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AI and National Security: The United States Risks Losing Its Competitive Edge

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The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S Government.

Introduction

Following the release of intelligent chatbot ChatGPT and its successor GPT-4, artificial intelligence (AI) has gained national attention. Even non-technologists have likely heard of the seemingly sentient capabilities of this AI to do everything from passing standardized tests to creating a productive and personalized daily schedule. But this is only the beginning. History will likely remember these years as the start of AI's exponential growth as it spreads into every area of society.

Many technologists, AI supporters, and futurists applaud these rapid technological changes. Others voice their dismay and point to the ethical, moral, and privacy concerns of non-human, semi-sentient programs potentially deciding or dictating outcomes for their human counterparts. Transhumanism—transcending human limitations through technological intervention—lurks behind those fears as a more existential threat of an AI-dominated future.[1] Among those who voiced apprehension, the Future of Life Institute recently issued a report that garnered several thousand signatures of leading experts like Elon Musk and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak. They called for a six-month pause on some types of AI development to allow AI policy to catch up.[2]

The report warned of the potential malicious uses of AI and advocated for increased regulation to prevent the damage AI might cause. While these and other recommendations have merit, a six-month pause could create more harm than it would avoid. Competitors such as China are advancing AI innovation, which endangers American national security and chips away at the United States' global competitive edge. Instead of pausing, the United States government should redouble its efforts to develop and deploy AI while also creating policies that protect its users and mitigate ethical concerns.

The Society-Altering Nature of AI

It can be easy to dismiss recent developments in AI as just another small step in the technological progress of modern society. However, AI is vastly different from even the giant technological leaps achieved in the past. AI researchers believe AI will "disrupt vast areas of our lives" and soon "become advanced enough to match or outperform humans in activities like translating languages, writing essays, working retail, driving trucks, and even performing surgery."[3]

AI is set to change the world. But what exactly is AI? In popular imagination, it has ranged from a rogue spaceship computer to an android designed for protocol functions. But the reality is much less fantastical. AI is simply the ability of a machine to intelligently perform "complex behavior that is conducive to reaching goals" without human intervention.[4] The

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[1] Jim Eckman, "Transhumanism and the Christian Worldview - Issues in Perspective," *Issues In Perspective* (blog), March 6, 2021, http://issuesinperspective.com/2021/03/transhumanism-and-the-christian-worldview/.

[2] "Policymaking in the Pause: What Can Policymakers Do Now to Combat Risks from Advanced AI Systems?" (Future of Life Institute, April 19, 2023), https://futureoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FLI_Policymaking_In_The_Pause.pdf.

[3] Kate K. Mays et al., "AI as a Boss? A National US Survey of Predispositions Governing Comfort with Expanded AI Roles in Society," *AI & SOCIETY* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 1588, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-021-01253-6.

[4] Vincent C. Müller, "Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2021 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021),

Department of Defense (DoD) puts it even more succinctly and defines AI as "the ability of machines to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence."[5]

AI is already at work throughout modern society. It can park a car or safely turn a vehicle against oncoming traffic. AI can automate common workplace tasks and make flight control decisions for a drone. AI could replace up to 30 percent of human labor by 2030.[6] Some futurists envision AI-enabled systems and devices that provide everything from curated virtual shopping experiences to AI-driven medical diagnoses from the comfort of home.[7]

Comparing this progress in AI to other transformative technological innovations can be tempting. The race to develop AI might seem, for example, like a new industrial revolution or the next space race.[8] But, such characterizations miss the fundamentally society-altering nature of AI. The National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) recognized this when they asserted AI to be "world altering."[9] AI's far-reaching ethical implications add further weight to this massive technological shift.

AI-related ethical concerns range and vary greatly. But they can be roughly summarized in three overarching categories. The first category is AI bias and issues associated with automated decision-making. This could be bias in hiring practices, questions of responsibility for driverless car crashes, or the dilemma of empowering drones to make lethal battlefield decisions.[10] The second category is using AI to replace human workers and the implications for social hierarchy and income inequality. And the third is the broad category of AI misuse, which could be state surveillance, manipulating public opinion, or something as simple as cheating with an AI-written term paper.[11] A perhaps more distant possibility is that AI-enabled transhumanism could introduce the potential for AI-driven ethical reasoning to supersede and transform that of its creators, completely rewriting the three categories above.[12]

National Security Implications of AI

AI's capabilities also present added challenges in the realm of national security. AI will amplify nation-state efforts to conduct malicious cyber activities. AI could be entrusted to make tactical battlefield decisions that could accidentally (or intentionally) accelerate conflicts beyond

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https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/ethics-ai/; Venema Liesbeth, "Defining a Role for AI Ethics in National Security," *Nature Machine Intelligence* 3, no. 5 (May 2021): 370–71, https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-021-00344-9.

[5] "Artificial Intelligence: DOD Should Improve Strategies, Inventory Process, and Collaboration Guidance" (United States Government Accountability Office, March 2022), https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-105834.pdf.

[6] Cem Dilmegani, "Top 9 Ethical Dilemmas of AI and How to Navigate Them in 2023," February 22, 2023, https://research.aimultiple.com/ai-ethics/.

[7] Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *The Future Is Faster Than You Think: How Converging Technologies Are Transforming Business, Industries, and Our Lives* (New York ; London: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[8] Mays et al., "AI as a Boss?"; "Final Report" (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, March 1, 2021), https://www.nscai.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final_Report_Executive_Summary.pdf.

[9] "Final Report."

[10] Dilmegani, "Top 9 Ethical Dilemmas of AI and How to Navigate Them in 2023"; Henry Farrell, Abraham Newman, and Jeremy Wallace, "Spirals of Delusion: How AI Distorts Decision-Making and Makes Dictators More Dangerous," *Foreign Affairs* (New York, United Kingdom: Council on Foreign Relations NY, October 2022).

[11] Dilmegani, "Top 9 Ethical Dilemmas of AI and How to Navigate Them in 2023."

[12] J.R. Miller, "Eugenics, Transhumanism, and Artificial Intelligence," *Mind Matters* (blog), January 13, 2022, https://mindmatters.ai/2022/01/eugenics-transhumanism-and-artificial-intelligence/.

the speed of human comprehension. And AI will also likely revolutionize intelligence-gathering activities.[13] Although these are only some potential outcomes, it seems certain that "the integration of AI into military and intelligence systems heightens the risk of instability and conflict between the United States and its rivals across a spectrum of scenarios."[14]

China stands out as chief among these rivals—particularly in developing and implementing AI.[15] China's New Generation Artificial Intelligence Plan calls for China to be "the world's primary AI innovation center" by 2030.[16] They have already begun to use AI in training for military commanders.[17] China's efforts have placed AI among the "five fields with [the] most intensive US-China tech competition."[18]

China's ideology makes their AI ascendence even more threatening. For example, China uses AI to violate the human rights of its Uyghur population. And they pursue technological development without fully considering its potential adverse effects.[19] Additionally, China bolsters its AI progress through illegal transfers, corporate investment in American companies, and intellectual property (IP) theft by exploiting the American economy as well as through foreign intelligence cyber and technical operations.[20] China's seemingly utilitarian AI ethical framework fundamentally differs from the United States' approach. It could give them an advantage as they use their end goals to justify their nefarious means of attaining them.[21]

China's efforts also threaten American AI leadership. The NSCAI noted that "for the first time since World War II, America's technological predominance—the backbone of its economic and military power—is under threat."[22] Yet, the United States still has room to maneuver. Despite China's efforts, the United States still leads the world in AI. The Global and National AI Vibrancy Rankings and the Global AI Index place the United States far ahead of its second-place

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[13] Eric Schmidt, "AI, Great Power Competition & National Security," *Daedalus* 151, no. 2 (2022): 288–98.

[14] Schmidt.

[15] *See* Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 2022, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2022 Annual Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission," November 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf.

[16] Graham Webster et al., "Full Translation: China's 'New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan' (2017)" (Stanford University, August 1, 2017), https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/full-translation-chinas-new-generation-artificial-intelligence-development-plan-2017/.

[17] Suyash Desai and Manoj Kewalramani, "Xi's Military Reforms and Its Efficacy in Furthering China's National Security Objectives," *India Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 429–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221108249.

[18] Kevin Honglin Zhang, "U.S.-China Economic Links and Technological Decoupling," *The Chinese Economy*, February 7, 2023, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2023.2173399.

[19] Bill Drexel and Hannah Kelley, "China Is Flirting with AI Catastrophe," *Foreign Affairs*, May 30, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1130375.

[20] Cameron F. Kerry, Joshua P. Meltzer, and Matt Sheehan, "Can Democracies Cooperate with China on AI Research?: Rebalancing AI Research Networks," *Brookings Institution Reports* (Washington, United States: The Brookings Institution, January 2023), https://www.proquest.com/docview/2766679280/abstract/84226C10AFDC4C82PQ/1; National Counterintelligence and Security Center, "National Counterintelligence Strategy of the United States of America 2020-2022" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 7, 2020), https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/features/20200205-National_CI_Strategy_2020_2022.pdf.

[21] Kerby Anderson, "Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," *Probe for Answers* (blog), May 27, 2004, https://probe.org/utilitarianism-the-greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number/.

[22] "Final Report."

competitor, China.[23] But this news should not relieve policymakers. The gap is narrowing.[24] China produces more AI engineers and research than the United States. And China is set to "overtake the United States in its share of the top one percent of the world's most-cited AI papers."[25]

Immediate Action is Needed

The nation that gains AI superiority will have unmatched strategic and tactical advantages. If China gets there first, they will set the terms of engagement. AI supremacy, coupled with quantum computing capability, will allow its possessors to "reshape the world to their benefit."[26] In 2023, the RAND Corporation testified to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs that AI presents "grave security challenges for which we are currently unprepared."[27] The NSCAI argued that China could surpass the United States within a decade, resulting in the loss of "our armed forces' competitive military-technical advantage."[28] This threat is severe when considering Chinese progress is fueled by state-funded innovation, theft, and espionage—effectively allowing them to leapfrog traditional development processes.

The United States must take immediate action to prioritize AI development across government sectors and prevent AI IP theft, including the robust measures recommended in the latest National Counterintelligence Strategy.[29] The pause suggested by the Future of Life Institute assumes that the United States can afford a development hiatus. The geopolitical reality suggests otherwise. The Senate Committee on Armed Services recently heard a consensus that a pause in AI development "would be deleterious to the national security of the country."[30] The Atlantic Council, a foreign policy think tank, argued that lagging in AI development "could compromise the strategic, technological, and operational advantages retained by the US military since the end of the Cold War."[31] If policymakers do not move quickly to solidify and further develop American leadership in AI, it makes room "for a geopolitical challenge to the United States and its allies."[32]

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[23] "The Global AI Index," Tortoise, accessed May 11, 2023, https://www.tortoisemedia.com/intelligence/global-ai/; "Global AI Vibrancy Tool," accessed May 10, 2023, https://aiindex.stanford.edu/vibrancy/.

[24] Jason Matheny, "Challenges to U.S. National Security and Competitiveness Posed by AI" (RAND Corporation, March 8, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CTA2654-1.html; Zhang, "U.S.-China Economic Links and Technological Decoupling."

[25] Drexel and Kelley, "China Is Flirting with AI Catastrophe."

[26] Johnathan Rudy, "'OK Google' Play the National Anthem: Arms Control and Eminent Domain to Maintain America's Technological Advantage," *Journal of Law, Technology, and the Internet* 12 (2021), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A676190152/GBIB?u=vic_liberty&sid=bookmark-GBIB&xid=3d09b7af.

[27] Matheny, "Challenges to U.S. National Security and Competitiveness Posed by AI."

[28] "Final Report."

[29] National Counterintelligence and Security Center, "National Counterintelligence Strategy of the United States of America 2020-2022."

[30] Christopher Burgess, "AI-Powered Chatbots: The Threats to National Security Are Only Beginning," *CSO* (blog), April 25, 2023, https://www.csoonline.com/article/3694509/ai-powered-chatbots-the-threats-to-national-security-are-only-beginning.html.

[31] Margarita Konaev and Tate Nurkin, "Eye to Eye in AI: Developing Artificial Intelligence for National Security and Defense" (Snowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, May 25, 2022), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/eye-to-eye-in-ai/.

[32] Schmidt, "AI, Great Power Competition & National Security."

Maintaining American AI Leadership

It will take a whole-of-government approach to maintain and grow the United States' competitive edge in AI. Additionally, given AI's complexity and far-reaching implications, serious collaboration will be required between government, academia, and industry to create effective approaches—more than can be discussed in a few pages here. However, four principles stand out as potential focus points for any comprehensive AI strategy.

First, the government must work closely with private industry and prioritize removing acquisition red tape. The Atlantic Council found that complicated bureaucratic hurdles and a risk-averse culture prevented the DoD from integrating external innovation.[33] Former Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, suggested that collaboration between the public and private sectors could help mitigate some AI ethical concerns—like those mentioned by the Future of Life Institute.[34] One way to implement this would be to facilitate fellowships between major AI innovators and the public sector.[35] This could create greater integration on technical and leadership levels.

Second, government leaders need to agree on the severity of the problem. The DoD has acknowledged the need to implement AI strategies but has yet to present and report on a comprehensive approach.[36] The DoD must immediately create an unclassified strategy (to the extent possible) to outcompete China with AI national security solutions. An unclassified strategy is crucial to partnering with industry—the domain where AI innovation is occurring.[37]

The Future of Life Institute has valid concerns over AI's ethical and social implications. China is already demonstrating how AI can control populations and manipulate national narratives. Yet, several institutions and organizations already have implementable ethical guidelines for AI.[38] These principles find their origins in classical liberal thinking, natural law, and the rights protected by the Constitution. These protections can be implemented alongside AI development. This cannot be "ethics washing," but policy resulting from debate and reflection.[39]

Third, the United States must address IP theft and the exploitation of the American economy in the domain of AI by geostrategic competitors—including China's foreign intelligence, cyber, and technical operations. Even if American policies are ethically developed, China could repurpose American technology without American ethical controls.[40] Policymakers should review cooperation with China on AI research to ensure China has no stake in or influence over nonpublic technologies.[41] They should also update export controls to prevent China from acquiring AI-related national security technology.[42]

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[33] Konaev and Nurkin, "Eye to Eye in AI."

[34] Ash Carter, "The Moral Dimension of AI-Assisted Decision-Making: Some Practical Perspectives from the Front Lines," *Daedalus* 151, no. 2 (2022): 299–308.

[35] Matheny, "Challenges to U.S. National Security and Competitiveness Posed by AI."

[36] "Artificial Intelligence: DOD Should Improve Strategies, Inventory Process, and Collaboration Guidance."

[37] Rudy, "'OK Google' Play the National Anthem: Arms Control and Eminent Domain to Maintain America's Technological Advantage."

[38] *See* The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, "Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles," *ERLC* (blog), accessed June 10, 2023, https://erlc.com/resource-library/statements/artificial-intelligence-an-evangelical-statement-of-principles/.

[39] Müller, "Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics."

[40] Drexel and Kelley, "China Is Flirting with AI Catastrophe."

[41] Kerry, Meltzer, and Sheehan, "Can Democracies Cooperate with China on AI Research?"

[42] Rudy, "'OK Google' Play the National Anthem: Arms Control and Eminent Domain to Maintain America's Technological Advantage."

Fourth, leaders and lawmakers should work to reassure the public. "Over 50% of executives" fear the ethical implications of AI.[43] The public is more likely to embrace AI when humans are a visible part of an AI decision-making process.[44] The public and private sectors should design AI systems that explicitly include human interaction and publish the ethical frameworks they employ to grow confidence in AI. Fear is a natural reaction during major technological leaps. These fears must be directly addressed to lower AI's risk perception.[45]

Conclusion

The race to develop increasingly complex AI systems for national security and more is only just beginning. The United States must take seriously China's ambitions for AI supremacy. American leaders cannot afford to believe that American technological leadership will continue as it has for the past century. The ethical and national security implications of allowing an authoritarian and repressive regime to set the rules of international AI engagement should push the United States toward greater technological innovation and motivate policymakers to take the lead on establishing foundational ethical frameworks while avoiding the murky ethical dilemmas of transhumanism and its associated ideologies.[46] AI policy regarding the ethics and use of AI does need to catch up—but not at the expense of national security.

The changes required to maintain a technological competitive edge will not be easy to implement. The NSCAI admitted that such shifts "will be expensive and require a significant change in mindset."[47] This means that all areas of government must work together to help the public believe in the importance of AI, clear red tape, and quickly adopt a robust ethical framework. Ultimately, American national security depends on the continued development of AI systems alongside effective counterintelligence policies and measures to mitigate the exploitation of the American economy. American leaders must take the Chinese threat seriously and work hard to counter it.

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[43] Beena Ammanath and Reid Blackman, "Everyone in Your Organization Needs to Understand AI Ethics," *Harvard Business Review*, July 26, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/07/everyone-in-your-organization-needs-to-understand-ai-ethics.

[44] Christopher Whyte, "Learning to Trust Skynet: Interfacing with Artificial Intelligence in Cyberspace," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 308–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2180882.

[45] Mays et al., "AI as a Boss?"

[46] Miller, "Eugenics, Transhumanism, and Artificial Intelligence"; Jason Thacker, "Transhumanism Is Yet Another Temptation to Play God," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), June 3, 2019, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/transhumanism-image-god/.

[47] "Final Report."

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