**Stability in South Asia**

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Emerging disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in robotic systems require adequate examination of how these affect the pursuit of strategic stability. The use of AI in sophisticated military weapons or next-generation systems can disrupt practically every aspect of war. Making future weapons systems fully autonomous and removing humans from the decision-making loop will almost certainly cause future crises to evolve quickly enough to fail fatally rather than safely. Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are known for their decision-making capabilities enabled by AI, sophisticated information systems, and sensors. The algorithms used to train (machine-learn) these systems can carry human biases with uncertain consequences.

Like the depleting ozone layer, the gaping hole in international law is also broadening due to emerging disruptive technologies. For instance, there is a loophole in international law on the use of force. It is a grey area for the operation’s commander to use LAWS because he cannot be held liable for any misuse, collateral damage, or accident.

Since 2014, the UN has been trying to add a protocol to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) that would regulate the development, deployment, and use of LAWS. Despite growing agreement in CCW, the UN’s Group of Governmental Experts (GGE), which is supported by international human rights activists, has advocated for a pre-emptive ban on the development of LAWS. A ban would make the points of their deployment and use irrelevant. This would address the moral, ethical, and legitimacy-related aspects of LAWS.

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Pakistan has been one of the states that have taken the lead in calling for the repeal of LAWS. However, for other states, the technological competition for military purposes is more serious than it looks. For instance, India has shown little regard for ethics, morals, and human rights in its rapid acquisition of this technology and has taken a dubious course that will allow New Delhi to develop, deploy, and use LAWS.

As for now, the U.S., Israel, Russia, and a few others are arming India to the teeth for their geopolitical and commercial interests. In January 2022, the Indian Defense Minister announced that the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) had begun research on information technology, AI, and robotics in technological warfare. Since then, Indian armed forces have rapidly made progress in the field of emerging technologies and have integrated new-age technologies. On the same occasion, products handed over to the Indian armed forces and Ministry of Home Affairs include an anti-drone system and smart anti-airfield weapons. The DRDO also developed counter-drone systems for the deterrence and destruction of incoming drones. The Indian military has also inducted new swarm drone systems into its mechanized forces. A contract for purchasing the most advanced drone, namely the MQ-9 Reaper, is under negotiation with the U.S.

The combination of India’s revisionist ideology, the pursuit of great power status, the unilateral arms race, and Hindutva ideology is a dangerous cocktail that will increase strategic instability. The advent of lethal drones has raised many questions among defence experts. India’s ability to possess such technology poses not only an additional risk to the normal balance of power but also a threat to regional stability. The Indian Army may use the LAWS and associated technologies in a future crisis that could lead to an unintended deterrence breakdown.

Any responsible nuclear power must ensure the integration of risk assessment into every weapon system it seeks to acquire or develop. It entails checks and balances processing at every stage, from policy to lower tiers, involving the design, development, testing, and deployment of that weapon throughout its entire life cycle. This principle is more applicable to LAWS. This seems like a wild goose chase in India where DRDO had incidents of not following the standard operating procedures in dealing with strategic as well as conventional weapons.

Even if one tends to trust the Indian alibi that the hit by the BrahMos missile on March 19 was accidental, it raises big questions about the Indian violation of its SOPs. The incident was one of many proofs that the West and Russia are betting on an unreliable and incompetent partner that is an irresponsible nuclear-armed state.

Drones and other technological advancements, such as LAWS, play a crucial role in pushing states into an arms race, harnessing indigenous capability for production, and threatening to disturb the peace. India’s military modernization is a pacemaker challenge to the effectiveness of the UN-sponsored non-proliferation regime.

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