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Top official's 'golden rule': in border protection, computer won't ever say no

By [David Wroe](#)

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Australia has adopted a "golden rule" that means even as artificial intelligence is used increasingly in border security, any adverse decision such as a visa rejection will be made by a human being so that people are never knocked back by a machine.



The secretary of the Home Affairs Department, Michael Pezzullo, has told Fairfax Media that fundamental rights, privileges and entitlements such as travelling between countries should never be

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deprived by a computer rather than an accountable person.

The nation's border security system is using cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to sort through data on inbound passengers and cargo, both of which are growing by double-digit percentages each year.



Home Affairs Department secretary Michael Pezzullo.

Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

The sheer volumes cannot be dealt with by employing more officers – so machines are being used to sift out low-risk cases to ensure human officers can concentrate on the more complex cases.

Mr Pezzullo said in an interview that Home Affairs was already picking up more cases of potential harm despite actually having fewer direct interactions with people. The way artificial intelligence – or AI – is used would inevitably evolve, he said, but it would never have the final say in rejecting applicants.

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"If you are denied a visa, you will be denied by a human officer. They might be prompted by an AI, they might be assisted by AI, but it's a human that will deny your visa. We call that the 'golden rule'," he said.

"No robot or no artificial intelligence system should ever take away someone's right, privilege or entitlement in a way that can't ultimately be linked back to an accountable human decision-maker.

"Your freedom to move, your ability to move between jurisdictions, your ability to travel, your ability to open a bank account, your ability to drive on the road, ultimately is going to be impacted by officials of the state saying you either can or can't do something.

"Whilst AI can assist them with that, in my view ... I don't think that power should ever be devolved to a computer under any circumstances."

The use of AI is a hot topic among national security officials and experts. Home Affairs is working with the CSIRO Data61 innovation centre and Data to Decisions CRC – a co-operative research centre involving government and industry – on introducing machine-learning and big-data analytics.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute earlier this month devoted a day-long conference to the role of AI in national security. China, meanwhile, is seeking to become a world leader in AI.

In a speech in Washington last month, Mr Pezzullo said the race between countries for the artificial intelligence advantage could be "as strategically significant as the race for naval mastery before the First World War, or the nuclear missile and space races during the Cold War".

In that speech to the International Summit on Borders in Washington, he said the growth of networks and connectivity across the world was overwhelmingly positive but had a dark side in the form of new risks.

These risks – including transnational crime, child exploitation and terrorism – were so complex with so many variables that it was becoming an "almost impossible challenge" to predict them accurately and respond using traditional methods of decision-making by governments.

Threats such as transnational crime outfits were finding gaps and spaces created by the mismatch between growing economic connectivity around the world and the persistent misalignment of countries' laws and rules.

"The 'border of the future' will be heavily dependent on digital systems, data analytics and automation-at-scale to both improve facilitation and mitigate risk," Mr Pezzullo said.



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David Wroe



David Wroe is the defence and national security correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, based at Parliament House

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