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REBALANCING HYPERSONIC ADVANTAGE: **TOWARD COGNITIVE AIR DEFENCE WARFARE**

ADEL BINSANQOOR – EDGE, UAE

Hypersonic missiles compress timelines, manoeuvre unpredictably, and operate in altitude bands beyond the reach of most air defence systems. These characteristics make them the most disruptive missile threat since the advent of the ballistic missile, challenging the assumptions that underpin deterrence and defence. Traditional systems, even layered and highly networked, are quickly saturated and cannot provide reliable protection against hypersonic salvos. This paper argues that defeating such threats requires a paradigm shift: the adoption of cognitive air defence warfare, where artificial intelligence augments—but does not replace—human decision-making across the kill chain. By enabling real-time threat prioritisation, adaptive interception strategies, and predictive modelling of complex trajectories, cognitive systems offer the agility needed to close the gap. Drawing on lessons from contemporary conflicts and emerging defence programmes, the paper outlines how militaries must think faster—not just harder—to maintain credibility, protect forces, and safeguard strategic stability in the hypersonic era.

Keywords
Hypersonic Weapons, Cognitive Air Defence, Artificial Intelligence, Integrated Air and Missile Defence

Hypersonic weapons are here, and they are reshaping the tactics of air defence. Capable of travelling above Mach 5, manoeuvring unpredictably, and operating in altitude bands above traditional cruise missiles yet below ballistic missile trajectories, these systems compress engagement timelines from minutes to seconds (Birkler et al., 2021; Schwartz, 2022). In such an environment, traditional air defence—built on sequential detection, classification, decision, and engagement cycles—is no longer sufficient. Airpower has always been a dynamic contest of offence versus defence, with each side adapting to the other's innovations (O'Connell, 2019). Hypersonics, however, break this cycle by collapsing time itself. Decision-making windows shrink dramatically, leaving even highly trained operators only seconds to respond, while conventional systems are quickly saturated. This is not merely a technological challenge; it is also a tactical and operational one. The ability to detect, track, and intercept high-value targets under compressed timelines becomes the defining factor in maintaining credible defence.

The emergence of hypersonics exposes gaps in conventional air defence architectures. Speed, altitude, and manoeuvrability combine to create threats that are difficult to detect, predict, and intercept. Hypersonic systems compress the kill chain and increase the likelihood that simultaneous attacks—

CONTACT: Adel Binsanqoor Adel.Binsanqoor@edgegroup.ae EDGE, Abu Dhabi

comprising multiple air-breathing vehicles, unmanned aerial systems, cruise missiles, and hypersonic missiles—can overwhelm defenders (Lewis, 2021). The result is not only a strain on operational systems but also a challenge to the decision-making process itself.

Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental upgrades. It calls for cognitive air defence warfare, where artificial intelligence augments human decision-making across the kill chain. AI accelerates detection, prioritises threats, predicts likely manoeuvres, and recommends optimised courses of action, while humans retain oversight, intuition, and strategic guidance (Cummings, 2020). This produces a streamlined decision cycle: Observe, Decide, and Act (ODA), with orientation embedded in machine processing, enabling operators to respond faster, more accurately, and more confidently.

In short, the hypersonic era demands both technological innovation and a doctrinal transformation. Defenders must be able to observe, decide, and act faster than the threat—not by replacing humans, but by integrating human judgment with machine cognition to restore tactical balance and preserve operational credibility in this new, accelerated battlespace (Birkler et al., 2021; Schwartz, 2022).

The Challenge of Hypersonics

Hypersonic weapons disrupt traditional air defence through a combination of extreme speed, altitude, and manoeuvrability. Travelling above Mach 5, these systems compress engagement windows from minutes to mere seconds. A missile launched from 500 kilometres may reach its target in approximately five minutes—or less—leaving conventional sequential detection, classification, decision, and engagement cycles insufficient to respond effectively (Lewis, 2021; Schwartz, 2022). This acceleration fundamentally changes the tactical landscape, collapsing the time available for human operators and automated systems alike.

Operating in an altitude band above traditional cruise missiles yet below ballistic missile trajectories, hypersonics occupy a range where conventional interceptors struggle to guide effectively. Aerodynamic constraints limit the efficacy of missile interceptors, while sensor coverage, radar fidelity, and interceptor kinematics face unique challenges at these extreme speeds and altitudes (Birkler, Karako and Weitz, 2021). The combination of these factors creates a scenario where traditional defences are not only strained but may be rendered ineffective against fast-moving threats.

The operational threat multiplies when multiple waves of hypersonic vehicles are launched simultaneously or in combination with other systems. Complex attacks—comprising air-breathing vehicles, unmanned aerial systems, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and hypersonic missiles—can overwhelm even the most advanced layered defences (Lewis, 2021). Such saturation forces rapid and high-stakes command decisions, compressing the kill chain and increasing the probability of missed engagements. In practice, operators must make split-second choices while managing a dense and rapidly evolving battlespace.

Beyond the technical challenge, hypersonics create significant operational and human pressures.

Rapidly shrinking decision windows can lower morale among military personnel and strain confidence at the command level. Public confidence in defence capabilities may be affected, and leadership may experience frustration when conventional tools appear inadequate (O'Connell, 2019). The ability to act decisively under these conditions is critical for preserving operational effectiveness and sustaining trust in defence systems.

Hypersonic weapons fundamentally alter the rules of air defence. Their combination of speed, manoeuvrability, altitude, and saturation potential creates a qualitatively new threat, one that demands integrated technological, human, and doctrinal solutions (Schwartz, 2022). This sets the stage for cognitive air defence warfare, which seeks to restore balance by merging artificial intelligence with human judgment to observe, decide, and act faster than the threat.

Cognitive Air Defence: Concept and Early Adaptations

Incremental upgrades—faster interceptors, additional radar coverage, or layered sensor networks—are insufficient to counter the multidimensional challenges posed by hypersonic threats. These weapons compress decision timelines, exploit altitude gaps, and manoeuvre unpredictably, creating a scenario where human operators alone cannot reliably detect, track, and engage high-value targets (Karako, 2020; Lewis, 2021). Cognitive air defence warfare represents a paradigm shift: it integrates artificial intelligence (AI), advanced sensor networks, and human judgment into a unified, anticipatory system. By augmenting human capabilities rather than replacing them, this approach enables defenders to operate at speeds that match or exceed those of the threat, restoring both tactical and operational balance.

Real-time threat prioritisation: Hypersonic engagements often produce hundreds of simultaneous tracks across multiple domains, including UAV swarms, cruise missiles, and ballistic or hypersonic waves. AI algorithms rapidly evaluate these threats, identifying the highest-risk targets while deprioritising lower-risk activity. Human operators can then focus on strategic, ethical, and situational decisions without becoming overwhelmed. A historical analogy can be drawn to early air defence during the Second World War: radar operators faced a deluge of incoming aircraft, and success depended on quickly distinguishing critical threats from background noise (Price, 2019). Modern AI performs this at speeds incomprehensible to human operators alone.

Predictive trajectory modelling: Machine learning enables anticipatory analysis of likely manoeuvres, including complex or deceptive flight paths. Fusing satellite, airborne, and ground sensor data, AI produces probabilistic predictions under uncertainty (Wright, 2021). Human operators provide oversight for anomalous or rare events, ensuring that intuition, experience, and ethical judgment remain central. This mirrors the evolution of naval gunnery during the mid-20th century, when human operators increasingly relied on analogue computing to anticipate moving targets under dynamic conditions—except now, AI performs millions of calculations in seconds, allowing humans to guide decisions rather than compute them.

Adaptive kill chains: Engagement sequences in hypersonic scenarios must remain flexible. Cognitive systems continuously optimise interceptor assignments, dynamically reallocating resources mid-flight to address shifting threat vectors. Humans define engagement rules and strategic priorities, intervening where judgment calls are required (Karako, 2020). In effect, the system operates as a “living” defence network, continuously reconfiguring itself like a well-trained squadron reacting to unexpected manoeuvres, but at speeds that exceed human reflexes.

Human–machine teaming and ODA acceleration: AI accelerates the traditional OODA loop by absorbing the orientation phase, transforming the decision cycle into Observe, Decide, and Act (ODA) (Shen and Zhang, 2021). By recommending the optimal course of action in real time, AI compresses decision cycles from minutes to seconds, while humans retain ultimate authority, providing strategic guidance, ethical oversight, and doctrinal enforcement. Analogous to a fighter pilot relying on an advanced heads-up display to execute complex manoeuvres, operators trust AI-generated options but remain accountable for the final decision, ensuring that ethical and operational considerations are preserved.

Digital Twin training and learning: Advanced simulations leverage one-to-one 3D modelling of real-world systems, combined with IoT networks and AI-driven threat replication (Boschert and Rosen, 2016). Digital twins allow human operators and AI systems to train in realistic, adaptive scenarios, refining predictive trajectory modelling, human–machine collaboration, and operational TTPs. Iterative exposure to increasingly complex engagements prepares operators to respond effectively under stress, while AI learns patterns, anticipates evasive manoeuvres, and proposes improved decision options. For example, simulating multiple simultaneous attacks—including UAV swarms, cruise missiles, and hypersonic waves—enables both AI and human teams to develop and rehearse the complex, split-second coordination required in real-world operations.

Early programmes—such as glide-phase interceptors, directed-energy systems, and AI-enabled battle management platforms—demonstrate the promise of cognitive air defence (Lewis, 2021; Wright, 2021). However, without integrating predictive modelling, adaptive decision-making, and structured human oversight, these technologies remain incomplete. True effectiveness arises when technology, training, doctrine, and command culture converge, creating a system capable of anticipating, adapting to, and countering hypersonic threats with precision and speed.

Cognitive air defence is more than a technical innovation; it represents a doctrinal, cultural, and organisational transformation. By embedding AI into operational decision-making while retaining human judgment at the centre, forces gain both speed and resilience. Operators can act decisively under compressed timelines, commanders can maintain strategic oversight, and the defence system as a whole achieves an agility that restores confidence, deterrence credibility, and operational effectiveness. By combining historical lessons, cutting-edge technology, and forward-looking doctrine, cognitive air defence transforms air defence from a reactive system into an anticipatory, adaptive, and agile force, capable of contending with the most disruptive threats of the modern battlespace.

Strategic and Operational Implications

Hypersonic weapons fundamentally alter both the operational and strategic calculus of air defence. Their combination of extreme speed, unpredictable manoeuvring, and operation at challenging altitudes compresses the decision-making timeline and exposes vulnerabilities in conventional defence architectures (Karako, 2020; Lewis, 2021). When multiple waves of hypersonic vehicles are employed simultaneously, often alongside UAVs, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, the resultant operational complexity strains even the most advanced kill chains. Commanders are forced to make rapid, high-stakes decisions under conditions of uncertainty, where delays or errors can compromise high-value targets and critical infrastructure (Wright, 2021).

The pressures induced by such environments extend beyond purely technical considerations. Human operators must contend with rapidly shrinking time windows, heightened cognitive load, and the potential for operational fatigue, all of which can affect decision quality, unit morale, and the broader confidence of military and civilian leadership (Shen and Zhang, 2021). In this context, the challenge is not simply to intercept missiles, but to manage the human, procedural, and technological dimensions of a compressed battlespace.

Cognitive air defence provides a framework capable of addressing these intertwined challenges. By integrating artificial intelligence-driven threat analysis, predictive trajectory modelling, and adaptive engagement strategies with human judgment, commanders can transform compressed timelines into actionable decision windows. Multi-domain data—including satellite, airborne, and cyber intelligence—can be fused into a unified operational picture, enabling anticipatory engagement rather than reactive responses (Boschert and Rosen, 2016). In effect, cognitive systems extend human cognition, allowing decision-makers to anticipate complex threat patterns, dynamically reallocate defensive assets, and maintain operational initiative.

The implications extend to strategic stability. Credible defences foster deterrence, reduce escalation risk, and strengthen allied confidence in shared capabilities. By anticipating threats and managing engagement at speeds that match or exceed those of the adversary, cognitive air defence restores a measure of control in an environment otherwise dominated by temporal disadvantage. Importantly, the effectiveness of these systems depends as much on organisational culture and doctrinal adaptation as on technological sophistication. Distributed decision-making, trust in machine-assisted cognition, and anticipatory command practices become critical enablers of both operational success and strategic coherence (Karako, 2020).

The emergence of hypersonic threats reframes the operational and strategic landscape. Success hinges not solely on technical capability, but on the integration of human judgment and cognitive augmentation to preserve initiative, maintain credible defences, and sustain stability in an accelerated battlespace. The capacity to anticipate, decide, and act effectively under compressed timelines defines the operational edge in the hypersonic era, ensuring that defenders are not merely reacting to threats but shaping the conditions of engagement proactively.

Counterarguments and Considerations

While cognitive air defence offers transformative potential, several critical limitations and considerations must temper expectations. Artificial intelligence systems, even when trained on extensive, high-quality datasets, cannot achieve perfect reliability. Errors in threat detection, trajectory prediction, or prioritisation may propagate rapidly through the decision chain, especially under the compressed timelines imposed by hypersonic threats (Lewis, 2021). Probabilistic outputs, adversarial attempts at deception, and cyber vulnerabilities introduce uncertainty that must be managed carefully. Semi-automated operational modes are therefore critical, allowing human operators to validate or override AI recommendations in real time. In high-stakes scenarios, such as the defence of densely populated areas or sensitive infrastructure, the cost of error is amplified, necessitating a cautious and carefully monitored approach to AI deployment.

Ethical and moral considerations further complicate operational planning. Hypersonic engagements compress decision cycles into seconds, challenging traditional human oversight and raising questions of accountability. Decisions made under these conditions may have unintended consequences, including collateral damage to civilian populations or essential infrastructure. Ethical frameworks must therefore be embedded within doctrine, rules of engagement, and training programmes. Advanced simulation environments, particularly Digital Twin systems that replicate real-world capabilities at a 1:1 scale, allow both AI and human operators to rehearse engagements under realistic conditions (Boschert and Rosen, 2016). Such simulations facilitate learning, improve predictive trajectory modelling, and refine human–machine teaming, ensuring that operational decisions align with ethical and moral responsibilities.

Strategic and resource considerations also shape the deployment of cognitive air defence. Advanced systems require significant investment in sensors, interceptors, AI infrastructure, and training, frequently exceeding the cost of offensive hypersonic weapons (Karako, 2020). This imbalance may trigger a form of technological attrition, with adversaries seeking to outpace one another in capability, cost-efficiency, and operational reach. Consequently, cognitive air defence must be integrated into a broader strategic framework that balances investment, deterrence, and operational sustainability, rather than functioning as an isolated technological fix. The organisational and cultural adaptation required is equally substantial: operators, engineers, and commanders must shift to a paradigm where human judgment is augmented by AI, trust in machine recommendations is systematically built, and doctrines evolve to exploit the strengths of human–machine collaboration (Shen and Zhang, 2021).

Integration complexity presents a further challenge. Coordinating multiple sensors, interceptors, AI-driven analytics, and distributed command networks is non-trivial. Mismatches in timing, data interpretation, or communications can produce cascading failures that compromise effectiveness. Digital Twin simulations and predictive modelling offer a solution by enabling continuous testing, refinement, and rehearsal, allowing human operators to develop intuitive understanding of AI behaviour and system dynamics. These methods help refine adaptive kill chains, improve operational cohesion, and ensure that human–machine teams function seamlessly under extreme pressure. Ultimately, cognitive air defence extends human decision-making capacity but does not replace it; its efficacy depends on careful system design, rigorous training, and robust oversight, ensuring ethical, operationally sound, and reliable defence even under the unique pressures of the hypersonic age.

Conclusion

Hypersonic weapons redefine the battlespace around time. Their combination of speed, manoeuvrability, and altitude collapses engagement windows from minutes into seconds. This temporal compression exposes not just gaps in technology, but structural limits in how militaries think, organise, and decide. Traditional doctrine—designed for sequential detection, classification, decision, and engagement—was never built for timelines measured in milliseconds. The central challenge is therefore not simply technological but conceptual: can doctrine, a tool of codified stability, ever fully account for the instability of hypersonic conflict?

This tension highlights why cognitive air defence must be understood not only as a doctrinal innovation, but as a cultural and human transformation. Doctrine provides essential structure, yet structure alone risks rigidity in an environment where adaptability is the key to survival. What hypersonic warfare demands is a shift in the very qualities cultivated in human capital.

Where legacy air defence emphasised procedural discipline and technical mastery, the hypersonic era demands:

- Cognitive agility — the ability to reframe problems and improvise under radical time scarcity.
- Human–machine teaming literacy — operators must develop intuitive judgment about when to trust AI recommendations, when to override them, and how to interpret probabilistic outputs under pressure.
- Ethical reflexes under compression — the capacity to make decisions in seconds that nonetheless align with strategic objectives, international law, and moral imperatives.
- Collaborative resilience — the ability to function as part of distributed human–machine networks, sustaining coherence across domains even when information is partial, ambiguous, or contested.

These qualities represent a decisive shift: from operators who executed established procedures to adaptive decision-makers who balance speed with judgment, and who thrive in environments of uncertainty. Cultivating such human capital requires new methods of preparation. Procedural drills must give way to immersive training environments, leveraging Digital Twin simulations and advanced wargaming to rehearse engagements under the stress, unpredictability, and ethical ambiguity of hypersonic combat. Training must build not only reflexes, but also trust—trust in teammates, in AI partners, and in one's own capacity to decide amid radical compression.

Ultimately, the advantage in the hypersonic age will not lie with the side fielding the fastest interceptor or even the most advanced sensors. It will belong to those who can outthink adversary, adapt most fluidly, and decide most wisely. The future of air defence will hinge less on singular technologies than on the integration of human judgment with machine cognition in ways that preserve initiative and credibility under pressure. Cognitive air defence is thus more than a doctrinal adjustment; it is a reimagining of what it means to defend in an age of speed. The defining edge will belong to forces able to anticipate, orient, and act faster than the threat—while holding firm to ethical and strategic clarity. In short, victory in the hypersonic era will belong not just to those who intercept missiles, but to those who can outthink the battle's temporal rhythm.

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