

Human judgement in the era of artificial intelligence

Military Leadership and Command Ethics

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THE Spanish Armed Forces are currently undergoing a process of deep transformation driven by the progressive integration of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and big data analytics. This evolution affects not only weapons systems and logistical processes, but also the exercise of command, decision-making and the ethics underpinning military leadership in an increasingly complex and fast-paced operational environment.

Technology is a decisive factor in shaping the States' power, not only because it reinforces it, but also because it generates cumulative transformation dynamics: every new breakthrough paves the way for other technological developments, multiplying their strategic impact. Against this backdrop, the international balance of power is conditioned by the technological gap between nations, in a scenario of accelerated competition in which many capabilities quickly become obsolete.

Furthermore, a significant portion of these technologies is dual-use. Systems designed for civilian, commercial or scientific purposes can be directly applied in the military field, while others originate directly from defence research. Artificial intelligence has thus established itself as one of the keys to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and in 2026 it has gone from being a possibility to becoming an operational reality in various theatres and domains.

In the current environment, the Armed Forces face a new paradigm. This goes beyond a mere technological or armament upgrade, as it reaches the very core of military culture. In fact, the emergence of AI is reshaping the very essence of military lead-

ership. In this context, military leaders must operate in scenarios in which reality changes in milliseconds. Addressing such circumstances requires defining the different spheres of responsibility, as well as the ethics that should bridge the gap between legal rules and military culture.

In the light of this reality, the challenge for the Armed Forces is not only technical. The integration of intelligent systems raises profound issues regarding the exercise of command, the attribution of accountability and the preservation of the values that have historically underpinned military leadership. This is because tools do not possess morality or ethics of their own; such values depend on how they are used. The issue is that this complexity makes assigning responsibilities increasingly difficult, which accentuates problems that were already present in previous technological contexts.

"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? That's not my department," said Wernher von Braun. This reflection illustrates the risks of a fragmentation of responsibilities, which modern military leadership must consciously avoid. Military history offers numerous examples of how the functional fragmentation of

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decisions can dilute the perception of individual responsibility. In the industrialised conflicts of the 20th century, the separation between those who designed the strategy, those who operated the technical systems and those who implemented orders on the ground contributed to a progressive depersonalisation of the use of force.

This phenomenon is exacerbated in highly technologised contexts in which the use of complex systems introduces a psychological distance between the decision made and its consequences. When an action depends on multiple actors —analysts, operators, planners and decision-makers— the risk is not only operational but also moral: the temptation is to blame technique, procedures or systems for the result of the decision, instead of holding the human leader accountable for authorising the action.

Artificial intelligence, like any major technological innovation, exacerbates this challenge. As classical political theory has cautioned, no far-reaching technical discovery allows us to fully anticipate its political effects. This is precisely why military leadership must reinforce, rather than weaken, the sense of personal responsibility in the exercise of command.

Military leadership rests on a dual pillar: on the one hand, ‘potestas’, the legal power emanating from hierarchy; and on the other, ‘auctoritas’, the moral legitimacy resulting from expertise and example. However, AI alters this balance. We should bear in mind that the total sum of the information available in history is now expanding so fast that it doubles in size roughly every two years. At a command post that is overflowing with electromagnetic signals and geographic intelligence, the leader is no longer

the main source of information but rather the primary manager of uncertainty.

Moral authority in 2026 is no longer rooted in “knowing more” than the machine. Human discernment becomes the last bastion of ‘auctoritas’. An algorithm can optimise a logistical route or identify a target with 99% accuracy; however, it lacks the ability to assess the politico-strategic impact of an error or to understand the morale of an exhausted unit. The command authority must act as a regulator, ensuring that algorithmic efficiency does not undermine the ultimate goal of the mission. It is important to remember that war is a social, cultural and fundamentally human phenomenon that is waged using the tools that a society has at its disposal at a given time in history.

THE FOUR TRANSFORMATIONS

The integration of AI into the military sphere does not introduce just a single change, but rather a series of concurrent shifts affecting knowledge, human relations, decision-making time and the command’s ethical framework. Below are four of the most relevant transformations from the perspective of contemporary military leadership:

1. The Epistemic Revolution: From Data to Contextual Understanding. AI’s processing power has led to a knowledge asymmetry. Leaders need to change from being “analysts” to “interpreters”. The epistemic risk lies in a “blind trust in the screen”: if the AI concludes the enemy is flanking the force, the leader must be able to discern whether the algorithm is falling prey to data spoofing or training bias. Critical data literacy must now be a core command skill.

2. The Relational Dimension: Hybrid Teams and Trust. The integration of autonomous systems, such as the drone swarms tested in the Ukraine conflict and the US Gremlins programme, has ushered in the era of Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T). Leadership is no longer exclusively interpersonal; it is exercised in hybrid environments in which people and autonomous systems interact. Since trust is an eminently human factor, managing it is a complex task for the command authority: excessive trust in AI leads to complacency while a lack of trust leads to operational inefficiency.

The integration of AI into Spain's 'Force 35' programme seeks to ensure that soldiers view the autonomous system as a reliable "partner" whose oversight is a tactical advantage rather than a burden.

3. Temporal Compression: The End of Traditional Deliberation. AI has compressed decision-making time. In scenarios of swarm saturation, the human brain cannot react at the required speed. This poses an operational dilemma: whether to delegate lethality to the machine (human-out-of-the-loop) or accept tactical vulnerability in order to retain human control (human-in-the-loop). Modern leadership requires the creation of pre-established trust protocols, in which human judgement operates primarily in the design of rules of engagement and in real-time oversight, acting more as an emergency override than as a manual operator. In this situation, leadership is determined by how well the boundaries of delegation and human control mechanisms are established, not by how quickly one responds.

4. The Ethical and Governance Dimension: The Power of Values. Ethics multiplies the long-term effectiveness of innovation rather than impeding it. The use of AI in target selection, as observed in recent precision operations in various international scenarios, raises challenges regarding traceability. The EU AI Act establishes strict frameworks which, despite some military exceptions, inevitably set the standard for what democratic society expects from its armed forces.

The military leader is the ultimate guardian of the principles of proportionality and distinction —pillars of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)— whose application cannot be fully delegated to opaque or non-explainable systems.

CASES OF APPLICATION

The following examples should not be viewed just as technological applications, but as illustrations of how military leadership is either reinforced or strained by the use of AI-enabled

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systems. Technology always serves as decision support; it never replaces the exercise of human judgement.

The Spanish Ministry of Defence has taken significant steps in this regard. The implementation of the SILPRE system by Indra for predictive logistics illustrates how AI can enhance the operational effectiveness of the Spanish Army without displacing human command authority. In this case, the logistics officer makes decisions based on failure predictions but weighs factors such as the operational context,

geopolitical deployment or strategic priorities, which are aspects that no automated system can assess on its own. The final decision is, therefore, still the responsibility of the human command authority.

Likewise, the Joint Cyberspace Command (MCCE) uses AI to detect intrusions that would be invisible to the human eye. However, the decision to launch a cyber-counteroffensive is still the prerogative of humans, who





Generative AI - OpenAI

are aware of the implications of conflict escalation. These cases underscore the need for technological sovereignty: AI leadership requires possessing one's own AI, whose biases and algorithms are known and auditable by the national chain of command. This example shows that even in highly automated domains such as cyberspace, the exercise of command retains a strategic and political dimension that cannot be automated. AI speeds up detection, whereas human leadership decides when, how and to what extent to act.

TRAINING FOR THE TIMES

Training in military academies and educational centres must be geared towards a model in which technological skills and humanistic education converge in a balanced manner. The leadership of the future is taught not only in military training areas, but also in high-fidelity simulators that use generative AI to create adaptive scenarios, as well as by studying the works of the classical thinkers.

The command authority needs to develop a "growth mindset" that can handle frustration with malfunctioning systems and the responsibility of commanding units where information is abundant but clarity is lacking.

In this context, leadership relies not only on technical skills, but also on the character of the command authority. Traditional virtues such as prudence, temperance and a sense of duty take on renewed relevance when decisions are made using intelligent systems.

THE MORAL BURDEN OF ALGORITHMIC ERROR

One of the least explored dilemmas of military leadership in the AI era is not technological, but profoundly human: who bears the moral burden of the error when the decision has been made using an algorithm? In the military sphere in which obedience and responsibility are clearly defined, the integration of intelligent systems introduces an unprecedented grey area.

When a decision support system recommends a course of action that eventually results in undesired consequences — collateral damage, political escalation, or the loss of lives— the leader cannot claim technological neutrality. Delegating is not the same as abdicating. The military authority remains accountable even if the process was algorithmically assisted. This tension can lead to what some authors refer to as moral injury: the internal fracture occurring when the actions performed transgress the leader's personal and professional values.

Unlike traditional human errors, algorithmic failure is often opaque, statistical and difficult to explain *ex post facto*. This requires a dual competence from the military command: accountability and moral strength to take responsibility for decisions made in a situation of great uncertainty. In this context, military command ethics ceases to be merely regulatory and becomes an ethics of character: prudence, temperance and moral courage in the face of systems that promise certainty but provide no meaning. From this perspective, AI does not reduce the burden of leadership; it intensifies it. The true leader is not the one who delegates the most, but the one who knows how far to delegate without losing his/her moral identity.

HUMAN JUDGEMENT AS AN ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE

AI will not replace military leaders, but those who use AI will replace those who do not. The real asymmetric advantage in 21st-century warfare will not be the fastest algorithm, but the organisation that best combines the machine's computing power with human moral judgement, intuition and courage.

Ultimately, leadership consists in taking responsibility. A machine can perform an order, but it can never be held accountable before history or justice. The military leader of 2026, therefore, needs to be a technological humanist: someone who masters technology to protect the essence of humanity, even in the chaos of battle.

AI may be the sword, but human judgement remains the arm that wields it and, above all, the mind that determines when force should be applied and when it must be restrained.