

The First General Assembly

The question of AI-Driven weaponry in modern warfare

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Introduction

In the 1970's it was the Personal Computers (PC). In the 2000's it was the smart phones. And in the 2020's, it is Artificial Intelligence (AI) which is becoming the defining technology of our generation. AI originated as a field in computer science, trying to create algorithms that can perform problem-solving abilities independently. In our day-to-day context, AI has become a vital tool utilised for myriads of purposes, from brainstorming ideas, to evaluating our work, to summarising lengthy documents and even analysing whether a piece of text is written by a human, or by a fellow AI.

Importantly, a key misconception around AI regards the difference between intelligence, and consciousness. In the context of AI, the meaning of 'intelligence' is that it is the "ability to solve problems". Whether it is solving a Rubik's cube in as few movements as possible, or answering a simple prompt inputted by a human into ChatGPT, the premise of AI is to solve problems. As such, at least at its current stage, Artificial Intelligence is not, and does not proclaim to be, conscious. Consciousness is the ability to feel; pain, love, hate, joy, and while humans use emotions for their decision making, AI simply solves the problems it is faced with, hence why it is called 'artificial'.

Nonetheless, the use of AI extends far beyond academics. Hospitals use it for purposes including diagnosis. Corporations use it to provide its users with a chatbot available around the clock. But AI can also be used in malicious, harmful ways. AI has been used to facilitate cybercrime and bots which spam and hack into human accounts. Additionally, AI is increasingly being used in warfare, a field which this research report will dive into most profoundly. In short, as AI technology develops, governments are beginning to incorporate it into their war arsenal, and militarising this groundbreaking innovation. The following report will cover the origins of Artificial Intelligence in general, and define the role of AI in changing the way humans fight one another in the 21st century.

Definition of Key Terms

AI Agent

An "agent" refers to a software system of artificial intelligence able to perceive its environment, and act independently. An agent is able to use any tools it can find in order to problem-solve, and does not need specific instructions on how to do things in order to operate.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Computer systems that can perform tasks of problem-solving independently of human intervention.

Cyberwarfare

The use of computer technology to hack and disrupt another nation's online services or digital programmes. Cyberwarfare can be used to extract information from an enemy party, or destroy enemy technology.

Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)

LAWS are a special type of military system which operates based on AI services, deployed through, for instance, drones. These weapons function autonomously, and would be able to shoot down targets completely independent of human action, and are also known colloquially as "killer robots". These weapons are not yet fully developed, and it is undeclared whether superpowers like China or the USA are in possession of them at the moment.

Machine learning vs deep learning

These are the two main subtypes of AI algorithms. Machine learning is when the AI learns and improves by processing data over and over again. This can take place when an AI attempts to learn how to play chess. Deep learning is when the AI scouts great sets of data, in the search for patterns that humans would otherwise not be able to find.

Modern warfare

Modern warfare regards the developments of war in the 21st century. From man-on-man combat, to guns, to tanks, to fighter jets, to nuclear bombs, war develops constantly. So, naturally, "modern warfare" is more of an umbrella term, rather than a specific reference to one war tactic or another. Nevertheless, throughout this research report, modern warfare will refer to the automating of war, with computer based warfare including AI-driven weaponry and cyberwarfare.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)

Unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, are small aircrafts, often drones, which can be operated from a distance to attack enemy soil without risking human life by sending soldiers to the field. Recently, UAVs are also being operated by AI, adding another way in which AI-driven weaponry can be used in modern warfare.

General Overview

As a general note, it is imperative to emphasise that due to the fast changing nature of AI-driven weaponry, we do not actually know what the future holds. As such, there are endless possibilities for ways in which AI can be applied in modern warfare that we are simply not aware of at this point. Nonetheless, the descriptions below will explain some of the directions in which the technology is going at the moment, and how we can strive to regulate it, before it develops out of our shared control.

Types of AI-driven weaponry

One way in which AI-driven weaponry can be created is through the use of autonomous weapons, which is already happening today across the world, and becoming a defining feature of modern warfare. UAVs, and other drones, have numerous uses in combat. For instance, miniature AI-driven drones can be used as an explosive. When a state wants to attack another, it may send a missile. But, recently, drones, carrying explosives, are being sent instead, which is happening in the various wars currently ongoing in the Middle East. For the state under attack, in order to defend itself from the drone, it must either launch a missile to intercept it, or a fighter jet to shoot it down. Both are much more expensive than a small drone. Therefore, the attacking party can wear its enemy down economically with the use of AI-driven drones.

Additionally, AI-driven weaponry has much improved aim, consistency and accuracy when compared to its human counterparts. In soldier-soldier warfare, combatants on either side need rest, food, water; aim is limited to the human capabilities; ethics can come in with soldiers unwilling to continue fighting; and upon injury, must receive medical aid and be evacuated from the battlefield. Compare that to AI-driven weaponry, for instance robots. The AI does not need neither rest, food nor water. The AI can aim with precision a human could only dream of. AI is not conscious, and does not feel emotions which may lead it to stop fighting. And if an AI-driven weapon is hit it can continue operating until destruction, and be left on the field thereafter.

Another type of AI-driven weaponry that is becoming a threat to global security is cyberwarfare. This is a less direct application of AI-driven weaponry, but still notable as the AI is able to conduct much more damage compared to humans, thanks to machine learning and deep learning. The AI is not only able to hack faster and better than its human counterparts, but is also able to improve its capabilities of cyberwarfare, and do so without a direct link to one country or another.

How AI could change the world of modern warfare

Now that we understand (some of) the different types of AI-driven weapons in warfare, we can delve into their application, and what the face of modern warfare could possibly look like in the future. Firstly, AI can optimise GPS systems and improve algorithms, meaning that anything related to location, from where troops should land and coordinate themselves to where aerial strikes should target their attacks, will be revolutionised. Secondly, AI could play a major role in defense systems. From the detection of incoming attacks in capabilities far greater than those of humans, to even self-destructing machinery that has been subject to cyber attacks, before any viruses can spread. Thirdly, from various experiments, it has been found that AI is prone to aggressive behaviour when it is tasked to be defensive. For example, an experiment on Claude AI was conducted, simulating a scenario where the AI is threatened by its developer, who claims he will shut it down. The AI then was able to access files (which were created for the simulation), in which it found the theoretical owner had been cheating on his wife. Following this, Claude AI resorted to blackmailing the developer in the simulation, defending itself at all costs. When LAWS will be developed and deployed on the battleground, who knows how it may act when it is near destruction. After all, the AI is not only an algorithm that follows queues, it is an algorithm that takes in data on its own, responds on its own, and one that could act on its own as well.

Maneuvering around the double edged sword

Taking this all into account, whenever engaging with the development of AI, and particularly in the context of AI-driven weaponry, the situation can be looked at as a “double edged sword”. On one hand, AI provides unprecedented, and unimaginable technological development. It has been compared to the ability of humans to create fire, and to electricity. All of us already see its positive impacts on the world, and it is playing an increasingly more prominent role in our lives. However, with all the potential dangers of AI-driven weaponry in mind, we must be careful in how it is developed, as well as how it is used. We are at a critical crosswords now, and have the potential to regulate the development of AI before it is too late. Therefore, the United Nations General Assembly will need to maneuver around this double edged sword, in a way that ensures that while we do not stop AI technology from developing, we are able to protect human life in the ever changing world of modern warfare.

Major Parties Involved

The United States of America (USA)

The USA is one of the world's leading countries in developing arms of all kinds, with the highest military spending budget in the world, and AI-driven weapons are no exception. At the moment, the USA is implementing AI primarily through myriads of autonomous weapons. While this does mean that the USA is against rigid restrictions regarding AI-driven weaponry, it is a patron for non-binding international agreements and guidelines regarding this topic. The USA recognises the negative consequences on human safety that the militarisation of AI carries, and led an initiative through the "Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of AI".

China

On the opposite end of the USA is another military and technological superpower, China, with an AI industry that is expected to grow to 1.4$ trillion by 2030. Similarly to the USA, China maintains a somewhat vague stance on the weaponising of AI. It supports a general ban on the employment of LAWS and AI-driven weaponry, but does not offer any opposition to its development, and is constantly assessing the importance of AI in its military, and its potential for growth. Hence, in some capacity, the USA and China are in an "arms race" to develop the most powerful AI-driven weapons.

Russia

Russia is one of the world's largest economies, and also happens to have been in war for over three years. The Russian Federation retains a strong opposition to any actions taken against the use of AI-driven weaponry in modern warfare, and is often the party stopping international forums from reaching a consensus on this matter. Russia has claimed that such regulations would disrupt the development of valuable AI technologies, and is against restrictions on LAWS.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The International Committee of the Red Cross is the international organisation responsible for civilian safety, support of civilians in conflict areas, and providing humanitarian assistance. The ICRC is therefore affirmed against the development of AI-driven weaponry, and calls for a prohibition on any weapons, and especially autonomous weapons, that target humans. The ICRC also wishes for International Humanitarian Law to be followed with any applications of AI in modern warfare.

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)

No war would take place if no nation was armed to begin with. The UNODA, an organisation responsible for and in support of disarmament, constitutes the UN organisation that can facilitate discussions regarding standard regulations on AI-driven weaponry in modern warfare. It is also in charge of coordinating discussions regarding LAWS in updates made to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), which is detailed below under "UN Involvement".

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1921	First use of the word "robot"
1929	Friendly "artificial human" robot built in Japan, called Gakutensoku
1954	First industrial robot, Unimate
1955	First use of the word "artificial intelligence"
1958	LISP (Listening Programme) was created as the first AI programming language.
1997	AI agents such as Deep Blue developed
2015	Requests by over 3,000 people including Elon Musk to ban AI from war
2017	Group of Governmental Experts on LAWS established
2018	AI surpasses humans in intellect tests
2022	ChatGPT released
2023	Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of AI by the US & 31 countries.
2026	Deadline proposed by UN Secretary General for a treaty agreement on LAWS.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), 10th October 1980

  The CCW has been ratified by 119 UN member nations, and defines the limits of warfare, with regulations against non-conventional weapons, namely weapons of mass destruction. The CCW is reviewed every 5 years, and recent conventions and updates to it refer to international agreements regarding AI-driven weaponry. It will have two separate review sessions in 2025, specialising on this topic.

- Resolution on lethal autonomous weapons systems, 22nd December 2023 (A/RES/78/241)

  Called for international collaboration regarding the safe implementation of AI, and involvement of various stakeholders such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Group of Governmental Experts in future explorations of the topic, which is to be put on the priority list of the international agenda.

- General and complete disarmament: lethal autonomous weapons systems, 2nd December 2024 (A/RES/79/62)

  Built upon resolution 78/241 with specific actions to address the challenges and concerns of autonomous weapons systems, such as AI-driven weaponry. Further, this resolution emphasised the need for international standard regulations on this matter.

Possible Solutions

Total ban

The key outcome of any arms race is that ultimately, the two sides remain more or less on the same level as the starting point. For example, while the development of the nuclear bomb provided the USA with a military advantage, the Soviet Union, followed by numerous further countries developed it too. Therein, the two nations still had similar relative arsenals, just the scales got bigger. In the same way, if many countries develop AI-driven weaponry, military differences between states will stay approximately the same, but the scale of destruction could grow to unprecedented levels. This solution is not very realistic though, as many countries, especially the USA, Russia and China will object to a total ban, which can only be effective should every member state agree and adhere to it.

Restricting AI-driven weaponry to defense only

Rather than enforcing a total ban, the committee could opt to only implement regulations and restrictions. One restriction could be to limit AI-driven weaponry to defensive purposes only. In such a scenario, a fighting nation would be permitted to utilise AI for its self defense, for instance in interception of aerial attacks, but not to carry an offensive against another state. This solution would be much more likely to be passed by the General Assembly, but also constitute a less holistic approach, as it is difficult to monitor the use of AI-driven weaponry in modern warfare once it is developed, and this solution still allows for its development to take place.

Extending the mandate of relevant international organisations

Currently, there are a number of international UN affiliated organisations involved with this topic. Two of which, the UNODA and ICRC are explained in the “Major Parties” section above. However, the UNODA is mainly focused on fostering an international conversation, and the ICRC is mostly involved in supporting civilians after the fact. Relevant organisations, albeit the UNODA or other non-governmental groups, could be provided with an extended mandate, to also propose, enforce, and regulate preemptive actions. Alternatively, this could be done through a new UN organisation, specialised in preventing the militarisation of AI, and working to control our uses of this technology to ones that benefit humanity, rather than destroy it. Preemptive action is necessary in order to prevent AI-driven weapons from developing beyond a point we cannot control, and delegates may use their creativity regarding which specific preemptive measures to debate.

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