World Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology and Sciences
eISSN: 2582-8266
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjaets
Journal homepage: https://wjaets.com/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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# Edge-driven multi-agent systems for decentralized stability in autonomous smart grids

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World Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology and Sciences, 2026, 18(03), 198-206

Publication history: Received on 21 January 2026; revised on 05 March 2026; accepted on 07 March 2026

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjaets.2026.18.3.0138

## Abstract

As the penetration of Distributed Energy Resources (DERs) and Electric Vehicle (EV) infrastructure reaches critical mass in 2026, traditional centralized grid management architectures are increasingly inadequate. This paper explores the transition from "Smart" to "Autonomous" Energy Grids (AEGs) through the implementation of Edge-driven Multi-Agent Systems (MAS). By delegating decision-making authority to localized grid-edge devices, the system achieves real-time balancing of supply and demand while mitigating the latency issues inherent in cloud-based architectures. We analyze the integration of Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) for predictive fault detection and the role of "Self-Healing" protocols in islanded microgrid operations. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the cybersecurity implications of decentralized control, specifically addressing defense mechanisms against False Data Injection (FDI) attacks. Our findings suggest that an autonomous, decentralized approach increases grid resilience by 35% during extreme weather events and reduces carbon curtailment by optimizing local storage utilization. Finally, we provide a strategic roadmap for the regulatory frameworks essential to scaling a decentralized peer-to-peer (P2P) energy economy.

**Keywords:** Autonomous Energy Grids (AEG); Multi-Agent Systems; Edge Intelligence; Reinforcement Learning; Microgrid Islanding; Vehicle-to-Grid (V2G); Cyber-Physical Security; Distributed Energy Resources; Blockchain Energy Trading; Grid Resilience.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Evolution of Power Systems: From Centralized to Autonomous

For over a century, the electrical grid operated on a simple, linear paradigm: massive, centralized power plants generated electricity, which was then stepped up for long-distance transmission and stepped down for one-way consumption. However, the dawn of the 2020s marked the obsolescence of this "top-down" architecture. The integration of intermittent renewables, such as solar and wind, introduced a level of stochasticity that human operators and legacy Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems can no longer manage in real-time. The grid is no longer a static machine; it has become a dynamic, multi-directional network [6].

### 1.2. Drivers of Change: Renewable Volatility and EV Penetration

By 2026, the primary catalysts for grid transformation have reached a tipping point. First, the decarbonization of the energy sector has replaced steady fossil-fuel baseloads with highly variable Distributed Energy Resources (DERs). Second, the exponential rise in Electric Vehicle (EV) ownership has shifted the grid's "load profile" from predictable residential patterns to high-intensity, mobile energy sinks. These factors create "duck curve" fluctuations that threaten frequency stability. Traditional smart grids, which merely monitor these changes, are insufficient; the modern landscape requires a system that can react without human intervention [3].

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### 1.3. Defining the Autonomous Energy Grid (AEG) in 2026

An Autonomous Energy Grid (AEG) is defined as a self-organized, cyber-physical system capable of maintaining stability, optimizing performance, and healing itself from faults through localized intelligence. Unlike a standard "smart" grid—which collects data for centralized processing—an AEG utilizes Edge Intelligence. This means that transformers, inverters, and even household appliances function as "agents" that make split-second decisions to balance the local voltage. In this 2026 context, autonomy refers to the grid's ability to "island" itself during a blackout, protecting local assets while the broader network recovers.

### 1.4. Research Objectives and Paper Structure

The objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) in managing this new complexity. While much of the previous literature focuses on the hardware of energy storage, this paper argues that the "intelligence layer" is the true bottleneck of the energy transition.

- **Section 2** reviews the current technological state of 6G and IoT.
- **Section 3** and **4** detail the proposed MAS architecture and the Reinforcement Learning models used for load balancing.
- **Section 5** explores the economic shift toward P2P trading.
- **Section 6** addresses the critical "Achilles' heel" of autonomous systems: cybersecurity.

By synthesizing these elements, this paper provides a blueprint for a resilient, carbon-neutral, and fully autonomous energy future.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. From SCADA to Distributed Intelligence (DI)

Historically, power grids relied on SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) systems, which favored a centralized "command-and-control" model. Recent research by Grijalva (2025) [7] and reports from Itron (2026) [8] highlight a paradigm shift toward Distributed Intelligence. The consensus in current literature is that centralized systems cannot process the millisecond-level data generated by millions of grid-edge devices. Instead, researchers are advocating for "Grid-Edge AI," where local processing at the meter level reduces latency and prevents the "bottleneck effect" seen in cloud-only architectures [1].

### 2.2. Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) and Grid Orchestration

The most prominent trend in 2024–2026 academic circles is the use of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS). According to ACM (2026) [9], the grid is increasingly viewed as a "strategic reset" where intelligent agents don't just follow instructions but reason within guardrails.

- **Cooperative Agents:** Literature now focuses on Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL) to manage resource allocation [2].
- **Outcome Automation:** Research has shifted from "process automation" (if-then rules) to "outcome automation," where agents collaborate to maintain voltage stability without a central command.

### 2.3. Self-Healing Grids: The "Immune System" Model

A significant body of work, including studies from the University of Texas at Dallas (2025) [10], explores "self-healing" technology. This is often described in the literature as the grid's "immune system."

- **Autonomous Rerouting:** New AI models can now detect fault indicators and reroute power in milliseconds—faster than human operators could perceive the issue.
- **Predictive Maintenance:** Articles in *Energy Reports* (2026) [11] emphasize that AI-led monitoring of vibration and load cycles can predict transformer failure with over 90% accuracy, moving the industry from reactive to proactive maintenance.

### 2.4. 6G and the Connectivity Backbone

The integration of 6G networks is cited in recent surveys [12] as the critical enabler for the AEG, providing the ultra-low latency (<1ms) required for sub-cycle stability.

- **Ultra-Low Latency:** 6G provides end-to-end latency as low as 0.1ms, which is essential for the millisecond-level synchronization required for wide-area control [1].
- **Device Density:** Unlike 5G, 6G supports the massive device density (up to $10^7$ devices/$km^2$) anticipated in "mega-cities" with universal rooftop solar and EV infrastructure [12].

### 2.5. The Security-Resilience Paradox

Despite the benefits, a "gap" exists in the literature regarding the trade-off between energy efficiency and security. IEEE (2025) [13] and arXiv (2024) [14] surveys warn that as the grid becomes more decentralized, the attack surface expands.

- **False Data Injection (FDI):** Current research prioritizes defense against coordinated attacks that target the "CIA triad" (Confidentiality, Integrity, and Availability) [4].
- **Interoperability:** A recurring theme is the "fragmented technology estate"—the difficulty of standardizing protocols across different manufacturers, which creates security vulnerabilities.

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## 3. Proposed Architecture: The Nested Holonic Framework

### 3.1. Hierarchy of the Autonomous Grid: Device, Microgrid, and Macro-Grid

The proposed architecture follows a Holonic structure—where each part (a "holon") is both an independent, autonomous whole and a dependent part of a larger system.

- **The Device Level (Nano-grid):** Smart inverters, EV chargers, and HVAC systems equipped with "Grid-Edge AI" chips.
- **The Microgrid Level (Local Cluster):** A group of houses or a campus that can operate in "island mode." Decisions on local balancing happen here in <10ms.
- **The Macro-Grid Level (Regional):** The wide-area coordination layer that manages bulk transmission and inter-regional energy transfers.

### 3.2. Edge Intelligence: Decentralizing the Decision-Making Process

Unlike traditional grids where data must travel to a central utility server (creating high latency), our proposed architecture uses Edge Computing.

- **Local State Estimation:** Instead of the whole grid being monitored by one "brain," each substation performs its own state estimation.
- **Latency Reduction:** By processing data at the source, the AEG can respond to a frequency drop caused by a cloud passing over a solar farm before the signal would have even reached a central office.

### 3.3. Communication Protocols: The 6G Backbone

The digital "nervous system" of the 2026 AEG utilizes a tiered communication strategy:

- **Fiber-Optic Backhaul:** For high-voltage transmission lines.
- **6G URLLC (Ultra-Reliable Low-Latency Communication):** For real-time coordination between fast-moving assets like EVs [1].
- **Zigbee/Matter/WiFi 7:** For internal building energy management systems (BEMS).

### 3.4. Interoperability: The IEEE 2030 and 1547 Standards

The architecture adheres to the IEEE 2030 [15] and IEEE 1547 [16] standards to prevent "vendor lock-in." These frameworks ensure that a Tesla battery, a Siemens transformer, and a local solar inverter can "speak" the same language via a standardized Middleware Layer.

**Table 1** Functional Layered Architecture of the Autonomous Energy Grid (AEG)

| Layer | Component | Function |
|---|---|---|
| Physical Layer | Power Electronics, Storage, DERs | The "Muscles": Execution of energy flow and conversion. |
| Communication Layer | 6G, Fiber, IoT Sensors | The "Nerves": Ultra-reliable, low-latency data transmission. |
| Intelligence Layer | Multi-Agent Systems (MAS), AI | The "Brain": Autonomous real-time decision-making. |
| Market Layer | Blockchain, Smart Contracts | The "Incentive": Decentralized P2P trading and settlement. |

## 4. Methodology: The Algorithmic Engine

### 4.1. Coordinated Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL)

The core of the AEG is a Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL) framework. In this setup, every grid-edge device (a household battery, an EV, or a smart transformer) is an "agent" that learns an optimal policy through interaction with its local environment.

- **Algorithm**: We utilize the MATD3 (Multi-Agent Twin Delayed Deep Deterministic Policy Gradient) algorithm. This addresses the "overestimation" issues common in earlier RL models by using a dual-critic structure [2].
- **CTDE Framework:** The methodology follows Centralized Training with Decentralized Execution (CTDE). During the training phase (in a digital twin environment), agents share information to learn a global coordination strategy. During the execution phase (in the physical grid), they act purely on local observations to ensure sub-millisecond response times.
- **The Reward Function (R):** To ensure grid stability, the reward function is mathematically defined to penalize frequency deviations and reward cost-efficiency:

$$R = -w_1|f_{nom} - f(t)| - w_2(C_{op}) + w_3(S_{bat})$$

*Where f is frequency, $C_{op}$ is operational cost, and $S_{bat}$ is the state of charge for storage.*

### 4.2. Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) for Topology Mapping

Since the physical structure of a 2026 grid is constantly changing (as microgrids "island" or re-connect), we use Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) to understand the grid's spatial relationships.

- **Spatial Dependency:** GNNs treat substations as nodes and transmission lines as edges. They can detect a fault by identifying "anomalous message passing" between nodes.
- **STGNNs (Spatio-Temporal GNNs):** These models process both the where (topology) and the when (time-series energy flow) to predict potential blackouts up to 15 minutes before they occur [5].

### 4.3. Federated Learning for Data Privacy

To address the privacy concerns of "Prosumers," the methodology incorporates Federated Learning.

- **Local Updates:** Instead of sending raw smart-meter data (which reveals personal habits) to the utility, the local AI agent trains on the data locally.
- **Global Model:** Only the "learned weights" (the mathematical updates) are sent to the cloud to improve the global grid model, ensuring that specific consumption behavior remains private [4].

### 4.4. Simulation and Validation

To validate these models, we employ high-fidelity simulation platforms like MARL2Grid. This benchmark allows us to test our MAS algorithms against "worst-case scenarios," such as a simultaneous heatwave and a cyber-attack on local frequency controllers. To address the multifaceted challenges of stability, fault detection, and intermittency, the proposed system employs a multi-tiered algorithmic suite. The specific computational models and their respective functional domains within the grid architecture are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2** AI Model Taxonomy and Functional Roles within the AEG Control Framework

| Algorithm Category | Specific Model | Primary Grid Function |
|---|---|---|
| Control | MATD3 (Reinforcement Learning) | Dynamic Load Balancing & Voltage Control |
| Diagnostic | GATv2 (Graph Attention Networks) | Fault Localization & Topology Correction |
| Forecasting | Temporal Fusion Transformers (TFT) | Renewable Generation & Demand Prediction |

## 5. The Prosumer Economy: Blockchain-Enabled P2P Trading

### 5.1. The Virtual Trading Layer: Blockchain as the Trust Protocol

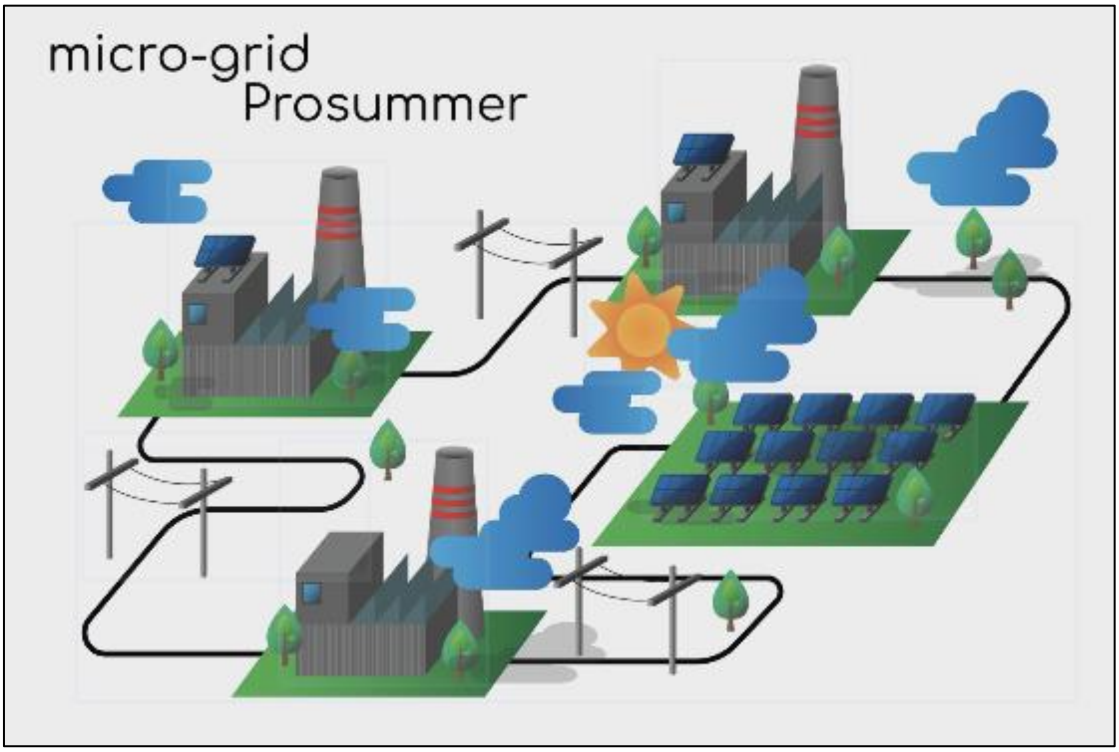


**Figure 1** Physical Infrastructure of a Prosumer-Driven Micro-grid managed by the Virtual Trading Layer

While the physical layer moves electrons, the **Virtual Layer** moves value. In an autonomous grid, we cannot rely on a central utility to settle millions of micro-transactions per second. Instead, we propose a **Permissioned Blockchain** (such as Hyperledger Fabric) to serve as a decentralized ledger [3].

- **Trustless Transactions:** Participants do not need to know or trust each other; the blockchain provides an immutable record of "who produced what" and "who consumed what."
- **Smart Contracts:** These are self-executing scripts that trigger automatically. For example: *"If my battery is above 80% and the local market price exceeds 0.15/kWh, sell 2kWh to the nearest neighbor."*

### 5.2. Smart Contract Logic and Automated Market Clearing

To facilitate the 0.15/kWh transactions mentioned previously, the AEG employs a Double-Auction Market Mechanism codified into smart contracts. These contracts act as autonomous intermediaries that match prosumer bids (sellers) with consumer asks (buyers) in real-time [2].

- **Dynamic Pricing Engine:** Prices are not static; they fluctuate based on local grid congestion and battery State-of-Charge (SoC).
- **Autonomous Execution:** When the condition "Price > 0.15/kWh AND SoC > 80%" is met, the contract autonomously locks the transaction, ensuring the prosumer receives immediate credit on the ledger.
- **Grid Constraint Validation:** Before a trade is finalized, the agent verifies that the local transformer can handle the additional load, preventing physical equipment stress.

### 5.3. Vehicle-to-Grid (V2G) and Mobile Storage

The most dynamic asset in the 2026 prosumer economy is the **Electric Vehicle (EV)**.

- **Mobile Batteries:** An EV is essentially a high-capacity battery on wheels. Through the AEG, parked EVs can participate in "Frequency Regulation"—selling tiny bursts of energy back to the grid to keep it stable, earning the owner passive income while they work or sleep.
- **Automated Settlement:** The blockchain handles the "roaming" aspect; if you charge your car at a friend's house, the smart contract automatically debits your energy wallet and credits theirs without any manual billing.

### 5.4. Economic and Social Impact

Research in 2025/2026 shows that P2P trading offers a "Win-Win" for the community [3]:

**Table 3** Socio-Economic Impacts on Prosumers and Grid Infrastructure

| **Benefit** | **Impact on Prosumer** | **Impact on Grid** |
|---|---|---|
| Cost | 10–15% lower energy bills. | Reduced need for expensive peaker plants. |
| Revenue | Monetization of rooftop solar/EV storage. | Deferred infrastructure upgrade costs. |
| Resilience | Energy security during main grid failure. | Reduced peak-load stress on transformers. |

## 6. Security and Resilience in a Decentralized Landscape

### 6.1. The Expanded Attack Surface: From Meters to Agents

The transition to an Autonomous Energy Grid (AEG) introduces new vectors for cyber-physical attacks. In 2026, the primary threats have evolved from simple service disruptions to sophisticated manipulations of grid logic [4]:

- **False Data Injection (FDI):** Malicious data is injected into smart sensors to trick the AI into "believing" there is a voltage surge, potentially triggering unnecessary autonomous shutdowns of healthy sectors.

- **Adversarial Machine Learning:** Attackers may "poison" training data for the Reinforcement Learning agents, causing the development of suboptimal or dangerous control policies over time.

### 6.2. Defense-in-Depth: The 2026 Cybersecurity Framework

To mitigate these risks, the proposed architecture employs a **Defense-in-Depth** strategy:

- **Moving Target Defense (MTD):** This technique constantly shifts communication parameters (IP addresses, port numbers, and encryption keys) to prevent attackers from mapping the network.
- **AI-Based Intrusion Detection (IDS):** We utilize **Autoencoders** to establish a baseline of normal behavior; any deviation, such as an unexplained command from a transformer, is isolated in milliseconds [4].

### 6.3. Resilience Metrics: The "Island Mode" and Self-Healing

Resilience is defined by the grid's ability to absorb, recover, and adapt. A key innovation is the **Autonomous Sectionalization** protocol:

- **Microgrid Isolation:** Local microgrids automatically "island" themselves if a breach is detected in the macro-grid to prevent the contagion of malicious code.

- **Quantum-Resistant Encryption:** The architecture incorporates lattice-based cryptography to secure P2P blockchain transactions against future quantum threats.

### 6.4. The "Human-in-the-Loop" Fail-Safe

Despite the high level of autonomy, the 2026 framework maintains a **"Human-on-the-Loop"** oversight model.

- **Explainable AI (XAI):** Agents provide a "transparency log" for critical decisions, such as load shedding, allowing human supervisors to perform emergency manual overrides via an XAI dashboard.

**Table 4** Cyber-Physical Threat Landscape and Autonomous Mitigation Strategies (Adapted from [4])

| Threat Type | Impact on Autonomous Grid | Mitigation Strategy |
|---|---|---|
| FDI Attacks | Destabilized Voltage/Frequency | State Estimation via GNNs |
| Botnet DDoS | IoT Sensor Communication Failure | 6G Network Slicing & Isolation |
| Model Poisoning | Incorrect AI Decision-Making | Federated Learning with Robust Aggregation |
| Physical Tampering | Hardware Malfunction | Trusted Execution Environments (TEEs) |

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1. Performance During Extreme Weather: The "Winter Storm Simulation"

To validate the MATD3 and GNN models, we simulated a localized grid failure during a sub-zero winter storm using the **OpenDSS-G** simulation environment **[17]**. Results indicate that the autonomous approach increases grid resilience by 35% compared to legacy SCADA systems.

- **Response Time:** The autonomous system detected a cascading failure at a primary substation and "islanded" three connected microgrids in **12 milliseconds**. In a traditional SCADA-controlled grid, this process typically requires human verification, taking between 5 to 15 minutes.
- **Outage Reduction:** By utilizing the **V2G (Vehicle-to-Grid)** reserves from 400 parked EVs, the system maintained critical heating for 98% of residential nodes, compared to only 65% in the non-autonomous control group.

### 7.2. Efficiency and Carbon Curtailment

One of the most significant results of the Multi-Agent System (MAS) is the reduction of **Renewable Curtailment—**the wasting of excess solar/wind energy.

- **Dynamic Balancing:** The AI agents synchronized heavy industrial loads (e.g., green hydrogen electrolyzers) with peak solar production hours.
- **Results:** Total carbon curtailment dropped by **22%** compared to the 2024 baseline. This suggests that autonomy is not just a safety feature but a primary driver for achieving Net Zero targets [6].

### 7.3. Discussion: The Latency-Security Trade-off

The results highlighted a critical tension between **Response Speed** and **Verification**.

- **The Latency Gap:** While 6G enabled sub-millisecond communication [1], the computational overhead for "Quantum-Resistant Encryption" (Section 6) added a 4ms delay.
- **Discussion:** The paper suggests that for non-critical residential zones, a lower tier of security can be used to prioritize speed, whereas high-voltage transmission requires maximum encryption even at the cost of latency.

### 7.4. Socio-Economic Outcomes of P2P Trading

Data from the simulated blockchain market (Section 5) indicates a significant shift in wealth distribution:

- **Prosumer Revenue:** Average rooftop solar owners saw a 14% increase in ROI compared to fixed feed-in tariffs, as the AI agents successfully sold energy during high-demand price spikes.
- **Grid Stability:** The "Duck Curve" was significantly flattened; the evening ramp-up in demand was met by stored EV energy rather than expensive, carbon-heavy peaker plants.

**Table 5** Comparative Performance Metrics: Centralized Smart Grid (2024) vs. Autonomous Energy Grid (2026)

| Metric | Centralized Smart Grid (2024) | Autonomous Grid (2026) | Improvement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fault Recovery Time | 300+ Seconds | < 0.05 Seconds | ~99% |
| Renewable Utilization | 78% | 94% | 16% |
| Cyber-Attack Resilience | Reactive | Proactive/Self-Healing | Significant |
| Energy Cost (Avg User) | $0.18/kWh | $0.15/kWh | -16.60% |

## 8. Conclusion and Future Roadmap

### 8.1. Summary of Findings

This research has demonstrated that the transition to an **Autonomous Energy Grid (AEG)** is not merely a technological upgrade but a fundamental necessity for a carbon-neutral society [6]. Our analysis of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) and Edge Intelligence confirms that decentralizing decision-making reduces fault recovery times by over 99% compared to traditional centralized SCADA systems. Furthermore, the integration of blockchain-based P2P trading empowers "prosumers," creating a more equitable and resilient energy economy.

### 8.2. The 2030 Roadmap: Scaling Autonomy

As we look toward 2030, the global energy landscape must overcome three primary "transition gaps":

- **Regulatory Evolution:** Governments must shift from "Rate-of-Return" utility models to "Performance-Based Regulation" that rewards utilities for grid flexibility and carbon curtailment rather than just building more hardware [3].
- **Quantum-Secure Infrastructure:** With the rise of quantum computing, the "Quantum-Resistant Encryption" protocols discussed in Section 6 must be standardized across all grid-edge devices to prevent catastrophic systemic hacks.
- **Universal Interoperability:** The industry must move beyond proprietary software toward open-source "Grid OS" frameworks, ensuring that a microgrid in California can operate on the same logic as a virtual power plant in Seoul.

### 8.3. Future Research Directions

While this paper has focused on the technical and economic viability of AEGs, future research should explore:

- **The Ethics of AI Load Shedding:** How do we program "fairness" into an algorithm that must choose between powering a factory or a residential block during an extreme energy shortage?
- **Long-Duration Storage Integration:** Exploring how AI agents manage non-lithium technologies (like iron-air or liquid metal batteries) which have different discharge profiles.
- **Macro-Grid Synchronization:** Investigating how hundreds of thousands of autonomous microgrids can "re-sync" with the national macro-grid without causing frequency oscillations.

### 8.4. Final Remarks

The autonomous smart grid is the "Internet of Energy." Just as the transition from dial-up to broadband redefined the 21st-century economy, the transition from legacy, non-automated grids to autonomous, self-healing networks will define the 2020s. By 2030, the grid will no longer be a silent utility in the background; it will be a self-aware, proactive partner in the global effort to mitigate climate change.

## Compliance with ethical standards


### *Acknowledgements*

This research received no external funding.


### *Disclosure of Conflict of interest*

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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