

INSIGHTS

The Illusion of the Algorithm: Precision, Attrition, and the New Global Security Divide

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For decades, the promise of military innovation has centered on a singular vision: the "clean" war. In this techno-utopian narrative, artificial intelligence (AI), persistent surveillance, and precision-guided munitions would compress decision cycles, eliminate the fog of war, and allow for rapid, decisive breakthroughs that bypass the bloody stagnations of the 20th century. However, the contemporary reality of battlefields in Ukraine and Gaza, alongside the shifting dynamics of global defense cooperation, suggests a far more complex trajectory. Instead of expanding military choice, the integration of AI is increasingly narrowing it through a process of battlefield filtering, while creating a new form of strategic dependence that threatens to further marginalize the Global South (Ślugocki, 2026; Tassos, 2026).

Understanding Capability: The Conversion Problem

To understand the impact of AI, one must first demystify what military AI capability represents. It is not merely a standalone application but a technology that supports existing functional processes, extracting patterns from vast datasets to emulate or exceed human intellectual capacity (Szabadföldi, 2021). National AI capability is fundamentally a problem of conversion occurring across three interdependent layers: Invention (technical possibility), Industrialization (scaling via computational infrastructure), and Operationalization (embedding AI into military workflows) (Tassos, 2026).

A state may possess advanced research but remain strategically impotent if it lacks access to chokepoints like high-end semiconductors or hyperscale cloud environments (Tassos, 2026). This private mediation means military power is no longer solely in the hands of the state but is mediated by private firms that control the infrastructure through which national capability must pass (Tassos, 2026). Consequently, strategic AI capability depends on connecting firm-controlled models and compute infrastructures to operational workflows, creating a concentration risk where a few private platforms become unavoidable intermediaries in national security (Tassos, 2026).

The Battlefield Filtering Model: The Reality of Attrition

The war in Ukraine has served as a brutal corrective to the myth of the clean breakthrough. Despite the rapid diffusion of drones and persistent surveillance, creating a transparent battlefield, the conflict has repeatedly returned to positional and attritional fighting (Ślugocki, 2026). This paradox is explained by the Battlefield Filtering Model, which identifies four interacting filters that reduce

the range of viable military options: the physical environment, sustainment capacity, organizational learning, and adversarial adaptation (Sługocki, 2026).

In a high-transparency environment, the arithmetic of war changes (Sługocki, 2026). When every movement is observed by drone ISR and commercial satellites, large-scale maneuver becomes prohibitively expensive (Sługocki, 2026). Transparency does not eliminate uncertainty; it merely accelerates the rate at which penalties are applied to forces misaligned with their environment (Sługocki, 2026). Consequently, forces are filtered toward fortified strategic complexes and sustained indirect fire, where the decisive variable is not technological novelty but the industrial depth to replace losses (Betz, 2022, as cited in Sługocki, 2026). For many states, technology sets a ceiling that operational conditions rarely permit them to reach (Sługocki, 2026).

The Ethical Paradox: Distinction for Indiscriminate Killing

Perhaps the most disturbing impact of military AI is found while the military used AI systems like "The Gospel" and "Lavender" to produce targets at a rate 50 times faster than human teams, the result was a scale of civilian death and infrastructure destruction that appeared indiscriminate (Schwarz, 2026).

Schwarz (2026) argues that AI was used not to reduce harm but to provide personalized justifications for mass killing. In an era of humanitized violence, where international humanitarian law (IHL) requires target distinction, AI serves as a "legitimation tool" (Schwarz, 2026). By algorithmically incriminating buildings and individuals based on big data patterns, AI transforms hay into needles, legitimizing the flattening of entire neighborhoods under the guise of technical precision (Schwarz, 2026). This suggests that even an error-free AI system can lead to horrific social impacts by dramatically reducing the cost and time of target production (Schwarz, 2026).

Impact on the Global South: Strategic Dependence and Proxy Risks

The implications for the Global South are profound and often overlooked. Defense cooperation is a primary tool for major powers to maintain influence, but it is frequently "strategically bankrupt" (Ross, 2026). While leading militaries use "delegation strategies" to shift risk to proxies in the Global South, such as in Somalia, the Sahel, or Uganda, these initiatives often fail because they ignore local political-economic dynamics (Ross, 2026).

The democratization of AI technology further complicates this. While reduced costs might seem to empower smaller states, the reality is a growing strategic dependence (Tassos, 2026). Small and medium states in the Global South often lack the industrialization layer of AI, the chips, the cloud access, and the energy-intensive data centers (Tassos, 2026). This leaves them dependent on "alliances as conversion infrastructures," where access to AI capability is conditioned by the interests of the provider (Tassos, 2026).

Furthermore, when major powers apply a peanut butter spread approach to defense cooperation—providing unfocused assistance to over 170 countries, they often exacerbate instability (Ross, 2026). In Iraq, the pursuit of conflicting strategies (delegation for counterinsurgency vs. systemic capacity-building) led to an Iraqi Security Force (ISF) that collapsed because it lacked the institutional enablers like logistics and command-and-control to survive without its sponsor (Ross, 2026). For states in the Global South, being a test lab for prototypical AI systems or a proxy for high-risk operations carries the burden of agency loss and long-term catastrophic forgetting of local military expertise (Klonowska, 2026; Ross, 2026).

Reliability and the Role of the Integrator

As we integrate AI into resort-to-force (RtF) decisions, the group of integrators, the project managers and systems engineers who bridge the gap between developers and users, becomes critical (Müller et al., 2025). These actors bear the responsibility of ensuring AI fits into the existing normative environment, including Article 36 of the Geneva Convention, which requires legal reviews of all new weapons (Klonowska, 2026; Müller et al., 2025).

However, AI reliability is elusive. Machine-learning models are prone to concept drift, where patterns learned from training data become unsuitable in a changed battlefield environment (Klonowska, 2026). They also suffer from catastrophic forgetting, where learning a new task causes the system to abruptly degrade on previously learned ones (Klonowska, 2026). Tinkering practices reveal that a commander's reasonable reliance on AI cannot derive from experience, since yesterday's performance is a limited indication of tomorrow's accuracy (Klonowska, 2026).

Müller et al. (2025) propose 10 pillars of responsible integration, emphasizing that technical artifacts have politics. Integrators must navigate automation bias, where users may defer to AI recommendations in as little as 20 seconds without examining raw data (Müller et al., 2025; Schwarz, 2026). Without robust human-in-the-loop systems and action rate limiters to dampen

escalatory feedback loops between adversarial AIs, the world risks artificial stupidity, where algorithms misinterpret data without common sense (Davis & Bracken, 2022; Müller et al., 2025).

Conclusion: Doing Less, Better

The future of global security lies not in the uncritical adoption of AI, but in a step change in strategic design. Ross (2026) offers a vital plea to policymakers: do less. Instead of spreading limited resources across hundreds of unsuccessful initiatives, providers should focus on a few and critical partnerships where they can invest in rigorous political-economy assessments and joint agreements (Ross, 2026).

For the Global South, digital sovereignty requires more than just buying software; it requires governed access to compute and the ability to maintain organizational coherence under pressure (Tassos, 2026). We must move beyond the illusion of reliability (Klonowska, 2026). AI does not replace the enduring constraints of terrain, sustainment, and human endurance; it merely intensifies them (Sługocki, 2026). To ignore this is to risk a future where precision is used to justify indiscrimination, and where the Global South remains trapped in a cycle of strategic dependence and "industrialized extermination" (Ross, 2026; Schwarz, 2026).

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