Fully autonomous weapons ("killer robots")
Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Background
States spurred on by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots have explored the parameters of ethical, legal, operational, proliferation, technical, and other challenges raised by permitting machines to take human life on the battlefield. The six meetings on this concern held at the United Nations in Geneva since May 2014 have seen strong convergence on the need to retain some form of human control over weapons systems and the use of force.

Current context
Yet states at the last Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) meeting on lethal autonomous weapons systems in August 2018 could not agree how to ensure this moral line is never crossed. All they could manage to propose was to continue deliberations next year, setting aside just two weeks for this purpose.

CCW states parties were tasked with making a recommendation on future work for the CCW’s annual meeting to decide on. Yet proposals to commence negotiating a legally binding instrument and other measures were rejected due to the consensus decision-making rule used by states at the CCW. Just a few or even a single state can block an agreement sought by a majority.

During the August meeting, most states proposed commencing negotiations in 2019 on a new treaty. Many of the 26 states calling for a preemptive ban on the development and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems reiterated their strong preference for that goal during the CCW meeting, including Colombia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Panama as well as a group of African states and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) group of states. Austria, Brazil, and Chile recommended a new CCW mandate “to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to ensure meaningful human control over the critical functions” of weapons systems.

Some states suggested the CCW focus on future deliberations on other measures, such as a non-legally binding political declaration proposed by France and Germany to outline principles such as the necessity of human control in the use of force and the importance of human accountability. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is concerned this declaration does not go far enough to protect humanity from these weapons. Measures that fall short of new international law will be insufficient to prevent the world from going down the dangerous path of developing fully autonomous weapons.

A handful of states said that the talks on fully autonomous weapons should continue, but
strongly opposed any work aimed at a new treaty, political declaration, or other new measures to address the dangers posed by these weapons. Disappointingly, Australia, Israel, Russia, South Korea, and the United States repeatedly expressed their desire to explore potential “advantages” or “benefits” to developing and using lethal autonomous weapons systems.

States will take their final decision on future work at the CCW’s annual meeting on 23 November 2018. The Campaign is dismayed that the only recommended action states could manage to agree on was to continue with their current mandate of exploring “options” for future work. The longer it takes states to negotiate a ban treaty, the more calls for new international law will multiply. For example, the Arms Control Association on 7 September issued its first substantive comment on the risks posed by lethal autonomous weapons systems. It found that “current policies and practices are clearly insufficient to address the dangers posed” and called on “responsible governments to act” to “promptly pursue multilateral negotiations on a legally-binding instrument to ensure meaningful human control over weapons of war and decisions to employ the lethal use of force.”

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:
- Articulate their national policy on fully autonomous weapons, including their position on the call to preemptively ban development, production, and use; and
- Elaborate their desired outcome for the CCW deliberations, including recommended mandate of work in 2019.

Beyond First Committee, states should:
- Seek agreement at the CCW’s annual meeting on 23 November on a revised mandate for to negotiate a new ban protocol on lethal autonomous weapons systems in 2019; and
- Develop formal national policies and national legislation that explicitly ban these weapons and retains meaningful human control over the use of force.

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Photo: Clare Conboy, August 2018