TOM SIMONITE   BUSINESS   NOV 18, 2021 7:00 AM

3 Years After the Project Maven Uproar, Google Cozies to the Pentagon

The company has contracts to detect corrosion on Navy ships and help maintain Air Force jets. Now it wants to bid for a lucrative cloud contract.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai issued guidelines for the company's defense work in 2018. PHOTOGRAPH: JUSSI NUKARI/AP

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APPLICATION: <u>SURVEILLANCE</u>, <u>LOGISTICS</u>, <u>CLOUD COMPUTING</u>   END USER: <u>GOVERNMENT</u>

SECTOR: <u>DEFENSE</u>   SOURCE DATA: <u>IMAGES</u>, <u>VIDEO</u>   TECHNOLOGY: <u>MACHINE VISION</u>

IN 2018, THOUSANDS of Google employees protested a <u>Pentagon</u> contract dubbed <u>Project Maven</u> that used the company's <u>artificial intelligence</u> technology to analyze <u>drone</u> surveillance footage. <u>Google</u> said it wouldn't renew the contract and announced <u>guiding principles</u> for future AI projects that forbid work on weapons and surveillance projects "violating internationally accepted norms."

At the same time, Google made clear it would still seek defense contracts. "While we are not developing AI for use in weapons," CEO Sundar Pichai wrote, "we will continue our work with governments and the military in many other areas."

In the three years since, Google has stayed true to his word. The company has built a significant line of business atop deep relationships with defense and intelligence agencies, including a series of contracts that haven't drawn the same scrutiny or outcry as Project Maven.

Google's thriving defense portfolio includes a project detecting corrosion on Navy vessels by applying <u>machine learning</u> to drone imagery and another supporting aircraft maintenance for the Air Force. Google also supplies cloud security technology to the Pentagon's Defense Innovation Unit, set up to help the agency <u>work more closely with tech companies</u>. In November 2020, Google won a piece of a <u>large CIA cloud contract</u>. And in May, it jointly won a $1.3 billion deal with <u>Amazon</u> to supply <u>cloud</u> services to the Israeli government, including its defense agencies.

Events this month suggest there may be more big defense deals in Google's future. Two weeks ago the company <u>said</u> it had received a Pentagon security certification allowing it to handle "controlled" government information. The same day, *The New York Times* <u>reported</u> that Google was preparing a bid for the Pentagon's most significant cloud contract yet, the <u>Joint Warfighter Cloud Capability</u>. Not long after, Google launched a <u>webpage</u> touting its contracts and support for the "critical missions of [its] military and national security personnel," and its cloud chief

Thomas Kurian was photographed, beaming, with the Army's chief information officer. In a blog post Friday, Kurian confirmed his interest in the warfighter cloud project, saying Google will serve "proudly" if selected and will adhere to its AI principles.

The Pentagon likes what it sees. Mike Brown, director of the Defense Innovation Unit, said this month that a vocal minority of protesters caught Google "flat footed" a few years ago, but management had since made clear "they want to pursue business" with the Department of Defense. "Personally I think we need Google," he said. "I'm glad to see the change."

Google declined to comment and referred WIRED to Kurian's blog post. He has led Google's cloud unit since 2019 and previously had a long tenure at Oracle, known for a sales-driven culture and comfort with US defense and intelligence agencies—the CIA was its first customer.

Some Google employees distrust their bosses' increasingly open embrace of defense and intelligence work. Around 700 signed a letter sent to Kurian and Pichai in October asking them to abandon the deal with the Israeli government, because it would contribute to surveillance and unlawful data collection on Palestinians. Some Amazon workers wrote to their own bosses; employees from both companies penned an opinion piece in the *Guardian*.

One Google employee who works in AI research and signed the letter feared that a contract with a close US ally could help Google make sales to the Pentagon and other agencies. The employee says the Israeli deal, known as Project Nimbus, was a "bellwether" for Google's ability to cement military contracts. Such contracts make it "inevitable our technology will be used to harm or surveil our own users because we're a global company," the employee says.

The Googler would prefer Google abandon military work altogether and takes little comfort from its AI principles. The Israeli finance ministry has said the contract bars companies from denying services to specific parts of the government. "Google has shown very little transparency around any of the details of these contracts or the AI principles reviews they supposedly undergo," the employee says.

"I think they just want plausible deniability."

— JACK POULSON, EX-GOOGLE EMPLOYEE AND HEAD OF TECH INQUIRY

It would be challenging for any employee protest to achieve the scale or impact of the Maven protests. Google's legendarily freewheeling internal culture has become more locked down since then, for example by tightening access to information about projects in development. Some leaders of protests against Maven and other causes at Google have complained of retaliation and left the company. The company is fighting charges from the US National Labor Relations Board that it inappropriately monitored, interrogated, or fired several workers involved in labor organizing or protesting a cloud contract with Customs and Border Protection. In the past year, prominent AI researchers Timnit Gebru and Margaret Mitchell were forced out after managers objected to a paper urging caution with software that processes text.

Google has worked with the US military since long before it sold cloud computing. The Federal Procurement Data System shows the Coast Guard bought licenses to Google Earth in 2005; the Army did the same in 2007. The Pentagon had a sympathetic ear at the top. In 2016, Eric Schmidt, formerly Google's CEO and then Alphabet's executive chair, became chair of the department's Defense Innovation Advisory Board, which promoted tech industry collaboration with the agency.

Google won the Maven contract in late 2017, just before Schmidt stepped down as Alphabet's chair. There were Googlers who disagreed with the project from the start. Early in 2018, Bloomberg later reported, a group of nine workers unhappy with Maven delayed plans to deploy a security feature called an "air gap" needed for Pentagon certifications. The project continued, but the Maven protests burst noisily into the open, prompting management to let the contract expire and announce the AI principles. Google says it has internal review processes to enforce those guidelines that have turned away some commercial business.

It now appears that while the Maven protests slowed Google down, they didn't significantly trim its ambitions in national security.
Jack Poulson, a former Googler who is now executive director of nonprofit Tech Inquiry, says the air gap and Maven protesters deserve credit for hindering the company's plans and forcing it to introduce some AI oversight. But he says the broad exceptions built into the AI principles and Google's permissive interpretation makes them into a shield used to deflect scrutiny rather than a meaningful moral compass.

"I think they just want plausible deniability," Poulson says. He quit Google in late 2018 over a project that would have adapted search technology to comply with Chinese internet censorship.

Alphabet Workers' Union, which represents a small minority of Google employees, tweeted Monday that although Google's AI principles say the technology should always be "socially beneficial," Joint Warfighter Cloud Capability would "modernize the DOD's tools of war & lead to the extrajudicial killing of people around the globe."

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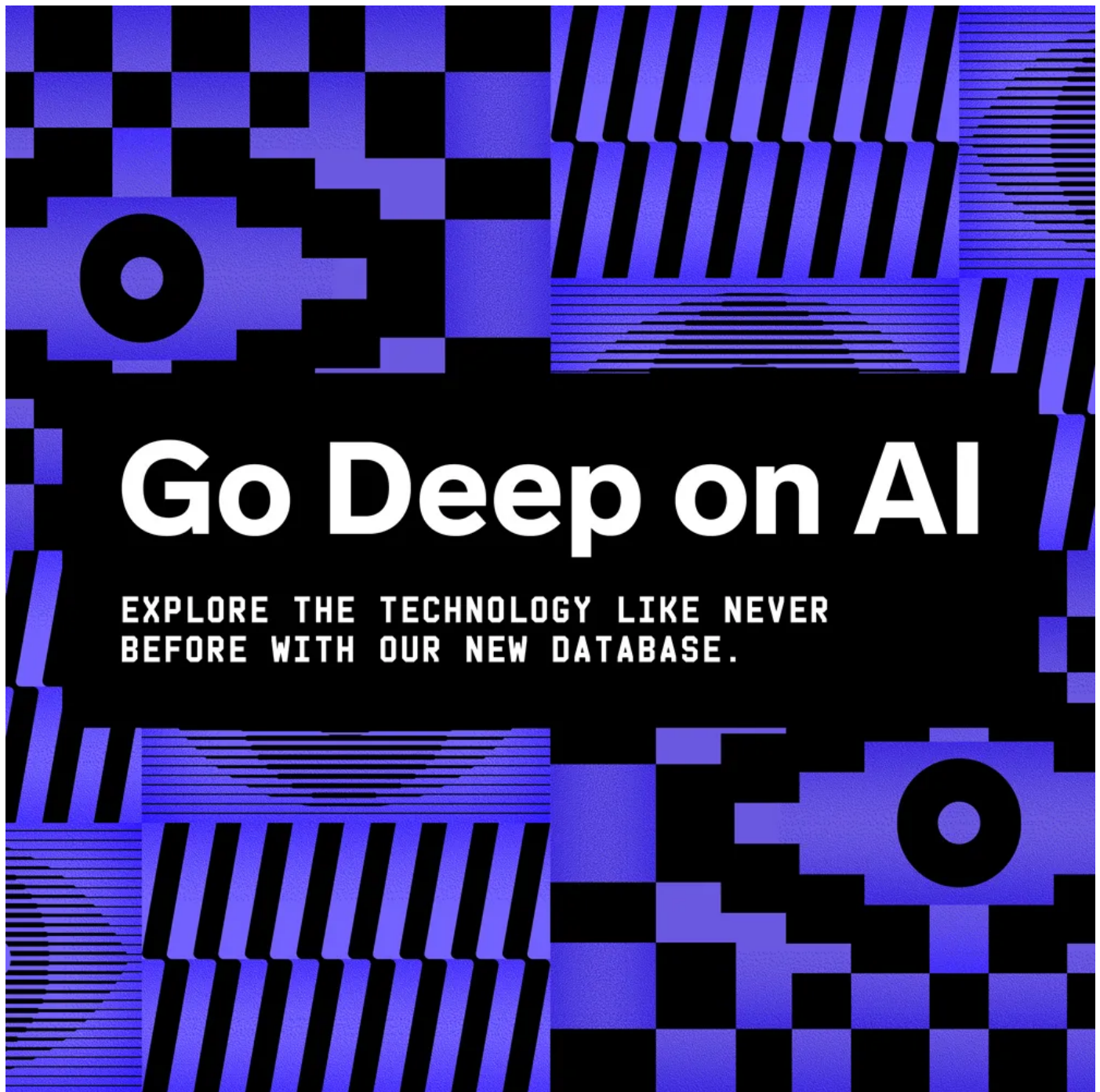
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Google remains far behind Amazon and Microsoft in competing for both commercial cloud computing deals and for government and defense contracts. Both have higher security certifications than Google, allowing them to handle classified information. And both are more openly supportive of working with the US government on national security.

Amazon has deals with many parts of the Pentagon, including one with Special Operations Command using AI to analyze media seized by US troops. Microsoft's contracts include an Army project equipping soldiers with augmented reality headsets. It drew employee protests but not at the scale of those at Google. A spokesperson for Amazon said the company's commitment to "ensuring that our warfighters and defense partners have access to the best technology at the best price is stronger than ever." Microsoft declined to comment; the company says its Office of Responsible AI reviews "sensitive" uses of its technology.

Google's chance to compete for the sweeping Joint Warfighter Cloud Capability contract came after the Pentagon in July nixed the original version, named JEDI and worth up to $10 billion, which was awarded to Microsoft. Amazon and Oracle had claimed in lawsuits the award process was unfair.

JWCC has a different format that will see work shared among multiple companies. The Pentagon has said Amazon and Microsoft are pre-qualified to bid and that it will consider inviting IBM, Oracle, and Google.

That structure could be good for Google. The company said in late 2018 that it would not bid for JEDI because it might breach its AI principles and—significantly—it lacked security certifications. Kurian said in his blog post Friday that missing certificates had been the "foremost" reason but that Google now had additional certificates. He said JWCC's format would allow Google to pick contracts within the scope of its AI principles, leaving more fraught work to others.

Jerry McGinn, executive director of the Center for Government Contracting at George Mason University, expects multi-cloud contracts to become common as federal cloud spending grows. That could help Google negotiate the constraints of its AI principles and its lack of certifications.

Modular contracts reduce the risk of legal challenges like that which sunk JEDI and add competition that improves value for the Pentagon, McGinn says.

Bloomberg Government estimated that in 2020 the federal government spent $6.6 billion on cloud contracts, with defense agencies nearly a third of that total, and that cloud spending was increasing around 10 percent a year. In 2019 the Pentagon released an AI strategy that calls for adoption of the technology in every aspect of the US military, underpinned by cloud computing.

What exactly JWCC contractors will be asked to do is not yet known. The program's name suggests some work could be directly related to armed conflict. The Pentagon's chief information officer said in July that JWCC would offer better support than JEDI to AI projects—Google's specialty—including a program developing algorithms to help commanders identify targets. The Pentagon is expected to release the formal request for proposals in coming weeks and aims to award contracts by April 2022.

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