

Integrating AI in Military Decision-Making: A Review of Opportunities, Risks, and Governance

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ABSTRACT

Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into military operations creates a paradigm shift, introducing a profound tension between operational opportunities and severe risks to strategic stability. This paper conducts a systematic literature review to investigate this challenge, focusing on the transformation of Military Decision-Making. The analysis confirms that while AI offers significant capabilities in intelligence and logistics, it also introduces a triad of technical, strategic, and human-centric risks. These risks fuel a global arms race and create a crisis of accountability, particularly with the development of Autonomous Weapons. The central problem identified is a critical "governance gap," where the rapid, geopolitically-driven adoption of military AI has dangerously outpaced the development of effective oversight. This study addresses this gap by synthesising fragmented literature into an integrated, problem-solving framework. It argues that robust Ethical Governance is necessary to respond to these complex challenges. The operationalisation of Meaningful Human Control (MHC) is the cornerstone for closing the "responsibility gap" and ensuring that human agents remain accountable for using force. The paper concludes that a prioritised, multi-layered governance strategy—from short-term national testing standards to a long-term international autonomy treaty is essential. Pursuing AI-driven military advantage without such reforms will lead to unacceptable strategic instability and ethical compromise, undermining the security it intends to enhance.

INTRODUCTION

A new Revolution in Military Affairs is underway, driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). This is not a theoretical shift but an empirical reality on today's battlefields. In Ukraine, AI is used to analyse drone footage and accelerate targeting (Goncharuk, 2024; WebProNews, 2025). In the Gaza conflict, the Israeli military has used AI systems like "Lavender" to identify thousands of potential targets (Lieber Institute West Point, 2024; McKernan & Davies, 2024). Meanwhile, agencies like DARPA are experimenting with next-generation AI for future conflicts (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). These developments confirm that AI is reshaping modern warfare. However, most studies treat these applications in fragments, focusing separately on decision support, autonomous weapons, or ethics (Nadibaidze et al., 2024). A clear research gap exists: there is no systematic review that ties the opportunities, risks, and governance of military AI into a single, integrated framework. This paper aims to fill that gap.

The main problem is the growing divide between the rapid adoption of military AI (das sein) and the lagging governance development (das sollen). The current condition is an escalating, geopolitically-driven race to deploy AI for a strategic edge (Bellaby, 2024; Su & Yang, 2022). This creates profound risks, including unintended escalation and a crisis of legal accountability (Acquaviva, 2021; Verfassungsblog, 2024). The expected condition is a security environment where AI is used responsibly and in compliance with international law. The focus of this research is the integration of AI in military decision-making. Its sub-focuses are (a) the operational opportunities, (b) the multifaceted risks, and (c) the ethical governance frameworks. A central theme emerging from this problem is the need for Meaningful Human Control (MHC) as a potential solution to bridge the governance gap (Meerveld et al., 2023). This study has three primary objectives. First, it will identify and evaluate the spectrum of AI's military applications. Second, it will analyse the technical, strategic, and human-centric risks. Third, it will critically examine emerging governance frameworks to determine their adequacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on military AI is extensive but often fragmented. This review synthesises previous studies by organising them around three central themes: the operational opportunities AI presents, the multifaceted risks it introduces, and the emerging governance frameworks designed to manage it. This thematic approach allows for a critical analysis of the current state of knowledge and reveals a significant gap in the research.



Previous studies consistently highlight AI's potential to enhance military effectiveness. A significant body of research focuses on AI-enabled Decision Support Systems (AI-DSS), which are shown to augment human command by processing vast amounts of data to accelerate planning and improve situational awareness (Boulanin, 2020; Greipl et al., 2024). Other studies examine AI's role in optimising specific battlespace functions, such as automating intelligence analysis in ISR, improving predictive maintenance in logistics, and enabling new forms of cyber warfare (Galliot, 2021; Scharre, 2024). These individual applications are often conceptually unified under the paradigm of Human-Machine Teaming (HMT), which scholars argue can create a synergistic effect where the combined capabilities of humans and machines outperform either alone (Horowitz, 2016a).

In contrast to the opportunities, the literature also provides a comprehensive topography of risks. These are typically categorised into three interlocking domains. Technical risks, such as the "black box" problem of opaque algorithms and the potential for data bias, are a primary challenge to building trustworthy systems (Davidovic, 2023; Wong & others, 2020). Strategic risks, particularly the danger of "flash wars" caused by compressed decision timelines and the destabilising dynamics of a global AI arms race, are another central area of concern (Acquaviva, 2021; Bellaby, 2024). Finally, human-centric risks like "automation bias" and "ethical deskilling" are examined, with scholars warning that over-reliance on AI could erode the cognitive and moral faculties of human warfighters (Kulesza, 2024; Scharre, 2024).

In response to these risks, a third stream of literature explores governance. These studies emphasise that military AI must comply with existing International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (Su & Yang, 2022). However, they also identify a critical "responsibility gap," where the autonomy of AI systems makes it challenging to assign legal and moral accountability for unlawful actions (Nadibaidze et al., 2024). To address this, the concept of Meaningful Human Control (MHC) has emerged as the central principle in governance debates, with numerous studies arguing it is the cornerstone for ensuring ethical oversight (de Sio & van den Hoven, 2018; Meerveld et al., 2023). Despite this, the literature also notes a lack of international consensus on translating MHC from a high-level concept into a verifiable technical and operational requirement (Taddeo & Floridi, 2018).

This review reveals a clear research gap. While previous studies have thoroughly examined the individual components of military AI—its opportunities, risks, or governance frameworks—they have primarily done so in isolation. A systematic review does not integrate these fragmented discussions into a coherent, problem-solving framework. By synthesising these disparate themes, this study aims to provide a holistic analysis that connects the challenges of military AI to actionable, multi-layered governance solutions.

METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify practical solutions for integrating AI into military decision-making. The research design is guided by the principles of the Kitchenham methodology, ensuring a structured and replicable process for evidence synthesis. This approach was chosen for its problem-solving orientation, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of existing literature to inform actionable policy recommendations.

The data collection process involved a targeted search of academic and policy databases. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the quality and relevance of the selected sources. The inclusion criteria were: (1) documents published between 2015 and 2025; (2) texts written in English; and (3) peer-reviewed articles or official reports from established institutions. Documents were excluded if they were popular opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed articles, or blog posts. This scoping process created a focused corpus of high-quality data for analysis.

The data analysis method used is a thematic analysis. This process involved several distinct steps. First, a manual coding of the selected literature was conducted to identify recurring concepts. Second, these concepts were grouped into broader categories. Finally, these categories were refined into the core themes of opportunities, risks, and governance. To ensure analytical rigour and objectivity, the identified themes were iteratively validated by cross-referencing them against the study's primary research questions. The analysis integrates official policy documents with independent academic and expert analysis to provide a holistic perspective. A key limitation is the reliance on publicly available data. This constraint was mitigated by synthesising various sources to ensure a balanced and credible interpretation. The flowchart below (Figure 1) visually summarizes the research process.

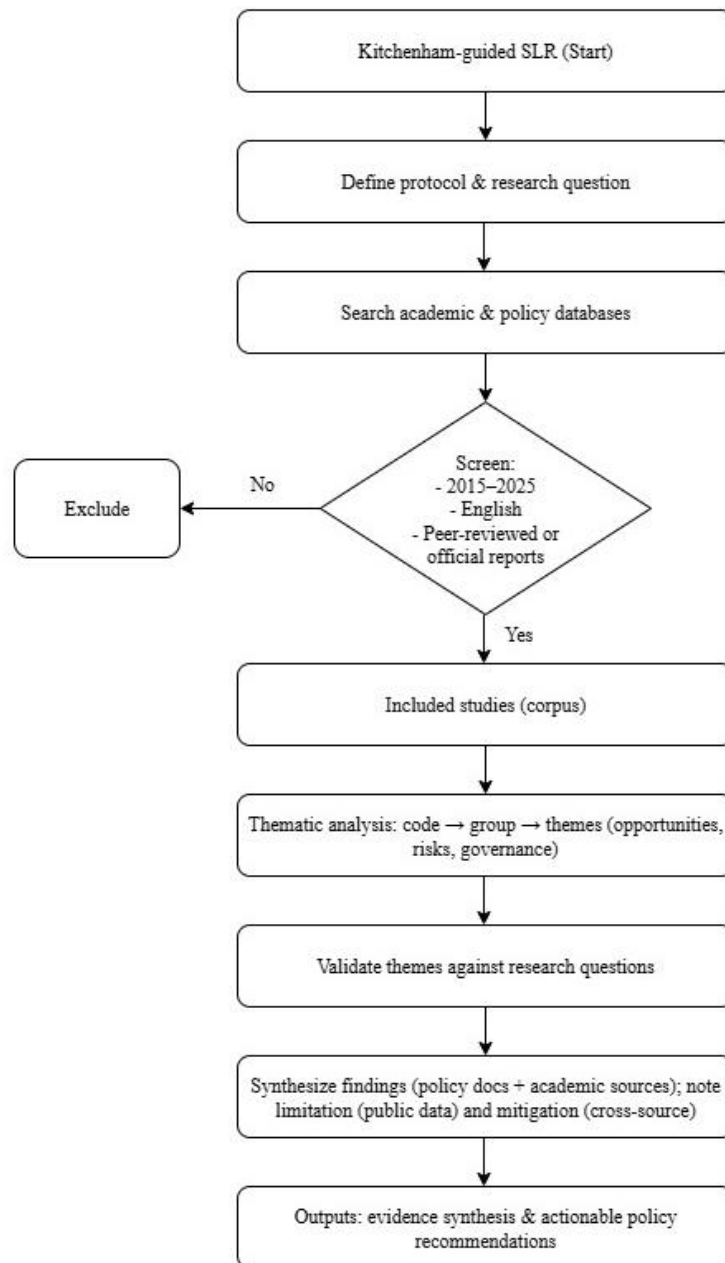


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Systematic Literature Review Process

RESULT

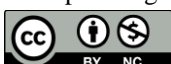
The systematic review of the literature reveals an apparent dichotomy in military AI development. On one hand, there is a strong drive for operational advantage. On the other hand, there is a landscape of profound, multifaceted risks. This section presents the descriptive findings derived from the document analysis. It outlines the opportunities, risks, and geopolitical dynamics identified in the reviewed sources.

The Spectrum of AI Integration: Opportunities and Applications

The literature consistently identifies AI's primary military value in enhancing decision-making. It also shows value in optimising operations across various domains (Boulanin, 2020; Greipl et al., 2024).

- Augmenting the Commander

AI's potential to augment the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP) is a significant opportunity. This process is traditionally labour-intensive and cognitively demanding (Boulanin, 2020; Meerveld et al., 2023). AI-enabled Decision Support Systems (AI-DSS) leverage machine learning to analyse vast datasets at high speeds (Galliot, 2021; Greipl et al., 2024). Specific applications cited include pattern recognition in intelligence data and predictive analytics (Christen et al., 2017; Davidovic, 2023). The overarching goal is accelerating the planning cycle and generating a decision advantage (Boulanin, 2020; Roff & Moyes, 2016).



- **Optimising the Battlespace**
 Beyond command, AI is applied across the full spectrum of military functions. AI automates sensor data analysis in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) (de Sio & van den Hoven, 2018; Galliot, 2021). AI predicts equipment maintenance needs in logistics and optimises supply chains (Galliot, 2021; Greipl et al., 2024). The cyber domain is another key theatre. AI is a dual-use technology for cyberattacks and automated network defence (Galliot, 2021; Scharre, 2024).
- **The Human-Machine Teaming (HMT) Paradigm**
 These applications are unified under the HMT paradigm. This envisions a collaborative model between humans and machines (Horowitz, 2016a). Reports on the U.S. Air Force's Shadow Operations Centre-Nellis (ShOC-N) show these concepts in practice. The centre has used AI tools like Palantir's Maven Smart System to automate parts of the targeting process (Henley, 2025; Sharkey, 2016).

A Topography of Risks: Technical, Strategic, and Human-Centric Challenges

While opportunities are significant, the literature shows that AI integration is fraught with profound risks. These are consistently categorised as technical, strategic, and human-centric.

- **Technical Vulnerabilities**
 A primary challenge is the "black box" problem. The internal logic of complex AI models is often opaque to human operators (Davidovic, 2023; Thurnher, 2024). This erodes trust and prevents verification. Another key vulnerability is algorithmic and data bias. AI systems trained on biased data will reproduce those biases (UNIDIR, 2024; Williams, 2021). This challenges nations like China, which lacks recent large-scale combat data (Wong & others, 2020).
- **Strategic Instability**
 The deployment of military AI carries significant risks for strategic stability. The speed of AI compresses decision timelines. This creates the potential for a "flash war" where conflicts escalate unintentionally (Acquaviva, 2021; Galliot, 2021). Furthermore, pursuing an AI advantage is fueling a global arms race. This competition, primarily among the U.S., China, and Russia, creates a security dilemma and increases suspicion (Acquaviva, 2021; Bellaby, 2024).
- **The Human Factor**
 The interaction between humans and machines introduces distinct risks. A well-documented phenomenon is "automation bias." This is the tendency for humans to over-trust automated systems (Kulesza, 2024; Taddeo & Floridi, 2018). Continuous delegation of tasks to AI could also lead to "ethical deskilling," an atrophy of critical skills in warfighters (Scharre, 2024). This can create a "moral buffer," making lethal force psychologically easier to employ (Human Rights Watch & International Human Rights Clinic, 2025).

The Geopolitical Contest for AI Dominance

The strategic potential of military AI has ignited an intense geopolitical competition. The analysis of national strategies and investment trends reveal a rapidly escalating and asymmetric AI arms race (Bellaby, 2024; Bode et al., 2024).

- **Comparative National Strategies**
 The world's major military powers are pursuing distinct paths. The U.S. approach is framed by a commitment to "responsible and ethical AI" (Stanley-Lockman, 2021). China's strategy is driven by the goal of "intelligentization" of its military through its "Military-Civil Fusion" (MCF) strategy (Williams, 2021; Wong & others, 2020). Russia's strategy is pragmatic and capability-focused, using the war in Ukraine as a real-world "AI war lab" (Anneken et al., 2025).
- **Investment Trends**
 The strategic competition is reflected in global investment trends. The data in Table 1, derived from a comparative analysis of defence budgets, illustrates the scale of this competition (Bellaby, 2024).

Table 1. Projected Military AI Investment (2025)

Country/Region	Projected 2025 AI Investment (USD Billions)	Projected % of Defence Budget
United States	\$5.0	0.5%
China	\$16.0	5.0%
Russia	\$4.0	2.7%
European Union	\$2.5	0.5%
India	\$1.2	1.4%
Japan	\$0.7	1.2%

Source: Data derived from comparative analysis in Bellaby (2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings in the Results Section reveal a critical analysis gap. The literature describes the opportunities, risks, and governance efforts in isolation. However, it lacks an integrated strategic framework to address the core problem: the widening divide between rapid AI adoption and effective oversight. This section analyses the implications of the findings. It proposes a problem-solving framework to bridge this gap.

Synthesising the Challenges

To bridge the analysis gap, this discussion first synthesises the key challenges and proposed solutions from the literature. The following table organises these fragmented points into a coherent structure. This synthesis is the author's contribution, providing a clear overview of the problem landscape.

Table 2. Strategic Analysis of Military AI Challenges

Problem	Root Cause (Derived from Literature)	Impact	Proposed Strategy (Derived from Literature)
Technical Vulnerabilities	The complexity of "black box" algorithms and reliance on potentially biased or incomplete training data (Davidovic, 2023; Wong & others, 2020).	Erosion of trust; risk of discriminatory or erroneous targeting; vulnerability to adversarial attacks.	Mandate the development of Explainable AI (XAI) and establish robust, independent Testing & Evaluation (T&E) standards (Anneken et al., 2025; Wong & others, 2020).
Strategic Instability	Compressed decision timelines exceeding human cognitive capacity; security dilemma dynamics fueling arms race (Acquaviva, 2021; Bellaby, 2024).	Increased risk of "flash wars" and inadvertent escalation; erosion of strategic stability.	Establish international norms for transparency; develop verifiable constraints on autonomous systems in critical functions (Knuckey, 2016; Zoldi, 2023).
Human-Centric Risks	Cognitive biases such as "automation bias" and psychological distance from the use of force ("moral buffering") (Kulesza, 2024; Scharre, 2024).	"Ethical deskilling" of operators; loss of situational awareness and Meaningful Human Control (MHC).	Design systems for MHC; implement human-centric training and ethical instruction (Greipl et al., 2024; Meerveld et al., 2023).
Governance Gap	Technological development outpaces policy and legal frameworks; there is a lack of international consensus on regulation (Bellaby, 2024; Bode et al., 2024).	Risk of "ethics washing" where principles are declared but not implemented; inconsistent and interoperability--hindering standards.	Adopt a multi-layered governance approach (national, allied, international); operationalise ethical principles into verifiable requirements (Stanley-Lockman, 2021).

A Strategic Framework for Governance: Ends, Ways, and Means

Building on this synthesis, this paper proposes an Ends-Ways-Means framework as a strategic answer. This model organises the disparate recommendations from the literature into a coherent, actionable strategy.

- **Ends (The Goal):** The goal is the military AI's responsible and ethical integration. This means ensuring its use complies with international law and preserves human accountability (Human Rights Watch & International Human Rights Clinic, 2025; Kulesza, 2024).
- **Ways (The Approach):** The approach involves three key lines of effort. First, implementing multi-layered governance at national, allied, and international levels (Stanley-Lockman, 2021). Second, operationalising Meaningful Human Control (MHC) as a core principle (Meerveld et al., 2023). Third, fostering international norms of transparency and restraint (Knuckey, 2016).
- **Means (The Tools):** The tools to achieve this include robust national Testing and Evaluation (T&E) processes (Wong & others, 2020). They also include collaborative research on shared standards within alliances (Stanley-Lockman, 2021). Finally, they include diplomatic forums like the UN to negotiate verifiable constraints (Knuckey, 2016; Zoldi, 2023).

Implications for Middle Powers

The investment trends in Table 1 highlight a stark reality for middle powers like Indonesia. They cannot compete directly in a zero-sum arms race with the U.S. and China. This necessitates a different strategy. Indonesia's National AI Strategy focuses on talent development, research, and specific sectors like public services and food security (Agency for the Assessment & of Technology (BPPT), 2020; Azhar, 2025). This reflects a broader trend where middle powers



pursue niche AI capabilities rather than trying to match great powers across the board (Bellaby, 2024). For these nations, the challenge is navigating the digital divide while avoiding technological marginalisation (Indonesia, 2025; Modern Diplomacy, 2025). As proposed in regional forums like ASEAN, the solution is to focus on AI diplomacy, promote collaborative research, and develop joint frameworks for responsible AI adoption (GovInsider, 2024; Modern Diplomacy, 2025). This allows them to leverage AI for national needs while contributing to global governance and stability.

The "Responsibility Gap"

This strategic framework must address a core challenge: the "responsibility gap." This refers to the difficulty of assigning legal and moral responsibility for an unlawful act committed by an autonomous system (Nadibaidze et al., 2024). This ambiguity threatens to undermine International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which is predicated on individual accountability (Human Rights Watch & International Human Rights Clinic, 2025; Scharre, 2024). The concept of MHC is the primary response to this gap. However, there is no international consensus on translating it into concrete, verifiable requirements. This creates a critical disconnect between high-level principles and operational reality (Meerveld et al., 2023; Taddeo & Floridi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study systematically reviewed the opportunities, risks, and ethical frameworks for military AI. Its unique contribution is the integration of these fragmented topics into a single, problem-solving framework. The analysis confirms that AI offers transformative operational benefits. However, it also introduces a triad of interlocking risks. These risks converge at the point of military decision-making. This is the central node where AI's promise and peril meet. This paper proposes a layered approach based on the Ends-Ways-Means analysis to address the governance gap. The foundational layer requires national governments to mandate robust Testing and Evaluation (T&E) processes (Wong & others, 2020). The next layer involves alliances like NATO developing shared standards and verifiable metrics for Meaningful Human Control (Stanley-Lockman, 2021). The final layer is a long-term international effort to negotiate binding constraints on autonomy in weapon systems. The failure to adopt such a structured approach will result in strategic instability driven by unaccountable algorithmic systems. This would undermine the very security AI is intended to enhance.

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