Who Are 'Humans' in Military AI?

Interdisciplinary Workshop

Utrecht, 12-13 June 2025

Utrecht University and the Asser Institute convene a workshop on 13 June 2025 to understand and evaluate who are 'humans' involved in—or excluded from—the development and use of AI systems in the military domain. The workshop will be combined with a keynote panel on 12 June, open to students, researchers, practitioners, and the wider public.

Theme of the workshop

The use of AI in military operations is understood as transforming military capabilities, following the precedents of transformation brought by nuclear, aerospace, cyber, and biotechnologies. Recently, algorithms have been employed at a large scale and in densely populated urban areas, in the conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. In the Gaza war ongoing since October 2023, it has been reported that the Israel Defense Forces used a series of AI-enabled decision support systems (AI-DSS) to generate targets in a manner that ultimately imposed extremely high civilian costs. Over the last decade, ethical, humanitarian, and legal concerns have been raised with regard to autonomous weapons systems (AWS) and other AI-enabled military systems (such as AI-DSS). A series of diplomatic talks have taken place since 2014 within the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) to discuss potential regulation applicable to 'lethal' AWS.

'Meaningful human control' has been one of the pillars in the decade-long debate on the regulation of AWS. Several other similar terms have also been used (such as 'human agency', 'appropriate levels of human judgment', and 'direct control and supervision of humans'). Yet 'meaningful human control' has been given importance both by State and non-governmental organisations at the CCW. The concept has also been used in the discussion of broader AI-enabled military systems, beyond AWS.

This workshop will critically look at the political construction of 'humans' involved in—or excluded from—the process of controlling and influencing the development and use of AI-enabled military systems. In a similar vein, the workshop will also look at 'humans' who are most affected by the use of such weapon systems as part of 'human-machine-human interactions'. What are the particular assumptions casted against 'humans' involved in the development or use of AI-enabled military systems? What critiques should we raise with regard to the assumptions embedded in the concept of humans, for instance from gender, race, and ethnicity standpoints? Who are actually present in, or absent from, groups of humans who may produce or interact with machines—such as military commanders, military legal advisors, executives of defence companies, program developers, engineers, and, ultimately, civilians in hostilities?

Day 1   Thursday 12 June 2025 (16.00-18.00) – Keynote Panel

Location: Johanna Hudig building (Alex Brenninkmeijer room), Achter Sint Pieter 200
Entry is also possible through the courtyard of Kromme Nieuwegracht 47E

15.30-   Registration

16.00-16.15   Introduction & welcome by the organizers

Machiko Kanetake (Utrecht University), speaking also on behalf of Marta Bo (Asser Institute)

Keynote Panel

16.15-17:30   Ingvild Bode (University of Southern Denmark)

Jessica Dorsey (Utrecht University)

Lauren Gould (Utrecht University)

17.30-18:00   Discussions

Day 2   Friday 13 June 2025 (10.00-17.00) – Workshop

Location: Vening Meinesz Building C (Playground – Event Space), Princetonlaan 6

09.30-   Registration

Panel 1   Assumptions about 'Humans' (To Be) Involved in Control

10.00-12.00   Chair: Klaudia Klonowska (Asser Institute)

Henning Lahmann (Leiden University)
The Patterns of Life of Actual Humans

Rupert Barrett-Taylor (Alan Turing Institute)
Process Management, Technology and Meaningful Control over Warfare

Qiaochu Zhang (University of Southern Denmark)
Who are 'Humans'? Unpacking Chinese Understandings of Human Agency in AI-enabled Military Systems

Marc Steen (TNO) and Nick Johnston (TU Delft)
Human-Centric AI in Military Operations: A Virtue Ethics Approach

12.00-13.00   Lunch break

Panel 2 Deconstructing Dichotomy and Hierarchy in Discourse and Practice

13.00-15.00   Chair: Róisín Burke (Utrecht University)

Anna Nadibaidze (University of Southern Denmark), Ingvild Bode (University of Southern Denmark) & Alexander Blanchard (SIPRI)
Control and Human Agency in the Debate on Military Applications of AI: The Politics of Concepts

Anna Zimmermann (University of Vienna)
(Hu)Man in the Loop: Gender Biases in Military AI

Arthur Gwagwa (Utrecht University) & Thomas Mollema (Highberg)
Identifying Epistemic Silencing in the LAWS Discourse and the Urgent Need for a New Framework for Epistemic Inclusion

Zaeem Hassan Mehmood (Greenwich University)
AI and Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Examining the Human Factor in Algorithmic Decision-Making

15.00-15.30   Coffee break

Panel 3 Processes and Effectiveness of Contestations and Reform

15.30-17.00   Chair: Katharine Fortin (Utrecht University)

Roberto J. González (San José State University)
Silicon Valley's Conscientious Objectors: Tech Employee Protests and the Militarization of AI

Nori Katagiri (Saint Louis University)
Human Response to the Politics of Project Maven

Larissa Furtwengler (Airspace Tribunal)
"When the Sky is Not Safe, No Other Place is Safe" -The Case for a New Human Right to Live Without Physical or Psychological Threat from Above

17:00-   Drinks

<u>About the organizers</u>

This workshop is co-organised by Utrecht University and Asser Institute. The event is supported by: Utrecht University's focus area on 'Governing the Digital Society'; the 'Realities of Algorithmic Warfare' (RAW) project under the research platform Contesting Governance; the Asser Institute's DILEMA project (Designing International Law and Ethics into Military Artificial Intelligence); and Utrecht University's Research Platform on Peace, Security, and Human Rights.