



The Selection Problem

Aligning Pacific Allies for Algorithmic Warfare

Michael C. Loftus and Eyck Freymann

Executive Summary

Recent campaigns have showcased the United States military's ability to leverage algorithmic targeting to prosecute unparalleled volumes of strikes against enemy targets. For a generation of warfare, positive identification of the enemy was the binding constraint. This is no longer true.

- In a potential war with China over Taiwan, the binding constraint would not be finding targets but choosing among them.
- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) would seek to drain allied magazines and tempt US forces to strike civilian targets, resulting in prominent incidents that rattle financial markets, disrupt supply chains, and divide the US-led coalition.
- China could flood the target nomination set with low-value, ambiguous, and civilian-adjacent targets, including maritime militia and merchant hulls that may carry containerized missiles.
- The United States, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and Taiwan must agree *in advance* on shared procedures for using algorithmic targeting against these kinds of assets.
- The allies need: (1) a shared target taxonomy that ranks targets by value, required confidence, and escalation sensitivity; (2) allied participation in the development and fielding of algorithmic and autonomous systems; and (3) preagreed joint control measures that shrink the ambiguous target set.
- Exclusion zones and notices to mariners are essential tools. The allies should coordinate with neutral-flag states and insurance companies to move compliant civilian shipping out of harm's way.

- These efforts need an institutional home. We propose establishing a standing multinational targeting cell at US Pacific Command, an expanded multinational annex to the Joint Fires Network, and dedicated “red team” injects in joint military exercises such as Balikatan and Talisman Sabre.

A targeting queue is not a plan. Algorithmic targeting in the Western Pacific will face acute challenges to both munition supplies and target discrimination. The only available solution to algorithmic targeting’s selection problem is coordinated allied action.

• • •

The United States has entered the era of algorithmic warfare. Algorithmic targeting is the artificial intelligence-enabled fusion of drone video, radar, signals intelligence, and friendly-force data to identify targets and recommend strike solutions.¹ It was central to the US capacity to strike more than thirteen thousand targets in Iran in thirty-eight days.² It is also viewed as crucial to deterring and, if necessary, defeating a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

But the promise of superior targeting conceals a trap. For generations, identifying and targeting enemy assets to strike has been the key bottleneck in the kill chain in maritime war. Today, the combination of space-based sensing and algorithmic nomination has effectively removed that bottleneck, at least for the United States.³ But these technological developments have pushed the bottleneck elsewhere: to munitions stockpiles and to political tolerance for error. As the Pentagon moves to accelerate artificial intelligence (AI) fielding under a directed revision of Department of Defense (War) (DOD) Directive 3000.09 and to expand algorithms’ role in picking targets, these two bottlenecks become pivotal.⁴

The first, obvious concern is magazine depth. In any near-term cross-Strait conflict, US munitions stockpiles would enter hostilities perilously low.⁵ Stocks were already drawn down to supply Ukraine. Then, the Iran war consumed thousands of critical munitions in its initial five weeks.⁶ Many of these munitions—particularly air-defense interceptors—were used wastefully against relatively low-value targets. The Trump administration has invoked the Defense Production Act of 1950 to reboot missile production. The Pentagon is pouring tens of billions of dollars into cheap munitions, including drones, to supplement exquisite precision missiles.⁷ But scaling up production of missiles and drones will take years. US and allied magazines will remain uncomfortably shallow through 2030, and possibly well into the 2030s.⁸ By that time, a large share of the allied long-range precision munitions deployed in the region could even be Japanese, not American.

Simultaneously, each strike would put high-value US and allied platforms at risk. Allied forces would be outnumbered by their PLA equivalents. A smaller number of allied attack submarines, bombers, and ground-based launchers would therefore need to achieve maximum possible effect in the critical early days and hours. Each strike would carry

risk, exposing the shooter's location to PLA detection. Even against Iran—which lost its air and naval power almost immediately in the war—US forces suffered forty-two aircraft lost or damaged in the first thirty-eight days.⁹ The PLA has far more numerous and sophisticated defenses. Avoiding wasting munitions on low-value targets thus also limits risk to high-value platforms.

Second, PLA counterintervention architecture is optimized to punish allied algorithmic abundance and amplify political risk. The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), a fleet of dual-use, nominally civilian vessels that blurs the line between legitimate military targets and noncombatants, is emblematic of the broader challenge.¹⁰ The PAFMM often helps the China Coast Guard assert Beijing's illegal, expansive claims in the South China Sea. But it also rehearses blockade operations and collects intelligence for conventional PLA naval forces.¹¹ A web of militia vessels operating hundreds of miles from China's coast can deliver over-the-horizon targeting solutions without PLA warships having to risk exposing their locations by lighting off their radars.

China's use of these paramilitaries is questionable under international law.¹² If war erupts, it poses five challenges to allied algorithmic targeting:

- **Camouflage** Militia vessels' perfidious resemblance to civilian fishing boats injects irreducible overlap between combatant and noncombatant classes.¹³
- **Decoy** Engaging militia vessels burns precious munitions on low-value targets.
- **Incident risk** Attempts to engage risk killing civilian fishermen, and potentially fleeing refugees, precipitating coalition-fracturing incidents.
- **Perception** Even accurate, lawful strikes on militia vessels will look like attacks on civilians.
- **Screen** If allied forces decline to engage, the militia shields the PLA Navy (PLAN) and cues targeting against intervening US carrier strike groups and allied naval forces.

Whether these functions are deliberate is open to debate, and ultimately beside the point. Algorithmic camouflage and munition depletion do not need to be the product of deliberate strategy by the PLA. Paramilitaries' function *may* simply be to screen Chinese naval forces and provide targeting intelligence, rather than deliberate perfidy. But regardless of intent, the strategic vulnerability thousands of indistinguishable militia vessels exploit in allied targeting guarantees that every allied choice would be wrong in at least one regard.

The PLA is also pioneering the use of containerized missiles, which can be deployed off commercial ships.¹⁴ In a crisis, China can deploy large numbers of these ships in key

maritime locations, including near allied ports and likely tracks of allied carrier strike groups.

Allied models must therefore be trained to screen thousands of PRC maritime assets and identify which ones pose significant threats. This blurring of the line forces allied models to contend with a precision-recall dilemma. False negatives endanger critical allied platforms; false positives flag actual civilians for attack. Ultimately, allies must accept harsh trade-offs in model tuning. If included in training data, the irreducible overlap complicates model optimization and setting of decision boundaries; if only encountered after deployment, it forces artificially high confidence thresholds or triggers catastrophic misclassifications.

The alliance must also guard against deliberately manufactured incidents.¹⁵ China can try to corrupt allied training data, manipulate data labels, alter platform signatures to evade detection, or inject backdoors and spoofed inputs to trigger malfunctions on cue.¹⁶ With agentic cyber offense and hardware compromise demanding rapid development of agentic defenses and component audits in unmanned systems, an undetected manipulation of the targeting pipeline could cause friendly or civilian vessels to be classified as hostile.¹⁷

If the United States mistakenly strikes civilians at any point in a conflict, the political fallout lands on allies first. The Philippines alone supplies a quarter of the world's mariners.¹⁸ If Filipino seafarers die in US strikes, the result could be a political crisis in Manila, jeopardizing a linchpin of US power projection. One can imagine scenarios where mistaken strikes lead to political blowback that paralyzes military options. As engineers hunt for the source of the malfunction, allied governments could face pressure from voters to limit cooperation with the US military or pause the use of algorithmic targeting altogether.

Finally, strikes against civilian targets could disrupt merchant shipping, breaking supply chains and triggering a global financial panic. Insurers could withdraw or reprice coverage. Even if insurance remained available, commercial shippers might avoid risky areas for fear of threats to their crews.

In short, in a cross-Strait war, allied forces will never run short of targets. But they may struggle to identify the *right* targets to spend scarce munitions on before they burn through shallow magazines of precision munitions. Additionally, algorithms can make mistakes—or be deceived. When mistakes are inevitably made, civilians can be harmed, and the political reactions can be swift and divisive. Attacks on merchant shipping can also disrupt supply chains and rattle financial markets. The accumulation of these factors could threaten allied cohesion in a confrontation with China.

Today, there exists no shared mapping from algorithmic confidence to engagement authority that attends to these political risks, whether across allies or even within the US joint force. The rest of this paper proposes how to build it.

WHY ALLIED COORDINATION IS THE ANSWER

To use algorithmic targeting effectively, the allies need a shared selection logic, preagreed with key partners before any war starts. Unilateral targeting prioritization risks missing decisive targets, duplicating strikes, and harming noncombatants. Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan hold indispensable local knowledge of civilian traffic in the Western Pacific. US forces can only absorb that knowledge through coordination.

The obvious objection is that allied coordination could add friction to the kill chain. The value of algorithmic targeting is speed, and coalition deliberation threatens to reintroduce friction at precisely the layer that was just liberated.

The answer is to deliberate not during the kill chain but before it, establishing a shared taxonomy for validating and prioritizing high-value targets. Prioritization should become a parameter rather than a reason for endless meetings. However, no preagreed scheme survives contact unchanged. Any allied framework therefore needs a standing revision mechanism: a multinational targeting cell empowered to reweight priorities and coordinate iterative algorithm improvement as the campaign evolves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SHARED TARGET-VALUE TAXONOMY

The taxonomy needs three axes:

- **Value** What does a target contribute to the campaign plan, and what is it worth in munitions and sortie risk?
- **Confidence** What level of certainty is required before each class of target may be engaged—for example, what model score, corroborated by which sensors, with what qualitative criteria and level of human review? Confidence floors should be defined independently of any given systems autonomy tier under DOD Directive 3000.09, since platform design indicates nothing about acceptable thresholds of political risk for allies, and militia-class targets should carry the most demanding corroboration requirements.¹⁹
- **Escalation sensitivity** Which targets are politically permissible to strike from, or within, an ally's territory?

A notional version of this taxonomy might look like table 1.

The taxonomy needs an institutional home. Ideally, this would be a standing multinational targeting cell at US Pacific Command. It may also be helpful to establish an expanded multinational annex to the Joint Fires Network and dedicated red-team injects at the Balikatan and Talisman Sabre exercises.

TABLE 1 TARGET-VALUE TAXONOMY TABLE

Priority tier	Illustrative targets	Munitions logic	Confidence required	Escalation sensitivity
Tier 1: Kill-chain enablers	PLAN command-and-control nodes, ISR and targeting infrastructure, over-the-horizon radars	Exquisite munitions justified	High; multisource corroboration; authority predelegated	Varies by location; mainland sites require alliance preconsultation
Tier 2a: Invasion capacity	PLAN amphibious lift, escorts, air-defense pickets	Mix of exquisite and attritable systems	Moderate; standard positive identification	Low to moderate within the Strait
Tier 2b: Dual-use invasion capacity	Dual-use roll-on/roll-off ferries and landing craft*	Mix of exquisite and attritable systems	High; multisource corroboration; authority predelegated	High; civilian ferries likely to be in operation in close vicinity
Tier 3: Sustainment	PLAN fuel and logistics vessels, transport aviation	Attritable systems preferred	Moderate; standard positive identification	Moderate
Tier 4: Militia-class/dual-use	PAFMM vessels, suspected containerized-missile hulls	Engage only when directly participating in hostilities*; attritable systems only	Highest; multiphenomenology corroboration plus in-depth human review	Highest; preagreed allied protocols govern engagement

* Thomas Shugart and J. Michael Dahm, "CMSI Note 18: Flooding the Zone: The Use of Civilian Landing Craft (LCTs) in PLA Amphibious Operations," US Naval War College Digital Commons, January 7, 2026, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/18/>; J. Michael Dahm, *China Maritime Report No. 25: More Chinese Ferry Tales: China's Use of Civilian Shipping in Military Activities, 2021-2022* (US Naval War College Digital Commons, 2023), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/25/>; and Conor Kennedy, "CMSI Note #4: Deck Cargo Ships: Another Option for a Cross-Strait Invasion," US Naval War College Digital Commons, February 8, 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/4/>.

† *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* (Office of the General Counsel, Department of Defense, 2023), 239–40, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>; and Nils Melzer, *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities Under International Humanitarian Law* (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2010), 48, 81, https://shop.icrc.org/interpretive-guidance-on-the-notion-of-direct-participation-in-hostilities-under-international-humanitarian-law.html?__store=en.

Australia

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is well positioned to collaborate with US forces on target-value taxonomy. Data standardization between national militaries has already begun under AUKUS Pillar II. The ADF is collaborating with the United States on the Joint Fires Network, an allied counterpart to the US Maven Smart System-based, all-domain command-and-control concept.²⁰ The Joint Fires Network, recently demonstrated during the Valiant Shield US-Australia exercise, serves as a data aggregation and communication layer between the ADF and US forces.²¹ Building out a shared target-value taxonomy from this baseline is an obvious next step. Given their participation in AUKUS Pillar II, UK forces could take part in these efforts as well.

Japan

Japan has further to go in terms of data standardization and interoperability with US forces than Australia. Still, Japan's defense modernization and build-out of strike capabilities presents a substantial value-add for multinational capabilities.²² Japan is acquiring hypersonic and antiship missiles and deepening its investments in unmanned strike systems.²³ Japanese surveillance data on PLA exercises around Taiwan and other operations may also complement US collection to support joint algorithmic development.

The Philippines

The Philippines is unlikely to play a substantial role in allied strike capacity in the near term. The Philippine Army only stood up its first battalion of land-based missile systems in October 2025.²⁴ Any allied targeting coordination needs to account for Philippine shore-based missile assets to mitigate fratricide risk. Even so, allied target-value taxonomy would primarily be shared with the Philippine armed forces to provide transparency into allied decision-making and lessen the likelihood of politically denied freedom of maneuver.

Taiwan

There is no formal defense integration with Taiwan at the command level where targeting logics would need to be coordinated. Nor are there trusted networks for targeting-grade data sharing. It may not be politically feasible to establish these things. The near-term objective should therefore be doctrinal harmonization with Taiwan to aggregate effects, not integration.

SEEK ALLIED INPUT ON CIVILIAN HARM MITIGATION DURING DEVELOPMENT AND FIELDING

Securing allies' and partners' buy-in to US concepts for algorithmic targeting will require deliberate, ongoing information sharing. That means clarifying existing access arrangements to require consultation with allies and partners on what assets are deployed where. There should be allied personnel and civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) staff

at the current Direct Reporting Portfolio Manager for Unmanned Systems and the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group as well as the proposed Robotic and Autonomous Systems Combatant Command. While the Pentagon only retained nine civilian harm mitigation personnel following cuts in 2025, increased staffing recommendations after the US strike on the Minab primary school in Iran could rebuild US capacity and build linkages with allied experts.²⁵ Alongside critical past steps such as introducing a civilian environment layer in Maven Smart System and a dedicated CHMR AI assistant, the United States should take allied perspectives into account during development, doctrine drafting, and testing of algorithmic or autonomous targeting.²⁶

Australia

Australia is well positioned to collaborate with the United States on system development, but its legal framework must be considered. Australia's formal policy on defense AI mandates legal reviews of new weapons systems under Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. These requirements go beyond US regulations. The Australian Department of Defence's Defence Science and Technology Group launched its Trusted Autonomous Systems Defence Cooperative Research Centre in 2018 and has developed its own incremental, layered "system of control" for the use of force and military autonomy.²⁷

Japan

Japan's guidelines for AI in defense explicitly prohibit autonomous lethal weapons.²⁸ As written, this is a major potential flash point with evolving US policy and deployed US systems. To reconcile differences with Japanese doctrine, Washington must explain how it will mitigate incidental harm to civilians and friendly forces on Japanese territory. If it can make this argument persuasively and heed Japanese opinions in shaping bilateral coordination mechanisms, over time it might be able to develop a true partnership with Japan on combined targeting.

The Philippines

Washington should consult Manila and share information on how it would use algorithmic targeting in and near Philippine territory under the Visiting Forces Agreement.²⁹ Relatedly, it should help build Philippine institutional capacity to collaborate on algorithmic and autonomous capabilities. Roughly 250,000 Philippine citizens live in Taiwan, and many may need to be evacuated in a contingency.³⁰ A new forward operating base is also being established in Batanes, in the middle of the Luzon Strait, where maritime evacuation, refugee flows, and PAFMM efforts to asphyxiate Taiwan would intermingle. Manila therefore has a vote over how algorithmic targeting is used in this area.

JOINT CONTROL MEASURES

Last, the United States and its allies and partners should predesign control measures for whenever autonomous capabilities are activated: jointly declared wide-area Maritime

Exclusion Zones (MEZ) with corresponding Notices to Mariners (NOTMAR), and No-Fly Zones (NFZ) with Notices to Airmen (NOTAM). These control measures form the allied coordination complement to the Pentagon's platform-level constraints requiring that autonomous capabilities be geographically delimited under the pre-revision 3000.09 directive.³¹ Where 3000.09 imposes system standards, joint control measures clarify how allies are notified, how commercial shipping is steered clear, and how civilians are warned. By declaring these jointly, allies promote awareness of risk among local populations, and make unfortunate incidents less likely and less politically complex.

These measures admittedly come with trade-offs. Declaring an exclusion zone whenever a system activates telegraphs allied operating areas to the PLA. One partial solution is to declare exclusion zones broadly and persistently rather than reactively. Another is to use overlapping or decoy declarations. Still, these are morally, legally, and politically preferable to using unannounced autonomous engagement zones in waters thick with civilian traffic.

Control measures should also extend to two key civilian constituencies: flag states and marine insurers. The merchant hulls that may carry the PLA's containerized missiles fly flags of convenience from neutral states such as Panama, Liberia, and the Marshall Islands. A strike on a Panamanian-flagged vessel is a diplomatic incident with Panama. Allied planning should consider the value of pre-crisis communications channels with the major open registries and the International Maritime Organization.

Insurance is another powerful lever for clearing innocent vessels out of spaces where algorithmic targeting is taking place. During the Red Sea crisis ongoing since 2023, the Lloyd's Market Association's Joint War Committee at various times designated maritime spaces as a war-risk zone. As insurers withdrew or repriced protection-and-indemnity coverage, commercial shipping periodically had to reroute. In a contingency in the Pacific, allied governments could potentially use the insurance market to distinguish friends from foe at sea. If allied exclusion-zone declarations are coordinated with the insurance market, compliant civilian traffic may exit risky areas of their own accord, shrinking the ambiguous tail of the target-nomination set. Unrestricted targeting even in declared exclusion zones can still be politically self-defeating, as German unrestricted submarine warfare demonstrated in the First World War.³² But carriers and merchant captains willing to accept the risks of operating uninsured in a declared exclusion zone will be few. Insurance signaling, in other words, does discrimination work that algorithms cannot.

CONCLUSION

The selection problem is ultimately an alliance problem. By exploiting it, the PLA could defeat allied forces strategically without winning on the battlefield. Solving it does not mean reincarnating bureaucratic strike complexes. It means a shared taxonomy of value, confidence, and escalation; collaborative development and fielding; and preagreed control

measures, extending to flag states and insurers, that shrink the ambiguous battle space before a shot is fired.

These conversations must happen now, in peacetime, because there will be no time for them in war. Without them, algorithmic targeting will win battles and lose the war.

NOTES

1. Matt Mande and Gregory C. Allen, "What Is Maven Smart System, and What Does It Do?," Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 2, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-maven-smart-system-and-what-does-it-do>.
2. Adam Goldman, Samuel Granados, Ronen Bergman, and Eric Schmitt, "What the US and Israel Have Targeted in Their Iran Blitz," *World, New York Times*, March 7, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/07/world/middleeast/us-israel-targets-iran.html>; Airwars, "Record Pace of Strikes in Iran Bombing Campaign: Analysis," March 6, 2026, <https://airwars.org/record-pace-of-strikes-in-iran-bombing-campaign-analysis/>; and The White House, "Peace Through Strength: Operation Epic Fury Crushes Iranian Threat as Ceasefire Takes Hold," April 8, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2026/04/peace-through-strength-operation-epic-fury-crushes-iranian-threat-as-ceasefire-takes-hold/>.
3. Steven Feldstein, "AI Targeting Systems Are Coming, but Not as Fast as Many Assume," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 25, 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/2026/06/ai-targeting-systems-are-coming-but-not-as-fast-as-many-assume/>.
4. The White House, "National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-11," June 5, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/06/national-security-presidential-memorandum-nspm-11/>; Katrina Manson, "Pentagon Sees Bigger Role for AI in Setting Military Targets," *Bloomberg*, June 25, 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-06-25/pentagon-sees-broader-role-for-ai-in-setting-military-targets>; and Noah Tan, "The Pentagon's Autonomous Weapons Definitions Don't Need an Overhaul, They Need an Update," *Just Security*, July 24, 2026, <https://www.justsecurity.org/143209/the-pentagons-autonomous-weapons-definitions-dont-need-an-overhaul-they-need-an-update/>.
5. Alexander Ward, Shelby Holliday, and Yoko Kubota, "Iran War Complicates Contingency Plans to Defend Taiwan, Some US Officials Say," *Politics, Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/iran-war-complicates-contingency-plans-to-defend-taiwan-some-u-s-officials-say-4384f7c1>.
6. Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, *Last Rounds? Status of Key Munitions at the Iran War Ceasefire* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2026), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/last-rounds-status-key-munitions-iran-war-ceasefire>; and Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, "Rebuilding US Missile Inventory: A Multiyear Project," Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 27, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rebuilding-us-missile-inventory-multiyear-project>.
7. Lara Seligman and Marcus Weisgerber, "Trump Invokes Cold War-Era Law to Boost Munitions Production," *Politics, Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/trump-invokes-cold-war-era-law-to-boost-munitions-production-74a0f37c>; Cancian and Park, "Rebuilding US Missile Inventory"; The White House, "Presidential Determination and Delegation of Authority Under Section 708 of the Defense Production Act of 1950, as Amended," *Federal Register*, June 11, 2026, <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2026-12286.pdf>; and Helene Cooper and Farah Stockman, "US Military's Weapons Shortage Shows Few Signs of Easing Soon," *US, New York Times*, June 25, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/25/us/politics/us-military-weapons-shortage.html>.
8. Paul Scharre, "Losing the War of the Future," *Foreign Affairs*, June 23, 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/losing-war-future-paul-scharre>; Eric Rosenbach, Ethan Lee,

and Bethany Russell, *The Autonomous Arsenal in Defense of Taiwan: Technology, Law, and Policy of the Replicator Initiative* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2025), <https://www.belfercenter.org/replicator-autonomous-weapons-taiwan>; and Cooper and Stockman, "US Military's Weapons Shortage."

9. Jennifer DiMascio, Daniel M. Gettinger, and Joshua Korzilius, "US Aircraft Combat Losses in Operation Epic Fury: Considerations for Congress," Congressional Research Service, May 13, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12692>.

10. James Kraska and Gavin Logan, "Get Ready for the New Rules of War in the Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, June 10, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/get-ready-for-the-new-rules-of-war-in-the-indo-pacific/>; and J. Michael Dahm, "Testimony Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission: China C4ISR and Counter-Intervention," Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, March 21, 2024, <https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/app/uploads/2024/03/03.21.24-PLA-C4ISR-USCC-Testimony.pdf>.

11. Dahm, "China C4ISR and Counter-Intervention"; Ryan Martinson, *China Maritime Report No. 46: China's Fishermen Spies: Intelligence Specialists in the Maritime Militia* (CMSI China Maritime Reports, 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/46>; Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, "Beijing's Maritime Militia Rehearsing Blockade Tactics, Analysts Say," May 6, 2026, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2026/05/beijings-maritime-militia-rehearsing-blockade-tactics-analysts-say/>; and "China's Shadowy Maritime Militia Is Worryingly Active," *The Economist*, July 21, 2026, <https://www.economist.com/interactive/china/2026/07/21/chinas-shadowy-maritime-militia-is-worryingly-active>.

12. James Kraska and Michael Monti, "The Law of Naval Warfare and China's Maritime Militia," *International Law Studies* 91 (2015), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1406&context=ils>; and Pornomo Rovani Astri Yoga and Lowell Bautista, "The Law of Perfidy and Ruses of War at Sea," *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 29, no. 3 (2024): 375–90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krae012>.

13. Kraska and Monti, "The Law of Naval Warfare"; and Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, "Beijing's Maritime Militia."

14. Kraska and Logan, "Get Ready for the New Rules of War in the Indo-Pacific."

15. Ruben Gallego, Letter to the Pentagon on Directive 3000.09 Update, Washington, DC, June 12, 2026, https://www.gallego.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Final_Gallego-Letter_Directive-3000.09.pdf.

16. Aaron Conti, "Data Poisoning as a Covert Weapon: Securing US Military Superiority in AI-Driven Warfare," *Articles of War*, June 30, 2025, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/data-poisoning-covert-weapon-securing-us-military-superiority-ai-driven-warfare/>; and Apostol Vassilev, Alina Oprea, Alie Fordyce, Hyrum Anderson, Xander Davies, and Maia Hamin, *Adversarial Machine Learning: A Taxonomy and Terminology of Attacks and Mitigations*, NIST AI 100-2e2025 (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.AI.100-2e2025>.

17. Christopher Koch, "Agentic AI and the Industrialization of Cyber Offense: Forecast, Consequences, and Defensive Priorities for Enterprises and the Mittelstand," *arXiv*, May 6, 2026, <https://arxiv.org/html/2605.06713v1>; Samantha Subin, "Hugging Face Hack Marks Start of Dangerous AI Cyber Era and Many Firms 'Don't Even Know It,'" CNBC, August 8, 2026, <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/08/08/hugging-face-ai-hack-cybersecurity-black-hat.html>; and Richard Holmes, "Spy Cameras on Navy Drones Secretly Sent Data to China," *Telegraph*, August 9, 2026, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/08/09/spy-cameras-on-navy-drones-secretly-sent-data-to-china/>.

18. Marita Moaje, "DMW Honors Filipino Seafarers, Partners on National Maritime Week," Philippine News Agency, September 28, 2024, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1234312>.

19. US Department of Defense, "DoD Directive 3000.09: Autonomy in Weapon Systems," January 25, 2023, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/portals/54/documents/dd/issuances/dodd/300009p.pdf>; The White House, "National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-11"; and Tan, "The Pentagon's Autonomous Weapons Definitions."

20. Brandi Vincent, "Feinberg's New Maven Directive Sets AI-Enabled Decision-Making as 'the Cornerstone' for CJADC2," *DefenseScoop*, April 3, 2026, <https://defensescoop.com/2026/04/03/palantir-maven-feinberg-directive/>; and Mikayla Easley, "Air Force Standing Up Integrated Program Office for Joint Fires Network on Oct. 1," *DefenseScoop*, September 23, 2025, <https://defensescoop.com/2025/09/23/joint-fires-network-integrated-program-office-air-force/>.
21. Mark Pomerleau, "Indo-Pacific Command to Test Prototype of Joint Fires Network This Year," *DefenseScoop*, March 21, 2024, <https://defensescoop.com/2024/03/21/joint-fires-network-indo-pacific-command-test-prototype/>; Easley, "Air Force Standing Up Integrated Program Office"; and Mark Pomerleau, "Joint Force, International Partners, Contractors Test Command and Control Capabilities in Pacific Exercise," *DefenseScoop*, July 19, 2024, <https://defensescoop.com/2024/07/19/valiant-shield-joint-force-partners-contractors-test-command-control-capabilities/>.
22. Rupert Schulenburg, "Japan's Emerging 'Counterstrike' Missile Posture," International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2026/02/japans-emerging-counterstrike-missile-posture/>.
23. Bryan Clark, David Byrd, Masashi Murano, Timothy A. Walton, and Shane Dennin, *Strengthening the Front Line: Transforming the Japan Self-Defense Force for Twenty-First-Century Deterrence* (Hudson Institute, 2026), <https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/strengthening-front-line-transforming-japan-self-defense-force-twenty-first-bryan-clark-david-byrd-masashi-murano-tim-walton-shane-dennin>; and Schulenburg, "Japan's Emerging 'Counterstrike' Missile Posture."
24. Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippine Army Stands Up Missile Battalion for Territorial Defense Operations," *USNI News*, October 27, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/10/27/philippine-army-stands-up-missile-battalion-for-territorial-defense-operations>.
25. Missy Ryan and Nancy A. Youssef, "A Tragedy in Iran Might Persuade Hegseth to Change Course," *The Atlantic*, July 31, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/2026/07/hegseth-pentagon-civilian-protections-iran/688110/>; Hannah Allam, "The US Built a Blueprint to Avoid Civilian War Casualties. Trump Officials Scrapped It," *ProPublica*, March 10, 2026, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-defense-department-iran-hegseth-civilian-casualties>; Report No. DOWIG-2026-084: (U) *Evaluation of the DoW's Implementation of the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan* (Inspector General, US Department of War, 2026), https://media.defense.gov/2026/May/14/2003930527/-1/-1/1/DOWIG-2026-084_REDACTED%20SECURE.PDF; and *Annual Report on the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence for Fiscal Year 2025* (US Department of Defense, 2026), 3, <https://policy.war.gov/Portals/11/Documents/CHMR/TAB%20B%20-%20DoW%202025%20CP%20CoE%20Annual%20Report%206.15.26-508.pdf>.
26. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2027, S. 4784, 119th Cong. (2026), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/4784/text>; Gallego, Letter to the Pentagon; Peter Hegseth, "Establishment of the Direct Reporting Portfolio Manager for Unmanned Systems," official memorandum, US Department of Defense, June 29, 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jul/01/2003956955/-1/-1/1/ESTABLISHMENT-OF-THE-DIRECT-REPORTING-PORTFOLIO-MANAGER-FOR-UNMANNED-SYSTEMS.PDF>; and *Annual Report on the Civilian Protection Center*, 6.
27. Defence Science and Technology Group, "First Defence Cooperative Research Centre Launched," media release, May 23, 2018, <https://www.dst.defence.gov.au/news/2018/05/23/first-defence-cooperative-research-centre-launched>; and Australia, "Australia's System of Control and Applications for Autonomous Weapon Systems," UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, March 26, 2019, [https://docs-library.unoda.org/Convention_on_Certain_Conventional_Weapons_-_Group_of_Governmental_Experts_\(2019\)/CCWGGE.12019WP.2Rev.1.pdf](https://docs-library.unoda.org/Convention_on_Certain_Conventional_Weapons_-_Group_of_Governmental_Experts_(2019)/CCWGGE.12019WP.2Rev.1.pdf).
28. NSBT Japan, "Japan Reveals New Guidelines for Incorporating AI into Defense Equipment," press release, *Asian Military Review*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2025/06/japan-reveals-new-guidelines-for-incorporating-ai-into-defense-equipment-nsbt/>.
29. US Department of State, "Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines Regarding the Treatment of United States Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines," Manila, Republic of the Philippines, 1998, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/107852.pdf>.

30. Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippine Armed Forces Chief Tells Troops to Prepare for Taiwan Invasion," *USNI News*, April 2, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/04/02/philippine-armed-forces-chief-tells-troops-to-prepare-for-taiwan-invasion>; and Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippine Military Opens New Luzon Strait Base near Taiwan," *USNI News*, August 29, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/08/29/philippine-military-opens-new-luzon-strait-base-near-taiwan>.
31. US Department of Defense, "DoD Directive 3000.09."
32. L. F. E. Goldie, "Maritime War Zones & Exclusion Zones," *International Law Studies* 64 (1991): 160–68, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol64/iss1/8/>.



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs license 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0>.

Copyright © 2026 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

The views expressed in this essay are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers, or Board of Overseers of the Hoover Institution.

31 30 29 28 27 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preferred citation: Michael C. Loftus and Eyck Freymann, "The Selection Problem: Aligning Pacific Allies for Algorithmic Warfare," Allied Coordination Working Group, Hoover Institution, September 2026.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



MICHAEL C. LOFTUS

Michael C. Loftus is a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins SAIS, where he studies military AI, autonomous systems governance, and allied Indo-Pacific strategy. A former US Senate fellow, State Department analyst, and Army officer with operational targeting and civilian harm mitigation experience, he has advised on related legislation and published in *Just Security*, *The Diplomat*, and *War on the Rocks*.



EYCK FREYMANN

Eyck Freymann is a Hoover Fellow at Stanford University, where he directs the Allied Coordination Working Group and participates in the Applied History Working Group. He is the author of several books, including *Defending Taiwan*, *The Arsenal of Democracy* (with Harry Halem), and *One Belt One Road*.

Allied Coordination Working Group

The Hoover Institution's Allied Coordination Working Group (ACWG) designs actionable, integrated strategies to help allied democracies compete more effectively with China. It is housed within the Hoover History Lab, which uses history to address contemporary policy challenges. The ACWG works closely with several other Hoover groups and draws on the expertise of colleagues at the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge and the Institute of Geoeconomics in Tokyo. It provides impetus for allied experts and policymakers to consult about their interests, needs, and capabilities—and to develop strategies collaboratively, from first principles to operational design.

For more information about this Hoover Institution working group, visit us online at hoover.org/research-teams/allied-coordination-working-group.

**Hoover Institution
Stanford University**
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

**Hoover Institution
in Washington**
1399 New York Ave. NW, Ste. 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

**Hoover Institution
in Texas**
3889 Maple Ave., Ste. 600
Dallas, TX 75219
hoovertexas@stanford.edu

