

Algorithmic Judgment, Strategic Misperception, and the Risk of Escalation in International Crises



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Abstract:

This article examines how artificial intelligence is reshaping strategic judgment in international crises, from a perspective that combines conceptual analysis with security and diplomatic applications. The main question is: how does artificial intelligence, as a cognitive and operational tool, affect the structure of strategic judgment, the production of misperception, and the rise of escalation risks? The article uses an analytical and interpretive approach based on a synthetic reading of recent literature in international relations, security studies, and artificial intelligence research. The discussion is organized around four connected sections: the algorithmic transformation of strategic judgment, artificial intelligence and strategic misperception, the shift from misperception to escalation dynamics, and the governance and control of algorithmic risk. The article concludes that artificial intelligence does not only increase speed and efficiency. It also reshapes the conditions under which decisions are produced, which may create new forms of misperception and faster paths to escalation. This makes institutional and normative governance essential for reducing these risks and protecting international stability.

Keywords: Algorithmic judgment; Strategic misperception; Artificial intelligence; International crises; Escalation dynamics.

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Introduction:

In recent years, artificial intelligence has changed the environment in which strategic judgment is made. States, military institutions, and diplomatic bodies no longer rely only on direct human judgment and traditional data analysis. They now operate in a new social and technical setting where algorithms produce images of reality, organize signals, set priorities, and suggest options. This change matters because it affects not only practical tools, but also the knowledge base of strategic perception itself. It also changes the relationship between knowledge and decision, and between interpretation and action.

This raises a central question: how does artificial intelligence reshape strategic judgment in international crises, and does this change improve decision-making or create new forms of misperception that may speed up escalation? More specifically, how does artificial intelligence, as a cognitive and operational tool in decision environments, affect the structure of strategic judgment, the formation of misperception, and the rise of escalation risks in international crises? This question is important because intelligent systems are spreading quickly in military and diplomatic fields. It also reflects a deeper shift: a move from a model in which human expertise controlled the whole chain of decision to a hybrid model in which humans and algorithms share the production of meaning, threat assessment, and the choice of options.

This article is based on the argument that the use of artificial intelligence in strategic judgment does more than improve speed and efficiency. It also changes the conditions in which decisions are produced. This can create new forms of strategic misperception. The article further argues that this problem does not remain limited to the cognitive level. Under time pressure and in complex crisis environments, it can develop into fast escalation dynamics. For this reason, institutional and normative governance is necessary to reduce algorithmic risks.

The article uses an analytical and interpretive approach. It draws on recent literature in international relations, security studies, and artificial intelligence research. Its purpose is to examine the link between algorithmic change in decision-making, the emergence of misperception, the possibility of escalation, and the need for governance. The article has four main aims: first, to explain the algorithmic transformation of strategic judgment; second, to identify the mechanisms through which artificial intelligence can produce strategic misperception; third, to show how such misperception can develop into escalation in international crises; and fourth, to discuss the institutional and normative frameworks that can govern algorithmic risks and limit their effects on international stability.

The structure of the article follows the logic of the problem. It begins by examining what has changed in the nature of strategic judgment. It then explains

how this change can produce new forms of misperception, and how these forms may develop into escalation dynamics. The final step is the question of control and governance. On this basis, the article first examines the algorithmic transformation of strategic judgment. Second, it studies how artificial intelligence contributes to strategic misperception. Third, it explains how this misperception can turn into escalation dynamics in international crises. Finally, it discusses the governance and control of algorithmic risks.

1. The Algorithmic Transformation of Strategic Judgment

The algorithmic transformation of strategic judgment is no longer just a technical update of state tools. It has become a change in the nature of judgment itself: in its knowledge base, its speed, and the side that produces the "reasonable picture" of reality. This is the main idea found in recent work on digital international relations. The issue is not only the digitalization of traditional tools. It is also what has been described as the disruptive interaction between digital technologies and structures of power, which changes the foundations of political action and reshapes patterns in the international system. In this sense, artificial intelligence enters the strategic field as a tool that changes the relationship between knowledge and decision, and between perception and power (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2024, p. 2).

The strength of this transformation comes from three linked developments: turning reality into data, the rapid growth of computing power, and the deep spread of digital technologies in political and social life. Traditional strategic judgment depended on reports, experience, and political reasoning. Algorithmic judgment depends more and more on turning relations, behavior, and communication into data that can be processed, then into patterns, then into predictions, and finally into recommendations. This is why the rise of artificial intelligence is linked to what can be called information geopolitics, where the ability to collect data, analyze it, and build representations of the world becomes a strategic resource in itself, not just something secondary to material power. In this context, the main question is no longer simply who has greater power, but who has the better structure for turning reality into knowledge that can guide judgment (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2024, pp. 5–7).

At the same time, this does not mean that the algorithm has simply replaced the human being. Work on technology and agency in international relations offers an important correction. Intelligent technologies work with people inside socio-technical systems where work, attention, perception, and decision are redistributed. The algorithm takes over the "heavy work" of scanning, filtering, and first detection, but the human element remains present and is placed inside a new chain of interaction. This point matters because it avoids the simple view that algorithmic change means the direct replacement of human judgment. A better

way to understand it is as a reorganization of judgment itself inside an environment where human beings and intelligent systems share the production of meaning and the ordering of priorities (Leese & Hoijsink, 2019, pp. 1–2).

For this reason, the meaning of "good judgment" also changes. In complex strategic environments, having more information is not enough. What matters is the ability to follow causal chains and estimate second- and third-order effects. This is the point stressed by Doumanas, Soularidis, and Kotis. They argue that sound military decision-making depends on understanding how actions produce later results in a changing environment. This becomes even clearer in their tests, where models were examined through anonymous combat cases so that they would not rely on stored memory, but on actual causal reasoning. This example is important because it shows that algorithmic strategic judgment is not only about speed. It is also about moving from the commander's intuition to testing links, scenarios, and complex effects that individual human judgment may not grasp at the same pace (Doumanas, Soularidis, & Kotis, 2026, pp. 1–4).

This change also reaches diplomacy. Diplomacy has moved beyond a slow, reactive style based on memoranda, reports, and closed meetings toward a more predictive style based on data. Recent studies show that tools such as sentiment analysis, automated response systems, and real-time threat detection have become part of diplomatic practice in digital settings. Natural language processing is also used to analyze diplomatic speech, detect contradictions in draft treaties, and generate alternative policy scenarios. In this way, artificial intelligence affects not only how actors read their rivals, but also how they shape negotiating options. Strategic judgment therefore shifts from reaction to analytical anticipation, where the ability to predict trends, sort signals, and generate options becomes part of foreign action itself (Zeynalova, 2026, pp. 2, 9).

The deeper meaning of this transformation appears in the changing nature of future conflict. Some studies suggest that future war will not be defined only by major battles between advanced platforms. It will also be shaped by a more fragmented and confusing environment in which "small things" become targets: key individuals, communication links, logistical nodes, and small but important weak points in infrastructure and supply chains. In this setting, power becomes increasingly tied to data systems, digital infrastructure, systems of influence, and systems of decision. This shows that algorithmic strategic judgment developed as a response to an environment that no longer allows slow and linear judgment. It requires a constant ability to detect small vulnerabilities and turn them into operational knowledge and then into action (Lacy, 2024, pp. 11–13; Habib, Amin, & Khan, 2026, p. 60).

This leads to an important conclusion. The algorithmic transformation, by redistributing knowledge power between the human actor and the system, creates new forms of efficiency, but it also opens the way to new forms of strategic

misperception. This makes the transition to the next section natural: if the algorithm has become a partner in producing judgment, how does it affect the kinds of error that may shape that judgment?

2. Artificial Intelligence and Strategic Misperception

Artificial intelligence becomes dangerous in the strategic field because it can reproduce misperception in a more convincing and stronger form. The problem does not always begin with a clear technical error. It may begin with the way system outputs are understood, with the information environment that feeds the system, and with the interpretive authority given to it inside institutions. From this perspective, algorithmic misperception is different from traditional misperception. It grows out of a complex relation between the model, the data, the user, and the conflict setting. For this reason, Erskine and Miller warn that the danger may start with a misunderstanding of generative models themselves, when their outputs are received as if they were a form of human-like thinking or judgment, even though they are probabilistic responses and do not seek truth in the human sense (Erskine & Miller, 2025, p. 4).

The first source of strategic misperception, then, is the human misunderstanding of the machine. A language model may produce a coherent and confident answer, but this does not mean that it understands the context or reads political and military symbols as a human actor does. The more convincing the output looks, the greater the risk of giving it interpretive authority that it does not deserve. The issue here is not only the information itself, but also the value assigned to that information. A decision-maker may treat the output as a final judgment, even though it is only an assessment shaped by the model's data and limits (Erskine & Miller, 2025, pp. 4–5).

This danger becomes stronger through what the literature calls automation bias, meaning the tendency to accept machine outputs without enough questioning. In high-risk situations, the system may be seen as more neutral or more capable than human beings, so it is silently given an interpretive role larger than its real capacity. Erskine and Miller connect this tendency to a deeper problem: deskilling, and even moral deskilling, meaning a decline in the human ability to make independent judgments, not only in knowledge terms but also in ethical and political terms. At that point, misperception becomes the result of a weaker human ability to correct misunderstanding in the first place (Erskine & Miller, 2024, pp. 139–140).

Misperception also begins in the information environment in which artificial intelligence operates. Pokhriyal and Koebe note that decisions in crises are often made under limited or incomplete information, and that data and signals may be deliberately distorted, hidden, or misused by the parties in conflict. This point is important because it means that artificial intelligence works on a reality

that has already been shaped by politics and conflict, and may already carry disinformation, noise, and bias. If the inputs are already damaged, the outputs may deepen uncertainty in a faster and more regular way (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023, pp. 2–3).

This becomes clearer in Lawal's example from the Russia–Ukraine war. He refers to the fake Zelensky video that spread in March 2022, where the Ukrainian president appeared to call on his forces to surrender. He also mentions the use of AI-driven social bots by Russia to spread pro-Kremlin narratives. The importance of this example is not only the deepfake technology itself. It shows how artificial intelligence can produce a false but highly convincing image of a political leader during war, creating confusion for the public, the armed forces, and outside actors at the same time. In this case, misperception grows from a flood of false knowledge designed to shape perception (Lawal, 2025, pp. 5266–5267).

The same danger exists in diplomacy. Zeynalova shows that tools such as sentiment analysis, automated responses, and real-time threat detection have already entered diplomatic practice. At the same time, she warns that heavy dependence on algorithms may weaken the sense of context and the human judgment needed for effective diplomacy. Decisions based on faulty algorithms or biased data may also produce false representations of foreign publics and increase tensions instead of reducing them. Here, misperception concerns not only a military opponent, but also the way foreign societies and external actors are represented inside the model (Zeynalova, 2026, pp. 2, 10).

Artificial intelligence can intensify misperception because it changes the conditions in which error is formed. This takes place through misunderstanding the nature of these systems, placing too much trust in their outputs, relying on damaged information environments, and accepting false or limited representations of opponents, publics, and contexts. The main challenge is therefore not only to improve technical accuracy, but also to prevent probabilistic outputs from being treated as firm strategic judgments.

3. From Misperception to Escalation Dynamics

Misperception turns into escalation because it develops inside a strategic environment shaped by time pressure, dense decision-making, and a short distance between analysis and action. In modern crises, decision-makers face not only a lack of information, but also a large and uneven flow of signals, competing interpretations, and institutional pressure that favors speed over caution. As a result, the mistake does not remain at the level of judgment. It can move quickly into action. Tina Comes shows that crises bring together complexity, speed, and value pressure at the same time. This places actors under heavy cognitive and moral pressure and leaves little time to examine longer chains of consequences. When algorithmic systems enter this process, they can make the problem worse by

speeding up the move from signal to recommendation and from recommendation to decision. In such conditions, misperception becomes harder to contain and more likely to develop into a chain of escalation (Comes, 2024, pp. 2–4).

The problem becomes deeper when intelligent systems take part in judging whether force should be used in the first place. At this level, the error affects the threshold of strategic decision itself. If a system can process large amounts of data, detect patterns, and produce quick expectations about an opponent's intentions or about the costs of action and restraint, there is a risk that these outputs will be treated as objective judgments rather than as probabilistic assessments limited by context and model design. At that point, misperception may move from a traditional human problem to an institutional problem covered by a technical appearance of certainty where only probability exists (Erskine & Miller, 2024, pp. 138–139; Erskine & Miller, 2025, pp. 2–3).

A historical example from the UNIDIR report on nuclear risk reduction shows how technical failure under time pressure can create dangerous strategic misperception. In 1983, Stanislav Petrov judged a Soviet warning of a nuclear attack to be false. It later became clear that the false signal had been caused by sunlight reflecting off high-altitude clouds and confusing the early-warning satellite sensors. Earlier, in 1979, a simulated Soviet missile attack was mistakenly inserted into the real warning system at NORAD before the mistake was discovered. These two cases show that complex systems can produce false strategic perception at the very moment when time is shortest, and that careful human judgment was the key factor that prevented a false warning from becoming a catastrophic decision. For this reason, the nuclear example is not only a story from the past. It helps explain what may happen when new layers of automation and artificial intelligence are added to early-warning, command, and control environments (Wan, 2020, p. 27).

The same pattern appears clearly in the case of algorithmic targeting in Gaza. Ahmad Mohee shows that the current transformation in war is not only about greater firepower. It is also about moving the "cognitive processes that select their points of impact" from slower human work to high-speed, data-heavy systems that can generate targets on a large scale. This example is important because it shows how misperception can move directly into military action. If the data are noisy, if behavioral patterns are unclear, or if model assumptions are biased, the error does not stay at the level of analysis. It may lead to target selection, then to a strike, and then to a counter-response. The study also argues that this type of warfare makes the combat function itself more vulnerable to data poisoning, deception, and interference, while also creating a responsibility gap that makes it difficult to know who made the mistake when harm occurs. This is a typical structure of escalation: faster decision, weaker review, and more diffuse responsibility (Mohee, 2026, pp. 2–3).

The danger also reaches the reasoning process inside advanced models. Doumanas, Soularidis, and Kotis point out that military decision-making depends not only on collecting information, but also on tracing causal chains, estimating second- and third-order effects, and adapting to quickly changing environments. This becomes especially important in the military simulations discussed in their article. Some large language models, when placed in wargaming environments, showed escalatory patterns and dynamics similar to arms races. They were also sensitive to prompt design and, in some cases, leaned toward more aggressive options. The problem here is not just wrong information. It is weak causal reasoning that may fail to understand the later effects of an early decision, producing recommendations that appear rational on the surface while pushing events toward escalation in practice (Doumanas, Soularidis, & Kotis, 2026, pp. 3–6).

The issue becomes sharper in the case of strategic deception. Tapang Ivo Tanku begins from the observation that recent wargaming experiments showed escalatory behavior by language models in simulated crises. He then asks a more disturbing question: can these models actually deceive, meaning can they send false signals on purpose in order to shape an opponent's view of their capabilities or intentions? The value of this example is that it shifts the discussion from misperception as error to misperception as the result of misleading signaling. The danger is not only that the model makes a mistake. It may also produce a surface imitation of strategic rationality without a real understanding of deterrence and bargaining. If such systems are used in real crises, they may add a new layer of uncertainty, because the machine may act through an unstable signaling logic that disturbs mutual perception and deepens misunderstanding (Tanku, 2026, pp. 1–2).

Studies on AI-supported diplomacy also show that these dynamics do not develop on clean ground. Pokhriyal and Koebe discuss the use of artificial intelligence in cases such as Ebola in West Africa, the Syrian refugee crisis, COVID-19, and the Russia–Ukraine war. They note that crisis decisions are often made under limited or incomplete information, and that data and signals may be deliberately distorted or hidden by the parties involved. This means that artificial intelligence works on a reality already shaped by politics and conflict. If the inputs are already biased or distorted, the outputs may deepen that problem in a faster and more regular way (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023, pp. 2–3).

Finally, the whole problem becomes more severe when the decision cycle is pushed beyond the point of real human oversight. Mohsen Hayat argues, in the context of hybrid threats, that artificial intelligence reshapes the epistemic and institutional conditions in which judgment is produced, and this may weaken human decision-making if the relation between machine recommendation and political judgment is not properly controlled. At the same time, Habib, Amin, and Khan show that sixth-generation warfare, with its combination of artificial intelligence, cyber operations, gray-zone pressure, and decision support, increases

instability when effective human control and legal-normative regulation are absent. The central lesson of this section is clear: the greatest danger is not a single machine error by itself, but an error that takes place inside a fast, tightly connected, and institutionally coupled system, where its spread is faster than its correction (Hayat, 2025/2026, pp. 1–2; Habib, Amin, & Khan, 2026, pp. 59–60, 64).

Artificial intelligence does not create escalation out of nothing. What it does is reshape the conditions that make escalation possible. It compresses time, gives probabilistic outputs more practical authority than they deserve, and introduces new forms of reasoning, deception, and speed into the strategic field. In such an environment, the key issue is no longer whether error will happen, but how and when it will move, inside fast algorithmic structures, from misperception to action and then to a wider escalatory chain.

4. Governance and Control of Algorithmic Risk

The problem of governance in the age of artificial intelligence comes from the fact that it changes the logic of decision-making itself: who defines danger, who sets the threshold for response, and who carries responsibility when a probabilistic assessment becomes a major political or security action. For this reason, it is not enough to see artificial intelligence as a tool that improves efficiency. Efficiency in this case may compress time, weaken human review, and expand the authority of the indicator or the model at the expense of political deliberation. In crisis situations, where speed, uncertainty, and values meet, governance becomes necessary to keep decision-making under human control, not just a regulatory framework added after innovation (Comes, 2024, pp. 7–10).

This can be seen clearly in examples of AI-supported early warning. De Agostini and Giovanardi present a series of cases showing that technical development has often moved faster than institutional development. Programs such as ICEWS, the Political Instability Task Force models, and the Early Warning Project are all examples of attempts to turn large amounts of data into early warning about unrest and violence. More direct examples include the company Rhombus, which estimated, through large-scale analysis of open sources and the dark web, a high probability of a large Russian invasion of Ukraine months before it happened, and the Raven Sentry system, which was used in Afghanistan to analyze decades of conflict data, weather data, social media, and satellite images in order to predict Taliban attacks at a speed close to that of skilled analysts. The importance of these examples does not lie only in successful prediction. They also reveal what the paper itself calls the warning-response gap. Having an early signal does not automatically mean having the ability to turn it into organized preventive action. At this point, governance begins in its real sense: not only improving model accuracy, but building channels that can turn warning into mediation, mobilization,

diplomatic pressure, or early institutional readiness (De Agostini & Giovanardi, 2025, pp. 2–5).

This is why institutional examples matter so much. The same paper notes that the European Union uses an early warning system for violence based on indicators and member-state input to identify countries at risk of escalation. It also notes that the German Foreign Office developed the PREVIEW platform to collect public data and produce regular lists of the countries most likely to face violence. NATO, in turn, did more than announce general principles on artificial intelligence. In 2024 it expanded its focus to include responses to AI-supported disinformation and linked this to strategic foresight and scenario planning. For this reason, De Agostini and Giovanardi propose the creation of Hybrid Peacemaking Intelligence Units, meaning mixed units that bring together the state, civil society, and technical experts to analyze warnings and activate preventive response channels. What is striking here is that governance appears as institutional design, not as a general ethical slogan: a platform, a coordination mechanism, a response protocol, and a human review authority, rather than simple talk about "transparency" in the abstract (De Agostini & Giovanardi, 2025, pp. 3–5).

This approach becomes even more necessary in diplomacy during crises. Pokhriyal and Koebe begin from examples such as Ebola in West Africa, the Syrian refugee crisis, COVID-19, and the Russia–Ukraine war in order to show that diplomatic decisions in crises are often made under limited information, and under signals that may be distorted, hidden, or exploited by the parties involved. For this reason, they stress that AI outputs should not be presented as solid facts, but as assessments that include calibrated and explained uncertainty. They also connect responsible use of artificial intelligence to four conditions: responsible models of data sharing, systems that are explainable and resistant to noise and bias, capacity-building for workers in diplomatic and humanitarian institutions so they understand the limits of models, and the preservation of deep human interaction with communities affected by crisis. In this sense, governance becomes a matter of epistemic justice as well: where the data came from, who was left out of it, and how uncertainty is shown to those who will bear the consequences of the decision (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023, pp. 1–4).

This issue becomes even sharper when the data themselves are highly sensitive. The same study refers to the use of mobile phone data, satellite images, spatial data, and digital data in estimating population movements, planning responses, and understanding health and humanitarian developments. This means that diplomatic or humanitarian decision-making no longer depends only on traditional reports. It also depends on data structures that may touch privacy, reproduce social and spatial bias, and give those who own analytical infrastructure a greater ability to define reality itself. Good governance therefore begins with data policy: who shares what, under which standards, for what purpose, and who checks

the safety of that sharing, rather than with the algorithm alone (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023, pp. 2–3).

In digital diplomacy, Zeynalova offers a different but highly relevant example. She shows that artificial intelligence and big data are pushing diplomacy from a gradual interactive pattern toward a predictive, data-based pattern, where tools such as sentiment analysis, automated responses, and real-time threat detection are now used in strategic communication and crisis management. The study presents the case of Azerbaijan as an example of a state from the Global South that invested, especially after the Second Karabakh War, in updating its digital diplomatic tools, setting national standards for artificial intelligence, and linking this to the priority of digital sovereignty. The importance of this example does not come only from "successful modernization." The study also shows the other side of the picture: algorithmic diplomacy brings risks of algorithmic bias, cyber threats, digital authoritarianism, and ethical ambiguity. A state may gain speed and flexibility, but at the same time it may open new areas of unclear responsibility and weaken trust and legitimacy (Zeynalova, 2026, pp. 1–3, 9–10).

In sum, control over algorithmic risks cannot be achieved through one principle alone, such as transparency or "the human in the loop." It requires a broader governance structure: early warning linked to response protocols, shared institutional structures for verification and coordination, responsible data policy, clear representation of uncertainty, real integration of human judgment, and legal and normative frameworks that control speed before it turns into escalatory momentum. The examples above show that governance failure does not appear only when a system makes a mistake. It may also appear when a system succeeds technically, but institutions cannot translate that success into legitimate and balanced action. The central issue, therefore, is not whether states will use artificial intelligence in crises, but whether they will be able to govern its use before it begins to govern the rhythm of their decisions (Comes, 2024, pp. 7–10; De Agostini & Giovanardi, 2025, pp. 4–5).

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence has altered the setting in which strategic judgment is formed. Its importance does not lie only in adding new tools to decision-making, but in changing how judgment is built in the first place. As the article has argued, strategic judgment now takes shape within socio-technical environments where relations, events, and signals are translated into data and then reorganized through models that produce patterns, forecasts, and recommendations. This shift has changed the instruments of judgment, the object of judgment, the speed of judgment, and the distribution of agency within the decision process.

The article has also argued that this transformation carries a serious risk. The spread of intelligent systems does not automatically improve judgment. It can

also generate new forms of strategic misperception. Models may be treated as if they possess a human-like capacity for understanding and evaluation, while distorted or biased data may reinforce error in a more convincing form. In this setting, misperception grows out of a combination of opacity, overconfidence in outputs, damaged information environments, and technical limits.

Under crisis conditions, these weaknesses become more dangerous. Once time pressure increases and the room for review becomes smaller, misperception can move quickly from the level of interpretation to the level of action. The result is not simply a mistaken reading of events, but a greater possibility that error will feed escalation. In such cases, escalation emerges from the meeting point between political intention and algorithmic structures that accelerate decision and narrow the space for correction.

For this reason, the problem cannot be answered by technical improvement alone, nor by broad ethical language without institutional effect. What is required is a governance framework that connects warning to response, data to accountability, interpretation to human judgment, and innovation to legal and political restraint. Without such a framework, systems introduced to improve decision-making may deepen instability instead.

At the broadest level, the article treats artificial intelligence in international relations as a force that is reshaping perception, decision, escalation, and control. The real issue is therefore not whether artificial intelligence will become part of international crises, but how its role can be limited and governed so that accelerated judgment and strategic misperception do not create a more dangerous crisis environment.

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