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Autonomous Weapons and Military Strategy: Assessing Pakistan's Role in South Asia's Security Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The rapid application of Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS) into contemporary military capabilities is reshaping the deterrence frameworks and local security situations, especially in nuclearized affairs like South Asia. This paper explores the strategic future of AWS to Pakistan in the light of the longer-term rivalry with India. The research, led by three objectives, first seeks to examine how AWS influences classical deterrence theory and Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) posture of Pakistan. Second, it evaluates the changing AWS capacities, diplomatic stance and defense alliances of Pakistan in the development of its military strategy. Third, it comes up with policy-based recommendations on the controlled adoption of AWS in order to strengthen the stabilizing role of Pakistan in South Asia. The research relies on the qualitative research of the official documents, such as defense policy, military statements, and international regulatory documents. The analysis of data was carried out with the help of an interpretive analytical approach, which allows an in-depth perception of strategic narratives, the change in the doctrines, and policy intentions. The results show that AWS are accelerating the decision-making process, making the calculations of deterring more difficult, and causing new escalation risks in the India-Pakistan security equation. Simultaneously, the fact that Pakistan seeks AI-empowered surveillance, unmanned platforms, and self-striking possibilities demonstrates an approach of asymmetric technological equalization of the conventional superiority of India (Ahmed, 2022). The research arrives at the conclusion that although AWS enhances the credibility of deterrence by Pakistan, a unregulated use may destabilize a crisis. As a result, the study suggests an improvement of the regulatory frameworks, progress of regional-confidence building processes and further participation in forums like the United Nations, to make sure a responsible governance of the AWS is made.

Keywords: Autonomous Weapon Systems, Pakistan, South Asia, Military Strategy, Full Spectrum Deterrence, Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Stability, Deterrence Theory, Emerging Technologies, Regional Security.

INTRODUCTION

The development of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) is a significant change in the approach to warfare, especially in South Asia where Pakistan successfully negotiates the rising tension with India during an AI arms race. These systems where autonomous target detection and attack can be achieved put the traditional forms of deterrence such as the Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) in Pakistan to question as the AI integration in India increases the risk of escalation in cases that have escalated to a nuclear hot spot. The urgency behind this work is the necessity to evaluate how AWS would hurt recessed deterrence and provide Pakistan with possibilities of asymmetric improvements with the help of alliances, including with China.

One of the key issues is due to technological asymmetry: India is improving in AI-driven precision strikes, which endangers the strategic status of Pakistan and could potentially shorten decision-making time and aggravate errors in times of crisis. Canadian UN posts promote binding laws on lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS), based on moral and security concerns but Pakistan has already demonstrated its use of AI-powered drones like Buraq in its last operations, which indicates adaptability. This dichotomy highlights the more general element of security dynamics whereby AWS enhance the defensive possibilities as well as unintended war risks in the area.

The use of autonomous weapons is rapidly changing the warfare approaches and security relations in South Asia whereby Pakistan needs to orient its defense-related policies to ensure stability in its strategic level amidst the changing technological rivalry. This research evaluates the contribution of Pakistan in the security system of the region due to the combination of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS) and AI-capable military systems, concentrating on the problems and policy reaction systems based on its rivalry with India.

The fast-emerging systems of autonomous weapons are transforming the contemporary warfare and this research endeavor is driven by the need to understand the impacts of the technologies on the security dynamics of South Asia with particular emphasis on Pakistan. The issue lies in the fact that autonomous weapons may increase conflict and deterrence destabilization in a historically unstable area. The main aim is to examine how Pakistan is strategizing to address the autonomous weapons in the face of India that is increasingly modernizing its military and aggressively incorporating AI. The most important questions are how Pakistan views these systems, their effect on its military policy, and the consequences it would have on stability in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of the autonomous weapons systems (AWS) in Pakistan is extremely important to the national security apparatus in the country, especially in checking the growing militarization of India on artificial intelligence, and ensuring a strategic balance in South Asia. In the presence of regional tensions, Pakistan has been pragmatic in implementing AI in the platforms such as the Burraq and Shahpar drones which has increased precision strike capability and surveillance capability that has worked during past conflict situations, but Pakistan is advocating that international strictures be placed to curb escalation risks through joining hands with other countries, especially China, to invest in local R&D and collaboration with them, thereby reinforcing Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) by countering asymmetries in response time and decision-making velocity inherent in the AWS.

Moreover, the course of the AWS in Pakistan highlights the more significant geopolitical interests, as the country has become the central figure in the global discussions about arms control and strengthened its military capabilities in the face of hybrid threats. Through its support of a functional definition of lethal AWS that targets autonomy in target selection and engagement, Pakistan can establish regulation but not the prohibition of systems that adhere to the international humanitarian law (IHL), thus maintaining the flexibility of its operations.

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The problem of autonomous weapons and military strategy in South Asia is becoming more and more frequently covered in the literature to highlight the revolutionary role of AI-driven systems in shaping the geopolitical situation in the region. The current shifts continue to take the center-stage of deterrence theory, especially as autonomous weapons no longer suit the conventional concepts of threat perception and retaliation time. Latent capabilities that yield strategic ambiguity have also been pointed out as relevant to the context of Pakistan-India, as there is an asymmetric application of AI technologies (Babar, 2024). Researchers believe that autonomous weapons also cause a rush in the decision-making process and increase the chances of error and unintentional escalation in a nuclearized world (Rafiq, 2025).

The increasing literature discusses the aggressive AI militarization in India, highlighting the focus on defense AI centers and the new theories of their use to acquire pre-emptive capabilities by using autonomous systems (Rafiq, 2025). Conversely, Pakistan is presented as an extremely careful participant in changing these trends, being dependent on technology but forced by the necessity to retain the strategic balance (Babar, 2024; Ahmed, 2024). The official rhetoric of Pakistan is based on ethical, legal, and national security issues when it comes to lethal

autonomous weapons and argues that it should be careful about integration instead of an outright technological arms race (Khan, 2024). This two-sided position speaks of a conflict between deterrence maintenance and international normative pressure in which Pakistan has tried to strike the right balance.

Studies find an expanding AI race in South Asia as both sides attempt to realize different yet overlapping plans of including autonomous weapons in their inventories (Rafiq, 2025; Babar, 2024). The orientation of India is inclined towards offensive positions backed by the strong technological environments whereas Pakistan is concerned about defensive and asymmetric reactions, including the cooperation with such partners as China (Ahmed, 2024). Empirical information regarding indigenous autonomous weapons capabilities in Pakistan, however, is scarce, and it highlights a large research gap that would hinder a complete strategic evaluation (Khan, 2024).

Lastly, multiple studies call to have multilateral regulation and confidence-building systems to help reduce destabilizing outcomes created by the use of AWS in South Asia (Khan, 2024; Ahmed, 2024). The literature demands increased clarity, greater diplomatic activities, and careful development of doctrines to avoid an out-of-control arms race that is driven by the AI technologies. In this respect, the role played by Pakistan is considered central to the balancing technology advancements and the long-term stability issues, focusing on the strategic innovation and advocated ethical standards (Babar, 2024).

Theoretical framework

This research relies on a few classical theories, which are like puzzle pieces in order to make sense of how Pakistan is managing the situation of autonomous weapons in the high-stakes environment of South Asia: realism, the theory of deterrence, the security dilemma, the dynamics of an arms-race, and a sprinkle of constructivism to capture the ethical and normative aspect of killer robots. These concepts are in perfect accord with the questions put forward in the abstract and introduction, why Pakistan is fine-tuning its doctrines, why it is ever-so-cautious about snatching semi-smart technology, and peacefully fretting about stability. Realism sets the stage. It perceives the world as a mean space where states must take care of themselves since they cannot rely on anyone to do so. Pakistan has always found itself in a larger, wealthier India, and as such has been compelled to employ asymmetric gambits, nuclear threats, and these new weapons to remain in the game in South Asia. When India introduces drones that seek targets autonomously or munitions that loiter and crash whenever they find it appropriate, Pakistan cannot afford to sit back and see the divide increase. According to realism, it must answer mostly by banking on China to upgrade on cheaply or it would be defenseless.

Deterrence builds on that. The nuclear weapons have maintained the peace (a sullen, nervous peace) because each side is aware that a major war is ruining to both. The concept of full-spectrum deterrence is formed in Pakistan. Things are complicated with adding autonomous systems: machines are not afraid, do not bargain, and do not pick up the phone to take everything under control. To retain a human finger on the trigger, Pakistan demands it and this is mainly because it

cannot do without the slow, calculated signaling that has dragged the region off the edge during previous crises. The paranoia can be accounted by the security dilemma. Pakistan perceives an offensive threat when India purchases drone swarms to feel safer. India becomes nervous when Pakistan surreptitiously sends smarter border drones. The effort by each side to defend itself makes the other feel more threatened and since autonomous systems are covert and swift, it becomes more difficult to determine whether it is a defensive mechanism or an offensive mechanism. That uncertainty breeds suspicion and drives the two towards more dangerous positions. Arms-race thinking is exactly the place. South Asia has always been an arms race prior to nuclear warheads, missiles, submarines, however AI accelerates everything and makes it cheap to enter. India is traveling at a rapid pace; Pakistan is compelled to follow suit or risk losing terribly. The outcome resembles a conventional spiral quite a lot: the greater the technology, the less time to think, the greater the risk of the accident.

Research Objectives

To navigate these challenges, this research outlines three objectives:

1. Examine AWS impacts on deterrence theories and Pakistan's FSD within India-Pakistan rivalry.
2. Assess Pakistan's AWS capabilities, diplomatic stances, and partnerships for military strategy evolution.
3. Formulate recommendations for regulated AWS adoption to reinforce Pakistan's stabilizing role in South Asian security

Significance of Research

The study is important as it deals with one of the most important and under-researched aspects of modern security studies the strategic aspect of the autonomous weapons in South Asia, specifically, in Pakistan. The conventional models of deterrence are being restructured at a rate never before witnessed as artificial intelligence and autonomous systems continue to take over warfare in the modern world. This research will help to understand the response of middle powers to disruptive military technologies better by examining the strategic adaptation of Pakistan to these technologies. This study is of particular value to policymakers and defense planners since it shows the impact that autonomous weapons can have on the stability of the crisis, the dynamics underlying escalation, and the organizational structures of decision-making within the volatile nuclearized area. Also, the study provides a region-specific picture that is largely lacking in the Western-dominated academic literature regarding autonomous warfare. The research has considerable academic and normative implications as the researchers connect autonomous weapons to the ethical, legal, and arms control discussions in the international arena, especially in fora like the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. It gives empirical reasoning to the position of Pakistan on creating significant human control of lethal force, thus contributing to the debate of humanitarian law and the new military technologies. Regional security wise, the

study is crucial in building confidence building measures between Pakistan and India since it highlights how unregulated autonomous systems have the potential of fueling arms competition and increasing the likelihood of unintentional war.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach to research is taken and the main focus on the secondary data through policy documents, strategic analysis and expert evaluation. The population also includes regional military and security policies with reference to the autonomous development of weapons by Pakistan and India. Triangulation of various sources with high credibility can ensure data validity and reliability is ensured by similar analytical frameworks used throughout the datasets.

Data Collection Sources

The sample of the present research is the international and regional collection of academic and policy-making literature on autonomous weapons, strategy, and the security relations in South Asia. It covers peer-reviewed journal articles, books of leading academic presses, official defense policy publications, military policies and reports of international security agencies. The population is also expanded to materials created by the strategical opinion teams like SIPRI, ORF and UNIDIR which specially respond to the military use of artificial intelligence, autonomy in weapon systems and local deterrence arrangements. A purposive sample will be used, where about 60 sources of high quality published between 2015 and 2024 will be analyzed in detail. The given period was selected because this is the time when the integration of artificial intelligence in the military system accelerates and becomes a significant strategic issue due to the appearance of autonomous weapons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS) are radically changing traditional assumptions of deterrence through shortening the decision-making processes and infiltrating algorithm-based reactions into the crisis situations. In the case of Pakistan, where Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) doctrine is based on the idea of flexible and scalable response, AWS are both responsive and escalation risks. This finding is quite similar to the findings of Scharre (2018), who discovered that autonomous systems make the OODA loop faster and additionally decrease the space in which a political control can be exercised during crises. On the same note, Rajagopalan (2020) states that under the nuclearized competition between Pakistan and India, the new technologies reduce the time frame of stability of crisis, making the risk of unintentional escalation more likely. These findings are further supported in the present study which demonstrates that AWS undermine the classical belief of slow, rational escalation captured in the Cold War deterrence theory.

However, unlike the classical deterrence thinkers like Snyder (1961), who focused on rational actors of states and deliberated controlled signaling, the current

analysis demonstrates that algorithmic decision-making in AWS brings non-human uncertainty to the relationships in deterrence. This is contrary to previous research in South Asia that concentrated mainly on the nuclear and missile abilities without considering AI-based warfare (Krepon, 2015). Nevertheless, this research validates even more recent findings of Acton (2021), which points out that the autonomy of weapons elevates the chances of the entanglement of conventional, cyber, and nuclear spheres. Therefore, the results contribute to the existing body of deterrence literature by showing that FSD in Pakistan is no longer determined only by nuclear and conventional balances but autonomous and algorithmic warfare is also becoming important.

It is noted in the analysis that the changing capabilities of the AWS, especially in unmanned aerial capability, AI-enabling surveillance, and loitering munitions, is an indication of how Pakistan is conducting an asymmetric technological balancing to counter the conventional military dominance that India has. This is in line with Ahmed (2022), who discovered that the modernization of Pakistan defense focuses on cost-effective technologies that create high impacts in order to counter resource asymmetries. The same trends were identified by Tellis (2017), who observed that Pakistan pursues the disruptive technologies in the past and does not pursue the numerical parity. The findings are supported by the current study which indicates that nowadays AWS occupy the center of modernization movement in Pakistan but not marginal experimental instruments.

In diplomatic terms, the normative dedication of the United Nations conventions on circumstances weapons identified by Akram (2020) is reflected in the advocacy of Pakistan to meaningful human control in the United Nations, which has been consistent over the years, as reflected in its contributions on lethal autonomous weapons. Nevertheless, a strategic duality is also present in this study, where Pakistan actively advocates regulation but, covertly, builds its own independent capacities, which is consistent with the results of Boulanin and Verbruggen (2017), who noticed the same trends among a number of middle powers. Such two-track stance is contrasting India with an expansionist stance more evident in India (Joshi, 2021) and reflects the finding that the strategy of AWS in Pakistan is more defensive and deterrence-focused than the power-projection one. The results indicate that the controlled adoption of AWS is necessary in case Pakistan can maintain its stabilizing position in South Asia. The unregulated deployment enhances the likelihood of accidental engagements, cyber engineering, and horizontal escalation. These are well supported by the efforts of UNIDIR (2021), which cautions that ineffective governance systems governing autonomous systems pose a great risk of increasing instability in a region. Likewise, Horowitz (2018) claims that those states that do not incorporate regulatory and ethical control over military AI will develop flash-crisis environments. These concerns are held true in the present study in the South Asian context in that, the responsibility of the successful incorporation of AWS into Pakistani deterrence is directly related to its security.

Meanwhile, the findings also indicate that a controlled use of AWS can

contribute to making the stabilization easier instead of weaker, a fact that somewhat opposes the somewhat pessimistic conclusions of Global Zero (2019), which proposes a near-complete ban on lethal autonomy. Rather, this research are more aligned to the works of Acton (2021) and Scharre (2018) who claim that controlled autonomy, along with the effective command and control protections, can enhance deterrence through better situational awareness and less misperception. In the case of Pakistan, this means that AWS, when implemented with stringent forms of human controls and regional trust-building systems, can help maintain stability of the crisis in relation to the Indian and not destabilize it. This subtle observation adds a meaningful middle-ground role to the rest of the world discussion on regulating autonomous weapons.

The initial significant theme, which is Acceleration of Warfare, is an indication of the fact that autonomous weapons have drastically decreased the time it takes humans to make decisions as they allow machine-speed targeting and engagement. The Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop is compressed by autonomous and AI-assistance systems, resulting in the higher probability of the rapid escalation of the situation during military crises (Scharre, 2018). Pakistan and India are engaged in political disputes that can slow down fast when it comes to South Asia, where history mistrust and frequent border incidents already put the two countries at risk of miscalculating and escalating the conflict (Rajagopalan, 2020). Automated reactions might have little space to de-escalate any political situation, hence obstructing the conventional crisis management practices.

The second theme, Deterrence Instability, points at the way autonomous systems disfigure the traditional deterrence logic with introducing the algorithm-driven decision-making to strategic environments. The classical theory of deterrence is based on human rationality and controlled escalation; but autonomous weapons bring about the uncertainties concerning the dependability of systems, accountability, and predictability (Snyder, 1961; Boulanin and Verbruggen, 2017). The likelihood of autonomous platforms wrongly identifying the targets or responding disproportionately to perceived dangers undermines second-strike credibility and escalates the risk of inadvertent war. Nuclearized South Asia meant that even restricted independent contacts might get out of control and develop into more general conventional or nuclear conflict.

The third theme is Strategic Adaptation by Pakistan, disclosing that the idea of the AI-enabled ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) systems, armed drones, and autonomous strike capabilities represent a measured strategy of technology asymmetric balancing to technological superiority of the conventional military of India (Ahmed, 2022). Instead of a traditional arms race that is expensive, Pakistan is using the emergent technologies to improve precision, situational awareness and credibility of deterrence. Nevertheless, the analysis also suggests that such technologies create new vulnerabilities in Pakistan, such as vulnerability to cyber attacks, system attacks, spoofing, and algorithm manipulation by the opponent (UNIDIR, 2021).

The military approach of Pakistan is an act of balancing, and AI and

autonomous technology integration is incremental with the support of such collaboration as with China. Due to its Full Spectrum Deterrence and Quid Pro Quo Plus policies that imply formidable retaliatory actions including nuclear options, Pakistan is keen on ensuring strategic stability by preempting or responding to Indian development of independent weapons. Nevertheless, the technological dependency on imports that Pakistan now faces restricts its ability to operate autonomously in the weapon sector, which opens up difficulties in keeping up with the pace of Indian AI weaponization. The development of self-governing regimes also creates issues of unintended intensification and instability in times of crisis, which explains the necessity of clear dogma and confidence-enhancing policies in South Asia. Heavy dependence on the imperatives of defense still influences the approach of Pakistan to balance the strategic asymmetry of the pursuits of regional dominance by India and the risks that may arise in the event of the use of lethal autonomous weapons.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results show that although AWS are effective and lead to accuracy, surveillance, and quick reaction, they also shorten the timing of decisions, and bring algorithmic unpredictability to the crisis setting. Such dynamics compound the risks of misperception, unwanted escalation and deterrence instability in the long-term rivalry with India, and such finding is not new to previous research on emergent military technologies and crisis instability in South Asia. Therefore, AWS are a two-sided sword to Pakistan, to the extent that they enhance its deterrence stance, yet create novel strategic weaknesses.

Additionally, the research concludes that the diplomatic lobby of Pakistan to deploy meaningful human control over lethal autonomy, especially in fora like the United Nations, is a normative investment in responsible military innovation, although it is in the process of building its own AI-enabled military forces. The study also finds that unbridled or opaque implementation of AWS may destabilize South Asian security by enhancing the arms competition, cyber risks, and escalation hazards. In its turn, a cautiously controlled policy, which is backed by the systems of governance both nationally and internationally, by the means of regional confidence-building strategies, and by the mechanisms of arms control, will allow Pakistan to use AWS as the means of defensive stabilization and not destabilization. Finally, the research also highlights the fact that the future of Pakistan as a stabilizing force in South Asia would not only be determined by the level of technology but also by the ethical, legal and strategic restraint in the pursuit of independent military systems.

To ensure the security of the region in the context of the autonomous weapon development, Pakistan is advised to focus on the development of AI-based military technologies locally so that it does not have to be dependent on outsourcing. It also needs to take part in diplomacy to create regional arms control systems to deal with LAWS and AI militarization threats. It will be important to revise the military

doctrines to incorporate autonomous systems strategically and regulate the risks of escalation. The mistrust related to the autonomous use of weapons can be counteracted by enhancing the dialogue with India via confidence-building and transparency mechanisms.

Recommendations

1. Pakistan must develop a holistic national policy on the Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS) that binds the appropriate legal recognition of effective human control over all choices on lethal force.
2. A permanent parliamentary and ethical oversight body should be instituted by the government to oversee the development, testing and deployment of autonomic military technologies.
3. Pakistan and India ought to embark on bilateral confidence-building over the emerging military technologies to minimize the dangers of misperception and escalation of crisis.
4. Pakistan has to considerably enhance the cybersecurity of its independent platforms to ensure that military systems are not hacked, spoofed, and manipulated by outsiders.
5. A human-machine teaming structure should be adhered to in the integration of AWS in strictness to make sure that the ultimate controls in all combat decisions stay with the political and strategic leadership.
6. The proactive diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Pakistan should be maintained at the international forums to push towards the global regulations regarding autonomous weapons instead of voluntary norms.
7. More investment is necessary towards defensive, surveillance and early-warning autonomous systems unlike fully autonomous offensive strike weapons.
8. The AWs risk-assessment and escalation-control preventive measures must be officially incorporated into the Pakistani nuclear and conventional command-and-control systems.
9. Independent strategic, legal and ethical evaluations of AWS should be promoted in universities, think tanks and other military research facilities, to aid in making informed policy decisions.

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