

Francesca Giovannini, Managing the Atom, HKS, Harvard Univ., MA, USA

Integration of AI in military early warning systems

Early warning systems are designed to detect and respond to imminent threats or conditions that could cause harm to people, property, or the environment. Throughout the Cold War, superpowers heavily invested in these systems as part of their strategic defense initiatives, which were crucial for maintaining awareness and readiness in the face of potential nuclear threats. Notably, the Soviet Union developed an automated system known as the Perimeter, also informally referred to as "Dead Hand." This system was designed to ensure that the Soviet Union could respond to a nuclear strike even if its leadership was incapacitated, thereby enhancing the credibility of its retaliatory capabilities and deterrence signaling.

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced extraordinary new opportunities to further enhance detection capabilities and automate responses. AI significantly improves the speed at which data is processed and decisions are made—crucial in nuclear scenarios where mere seconds can determine the outcome. Furthermore, AI's ability to handle vast and varied data sources enhances the scalability and adaptability of these systems, enabling them to function effectively under various threat scenarios. Autonomous diagnostics facilitated by AI reduce reliance on human operators, minimize errors due to human fatigue or oversight, and enhance the overall reliability of the nuclear deterrent.

However, the integration of AI also introduces pressures on decision-makers and could lead to potential complacency. The growing trust in computerized systems might result in reduced human oversight, which carries its own set of risks, particularly in situations where human judgment is crucial.

The core argument of the talk is that in the integration of AI into early warning systems, there is a notable risk that might arise from an overemphasis on predictive analytics at the expense of diagnostics. While predictive analytics offers valuable insights into potential future threats by analyzing patterns and trends from historical data, it inherently relies on the assumption that future events will mirror past ones. This reliance can sometimes overshadow the critical need for diagnostics, which focuses on analyzing and understanding current system states and identifying the root causes of issues as they occur. The consequence of prioritizing predictive analytics over diagnostics in early warning systems can lead to a scenario where systems are less prepared to deal with novel or evolving threats that have not been previously encountered or recorded.