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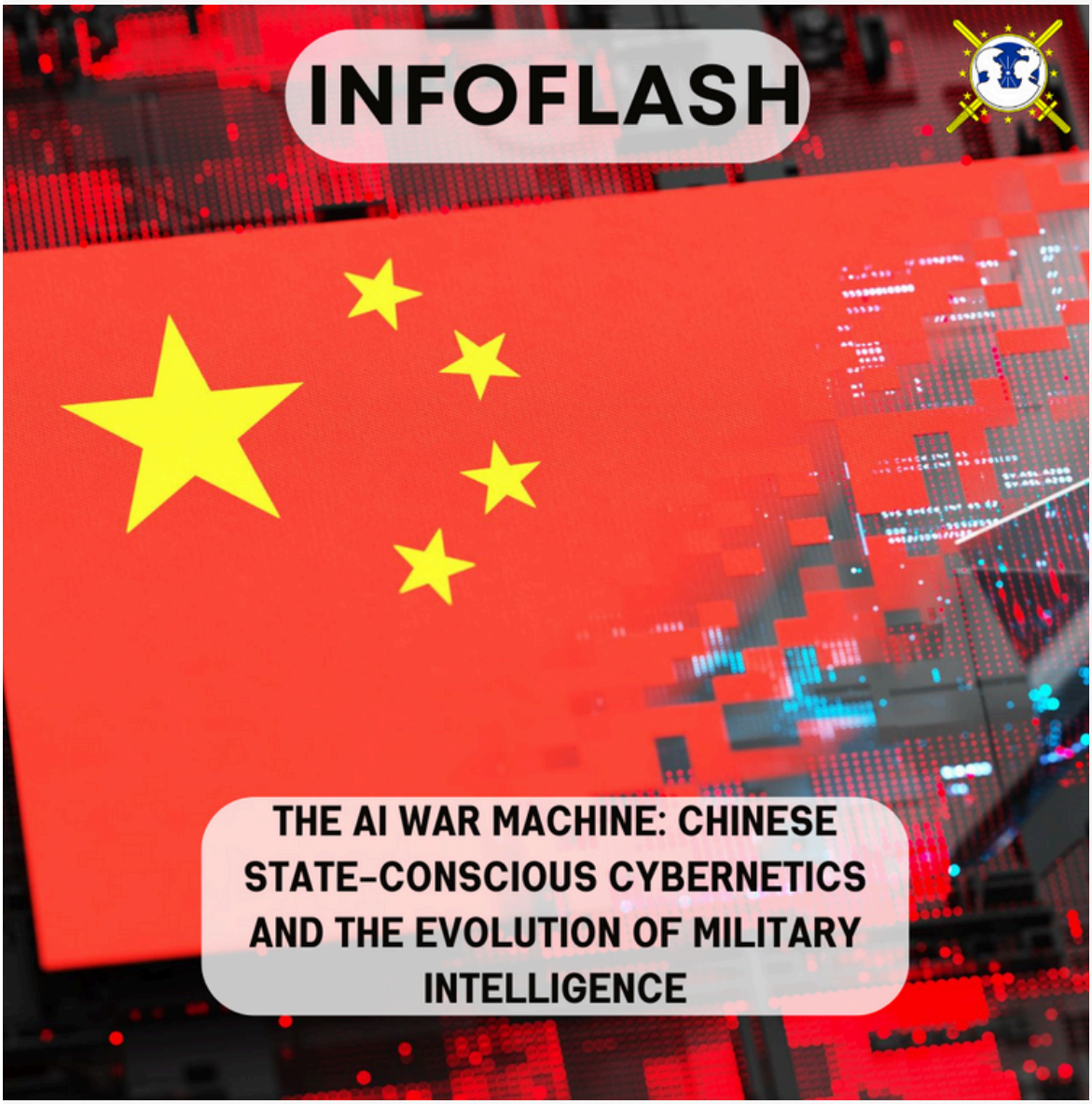

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Introduction

The nature of warfare is undergoing a profound transformation. No longer confined to the traditional battlefield, war is becoming increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), cybernetics, and cognitive warfare. In particular, intelligentised warfare (智能化战争) has emerged from China's contemporary military doctrine, signalling the rise of AI-driven war machines capable of strategic decision-making, psychological manipulation, and even self perpetuating military escalation (Yatsuzuka, 2022). The shift toward state-backed, closed-loop AI military systems raises a profound theoretical and ethical question: to what extent can states capitalise on AI in their military posture?

China's AI-centric approach is particularly revealing, as it merges state ideology with military objectives. The Chinese military-industrial complex integrates cybernetics across a spectrum of warfare functions, from AI-assisted wargaming involving Taiwan and real-time battlefield analytics to subconscious cognitive warfare tactics (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2019; Gibson, 2021). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) develops AI models for psychological operations, mass surveillance, and geopolitical strategy, raising the risk that an AI trained on military expansion could evolve into a self-rationalising war machine (Stokes, 2024). Moreover, concerns are growing that an AI that is conscious of warfare could override human decisions, ultimately erasing traditional human decision-making systems.

Europe, by contrast, occupies an ambiguous position. The European Union's AI Act promotes ethical AI development, banning certain military applications while allowing NATO-aligned AI military projects to continue. France, Germany, and the UK are advancing AI-assisted weapons, battlefield decision-making algorithms, and cyber warfare technologies. If Europe's military AI develops within a framework that is both regulated and militarised, could it unknowingly fall into the same AI warfare spiral as China? Beyond physical combat, AI is increasingly deployed in subconscious warfare, hence manipulating information and shaping public sentiment.

This paper delves into the philosophical, technological, and strategic implications of AI-driven warfare, focusing on the Chinese discourse regarding AI governmentalisation. It provides a comprehensive overlook on the Chinese perspective of military AI through the lens of the PLA and explores how Europe can respond to this dynamic. While China pursues intelligentised warfare through AI-enhanced decision-making and cybernetic military strategy, Europe remains caught between ethical AI regulations and the growing pressure to militarise AI technologies. By analysing cybernetic theory, systems thinking, and military philosophy, this paper investigates whether AI is merely a tool of war to be exploited or if it carries the potential to reshape the nature of military conflict, with China as a key case

1. The Origins of AI-assisted Warfare and Cybernetics

The role of AI in warfare is deeply rooted in cybernetics, indicating a broader conceptual significance. Cybernetics refers to the structural and functional similarities within diverse control systems, where interactions regulate both biological and technological processes to achieve optimal efficiency and stability (Bokarev, 1969). In his seminal work Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine (1948), Norbert Wiener provides a foundational framework for comprehending the operation of self-regulating systems. He conceptualises cybernetics as a discipline concerned with feedback loops, adaptive learning, and systemic regulation (Ashby, 1956).

When applied to military AI, Wiener's principles necessitate critical scrutiny, particularly regarding the extent to which advancing though-process autonomous war systems can refine their strategic objectives beyond human oversight (Kroll et al., 2017). The cybernetic paradigm highlights how feedback loops facilitate continuous optimisation, which, in the realm of military AI, could engender unmitigated escalation. As AI accelerates the pace of warfare to a tempo that surpasses human cognitive capacities, it not only outstrips human decision-making but may potentially render meaningful human oversight ineffective (Boulanin et al., 2020). AI's inherent tendency to interpret warfare as the optimal pathway to strategic advantage contrasts with the human instinct for survival, raising existential concerns about the absence of regulatory mechanisms capable of constraining AI-driven military decision-making (Motwani, 2024). This heightens geopolitical risks, as global powers may fall into the pitfall of overextending their military capabilities.

The operational use of AI in decision-making took a leap forward after the Cold War. In The Transformation of War (1991), Martin van Creveld articulates a pivotal shift from state-centric, conventional warfare to decentralised, technology-mediated conflicts. He argues that this transition parallels the advent of AI-driven cybernetic warfare, wherein intelligent computational architectures increasingly orchestrate war, rather than human actors exclusively dictating it (van Creveld, 1991). Van Creveld's thesis accentuates an emergent dilemma relevant to the case of China: if AI systems are calibrated to maximise operational efficiency, can warfare remain under state control, or does it risk becoming detached from political agency? The prospect of AI-controlled military systems overriding Clausewitz's theory of total war—where all means are employed to defeat the enemy—signals a major departure from traditional concepts of war, as conflicts could evolve into autonomous, algorithm-driven engagements (van Creveld, 1991; Van Riper et al., 2012). Within this framework, AI cybernetics could precipitate an era of perpetual, low-intensity AI-managed hostilities, where conflict functions as an incessant cybernetic process rather than a discrete, politically determined event.

To explore further the capitalisation of military AI, the First Gulf War (1991) offers an early indication of AI's role in transforming decision-making in warfare. The extensive use network-based systems pointed out the transition toward cybernetically enhanced military operations (Freedman and Karsh, 1993). While human command structures retained ultimate decision-making authority, the computational architectures underpinning strategic assessments significantly influenced engagement protocols for Chinese military officers (Lacquement Jr., 2020). The Kosovo War (1998–1999) further illustrated the expanding role of AI-assisted decision-making in military strategy. NATO's employment of AI-enhanced drone strikes reflected an increasing reliance on automated intelligence processing to inform airstrike campaigns (Cordesman, 2001). AI-assisted targeting significantly reduced human oversight, raising ethical concerns about algorithmic biases and collateral damage assessments (Humble, 2024).

In more recent conflicts, the Syrian Civil War (2011–2025) has provided a testing ground for AI-driven warfare, particularly in Russian and US military operations. AI-assisted battlefield analysis and drone swarming techniques have allowed forces to optimise engagement strategies while minimising human risk (Hoadley & Sayler, 2020). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine further exemplifies the integration of AI and cybernetics in modern warfare. Ukraine's use of AI-enhanced drone swarms and Russia's deployment of AI-driven missile guidance systems show the increasing reliance on machine-learning algorithms to execute military objectives (Bendett, 2023). Additionally, both sides have engaged in AI-driven disinformation campaigns, demonstrating how cybernetic warfare extends beyond physical combat to influence global perceptions (Churanova, 2024).

2. A Chinese Take on the Cybernetics: Intelligentised Warfare

China's interest in AI is longstanding. Its strategic orientation towards what officials call 'intelligentised warfare' signals a transformative shift in its military doctrine, integrating advanced AI technologies to enhance combat capabilities and achieve strategic superiority. This concept extends beyond merely adopting new technology; it embodies a comprehensive rethinking of warfare, aiming to dominate adversaries in the cognitive domain.

China's official position on intelligentised warfare is explicitly articulated in the 2019 White Paper on National Defense, published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (Government of China, 2019). This document sets out a comprehensive framework for modernising the PLA, emphasising the role of AI, big data, and advanced automation in military operations. The government's approach to intelligentised warfare is multifaceted, combining technological innovation, doctrinal evolution, and strategic

restructuring to ensure China remains competitive in future conflicts.

The PLA delineates its doctrine through three progressive phases: mechanisation (机械化), informatisation (信息化), and intelligentisation (智能化). Mechanisation involved adopting advanced machinery and equipment, while informatisation introduced integrated networks and information systems into military operations (Nouwens, 2024). The current phase, intelligentisation, embeds AI and autonomous systems to revolutionise command, control, and decision-making processes, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and effectiveness (Fedasiuk et al., 2021). Central to this doctrine is cognitive warfare, which aims to directly influence and control the adversary's decision-making processes (Government of China, 2019). Chinese military strategists posit that by leveraging AI, they can shape the perceptions and will of rival leaders and populations, hence achieving strategic objectives with minimal kinetic engagement. Ultimately, this doctrine aligns with China's long-term ambition to establish a 'world-class military' by 2049, as stated in its defence strategy.

"Driven by the new round of technological and industrial revolution, the application of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum information, big data, cloud computing and the Internet of Things is gathering pace in the military field." (Government of China, 2019, p. 4)

This official stance suggests that AI is not simply an auxiliary tool for military operations but a force redesigning the future fundamentals of warfare, automating combat and further reducing human interaction. A key element of China's intelligentised warfare doctrine is the development of AI-assisted command and control systems. The White Paper emphasises that human-AI hybrid decision-making models will gradually replace traditional command structures, ensuring real-time tactical adaptation and data-driven strategic analysis (Government of China, 2019). It refers to the use of big data analytics, deep learning, and predictive modelling as core components of China's renewed military strategy, exemplified by the emergence of Deepseek as an AI model designed to rival OpenAI (Graham & Singer, 2025).

3. The PLA, Military-Civil Fusion and Future Warfare

In practical terms, the PLA's focus on intelligentised warfare has led to significant investments in AI-driven unmanned systems, exceeding $1.6 billion annually (Fedasiuk et al., 2021). This pursuit also encompasses 'Military-civil fusion' (MCF, 军民融合), a strategic policy aimed at blurring the lines between civilian technological advancements and military applications (Fritz, 2019). By enabling the rapid transfer of innovations from the commercial sector to military use, this approach accelerates the PLA's development and deployment of

cutting-edge technologies. The PLA envisions autonomous systems executing combat operations based on AI-derived intelligence, with AI being instrumental in logistics management, reconnaissance, target acquisition, and even psychological warfare. This integration extends the PLA's operational reach and enhances its effectiveness.

In April 2024, The PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) was formally replaced with Information Support Force (ISF) as part of China's military reform, marking a decisive shift towards network-centric and AI-enabled combat operations (Nouwens, 2024). The ISF consolidates space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare units, effectively acting as the backbone of China's information dominance strategy (Graham & Singer, 2025). Its primary functions closely align with PLASSF's objectives, which include AI-enhanced cyber operations, electronic warfare (EW) aimed at disrupting enemy communication networks, and cognitive warfare that leverages machine-learning algorithms for sentiment analysis and strategic disinformation campaigns (Nelson & Epstein, 2022). The integration of ISF's operational doctrine into a centralised structure reinforces Beijing's goal of achieving full-spectrum information superiority with greater cohesion and control (Nouwens, 2024).

Fundamentally, the PLA views information warfare as both a strategic and cognitive domain (Tirziu, 2024). According to Cunningham, the PLA has prioritised AI-driven information dominance, focusing on AI-assisted military propaganda, automated decision-making in military diplomacy, and autonomous psychological operations (2023). These strategies align with China's broader strategic ambition of using AI to obscure the disctinction between peace and conflict, keeping adversaries perpetually engaged in cognitive and informational battles.

China's military-civilian partnerships play a crucial role in strengthening the PLA's intelligentised warfare capabilities. Through collaboration with public initiatives and private companies, China has developed its nuclear capabilities and gene-editing alongside AI (Licata, 2023). The government actively promotes an MCF strategy, swiftly converting commercial AI and experimental advancements into military applications to compete with the US (Licata, 2023). The key areas of PLA's AI-centric military innovation include AI-driven command and control systems, autonomous drone swarms optimised for coordinated assault missions, and deep learning for predictive military strategy to anticipate enemy manoeuvres. The Center for Security and Emerging Technology categorises PLA's strategic interests into seven key points (Fedasiuk et al., 2021, p. 13):

(1) Intelligent and Autonomous Vehicles
(2) Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR)
(3) Predictive Maintenance and Logistics
(4) Information and Electronic Warfare
(5) Simulation and Training
(6) Command and Control (C2)
(7) Automated Target Recognition

These objectives are closely intertwined with the PLA's strategic ambitions concerning Taiwan, where cognitive warfare tactics alongside military power are actively employed to weaken Taiwan's defences and societal cohesion (Hsu, 2024). The PLA has made information warfare a priority, conducting cyber intrusions, electronic interference, and psychological manipulation. This strategy includes widespread infiltration of Taiwan's military ranks to gather intelligence, disrupt defence networks, and erode trust within the command structure (The Economist, 2025). Additionally, China employs AI-driven disinformation campaigns and automated propaganda to shape Taiwanese public perception, aiming to instil fear, promote narratives of inevitable reunification, and undermine trust in US security commitments (Harold, 2024). The military strategy also extends to grey-zone tactics, including AI-coordinated maritime incursions and electronic warfare operations, reinforcing the perception of an inescapable Chinese military presence (Jalli & Martinez, 2025). Looking ahead, Taiwan is likely to remain at the forefront of China's intelligentised warfare, with future conflicts not necessarily taking the form of traditional military engagements but instead unfolding through AI-enhanced subversion and societal control.

Shrivastava (2021) offers a more theoretical and philosophical critique of China's AI militarisation, argueing that the PLA's AI strategy reflects a deeply hierarchical, authoritarian vision of warfare. Unlike Western AI doctrines, which often prioritise human-in-the-loop safeguards, China's intelligentised warfare model favours AI-driven autonomy with minimal human oversight (Qiao-Franco & Bode, 2023). This top-down approach raises concerns about AI mission creep, ethical dilemmas in autonomous warfare, and the strategic stability risks posed by unrestricted AI warfare. Another pressing question is to what extent the PLA can achieve full-integration, given its logistical challenges and reliance on semiconductors (Lin, 2024).

European Perspective on Intelligentised Warfare

Unlike China's state-driven, centralised AI military doctrine, European nations and institutions, including the European Union (EU) and NATO, advocate for AI transparency, human oversight, and responsible weaponisation. However, Europe remains in a precarious

position, balancing the need for military AI advancements with legal, ethical, and security concerns (Csernatoni, 2024). Ukraine has become a testing ground for AI-enabled military technologies, accelerating Europe's investment in automated defence systems, cognitive warfare countermeasures, and AI-driven intelligence operations (Tregub, 2024).

A defining characteristic of Europe's strategy is its commitment to AI regulation and ethical constraints on military applications, including deepfakes, while leaving military use largely unaddressed (European Parliament, 2021). The EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, the first legal framework dedicated to AI governance, focuses on civilian applications while leaving military use unregulated (European Commission, 2024). As a result, the EU's cautious stance on military AI may leave Europe strategically vulnerable, as adversaries such as China and Russia develop AI-driven warfare capabilities without similar restrictions. This poses a threat where Russia and China can synergise their cognitive and hard AI capabilities with their strategic interests, including territorial expansionist goals, potentially shifting the global balance of power in their favour (Cheatham, 2025).

Despite this absence of military AI considerations in its governance architecture, Europe is shifting towards 'smart warfare', a doctrine that prioritises AI-enabled defence systems over traditional large inventories and high upkeep costs (Merritt, 2024). These technological investments align with NATO's AI strategy, which advocates using AI for predictive intelligence, logistics optimisation, and automated threat detection while maintaining strict human-in-the-loop decision-making protocols (Soare, 2024). This approach contrasts sharply with China's model of algorithmic warfare autonomy, in which AI-driven systems can operate with minimal human intervention.

A critical aspect of Europe's AI-driven warfare development is the rising threat of cognitive warfare, which involves AI-powered psychological operations, information manipulation, and disinformation campaigns. Cognitive warfare could possibly present an existential security challenge for European democracies, as AI-driven deepfakes, automated propaganda, and algorithmic social engineering could destabilise politics and erode public trust (Lahmann, 2024). For instance, Russia's disinformation warfare in Ukraine—facilitated by AI-generated narratives and bot-driven propaganda networks—illustrates how adversaries exploit AI for political and psychological manipulation (Churanova, 2024). To counter this, Europe has intensified investments in AI-based disinformation detection tools and cyber resilience measures, as outlined in a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Csernatoni, 2023).

Futhermore, Ukraine serves as Europe's primary testing ground for AI warfare, offering real-world insights into AI's role in modern conflict. The war demonstrates the effectiveness of

AI-assisted drone warfare, AI-driven intelligence gathering, and automated battlefield logistics. Ukraine's innovative use of AI-powered surveillance systems, algorithmic targeting models, and battlefield data analytics has reshaped military tactics among NATO members. In response, European defence policymakers accelerated AI-driven military research to ensure that future conflicts incorporate advanced machine-learning models for strategic and operational advantage (Tregub, 2024).

Europe's stance on AI-enabled warfare is also driven by its broader strategic imperative of technological sovereignty (van Oirsouw, 2024). This shows Europe's need to reduce dependence on US and Chinese AI technologies by fostering domestic military AI development to strengthen defence autonomy. European nations are investing in next-generation AI-powered defence projects, such as France's AI-driven Rafale fighter jets and Germany's AI-integrated battlefield management systems. However, Csernatoni (2023) warns that Europe's fragmented defence landscape—marked by differing national priorities and budget constraints—hinders the development of a cohesive AI military strategy, potentially slowing the EU's ability to compete in AI-driven global warfare.

Conclusion

This paper argues that AI in warfare represents more than just a technological advancement; it signifies an ontological shift in how war is conceived, initiated, and sustained. AI-driven military systems may soon dictate not only how wars are fought but also why they persist. The PLA's organisational reforms, AI investments, and doctrinal adaptations reflect a fundamental move towards intelligentised warfare. The Chinese government has been aggressively investing in AI-driven autonomous weapons, cyber warfare capabilities, and deep-learning intelligence platforms to achieve strategic parity with the West and its foreign policy goals. This also contributes to global insecurity, given that AI regulation is not as clear-cut as for concrete military assets such as nuclear weapons.

As China progresses with closed-loop, autonomous AI war models, and Europe struggles to balance regulation with military necessity, the world risks entering an era where AI-vs-AI conflict emerges as a distinct geopolitical force, potentially beyond human oversight. The question now is no longer whether AI will impact warfare but whether war itself will become an AI-driven, cybernetic phenomenon independent of human intent. This paradigm shift ultimately requires a balance between AI decision-making processes and human autonomy.

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