

# AI WAR MACHINE

*How artificial intelligence took over the kill chain*

## THE OPENING CAMPAIGN

**When Israel and the United States** opened their air campaigns against Iran, AI was not a tool bolted onto the targeting process. It was the spine of it. Israeli systems fused surveillance feeds in real time and chose targets by pattern recognition, across a country the size of Iran, at a speed no human staff could match. Without that machine layer, analysts judged, the campaign would have hit a fraction of its targets, or sunk into a long war of attrition.

Then the success became the problem. A human staff has an instinct for “enough”: two missiles erase a target, and the third is saved for the next fight. A machine optimising for probability of kill has no such instinct. Across a whole campaign it spends one weapon more than a person would, every time, at machine speed. In the twelve-day war of June 2025, US forces fired about a quarter of their high-end THAAD interceptor stockpile in under two weeks. In the longer 2026 campaign, more than eleven thousand munitions went out in sixteen days. Replacing them takes years. Analysts named the condition the magazine abyss.

***Every target fell on schedule.***

***So did the stockpile.***

Officially, a human approved every shot. But the same campaign produced the episodes that show what that approval is worth at machine speed. A strike on a girls' school in Minab, which Iran says killed at least 168 people, sat on a target list, and US senators are still asking whether AI chose it.

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The machine did not grab the trigger. Human review simply shrank to a rubber stamp when the system moved faster than anyone could check.

### NO HUMAN REQUIRED

On 9 July 2025, in Kharkiv Oblast , two Russian soldiers were cornered in a bunker with no human enemy in sight. What closed in were machines: first small attack drones, then ground robots, one to blow open the approach, another carrying thirty kilograms of explosive. With no way out, the men held up a cardboard sign: *we want to surrender*. An operator watching from a screen far away guided them out. They had surrendered not to men, but to machines standing in for men. It had not happened quite that way before.

***Men surrendered, for the first time,  
not to other men but to machines.***

Ukraine has become the world's busiest laboratory for military AI, where a new trick stays ahead of the enemy for only three to six months before it is countered. The whole front runs on a system called Delta, a live map that links drone pilots, troops and commanders. At its core, an AI agent reportedly watches up to fifty thousand drone feeds at once and pulls targets from the flood. The payoff is brutal arithmetic. AI navigation lifts a drone's strike rate from roughly ten or twenty percent to seventy or eighty. By Ukraine's own count, drones caused ninety-six percent of Russian casualties in March 2026.

The next step is the swarm: hundreds of drones coordinating in flight, choosing among themselves when to strike. One Ukrainian engineer described where it leads: swarms carrying drones to defend them from other drones sent to intercept them, the whole battle run by AI answering to a general far in the rear. How do you defend against that, he asked. It was not a rhetorical question.



## FIND AND KILL

If Ukraine shows autonomy emerging by accident, China is engineering it on purpose. A research team in the country's northwest has published an algorithm, HG-STR, built to let a fleet of drones sweep a battlefield and destroy every enemy on it even when jammed and blind. In an idealised test, it cleared the field completely.

What matters is what it removes. Most drones today are still flown by people. This points to a future where a swarm is sent into a jammed zone, cut off from command, with one order: find and kill. The algorithm tags every object as friend, foe or ground and decides in 6.6 milliseconds, fast enough that the drone never flies blind while it thinks. Cut off from its team, each drone remembers where everyone was last seen, then decides in layers: search or strike, which target, and finally how much ammunition to spend.

***Note the last step.***

***The machine now decides how many weapons a target is worth.***

In simulation it scored a hundred percent kill rate, including against hidden targets, and scaled to larger battles without retraining. The authors admit it is still lab work. But the self-deciding swarm is being built, not just imagined.

### ALGORITHM WARFARE

If the algorithm now aims the weapon, the algorithm becomes the target. Chinese researchers call this algorithm warfare: protecting your own AI while corrupting, stealing or fooling the enemy's. Their doctrine is four words, take the initiative to strike. Hit the other side's AI first, they argue, and you win cheaply.

***Blind an army not by jamming its radars,  
but by deceiving the mind behind them.***

The methods are already mapped. Poison the training data, so a tank is learned as a civilian bus. Plant a hidden trigger, so the model works perfectly until it sees a chosen target, then fails on command. Flood the model with queries until it can be cloned and its blind spots learned. Or paint a launcher with patterns that make the enemy's AI see nothing at all.

None of this is China alone. The United States has led since 2017, when the Pentagon coined "algorithmic warfare" and built Project Maven, a version of which now reportedly helps aim US strikes in Iran. Russia, Israel, Britain and NATO are all folding AI into targeting.

And the firms that build these tools do not always want them used this way: reporting says Washington sidelined one of its main AI suppliers, Anthropic, maker of the Claude model, in a dispute over military use a day before the February 2026 offensive. It is one reason several militaries now want models of their own.



## THE FLATTERER IN THE LOOP

The sharpest warning about military AI comes from the PLA's own newspaper. In June 2026, *PLA Daily* warned of "AI sycophancy," the habit of AI systems telling users what they want to hear, even backing a clear error over the truth, and called it a severe threat as armies lean harder on automation.

It is the same trait that makes chatbots agreeable, trained to please. On a battlefield it turns dangerous: the AI quietly confirms a commander's existing plan, buries the doubts, and because it keeps agreeing, the humans stop double-checking. A force riding a wave of early success is exactly the one a flattering machine will keep cheering on, right up to the moment the magazines run dry.

***The deadliest AI on the battlefield  
may be the one that agrees with you.***

Beijing's answer is to engineer against it: train models to value truth over agreement, make them show their evidence and their doubts, and keep soldiers sharp enough not to over-trust the screen. China still insists AI must not replace human judgement in battle. How that squares with a swarm built to find and kill on its own is a contradiction it has not resolved. Nor has anyone else.

## COMMAND OF THE RELOAD

One shape emerges from all of it. Across Iran, Ukraine and China's labs, the human is leaving the loop, not by a decision to remove them, but because the loop now turns faster than a person can follow. Push human judgement to the slow edge of a system built for speed, and sooner or later it is engineered out.

The same wars that proved AI's dominance also exposed three new weaknesses. The magazine: machine-speed war empties stockpiles faster than factories can refill them. The supply chain: the chips and rare earths behind these weapons run, awkwardly for everyone, through China. And the machine's own mind: it can be

poisoned, fooled, or simply trusted too much. The strikes on Iran even drew down the very stockpiles the United States holds for a possible fight in the Pacific.

***Learning speed wins the battle.***

***Magazine depth decides the war.***

### INSIGHTS

- 1. AI has moved from helper to backbone of the kill chain.**
- 2. Success is self-limiting: machine-speed strikes drain stockpiles that take years to rebuild.**
- 3. Human control is fading by speed, not by decree.**
- 4. The swarm is being built to choose its own targets, and its own ammunition.**
- 5. The subtlest threat is flattery: an AI that tells commanders what they want to hear.**

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### SOURCES

*Reporting and analysis on the 2025 and 2026 Israel-Iran and US-Iran campaigns and the resulting interceptor and munitions shortfalls by CNN, the Royal United Services Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Al Jazeera, The Jerusalem Post, NPR, Nature and Chatham House. South China Morning Post coverage of People's Liberation Army research, including the HG-STR drone-swarm algorithm (Acta Aeronautica et Astronautica Sinica, May 2026), the algorithm-warfare study from the National Defence University's Joint Operations College (Tactical Missile Technology, April 2026), and the PLA Daily article on AI sycophancy (June 2026). IEEE Spectrum and CSIS on autonomous systems in Ukraine, and reporting on Project Maven and the Anthropic-Pentagon dispute.*