CAMPAGNE CONTRE
LES ROBOTS TUEURS

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Observatoire des armements

Why France Must Oppose the Development of Killer Robots

English Report Summary

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Fully autonomous weapons or killer robots are systems that, once activated, can choose and attack a target without human control. Although fully autonomous systems have not yet been developed, considering advances in robotics and artificial intelligence, they could appear within a few years.

Since 2013, the United Nations has been addressing this issue through the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). After six meetings on the subject, 26 States[1] called for a ban on killer robots, and a majority is ready to negotiate a treaty. Only a handful of countries, including Russia and the United States, are still resisting.

Allowing a robot to kill a human being is a moral red line, a threat to international law and human rights, and a danger to international security. France must therefore support the adoption of an international treaty for a preventive ban on killer robots.

Killer robots: a moral, legal and international security risk

Delegating life or death decisions to a machine or algorithm represents a moral red line, incompatible with the Martens clause[2], which requires that emerging technologies be judged on the basis of the "laws of humanity" and the "requirements of public conscience" when they are not already covered by the provisions of other treaties. To grant a choice of life or death over a human being to a machine without

[1] Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China (which has only called for a ban on the use of such weapons), Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Ecuador, Egypt, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, Holy See, Iraq, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Palestinian State, Uganda, Venezuela, Zimbabwe

[2] The Martens clause is a provision of the Geneva Conventions that applies to areas that are not specifically regulated by international law

moral judgment and compassion is contrary to the principle of humanity and the requirements of public conscience.

Autonomous weapons systems cannot respect the main principles of international humanitarian law (IHL), in particular the principles of proportionality, distinction and precaution. Compliance with these principles requires to fully understand and be able to adapt to complex and changing situations, which requires the analytical skills of a human brain, which no machine can and will be able to achieve in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the use of killer robots would not establish clear responsibility for crime.

There is a high and systematic risk that these killer robots will attack the wrong people: computer programs are based on imperfect data and robots would not have the ability to doubt or become aware of the risk of error.

Killer robots may facilitate the outbreak of large-scale conflicts. They would require fewer human resources, considerably lowering the cost of entering a war. The damage caused by killer robots could be of an inordinate magnitude: machines are tireless, they have the ability to act on a very large scale and at high speed, and do not have the ability to assess the ethics of an order. Easy to produce once the programs have been designed, killer robots could quickly proliferate and end up in the hands of many states and groups, some of which are already violating IHL and human rights. Not to mention the risk of piracy by other groups or states.

Finally, beyond armed conflicts, once developed, killer robots could be used for law enforcement or border control. Again, they would likely be guilty of human rights violations, with no real possibility of being held accountable.

Why we need a treaty to ban killer robots

Given the threat they pose, the development of killer robots must be prevented. A simple political declaration or existing international humanitarian law will not be enough.

A treaty is the only way to clarify States' obligations. A treaty sends a clear signal and stigmatizes the targeted weapons, which has an impact even on States that are not signatories, as well as on the industry and investors. A preventive ban on a type of weapon is not new: CCW Protocol IV has already banned blinding lasers as a preventive measure. Besides, the prohibition of a type of technology for weapons (blinding lasers, chemical weapons, etc.) has never hindered research in the civilian sector or for other military applications.

Prohibition treaties are effective. Blinding lasers have never been used on a battlefield. The Ottawa Treaty, which prohibits anti-personnel mines, has drastically reduced the number of victims over the past twenty years.

Affirming that a treaty would be premature is a delaying strategy, which had already been used by States opposed to the ban on anti-personnel mines or cluster munitions.

A broad movement in favour of a preventive ban on killer robots

From Stephen Hawking to Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, thousands of scientists and artificial intelligence experts are sounding the alarm, calling for a preventive ban on killer robots, and pledging not to contribute to their development. In June 2018, Google adopted guidelines committing the company not to design or develop artificial intelligence destined to be used in weapons.[3]

160 religious leaders, 20 Nobel Peace Prize winners and dozens of human rights groups have also called for a preventive ban on killer robots. Since its launch in April 2013, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots[4] has grown to include 85 groups in 48 countries, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Handicap International and Sciences Citoyennes.

Several UN reports recommend the adoption of a binding legal text on lethal autonomous weapon systems, and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has pledged to support States' efforts in this regard.

The European Parliament has also adopted three resolutions calling for a ban on killer robots and the adoption of a treaty. The Icelandic and Belgian parliaments have passed similar resolutions, and several MPs from other countries are starting to examine the issue and challenge their governments on the subject (Norway, Finland, United Kingdom, Switzerland...)

France's confused position

While President Emmanuel Macron said he was "categorically opposed" to the development of killer robots and Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly said that "France does not allow killer robots to emerge", France is only proposing the adoption of a political declaration at the United Nations level.

This unambitious position could be explained by the temptation of the Ministry of Armed Forces and defence manufacturers to join the race for killer robots. Many French military systems already have elements of autonomy and the ongoing research

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[3] Artificial intelligence principles at Google https://ai.google/principles/

[4] https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/

programmes (Neuron, Furious or Man-Machine Team) also aim to develop increasingly autonomous systems.

Conclusion and recommendations

Time is running out to prevent the development of killer robots: France must overcome its contradictions and focus on the respect of fundamental rights rather than on short-term military interests or the quest for profit by manufacturers. Whether for the prohibition of anti-personnel mines or cluster munitions, France has already made this choice in the past, and has taken ambitious decisions on disarmament.

Governments should not wait until they are shown the first victims of these new weapons before taking action.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots therefore urges France to:

- Undertake without delay the negotiation of a legally binding preventive prohibition treaty to determine how and where to set the limits of future autonomy in weapons systems;

- Specify the human controls necessary and required for the essential functions of target identification, selection and attack, as well as during individual attacks;

- Adopt national policies and legislation to prevent the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons.