

3. Military AI and The Urgency of Guardrails

India abstained from signing a pledge to govern the **deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) in warfare** at the third global summit on Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain (REAIM)

Global Debate on Military AI and Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)

Recent international deliberations on military AI reflect deep divisions among states. Only **35 out of 85 participating countries** signed the latest “*Pathways to Action*” declaration, compared to **60 signatories in the previous summit**. Major powers such as the **United States, India, and China** did not sign.

The reduced consensus highlights geopolitical competition, strategic mistrust, and the complexity of regulating emerging military technologies.

i. Strategic Context of Military AI Governance

Fragmented Global Consensus—Decline in signatories indicates divergence between technologically advanced states and smaller states advocating stricter controls. Major military powers are reluctant to constrain strategic flexibility.

Rapid Technological Evolution—AI technologies evolve faster than diplomatic negotiations. Difficulty in defining “*autonomy*,” “*meaningful human control*,” and “*lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)*” complicates treaty-making.

Dual-Use Nature of AI

1. Civilian AI applications overlap with military uses.
2. Regulating military AI without affecting civilian innovation poses a structural challenge.

ii. Arguments in Favour of Deploying AI in Warfare

1. Enhanced Precision and Reduced Collateral Damage

1. AI-enabled targeting systems use real-time satellite imagery, geospatial analytics, and computer vision.
2. Potential to improve discrimination between combatants and non-combatants under International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
3. Smart munitions and autonomous drones can reduce unintended destruction compared to indiscriminate weapons.

2. Accelerated Decision-Making

1. Modern battlefields generate massive volumes of sensor, cyber, and intelligence data.
2. AI systems process information in milliseconds, enabling faster Observe–Orient–Decide–Act (OODA) cycles.
3. Critical in high-speed warfare domains such as hypersonic missile defence and cyber conflict.

3. Reduced Risk to Human Soldiers

1. Use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), ground robots, and autonomous naval systems limits troop exposure.
2. Supports high-risk missions such as mine clearance, reconnaissance, and urban warfare.

4. Cyber and Information Warfare Advantages

1. AI enhances cyber defence by detecting anomalies and malware in real time.
2. Strengthens offensive cyber capabilities through automated vulnerability exploitation.
3. Supports psychological and information operations via data analytics.

5. Strategic Deterrence

1. Technological superiority can strengthen deterrence credibility.
2. Similar to nuclear deterrence logic during the Cold War, advanced AI systems may alter power balances.

6. Adaptation to Hybrid Warfare

1. Modern conflicts combine conventional, cyber, space, and information domains.
2. AI enables integration across these domains, enhancing battlefield coordination.

iii. Arguments Against Deployment of AI in Warfare

1. Ethical and Moral Concerns

1. Autonomous weapons challenge principles of humanity and dignity under IHL.
2. Delegating life-and-death decisions to machines raises moral legitimacy questions.

2. Accountability Gaps

1. Unclear responsibility in cases of war crimes or wrongful deaths.
2. Legal frameworks like the Geneva Conventions assume human agency.
3. Ambiguity between programmer liability, commander responsibility, and state accountability.

3. Algorithmic Errors and Civilian Harm

1. AI models may misidentify targets due to biased datasets or technical malfunctions.
2. Errors in high-stakes environments can result in disproportionate harm.

4. Vulnerability to Cyber Manipulation

1. Autonomous systems can be hacked or spoofed.
2. Risk of adversaries turning AI-enabled weapons against their operators.

5. Systemic Technological Dependence

1. Over-reliance on automation may degrade human decision-making skills.
2. Failures due to power outages, electronic warfare, or unexpected battlefield conditions could create catastrophic vulnerabilities.

6. Risk of Arms Race

1. Absence of global norms may trigger competitive AI militarization.
2. Lower entry barriers compared to nuclear weapons increase proliferation risks.

IV. India's Position on Military AI

1. Support for Responsible Use

1. India supports ethical deployment of AI in compliance with International Humanitarian Law.
2. Advocates "meaningful human control" over lethal systems.

2. Opposition to Immediate Legally Binding Ban

1. Considers a binding treaty on LAWS premature.
2. Highlights definitional ambiguity and rapid technological evolution.

3. Regulatory Flexibility for Indigenous Development

1. India is expanding investments in AI R&D for defence modernization.
2. Prefers not to constrain domestic technological progress through premature restrictions.

4. Preference for Non-Binding Normative Framework

1. Supports principle-based guidelines focusing on transparency, accountability, and state responsibility.
2. Advocates gradual norm-building before legally binding commitments.

V. Way Forward – Balanced Global Governance Framework

Develop Clear Definitions–Establish consensus on what constitutes autonomy and meaningful human control.

Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms–Clarify command responsibility in AI-assisted military operations.

Promote Confidence-Building Measures–Transparency in testing, deployment doctrines, and safeguards.

Encourage Multilateral Dialogue–Discussions under the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

Ensure Ethical AI Development–Embed safety audits, bias testing, and cybersecurity safeguards in military AI systems.

Conclusion

The debate over military AI reflects a tension between technological advantage and humanitarian safeguards. While AI offers enhanced precision, faster decision-making, and strategic benefits, it also raises profound ethical, legal, and security concerns. India's approach seeks a middle path – supporting responsible AI deployment with meaningful human oversight, while resisting premature legally binding restrictions that could hinder national technological advancement.

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