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The Algorithmic Arms Race: AI, Military Power, and Security Dilemmas in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence into military systems is transforming the character of global security, creating new forms of strategic competition and generating pressures for regional arms races. This paper examines the implications of the emerging AI arms race for West Africa, with particular attention to Nigeria. It argues that the intersection of AI and military power is generating new insecurities, creating pressures for regional arms races, and embedding values in technological systems that may not serve African interests. Drawing on C. Wright Mills's theory of the power elite, Robert Jervis's security dilemma, and Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology, the paper analyses the structural dynamics that drive AI militarisation and the values embedded in AI systems. It also engages with African perspectives that challenge the assumption that the AI arms race is a concern only for great powers. The paper argues that Nigeria must

develop a strategic approach to AI that neither ignores the realities of great-power competition nor uncritically adopts the priorities of external actors. It concludes with recommendations for Nigerian policymakers, the African Union, ECOWAS, and the international community.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; arms race; security dilemma; West Africa; Nigeria; military technology.

INTRODUCTION

The global security landscape is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the rapid development and integration of artificial intelligence into military systems. What began as a technological curiosity in academic research laboratories has become a central organising principle of great-power competition, generating new capabilities, new vulnerabilities, and new sources of strategic instability. The race between leading AI powers, particularly the United States and China, is intensifying amid broader strategic competition, with profound implications for international security and stability (Mitre et al., 2025, p. 4). Autonomous weapons systems, AI-enabled surveillance platforms, algorithmic targeting systems, and machine-speed command-and-control architectures are reshaping how states prepare for and conduct war. As the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research has warned, the integration of AI into weapons systems and military decision-making at scale could undermine strategic stability in ways that existing governance frameworks are ill-equipped to address (Geiss, 2025, p. 1). The global AI governance landscape remains fragmented, with no binding international treaty governing military AI and major powers differing widely in their regulatory approaches (Sisson, 2025, p. 3).

This transformation has significant implications for West Africa, a region already grappling with multi-modal security threats including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, communal violence, and maritime piracy. The AI arms race between the United States, China, and other powers is not a distant phenomenon confined to the theatres of great-power competition. Its effects are felt in West Africa through the proliferation of autonomous weapons systems, the militarisation of cyberspace, the use of AI-enabled surveillance technologies by both state and non-state actors, and the strategic dependencies created by reliance on foreign AI providers. AI-enabled weapons are already deployed across Africa, yet importing states have little insight into how the embedded software selects targets, navigates, and decides whether to engage (Gor & Yeboah, 2026, p. 4). Reliant on foreign suppliers, the continent remains poorly equipped to govern this asymmetry. As Kwarkye (2025, p. 438) observes, African countries are adopting AI regulatory frameworks at an accelerating pace, yet their motivations and political contexts vary significantly, and the values embedded in these policies are shaped by complex dynamics of power, knowledge, and historical contingency.

The threat is not merely hypothetical. Research by the University of Cambridge has documented that Boko Haram fighters in northeastern Nigeria are using artificial intelligence chatbots to build more powerful bombs, plan attacks, and solve problems during combat (Juelich, 2026, p. 1). Researchers interviewed 27 former members of Boko Haram's two factions, the Islamic State West Africa Province and Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad, who described using ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Grok, Meta AI, and DeepSeek as routine sources of technical and military advice before, during, and after attacks (Juelich, 2026, p. 3). Both factions established dedicated AI units staffed by engineers, weapons specialists, and bomb-makers, with one former commander describing a specialised unit of 23 people working from a solar-powered room, answering questions, analysing information, and training senior commanders (Juelich, 2026, p. 6).

This is not the AI arms race of great-power theory; it is the AI arms race as experienced on the frontlines of West African conflict, where the proliferation of accessible AI tools is reshaping the capabilities of both state and non-state actors. The Cambridge research underscores that non-state armed groups are not passive observers of the AI revolution but active exploiters of its affordances, creating new challenges for security governance that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

This paper examines the implications of the AI arms race for West Africa, with particular attention to Nigeria. It argues that the intersection of AI and military power is generating new insecurities, creating pressures for regional arms races, and embedding values in technological systems that may not serve African interests. The paper is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives: C. Wright Mills's theory of the power elite, which illuminates the structural forces driving AI militarisation; Robert Jervis's security dilemma, which explains the dynamics of the AI arms race; and Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology, which reveals the values embedded in AI systems. It also engages with African perspectives that challenge the assumption that the AI arms race is a concern only for great powers. The paper argues that Nigeria must develop a strategic approach to AI that neither ignores the realities of great-power competition nor uncritically adopts the priorities of external actors.

The paper is divided into seven parts. Following this introduction, the second part presents the theoretical framework. The third part examines the global AI arms race and its structural drivers. The fourth part analyses the implications for West Africa. The fifth part presents African perspectives on AI, security, and governance. The sixth part offers lessons for Nigeria. The seventh part concludes with recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives that together illuminate the intersection of artificial intelligence, military power, and the emerging global arms race. These frameworks provide analytical tools for understanding why AI is becoming militarised, how this militarisation generates security dilemmas, and what values are embedded in the technologies being deployed.

Mills's Power Elite and the Military-Industrial Complex

C. Wright Mills (1956) argued that American democracy is dominated by a "power elite" composed of interconnected leaders from the corporate, military, and political spheres. These elites occupy commanding positions in the major hierarchies of modern society and share a common worldview that prioritises national security, corporate profit, and the preservation of their own institutional power. Mills's analysis of the "revolving door" between the military and corporate sectors anticipated the contemporary phenomenon of tech executives moving between Silicon Valley firms and the Pentagon.

Contemporary scholarship has extended Mills's framework to the digital age. Coveri et al. (2025a, p. 82) document how the "digital-military-industrial complex" represents a new configuration of the power elite, in which Big Tech corporations have become indispensable partners of the US military apparatus. The authors identify three structural features of this relationship: an "originary linkage" binding the development of digital platforms to military research and development; the critical nature of infrastructures and technologies controlled by platforms; and their role as the government's "eyes and ears" both domestically and abroad. Coveri et al. (2025b, p. 1645) further demonstrate that the revolving door between the Pentagon and Silicon Valley has created "growing power elites between the two sectors," confirming Mills's core insight in a new technological context.

The mechanisms of this capture are now visible. In June 2025, the US Army formalised the fusion of tech expertise and military innovation by appointing four tech leaders as reserve lieutenant colonels to its newly established "Detachment 201," also known as the "Executive Innovation Corps" (Xie, 2026, p. 5). The Pentagon has begun commissioning Silicon Valley executives directly into military ranks through Detachment 201, a programme that counts among its officers Palantir's chief technologist, Meta's AI chief, and product leads from OpenAI (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2026, p. 27). The revolving door between government and industry has become a structural merger. In July 2025, the US Army quietly signed one of the largest defence contracts in American history, a 10-billion-dollar deal that handed control over battlefield intelligence, logistics, homeland security, and immigration control systems to Palantir Technologies (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2026, p. 5).

Nadibaidze (2025, p. 488) shows how US-based AI startups position themselves as essential providers of security technologies, promoting discourses that legitimise algorithmic warfare. These startups, though nominally private enterprises, function as extensions of the military-industrial complex, shaping the epistemic foundations of how war is imagined and conducted. The power elite that Mills described has thus been reconstituted as what one analysis calls a "conspicuous platform elite," in which AI adds "another layer to the revolving door effect of economic, political, and military control in the creation of a shared understanding of information in the hands of a few elites" (Ayolov, 2026, p. 12).

Jervis's Security Dilemma and the AI Arms Race

Robert Jervis (1978) articulated the security dilemma as the condition in which one state's efforts to increase its security, through the accumulation of arms or the development of new technologies, inevitably decrease the security of other states. This dynamic generates a spiral of mutual insecurity, as each state responds to the other's defensive measures with its own offensive preparations. The security dilemma is most acute when offensive and defensive capabilities are indistinguishable, when states cannot reliably signal their defensive intentions, and when the offensive advantage appears to be dominant.

Jervis's framework is directly applicable to the contemporary AI arms race. The opacity of AI systems, particularly the "black box" problem of unexplainable algorithmic decision-making, prevents states from reliably assessing each other's intentions. As Jervis (1978, p. 187) observed, the absence of transparent intentions fuels armament races. The security dilemma preserves itself through opacity. The integration of AI into military systems intensifies the dilemma because AI-enabled capabilities, such as autonomous weapons systems and AI-assisted targeting, blur the distinction between offensive and defensive postures. A state that deploys AI for defensive purposes, such as border surveillance or threat detection, may be perceived by its adversaries as preparing for offensive operations, triggering reciprocal militarisation.

The ongoing competition between China and the United States in artificial intelligence exhibits many characteristics of the security dilemma. Despite the rapid advancement of AI, there is still no unified or binding international treaty governing AI technologies. Global AI governance remains fragmented and regionally driven, with no universally authoritative institution in place. Major powers differ widely in their core concepts, value orientations, and regulatory approaches, leaving the international system in a state of governance anarchy (Sisson, 2025, p. 3). Mutual suspicion, fear, and uncertainty about intentions have long shaped the trajectory of US-China relations, and the AI competition has intensified these dynamics.

Onderco (2025, p. 608) demonstrates how the Ukraine conflict has accelerated NATO's adoption of military AI, creating pressures for member states to develop compatible systems and share data. This dynamic replicates the security dilemma at the alliance level: NATO's AI integration is framed as defensive, but it generates incentives for Russia and China to accelerate their own military AI programmes. The result is an AI arms race that no party can unilaterally halt without risking strategic disadvantage. As the Brookings Institution has noted, without deliberate measures to constrain this dynamic, unilateral pursuit of advantage will undermine stability, and failure to do so risks fuelling an unconstrained arms race with destabilising global effects (Sisson, 2025, p. 28).

Erskine and Miller (2024, p. 138) examine the specific risks that AI poses to resort-to-force decision-making, arguing that the speed and opacity of AI-enabled systems may compress the decision time available to leaders and increase the likelihood of inadvertent escalation. The security dilemma thus operates not only between states but within the command structures of individual states, as human decision-makers struggle to maintain meaningful control over AI systems that operate at machine speed.

Feenberg's Critical Theory of Technology and the Values Embedded in AI

Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology provides a framework for analysing the values and interests embedded in technological systems. Feenberg (2017) rejects the notion that technology is neutral or value-free, arguing instead that technology is a socially constructed artefact shaped by competing social interests. He contends that technologies embody "technological codes" that reflect the power structures of the societies that produce them. These codes are not inevitable; they can be contested and transformed through democratic intervention.

Feenberg's framework illuminates the values embedded in military AI systems. The development of autonomous weapons systems, predictive policing algorithms, and AI-assisted targeting technologies reflects a set of priorities: speed over deliberation, efficiency over due process, and technological solutionism over political negotiation. As Feenberg (2017, p. 45) argues, the "technical rationality" that governs technological design is not neutral but embodies a particular "technological code" that privileges certain values and interests over others.

Recent scholarship has applied Feenberg's framework to AI specifically. Krijger (2022, p. 1428) demonstrates that AI technologies, despite being developed as "rational and efficient tools," often "reproduce social discrimination and algorithmic bias rooted in existing power relations," revealing AI as "a socially constructed technology reflecting particular interests rather than a value-neutral instrument." In the military domain, these biases can have lethal consequences: AI targeting systems trained on skewed data may misidentify civilians as combatants, or predictive policing algorithms may reproduce racial biases in surveillance operations. The integration of AI into weapons systems raises profound questions about the permissibility and feasibility of programming normative reasoning into AI systems (Sisson, 2025, p. 5). As NATO has emphasised, the concept of meaningful human control explicitly emphasises the ethical and legal aspects of human oversight and implicitly assigns responsibility and accountability (NATO Science and Technology Organization, 2025, p. 4).

Feenberg's concept of the "democratization of technology" suggests that AI systems should be subject to public deliberation and democratic control. Achieving a "deep democratization of AI technologies requires the establishment of sustainable democratic mechanisms that guarantee the redesign of AI technologies through ongoing technological contestation and deliberative dialogue among technical experts and diverse stakeholders" (Krijger, 2022, p. 1435). This insight is particularly relevant to West Africa,

where AI governance frameworks are still nascent and where the priorities embedded in imported AI systems may not reflect local needs or values.

THE GLOBAL AI ARMS RACE

The Militarisation of Artificial Intelligence

The integration of artificial intelligence into military systems has accelerated dramatically over the past decade. What was once a peripheral concern of defence planners has become a central organising principle of military modernisation for the world's major powers. The United States, China, Russia, and a growing number of middle powers are investing billions of dollars in AI research and development, seeking to gain strategic advantage through superior algorithms, faster data processing, and autonomous decision-making capabilities.

The militarisation of AI takes multiple forms. Autonomous weapons systems, which can select and engage targets without human intervention, represent the most visible manifestation of this trend. AI-enabled surveillance platforms, which process vast quantities of data to identify threats and track individuals, are increasingly deployed in both domestic and international security contexts. Algorithmic targeting systems, which use machine learning to identify and prioritise targets, are being integrated into command-and-control architectures. And AI-assisted logistics and planning systems are transforming the ways in which militaries organise and deploy their forces.

The United States has been at the forefront of military AI development. The US Department of War announced cooperation agreements with multiple cutting-edge artificial intelligence companies to deeply integrate advanced AI technologies into its military combat systems (Xie, 2026, p. 4). This move has sparked high international concern over the accelerated development of AI militarisation. Against the backdrop of great power competition, the US has continuously securitised and militarised AI development, intensifying the confrontational nature of the AI competition (Xie, 2026, p. 10). In the early stages, the US military primarily utilised AI for intelligence processing, image recognition, and target screening to efficiently handle massive data generated by drones, satellites, radars, and sensors. With the development of large models, multimodal technologies, and data fusion platforms, AI has expanded into fields such as command and control, mission planning, and joint combat coordination, evolving from a standalone tool into a critical pillar of military system operations (Xie, 2026, p. 16). During the confrontation with Iran, AI helped commanders select targets at ten times the tempo of previous conflicts, though a Pentagon investigation into an accidental strike on an Iranian school underscores the ethical stakes of that speed (NATO Innovation Network, 2026, p. 16).

China has also made military AI a central priority. A Chinese research team claims to have built an algorithm, HG-STR, that lets drone swarms keep tracking and attacking targets even when jammed or operating with poor visibility, reportedly hitting a 100% kill rate in simulation by reasoning about the battlefield as a dynamic network rather than isolated data points (NATO Innovation Network, 2026, p. 22). France is testing Arcadia, a homegrown AI battlefield command system built with Mistral AI, Safran.ai, Thales, and Airbus, as a European, digitally sovereign alternative to Palantir's Maven Smart System (NATO Innovation Network, 2026, p. 19). Russia is fielding a new generation of jet-powered strike drones with longer range and bigger warheads to counter Ukraine's interceptor drones (NATO Innovation Network, 2026, p. 33).

The Digital-Military-Industrial Complex

The structural dynamics of the AI arms race cannot be understood without attention to the power elite that drives it. As Coveri et al. (2025a, p. 82) document, Big Tech corporations have become indispensable partners of the US military apparatus, creating what they term the "digital-military-industrial complex." This configuration represents a new chapter in the history of the military-industrial complex that President Dwight Eisenhower famously warned against in his farewell address of 1961. Over the past decade, the familiar concept of the military-industrial complex has evolved into a new hybrid: the digital-military-industrial complex, which revolves around firms that specialise in data, artificial intelligence and digital platforms, as well as startups deliberately positioned as defence-oriented technology providers (Xie, 2026, p. 13).

Traditional defence giants such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics now face intense competition from two kinds of digital players. The first category comprises big tech corporations including Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Oracle, HP, Dell, Motorola, and IBM, many of which have secured sizable Pentagon contracts to supply advanced systems software and cloud, data, and AI services. The second category consists of venture-backed startups, often funded by Silicon Valley investors that focus on AI, autonomy, sensing, and networked command-and-control systems tailored to military and intelligence needs (Xie, 2026, p. 22). Examples include Anduril, founded in 2017 by investors including Palmer Luckey and Peter Thiel, which supplies autonomous systems that combine AI and robotics, and Palantir, founded in 2003, which has significantly expanded military collaboration in recent years (Xie, 2026, p. 31).

The concentration of AI capabilities in the hands of a small number of corporations raises profound questions about accountability and democratic control. As Nadibaidze (2025, p. 489) demonstrates, US-based AI startups position themselves as essential providers of security technologies, promoting discourses that legitimise algorithmic warfare. These corporations are not neutral actors; they have interests, values, and agendas that shape how AI is developed and deployed. The power elite that Mills (1956) described has thus been reconstituted in a form that is simultaneously more concentrated and less accountable. As the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (2026, p. 20) observes, unlike the Cold War-era military-industrial complex, this formation is faster, transnational, and ideologically coherent. It embeds itself through personnel pipelines, procurement loops, and technical architectures without which the state can no longer function.

The Security Dilemma Dynamics

The AI arms race exhibits the classic features of the security dilemma that Jervis (1978) described. Each state's efforts to increase its security through AI development decrease the security of other states, generating a spiral of mutual insecurity. The opacity of AI systems prevents states from reliably assessing each other's intentions, and the blurring of offensive and defensive capabilities makes it difficult to distinguish between preparations for defence and preparations for attack.

The security dilemma operates at multiple levels in the AI context. At the level of great-power competition, the United States and China are engaged in a race for AI supremacy that neither can unilaterally halt without risking strategic disadvantage. Each side interprets the other's AI investments as evidence of aggressive intent, justifying its own investments as defensive necessities. The result is a classic action-reaction spiral that neither side can escape without mutual agreement on restraint. As the Brookings Institution has argued, China and the United States, as the leading developers and deployers of AI military systems, have a special responsibility to govern AI in the military domain and to prevent it from harming civilians (Sisson, 2025, p. 34).

At the alliance level, NATO's AI integration has created pressures for member states to develop compatible systems and share data, as Onderco (2025, p. 608) documents. This dynamic replicates the security dilemma within the alliance: states that fall behind in AI capabilities may be perceived as unreliable partners, while states that develop advanced capabilities may be perceived as seeking to dominate alliance decision-making. The result is a race within the alliance that no member state can unilaterally opt out of without risking marginalisation.

At the level of individual states, the integration of AI into command-and-control systems creates new risks of inadvertent escalation. Erskine and Miller (2024, p. 138) argue that the speed and opacity of AI-enabled systems may compress the decision time available to leaders, increasing the likelihood that crises escalate to war before human decision-makers have an opportunity to exercise restraint. The security dilemma thus operates not only between states but within the command structures of individual states, creating new sources of instability that traditional arms control frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WEST AFRICA

The Proliferation of Autonomous Weapons Systems

The proliferation of autonomous weapons systems poses particular risks for West Africa. Gor and Yeboah (2026, p. 4) observe that AI-enabled weapons are already deployed across Africa, yet importing states have little insight into how the embedded software selects targets, navigates, and decides whether to engage. Reliant on foreign suppliers, the continent remains poorly equipped to govern this asymmetry. Acquisition of these weapons is accelerating. China, Russia, and the United States together have supplied about 55 percent of the region's major arms imports. Türkiye has delivered combat drones, some AI-capable, to at least 12 African states, becoming the continent's largest supplier of AI-enabled weapons (Gor & Yeboah, 2026, p. 10).

The risks are particularly acute in West Africa, where several states are engaged in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province, and other armed groups. The deployment of autonomous weapons systems in these contexts raises profound ethical and legal questions. Who is accountable when an autonomous system kills civilians? How can meaningful human control be maintained over systems that operate at machine speed? What safeguards exist to prevent autonomous systems from being used to commit atrocities? When a Turkish-manufactured Kargu-2 loitering munition operated in Libya in March 2020, a UN Panel of Experts documented that the weapon was "programmed to attack targets without requiring data connectivity between the operator and the munition" (Gor & Yeboah, 2026, p. 26). This was the first UN-reported case of autonomous weapons use, and it occurred on African soil.

Oyewole et al. (2025, p. 618) warn that autonomous weapons systems could lower the threshold for the use of force, reduce the costs of military intervention, and increase the likelihood of conflict escalation. These risks are particularly acute in regions where border disputes, resource competition, and communal violence already create high levels of insecurity. The proliferation of autonomous systems could intensify these dynamics, making conflict more frequent, more lethal, and more difficult to resolve. Olumba et al. (2025, p. 2) argue that existing international and regional safeguards are insufficient to address the risks posed by lethal autonomous weapons systems, especially for countries in the Global South. The African continent has seen an increased concentration of the use of military drones and other precursor or potential component technologies to autonomous weapons systems, with the first UN-reported case of AWS use in Libya and tests of new systems like the Triton autonomous maritime drone in the Gulf of Guinea

(Stop Killer Robots, 2026, p. 14). This makes the regulation of autonomous weapons systems an urgent need for the African continent.

The Militarisation of Cyberspace

The militarisation of cyberspace represents another significant dimension of the AI arms race with implications for West Africa. As states develop AI-enabled cyber capabilities, including autonomous malware, AI-powered intrusion tools, and machine-speed cyber defences, the risks of cyber conflict increase. West African states, which have limited cyber defence capabilities, are particularly vulnerable to these threats.

Nigeria, as the largest economy in West Africa and a significant player in the digital economy, is a prime target for cyber attacks. The country has experienced numerous high-profile cyber incidents in recent years, including attacks on financial institutions, government agencies, and critical infrastructure. The integration of AI into cyber operations intensifies these threats, enabling attackers to develop more sophisticated and evasive malware, to automate reconnaissance and exploitation, and to conduct operations at machine speed. The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research has documented that adversarial uses of AI range from sophisticated AI-generated misinformation and cyberattacks to the dangers of adversaries leveraging dual-use technologies as well as chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear risks (Geiss, 2025, p. 29).

The AI arms race in cyberspace also creates pressures for West African states to develop offensive cyber capabilities, which could have destabilising consequences for the region. As states acquire the ability to conduct offensive cyber operations, they may be tempted to use these capabilities against their rivals, leading to escalation and conflict. The lack of clear norms and safeguards governing cyber operations makes this scenario particularly dangerous. Sissoko and Dembele (2025, p. 5) demonstrate how AI in West Africa operates ambivalently, serving both as a tool for digital repression by governments and as a means for citizen mobilisation. This dual character means that the same AI technologies that could enhance regional security cooperation also enable surveillance and control, raising profound questions about the values embedded in these systems.

The Dependency on Foreign AI Providers

A third implication of the AI arms race for West Africa is the dependency on foreign AI providers. West African states lack the industrial base, research infrastructure, and skilled workforce necessary to develop indigenous AI capabilities at scale. This dependency creates vulnerabilities: imported AI systems may embed values and priorities that are not aligned with local interests, and foreign providers may restrict access to critical technologies for political or commercial reasons.

Coveri et al. (2025a, p. 84) document how Big Tech corporations function as extensions of the US military apparatus, raising questions about the reliability of these corporations as partners for African security agencies. When West African states procure AI systems from American or Chinese providers, they are not merely acquiring technology; they are entering into relationships of dependency that shape their strategic options and constrain their autonomy. Gor and Yeboah (2026, p. 7) argue that for African states, which depend overwhelmingly on foreign suppliers for these advanced weapons systems, this creates a governance gap. Existing arms-control frameworks, built around the physical characteristics of weapons, are ill-suited to address the software-defined capabilities that govern how AI-enabled weapons behave. Abraham (2026, p. 12) identifies structural dependency, algorithmic colonialism, and epistemic erasure as three interrelated dynamics that shape AI development in postcolonial West African contexts. The development of AI continues to be shaped mainly by Euro-American perspectives

that neglect the intricate historical, structural, and epistemic factors influencing technology adoption in West Africa, raising important questions about the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of ethical considerations in AI deployment.

The dependency on foreign AI providers also raises questions about data sovereignty. AI systems trained on data from West Africa may extract value from local communities without providing adequate compensation or benefit sharing. The data generated by West African users and institutions may be used to train AI systems that serve the interests of foreign corporations and states, rather than the interests of the people who generated the data. Inyang (2025, p. 368) examines how the increasing use of AI-driven surveillance technologies at West African borders marks a shift in ECOWAS's approach to regional security, migration management, and crime control. Biometric identification systems and AI-powered analytics, frequently supplied by external vendors, are deployed despite concerns about data protection, raising questions about whether constitutional guarantees are being outpaced by the operational realities of vendor-controlled tools.

The Risk of Regional Arms Races

The AI arms race between great powers creates pressures for regional arms races in West Africa and beyond. As states adopt AI-enabled military technologies, they generate pressures for neighbouring states to do the same, creating risks of regional escalation. The security dilemma dynamics that operate at the global level are replicated at the regional level, as each state's efforts to increase its security decrease the security of its neighbours.

ECOWAS has recognised the potential of AI for counterterrorism and peace operations, and has begun to consider the deployment of AI in these contexts. A Professor of Cybersecurity and Computing, Uche Mbanaso, has called on ECOWAS to embrace and deploy Artificial Intelligence tools to tackle the sub-region's multi-faceted security challenges like violent extremism and terrorism (Mbanaso, 2025, p. 4). Speaking at the ECOWAS Parliament's 2025 Second Extraordinary Session, Mbanaso said integrating AI deployment in the security sector would transform West Africa's security architecture. He emphasised that the integration of AI deployment in the security sector is poised to transform regional security and safety, offering both opportunities and challenges for the sub-region, and called on ECOWAS to emphasise the need for a unified and structured framework for AI integration, supported by ethical guidelines, to maximise benefits while reducing risks (Mbanaso, 2025, p. 17).

Nigeria's Minister of Defence, Mohammed Badaru, has outlined three priority fronts for a joint security framework: real-time intelligence integration using AI, operationalising the ECOWAS Standby Force through harmonised legal frameworks, and tackling root causes such as poverty, exclusion, and weak governance while investing in education and resilience (Badaru, 2025, p. 18). He warned that piecemeal national responses can no longer contain the escalating wave of terrorism, stating that "security in one country is inseparable from the security of its neighbours" (Badaru, 2025, p. 13). Nigeria's National Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Major General Adamu Laka, warned that terror groups from Boko Haram and ISWAP to newer cells like Lakurawa are multiplying and exploiting digital platforms for recruitment and radicalisation, especially among youth (Laka, 2025, p. 37).

While these initiatives are driven by legitimate security concerns, they also create risks of regional arms races if they are not accompanied by robust safeguards and transparency measures. The deployment of AI-enabled surveillance and border control systems, if not properly governed, could exacerbate tensions between neighbouring states and contribute to a climate of suspicion and insecurity.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON AI, SECURITY, AND GOVERNANCE

The Epistemic Exclusion of African Voices

A genuinely global analysis of AI and the arms race must engage with African perspectives that have been marginalised in mainstream security studies. Oyewole et al. (2025, p. 604) observe that "there are inadequate African perspectives on the development and deployment of autonomous weapons systems," a gap that reflects broader patterns of epistemic exclusion. Their study documents the emerging realities of autonomous weapons in Africa and argues that African states must develop regulatory frameworks that reflect local contexts and priorities.

The exclusion of African voices from global AI governance debates is not merely a matter of representation; it has material consequences. When AI governance frameworks are developed without input from African states and communities, they may fail to address the specific challenges and opportunities that AI presents in African contexts. They may also impose regulatory burdens that are inappropriate for African conditions or that serve the interests of external actors rather than local stakeholders. Oloyede (2026, p. 243) argues that effective AI governance in Africa requires collaborative regulation that leverages existing authorities rather than creating new agencies, recognising that many African countries already possess institutional frameworks that can be adapted to AI oversight.

Falode et al. (2021, p. 19) demonstrate that Nigeria has not integrated AI into its strategic policy documents or military doctrine, despite facing multi-modal security threats including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, and cybercrime. They argue that Nigeria should follow the example of countries like the United States, Russia, China, Israel, and Estonia that have effectively integrated artificial intelligence into their overall national security architecture. However, they caution that such integration must be accompanied by attention to cybersecurity, intelligence, defence, and internal security in ways that are appropriate to Nigeria's specific circumstances.

In a subsequent study, Falode et al. (2025, p. 269) argue that "the limited adoption of AI across key sectors, particularly defence and the broader economy, has constrained the country's ability to respond effectively to the multi-modal security threats it faces." They recommend the strategic integration of AI into Nigeria's agricultural, defence, military, and financial sectors, while acknowledging the resource constraints and infrastructural deficits that limit the country's capacity to build robust AI systems.

Ubuntu and the Ethics of AI

African philosophical traditions offer resources for thinking about the ethics of AI that are not captured by Western frameworks. The concept of Ubuntu, which emphasises relationality, community, and mutual recognition, has been applied to AI governance in a growing body of scholarship. Many scholars point to the role of indigenous ethical systems, particularly Ubuntu, in addressing the limitations of Western AI ethics frameworks (Eke & Ogoh, 2025, p. 3).

Ubuntu's emphasis on the interconnectedness of persons challenges the individualistic assumptions that underpin many Western approaches to AI ethics. Where Western frameworks focus on individual rights and autonomy, Ubuntu emphasises responsibilities, relationships, and the collective good. This has implications for how we think about AI systems: rather than treating them as tools for maximising individual utility, Ubuntu suggests that they should be evaluated by their contribution to community well-being and social harmony.

However, the application of Ubuntu to AI governance is not without complications. As Eke and Ogoh (2025, p. 3) observe, neither the normative structure of

Ubuntu nor the AI governance initiatives in Africa fully articulate an African perspective of AI ethics that addresses epistemic injustice. The danger is that Ubuntu becomes a formulaic label that is applied to AI without genuine engagement with its philosophical content, or that it is used to legitimise AI systems that do not actually serve community interests. Olumba et al. (2025, p. 14) propose a dual-theoretical approach informed by technological determinism and grounded in Ubuntu, centring collective human accountability and reinforcing the imperative of meaningful human control in the design, deployment, and governance of lethal autonomous weapons systems. This approach lays the groundwork for African-led regulatory mechanisms for emerging military technologies and offers an Afrocentric perspective on rethinking the global governance of LAWS.

Pan-African Approaches to Defence Cooperation

Pan-African approaches to defence cooperation offer a framework for West African states to develop collective responses to the challenges posed by the AI arms race. The African Union's Agenda 2063 calls for the development of world-class infrastructure and science, technology and innovation, recognising that technological capability is essential to the continent's security and development. African states, institutions and experts have made significant contributions to the international discussion on autonomous weapons systems, calling for a legally binding instrument on AWS, emphasising the need for meaningful human control and agency, ensuring responsibility and accountability, curbing proliferation to non-state actors, and highlighting the dangers of algorithmic bias (Stop Killer Robots, 2026, p. 20).

The African Union has called for the negotiation of a legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons systems in 2026, recognising that sufficient common ground has now been developed to launch negotiations. African states have been urged to ensure their individual and collective views are included in deliberations towards the development of a strong legal instrument, and to develop their positions and contributions further on issues including the centrality of meaningful human control, ensuring predictability, the need to address bias, resisting dehumanisation, prohibiting anti-personnel systems, and the need for a comprehensive legal framework to prevent the erosion of human control and ensure civilian protection (Stop Killer Robots, 2026, p. 25). As Olumba et al. (2025, p. 18) argue, a philosophical perspective rooted in African ethical and political thought can enrich regional and global debates on regulating LAWS, which remain dominated by Eurocentric assumptions.

These initiatives represent a recognition that the challenges posed by AI and the arms race are too great for any single state to address alone. However, the realisation of these aspirations requires addressing the structural barriers that limit African agency in the global AI landscape. These barriers include the concentration of AI research and development in a handful of countries, the extraction of African data for training AI models without adequate compensation or consent, and the imposition of regulatory frameworks that reflect the priorities of external actors. A decolonial approach to AI governance would centre the interests and agency of African states and peoples, demanding not only access to technology but also meaningful participation in its design and governance.

LESSONS FOR NIGERIA

The analysis presented in this paper generates several lessons for Nigeria's engagement with AI and the emerging global arms race.

First, Nigeria is not insulated from the dynamics of great-power technological competition. The AI arms race between the United States, China, and other powers has

direct implications for Nigerian security, including through the proliferation of autonomous weapons systems, the militarisation of cyberspace, and the use of AI-enabled surveillance technologies by both state and non-state actors. As Falode et al. (2021, p. 19) demonstrate, Nigeria's strategic policy documents have failed to engage with these realities, leaving the country ill-prepared for the security challenges of the AI era.

Second, Nigeria's position in the global AI ecosystem is characterised by dependency and asymmetry. The country lacks the industrial base, research infrastructure, and skilled workforce necessary to develop indigenous AI capabilities at scale. This dependency creates vulnerabilities: imported AI systems may embed values and priorities that are not aligned with Nigerian interests, and foreign providers may restrict access to critical technologies for political or commercial reasons. Coveri et al. (2025a, p. 84) document how Big Tech corporations function as extensions of the US military apparatus, raising questions about the reliability of these corporations as partners for Nigerian security agencies. Abraham (2026, p. 15) shows how structural dependency and algorithmic colonialism reproduce historical forms of dependency and epistemic marginalisation in West African AI development, while also surfacing forms of resistance and aspirations for decolonial alternatives.

Third, the security dilemma dynamics described by Jervis (1978) are increasingly relevant to Africa. As African states adopt AI-enabled military technologies, they generate pressures for neighbouring states to do the same, creating risks of regional arms races. Oyewole et al. (2025, p. 618) warn that autonomous weapons systems could lower the threshold for the use of force, reduce the costs of military intervention, and increase the likelihood of conflict escalation. These risks are particularly acute in regions where border disputes, resource competition, and communal violence already create high levels of insecurity.

Fourth, the values embedded in AI systems matter. Feenberg's (2017) critical theory of technology reminds us that AI systems are not neutral tools but embodiments of particular interests and priorities. The development of AI-enabled surveillance systems, predictive policing algorithms, and autonomous weapons reflects a "technological code" that privileges speed, efficiency, and control over deliberation, due process, and human dignity. Nigeria must ensure that the AI systems it adopts reflect values of justice, accountability, and respect for human rights, rather than reproducing patterns of discrimination and oppression.

Fifth, African philosophical traditions offer resources for thinking about AI ethics that are not captured by Western frameworks. Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality, community, and mutual recognition challenges the individualistic assumptions that underpin many Western approaches to AI ethics. However, as Eke and Ogoh (2025, p. 3) caution, Ubuntu must be engaged with seriously as a philosophical framework, not merely invoked as a label. Olumba et al. (2025, p. 22) demonstrate that combining the explanatory value of technological determinism with the normative grounding of Ubuntu can provide a robust framework for regulating emerging military technologies in ways that centre collective human accountability.

Sixth, the enforcement of AI governance frameworks depends on institutional capacity. Ehirim (2026, pp. 124, 132–133, 147–148) argues that judicial autonomy, particularly financial and administrative autonomy, is indispensable to effective justice delivery, and that continued dependence upon the executive may weaken public confidence and judicial capacity. In a different public-law context, Ehirim et al. (2025, pp. 1, 3, 7) demonstrate how inadequate constitutional safeguards, weak judicial responses, and the political weaponisation of adjudication may undermine the effective enforcement of legal norms. These findings provide relevant institutional context for assessing the challenges of implementing AI governance frameworks in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the implications of the emerging AI arms race for West Africa, with particular attention to Nigeria. It has argued that the intersection of artificial intelligence and military power is generating new forms of insecurity, creating pressures for regional arms races, and embedding values in technological systems that may not serve African interests. The theoretical frameworks of Mills, Jervis, and Feenberg provide analytical tools for understanding these dynamics: Mills illuminates the power elite that drives AI militarisation, Jervis explains the security dilemma that fuels the arms race, and Feenberg reveals the values embedded in AI systems.

The analysis has drawn on African perspectives that challenge the assumption that the AI arms race is a concern only for great powers. Oyewole et al. (2025), Falode et al. (2021, 2025), and Olumba et al. (2025) demonstrate that African states are not passive spectators but active participants in the global AI landscape, albeit from positions of structural disadvantage. The paper has argued that Nigeria must develop a strategic approach to AI that neither ignores the realities of great-power competition nor uncritically adopts the priorities of external actors.

Based on this analysis, the paper makes the following recommendations:

For Nigerian Policymakers

1. Develop a national AI strategy that explicitly addresses military and security applications, including autonomous weapons systems, AI-enabled surveillance, and cyber capabilities.
2. Invest in domestic AI research and development, particularly in universities and research institutions, to build the capabilities necessary for technological sovereignty.
3. Establish regulatory frameworks for AI in the military domain that reflect Nigerian values and interests, including respect for human rights and accountability for AI-enabled harms.
4. Engage with regional and continental bodies, including ECOWAS and the African Union, to develop shared approaches to AI governance and to prevent regional arms races.
5. Develop a national policy framework on the responsible use of AI that addresses the ethical, legal, and security implications of AI deployment.

For the African Union and ECOWAS

6. Develop continental and regional frameworks for the governance of military AI, including norms against the development and deployment of fully autonomous weapons systems.
7. Establish mechanisms for sharing AI research, data, and infrastructure among African states to reduce dependency on external providers.
8. Build capacity for AI governance among African policymakers, military officers, and civil society organisations.
9. Support the negotiation of a legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons systems, as the African Union has called for.

For the International Community

10. Negotiate binding international agreements on the governance of autonomous weapons systems, including prohibitions on fully autonomous systems that operate without meaningful human control.
11. Establish mechanisms for technology transfer and capacity-building to support AI development in the Global South.

12. Ensure that AI governance frameworks reflect the perspectives and interests of affected communities, including those in West Africa and the Sahel.

The AI arms race is not inevitable. It is the product of political choices, institutional structures, and technological designs that can be contested and transformed. As Feenberg (2017) argues, technology is not destiny; it is a socially constructed artefact that can be redesigned to serve different values and interests. The challenge for Nigeria and other African states is to ensure that the AI systems they adopt reflect their own priorities, rather than the priorities of the great powers and corporations that dominate the global AI landscape.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis relies on publicly available sources, including academic articles, policy reports, and media coverage. Many aspects of AI development and military applications are classified, and the study cannot access information that governments and corporations treat as secret. The findings should therefore be understood as an analysis of the publicly visible dimensions of the AI arms race, rather than a comprehensive account of all relevant developments.

Second, the field of AI is evolving rapidly, and the technologies, policies, and security dynamics discussed in this paper are subject to change. The analysis represents a snapshot of the situation at the time of writing, and readers should be aware that new developments may have occurred since.

Third, the study relies primarily on English-language sources, which may introduce a linguistic bias. Important perspectives from Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking African countries may be underrepresented. Future research should engage with sources in French, Portuguese, and Arabic to provide a more comprehensive picture of AI governance debates in Africa.

Fourth, there is limited empirical data on the deployment of AI systems in West Africa specifically. Much of the analysis relies on extrapolation from global trends and from studies of other regions, and the specific dynamics of AI adoption in Nigeria and its neighbours require further research.

Fifth, the study focuses on state-level actors and dynamics, and does not fully address the role of non-state armed groups, private military companies, or other non-state actors in the AI landscape. The Cambridge research on Boko Haram's use of AI chatbots suggests that non-state actors are already exploiting AI technologies in ways that require urgent attention, but this is an area that requires further investigation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable contribution to understanding the implications of the AI arms race for West Africa and offers a framework for analysing the intersection of technology, security, and governance in the region.

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