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**The Ethics of the New
War: Humanizing
AI-Enabled Warfare
through Meaningful
Human Control**

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Abstract

The rapid incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous weapon systems, algorithmic targeting, unmanned platforms, ubiquitous surveillance, and AI-enabled decision-support technologies is transforming contemporary warfare. While these technologies promise greater precision, speed, situational awareness, and operational efficiency, they also create profound ethical and legal challenges concerning human dignity, civilian protection, responsibility, accountability, and the legitimate use of force. This article examines the central paradox of AI-enabled warfare: technologies designed to increase the precision of violence may simultaneously increase the physical, perceptual, and moral distance between decision-makers and those subjected to violence. It argues that the principal ethical challenge of the new war is not technological autonomy as such, but the potential displacement of human moral agency by algorithmic decision-making. Drawing on 'Just War Theory', international humanitarian law (IHL), human security, responsible AI, and contemporary debates concerning autonomous weapons, the article develops a human-centred normative framework based on ten principles: humanity before military efficiency; meaningful human control; a presumption against autonomous lethal action; humanity impact assessment; minimisation of foreseeable harm; human-centred AI; preservation of human judgement; independent investigation and accountability; empathy in security policy; and strong international regulation. The article concludes that technological progress in warfare should be evaluated not primarily by computational speed, precision, or destructive efficiency, but by its capacity to preserve human dignity, minimise suffering, maintain accountability, and protect civilian life.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Autonomous Weapons, Ethics of Warfare, Meaningful Human Control, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), Human Dignity, Algorithmic Warfare, Human Security, Responsible AI, Autonomous Weapons Systems

Introduction

The transformation of warfare through artificial intelligence (AI) represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary international security. AI-enabled systems can process enormous quantities of information, identify patterns, support intelligence analysis, recognise potential targets, coordinate unmanned platforms, and accelerate military decision-making. Autonomous and semi-autonomous systems are consequently becoming increasingly integrated into military operations. These developments have generated expectations that future warfare will become more precise, efficient, discriminating, and information-driven (Scharre, 2018; Russell, 2019).

Yet the technological transformation of warfare creates a fundamental ethical paradox—the same technologies that may reduce some forms of uncertainty can also create new forms of uncertainty, responsibility fragmentation, and civilian vulnerability. A system capable of processing millions of data points in real time may make decisions at a speed beyond ordinary human cognition, but computational speed does not necessarily constitute moral judgement. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has emphasised that AI systems should serve and augment human decision-makers rather than replace them, particularly where decisions may have serious consequences for human life (ICRC, 2019, 2026).

The central question of this article is therefore: How can artificial intelligence be incorporated into warfare without allowing technological efficiency and algorithmic autonomy to displace human moral responsibility and the protection of human dignity?

The article advances three related arguments. *First*, warfare is moving from physical and industrial forms toward increasingly digital, networked, remote, and algorithmic forms of power. *Second*, this transformation creates a distinctive ethical problem because digital mediation can separate the act of deciding from human consequences of the decision. *Third*, the appropriate response is neither technological rejection nor unrestricted automation, but a human-centred framework based on meaningful human control, accountability, precaution, empathy, and international regulation.

The article makes a conceptual contribution by proposing ten principles for humanizing the new war. These principles integrate insights from ‘Just War Theory’, IHL, human security, AI ethics, and debates surrounding lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS).

From Physical Force to Algorithmic Power

The Physical Stage: Warfare as Biological Force

The earliest forms of warfare were predominantly constrained by human physical capacity. Weapons such as spears, swords, bows, and rudimentary projectiles extended the capacity of the human body but did not fundamentally eliminate human presence from the battlefield. Military organisations, mobility, logistics, and strategy nevertheless remained decisive.

The Industrial Stage: Mass Production and Mass Destruction

Industrialisation transformed warfare through mechanisation, mass production, artillery, machine guns, aircraft, tanks, chemical weapons, and industrial logistics. The First World War demonstrated how industrial production could be translated into industrialised destruction. The battles of Verdun and Somme illustrated the extraordinary human cost of this transformation, contributing to the broader development of international humanitarian restraints (Best, 1980).

The Nuclear Stage: Strategic Destruction and Human Survival

The development of nuclear weapons represented another fundamental transformation. Nuclear weapons transformed warfare from a predominantly battlefield-centred activity into a potential threat to entire populations and future generations. The nuclear age consequently intensified debates concerning deterrence, proportionality, necessity, and the limits of technological destruction (Schelling, 1966; Walzer, 1977).

The Digital and Networked Stage

The emergence of satellites, precision-guided weapons, cyber capabilities, drones, advanced sensors, and real-time communications transformed warfare into a networked information environment. The distinctive characteristics of this stage is not simply increased destructive power but the increasing separation between the location of decision-making and the location where violence occurs.

The Algorithmic Stage

AI introduces a further transformation— the transition from remote warfare towards algorithmic warfare. Systems can increasingly collect information, identify patterns, classify

objects, prioritize targets, predict behaviour, and recommend courses of action. The central question consequently changes from who controls the weapon to who controls the decision-making architecture through which the weapon is employed (Scharre, 2018; Roff & Moyes, 2016).

The Ethical Paradox of Intelligent Warfare

Computational Intelligence versus Moral Intelligence

AI systems can process information, recognise patterns, calculate probabilities, and optimise decisions. These capabilities should not, however, be confused with moral intelligence. Computational intelligence concerns the capacity to process information and generate outputs, whereas moral judgement concerns values, responsibility, dignity, suffering, intention, and consequences (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Russell, 2019).

Digital Representation and the Disappearance of the Human

Digital warfare converts physical reality into images, coordinates, data points, probability scores, and classifications. A civilian can become a pixel; a building can become a coordinate; and human behaviour can become a statistical pattern. This creates a form of algorithmic abstraction in which morally significant realities are transformed into computationally manageable objects.

Perceptual Distance and Moral Distance

Remote warfare creates physical, perceptual, and potentially moral distance. Decision-makers may experience warfare through screens, sensor feeds, satellite imagery, and algorithmic recommendations. Such technological mediation may weaken the direct perception of suffering and increase the danger of treating lethal action as an abstract optimization problem (Asaro, 2012; Sparrow, 2007).

AI, Error, and Systemic Risk

One of the most important characteristics of AI is ‘scalability’. An algorithm can process enormous quantities of information and potentially support numerous operations simultaneously. A human error may be individual and localized, whereas an algorithmic error may be replicated across multiple decisions. Consequently, human error can be local while algorithmic error can become systemic.

Potential sources of military AI error includes inaccurate training data, incomplete datasets, biased classification models, inadequate contextual information, adversarial manipulation, software malfunction, sensor failure, unexpected battlefield conditions, and automation bias. The ethical issue is therefore not merely whether an AI system has a high statistical accuracy rate. In military operations, the significance of the remaining errors may be disproportionately large if those errors concern civilian life (Amodei et al., 2016; Russell, 2019).

International Humanitarian Law and AI-Enabled Warfare

Distinction

The principle of distinction requires parties to distinguish between civilians and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives. Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions codifies this principle, while the ICRC emphasises that AI-enabled systems must remain capable of supporting context-specific judgements required by IHL (ICRC, 2026). Pattern recognition cannot automatically establish legal targetability.

Proportionality

Proportionality prohibits attacks expected to cause incidental civilian harm that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. Proportionality cannot be reduced to a simple numerical formula. It requires contextual judgement concerning uncertainty, expected civilian harm, military advantage, alternatives, and circumstances of the operation (Additional Protocol I, 1977, Art. 51(5)(b); ICRC, 2026).

Precaution

The principle of precaution requires feasible measures to verify targets and minimise civilian harm. AI can strengthen precaution through improved surveillance, intelligence analysis, and target verification, but technological sophistication can also create an illusion of certainty. A probability score is not equivalent to factual certainty. Precaution must therefore encompass both verification of the target and verification of the reliability and limitations of the technological system (Additional Protocol I, 1977, Art. 57; ICRC, 2026).

Meaningful Human Control as the Normative Boundary

Meaningful human control provides an important normative framework for addressing autonomous weapons. Human control should not be reduced to the mere physical presence of an operator. It requires substantive authority and practical capacity. Four conditions are especially important: adequate information, decision-making authority, sufficient time and cognitive capacity, and traceability. The ICRC similarly identifies human supervision, ability to intervene, predictability, and operational constraints as important components of human control (ICRC, 2018, 2019, 2026).

The concept is important because international humanitarian law is addressed to human actors. Responsibility for compliance cannot simply be transferred to software or a weapon system. Human control must therefore remain meaningful at the stages of planning, activation, operation, and assessment of consequences.

Ten Principles for Humanizing the New War

Humanity Before Military Efficiency

Military effectiveness is an instrumental value, whereas human dignity and protection of life are fundamental values. The question should therefore not merely be whether AI can make warfare more accurate or efficient, but whether its use reduces unnecessary human suffering. Technological efficiency cannot itself constitute moral legitimacy (Walzer, 1977; ICRC, 2026).

Meaningful Human Control

Meaningful human control requires informed, substantive, continuous, and accountable human involvement in decisions concerning lethal force. Humans must retain the authority to question, reject, modify, or terminate algorithmically generated recommendations (ICRC, 2019; Roff & Moyes, 2016).

A Presumption Against Autonomous Lethal Action

The greater the uncertainty surrounding a target or operational environment, the stronger the presumption should be in favour of human intervention. This principle does not reject every form of autonomy; it focuses particularly on autonomy in decisions to intentionally apply lethal force against human beings (ICRC, 2026; United Nations, 2024).

Humanity Impact Assessment

Weapon reviews should be complemented by a Humanity Impact Assessment examining immediate casualties and longer-term consequences for psychological well-being, displacement, civilian vulnerability, infrastructure, social cohesion, and the political threshold for using force.

Minimisation of Foreseeable Harm

AI-enabled warfare should maximise the protection of human life consistent with legitimate security requirements. Technological sophistication does not eliminate uncertainty, and military necessity remains constrained by distinction, proportionality, precaution, and humanity (ICRC, 2026).

Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence

Military AI should not simply help states win wars. It can also contribute to civilian evacuation, humanitarian logistics, early warning, medical protection, mine detection, disaster response, and improved verification. The central question should shift from how AI can make warfare more effective to how AI can reduce the human cost of unavoidable conflict (ICRC, 2019, 2026).

Preservation of Human Judgement

Human judgement must remain substantively meaningful. Operators should be able to question recommendations, obtain additional information, reject algorithmic outputs, modify operations, and terminate action when circumstances change. This requires training concerning AI limitations, uncertainty, bias, and failure modes.

Independent Investigation and Accountability

AI must not create an accountability gap. Clear chains of responsibility should exist among political authorities, commanders, operators, developers, and other relevant actors. System logs, operational data, and decision records should be preserved to enable independent investigation (ICRC, 2018; United Nations, 2024).

Empathy in Security Policy

Security policy should incorporate the human experience of violence. A civilian casualty is not merely a numerical variable— it represents an individual, family, community, and potentially a long-term social trauma. Empathy broadens security rationality by incorporating the human consequences of strategic decisions (Commission on Human Security, 2003).

Strong International Regulation

The pace of technological development creates a risk of regulatory lag. International governance should establish common standards concerning human control, weapons review, testing, verification, transparency, accountability, incident investigation, and restrictions on unacceptable forms of autonomy. International regulation can reduce escalation risks and establish common standards of responsible behaviour (ICRC, 2026; United Nations, 2024).

The Ethical Lock: From Principle to Institutional Safeguard

One practical mechanism for implementing meaningful human control is what this article terms an ethical lock. An ethical lock would require an AI-enabled weapon system to suspend lethal action whenever specified conditions of uncertainty or humanitarian risk are reached. Such conditions could include uncertainty concerning target identity, insufficient confidence in underlying data, significant probability of civilian presence, unexpected changes in the operational environment, inability to verify the target, excessive anticipated civilian harm, or loss of effective human communication or supervision.

A numerical threshold such as 99.9 percent may be used illustratively in narrowly defined technical contexts, but statistical confidence should never be treated as a substitute for legal or moral judgement. The ethical lock should therefore embody a broader principle: when technological certainty is insufficient to protect human life, the system should default to human review rather than autonomous action.

From Digital Responsibility to Human-Centred Security

The ethical challenge of AI-enabled warfare extends beyond weapons. Digital platforms, algorithmic governance, big-data analytics, surveillance technologies, and automated decision-making create new forms of social and political power. This requires an expanded concept of digital

responsibility encompassing data protection, transparency, fairness, accountability, privacy, human capital, risk management, and public interest (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin, Ienca, & Vayena, 2019).

AI systems should therefore be designed around human dignity and justice rather than solely around operational performance. Fairness should be considered throughout the AI lifecycle, including data collection, model development, testing, deployment, monitoring, auditing, and post-deployment evaluation.

Discussion: From Technological Superiority to Human Superiority

The central argument of this article can be summarised through a distinction between technological superiority and human superiority. ‘Technological superiority’ concerns computational speed, precision, range, connectivity, autonomy, prediction, and destructive capability. ‘Human superiority’, by contrast, concerns judgement, responsibility, empathy, dignity, restraint, accountability, and the capacity to recognise the moral significance of human life.

The danger of algorithmic warfare is that ‘technological superiority may progressively displace human superiority’. The objective of humanizing the new war is therefore not to oppose technology but to subordinate technology to humanity.

If AI lowers the political, psychological, and operational costs of using force, it may potentially lower the threshold for military action. The international community must therefore ensure that technological efficiency does not inadvertently make war easier to initiate or conduct (United Nations, 2024).

The ethical governance of AI-enabled warfare consequently requires three simultaneous forms of control: technical control over the system; legal control over its use; and ethical control over the consequences of its decisions. The third dimension is especially important because ‘legal compliance alone cannot exhaust the meaning of humanization’.

Conclusion

The emergence of AI-enabled warfare represents a transformation in the relationship between humans, machines, information, violence, and responsibility. Warfare is moving from

physical force through industrial and nuclear forms towards increasingly digital, networked, remote, and algorithmic forms of power.

This transformation creates opportunities for improving precision, situational awareness, defensive capabilities, and civilian protection. It simultaneously generates new risks associated with algorithmic error, automation bias, perceptual distance, responsibility fragmentation, systemic failure, and the potential displacement of human moral agency.

The principles of ‘distinction, proportionality, and precaution’ remains essential in this technological environment. Indeed, their importance increases as military decisions become increasingly mediated by algorithms. The ten principles proposed in this article collectively establish a normative framework in which AI remains a tool of human decision-making rather than a substitute for human moral agency.

The fundamental challenge is therefore not whether machines can become sufficiently intelligent to conduct war. It is whether human beings can remain sufficiently responsible to control the technologies they create.

The ultimate test of intelligent warfare should not be whether machines can identify and eliminate targets faster than humans. It should be whether technological intelligence can contribute to protecting human life, reducing suffering, and preserving human dignity.

Technology must serve humanity; humanity must never become subordinate to technology.

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