REVIEW ARTICLE

Reshaping National Security and the Future of Warfare in the Age of Competitive Artificial Intelligence

HURŞİT DİNGİL

Independent Researcher

ORCID No: 0000-0002-0836-0620

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare: The USA, China, and Strategic Stability

By James Johnson

Manchester University Press, 2024, 240 pages, $118.62, ISBN: 9781526179081

Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

By Paul Scharre

W. W. Norton and Company, 2023, 496 pages, $32.50, ISBN: 9780393866865

The AI Wave in Defence Innovation: Assessing Military Artificial Intelligence Strategies, Capabilities, and Trajectories

Edited by Michael Raska *and* Richard A. Bitzinger

Routledge, 2023, 264 pages, $163.88, ISBN: 9781032110752

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Introduction

Security has long remained one of the fundamental needs of states. To meet their security requirements, states have developed a variety of strategies, designing the means and methods accordingly. In realist theories, states are the primary actors in the international system, wherein they are engaged in a perpetual struggle for survival. This existential concern, commonly referred to as survival or national interest, is rooted in states' fundamental desire and necessity to preserve their existence. On this basis, states aim to maintain their presence over the long term. These changing long-term contexts have transformed the concept of security itself. Over time, theoretical debates intensified, leading to the emergence of alternative security paradigms.

Critical security theory challenges state-centric approaches by expanding security beyond military issues to include non-state actors and emerging domains, reflecting international relations' evolving nature. The broadening and deepening of the concept have significantly influenced state security approaches, even within realist paradigms where states are viewed as the central actors. Technology has become a key arena of competition in states' pursuit of existential interests. It has facilitated the enhancement of military capacities, enabling states to pursue their strategic objectives more effectively. Within the state-driven international system, technological developments are among the most evident indicators of change and transformation. Consequently, states are compelled to adapt rapidly to such changes, driven by the imperative to preserve their essential interests. These shifts, especially in the realm of technology, have had a direct impact on states and continue to shape the trajectory of their existential struggles.

Today, artificial intelligence (AI) stands out as one of the most prominent manifestations of these ongoing changes and transformations. As a result, the interaction between AI and national security has become a subject of risk and threat assessment for states. Although a clear framework has yet to be fully established, it is evident that states are closely monitoring and cautiously evaluating both the current and future implications of AI. AI's impact on military capabilities remains one of the most critical concerns for national security. The direct and indirect effects of AI on conventional security practices are increasingly associated with the vital interests of states. Simultaneously, AI is becoming increasingly significant in the broader context of geopolitical power struggles among nations.

This article reviews three significant books that examine the relationship between artificial intelligence and military capabilities in the context of international strategic power competition: *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare: The USA, China, and Strategic Stability* by James Johnson, *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* by Paul Scharre, and *The AI Wave in Defence*

Innovation: Assessing Military Artificial Intelligence Strategies, Capabilities, and Trajectories edited by Michael Raska and Richard A. Bitzinger.

While the question of which international relations theories can be employed to analyze AI remains a theoretical concern throughout these works, the central problem addressed is how the current and future military applications of AI may influence national security dynamics. Based on the insights drawn from the three books, this article explores examples of military applications of AI, the transformation of AI into an instrument of power, its role in strategic power competition, and the national security risks and threats associated with AI development.

Furthermore, the books provide detailed discussions on the limitations, challenges, and advantages of current AI applications in the defense sector. A critical issue shared across all three works concerns the methods and possibilities for controlling AI in military contexts. The governance dimensions of AI are also evaluated with reference to a variety of examples, and the military applications and AI policies of the U.S., China, and Russia are analyzed in detail.

A central argument shared by all three books under review is that AI is reshaping military applications and that this transformation is progressing through the integration and fusion of AI with conventional military capabilities. According to the authors, AI not only modifies traditional defense assets but also directly influences national security.

Additionally, this article is structured around three central research questions: Which international relations theory can explain the relationship between artificial intelligence and national security? How do military applications of artificial intelligence impact strategic power competition? And in what ways do military applications of artificial intelligence affect national security? To address these questions, the article analyzes the arguments and perspectives presented in the three books under two thematic sections: "Deterrence, Escalation, and Strategic Stability" and "Technological Competition and AI as a Force Multiplier."

Deterrence, Escalation, and Strategic Stability

The emerging role of AI in the military domain has sparked intense debate over its implications for nuclear deterrence, escalation dynamics, and strategic stability. Three key works, James Johnson's *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare*, Paul Scharre's *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, and *The AI Wave in Defence Innovation* edited by Michael Raska and Richard A. Bitzinger, offer distinct yet intersecting perspectives on how AI may reshape the foundations of national and international security.

James Johnson's *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare* is the most

narrowly focused of the three, offering an in-depth analysis of AI's implications for nuclear deterrence, strategic stability, and escalation, particularly within the framework of international relations theories. Johnson evaluates the effects of AI on nuclear stability through a series of case studies. He argues that AI-driven emerging technologies will significantly enhance military capabilities in surveillance, locating, tracking, targeting, and precision strikes, thus potentially undermining the delicate balance of deterrence between nuclear powers. In essence, he suggests that actors may acquire the ability to neutralize adversaries' strategic assets without resorting to nuclear weapons. Johnson emphasizes the potential for AI-enabled drone swarms and hypersonic weapons to render missile defense systems ineffective. This, in turn, could substantially alter first-strike and second-strike calculus, threatening the existing deterrence equilibrium. Johnson also contends that while AI may not constitute a revolutionary military technology in itself, its integration with other capabilities, such as hypersonic weapons, cyber tools, and unmanned systems, could fundamentally disrupt the deterrence equilibrium among nuclear powers. He notes, "Even if AI does not become the next revolution in military affairs, and its trajectory is more incremental and prosaic, the implications for the central pillars of nuclear deterrence could still be profound" (p. 6). He is particularly concerned with the potential for AI to compress decision-making cycles, introduce perceptual errors, and increase the risk of inadvertent escalation during crises. Johnson identifies one of the greatest risks as the premature and unregulated integration of untested, uncertified AI systems into nuclear command-and-control architectures. Such integration could lead to irreversible consequences, including accidental war, erroneous decision-making due to system failures, or breakdowns in strategic communication.

Scharre's *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* complements but also challenges Johnson's concerns while offering a broader strategic framework. Both Scharre and Johnson's discussions reframe the deepening military AI power competition between the U.S. and China. Whereas Johnson concentrates on the risks AI poses to nuclear deterrence and strategic stability, Scharre situates AI within a larger context of power competition and military innovation. Scharre's argument suggests that deterrence today relies not only on nuclear capabilities but also on information dominance, speed, and precision. He conceptualizes deterrence not solely in nuclear terms but as part of a wider struggle for dominance. Contrary to Johnson, Scharre argues that AI has the potential to reinforce deterrence by enhancing decision-making accuracy and shortening the decision cycle, provided it is employed responsibly. Through the concept of human-machine teaming, Scharre argues that AI systems, when integrated under human control, can become a reliable component of deterrence (pp. 273-

286). However, Scharre also acknowledges the risks posed by algorithmic opacity and emergent behaviors, concerns that echo Johnson's warnings about explainability and strategic miscalculation.

The AI Wave in Defence Innovation further broadens the discussion through a comparative analysis of multiple state approaches to military AI. Like Johnson and Scharre, the book recognizes that AI can either stabilize or destabilize strategic environments depending on its integration and governance. Its tripartite analytical framework, comprising optimists, pragmatists, and deniers, provides a useful classification for placing Johnson's and Scharre's positions. Johnson aligns with the pragmatist camp: He views AI as a potentially transformative force but emphasizes that, lacking robust control mechanisms and measures, it may amplify instability. Scharre, while more aligned with the optimists, nonetheless advocates for strong ethical and institutional controls. The deniers, meanwhile, draw attention to technical limitations, such as algorithmic opacity, data scarcity, and adversarial vulnerabilities, that both Johnson and Scharre recognize, albeit to varying degrees.

The AI Wave in Defence Innovation offers a more empirical counterpoint to Johnson's primarily theoretical analysis. It illustrates how major powers differ in their approaches to military AI integration, focusing on their ethical, institutional, and technological dimensions. While the European Union is described as progressing slowly due to fragmented approaches and ethical concerns, the U.S. is reported to be developing a comprehensive governance framework to secure a competitive advantage grounded in ethical leadership. China, in contrast, views AI as a strategic lever to accelerate military transformation, whereas Russia aims to integrate AI through civil-military fusion.

All three works converge on the understanding of AI as a strategic force multiplier, yet they diverge in emphasis and scope. Johnson focuses narrowly on nuclear risk and crisis instability; Scharre situates AI within a broader framework of strategic competition and deterrence; and *The AI Wave in Defence Innovation* maps out the comparative strategies and theoretical positions adopted by different states. Collectively, these works underscore a critical insight: The future of strategic stability will not be determined by AI in isolation, but by how states develop doctrines, norms, and institutional mechanisms to manage their integration into military systems. The shared concern is clear: Without deliberate and coordinated governance, AI could undermine the balance of deterrence that has underpinned international security for decades.

Technological Competition and AI as a Force Multiplier

The integration of AI into military domains has emerged as a defining

driver of great power technological competition. Across the three key works, Paul Scharre's *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, James Johnson's *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare*, and *The AI Wave in Defence Innovation: Assessing Military Artificial Intelligence Strategies, Capabilities, and Trajectories* edited by Michael Raska and Richard A. Bitzinger, a shared concern emerges: AI is not merely a technical tool, but a force multiplier that is reshaping power dynamics among states.

In *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, the core of the book supports the argument that four strategic elements determine a nation's AI strength. Scharre refers to these as the new strategic resources of our time, akin to oil in the 20th century. He writes, "To better understand which countries have an advantage in military, economic, and political power in the age of AI, we'll need to dive deeper into four key areas: data, compute, talent, and institutions" (p. 29). For instance, he stresses, "The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data" (p. 30), highlighting its competitive pivotal role in information generation and machine learning processes.

These, he suggests, are the new competitive determinants of national strength in the AI era Scharre identifies the U.S. and China as the two leading actors in the AI race, emphasizing that this competition extends beyond the economic domain and includes ideological dimensions as well. According to Scharre, China is establishing a model of "digital authoritarianism" through facial recognition and surveillance technologies, one that not only transcends national boundaries but also poses a serious threat to global freedoms. As he asserts, "China is pioneering a new model of AI-enabled surveillance and repression that is increasingly being adopted around the world, threatening global freedoms" (p. 19). While China pioneers "digital authoritarianism" through surveillance and repression, Scharre contends that democratic societies must respond by constructing ethical AI governance systems grounded in openness and transparency.

Johnson's *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare* offers a more focused emphasis on nuclear deterrence and escalation. While Scharre presents AI as a general-purpose transformative force, Johnson highlights the destabilizing risks AI introduces to nuclear command-and-control systems. He warns that AI, when combined with hypersonic weapons, unmanned technologies, and cyber capabilities, could undermine traditional deterrence mechanisms by heightening uncertainty, compressing decision-making timelines, and increasing the potential for misperception or inadvertent escalation. Although Johnson acknowledges AI's force-multiplying effects in domains such as surveillance, targeting, and autonomous weapons, his central concern remains the fragility of strategic stability in the "Second Nuclear Age."

On the other hand, *The AI Wave in Defence Innovation* builds on these insights through a broader, multi-country assessment of AI's military applications. The book explores the impact of AI on the nature of warfare through three conceptual lenses: optimists, pragmatics, and deniers. Key issues addressed include AI's capacity to accelerate decision-making in combat and its transformative effects on human-machine interaction (pp. 12-18).

According to optimists, AI will transform both the character and the very nature of warfare. They argue that AI will increase the pace of warfare, shift decision-making processes to machine speed, reduce the fog of war, and enable autonomous combat operations. Particularly with swarm drones and AI-supported decision systems, optimists envision a future where war can be conducted without human intervention.

Pragmatics, on the other hand, acknowledge AI's military potential but believe its impact will remain limited to operational and tactical levels. They emphasize that AI is most effective in controlled domains such as logistics, reconnaissance, planning, and training, while strategic-level decisions will continue to rely on human judgment.

In contrast, deniers question the applicability of AI in military contexts. According to this view, the opacity of algorithms (the black box problem), the lack of adequate military datasets, and system vulnerabilities to deception (e.g., adversarial attacks) render AI unreliable and unpredictable in combat environments. These three perspectives form the foundation of ongoing theoretical and practical debates regarding AI's role in warfare. These competing perspectives offer an analytical framework for situating Scharre as an optimist-pragmatist and Johnson as a pragmatist with a cautionary emphasis.

The AI Wave in Defence Innovation examines the divergent AI strategies of major and middle powers. The U.S. is characterized as pursuing ethical leadership through institutional coordination, while China leverages AI for rapid military transformation, and Russia emphasizes civil-military integration. Middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia follow more cautious approaches, adapting AI development to their respective capabilities and ethical frameworks. These strategic variations align with Scharre's analysis of competing state models and with Johnson's warning about the lack of international norms governing AI's integration into strategic systems.

In sum, these three works collectively underscore that AI functions as a strategic force multiplier, enhancing national capabilities, deepening geopolitical rivalries, and complicating efforts to maintain strategic stability. Scharre highlights structural competition and the democratic response to authoritarian tech governance; Johnson emphasizes nuclear risks and the dangers of strategic miscalculation; and *The AI Wave in Defence Innova-*

tion provides a comparative overview of national strategies, handling international diversity of AI implementation. Together, they converge on a critical insight: AI's role in international security is inseparable from political institutions, ethical standards, and existing power asymmetries and conventional-asymmetric military capabilities. Managing AI as a force multiplier will require not only technological adaptation but also multilateral coordination, norm development, and long-term strategic calculations.

Conclusion

The impact of military AI on international security architecture signifies not merely technical advancement but a gradual process of transformation that influences both national and international security dynamics. This article demonstrates that AI, through its military applications, is reshaping national security, deepening great power competition, and altering the very nature of strategic stability. Although military AI is not revolutionary, it represents a transformative force that gradually reshapes core concepts in international relations, such as national security, deterrence, escalation, first-second strike dynamics, and strategic stability. As states integrate AI into military operations, decision-making cycles will accelerate, human control and oversight will diminish, and the likelihood of miscalculation or unintended conflict will increase. The opacity of AI systems, particularly in high-stakes domains like nuclear command and control, poses serious challenges to strategic stability and the nature of escalation. Central tension stems from the dual-use nature of AI. While it enhances precision and operational efficiency in military applications, it simultaneously generates vulnerabilities, including susceptibility to adversarial manipulation, system failure, and heightened uncertainty.

Drawing on the comparative review of three key works, this article suggests that strategic stability in the AI era will depend less on the technology itself and more on the institutional and normative frameworks within which it is integrated, regulated, and controlled. AI does not inherently destabilize the balance of deterrence, but in the absence of deliberate mechanisms for control, communication, and verification, its adoption may erode the very foundations that have sustained peace in the nuclear age.

National security in the age of competitive AI is evolving into a structure that transcends conventional threat paradigms, encompassing uncertainty, interdependence, and complex multi-actor dynamics. While the integration of AI into military strategy appears inevitable, ignoring its strategic and ethical consequences risks triggering irreversible security crises. One of the most urgent questions in the coming era of international relations, therefore, is how to preserve peace, security, and stability in a world increasingly defined by competitive artificial intelligence.