

US military AI hallucination “almost started a war” with China

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In an exclusive last weekend, CNN revealed that the US military had been on the point of seizing a Chinese ship in the Middle East by force before a closer examination of the relevant intelligence report showed that it was based on an AI hallucination. One of CNN’s sources stated that the report was “entirely false” and “almost started a war,” because the US seizure of a Chinese vessel risked spiralling into an armed conflict between the two nations.

The CNN report contained few details of the incident, which has been covered up for months since taking place this year in the northern spring in the midst of the US-led war on Iran. The intelligence report, generated with AI assistance and then circulated across the US military, stated that the ship was transporting components of a nuclear weapons program.

According to CNN sources, the US military rapidly prepared to intercept the vessel. “According to two of the sources, armed members of the US military were preparing to board the ship. Military planes were in the air, one of those sources and another source familiar with the incident said,” CNN stated.

Only at the last minute did officials re-examine the report to discover that a special operations command analyst had produced it with the assistance of an AI chatbot that had inaccurately identified the ship’s cargo. The analyst had queried the chatbot about intelligence reporting on the ship’s manifest that originated with US Special Operations Command Pacific, based in Hawaii. And the unidentified chatbot “hallucinated”—invented a fact—no doubt influenced by the prejudices and previous activity of its user.

That a US military operation was underway with the potential to escalate into war with China, before basic facts were checked, testifies to the utter recklessness of the Trump administration and American imperialism.

That such an operation in the Middle East was even contemplated underscores the fact that the wars underway there and in Europe are interconnected fronts of a global conflict that has China as its chief target.

China has long been regarded by Washington as the chief threat to US global hegemony and has been the target of extensive build-up of US military forces in the Indo-Pacific, the strengthening of military alliances in the region, and military provocations in the South China and East China Seas. The Trump administration has repeatedly made unsubstantiated claims that Beijing has provided military support to Russia and Iran, including through the sale of military or dual-use items.

The Trump administration is already engaged in an economic war against China that includes not only huge tariffs but bans on the export of the most advanced semi-conductors, including those required for AI. Trump, however, was compelled last November to pull back from more extensive bans when China retaliated with restrictions on the export of key critical minerals needed by US corporations for both military and civilian applications.

A one-year truce was agreed which expires in a little over a month and will undoubtedly be discussed at the summit between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in New York later this week. Neither Washington nor Beijing has officially commented on the CNN report. However, in talks on Sunday, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng discussed the establishment of a US-China AI dialogue, including a notification system that would cover AI-related incidents involving national security.

Even if such a notification system had existed, the incident reported by CNN would still have taken place,

given that the AI hallucination was only found at the last moment. As CNN reported, the US military and intelligence agencies have dramatically increased its use of AI, weaving it into nearly every facet of their work, from analysing the huge volumes of raw intelligence the US collects and selecting targets for strikes, to more mundane applications like managing budgeting, logistics and supply chains.

In January, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth launched the Pentagon's "Artificial Intelligence Acceleration Strategy" in a bid to dramatically speed up the military's implementation of AI. A Department of War (DoW) statement declared that the aim was to extend our lead in military AI deployment and "usher in an unprecedented era of American military AI dominance."

Hegseth declared: "We will become an 'AI-first' warfighting force across all domains." The strategy, the department, stated "will strengthen battlefield decision-making, rapidly convert intelligence data and modernize daily workflows, all in direct support of more than three million DoW personnel."

The Trump administration's determination to implement this strategy, regardless of the dangers of triggering new conflicts, committing war crimes or battles spiralling out of control, was underscored by the Department of War's legal battle with Anthropic after it branded the company a "supply chain risk," blocking all personnel from using Anthropic products.

This punitive action followed Anthropic's refusal to remove internal safety guardrails that would prevent the military from using its Claude AI model in autonomous weapons and mass surveillance, which the company argued was not reliable enough for such purposes. While a US judge late last month ruled unlawful the Department of War's action, the case signals a move toward the use of AI in "autonomous weapons" systems without any significant human oversight or control.

"AI in targeting is definitely something that is ramping up and there is no real guidance for how having a human in the loop will prevent civilian casualties or fratricide," another source familiar with the military's current policies told CNN. Or as another CNN source put it: "AI allows you to get to a bad idea faster."

The CNN report prompted three Democrat

senators—Mark Warner, Jack Reed and Chris Coons—to send a letter to Hegseth calling for an immediate investigation into the incident involving the Chinese ship. The letter expressed "growing concern about the extent to which agencies under your oversight have prioritised acceleration of AI capability adoption and 'experimentation' over effective governance."

Significantly their primary concern was not the military use of AI, but rather its impact on public opinion and the growth of anti-war opposition. The letter said the investigation should have "a higher degree of public transparency in the ultimate findings, given the impacts these perceived failures have on public confidence in our intelligence and warfighting missions."

The CNN report highlighting the dangers of the military use of AI feeds into the broader discussion in ruling circles in the US and internationally and calls for constraint. It is not, however, AI that threatens the "existence of mankind," as some commentators declare, but the subordination of this powerful technology, which potentially offers great benefits to humanity, to corporate giants and the capitalist state.

The greatest danger to humanity's existence is the unfolding world war between nuclear-armed powers as US imperialism aggressively seeks to retain global domination against all rivals, particularly China.



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