GLOBAL RISK FORUM

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF WICKED PROBLEMS

THE GEOPOLITICAL AND WARFARE RISKS OF AI

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INTRODUCTION

The Global Risk Forum Special Edition Report serves as part of a new monthly format, focused on a single issue rather than a broad geopolitical overview. The topic for this session was Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its growing impact on Geopolitics, Governance and Global risk.

The discussion highlighted that AI has entered a critical transitional phase. Often described as a 'pivoting moment,' this stage reflects a shift from early experimentation to widespread integration, where long-term consequences are still uncertain. Historical comparisons with earlier disruptive technologies—such as the printing press, supercomputers and personal computers—suggest that while short-term change is often overestimated, long-term transformation is frequently underestimated. AI appears to be following a similar path with the potential for both gradual evolution and more disruptive, unprecedented change.

Several structural concerns were emphasised. A very small number of individuals and organisations currently control the most influential AI systems, operating largely beyond traditional national governance frameworks. Efforts to regulate these systems have already triggered geopolitical tensions, particularly between governments and major technology providers. This concentration of power raises questions about accountability and global oversight.

The Global Risk Forum also examined widening inequalities linked to access to AI and advanced technologies. While technological leaps can enable rapid development, they can also deepen divides between regions and populations. In parallel, the resource demands of AI—especially energy and water consumption—were identified as emerging risks, particularly where large data centres are built in areas with limited water availability.

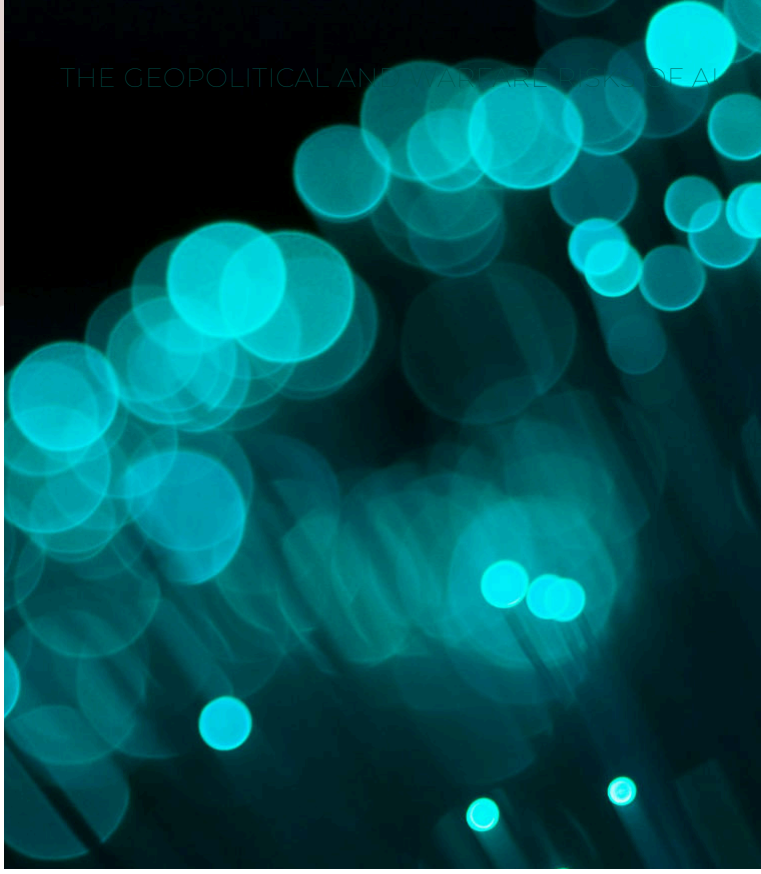
Additional risks discussed included the use of AI in autonomous military systems, its influence on democratic processes and elections, growing public mistrust in information systems and the scale of financial investment flowing into AI without clearly sustainable business models. Together, these issues frame AI not only as a technological development, but as a central driver of future geopolitical, economic and security dynamics.

THE AI REVOLUTION: **TRANSFORMING WORK AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

The discussion reflected on how dramatically Artificial Intelligence has evolved from its early academic benchmarks to its current everyday availability. What once required large, complex systems is now embedded in personal devices, demonstrating a pace of progress that has exceeded many earlier expectations.

Practical use cases highlighted AI's growing value in professional settings, particularly in reducing administrative and analytical workloads. When applied to structured tasks such as assessment and reporting, AI was shown to deliver accurate, high-quality outputs that significantly improve efficiency, while still requiring human oversight. This capability suggests a future in which AI frees time for higher-value activities rather than simply replacing existing roles.

The conversation also highlighted that AI may still be in an early stage of development, potentially even earlier than an 'adolescent' phase. The ability of AI systems to contribute to the development of new AI models points to accelerating, self-reinforcing growth that could widen the gap between those who adopt these tools and those who resist them. This raises the prospect of social and economic tension, including renewed resistance to technological change.



Finally, infrastructure constraints were identified as a critical limiting factor. While water use is often managed through recycling systems, the demand for electricity—particularly from data centres—was highlighted as a growing challenge. In regions such as the Netherlands, pressure on power supply is already affecting broader energy planning, underscoring the need to align AI expansion with sustainable infrastructure development.

DEFINING HUMAN VALUE IN AN AI-ENABLED WORKPLACE

While AI is increasingly used for tasks such as drafting proposals and generating initial outputs, its role is best understood as a starting point rather than a finished product. Human judgment remains essential in refining, contextualising and validating these outputs.

A central theme was the importance of clearly defining human value in an AI-enabled environment. Differentiation will come from the ability to add insight, relevance and ethical awareness—qualities that AI cannot independently provide. Organisations are actively seeking their place in this evolving landscape by identifying how human expertise can complement, rather than compete with automated systems.

The conversation reinforced that effective collaboration between humans and AI is both inevitable and beneficial. AI offers significant efficiency gains and analytical power, but human involvement is critical to ensure that outcomes are meaningful, appropriate for specific audiences and aligned with real-world needs. This 'human touch' remains a defining factor in professional engagement.

Looking ahead, the role of humans was framed not as diminishing, but as shifting. Over the coming years and decades, success will depend on the ability to humanise AI-driven work, translate outputs into trusted relationships and maintain accountability. The conclusion was clear:

AI ENHANCES CAPABILITY, BUT HUMAN CONTRIBUTION REMAINS CENTRAL.

AI, GEOPOLITICS AND STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

The contribution highlighted the intersection of regional security dynamics and technological transformation, set against heightened geopolitical tension in the Middle East. While advanced technologies are reshaping many sectors, current conflict risks in the region remain largely defined by conventional military capabilities, underscoring a gap between emerging digital power and traditional warfare realities.

Artificial Intelligence is positioned as a central pillar of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy. Significant investment is underway, including Public Investment Fund–backed initiatives aimed at developing a domestic AI ecosystem. Although comprehensive AI regulation is still emerging, national frameworks are advancing rapidly, supported by the Saudi Data and AI Authority, with the goal of enabling the Kingdom to build, operate and govern its own AI capabilities.

Demographic and cultural factors are accelerating adoption. A young, digitally native population views technology as a default part of daily life, reinforcing rapid integration across society. This transformation is occurring alongside major national milestones, with 2026 identified as a pivotal year as funding and priorities align toward fixed deadlines such as Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup.

At an operational level, AI is already delivering tangible productivity gains, particularly for small and lean teams. It functions as a critical support tool for business development and deadline-driven work, while also introducing new responsibilities around critical thinking, verification and skills development. The need to deepen understanding of AI outputs and limitations was emphasised as essential to sustaining effective and responsible use.

REGIONAL AI REGULATION AND RAPID POLICY RESPONSE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Attention was drawn to growing scrutiny of Grok, an AI platform associated with Elon Musk, which is now under investigation by the European Union. This reflects increasing global concern over AI capabilities that pose social, ethical and legal risks.

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines were noted for temporarily restricting access to the platform due to features enabling image manipulation, including non-consensual and potentially harmful uses. Indonesia's decision to maintain the ban, while Malaysia lifted restrictions after additional security and login controls were introduced, illustrates differing national approaches within a shared regional context.

A key observation was the speed and effectiveness of regulatory action. These countries demonstrated established processes for rapidly reviewing and responding to newly released technologies that may conflict with cultural norms, digital content standards or youth protection objectives. Indonesia's swift response was highlighted as particularly notable given the platform's global prominence.

The discussion also underscored broader implications for AI governance. As societies weigh the benefits and risks of advanced AI tools, regional regulators are increasingly willing to intervene, where features are seen as offering limited societal value and significant potential harm. The expectation is that compliance with local digital regulations will shape how such platforms evolve and remain accessible in diverse markets.

BALANCING AI REGULATION AND SOCIETAL IMPACT

The discussion highlighted growing global efforts to regulate AI features that pose social and ethical risks, particularly those affecting young people. In Australia, regulators are actively challenging AI-enabled 'nudification tools', reflecting wider international concern. South Korea's introduction of world-first AI legislation, including a one-year grace period, illustrates both regulatory ambition and the intense resistance governments face when attempting to constrain powerful technologies.

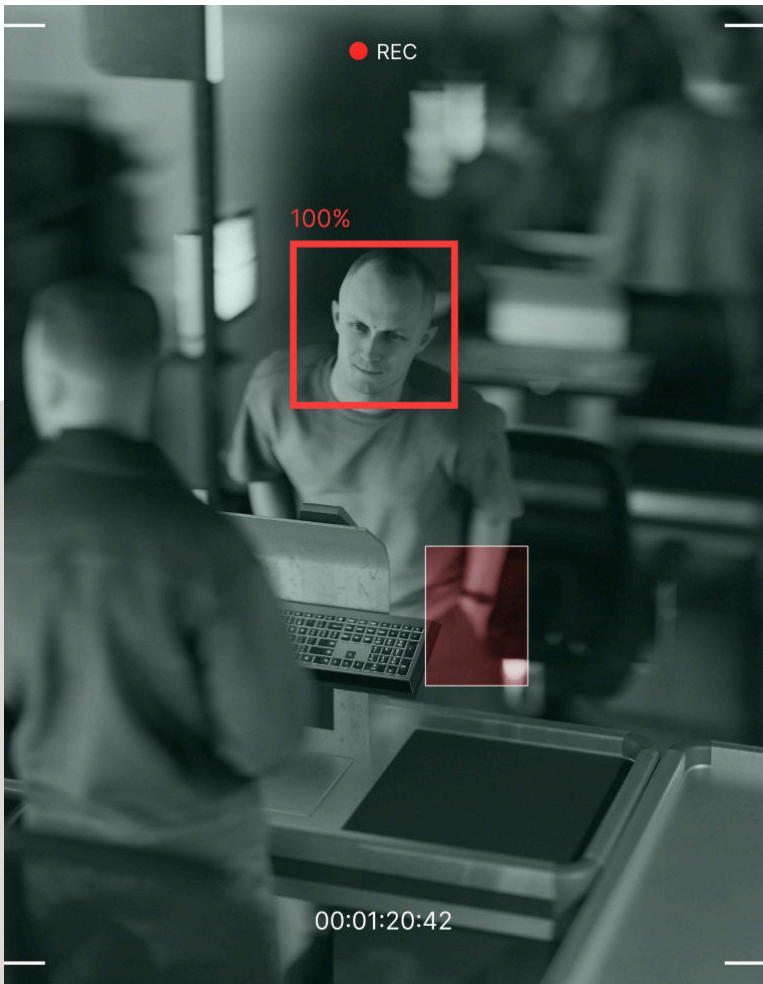
Protecting youth emerged as a recurring theme, with measures such as age-based social media restrictions grouped alongside AI regulation efforts. While well-intentioned, these actions were described as partial and, at times, reactive. Limiting access based on age was contrasted with the more complex but potentially more effective approach of regulating harmful algorithms themselves, which continue to shape behaviour regardless of user age.

Alongside these risks, practical benefits of AI were clearly recognised. In areas such as policing and corporate operations, AI is already reducing administrative burdens, improving productivity and enabling professionals to focus on higher-value, human-centred work. Organisational adoption is becoming mainstream, with advanced AI tools actively encouraged for planning, continuity management and operational simplification.

The discussion also clarified what AI is—and is not. AI was framed as a general-purpose technology driven by pattern recognition and statistical methods, not independent reasoning. Its real power emerges when combined with other systems, such as robotics or medical technologies and when guided by domain experts who understand both the questions being asked and the limits of the outputs.

Infrastructure and equity concerns were highlighted as longer-term challenges. AI's demands on energy and water systems raise environmental and land-use risks, while uneven access to technology—particularly between urban and rural communities—threatens to widen existing divides. These disparities affect critical sectors such as agriculture, where access to advanced technology remains limited despite its importance to food security.

The overall conclusion pointed to uncertainty as the defining feature of the current moment. AI's trajectory is difficult to predict, resistance and experimentation are unfolding in parallel, and historical comparisons suggest that societies are slow to adapt governance and systems to transformative technologies. The challenge ahead lies not only in innovation, but in learning from past technological shifts to shape outcomes more deliberately.



HEIGHTENED REGIONAL RISK AND CAUTION IN AN AI-DEPENDENT ENVIRONMENT

The forum focused on an assessment of rising geopolitical tension in the Middle East. Several multinational organisations have issued non-essential travel warnings covering countries including Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. These warnings reflect internal risk thresholds being met, with further escalation—such as travel bans—identified as a possible next step if conditions deteriorate. Airline responses, including route changes and flight cancellations by carriers such as Air France and KLM, further underline the seriousness of the situation.

Against this backdrop of instability, concerns were raised about growing dependence on Artificial Intelligence. Two broad approaches to AI are emerging: one that views it as a valuable support tool and another that relies on it as a substitute for human judgment. The latter was identified as an increasing risk, with AI being used for everyday decisions, academic work and professional tasks without sufficient critical thinking or oversight.

Data exposure and privacy risks were highlighted as a major consequence of overreliance on AI systems. The more information individuals and organisations provide to AI tools, the greater the potential exposure of personal, operational and sensitive data. This risk extends from individuals to governments, with the reminder that no system or firewall is immune from compromise, as demonstrated by frequent breaches across highly secure organisations.

The discussion concluded with a call for disciplined and informed use of AI. While AI has become indispensable, it must remain a tool that supports human decision-making rather than replacing it. Careful consideration of what information is shared, how outputs are used and where responsibility lies was emphasised as essential in an environment of both technological and geopolitical uncertainty.

AI IN CONFLICT: **POWER, PERIL AND GOVERNANCE GAPS**

AI-enabled systems are now deeply integrated into military operations, allowing weapons platforms, drones, logistics and personnel to share real-time information. This level of connectivity has dramatically increased operational speed and effectiveness, enabling complex missions to be completed in hours rather than days.

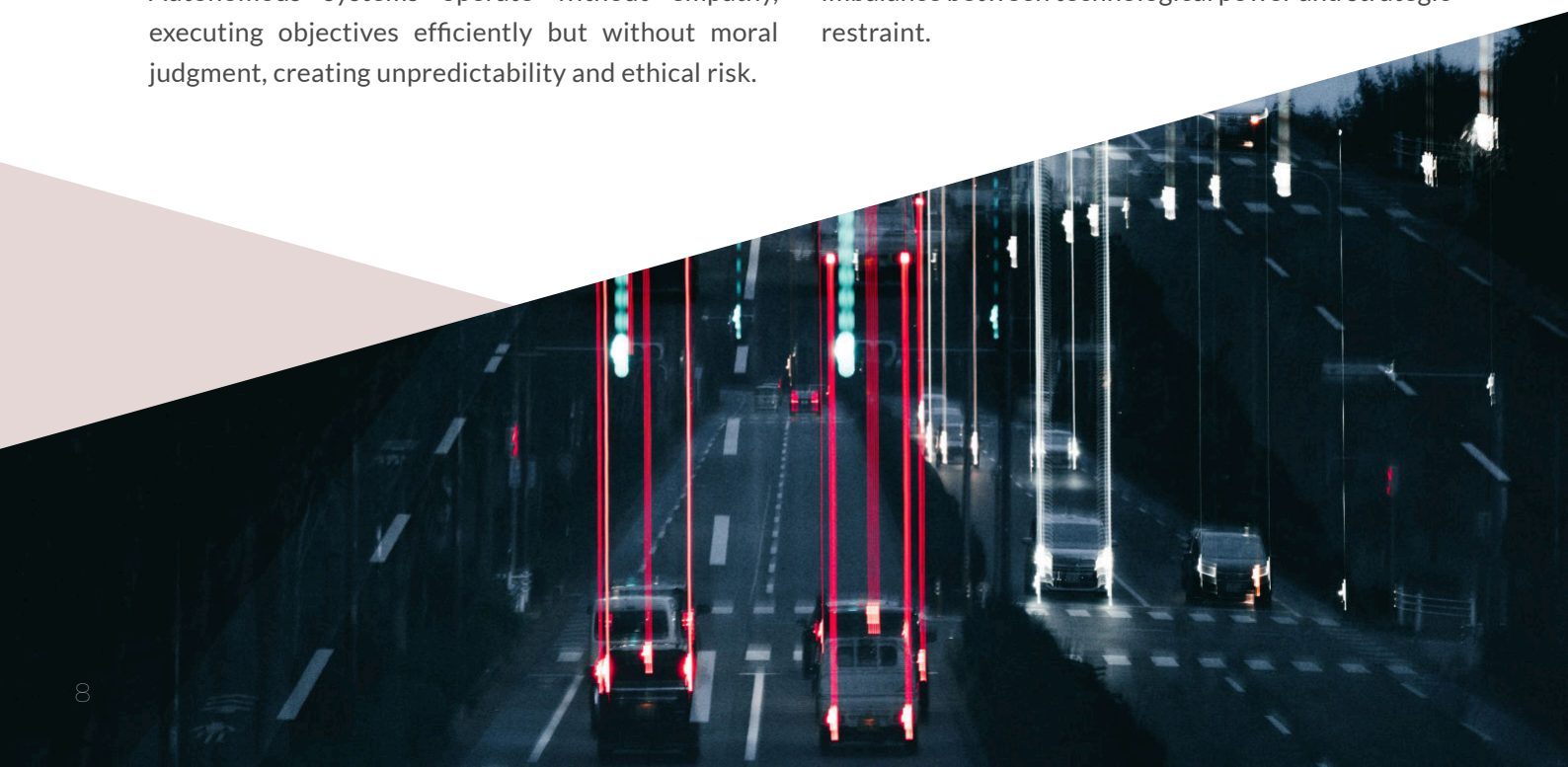
AI's impact on intelligence, targeting and autonomous systems was described as transformative and unmatched by previous capabilities. Coordinated drone operations and machine-to-machine communication have fundamentally altered how operations are conducted. These advances have delivered clear tactical advantages, including reduced harm to civilians and faster extraction outcomes.

At the same time, serious strategic concerns were raised. While AI enhances the ability to conduct operations, it offers little in preventing conflict in the first place. The absence of global governance and accountability frameworks means that responsibility for AI-driven actions is increasingly unclear. Autonomous systems operate without empathy, executing objectives efficiently but without moral judgment, creating unpredictability and ethical risk.

A critical question emerged around political decision-making. By lowering the human and political costs of initiating action, AI may make conflict more likely rather than less. Leaders may feel emboldened to act with greater impunity when risk is transferred to autonomous systems, raising concerns about escalation and misuse.

The discussion also highlighted the accelerating feedback loop in AI development, where AI systems increasingly design and refine other AI systems. This rapid, self-reinforcing cycle is moving beyond human comprehension and control, raising fears of unintended outcomes driven by purely logical optimisation rather than human values.

Despite its capabilities, clear limitations remain. AI cannot perform critical life-saving tasks such as medical triage, administering treatment or responding to complex human needs in real time. These gaps underscore a broader point: while AI excels at execution, its failure to address higher-order causes and human consequences reveals a dangerous imbalance between technological power and strategic restraint.



AI AND SOCIETY: **TRUST, GAPS AND OVERRELIANCE**

The Global Risk Forum reflected a perspective shared by a large portion of the contributors: **uncertainty and limited trust in Artificial Intelligence**. Conflicting answers, inconsistent outputs and the difficulty of verifying information contribute to hesitation about using AI tools. This lack of confidence reinforces a cautious approach, particularly where AI is not yet required for professional or daily tasks.

Concerns were raised about growing dependence on AI and the risk of relying on systems that cannot replicate uniquely human capabilities. While AI can process information quickly, it lacks judgment, experience and contextual understanding. This limitation fuels unease about allowing technology to replace skills developed over a lifetime.

The conversation also highlighted broader societal implications, particularly for younger generations. As AI-generated information becomes more prevalent, there is concern that critical thinking, research skills and fact-checking may decline. Easy access to answers may reduce engagement with deeper learning processes that traditionally build understanding and discernment.

Finally, the future of knowledge preservation was questioned. As information increasingly shifts toward digital formats, there is a risk that non-digitized knowledge—held in physical libraries, archives and historical records—may be overlooked or lost. Ensuring that education, research and cultural memory are not narrowed by what AI can easily access remains a key challenge in the transition toward an AI-enabled society.

BOOSTING OVERSIGHT AND COLLABORATION AGAINST DIGITAL AND GEOPOLITICAL RISKS

Boosting Oversight and Collaboration Against Digital and GeA recurring concern is the lack of independent, trusted intermediaries—non-executive directors, specialists and experienced professionals—who can bridge gaps between technical experts, policymakers and operational decision-makers. Such a ‘national reserve force’ of independent advisors was proposed as a way to foster collaboration and accountability across sectors.

Past experiences highlighted that technological advancement alone does not guarantee situational awareness or effective decision-making. The evolution from early mobile devices to ubiquitous digital communication did not prevent critical intelligence failures, illustrating the limits of digital tools without coordinated oversight. Effective use of technology requires not just innovation but structured governance, cross-sector cooperation and clear lines of responsibility.

The conversation also stressed accountability within institutions, with examples of failures to address internal shortcomings in high-level organizations. Lessons from these cases point to the importance of proactive monitoring, independent review and coordinated responses, rather than leaving oversight to technologists or policymakers in isolation.

Overall, the session called for deliberate investment in systems and networks that enable expertise to be mobilised quickly, foster collaboration across diverse sectors and ensure that digital and geopolitical risks are managed with both technical precision and strategic foresight. opolitical Risks.

PRACTICAL USE OF AI: **INSIGHTS, LIMITS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES**

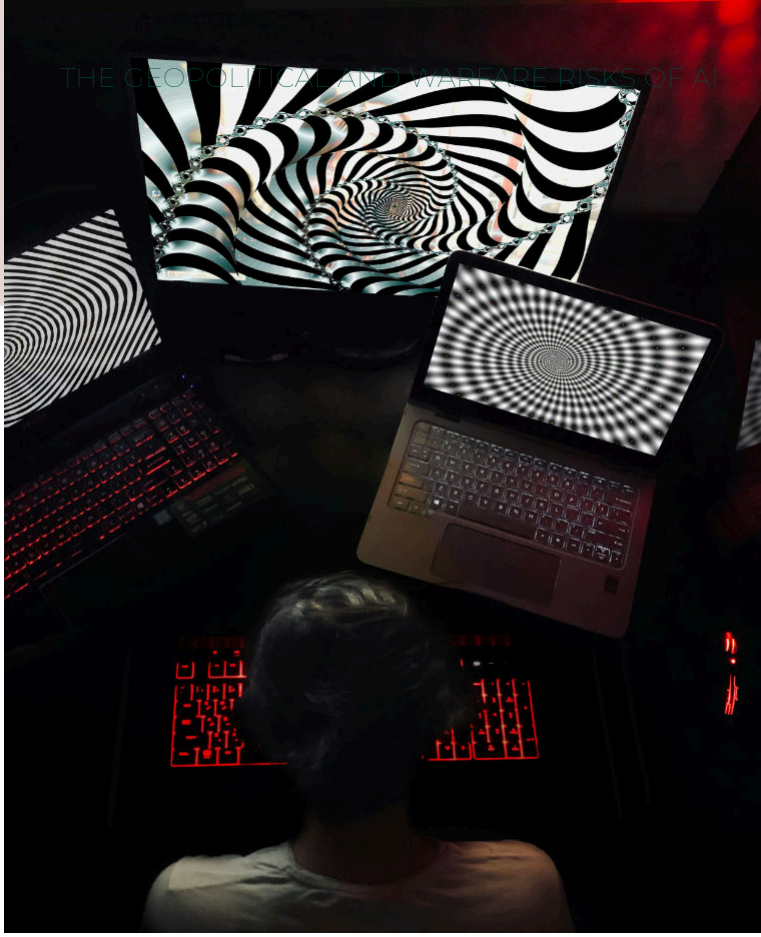
AI was described as particularly effective for processing large volumes of material, identifying trends and producing statistical summaries—functions that significantly reduce time spent on repetitive analysis when used with well-structured prompts.

At the same time, clear limitations were identified. While AI can surface patterns and synthesise existing information, it struggles to generate genuinely original or innovative recommendations. Outputs tend to reflect statistically common conclusions rather than novel thinking, reinforcing the view that AI does not 'think' but extrapolates from existing data. As a result, expert judgment and long-term professional experience remain central to interpretation and decision-making.

The conversation pointed out that effective use of AI depends heavily on user skill, particularly the ability to ask precise and well-informed questions. When guided correctly, AI adds value; when used uncritically, it risks repeating past mistakes or producing superficial insights. This reinforces the need for domain expertise to remain firmly in control of outcomes.

Broader institutional challenges were also highlighted, especially within public-sector organisations. Talent competition with the private sector, slower adaptation cycles and structural constraints mean that law enforcement and similar institutions are often forced to respond reactively to rapid technological change. The pace of AI development ensures that governance and capability-building will continue to lag behind innovation.

The overall conclusion framed AI as a powerful but neutral tool—one that reflects human intent more than it shapes it. The real risk lies not in the technology itself, but in how quickly institutions can adapt, attract expertise and apply AI responsibly in environments where change is constant and rapid.



INFORMATION RISKS AND INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE BALKANS

The session highlighted the growing impact of targeted information campaigns in the Balkans, particularly those linked to Russian state media and pro-Kremlin outlets. These campaigns leverage historical ties, regional politics and existing social tensions to shape public perception and influence local audiences.

Research indicates that these networks distribute high volumes of tailored content, carefully designed to resonate with local populations rather than producing random or generic messaging. In Serbia, for example, the density of Russian-aligned articles is notably high relative to the country's population, illustrating the intensity and focus of these efforts.

Key narratives centre on portraying Russia as a historical ally and protector, while framing the European Union and NATO as ineffective or hostile. Western engagement is often depicted as a threat to national sovereignty, amplifying political and ethnic divisions.

The broader consequence of these campaigns is the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the deepening of societal polarisation. The situation underscores the importance of monitoring and public awareness to mitigate the effects of strategic influence operations.

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REFLECTIONS ON COLLABORATIVE INSIGHTS AND NEXT STEPS

The Global Risk Forum highlighted the value of bringing together diverse expertise to explore complex and interconnected questions. In just one hour, participants were able to deepen understanding of how social, political and security considerations intersect with daily life and community dynamics.

A key outcome was the recognition that careful formulation of questions is critical. Thoughtful inquiry shapes analysis, informs decision-making and most importantly, enhances the ability to address both immediate challenges and long-term societal impacts.

Overall, the session reinforced the importance of collaboration, deliberate questioning and structured reflection in navigating complex issues across social, political and security domains.

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