

Artificial intelligence and Strategic stability: Assessing the Security Implications of Autonomous Warfare

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ABSTRACT: The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has begun to be one of the most significant technology shifts in current warfare, military change, and stability of strategy related to war. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the security implications of warfare reliant on AI with a particular focus on the expanding AI-based competition between India and Pakistan, in South Asia. This paper looks at how AI-based advances such as autonomy, drones, cyber abilities, surveillance systems and decision-making support systems are changing the previous definitions of deterrence, crisis stability and military conflict. This study examines the accidental escalation risk, the cyber vulnerability risks, the dynamic of arms race/competition, and the ethics associated with AI weapons with qualitative case study and content analysis techniques. The study also assesses how present international legal agreements do not adequately deal with the regulation of AI-based military systems. This paper concludes that although AI has the ability to provide great human welfare and operate effectively in the context of war, there is not currently a sufficient global governance framework in place to guarantee the minimization of regional instability, security dilemma creation, or the establishment of a sufficient amount of human oversight over AI in war. Accordingly, the findings of this research highlight the need for the international community to cooperate to develop legal regulatory policies and responsible AIs to sustain strategic stability in a rapidly changing technological environment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Geopolitics, Autonomous Warfare, Strategic Stability, India-Pakistan Relations, Security Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation has long shaped the character of international politics, military competition, and strategic stability. From railways and radar systems to nuclear weapons and cyber technologies, states have consistently sought to harness emerging technologies for both civilian and military purposes. Most modern technologies possess a dual-use character, meaning they can simultaneously contribute to economic development and military advancement (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021). Among contemporary disruptive technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative and potentially destabilising innovations of the 21st century. AI is not only capable of improving economic productivity, governance, and communication systems, but also possesses immense military applications that can alter the balance of power between rival states (Schmidt et al., 2021). Its rapid diffusion, software-based architecture, and destructive potential distinguish AI from many earlier technologies. Many of today's new technologies are dual-use; they can be used for both civilian and military purposes, and may help to generate economic growth as well as to improve military capability. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is regarded as the world's most disruptive technology, and has the potential to create instability among nation-states in the 21st century, like nothing else before it. AI could increase economic productivity, increase good governance and provide better means to communicate among people, but AI's most powerful impact will be felt in how it transforms the distribution of power among hostile nation-states (Schmidt et al., 2021). AI's innovative nature is enhanced by rapid adoption, software-based structure, and more destructive than other prior technology.

There is increased concern about the strategic competition and escalation dynamics created by AI in the military sphere as AI becomes more integrated into military systems around the world, particularly among military powers with nuclear weapons. In South Asia, there is competition between India and Pakistan that has been expanding to include the technological realm; both countries are developing military capabilities through military modernization that includes use of AI. Some examples of capabilities being developed within the military by both states include: integration of AI technologies into intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), cyber operations, and autonomous weapon systems, as well as improvements to command and control and missile defense systems (Boulain et al., 2020). Due to the advancements in technology, traditional definitions of deterrence, crisis stability, and warfare are changing in the region.

India has committed resources to the development of artificial intelligence in its military establishments through the use of 'AI' in securing surveillance systems; improving the use of drones; and applying it in electronic warfare, cyber protection, battlefield

management, and on platforms that can function independently using various research and defence technology institutes (DRDO, CAIR, DAIC) as well as through partnerships with the US and allied nations (such as the India-US Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies - iCET) to establish itself among the leading global powers in military use of AI (Mohanty & Singh 2024). Pakistan, while being resource constrained, is also pursuing its objective of incorporating AI into military planning through centres that are dedicated to artificial intelligence and computing (CENTAIC) and emerging technologies for the military (the Army Centre for Emerging Technologies - ACET). Pakistan uses AI-enabled drones, electronic warfare systems, and advanced missile technologies to counterbalance India's technological advancements (Ali 2023). India and Pakistan's race in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) has resulted a new security dilemma in South Asia. Herz (1951) describes a security dilemma as occurring when one nation multiplies its security measures and those measures then cause another nation to feel insecure and subsequently build its military capabilities accordingly. The incorporation of AI into strategic and military realms adds to the ambiguity concerning the adversaries' intentions, operational capabilities, and escalation levels (Jervis, 1976). In South Asia, where nuclear weapons are widely held, the introduction of AI-enabled automated weapons systems, swarming drones, cyber capabilities, and decision support systems may raise the risk of misinterpretation of targets, unintended escalations, and rapid, unstable crises. Following the Pahalgam incident, the military confrontation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 was yet another example of how AI-enabled warfare is operationalising in South Asia. Both countries used advanced drones, electronic warfare systems, precision-guided missiles, and military hardware augmented by AI in this conflict. This illustrates a shift towards a technology-based arms race between India and Pakistan in South Asia. As part of this context, this research project will investigate the AI arms race between India and Pakistan and its implications for strategic stability in South Asia. Specifically, the research will examine how AI-enabled military modernisation is reshaping regional deterrence dynamics, exacerbating security dilemmas, and changing the future character of warfare between both of these nuclear powers.

2. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF AUTONOMOUS WARFARE

Autonomous warfare describes the usage of advanced technologies like AI, machine learning, and robotics with minimal or no direct human involvement in military operations. The rapid evolution of emerging technologies has changed the way we conduct warfare from being historically reliant on human beings to relying heavily on technologically based systems as well as creating a new type of warfare; i.e., a networked-based, technology-focused warfare environment. Autonomous weapons are also being incorporated into the full range of military applications including: intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, target acquisition, cyber operations, missile defense, and battlefield management systems (Scharre 2018). All these systems of autonomous warfighting will have the capability to process data, recognize threats, and perform military tasks at a speed faster than any human could do, and as such will fundamentally alter the traditional operational aspect of modern war.

The conceptual basis for autonomous warfare is based on advancements made through military technology. Major developments in military technology have traditionally taken place through revolutions such as gunpowder weapons, mechanized warfare, nuclear weapons, and information technology. Autonomous systems powered by artificial intelligence are now the latest development in this continuum, as they provide computational capability, real-time data processing, and independent operation (Kissinger et al., 2021). Autonomous systems differ from traditional weapons in their ability to modify their functions based on battlefield circumstances using machine learning and algorithms, resulting in high levels of adaptive and effective combat performance. Autonomous warfare includes a wide variety of autonomous systems that include: autonomous drones, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs), robotic combat systems, loitering munitions, autonomous naval platforms, and AI equipped missile defence systems (Boulain & Verbruggen 2017). All of these technology systems can carry out Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations along with precision strike operations, electronic warfare operations, and cyber operations. An example of an autonomous (AI-enabled) system that is able to carry out an operation is Swarm Drone Technology. Swarm Drone Technology allows several drones to autonomously coordinate and carry out an attack using AI-based methods for communication and navigation. This technology significantly improves both offensive and defensive capability within the military. A significant debate regarding autonomous warfare revolves around whether humans maintain control over military decision-making. The distinction is made between different levels of control by humans in making decisions about warfare - "human-in-the-loop," "human-on-the-loop," and "human-out-of-the-loop" (Horowitz, 2018). In a human-in-the-loop system, human intervention is needed before an autonomous system can execute lethal action. By contrast, in a "human-out-of-the-loop" system, an autonomous system has an ability to autonomously identify and engage in a target independent of human intervention. These increasing levels of autonomy raise ethical, legal, and strategic concerns in relation to accountability, civilian casualties, escalation risks, or starting a conflict due to accident or miscalculation. As India and Pakistan engage more deeply in their current strategic competition, autonomous warfare is inextricably linked to that competition. Both countries are adding AI-enabled technologies to their military modernization efforts, including those related to drones, missile systems, cyber warfare, and electronic warfare. Autonomous technologies will contribute to the overall regional security dilemma by increasing uncertainty within the regional actors, reducing the amount of time available for crisis decision making, and increasing the likelihood of miscalculation between two nuclear armed adversaries (Jervis, 1976).

3. AI AND STRATEGIC STABILITY

Strategic stability exists in a state where competing countries are deterred from starting military action due to known military equivalencies, credible deterrents, and the dread of unacceptable results (Jervis, 1989). In the past, there was a traditional dependence on rationality, human judgment, good communication channels, and a reasonable amount of time for political and military leaders to evaluate judgments of a threat prior to taking action. Stability has been influenced by the factors of deterrence,

command and control systems and practices, and crisis management between India and Pakistan in highly nuclearized regions such as South Asia. The increasing reliance on the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into military systems is fundamentally changing the traditional underpinnings of strategic stability.

3.1 ACCELERATION OF DECISION-MAKING

AI's use in the armed forces will also have an effect on strategic stability because of its ability to expedite military command and control. Using AI, military units can receive, process, and analyze considerable amounts of information about the battlefield in a matter of seconds. This provides the military with the ability to react quicker than ever before (Horowitz, 2018). Additionally, with the application of autonomous surveillance systems, AI-based missile defense systems, and machine-based algorithms to assess and analyze intelligence and assess threats, the military will have lower dependence on humans regarding the operational effectiveness of future missions (Horowitz, 2018). Today's fast pace of war has made it increasingly difficult for military commanders to assess situations and make sound judgments during crises due to the compression of time available to arrive at a decision. Previously, commanders would have taken hours or many minutes to arrive at a decision; however, with the rapidity of combat, it may now only take seconds for a commander to reach a decision. This leads to a greater chance of commanders making impulsive and/or premature responses. When military commanders are operating in high-stress environments, it is conceivable that AI systems could misinterpret ambiguous signals, anomalous radar signals, or cyber related intrusions as acts of aggression which would result in unintended escalation of hostilities. The possibility of unintended escalation of hostilities is magnified in the case of nuclear powers, as the consequences of a miscalculation or a false alarm could be catastrophic. Many scholars have expressed concern that reliance on automated military systems may degrade human authority over military operations and interfere with the opportunity to diplomatically de-escalate a situation (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021).

3.2 CRISIS INSTABILITY

Crisis instability is further aggravated by the unpredictability introduced by AI-enabled warfare. Algorithms, sensors, and software networks power autonomous systems; however, they can fail due to technical issues, lack of data, or cyber attacks. AI-enabled drones, missile defence systems and autonomous weapons will operate in militarily contested environments subject to electronic jamming and other types of interference. Some of the issues with autonomous systems will cause them to operate unpredictably in war crisis situations (Scharre, 2018).

Rapidly changing environments often lack reliable human judgment which has traditionally served as the basis for building confidence and managing crises. Usually, humans will base their decisions on political calculation (the value of an ally versus the loss of an enemy) and will exhibit emotional control while negotiating diplomatically with opponents so as not to escalate the current situation without proper escalation. Autonomous systems lack any understanding of context and cannot reason morally about the effects their actions may have therefore, they do not possess the ability to refrain from acting during ambiguous events (Jervis 1976). Moreover adversarial attacks utilizing cyber capabilities on AI systems will create an environment where artificial intelligence will not be able to establish reliable systems for providing situational awareness, and will also influence command-and-control capabilities and reduce trust and increase uncertainty among competing nations. For example, India and Pakistan frequently experience crises and limit their use of each other's communication systems; however, AI integrated into their respective military doctrines creates even greater opportunities for future migration to escalation.

3.3 ARMS RACE DYNAMICS

Militarizing AI has led to a faster global or regional arms race between nations throughout the world. As countries see that having an edge in AI gives them the highest military power over others, they are investing heavily into different types of tools that use AI- such as autonomous weapons, cyber capabilities, or drones- to avoid being behind technologically Payne, K. (2018). This competition produces a traditional security dilemma, where one state's attempts to achieve a higher level of security leads to the opposite effect for competing states and causes them to compete with each other technologically (Herz 1951). Both India and Pakistan are incorporating AI into their military modernization efforts, especially regarding drone operations, electronic conflict, collection and analysis of intelligence, and missile technology. If both countries develop their AI capabilities further, a self-perpetuating cycle of modernization and technical rivalry may occur leading to long-term destabilization of South Asian strategic stability.

4. SECURITY RISKS OF AUTONOMOUS WARFARE

The rise of autonomous military has raised serious concerns about security that go way beyond conventional warfare. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-capable militaries are changing what it means to fight by allowing for faster operation, less human participation, and more extensive warfare through cyberspace and information technology than has ever been possible before. While these technological developments increase the efficiency and accuracy of warfare, they also provide new vulnerabilities to military forces and present new risks to international security as a whole (Scharre, 2018).

4.1 ACCIDENTAL ESCALATION

One of the greatest threats of autonomous warfare is the risk of accidental escalation. Artificial intelligence (AI) systems operate completely independently of any human control or direction by processing data regarding the battlefield, identifying the threat presented by that data, and generating a response at machine speed. These systems can also process (and therefore interpret) ambiguous military signals, incorrect sensor information, or cyberattacks as hostile actions. An unintended military engagement

may therefore be initiated by AI systems in the event of intentional or unintentional misinterpretation of this type of data by AI systems (Boulain & Verbruggen, 2017). Unlike human commanders, AI systems are not able to give political judgment, exercise emotional restraint, or have an understanding of context, making the potential for escalation during high-stress scenarios very high. In the volatile region of South Asia, where India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and have faced increasing military tensions, there is great potential for an unwittingly escalated conflict resulting from a mistake in AI operation or programming. These types of engagements may occur faster than an effort to diplomatically or politically resolve the situation, which will limit the ability to manage crises or de-escalate (Jervis, 1976). Additionally, cyber-attacks on autonomous military systems could intentionally deceive and negatively impact algorithms and data on the battlefield with intent to create unintentional confrontations between adversarial states.

4.2 CYBER VULNERABILITIES

The use of artificial intelligence developed for the military relies on the infrastructure (including sensors, software networks, cloud computing, communication systems) that connects these systems together; therefore, they are at risk of attack through a wide variety of cyber threats (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher 2021). These threats can include hacking into the system, data poisoning, algorithmic manipulation, interference with communication signals, and electronically disrupting military equipment through electronic warfare. In addition, adversaries could take advantage of weaknesses in an AI system to hinder military operations or change the intended targets of a fire, disable an autonomous weapon while in use, etc. Autonomous Systems that become compromised may inadvertently attack allied forces or civilian objects resulting in escalating hostilities causing the loss of strategic stability. The growing integration of Artificial Intelligence into the Cyber Warfare domain is further making it unclear what is being called “conventional” versus “non-conventional” warfare thus creating an even more chaotic situation with regards to security.

4.3 PROLIFERATION RISKS

The increased availability of artificial intelligence technology to people not associated with governments is of utmost concern; AI is generally much easier to obtain than nuclear weapons technologies (Horowitz, 2018). Terrorist organizations, rebel groups and extremist groups can use commercial drones, machine-learning algorithms, and open-source artificial intelligence tools to develop independent abilities. The democratization of artificial intelligence is creating an increased potential for Decentralized Autonomous Violence, where small groups or individuals can conduct surveillance, perform targeted attacks, disrupt networks and wage drone warfare using advanced technology. Due to the mass accessibility to this technology, regulating autonomous warfare becomes a much greater challenge than previously thought, resulting in long-term implications to both global and regional security.

5. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as well as autonomous weapons systems is putting great strain on the current international legal framework for warfare. For instance, while International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the Geneva Conventions and the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) were all created under a different paradigm where human beings were fully engaged and in control of military operations and decisions, the advent of autonomous systems that can independently select (identify/locate) and engage their targets raises many legal and ethical issues regarding the application of these traditional legal regimes to the current AI driven paradigm of warfare (Scharre, 2018).

5.1 CHALLENGES TO EXISTING LAW

Autonomous weapons systems present a challenge to numerous fundamental norms of International Humanitarian Law, specifically distinction, proportionality, military necessity and accountability. For example, the principle of distinction states that parties involved in armed conflict must distinguish between soldiers and civilians; Similarly, Principle of Proportionality prohibits attacks against civilians that would cause excessive civilian losses when compared to the expected military benefit (Boulain & Verbruggen 2017).

Systems equipped with AI may have difficulty making proper judgments or discerning complex humanitarian issues, as they can't interpret large amounts of information in urban areas that contain both civilians and soldiers. Additionally, autonomous weapons may not be able to make proper judgments or discern appropriate proportions for attacking situations where combat is occurring rapidly and dynamically. A different form of challenge for accountability for unlawful actions taken by autonomous systems. The legal system currently uses human beings as its basis for assigning accountability and thus it can't identify an account for breaches of law when an autonomous weapon misfires or operates unexpectedly (Horowitz, 2018).

5.2 UNITED NATIONS INITIATIVES

Knowing of these problems, the United Nations formed a Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) to discuss the lethal autonomous weapons system (LAWS) under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). The GGE has been holding periodic meetings since 2017 to address the ethics, legal implications, and security impacts of autonomous weapons and explore potential regulations (United Nations, 2023). However, international treaty development has been very limited due to the geopolitical struggles between nations and differences in how countries are treating the issue. Many of the largest militaries in the world do not want to impose strict legal restrictions related to AI and autonomous weapons because they feel they will lose a technological or military advantage with respect to their use of autonomous weapons.

5.3 NEED FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The lack of common definitions for autonomy and meaningful human control makes it difficult to regulate autonomous warfare. To provide good governance over autonomous weapons, there needs to be international agreement on legal standards, transparency, ethical guidelines, and arms controls (Kissinger, Schmidt, and Huttenlocher, 2021). Without global governance to restrain the military use of AI technology, the militarization and proliferation of AI will lead to greater instability and increased competition in arms proliferation, thereby threatening international peace and security.

6. TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETITION AND GEOPOLITICS

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to develop rapidly, it has created greater geopolitical competition between great powers and regional powers. Countries are increasingly viewing AI superiority as a fundamental element of military power and strategic influence within the international system (Horowitz, M. C., 2018). Countries like the United States, China, Russia, India, etc., are investing heavily in building up their militaries using AI, investing in developing cyber, developing autonomous weapons systems, and building surveillance systems. Consequently, AI has become a significant strategic asset similar to past technological revolutions, such as nuclear weapons and space technology (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher 2021). In South Asia, the escalating artificial intelligence competition between India and Pakistan has resulted in the formation of an emergent technological arms race. As India forms an increasing number of alliances with the USA and other technologically advanced nations, its AI capacity continues to grow at a rapid pace, therefore causing Pakistan to increase its level of cooperation with China & Türkiye in defence related issues. This geopolitical competition continues to contribute to regional security dilemmas and increases both the level of mistrust and vulnerability towards strategic instability in the region (Jervis, 1976).

7. HUMANITARIAN APPLICATIONS AND POSITIVE POTENTIAL

AI and autonomous technology have been linked to military competition and security concerns, they also hold great potential for humanitarian and peacekeeping applications. For example, AI technologies provide faster, more accurate and more efficient solutions to perform “dangerous” tasks in disaster scenarios for disaster management, protection of civilians and humanitarian assistance efforts (Boulain & Verbruggen, 2017). Autonomous drones and robotic technology are being increasingly used for search-and-rescue missions during natural disasters (for example, earthquakes, floods or wildfires) in situations where human access is unsafe or impractical. Food, medicine, and emergency supplies can be delivered to locations where goods are considered scarce through the use of AI technology. Autonomous technologies can help locate and remove landmines and unexploded ordnance left behind after a war, reducing civilian deaths and improving the safety of rehabilitation efforts (Scharre, 2018). Similarly, autonomous systems for medical evacuation can be used to move injured civilians and soldiers out of high-risk areas without further endangering rescue personnel. Moreover, employing an AI-based system of surveillance and monitoring within a peacekeeping operation could potentially provide situational awareness as well as identify potential threats to civilian populations. Responsible use of autonomous systems with appropriate human supervision can decrease the risk of loss of life to military personnel while helping to provide humanitarian protection and increase operational efficiency in dangerous environments. (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021).

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The increasing incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into military systems necessitates rapid policy action at both the regional and international level. To maintain strategic stability, it is important to ensure that all autonomous weapons systems continue to have significant human input, particularly in the area of nuclear command and-control systems and deadly decision making; this will help avoid unexpected escalations of conflict, algorithmic mistakes, and unintentional military engagements (Scharre, 2018). At the international level, improvements in the governance of autonomous warfare technologies should occur through stronger global governance mechanisms.

The United Nations and the Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems should work together to create legally binding international norms, transparency measures, and accountability frameworks for the use of AI military systems (United Nations, 2023). Establishing confidence-building measures, maintaining military communications between opposing sides, and creating risk reducing agreements about the potential risks of AI in military systems are also critical in places that have a history of conflict, such as South Asia. India and Pakistan need to establish bilateral dialogue mechanisms regarding cyber security, autonomous weapons and crisis management to build trust and reduce the risk of technological escalation. Future research must be directed at the operational implications of AI on deterrence, cyber warfare, and crisis decision-making within South Asia. Studies that combine international relations, ethics, computer science, and security studies will also be necessary to develop balanced approaches to maximize the humanitarian benefits of AI and to minimize its destabilizing effects (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in military applications is affecting how warfare is conducted, how countries interact with each other strategically, and how the world addresses security issues. Advances in the use of autonomous systems as part of military operations have improved some aspects (such as surveillance; targeting; cyber capabilities; and battlefield efficiencies), but have led to concerns about strategic stability; escalation of conflict; and accountability and ethical issues. In South Asia, the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan, and their nuclear capabilities, bring some risk to the level of insecurity, mistrust, and the arms race dynamic being created by increased military competition using AI. The use of autonomous systems in military operations will also result in reduced time to make decisions; increase the potential for an accidental escalation; and potentially pose challenges to

existing international legal frameworks governing armed conflict. In addition, however, AI technologies can also be applied in useful humanitarian efforts (e.g., responding to disasters, protecting civilians, and supporting peacekeeping efforts). Therefore, the establishment of effective global governance, meaningful human control, international cooperation, and responsible technology regulation will be key to ensuring that AI will contribute positively to international security, rather than negatively destabilizing the world or causing conflict.

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