Obvia's Briefing Outlook

JUNE 2026

Defending Without Depending? Military AI, Digital Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy

Context

Artificial intelligence (AI) is not only a driver of economic innovation or a means of optimizing organizations. Since its origins during the Cold War, this technology has also been associated with the promise of immense military potential[1]. **AI revives an old ambition in a new technological form: in a world marked by the return of geopolitical rivalries, it has become a pillar of security and defense policies**. Warfare is thus taking on a new dimension, bringing armed forces into the age of data, cloud computing, and software power, where achieving absolute decision superiority has become the ultimate objective. In this context, battlefield advantage increasingly depends on the interoperability of military systems, that is, the ability to connect sensors, troops, headquarters, and weapons platforms in real time within an integrated operational architecture.

To succeed in this transition, states must attract the talent required to develop advanced software and strengthen collaboration among armed forces, technology companies, the defense industry, and AI research laboratories. In Canada, the recent Defence Industrial Strategy moves in this direction by calling for the strengthening of this ecosystem and prioritizing domestic firms and expertise[2].

This strategic dimension directly affects issues of digital sovereignty. **From a military perspective, AI is no longer solely about data protection, cybersecurity, or platform regulation. It also concerns the state's ability to perceive a crisis, make decisions, command, act, and develop a credible theory of victory**. The challenge is to avoid becoming entirely dependent on a dominant ally that controls key technological capabilities, thereby risking the loss of strategic flexibility and being compelled to follow political and military decisions made elsewhere[3].

In this context, a workshop held during the Obvia Community Scientific Day on May 21, 2026, opened a space for reflection on future research priorities. Discussions among researchers highlighted three main avenues: analyzing the transformation of civil-military relations as military expertise shifts toward technological actors and algorithmic systems; preserving human control over the use of force in automated decision chains; and studying the prospective scenarios that make certain futures of warfare appear desirable, inevitable, or unthinkable. **This briefing note presents and explains these three major research priorities concerning AI in defense considering the current literature**.

According to Canada's Defence Industrial Strategy, the federal government intends to increase to 70% the share of defense procurement awarded to Canadian companies and to increase public investments in defense-related research and development by 85%[4].

1 Hoijtink, M., van der Kist, J. et Steinwärder, L. (2026). The rise of the tech oligarchy and its military entanglements: A platform approach. *Science as Culture*, p. 3. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2026.2666079

2 Gouvernement du Canada. (2026). *Security, Sovereignty and Prosperity: Canada's Defence Industrial Strategy*. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/industrial-strategy.html

3 Stewart, R. (2026). A European Way of War Without the United States. *Survival*, 68(3), p. 7-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2678691

4 Gouvernement du Canada, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

Knowledge Overview

Digital Sovereignty and Strategic Dependencies

Digital sovereignty should not be understood as the pursuit of complete autonomy. No state today can claim to produce on its own all the critical infrastructure, strategic raw materials, and software components it requires. The primary challenge is maintaining sufficient control over critical systems: knowing who designs them, who operates them, who maintains them, who can access them, who can interrupt them at will, and under what conditions they can be replaced.

Digital sovereignty therefore refers less to complete independence than to the ability to choose, diversify, reduce, and manage one's dependencies while avoiding situations of capability loss[5].

This issue is particularly acute in the defense sector. Military effectiveness is no longer measured solely by the physical power of equipment; it increasingly relies on complex digital architectures that ensure the performance of physical platforms. Strategic value is therefore shifting from hardware to software, to the point where physical equipment risks becoming little more than a disposable shell subject to rapid obsolescence[6].

The transition from traditional defense to software-based defense radically alters the pace of military innovation, contrasting the decades-long cycles of conventional armament programs with digital technologies that evolve within weeks or even days. This evolution increases military dependence on private technology giants that, far from being simple contractors, control critical infrastructure and expertise. States therefore face the risk of **vendor lock-in**, becoming tied to technical ecosystems that are complex and difficult to replace without the original supplier[7]. This situation highlights **the gap between declared sovereignty and operational reality, reminding us that proclaiming strategic autonomy is meaningless if defense plans rely on critical tools that are not fully under state control[8]**.

This dynamic is part of a subscription-based model in which ownership of equipment is increasingly replaced by continuous access to paid services. For armed forces, this model may generate rapid efficiency gains, but at the cost of potentially crippling dependence on private actors who control access to capabilities, their evolution, and sometimes even their intelligibility. This phenomenon illustrates what Anthony King calls the **"military-tech complex"**[9], characterized by the growing integration of venture capital, start-ups, and major technology firms into the direct production of military capabilities[10].

More than a modernization of tools, this transformation represents a revolution in military culture, pushing military organizations to reinvent their norms, working methods, and relationship to risk by drawing inspiration from the boldness and rapid innovation associated with technology companies[11]. As the boundaries between armed forces and technology companies become increasingly blurred, some military units aspire to adopt the start-up model while preserving their combat mission.

A fundamental question therefore emerges: does the digitalization of defense strengthen the state's strategic capacity, or does it subject military priorities to financial imperatives of profitability, accelerated growth, and capital valorization?

Excerpt from Canada's New National AI Strategy

"Given Canada's national security commitments and the recently released Defence Industrial Strategy, sector investments will also prioritize dual-use applications and ensure alignment with Canada's protection, sovereignty and security objectives."[12]

5 Farrell, H. et Newman, A. (2023). *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy.* New York : Henry Holt and Company ; Baumier, G. (2025). Comment le Canada peut affirmer sa souveraineté numérique, *Options politiques.* https://policyoptions.irpp.org/fr/2025/05/canada-souverainete-numerique/

6 Nadibaidze, A. (2025). Startups Envisioning Algorithmic Warfare: The Discourses of US Tech Companies in Defense AI. *Global Policy*, 16(3), p.490. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70047 (DOI)

7 Hoijtink, M., van der Kist, J. et Steinwärder, L. (2026), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

8 Stewart, R. (2026), *op. cit.*, p. 9-10.

9 King, A. (2025). *AI, Automation, and War.* Princeton University Press.

10 Schwarz, E. (2025). From blitzkrieg to blitzscaling: Assessing the impact of venture capital dynamics on military norms. *Finance and Society* https://doi.org/10.1017/fas.2024.18; Merrill, A. (2025). Start-Up War and the world as platform: Venture capital, the U.S. military, & Silicon Valley. *Critical Military Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2532863

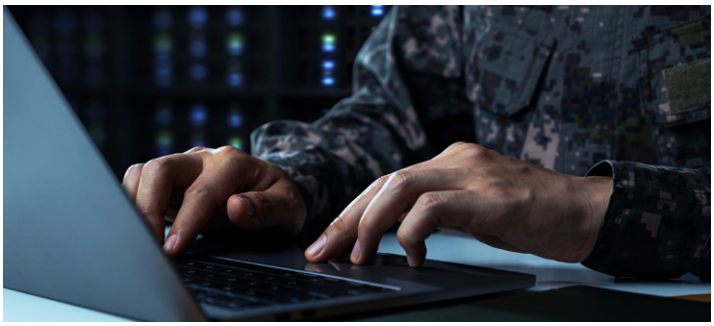
11 Zweibelson, B. (2023). *Understanding the Military Design Movement: War, Change and Innovation.* Londres/New York : Routledge.

12 Gouvernement du Canada. (2026). *Canada's National Artificial Intelligence Strategy: AI for All.* https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en/canadas-national-artificial-intelligence-strategy-ai-all, p. 13

Military Ethics and the Transformation of Armed Forces

The integration of AI into military operations profoundly transforms processes of perception and decision-making in the face of massive flows of data. It promises enhanced tactical awareness in conflicts whose speed increasingly exceeds human comprehension[13] and where the decisive advantage belongs to the actor capable of converting information into decisions more rapidly than its adversary. This acceleration raises **an ethical tension**, because reducing deliberation time weakens escalation control by making waiting costly and immediate action, validated by algorithms, more appealing. The challenge therefore lies less in the deployment of autonomous lethal weapons than in the transformation of command centers, where the emergence of **"augmented command"** risks evolving into **"artificial command,"** in which automation preempts and absorbs the judgment of military staffs[14].

This transfer of authority toward algorithms perceived as more reliable and objective than humans may generate automation bias. Humans may formally remain "in the loop," yet this presence can become an illusion of control if operators no longer possess the time, expertise, or authority necessary to understand, challenge, or halt recommended actions[15]. Preserving meaningful human oversight therefore requires reframing the issue: it is not enough to keep humans in the loop; it is equally important to keep **the machine in the loop**[16]. In other words, **AI must remain a complementary system that is understandable, contestable, and governed by clear rules**. Control does not depend solely on the individual sitting in front of the screen; it also depends on organizations, training, procedures, legal responsibilities, and design choices made from the outset[17].



The ethical question is not merely whether AI can make armed forces more effective and better able to comply with international humanitarian law. It is also about determining what AI shifts in terms of responsibility, military judgment, combatant identity, and the political conditions governing the use of force. By externalizing risk and reducing direct human exposure, a heavily robotized military could lower the political threshold for conflict, making the use of force appear more acceptable, more distant, and ultimately easier to initiate[18].

Decoding the Promises of AI in Defense

Beyond its technical characteristics, military AI relies on narratives, promises, and sociotechnical imaginaries that present certain technological trajectories as desirable, urgent, or inevitable[19]. Discourses surrounding information superiority, decision dominance, augmented command, autonomous weapons systems, or "**hyperwar**"[20] do not merely describe the future. They actively shape research priorities, military doctrines, and procurement policies[21].

This rhetoric is now embodied in the concept of "**algorithmic warfare**"[22], a vision of future warfare in which advantage depends on the automation of an ever-increasing number of tasks, from intelligence analysis and targeting to planning and logistics. However, this perspective is far from neutral. It reflects an imaginary constructed by actors with economic, technological, and geopolitical interests who claim the authority to define the contours of future warfare.

13 Reynolds, T. (2025). Speed and War in US Military Thought: Mapping the Conditions for AI-Enabled Decision-Making. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 53(2), p. 491-494 ; Johnson, J. (2023). Automating the OODA loop in the age of intelligent machines: Reaffirming the role of humans in command-and-control decision-making in the digital age. *Defence Studies*, 23(1), p. 52-53.
14 Johnson, J. (2025). Can AI behave ethically during military crises? Preserving human moral agency. *International Affairs*, 102(1), p. 63-66.
15 Johnson, J. (2025), *op. cit.*, p. 69-70.
16 Ferl, A.-K. (2024). *Imagining Meaningful Human Control: Autonomous Weapons and the (De-)Legitimisation of Future Warfare.* Global Society, 38(1), p. 139-141.
17 Prem, B. (2026). Control-by-design? Autonomous weapons systems as technopolitical projects. *Contemporary Security Policy,* 47(2), p. 415-418.
18 McCarthy, D. R. (2026). A "journey to trust" for AI: Civil–military relations and epistemic authority in American socio-technical imaginaries of artificial intelligence. *Contemporary Security Policy,* 47(2), p. 273-276 ; Roucy-Rochegonde, L. de. (2024b). Les robots tueurs : enjeux éthiques des moyens de combats déshumanisés. *Études*, (3), p. 61-62.
19 Biegon, R., Ølgaard, D. M. et Watts, T. F. A. (2026). Interrogating the imaginary turn: Technology, war, and world politics in an era of great power competition. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 47(2), p. 241-245.
20 Reynolds, I. J. (2025). Speed and War in US Military Thought: Mapping the Conditions for AI-Enabled Decision-Making. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 53(2), p. 495 ;
21 Watts, T. F. A. (2026). The offset imaginary: Great power competition, security imaginaries, and the making of artificial intelligence in American defense planning. *Contemporary Security Policy,* 47(2), p. 384-387.
22 Brose, C. (2020). *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare.* New York : Grand Central Publishing ; Payne, K. (2021). *I, Warbot: The Dawn of Artificially Intelligent Conflict.* Londres : Hurst & Company.

Ideas popularized by Silicon Valley increasingly permeate defense environments, promoting a vision of the military future centered on speed, automation, data dependence, and software ubiquity[23]. Although these visions can stimulate innovation, they simultaneously disseminate language, assumptions, and ideological beliefs that must be critically examined and mapped. **The rise of generative AI, chatbots, and synthetic content creates new opportunities to spread disinformation at scale, tailor information manipulation to specific audiences, blur shared points of reference, and undermine trust in institutions**[24]. More than a matter of command systems or battlefields, future warfare is a struggle over the stability of the public sphere, the protection of collective judgment, and resilience against orchestrated cognitive destabilization.

Studying these narratives of the future is essential for identifying the actors who define priorities, legitimize certain technological responses, and impose their vision of the future while gradually rendering alternatives unthinkable[25]. Anticipation is never neutral: scenarios, simulations, foresight exercises, and future-war narratives function as instruments of influence that actively shape present-day decisions. From a research perspective, it is therefore essential to deconstruct these visions without confusing them for technological destiny, in order **to rigorously assess the social, political, and ethical conditions under which AI in defense becomes not only conceivable and acceptable, but also governable**.

Roles Public Actors Can Play

1 Mapping critical digital dependencies

- Systematically identify the vulnerabilities of public administrations, armed forces, and security organizations with respect to providers of data, software, cloud infrastructure, computing capabilities, and AI systems.

2 Cognitive and regulatory sovereignty

- Strengthen public-sector expertise, assessment, and auditing capacities so that governments possess the leverage necessary to understand, test, and regulate AI systems supporting critical sovereign functions.

3 Countering technological lock-in

- Reduce the risks associated with vendor lock-in through interoperability requirements, data portability, open standards, contractual reversibility, and supplier diversification.

4 Supporting a Canadian defense industrial and digital base

- Build a sovereign ecosystem by actively integrating domestic firms, SMEs, start-ups, and AI research laboratories into innovation policies and defense procurement.

5 Ensuring meaningful human control

- Preserve human judgment at the core of tactical and strategic decision chains, particularly when AI is integrated into surveillance, targeting, and operational planning cycles.

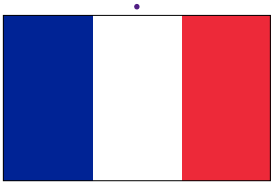
6 Institutionalizing multidisciplinary foresight

- Mobilize the social sciences, law, and ethics within foresight exercises to identify emerging risks, conceptual blind spots, and imaginaries of future conflict.

International partnerships in AI and defence[26]

Sovereign Technology Alliance

EU-Canada Strategic Partnership of the Future



General Security of Information Agreement[27]

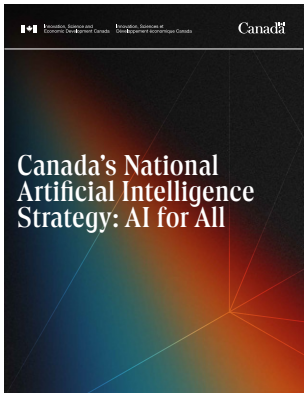
23 Csernatoni, R. et Martins, B. O. (2024). Disruptive Technologies for Security and Defence: Temporality, Performativity and Imagination. *Geopolitics*, 29(3), p. 849-852 et p. 862-865.
24 Colon, D. (2023). *La guerre de l'information: les États à la conquête de nos esprits.* Tallandier.
25 Mawdsley, J. et Martins, B. O. (2026). War economy vs European Silicon Valley? The EU's competing sociotechnical imaginaries of defence innovation and industry. *Contemporary Security Policy,* 47(2), p. 300-303.
26 Government of Canada. (2026). *op.cit.*, p. 49
27 Prime Minister of Canada (2026, 12 June). Prime Minister Carney deepens partnership with France across trade, defence, and advanced technologies. https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2026/06/12/prime-minister-carney-deepens-partnership-france-across-trade-defence-advanced-technologies

Key Messages for Policy and Practice

1. **Digital sovereignty does not mean complete autonomy; it means the ability to choose, reduce, and manage the critical dependencies that condition public and military action.**
2. **AI in defense is transforming relationships between the state, armed forces, and technology companies by shifting part of strategic expertise toward data, software, and private infrastructures.**
3. **Human control over the use of force cannot be reduced to a symbolic presence within decision-making loops; it requires a genuine capacity to understand, challenge, interrupt, and be accountable for decisions.**
4. **Imaginaries of future warfare shape present-day decisions. Studying them is essential to avoid confusing specific technological visions with strategic necessities.**

Further Reading

Read the report



Read the report

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The translation of this briefing note was produced with the help of AI tools (ChatGPT and DeepL) and then reviewed and edited for accuracy and clarity.

https://doi.org/10.61737/ZUUO5746 ISBN : 978-2-925581-51-2