



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Can we hope to restrain the five horsemen of an AI apocalypse?

The possibility of an AI-led dystopian future spells the need for global guardrails but with all major AI powers on board



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**D**ario Amodei, Sam Altman, Demis Hassabis, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk—a recent *Economist* article describes them as the small, powerful group of five men who will determine the path along which artificial intelligence (AI) evolves. Their fellow AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton, who invented the neural network system that enables AI models to learn like humans, quit Google in 2023 to alert the world that while further development of AI could lead us to a utopian future, it could equally lead us to a dystopian one. Since then, a debate has raged over which way AI is taking us. This is an open question. But the fact that a dystopian future is even a possible scenario requires the world to establish guardrails to protect itself against the ambitions of these horsemen of an AI apocalypse. That points us to another question: whether competition among AI innovators will drive us towards an apocalypse, and if so, what can be done to pre-empt it. That question has to be asked in the context of global geopolitics, in particular the intense competition for hegemony between the US and China.

Seen through such a geopolitical lens, the AI race is best compared with the history of the race for arms—from guns, tanks and submarines to warplanes, missiles, drones and now cyber-weapons and the development of increasingly lethal nuclear bombs. AI models have already been weaponized as parts of virtually autonomous weapon systems. The recent hostilities in Gaza, Iran and Lebanon have demonstrated the gruesome collateral cost in lives and livelihoods when frontline weapons like guns, missiles and drones are linked to back-end AI models via satellites. Surveillance models like Claude, rolled out by Amodei's firm Anthropic, were reportedly deployed by Israel and the US to hack into enemy communication networks and extract information about the characteristics, behaviour patterns and locations of potential targets. The information generated by these surveillance models is integrated with other models in the AI stack to create databases that are classified and used for setting targets—be it locations or individuals—with the help of a third set of models, leading finally to the execution of a strike. Since the targets are not directly identified but selected on the basis of pattern recognition and behaviour, the probability of error is significant and the weapons are so lethal that even a few errors can result in thousands of deaths.

Mythos, which was recently released by Anthropic, and other similar AI models launched by others have spread alarm. These can hack into virtually any communication system. Tomorrow, they could be deployed to disrupt power grids, water supply systems, rail networks or airline schedules in an enemy country, bringing it to its knees. It is possible that China and Russia may



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have already pilot-tested their own versions of such AI models.

In our search for global guardrails against an AI-driven apocalypse, perhaps the best analogy is the nuclear test ban treaty. The original treaty, banning all except underground nuclear tests, came into force in 1963, soon after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis demonstrated the dangers of nuclear confrontation. Originally signed by the US, Soviet Union and UK, it eventually had more than 100 countries as signatories. The significant exceptions were France, China, India and Pakistan, which considered it an unequal treaty. It took another 45 years for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT) to be signed and ratified in 2007 by 44 member countries of the United Nations Conference on Disarmament that possess nuclear reactors. India, Pakistan and North Korea were again notable exceptions, but even these countries have abided by the CTBT ban on testing.

Since the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II in 1945, no country has deployed a nuclear weapon against an enemy country so far. When countries, even enemies, face the prospect of mutually assured destruction from the deployment of such lethal weapons, they come together to establish

global guardrails to pre-empt such a disaster.

In its discussion of a roadmap for India's AI future, the *Economic Survey* for 2025-26 refers to the findings of AI Lab Watch, an independent organization dedicated to AI safety, on how big technology firms obfuscate or misreport the internal safety evaluations of their models. It argues the

case for international collaboration to establish an AI Safety Institute proposed by the IT ministry's Governance Guidelines. The AI Safety Institute would, among other functions, analyse emerging AI risks, identify regulatory gaps, coordinate among concerned parties on AI safety issues and undertake safety training and advocacy. The *Economic Survey* recommends collaboration with the AI Security Institute in the UK and National Institute of Standards and Technology in the US for the establishment of a global AI Safety Institute. Although this

proposal is most welcome, it does not go far enough. China, which is among the main players in the AI race underway, must have its skin in this game too. Effective global guardrails against an AI apocalypse would require close cooperation among all the main players—especially China, the US, UK, EU, Russia, Japan, Korea and India, and preferably under UN auspices.

*These are the author's personal views.*

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As proposed by India's Economic Survey, there's a case for an AI Safety Institute to be set up that would track AI risks and regulatory gaps to coordinate action for everyone's well-being.

Any such body must have all major players in the AI race as its members for it to play a meaningful role and should preferably operate under the auspices of the United Nations.

# The Strait of Malacca must not end up as another chokepoint

Asian countries must work together to pre-empt trade disruption



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The strait is exposed to tensions between China and the US. ISTOCKPHOTO

If the Iran War has taught us nothing else, it's that weaponizing shipping routes is now the military move *du jour*. That has rightly turned attention to the Taiwan Strait, but in this era of intense US-China rivalry, the Strait of Malacca is just as important.

The shipping route—which carries roughly 40% of global trade and around 80% of China's imported oil—has long been regarded as vulnerable to disruption. Southeast Asia's divisions will make any crisis much harder to contain.

The confrontation between the US and Iran over the Strait of Hormuz has shown how easily chokepoints can be militarized and how quickly economic fallout can spread. The same logic applies to Malacca, except that here, the consequences would cut to the heart of Asia's economies.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore border the strait and jointly manage it, but have no common framework to deal with pressure in their own waters. Existing cooperation has largely been limited to operational issues such as piracy and safety, but that approach is poorly suited to geopolitical pressure.

Recent discussions between Jakarta and Washington on expanding defence cooperation indicate the Trump administration could be seeking a greater role in the region. Earlier this month, the two announced a major defence partnership and discussed the possibility of expanded US military overflights through Indonesian airspace. Jakarta has stressed that nothing has been finalized, but even limited access would enhance US ability to monitor—and project forces across—this corridor linking the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Southeast Asia's response to Hormuz remains fragmented, though Singapore's approach is worth considering. It has emphasized the principle of freedom of navigation and adherence to international law, arguing that paying tolls for safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, as Iran is demanding, would set a dangerous precedent for the Malacca Strait.

Malaysia has taken a different route, negotiating a deal that allows several of its ships to cross the waterway. Indonesia, meanwhile, continues to hedge between Beijing and Washington, even as it explores closer defence ties with the US. But this could be interpreted as alignment by China, potentially drawing Jakarta more directly into a US-China confrontation it has long sought to avoid.

There is no immediate threat to Malacca, but the strait is uniquely exposed to ten-

sions between China and the US both because of its geography and its role in the global economy.

Chinese strategists have long worried that in a conflict, US forces could threaten the sea lanes that carry much of its imported oil, a vulnerability former President Hu Jintao famously termed the "Malacca Dilemma." Washington has far greater capacity to project power in this area than China does, thanks to its naval reach and network of allies and partners.

The war in Iran has underscored Beijing's Achilles' heel. In a crisis—whether over Taiwan, the South China Sea or other points of tension between the two powers—the Strait could be drawn into US-China competition. The impact wouldn't be confined to China; disruption would reverberate across global supply chains, raising energy costs, delaying trade flows and intensifying economic shocks worldwide.

Beijing has spent billions trying to mitigate that risk, building pipelines through Myanmar, investing in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and even Arctic routes. But so far none offers a viable substitute for Malacca.

It's time for Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to take a unified approach to maritime security governance of the waterway. Countries are beginning to diversify their options, and this should continue. Thailand, for example, is already pushing ahead with plans for a land bridge linking the Indian and Pacific oceans that would in theory allow it to bypass Malacca altogether.

Yet, none of that is a substitute for Asian unity, particularly among the nations that manage the waterway. They should consider upgrading existing arrangements with more robust joint patrols and develop clearer mechanisms for what to do if conflict breaks out. Above all, they need to present a unified front to both Washington and Beijing and resist the temptation to strike separate deals, which weakens their collective leverage.

Failing to do so would make the Strait of Malacca yet another contested artery of international trade. In an era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, the costs of such fragmentation would be felt far beyond Southeast Asia. The global economy can't afford another shock. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

# The kids are not alright and neither are the parents

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**L**ately, I've been afflicted with a strange problem. I've started to sound quite like a 47-year-old woman. This would have been perfectly alright—if I wasn't just 28. I first noticed it last month on a visit to my 59-year-old mother. I found myself telling her, "Will you please just keep your phone aside and listen to me?" I was horrified. What made it worse was her reply, "Wait, let me just finish this reel first."

Had we gone back in time and switched souls? Was I in a *Freaky Friday* spin-off nobody told me about? No, it turns out this is just what happens when older folks with the infinite time of retirement meet the infinitely addictive algorithms of their smartphones.

Interestingly, for many people my age, this shift coincides with that surreal phase of life where adult children find their parents acting more and more childlike.

While last month's landmark *K.G.M. vs Meta* et al ruling in the US showed that firms like Meta and Google develop deliberately

addictive social media products, the focus was largely their impact on young people. This makes sense. Their brains are still developing, they're vulnerable to predators and inappropriate content, and are still learning about themselves and how to socialize. Senior citizens, on the other hand, have lived full lives, formed identities and built relationships. However, the consequences of too much screen time go far beyond and are age-agnostic: poor sleep, negative mood, political polarization, vulnerability to scams and fake news, and excessive dependence on one's device. Besides, relationships, even lifelong ones, are not static. They require attention to stay alive. A friend I spoke to said her grandmother's attention span was so 'cooked,' she couldn't hold a conversation anymore, much to the frustration of her relatives.

At this point, you might be thinking, shouldn't the elderly be the experts on this? Haven't they been shaking their heads at young people for being chained to their phones since the first cellphone was invented? The apparent hypocrisy can be frustrating. One former colleague said of her mother whose sleep is impacted by phone overuse, "Basically, everything she tells us to stop doing, she is doing." This should tell us

that nobody is invulnerable to addictive design. Studies across the world have found that screen time is on the rise among the elderly, and in some places, at levels comparable to the youth. We're all in the same boat. The only difference is that those of us who've had social media for a decade or more have greater digital literacy and experienced both the positive and negative effects for long enough to know what it skews. For our parents and grandparents, on the other hand, the combination of suddenly having too much time, losing your purpose post-retirement, having an 'empty nest,' limited mobility, loneliness and even liberation from lifelong responsibilities can outweigh prudence.

While guardrails for the young like age gates, age-based content restrictions and parental controls cannot be applied to the elderly, the core issue of addictive-by-design applications must be addressed.

We need groups like the Centre for Humane Technology that lobby for public awareness and incentives that make technology uphold ethical standards, plus rulings like *K.G.M. vs Meta* to set precedents that make it easier to argue for better regulation.

Many of us would love to have control over our parents' phone time, not only to protect them from the evil that lurks in the dark recesses of the internet, but also to encourage them to be who they used to be. A friend told me she felt bad about her father's phone

overuse and wishes he would do something more productive or fulfilling instead. She also felt that WhatsApp forwards provided the illusion of connection, but were not meaningful exchanges. Another lamented that her father, once a voracious reader, no longer picks up books for leisure, choosing to use his phone instead. I, too, have tried in vain to get my mother to read again. It turns out all she

needed was to get knee surgery and be stuck in the ICU with no phone and nothing else to do, but that's a story for another time. At the end of the day, our elderly loved ones are adults with agency. All we can do is try to create conditions that encourage them to make better choices for themselves.

Government and non-government bodies should foster digital literacy among the elderly to help them understand the effects of phone overuse, how to navigate digital spaces safely and protect themselves from bad actors. To address the unmet needs of seniors that make them more likely to overuse their phone, governments, NGOs and startups could collaborate to create avenues for the elderly and retired to discover and rediscover hobbies, and form a community not only with peers, but also with younger generations. I can attest to the wonders of intergenerational friendships: one of the most enriching friendships in my adult life has been with a septuagenarian. Finally, public spaces must be made more accessible and inviting to the elderly and those with limited mobility so that they have an incentive to go out and take the world in, as they have always encouraged us to. We all need to touch grass from time to time.

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A rise in screen addiction among the elderly, often seen as a young people's problem, is coinciding with the phase of life where 28-year-old children find their 59-year-old parents acting childlike.

We need policy intervention to keep addictive-by-design apps in check and must foster digital literacy among the elderly. We must also address the underlying causes of screen overuse.