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Intelligent Nuclear Energy Systems: AI-Based Monitoring, Safety Assessment and Predictive Maintenance

Colby Moorberg

Associate Professor Kansas State University

Abstract

The nuclear energy sector is increasingly exploring artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and advanced data analytics to improve plant monitoring, safety assessment, equipment reliability and predictive maintenance. Nuclear facilities generate large volumes of heterogeneous operational data from sensors, control systems, inspections and maintenance records, creating opportunities for data-driven approaches to complement established physics-based models and engineering practices. This paper examines the emerging role of AI in intelligent nuclear energy systems, focusing on real-time condition monitoring, anomaly detection, fault diagnosis, risk-informed safety assessment and predictive maintenance. Particular attention is given to machine-learning models, digital twins, sensor fusion, explainable AI, edge computing and hybrid physics-informed approaches. A conceptual framework is proposed in which plant data are integrated with physical models and AI analytics to identify abnormal behaviour, estimate equipment health and support maintenance decisions. The paper also considers challenges associated with data scarcity, rare-event prediction, model validation, uncertainty quantification, cybersecurity, regulatory acceptance and the consequences of AI failure in safety-critical environments. The analysis suggests that AI should primarily function as a decision-support and monitoring technology rather than an uncontrolled replacement for established nuclear safety systems. Hybrid architectures that combine validated physical models, deterministic safety principles and carefully verified AI models may provide the most credible pathway toward intelligent nuclear operations. Future research should focus on trustworthy AI, human–machine collaboration, explainability, robust validation, digital-twin development and secure deployment.

Keywords: Nuclear Energy, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Nuclear Safety, Predictive Maintenance, Condition Monitoring, Digital Twin, Fault Diagnosis, Explainable AI, Nuclear Power Plants

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1. Introduction

Nuclear power plants are among the most complex engineered systems in the world.
Their operation requires continuous monitoring of:

- Reactor conditions.
- Cooling systems.
- Turbine systems.
- Pumps.
- Valves.
- Steam systems.
- Electrical equipment.
- Radiation levels.
- Structural components.

Safety depends on the ability to identify abnormal conditions early and maintain critical systems within validated operating limits.
AI offers new capabilities for processing large volumes of plant data and identifying patterns that may be difficult to detect using conventional monitoring approaches.
The emerging concept is:

Sense → Analyse → Predict → Assess → Act

However, nuclear applications require substantially greater assurance than ordinary industrial AI systems because errors can have serious consequences.

2. Intelligent Nuclear Energy Systems

An intelligent nuclear energy system can be conceptualised as a conventional nuclear facility enhanced by:

- Advanced sensors.
- Data infrastructure.
- AI analytics.
- Digital twins.
- Predictive maintenance.
- Decision-support systems.
- Cybersecurity mechanisms.

The objective is not simply automation.
It is to improve:

Safety + Reliability + Availability + Maintenance Efficiency + Operational Awareness

3. Nuclear Plant Data

Modern nuclear facilities can generate extensive information from:

- Temperature sensors.
- Pressure sensors.

- Flow meters.
- Vibration sensors.
- Radiation monitors.
- Electrical measurements.
- Valve-position indicators.
- Maintenance records.
- Inspection data.

AI systems can integrate these heterogeneous sources.

4. AI-Based Condition Monitoring

Condition monitoring evaluates the health of equipment during operation.
AI can analyse sensor patterns to identify deviations from normal behaviour.
A conceptual process is:

Sensor Data
↓
Feature Extraction
↓
AI Model
↓
Equipment Health Assessment
↓
Maintenance Recommendation

5. Anomaly Detection

Many equipment failures develop gradually.
Before failure, equipment may exhibit changes in:

- Vibration.
- Temperature.
- Pressure.
- Acoustic characteristics.
- Electrical behaviour.

Anomaly-detection algorithms can identify deviations from established operating patterns.

6. Machine Learning for Fault Diagnosis

AI models can potentially classify equipment conditions such as:

- Normal operation.
- Sensor malfunction.
- Pump degradation.
- Valve abnormality.
- Cooling-system problems.

- Turbine anomalies.

The objective is to identify the most likely source of abnormal behaviour.

7. Predictive Maintenance

Traditional maintenance can be based on:

- Fixed schedules.
- Operating hours.
- Periodic inspections.

Predictive maintenance instead estimates equipment condition continuously.

The general principle is:

Current Condition

•

Historical Behaviour

•

Operating Context

↓

Predicted Failure Risk

This can support maintenance planning.

8. Remaining Useful Life

One important predictive-maintenance objective is estimating remaining useful life (RUL).

For example:

Equipment Health

↓

Degradation Model

↓

Estimated Remaining Life

↓

Maintenance Planning

RUL predictions should be accompanied by uncertainty estimates rather than treated as exact dates.

9. Pump Monitoring

Pumps are critical components in many nuclear systems.

AI can analyse:

- Vibration.
- Flow.
- Pressure.

- Temperature.
- Motor current.

Changes in these signals may indicate mechanical degradation or abnormal operating conditions.

10. Valve Monitoring

Valves play important roles in controlling fluid flow.

AI-based monitoring can potentially identify:

- Abnormal response.
- Excessive actuation time.
- Mechanical degradation.
- Leakage-related signatures.

Such systems can complement established inspection and testing programmes.

11. Turbine Monitoring

Turbine systems contain rotating components operating under demanding conditions.

Machine-learning systems can analyse:

- Vibration.
- Rotational speed.
- Temperature.
- Pressure.
- Power output.

Anomalous patterns may provide early warning of developing equipment problems.

12. Heat Exchanger Monitoring

Heat exchangers are important for thermal management.

Performance degradation may result from:

- Fouling.
- Corrosion.
- Reduced heat-transfer efficiency.
- Flow abnormalities.

AI can compare operational performance with expected behaviour.

13. Reactor Monitoring

AI can potentially support monitoring of reactor-related variables.

Potential applications include:

- Pattern recognition.
- Sensor validation.
- Anomaly detection.
- Operational forecasting.

Because reactor protection functions are safety-critical, AI-based monitoring must be carefully separated from independently required protection systems unless specifically qualified and approved.

14. Sensor Fault Detection

Not every abnormal sensor signal represents an actual plant problem.
A sensor itself may fail.
AI-based sensor validation can compare:

Sensor A

•

Sensor B

•

Physical Model

↓

Consistency Assessment

This can help distinguish equipment abnormalities from instrumentation faults.

15. Sensor Fusion

Nuclear plants contain multiple measurement systems.
Sensor fusion combines different observations to create a more reliable assessment.
For example:

Temperature + Pressure + Flow + Vibration

↓

Integrated Equipment State

Sensor fusion can improve situational awareness.

16. Physics-Informed AI

Purely data-driven AI may be problematic when training data are limited.
Nuclear systems have well-established physical relationships.
Physics-informed approaches can combine:

Physical Laws

•

Operational Data

•

Machine Learning

This can improve plausibility and reduce reliance on purely empirical correlations.

17. Hybrid Digital Models

A hybrid model may consist of:

Physics-Based Simulation

•

Machine-Learning Correction

The physics model captures known behaviour, while AI learns patterns that are difficult to represent analytically.

18. Digital Twins

Digital twins are computational representations of physical assets or systems.

A nuclear digital twin could integrate:

- Plant geometry.
- Equipment models.
- Sensor measurements.
- Historical operating data.
- Maintenance information.

The digital twin could support condition assessment and predictive analysis.

19. Digital-Twin Architecture

A conceptual architecture is:

Physical Nuclear Plant

↓

Sensors + Operational Data

↓

Data Platform

↓

Digital Twin

↓

AI Analytics

↓

Health / Risk Assessment

↓

Human Decision Support

20. Safety Assessment

Nuclear safety traditionally relies heavily on deterministic engineering analysis and probabilistic safety assessment.

AI can potentially provide additional analytical capabilities.

Applications include:

- Anomaly identification.
- Risk estimation.
- Scenario analysis.

- Accident progression modelling.
- Safety-significant equipment monitoring.

AI outputs must remain subject to appropriate engineering and regulatory controls.

21. Probabilistic Risk Assessment

Probabilistic Risk Assessment evaluates combinations of:

- Initiating events.
- Equipment failures.
- System responses.
- Consequences.

AI could assist in analysing large scenario spaces and identifying patterns within complex datasets.

22. Accident Scenario Analysis

AI can support rapid analysis of hypothetical scenarios.

For example:

Initiating Condition

↓

System Response

↓

AI-Assisted Prediction

↓

Potential Outcome

Such tools can complement detailed physics-based simulations.

23. Early Warning Systems

One potential application is early warning.

A system could continuously assess plant behaviour and flag unusual combinations of measurements.

The output could be:

- Normal.
- Advisory.
- Investigation required.
- High-priority anomaly.

The final interpretation should remain within established operational procedures.

24. Explainable AI

Explainability is particularly important in nuclear applications.

Operators need to understand why an AI system produced a warning.

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Useful explanations could identify:

- Contributing sensors.
- Relevant trends.
- Equipment condition indicators.
- Comparison with historical behaviour.
- Model confidence.

25. Human–AI Collaboration

AI should support experienced nuclear operators rather than obscure their decision-making.
An effective architecture is:

AI Detection
↓
Explanation
↓
Operator Review
↓
Engineering Assessment
↓
Action under Approved Procedures

This maintains human oversight.

26. Uncertainty Quantification

AI predictions should account for uncertainty.
For example, an equipment-health model might report:

Predicted degradation: High
Confidence: Moderate
rather than simply declaring:
Failure will occur in 12 days.
Uncertainty-aware systems are particularly important for safety-critical applications.

27. Rare Events

Nuclear accidents and major equipment failures are fortunately rare.
This creates a major machine-learning challenge.
A model cannot easily learn failure behaviour from large numbers of real-world failures because such events are uncommon.
Alternative data sources may include:

- Simulations.
- Historical incidents.

- Component test data.
- Expert-generated scenarios.

28. Synthetic Data

High-fidelity simulation can generate additional training examples.
The workflow could be:

Physics Simulation
↓
Synthetic Operational Data
↓
AI Training
↓
Model Validation
↓
Limited Real-World Data

However, synthetic data must be carefully validated to ensure that models do not learn unrealistic simulation artefacts.

29. Transfer Learning

A model trained on one system may potentially be adapted to another.
For example:

Laboratory / Simulator Data
↓
Pretrained Model
↓
Plant-Specific Data
↓
Adapted Model

This may reduce data requirements.

30. Edge AI

Some monitoring applications require low latency.
Edge computing can process data close to the equipment.
A conceptual architecture is:

Sensor
↓
Local Processing
↓
AI Detection

↓
Alert

This reduces dependence on remote communication.

31. Cybersecurity

Connected AI systems introduce cybersecurity risks.
Potential threats include:

- Data manipulation.
- Model manipulation.
- Sensor spoofing.
- Malware.
- Unauthorised access.

Cybersecurity must therefore be integrated into intelligent nuclear architectures.

32. Adversarial and Data Integrity Risks

AI systems can be sensitive to abnormal or manipulated data.
A malicious actor could potentially attempt to influence:

- Sensor inputs.
- Training data.
- Model parameters.
- Decision-support outputs.

Secure data pipelines and robust validation are therefore essential.

33. AI Model Validation

Before deployment, models should undergo extensive testing.
Validation should consider:

- Normal operating conditions.
- Transient conditions.
- Sensor faults.
- Equipment degradation.
- Unseen conditions.
- Model uncertainty.

34. Verification and Validation

AI introduces different verification challenges from conventional deterministic software.
Important questions include:

- Is the training data representative?
- Does the model generalise?
- Can outputs be reproduced?

- How does the model behave outside its training distribution?
- What happens when inputs are missing?

These questions must be addressed systematically.

35. Predictive Maintenance Architecture

A predictive-maintenance system can include:

Step 1

Collect equipment data.

Step 2

Clean and validate measurements.

Step 3

Extract health indicators.

Step 4

Predict degradation.

Step 5

Estimate uncertainty.

Step 6

Prioritise maintenance.

Step 7

Record maintenance outcomes.

Step 8

Update the model under controlled procedures.

36. Maintenance Prioritisation

Not all equipment requires the same level of attention.
AI can support risk-based prioritisation using:

Failure Probability

•

Safety Importance

•

Operational Impact

•

Maintenance Cost

This can produce a prioritised maintenance schedule.

37. Cost Optimisation

Predictive maintenance can potentially reduce:

- Unnecessary inspections.
- Unplanned outages.
- Replacement of healthy components.
- Maintenance-related downtime.

However, cost optimisation must never override safety requirements.

38. Workforce Support

AI can also support nuclear engineers and technicians by providing:

- Automated trend analysis.
- Equipment histories.
- Inspection prioritisation.
- Maintenance recommendations.
- Relevant technical information.

This can reduce information overload.

39. Knowledge Management

Nuclear plants accumulate decades of engineering knowledge.
AI can potentially connect:

- Maintenance records.
- Inspection reports.
- Equipment histories.
- Operating data.
- Technical documentation.

This creates a searchable institutional knowledge base.

40. Natural-Language Interfaces

AI-based interfaces could allow engineers to query plant information using natural language.
For example:
"Show recent abnormal vibration patterns for this pump."
The system could retrieve relevant historical measurements and maintenance records.
Such interfaces must still enforce access controls and provide traceable sources.

41. Autonomous Inspection

Robotics combined with AI can support inspection in difficult environments.

Applications may include:

- Visual inspection.
- Radiation-area monitoring.
- Pipe inspection.
- Structural assessment.

Robotic systems can reduce human exposure to hazardous environments.

42. Computer Vision

AI-based computer vision can analyse images and videos for:

- Corrosion.
- Cracks.
- Surface degradation.
- Component anomalies.

The results can support, but not automatically replace, qualified inspection processes.

43. Predictive Corrosion Monitoring

Corrosion is a long-term degradation mechanism.

AI can integrate:

- Temperature.
- Chemistry.
- Flow conditions.
- Inspection history.
- Material characteristics.

to estimate corrosion trends.

44. Advanced Materials and AI Monitoring

New reactor technologies may introduce new materials and operating conditions.

AI can potentially support:

- Material degradation monitoring.
- Thermal analysis.
- Structural health assessment.
- Lifetime prediction.

45. Proposed Intelligent Nuclear Energy Framework

A comprehensive architecture can contain seven layers:

Layer 1 — Physical Plant

Reactor, cooling, turbine and support systems.

Layer 2 — Sensing
Operational and inspection data.

Layer 3 — Data Infrastructure
Secure data acquisition and storage.

Layer 4 — AI Analytics
Anomaly detection and prediction.

Layer 5 — Physics-Based Models
Validated engineering and simulation models.

Layer 6 — Decision Support
Risk and maintenance recommendations.

Layer 7 — Human Oversight
Operators and engineers make decisions within approved procedures.

46. Conceptual Architecture

Nuclear Plant
↓
Sensors + Inspection Systems
↓
Secure Data Layer
↓
Physics Models + AI
↓
Anomaly / Health / Risk Assessment
↓
Explainable Decision Support
↓
Operator / Engineer
↓
Approved Operational or Maintenance Action
↓
Feedback Data

47. Performance Metrics

Metric	Purpose
Detection accuracy	Identifying abnormal conditions
False-alarm rate	Measuring unnecessary warnings
Miss rate	Identifying undetected abnormalities
Prediction error	Evaluating degradation forecasts
RUL error	Evaluating remaining-life estimates
Calibration	Assessing confidence reliability
Robustness	Performance under unusual conditions
Explainability	Understanding AI outputs
Availability	System operational reliability

48. Research Questions

1. How can AI improve nuclear equipment condition monitoring?
2. Which machine-learning approaches are most suitable for rare-event prediction?
3. How can physics-based models and AI be integrated safely?
4. Can digital twins improve predictive maintenance?
5. How can AI detect sensor failures without creating unnecessary alarms?
6. What forms of explainability are most useful to nuclear operators?
7. How can uncertainty be incorporated into AI-based safety assessment?
8. How can synthetic data support training while avoiding simulation bias?
9. What cybersecurity architecture is appropriate for AI-enabled nuclear systems?
10. How should AI models be verified and validated before deployment in safety-related applications?

49. Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on:

- Physics-informed machine learning.
- AI-enabled digital twins.
- Explainable AI.
- Uncertainty-aware prediction.
- Autonomous inspection robotics.
- AI-assisted probabilistic risk assessment.
- Advanced anomaly detection.
- Predictive materials degradation.
- Secure edge AI.

- Human–AI decision support.
- Automated knowledge management.

50. Discussion

AI has significant potential to improve the intelligence and efficiency of nuclear energy systems, particularly in areas where large quantities of operational data must be continuously analysed.

However, nuclear applications differ fundamentally from many conventional AI applications.

A recommendation system can tolerate occasional incorrect predictions.

A safety-critical nuclear system cannot rely on an AI model simply because it performs well on a test dataset.

Therefore, the most credible approach is likely to be hybrid intelligence.

This means combining:

Physics + Engineering Rules + AI + Human Expertise

rather than relying exclusively on machine learning.

51. AI as Decision Support

The safest near-term applications are likely to involve:

- Monitoring.
- Diagnostics.
- Predictive maintenance.
- Inspection support.
- Data analysis.
- Operator decision support.

These applications can provide substantial benefits while retaining established safety barriers and human oversight.

52. Long-Term Intelligent Nuclear Systems

Future nuclear facilities may increasingly resemble cyber-physical systems in which:

Sensors

continuously monitor equipment,

AI

interprets operational patterns,

Digital Twins

simulate system behaviour,

Predictive Models
estimate future conditions,
and

Engineers
make informed decisions using validated information.

53. Conclusion

Intelligent nuclear energy systems represent an emerging convergence of nuclear engineering, artificial intelligence, advanced sensing, digital twins and predictive maintenance. AI can provide valuable capabilities for analysing complex operational data, identifying anomalies, diagnosing equipment conditions and forecasting degradation.

Predictive maintenance is particularly promising because it can help move maintenance programmes from purely time-based approaches toward condition- and risk-informed strategies. Digital twins can further integrate real-time measurements with physics-based representations of plant systems, creating a more comprehensive understanding of equipment and system behaviour.

Nevertheless, nuclear applications demand exceptionally high levels of reliability, transparency and assurance. Challenges involving rare-event data, uncertainty, model validation, cybersecurity, explainability and regulatory acceptance cannot be treated as secondary issues.

The most promising pathway is therefore a hybrid AI architecture combining validated physical models, deterministic engineering principles, machine learning, secure data infrastructure and human expertise.

The future nuclear plant may consequently be characterised not by fully autonomous AI control, but by intelligent, explainable and continuously monitored decision-support systems that enhance the ability of operators and engineers to maintain safe, reliable and efficient nuclear energy production.

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