

AI Diplomacy: How Great Powers Weaponize Artificial Intelligence in Foreign Policy - A Comparative Study of the United States, China, and Russia

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Abstract:

AI is becoming a fundamental part of international politics, influencing the ways in which great powers collect intelligence, make their strategy, and exert influence. This paper proposes a comparative perspective to analyze how the United States, China and Russia are using AI in their foreign policy. Based on policy documents, institutional analysis, and open-source intelligence, the study proposes three strategic logics: (1) the American logics of technolinguistic enclosure through export controls and alliance coordination, (2) the Chinese logics of standards-based order building through institutional entrepreneurship and multilateral diplomacy, and (3) the Russian logics of asymmetric cognitive disruption through information operations and deepfake-enabled warfare. Analysis of these approaches indicates that they are not converging, but rather they are the result of deep strategic cultural, domestic political-economic and global technological differences. This fragmentation will be institutionalized in 2026, when the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO) is established, which is based on the vision of China's governance, while the United States is following selective multilateralism. These three logics create compounded risks, such as rapidly accelerated decision cycles, disjointed governance and the erosion of the epistemic commons, which are not easily managed by any single power, the paper argues. The framework developed here can serve as a starting point for exploring the implications of AI for statecraft and the circumstances in which international collaboration could be achieved.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Diplomacy, Great Power Competition, Strategic culture, Global Governance, Cognitive Warfare.

I. INTRODUCTION

AI has gone from periphery to centre stage in great power competition. Once again a technological novelty in the laboratory, it is now a core component of a state's intelligence, strategic, diplomatic and power projection capabilities, and has fundamentally transformed international politics. The year 2026 marked a pivotal moment, with the founding of the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO) that involved 29 founding members, including China and Russia, but not the United States, representing a new institutional structure of global AI governance that is becoming an axis of geopolitical alignment (Xinhua, 2026). At the same time, AI has become a key tool for warfare, with the development of new AI targeting systems, the deployment of AI-driven large language models in the fight against information warfare, and the enactment of broad export restrictions on cutting-edge semiconductors.

This paper proposes a comparative method to explore the issue of how the U.S., China and Russia are using AI in their foreign policies. The puzzle here is that each power has reacted to the algorithmic shift in international politics in a different way but all three argue that they are acting in self-defence and in line with international norms. The United States would like to achieve the technological enclosure, which is the creation of barriers against frontier capabilities and the use of current capabilities for coercive effect. China adopts standards-based order building by institutional entrepreneurship and multilateral diplomacy to influence the global governance of AI and at the same time to upgrade its military. Russia uses asymmetric cognitive disruption – it is a way to overcome the material and technological disadvantages using information operations and weaponization of ambiguity.

The comparison isn't just an observation. It sheds light on the various trajectories of the same technology, as they are developed by the different strategic cultures, domestic political economies and roles of the various nations in the global technological hierarchy, and on the implications of these different trajectories for international stability. The paper is divided into 4 parts. First, it provides a conceptual framework to analyse the weaponisation of AI in foreign policy. Second, it looks at each case in detail and elucidates the strategic rationale, institutional processes and working practices behind each power's strategy. Third, it carries out a systematic comparative analysis which involves convergence, divergence and interaction effects are identified. Lastly, it examines the implications for international stability and international governance.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING AI WEAPONIZATION IN FOREIGN POLICY

AI diplomacy has three interwoven aspects: diplomacy with AI actors, diplomacy about AI, and diplomacy through AI. Everything from coercive export controls and military use of AI to discursive and cognitive operations is part of the "weaponisation" of AI in foreign affairs.

There are six dimensions (1) strategic narrative, (2) core objectives, (3) policy tools and initiatives, (4) mode of international engagement, (5) focal technological domains, and (6) distinctive emphases, which can be used as an analytical tool for comparing the different approaches. When applied to this, it becomes clear what the commonalities are: All three powers are seeking to use AI as a soft power and have differences of opinion on technical standards, as well as what they are for.

The term “weaponization” needs to be precisely defined. It doesn't need to involve the actual deployment of autonomous weapons, although it's one part of it. Instead, it is a matter of embedding the capabilities of artificial intelligence in the whole process of foreign policy formulation, international negotiation, public diplomacy, crisis management and security governance. This comprises intelligence analysis, strategic planning, influence operations, economic statecraft, and military command and control all using AI.

III. THE UNITED STATES: TECHNOLOGICAL ENCLOSURE AND INTEGRATED DETERRENCE

A key signature of the American use of AI weaponization is technological enclosure, which involves the strategically engineering of a fence around the frontier technologies and the use of current benefits to enforce them. It is in line with the strategic culture of the United States to retain qualitative military superiority and because it is the world's leading technology nation.

Strategic Narrative and Objectives

AI is a key component in America's strategic narrative for the “integrated deterrence” that is necessary in all domains of competition. The story is about the necessity to speed up the use of AI and the assurance of reliable, robust, steerable and controllable systems. Such a framing helps to make AI development a security need and a competitive requirement, but also to recognize the dangers of relying too heavily on a system that can be unpredictable.

Military Integration

The most apparent facet of American AI weaponisation has been the incorporation of AI into the military's operations. DOD has taken a proactive approach towards integrating AI into its operations, including planning, intelligence analysis, and targeting. This integration, however, has many challenges, and shows the dichotomy of aspiration and capacity. AI is a “tool for queuing human action,” not a replacement for human decision-making, “it is not a replacement for the human brain” (Air University, 2026), military leaders have stressed.

There are both physical and institutional barriers to the diffusion of AI in the U.S. military. As the level of autonomy increases and compute needs rise, even digital-only AI apps have infrastructure limitations. The Pentagon's new budget request was for \$4.2 billion to fund “sovereign AI infrastructure,” but Congress hasn't yet passed the funding and physical infrastructure can take years to construct. While some data centers are facing challenges due to grid limitations, others are facing more industrial, political and bureaucratic hurdles with some projects in the U.S. coming to a standstill.

Export Controls and Economic Statecraft

The economic aspect of the weaponization of AI in the United States is export restrictions. The CHIPS Act and the advanced semiconductor export ban to China are a sign of efforts to preserve the structural advantage by denying supply chain. This can be expanded to alliance coordination under AUKUS and Quad technology working groups and establish a web of technology sharing partnerships without competitors. The motivation behind this is technological containment: the idea is to keep the most

powerful chips, software and manufacturing facilities out of China's hands so as to impede its race to AI parity, but not lose the qualitative edge it has.

But a recent study suggests that this approach has had counterintuitive results. In recent years, Chinese companies have made new or published progress in the design and production of chips and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, and US export-control policy has been confused and bogged down by bureaucratic sloth. (IISS, 2026) Huawei announced a new method for creating advanced semiconductors, dubbed LogicFolding, that it thinks it can do without the use of the extreme ultraviolet lithography machines, built by ASML, the Netherlands. While the restrictions have been put in place to limit the growth of China's firms, they may have been a “protective shield” for those that would not have been able to compete with the established ecosystems had they not been there (CSF, 2026).

Institutional Posture

American institutional attitude is selective engagement. The U.S. does not intend to sign the statement on responsible military AI, which was signed by 2026, and in doing so China rejected the offer as well (UNIDIR, 2026). This is a typical trade-off: the more likely that verification regimes are to be adopted, the more likely that sensitive model parameters can be disclosed and the faster the technology diffuses to other competitors. Another reason for the U.S. approach is because of the nature of domestic politics, with technology firms not wanting to be limited in using their technologies for military purposes.

IV. CHINA: STANDARDS-BASED ORDER BUILDING AND SMART DETERRENCE

China's strategy is to build up its capabilities and influence in AI while simultaneously influencing the rules of the game. China is doing both building capabilities and establishing rules for the global AI order. The strategic narrative follows the path of emphasizing the importance of AI for “national rejuvenation” and “global tech leadership”, using “win-win cooperation” rhetoric and driving for self-reliance on critical technologies.

Strategic Narrative and Objectives

The strategic narrative that is promoted in China is based on the concept of “intelligence for good” (zhìnéng xiàng shàn) and against “using technological advantage to violate other countries' sovereignty.” The framing of this approach places China in the position of protecting developing nations from the technological dominance of the West, and creates a rationale for developing an AI for national sovereignty and development rights. It also highlights the significance of the UN in AI governance, which China sees as a key factor in combating unilateralism by the U.S. in the field.

Military Applications

The Chinese military's use of AI is focused on the “intelligentization” of the intelligence cycle, as well as on achieving superior intelligence. The PLAAF has an AI-based system to generate plans for major strike missions, prioritize targets from hundreds, organize dozens of formations, and allocate missions to over 100 tactical units (GlobalSecurity.org, 2026). A CCTV documentary that exposed the system has already revealed several missions that have been flown using the system. The importance of the system is the fact that it is in the command chain. The software is not autonomous weapon systems but instead chooses and targets these. It assists in the planning of air campaigns by suggesting the proper mix of aircraft, electronic

warfare assets and supporting capabilities for the commander to consider before he or she decides to execute the mission. China has always believed that AI should aid rather than replace human judgment. However, the fact that the system is seemingly able to compress hours of complicated campaign planning into minutes could lead to a humanless system becoming just a rubber stamp. If the planning takes place in minutes, then the space for human evaluation decreases as well as the time frame. In high tempo operations, human intervention may be confined to merely giving "yes" or "no" to the options presented by the AI. This places a significant strain on China's rhetoric and reality, which is evident in their actions. China has also revealed the Atlas drone swarm operations system which allows one man to control up to 96 drones, each of which can carry out autonomous target recognition, task allocation and route planning (China Military Online, 2026). The system showcases modular task configuration of saturation attack, precision strike and deep-strike operations.

Institutional Strategy

The most unique aspect of China's approach is its institutional approach. China has been playing the role of the champion of "open-source" AI versus "technological colonization" by the West and Russian officials have explicitly said that the dichotomy is between the open Chinese AI and the closed Western AI (Sputnik, 2026). The founding of WAICO in 2026, when the US is not a member but Russia is, is a step towards establishing an alternative system of governance in which Chinese standards will have de facto international status (Xinhua, 2026).

This institutional approach is underpinned by China's UN diplomacy. It has also made the "intelligence for good" principle, "using technological advantage to violate other countries' sovereignty" and "UN centrality in AI governance" a focus of its ambassador to the UN (Permanent Mission of China to the UN, 2026). China has also introduced draft resolutions to the UN General Assembly concerning the "Promotion of International Cooperation on the Peaceful Use of" in the context of International Security, which highlight the right of all states to the fullest possible interchange of technology for peaceful purposes, and the need to eliminate unnecessary restrictions on the developing world.

The orientation of WAICO towards the Global South is special. In many developing countries, the governance structures have so far not offered much influence over the standards and regulations of new technologies. To mitigate this imbalance, WAICO aims to provide developing countries with a greater influence in the global development of AI norms, facilitate technology transfer and capacity development, enable digital sovereignty and work towards ensuring equitable access to the developmental potential of AI (Leandro, 2026).

Domestic Control

Domestic control is in addition to external projection. Rigid rules and regulations on data and security are extraterritorial, giving China the right to claim its sovereignty over data flows even though it is attacking the "hegemony" of the West. This regulatory system is also a blueprint for other nations interested in asserting their own digital sovereignty, and is a source of regulatory soft power, which has an impact beyond China's boundaries.

V. RUSSIA: ASYMMETRIC COGNITIVE DISRUPTION

If someone wants to understand Russia's approach it is best understood as asymmetric cognitive warfare, meaning, compensating for material and technological disadvantages through information operations, deception, and the weaponization of ambiguity. The strategic narrative emphasizes “technological sovereignty” and resistance to Western domination.

Strategic Narrative and Objectives

AI is seen as a key component of modernization in Russia, with the goal of minimizing risks for the country's security. AI plays a key role in Russia's strategic narrative, which emphasizes achieving minimal risk in ensuring the country's security within a military modernization process. In a recent speech, President Putin highlighted the need to develop ‘artificial intelligence, digital platforms and autonomous systems’ that are ‘fundamentally changing the national defence and security landscape.’ President Putin believes that Russia's basic AI models should be ‘world-class and completely independent.’” The entire setup places development of AI within the security context of the nation, positioning this as a top priority. The Russian way is by adapting pragmatically. As of today, the four-year-long conflict in Ukraine is in its fourth year, with Russia establishing a pattern in how its military has innovated throughout the engagements. Four years into the war, Russian troops have evolved a sense of how they have innovated in their conflicts in Ukraine, noting “what works over what is elegant, what scales over what is ambitious, what delivers battlefield results over what impresses on paper” (UNIDIR, 2026).

Military Applications

In cases of Russia, when adaption under constraint applies to military uses of AI. Ukraine has been a proving ground for the use of drone warfare and AI systems to control war. Drone warfare and AI-commanded warfare have been salient points of learning in the Ukraine conflict. About 70-80% of casualties in the conflict in Ukraine have been related to drone use, underscoring the pivotal role of drones or unmanned systems in general in the war (UNIDIR, 2026). In 2025, Russian Defense Minister Belousov announced the success of Russian military operations in the use of unmanned systems, claiming that approximately 80% of fire strike missions are now performed by these systems.

Russia is investing heavily in UAS and AI and has put together an ecosystem for these. In 2030, one million specialists would be working in the sector of unmanned work, the Kremlin predicts. On top of that, it wishes to grow the number of AI experts per year within the priority industries by 400% to “readiness for the implementation of artificial intelligence technologies” (Wiley, 2025), particularly in the agro-food sectors. The military is not changing its buying process of weapons with already existing companies but rather the rest of the workforce and industry in general.

Russia has also grown up in the realm of a more agile battlefield software program, instead of network-centric warfare assiduously used by the West. These are comprised of the Glaz (reconnaissance), Groza (ballistics calculations) and ZOV Maps (geospatial awareness) software applications (UNIDIR, 2026). It has neither a doctrinally lofty nor a comprehensive approach in it, but serves as a practical, step-by-step method, a Russian way of doing things, since Russia is not a technological leader. However, the Russian authorities have acknowledged that they lag behind Ukrainian in introducing the command-and-control system based on drones in their military by about 1.5-2 years.

Cognitive Warfare

Russia's most unique contribution to AI weaponization is known as "cognitive warfare". The one thing that is quite distinct about Russia's contribution to the weaponization of AI is called "cognitive warfare". The amount is huge - more than 1,000 fake videos were found that form a "kills chain" sent to various groups of people by different actors, such as military personnel, civilian, as well as Western audiences (Ukrinform, 2026). Videos targeting the army emphasize upon the "futility of resistance", the "collapse of the front", and undermine the credibility of the army leaders. Such videos are intended for civilians to be more emotionally exhausted, accepting the conditions of Russia, and make them lose faith in institutions. The ultimate objective of the proponents of a "info-brownout" theory is not simply to "prove" audiences what to believe, but to drum into their heads the idea that "some" are telling the truth, while "others" (as in Russia) are known to lie, deliberately or unconsciously (Ukrinform, 2026). This allows the aggressor to avoid accountability and responsibility of real crimes "completing their chains," by sowing doubt in their minds on whether any evidence was valid.

In particular, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) has reported using an AI-generated variant of footage and an altered version of footage to support Russia's claims of progress made in the Fortress Belt in Donetsk Oblast (ISW, 2026). Russian sources are exploiting this AI video to spin a rosy narrative of how Russia have been moving forward faster than reported and that commanders have been reprimanding and "disciplining" their subordinates for using AI-enhanced video to "provide some justification" when their performance has been sub-standard.

Russia has also been a world leader as an entity of "cogmotional warfare" undertaken through "mediated emotional atmospheres." Such phenomena involve everything from the disruption of infrastructure, to the temporality of war, to the ritualization of politics, from affecting how populations feel, to how they interpret and inhabit their political reality (T&F Online, 2026). In the "povremeny" (in Russia) the mechanisms of cognition work reflexively, reprovoking certain internal memory and interpretation of the mechanisms of identity, continuity and national purpose. The territorial dimension of cognitive warfare is an area of fear, instability and social disintegration that is produced in the occupied or war-affected areas.

Institutional Positioning

The institutional situation in Russia is ambivalent. Russia is a member of WAICO, following China's alternative governance vision, and its information operations take place in a vacuum. This is a dual position: insider in alternative institutions, disruptor in the existing information order, which maximises flexibility. In the absence of participation in Western-led governance regimes, Russia enjoys an alternative governance structure being constructed by China.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: LOGICS OF AI WEAPONIZATION

The analysis shows that there are three different strategic logics of weaponizing AI. The U.S. is working to enclose technology, both through export controls and through coordinating its alliances to prevent rivals from accessing the technology. China has adopted a standards-based approach to order building and spreads its technical standards and governance norms through different institutions, such as WAICO and

UN diplomacy. Russia uses asymmetric actions to disrupt the epistemic basis of the societies it is targeting, such as information operations and deepfake technology.

The logics give rise to other deterrence models – integrated deterrence, smart deterrence and cognitive warfare – and are a reflection of the status of each power in the global technological ranking. While there are some similarities in the standards competition and military investment, the three approaches are not converging but increasing the fragmentation, increasing the risk of escalation, increasing the risk of governance failure, increasing the risk of loss of the epistemic commons that can't be managed by any one power. The table below summarizes the comparative analysis:

DIMENSION	USA	CHINA	RUSSIA
Core Logic	<i>Technological enclosure</i>	<i>Standards-based order building</i>	<i>Cognitive disruption</i>
Deterrence Model	<i>Integrated deterrence</i>	<i>Smart/preemptive deterrence</i>	<i>Cognitive warfare</i>
Primary Instrument	<i>Export controls, alliances</i>	<i>Standards, institutions</i>	<i>Information operations</i>
Institutional Posture	<i>Selective multilateralism</i>	<i>Alternative institution-building</i>	<i>Dual-track</i>
Key Vulnerability	<i>Corporate resistance, infrastructure</i>	<i>Dependence on foreign chips</i>	<i>Technological backwardness</i>

Convergence

All three powers make use of AI as a means of influence, and struggle among themselves for technical superiority. Everyone uses AI in order to gain intelligence and surveillance. Everything they do is done in a defensive manner, because the others are considered to be aggressive in everything. All three are focusing heavily on the development of military usage of AI, but with various goals and limitations. This is most prominently the case for the standards competition. The formation of WAICO is an attempt at developing an alternative system of governance yet, even within Western-led instruments, all three powers attempt to use them to influence how standards are developed to their benefit in relation to their domestic industries. Thus, standards are not only technical issues but are tools of geopolitical competition related to AI safety, interoperability, and data governance.

Divergence

The United States weaponizes by denial, blocks rivals' capabilities with export controls and coordination of capabilities through allies. China weaves its way in through diffusion: via multilateral institutions and open source platforms. Russia is a weaponizer country that operates by sowing seeds of disruption: discrediting the epistemic foundations of the target countries' societies through information operations and cognitive warfare. These logics are not the only ones that are possible. But the United States, China also

limits its technology, and Russia also tries to influence standards. But they are different strategic focuses that reflect different strategic viewpoints from the vantage points of the technological hierarchy in the world. As the current technological leader, the USA wants to maintain the lead and so wants to enclose. As the emerging power, China aims to influence the rules-making by building institutions. As the existing system is not working in their favour, Russia, as the declining power is trying to unsettle the system.

Interaction Effects

Compounded risks take place when the three logics interact with each other. Items sold to the US can help advance China's self-reliance drive and foster alternative supply chains. Items traded to the US can help foster China's own self-reliance drive, and spur alternative supply chains. Standards setting in China produces other governance blocks—ones that leave out the United States and its friends. The use of Russian cognitive warfare undermines the common factual basis on which arms control or confidence building might be based.

The formation of WAICO and U.S. decision not to join indicate the likely continued governance fragmentation unless efforts are made for deliberate space bridging to achieve greater connectedness. “Algorithmic deterrence”, as one analysis cautions, can “shorten the length of time people take to react”, and “make it harder to determine who's behind an attack.” The danger of AI being applied in war is not only that it could be utilized in war, but that the dynamics generated by competing AIs would be beyond anyone's control.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

First of all, there are no convergence of logics of AI weaponisation. The principal differences in their approaches(US, China, Russia) stem from their respective national "strategic cultures" and political economies at home, as well as their roles within the global technological hierarchy - the United States, China, and Russia are pursuing fundamentally different approaches. The divergence makes it very hard to coordinate on governance of AI, as each power sees the other power's approach as threatening.

Secondly, these logics have interaction effects causing systemic risks. Indigenous innovation is accelerated in countries of export control. Standards competition divides up the global governance system. Cognitive warfare is a devaluation of the epistemic commons that is instrumental to any international cooperation. The dynamics are reinforcing each other and form a vicious circle of competition and distrust.

Thirdly, the human control issue is present in all cases, but is different. While all three have strict guidelines on how to make human decisions when it comes to critical aspects of decision making, they all have pressures to speed decisions and to give machine input. The U.S. strategy is based on familiarisation and training. China's style officially retains the essence of the human rule, but also sets up practical conditions that could restrict its role to rubber stamping. Russia is more free of legal and ethical limitations but is limited by technology.

Last, AI systems are becoming more decentralised. Although it is a milestone that the WAICO was established, it also further alienates rival power structures and deepen the divide between Western governance and Chinese/Russian governance. There is no chance of a global governance system being

formed in the near future because the US is not participating in WAICO and China and Russia are not participating in the Western led system.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The artificial intelligence-powered weapon is a revolution in the ways of great powers. Each one has come up with a different strategy, based on their strategic cultures and in their respective places in the world technological hierarchy, the United States, China, and Russia. Technological enclosure is the practice of the United States; standards-based order building is the practice of China; and asymmetric cognitive disruption is the practice of Russia. These strategies are not coming together. They have differing notions of what AI can be used for, how it should be regulated, and how it can be involved in foreign affairs. These strategies combine to produce systemic hazards: more rapid and responsive decisions, uneven governance and the degradation of epistemic commons, which are not capable of being handled by any single actor. The current comparison indicates that progress towards more effective international governance of AI does not seem to be achieved without recognizing these differences. It will take the ability to find common ground amongst the goals of avoiding unintended escalation, securing critical infrastructure and rendering some level of human control – and will demand that while greater governance structures will continue to remain less than seamless, they be resolved through consensus. What would happen if different AI systems were left to interact with each other in unpredictable ways, out of the control of humans, and with potentially devastating results? For scholars and policy makers, the issue is to grasp these dynamics, and to design strategies to deal with them. This paper has aimed to help such understanding by systematically comparing the initiatives in foreign policy of three great powers to weaponize AI. More work is required on the practicalities of AI-based military systems, the success of export restrictions and when international cooperation in the governance of AI could be achieved.

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