



## The New Consumer: When Shopping Becomes Geopolitical

Dr. Samriti Mahajan  
Associate Professor, New Delhi Institute of Management

### Abstract

*This paper explores the emergence of the “geopolitical consumer,” where purchasing behavior increasingly reflects political identity, national interests, and global power dynamics rather than purely economic considerations. It traces the evolution of consumer activism into a strategic tool shaped by states, social media, and economic nationalism. The study highlights how global supply chains, trade policies, and digital platforms have transformed everyday consumption into a site of geopolitical contestation. It further examines the economic and social consequences, including price distortions, market disruptions, and risks of manipulated consumer nationalism. The paper argues for the need to foster informed and economically literate consumers capable of making rational choices in a politically charged marketplace.*

*Keywords: Geopolitical Consumer, Consumer Nationalism, Economic Nationalism, Global Trade, Digital Economy, Supply Chains, Consumer Behavior*

### Introduction

During decades, the process of product purchase was perceived as individual economic choice - based on price, quality, and convenience. That perception is being thoroughly rethought nowadays. Shopping nowadays is a geopolitical form of expression, identity, and, in some cases, a tool in geopolitical struggles around the world. The emergence of the geopolitical consumer turns out to be one of the most dramatic changes in contemporary trade that is yet to be fully understood by governments, corporations, and economists.

### Market Choices to Political Acts

The revolution did not occur immediately. The seed was planted decades ago when consumer boycotts had been turned into an instrument of civil action the Montgomery Bus Boycott, divestment actions in the era of apartheid. The new 21 st century is however in the extent to which and the intentionality with which states are now crafting consumer behaviour as a tool of diplomacy. Take the case of Chinese consumer reaction to South Korean deployment of THAAD missile in 2017: South Korean brands, specifically Lotte, Hyundai, and Samsung, have been subjected to organized



boycotts in china that cost the brands billions of dollars. Or the boycott of French products in the Muslim-majority countries in response to the comments by French President Emmanuel Macron on Islam in 2020. More recently in the aftermath of the Israel-Gaza war, Southern Asian, Middle Eastern and some European consumers started making conscious decisions not to purchase products of companies seen to be on one side, no matter how true the perceptions. The same has been experienced in India. The Boycott China attitude after the Galwan valley attacks of 2020 resulted in a quantifiable albeit short-term change of consumer preferences. Applications were canceled, Chinese products were kicked out in the street. The state also had its part to play - the government has blocked 59 Chinese apps combining regulatory with popular will in a manner that it is hard to define where the policy stops and consumer nationalism starts.

### **The Geopolitical Consumer Architecture**

Why is the modern consumer vulnerable to the geopolitical influence? Several forces converge. To begin with, social media form information ecosystems in which political narratives become viral at a share speed. Millions of buying choices can be mobilised in hours using a hashtag. Second, the emergence of economic nationalism as a political brand name, off, Make in India, Buy American to China dual circulation, strategy explicitly confuses the causes of nationalism with consumerism. Third, and arguably most structurally significant, is the increasing concentration of global supply chains so that a few geopolitically-contentious geographical areas become the hubs of global migration. Taiwanese semiconductors, Chinese rare earths, Indian pharmaceuticals - the localization of manufactures has become a national security issue and the customer increasingly realizes it. Purchasing a phone is no longer merely purchasing a phone but it could be a vote on how a trade order can be. Brands, in their turn, are placed in a dilemma. It is now a political statement to be viewed as politically neutral. Businesses that failed to come out clearly in the Russia-Ukraine war, whether by remaining or by exiting the Russian market, were criticized by both parties. The price of silence has led to a steep increase.

### **The Consumer in the Middle, Trade, and Tariffs**

The US under various differing administrations has continued to weaponise trade, starting with Section 301 duties imposed on Chinese goods through the imposition of trade missions on semiconductor exports. European Union is producing its own framework in China. All those macro-



level geopolitical choices are transferred to the consumer level in the form of higher prices, lack of products, and supply interruptions. The case of India is educative. Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme is clearly meant to change the consumer dependency on Chinese manufacturing to the goods produced locally. The change, however, is not evenly spread over - Indian consumers are still exposed to a greater price on the electronics assembled locally, despite being ideologically encouraged to purchase locally. The disequilibrium between market reality and political aspiration is the tension. The geopolitics of consumption is acute in Jammu & Kashmir, in particular. Informal cross-border trade that previously saw goods crossing the Line of Control was significantly curtailed due to the constitutional revisions of 2019 and later diplomatic freezes with Pakistan. There was need to restructure local markets which relied on certain across the border inputs. The consumer of this region cannot afford to take the luxury of making shopping apolitical - the politics is embedded in the availability.

### **The New Battlefield Digital Consumption**

There is an especially digital acuity to the geopolitics of consumption. Application Social media applications such as TikTok, owned by the company, have been highly restricted in India and regulated in the United States based on the belief that their data structure presents a national security risk. The decision that the consumer makes concerning the social media platform has become an implicitly geopolitical action. E-commerce giants are not an exception. Amazon and Alibaba are not just rivals, but rivals of visions of digital trade regulation. The predominance of a particular platform in a specific area has consequences on the concept of data sovereignty, tax incomes, and also the cultural discourses that are advanced by algorithmic curation. This is more what governments are learning, although consumers may not always know. Another layer is added by the emergence of digital payments. India UPI system, a national success story that is touted as such, is also a strategic hedge against Visa, Mastercard and now Chinese payment systems dominance. Each of the taps to pay is integrated into a bigger game on who owns the plumbing of commerce.

### **The Limits and Perils of Consumer Nationalism**

The geopolitical consumer euphoria needs to be offset and dotted with clear eyed thinking of its limits. Consumer boycotts have an infamously brief lifecycle, the attention span and price sensitivity will ultimately come back to play. The moment of boycott China in India rose to the height and



declined thereafter with Chinese imports returning to the upward trend within a year. Worse still, states can use consumer nationalism to quash dissent, persecute minorities, or ignore domestic economic malpractices. The transfer of economic grievances to external sources instead of internal targets by governments replaces accountability. The consumer is not a political actor emboldened but is a manipulated actor. Economic self-harm is also possible. Whatever the geopolitical induced nature of the sanctions regime and import restriction may be, it increases prices, narrows choice and disproportionately affects lower-income consumers. It is frequently the least prepared individual who is usually most vulnerable to the effects of geopolitical consumption.

### **Towards a Knowledgeable Customer**

So what is the normative prescription? The geopolitical consumer does not disappear, the forces which have led to politicisation of consumption are structural rather than conjunctural. However, there is an essential distinction between an educated consumer making conscious decisions and a programmed consumer responding to created outrage. Economic literacy should spread to encompass supply chain knowledge, the ability to discern between corporate and national interests as well as the capability of understanding between symbolic and action-based action. The role of the civil society, academia and the media in this is just what they have started playing. In more economies such as India, which at the same time are trying to get closer to the global supply chains and develop industrial capacity domestically, the geopolitical consumer moment should be handled delicately. It should not attempt to close the consumer off to forces around the world, but rather should make sure that the decisions under consideration are truly free and truly informed.

### **Conclusion**

The new consumer is political regardless of whether he or she wants to be or not. The purchasing of 2024 occurs in the context of a thicket of geopolitical rivalry, the technology rivalry, the rivalry of the pathways of trade, of information, of the very structure of global commerce. The first step is the realisation of this. The second one is to resist the instrument of awareness by those who want a malleable consumer rather than a critical one. When shopping has become geopolitical, it is not either to take part in that reality or not, but to do it clearly and intelligently and with the true economic interest of personal and general interest, at the heart.



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