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Strategic latency under algorithmic risk: Pakistan's divergence from the AI arms Race

Sajjad Ahmed & Ahmad Nizar Yaakub

Received 22 Jun 2025, Accepted 21 Apr 2026, Published online: 26 Apr 2026

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates Pakistan's evolving military artificial intelligence (AI) posture to challenge the dominant assumptions of competitive acceleration and linear diffusion in strategic and defence studies. Drawing on 14 expert interviews with experts, it provides an empirical account of how AI is interpreted and governed within a nuclearized and operationally complex security environment. The findings show that Pakistan's trajectory is not defined by technological lag or imitation, but by institutional learning derived from prior exposure to semi-autonomous systems, particularly during

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates Pakistan's evolving military artificial intelligence (AI) posture to challenge the dominant assumptions of competitive acceleration and linear diffusion in strategic and defence studies. Drawing on 14 expert interviews with experts, it provides an empirical account of how AI is interpreted and governed within a nuclearized and operationally complex security environment. The findings show that Pakistan's trajectory is not defined by technological lag or imitation, but by institutional learning derived from prior exposure to semi-autonomous systems,

particularly during the War on Terror (WoT). These experiences have produced a pattern of strategic latency, in which capability development is accompanied by deliberate constraints on deployment through human oversight, threshold management, and doctrinal ambiguity. This article develops the concept of System Restrain Realism (SRR) to explain how states respond not only to adversarial pressures but also to risks embedded within algorithmic systems, including misclassification and escalation under uncertainty. By demonstrating how capabilities can be decoupled from operational use, this study contributes to emerging debates on military AI by shifting attention from competition and speed to risk governance and institutional adaptation in middle-power contexts.

KEYWORDS:

Military AI strategic latency doctrinal restraint Pakistan algorithmic risk

System Restrain Realism

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Additional information

Sajjad Ahmed

Sajjad Ahmed is a PhD scholar from University Malaysia Sarawak major in International Relations. His research interests are: Autonomous systems, Military AI, Security and Strategies.

Ahmad Nizar Yaakub

Ahmad Nizar Yaakub holds a PhD in International Relation from the University of Western Australia, Australia. He is working at University Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia as Associate Professor. He is the author of over 20 theoretical and technical publications. His areas of interest are in Indonesia, foreign policy, strategic and security, election & democracy and sustainable development.

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