Normandy Initiative on Global Security and Catastrophic Risk

Strategic Foresight Group and Forum Mondial Normandie pour la paix

Keynote address by
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Caen, 21 September 2022

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this workshop of the Normandy Initiative on Global Security and Catastrophic Risk.

It is a pleasure for the Geneva Centre for Security Policy to partner with the region of Normandy and my good friend Sundeep Waskelar from the Strategic Foresight Group.

At GCSP, we focus on finding solutions to global challenges. What topic could be more important than the one we are discussing today? This is not an academic or theoretical exercise. Our existence as a species is at stake.

I will not go into details about the risks we face: you are all experts, and an excellent background paper has been prepared.

But allow me to highlight a number of points.

First the impact of **geopolitics**. In the context of the war in Ukraine, President Putin has more than once made a veiled threat about the use of nuclear weapons, more recently yesterday.

North Korea has recently passed a law to declare itself a nuclear weapons state; the law enshrines the country's right to use a pre-emptive nuclear strike to protect itself.

Senior Iranian officials now speak openly about the means to produce a nuclear bomb.

These threats have caused other countries in Asia and the Middle East to consider developing a nuclear weapons capability. And it may change the nuclear posture of countries that already possess such weapons.

Second, **technology**. The current situation concerning nuclear weapons is volatile enough, yet it is still largely dictated by the Cold War logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

However, new ideas are creeping in, like "low yield weapons" as if a small nuclear explosion is OK. Hypersonic missiles and unmanned underwater vehicles enable new delivery systems for nuclear payloads. The combination of small nuclear payloads – even dirty bombs – and drones is a frightening prospect.

Furthermore, artificial intelligence is opening new frontiers that could increase the risks of nuclear confrontation. AI could increase the speed of decision-making, leading to rapid escalation and increasing the automaticity of devastating responses. It could take humans out of the chain of command, data theft, manipulation, and poisoning could compromise security and thicken the fog of war. Disruption of civilian infrastructure could cause instability and lead to retaliation.

If we are not careful, AI could develop in ways that spiral out of control. One of the major threats is increased unpredictability. At the moment, there are no safeguards and no regulatory framework for the use of this technology. Nothing is stopping the proliferation of cyber and AI. I am not even sure if there are cyber arms-control negotiators.

Another problem is that machines lack empathy. They have no moral compass. Can machines exercise restraint? What does this mean for military doctrines and the future of international relations?

Furthermore, it is not only states that may have the power to use this technology. Companies may be able to develop AI in ways that are both unethical and dangerous, and non-state actors may be able to either supply or use data to perform disruptive cyber functions. Companies also have a strategic advantage over states as they own most data.

Therefore, we need close collaboration between government and industry to ensure proper codes of conduct, safeguards, and consultations between states to establish guardrails and limitations on how AI is used.

Ladies and gentlemen, we will not be able to stop the development of artificial intelligence. But we must learn to control it. Therefore, the main focus of this meeting is to look at practical risk reduction measures in relation to the interface between artificial intelligence and nuclear weapons.

The P5 have a vested interest in strategic risk reduction and has considerable leverage to make it possible. I, therefore, urge you to use this opportunity to engage in dialogue on the emerging risks of AI and weapons of mass destruction, to explore possible risk reduction and confidence and security-building measures, to understand and perhaps even define the limits of AI technologies, to share views on strategic concepts and red lines, as well as to identify better ways of communicating to prevent and deal with incidents and accidents. A potential risk that exists here is the gap between actual and perceived AI capabilities. This is in itself escalatory when it comes to nuclear deterrence combined with AI, as actors tend to magnify their actual capabilities.

We also need to insert ethics into the way AI is being used.

I regret that circumstances do not allow our Russian colleagues to take part in these discussions. An issue like this demonstrates the importance of states maintaining channels of dialogue and developing a rules-based system to avoid catastrophic risks. And if states are, for political reasons, no longer willing to talk to each other, it becomes even more important that we maintain or create informal platforms where exerts keep talking to each other. As with nuclear weapons, when states develop new cyber and AI capacities, they should keep in mind their responsibility to uphold international peace and security, not just narrow national interests. It is precisely in such dangerous times that there should be communication on issues of disarmament and non-proliferation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are witnessing one of the most transformative periods in modern history since the invention of the printing press. Artificial intelligence is already changing the way that we live – and we are just at the beginning of this transformation.

AI looks set to transform nuclear capabilities in ways that will increase risk and instability. If we are not careful, the impact of disruptive technologies combined with destructive weapons could be catastrophic. Increasing the power of machines in an increasingly digital and nuclearized world could threaten human security in the most basic sense: the survival of our species.

Therefore, while pushing the boundaries of enhancing cooperation between machines and humans, we should also seek to strengthen cooperation between states to regulate the use of AI.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to a fruitful meeting with practical suggestions that can reduce risks to humanity.