

WATCHING BRIEF 19-8: LETHAL AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS (UPDATE)

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

August 2019

The emergence of new technology in weapons systems raises many issues (see Watching Brief 19-2). The current integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is particularly concerning with lethal autonomous weapons systems without human control on the horizon.

This Brief (prepared in consultation with Safeguard) outlines the current trends and how Australian Friends might respond.

Background

Fully autonomous weapons, also referred to as Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) or ‘killer robots’ are weapons which can independently select targets and employ the use of force without any human control. These weapons which utilize artificial intelligence (AI) and delegate the decision over life to machines are in development in countries including US, Russia, China, South Korea and Israel. AI is already being integrated into weapons and other defense technologies. With fully autonomous weapons on the horizon, the international community is concerned by the implications of these weapons. These weapons raise unprecedented moral, ethical, legal and security concerns and both government and civil society is mobilized on the issue.

The increasing autonomy being incorporated into defense systems has some positive applications such as the ability to clear mine-fields or deliver aid relief. However, losing human control over the critical functions of selecting and choosing to harm human targets crosses a red line. There is a need for decisive and urgent action to establish legal clarity around human control in weaponry particularly as fully autonomous weapons will not comply with existing standards of international humanitarian law in key areas such as distinction, proportionality and accountability. The ICRC has stated “weapons beyond human control are unlawful by their very nature”.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, made the following statement on 11 November 2018 regarding fully autonomous weapons: “I call on states to ban these weapons that are politically unacceptable and morally revolting”. Under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), the UN has convened a forum called the Group of Government Experts (GGE) to examine the issues involved.

The GGE and International Progress

Progress at the CCW has been very constrained due to the need for consensus. The GGE met in March and August of 2019, and the draft report concludes a further two years of discussions will take place within the GGE for a duration of 10-20 days yet to be determined. There is a need for a new legal instrument. 29 countries have explicitly called for a ban, in addition to the Non-Aligned Movement of 120 countries. Only a small handful of countries oppose the development of a new legal framework to address the concerns of these weapons. Fully autonomous weapons and autonomous weapons systems broadly have featured in the recent meetings of the United Nations General Assembly First Committee in October. There is growing commitment to multilateral approaches in addressing these weapons but decisive action is required to establish legal clarity around the requirements of human control in the selecting and use of lethal force.

Australia

At the GGE meeting in March, Australia was among a group of only 6 states who did not believe any kind of new legal instrument should be pursued; and in August they objected to the GGE developing frameworks within its next two year life span. Australia’s longstanding position is that it is ‘premature to support a ban’, that a universal definition is absent, and it may constrain development of helpful technologies using AI for defence purposes. In 2017, an open letter signed by 122 AI Experts to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull urged the government to support a process to create an international ban and to take a position of leadership. However, the response from Foreign Minister Julie Bishop simply reiterated the official position.

Also in 2017, Trusted Autonomous Systems (TAS) was launched. It received \$50million of funding for its first seven years as Australia’s first Defence Cooperative Research Centre (CRC). Defence CRCs link the Defence Department with both industry and academia. In March this year, TAS initiated research that attempts to embed ethics into killer robots. AI experts worldwide called the endeavour futile on both technical and moral grounds. This research project, in partnership with University of NSW (Canberra) received \$5 million as reported by Jake Evans (*ABC News* 1 March 2019).

In spite of constant assertions that Australia upholds its obligations under international law and the ICRC’s comments that weapons beyond human control are ‘unlawful by their very nature’, Chief of Defence Forces General Angus J Campbell stated ‘there is not going to be one answer in the future with regards to where is the human in this system.’ Australia is skirting around the crux of the issue and failing to take decisive action.

Action

Join the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots - a civil society movement working to pre-emptively ban fully autonomous weapons. It is a rapidly growing coalition of 130 non-governmental organizations in 60 countries, which Australia joined at the beginning of this

year. Pledges have been signed by researchers and developers in technical fields, as well as by company programmes stating they will not aid the development of these weapons.

In Australia, presently the campaign is managed by SafeGround Inc and National Coordinator Matilda Byrne. IPAN and WILPF are also official partners and we have growing engagement with the peace network. Campaign event and activities on the following webpage:

<https://safeground.org.au/what-we-do/campaign-to-stop-killer-robots/>

Write to MPs and Senators to alert them to your concerns, and urge Australia to change its position.

Canberra

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