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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Algorithmic War: AI, Autonomy and India's Defence Choice

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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# Algorithmic War: AI, Autonomy and India's Defence Choice

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## THE LIFT LINE

Wars are increasingly decided not only by who has the sharpest steel but by who has the smartest software. Artificial intelligence, military autonomy and algorithmic decision-making now shape targeting, surveillance and the pace of battle itself. For India, the choice is stark: build sovereign defence AI and set the ethical terms of its use, or depend on imported systems whose logic, data and vulnerabilities belong to someone else.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Emerging technologies in security, **indigenisation** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/indigenisation/>) and international humanitarian law converge here, a forward-looking GS3 theme with a strong ethics dimension.

**GS Paper 3:** Security challenges and their management; role of external state and non-state actors; developments in science and technology and their applications in defence; indigenisation of technology and developing new technology.

**Ethics crossover (GS4):** Meaningful human control, accountability for autonomous decisions, and the moral limits of delegating lethal choices to machines.

**Prelims angle:** Defence AI Council (DAIC), Defence AI Project Agency (DAIPA), DRDO's Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR), **iDEX** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/idex-defence-innovation/>) and the ADITI scheme, lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) discussions.

**Mains angle:** Examine how AI and autonomy are transforming warfare and assess India's strategy for building sovereign, responsible defence AI capabilities.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Recent conflicts have showcased a new grammar of war: swarms of low-cost drones, AI-assisted targeting, loitering munitions and real-time battlefield analytics. The **convergence** (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/convergence/>) of three forces, artificial intelligence (pattern recognition and prediction), military autonomy (systems that sense, decide and act with reduced human input), and algorithmic warfare (data-driven command decisions), is compressing decision cycles from minutes to seconds.

India has built institutional scaffolding for this shift. The Defence Artificial Intelligence Council (DAIC) and the Defence AI Project Agency (DAIPA), established in 2019, steer AI integration across the armed forces. DRDO, through its Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR), has developed a large portfolio of AI-based defence products spanning autonomous platforms, cybersecurity and surveillance, and is pursuing research on autonomous systems including underwater autonomous vehicles. Innovation is channelled through iDEX and the ADITI scheme, which targets deep-tech critical and strategic technologies such as autonomous weapons, AI, quantum and underwater surveillance. All of this sits within the wider Atmanirbhar Bharat push for defence indigenisation.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### Sovereignty is the strategic core

An imported AI-military system is a black box: its training data, decision logic and potential backdoors are controlled by the exporter. In algorithmic warfare, dependence on foreign software is a strategic **vulnerability** (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/vulnerability/>), because whoever controls the algorithm can, in principle, degrade, deceive or deny it. Data and algorithmic sovereignty are therefore inseparable from national security. India's official stand, responsible use, indigenisation and strategic autonomy, flows directly from this logic.

### The ethics and law of autonomy

DIMENSION	THE PROMISE	THE PERIL
Speed	Faster sensing and response	Decision cycles too fast for human oversight
Precision	Better target discrimination	Errors scale rapidly; accountability blurs
Cost	Cheap, attritable drones	Lower threshold ( <a href="https://ujivari.com/vocab/threshold/">https://ujivari.com/vocab/threshold/</a> ) for using force
Autonomy	Fewer soldiers in harm's way	Delegating lethal choices to machines

**International humanitarian law** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/international-humanitarian-law/>) **demands distinction** (combatant versus civilian), **proportionality and accountability**. **Lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)** strain all three. The central principle in global debate, including at the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, is **meaningful human control**: a human must remain morally and legally responsible for the use of lethal force. An AI arms race, in which states rush to field autonomous weapons to avoid being outpaced, risks eroding that principle and lowering the threshold for conflict.

## The indigenisation imperative

Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence is not merely industrial policy; in the AI era it is strategic necessity. Building sovereign models, secure data pipelines and domestic drone and counter-drone capability reduces the risk that a future adversary controls the software India fights with.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use a **capability-versus-control balance**. On one axis lies capability: India must not fall behind adversaries in AI-enabled warfare. On the other lies control: it must preserve meaningful human oversight and comply with international humanitarian law. The mature posture is not to reject autonomy (that cedes the battlefield) nor to embrace it blindly (that abandons ethics and **sovereignty** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/sovereignty/>)), but to pursue **responsible autonomy**, advanced indigenous capability governed by clear human-control doctrine.

Layer on the **three sovereignties**: data sovereignty (control of training data), algorithmic sovereignty (control of models and logic), and operational sovereignty (freedom from foreign kill-switches). Security in algorithmic war means holding all three.

## THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Imagine a slider running from full human control on the left to full machine autonomy on the right. Push the slider too far left and you are outpaced by faster, AI-driven adversaries. Push it too far right and you surrender moral and legal responsibility to a machine that cannot be held accountable. India's task is to fix the slider at "responsible autonomy": machines that sense, recommend and, within tight bounds, act at speed, but always with a human owning the decision to kill and a sovereign, home-built brain running the system.

## WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Deepen indigenisation.** Fund DRDO, CAIR, DAIPA, iDEX and ADITI to build sovereign models, secure chips and domestic drone and counter-drone stacks.
- 2 **Codify** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/codify/>) **a human-control doctrine.** Adopt a clear national policy on meaningful human control over lethal force, consistent with international humanitarian law.

- 3 **Champion responsible use internationally.** Continue engaging in CCW and multilateral [forums, reflecting India's stand of responsible, ethical and human-supervised military AI.](https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/multilateral/)
- 4 **Build data and algorithmic sovereignty.** Secure defence data pipelines, invest in indigenous compute, and audit imported systems for backdoors.
- 5 **Grow the talent and startup base.** Deepen civil-military tech fusion so that Indian AI startups strengthen the defence base without ceding strategic autonomy (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/strategic-autonomy/>).

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The theme extends UPSC's coverage of technology in security. **UPSC Mains GS3 (2020):** "Analyse the multidimensional challenges posed by external state and non-state actors, to the internal security of India." and **GS3 (2018):** "Data security has assumed significant importance in the digitised world due to rising cyber-crimes. The Justice B. N. Srikrishna Committee Report addresses issues related to data security. What, in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of the Report relating to protection of personal data in cyber space?" both map onto sovereignty and security.

**Practice question (Mains, 15 marks, 250 words):** "Artificial intelligence and military autonomy are reshaping modern warfare. Discuss the strategic and ethical challenges they pose and evaluate India's approach to building sovereign, responsible defence AI capabilities."

*Sources: The Indian Express (<https://indianexpress.com>)*

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

## Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/ie-ai-warfare-military-autonomy-2026/>

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