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THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTING THE AUTONOMY OF VIOLENCE

Ray Acheson | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Barely a week ago, it did not look like this meeting would be convened. Postponed in June and again in August, it wasn't clear that the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) would meet to continue discussions on autonomous weapon systems at all this year. Even still, it is not clear if the state objecting to the convening of this meeting—Russia—will throw procedural wrenches into the works once the meeting commences. Understanding this dynamic is important for understanding where we sit much more broadly and profoundly in relation to the creeping autonomy of violence.

Deferred action

The postponement of the GGE's work this year is in the first order related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many other intergovernmental processes, the UN's work on autonomous weapons has been delayed due to the inability of participants to meet in person at the United Nations in Geneva or New York. However, other processes have managed during this time to convene online. States parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Mine Ban Treaty convened virtual meetings; the UN General Assembly has managed to adopt 55 resolutions and decisions since March; and the Human Rights Council has adapted to virtual formats for much of its work.

To fill the time these past few months, the former Chair of the GGE requested states submit written commentaries on autonomous weapon systems (an initial analysis for these commentaries is included in this edition of the CCW Report) and hosted two informal "fireside chats". But he couldn't garner consensus on convening the GGE's formal work, despite the abovementioned models available for online discussions. There are of course drawbacks to virtual meetings: interpretation, time zones, and Internet access can all be challenging; the side conversations made possible through in-person meetings must be scheduled rather than happening spontaneously

on the margins of meetings; advocacy for activists is more difficult for the same reason. But there are ways around this—breakout rooms, chat functions, webinars, and other convenings on the margins all enable new and potentially even more equitable participation and accessibility than having to travel to Geneva.

Advancing autonomy of violence

Thus, it seems that the opposition to commencing work on autonomous weapons has more to do with politics than it does with procedural or technical challenges. This becomes even more clear when seen in light of the antics at the GGE last year, when the same country that is now objecting vociferously to the September hybrid in-person/online GGE meeting also tried to limit the number of days the GGE would meet this year and confine its mandate as much as possible.

But this isn't just about one country—there are several governments that benefit from less international work on autonomous weapon systems. As their military-industrial complexes advance with the work of building these systems, the last thing they want is scrutiny from governments and activists. While the GGE is still only limited to a discussion mandate, rather than negotiation of any legally binding rules, it is clear from recent history that international processes establish norms against certain behaviour or certain weapon systems, even if not all states agree to the outcomes of those processes. Delaying the GGE's work on autonomous weapons means that the states pursuing them have more likelihood of finalising the development of these weapons before any meaningful preventative action takes place.

The world we don't want

This is significant. The pursuit of autonomous weapons says a lot about the kind of technologies of violence and control certain governments feel

they have the right to possess and deploy. In a world where weapons are treated as tools of power, where violence and subordination of others is how governments, and the economic and political elite, maintain their authority and their privilege, increasing the remoteness and abstraction of violent technologies is incredibly perilous.

Autonomous weapons pose an egregious threat to the safety and security of the majority of people in the world. Weapons that target and attack certain individuals or groups, based on characteristics or behaviour coded in algorithms and detected by sensors, has implications for the normalisation and abstraction of violence beyond that to which our world is already subjected. Technologies of increasingly automated violence need to be considered in the context of technologies for coercive state power that already exist, and where it looks like we are heading absent any effective challenge.

Understanding how autonomous weapons fit into the structures and apparatus of militarism, surveillance, and exclusion that are necessary for the “national security state” and the pursuit of “full spectrum dominance” is vital. These weapons are not just material technologies, but also reflect broader policies and structures of racism and patriarchy that seek to divide, categorise, and process human beings as objects.

Shaping peace

As the United Nations turns 75, and as member states seek to “Shape Peace Together” as the supposed guiding philosophy for their work this year, it’s imperative to recognise what autonomous weapons mean to peace, what they mean for global cooperation and collective security, what they mean for fulfilling the promise of the UN Charter to “end the scourge of war for succeeding generations.”

Autonomous weapons are about autonomising the worst of humanity: our biases and our violence. They will undermine peace, they will be used to control, confine, and kill human beings on the basis of algorithms, they will make human death more abstract, our lives changed or ended in a Kafkaesque world in which there is no human responsibility. This cannot be the kind of “peace” the UN wants to shape. This cannot be the world we allow to be built for us.

This meeting of the GGE should go ahead, if for nothing else then to show to countries that oppose its convening that vetoes have no place in multilateralism. But the states, international organisations, and civil society members that want to truly shape peace together and advance the UN Charter’s goals and objectives must get creative about how to prevent the development of autonomous weapon systems. This forum has not enabled us to progress the way we need to over the past seven years. The action we need to prevent this particular dystopia is upon us and if our experience over the past few months has taught us anything it should be that creative collective care and mutual support and aid is the only thing we have to rely on. This should be the model for us at the international level as we move from endless discussions to meaningful negotiation.



MAINTAINING MOMENTUM DURING THE PANDEMIC

Mary Wareham | Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

2020 is a year of many firsts including, hopefully, the first virtual, physically-distanced diplomatic meeting on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), or killer robots, as well as the first one to be broadcast live on UN Web TV.

Like others, the [Campaign to Stop Killer Robots](#) is keen to see diplomacy make a smooth transition into the digital world. The Campaign has also been rapidly adjusting its activities and working methods to adapt to the uncertain new circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the pandemic has provided time to reflect on the importance of being prepared and able to respond with urgency to existential threats to humanity, from climate change to fully autonomous weapons.

A new international treaty is now widely regarded the only effective way to deal with fully autonomous weapons. In the Campaign's view, momentum for the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)-mandated talks may be flagging, but elsewhere support is building for this goal.

Since the last Group of Governmental Experts meeting on killer robots in August 2019, the Campaign has grown from 113 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 57 countries to now encompass 165 NGOs in 65 countries, a significant increase.

More private sector actors have expressed their support for regulation. In June 2020, the ethics committee of the Norwegian Pension Fund Global [recommended](#) that lethal autonomous weapon systems be added to the Fund's exclusion list of weapons that it will not invest in.

Technology sector allies are showing support for the effort to establish a legally binding instrument, as could be seen in the high level of interest in the Campaign's "RightsCon" briefing in July 2020 for activists working for human rights in the digital age.

One of the most promising developments has been the Campaign's consultations with children and young people keen to help ban killer robots. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in June won the [2020 Ypres Peace Prize](#) and 90 per cent of those who voted for the five shortlisted nominees were age 18 or younger.

The CCW's 125 High Contracting Parties should bear in mind the growing public awareness of the dangers raised by removing human control from the use of force. Many CCW states are investing heavily in civilian robotics and emerging technologies and must provide the necessary regulatory response to killer robots to avoid a technology backlash and retain their competitive edge.

States must make up for lost time and work to achieve measurable progress by the CCW's Sixth Review Conference in December 2021. Failure to produce an appropriate regulatory response by this milestone meeting would not bode well for the CCW's future.

Focused deliberations will help lay the groundwork for negotiating the international treaty that is urgently required to ban fully autonomous weapons and retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

We have read and reviewed every commentary and working paper submitted by states to the CCW this year, including those that are not available on the UN website. We shared our own [CCW commentary](#) in June and encourage all states that have not yet done so to provide submissions and make them publicly available.

The Campaign appreciates the [commonalities paper](#) prepared by the previous GGE chair. Several submissions highlight the need to determine if international humanitarian law is sufficient and many highlight the need for a legally binding instrument. Most submissions draw attention to the guiding principle on human-machine interaction, as described elsewhere in this edition.

A new report by Human Rights Watch surveying the positions of 97 countries found that governments share serious concerns over permitting machines to take human life.

That desire to retain human control over the use of force provides a sound basis for collective action.

HOW STATES' COMMENTARIES HELP BUILD TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL REGULATION

Elizabeth Minor | Article 36

For states considering the issue of “emerging technology in the area of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS)” there are two key problems to solve: firstly, whether some of the real or hypothetical weapon systems or configurations within the scope of these discussions are fundamentally unacceptable and must be ruled out of states’ arsenals and practices; and, secondly, how human control can be meaningfully maintained over the rest of the systems within this discussion’s scope, in order to adequately uphold both legal obligations and more profound moral and ethical principles.

Moving towards clear common approaches and answers to these questions—which would provide building blocks for effective international regulation—now requires the elaboration of detailed positions and proposals from the states and others engaged in this debate. The exercise set by outgoing chair Ambassador Janis Karklins—for states to elaborate their national positions on the meaning of the [Guiding Principles on LAWS agreed in 2019](#)—provided a means this year for countries to start doing this. It allowed states to build on their understandings of the subject to give more form and content to concepts such as how human control over weapons can be maintained—and has provided much useful material in this regard.

An effective structure for the regulation of sensor-based weapon systems

Though states have significantly different conceptualisations of the subject matter under discussion (from ideas of loops and automation to “AI weapons”), for [Article 36](#) and the [Campaign to Stop Killer Robots](#), a broad scope of systems that incorporates all states’ definitions would encompass systems that employ a particular

process to apply force: that of matching sensor inputs to a “target profile” of characteristics following a system’s activation, emplacement, or deployment. This means that with such systems the exact time, place, and object to which force will be applied will not be known in advance. It is from this uncertainty that most concerns arise, from control to moral acceptability.

In our opinion, the most productive way forward will be to consider applying legal obligations to this broad scope of systems, centring prohibitions and regulations on human action and control regarding their use as well as the value of human dignity. Within this scope, certain systems should be prohibited as straightforwardly unacceptable, and the others should be subject to positive obligations on their design and use to ensure they remain under meaningful human control when used.

It is our position that the targeting of people through systems within this scope should be prohibited because this violates [human dignity](#). Systems must also be prohibited that cannot be meaningfully controlled by their users—for example, because the complexity of their functioning means that the range of outcomes they produce would not be sufficiently understood.

A structure of components to ensure meaningful human control is needed for the remaining systems within this scope, to be applied on a case by case basis within individual attacks and operations. As some states have already noted, principles and practices of control might draw substantially from how states already manage uncertainty with less advanced sensor-based weapon systems.

Substantial content in the commentaries for moving forward

Dispersed across the 30 state commentaries submitted so far this year that we have seen, there is already substance to support different elements within this approach, which could be developed and brought together towards a strong framework along the lines that we would consider effective:

Prohibiting anti-personnel use of systems:

A number of countries in their commentaries expressed opposition to human life and death “decisions” being carried out by machines and/or suggested restrictions could be made on the types of targets systems could apply force to. Such positions should be further explored and developed with respect to considering a prohibition on targeting people.

Prohibiting systems that can’t be meaningfully controlled: Several commentaries emphasised the need for the users of weapon systems to understand how these will function in practice, with some linking this explicitly to legal compliance. Some expressed concern at systems that might “evolve” or highlighted that system design should ensure sufficient human understanding of functions is possible. These suggestions can be linked to the need to prohibit systems whose complexities of functioning mean that their effects cannot be sufficiently predicted/foreseen or understood by their operators. This would be one element of prohibiting systems that cannot be meaningfully controlled.

Building the elements of human control: As Ambassador Karklins notes in his [paper](#), it is a significant commonality within states’ commentaries that further collective work is needed to “determine the type and extent of human involvement or control necessary” to ensure compliance with international law and to respond to ethical concerns. It is useful that, in general, states consider this to be the key area for agreement—as is the consensus that human involvement is implicated in legal compliance.

For Article 36, focusing on the time, place, and target to which force will be applied in an individual attack using a sensor-based system should be

the key building blocks for constructing regulation for human control, to address the core issue of uncertainty about the point of application of force.

Within the commentaries, there is much useful material elaborating what the key elements for control could be. For example, several mentioned applying temporal and spatial limits to the use of systems, including (for some) to ensure sufficient proximity of force application to legal judgments, and/or controls on what contexts systems could be used in. Points raised regarding understanding what systems might apply force to in practice, and limiting types of targets, included one proposal to place limits on systems’ target profiles depending on the operational environment.

There was recognition in several commentaries that the exact requirements for adequate levels of control might vary depending on the tool and context. We believe therefore that placing discussions in the context of considering individual attacks (as at least one commentary did) is helpful, in order to focus on human action—rather than the generalities and technicalities of systems. In this regard, though a popular point, we would caution against giving undue significance to (undoubtedly important, but ultimately insufficient) technical elements such as contact/recall/supervision/self-destruction. Our focus must be broadly on human actions rather than (sometimes merely imagined) technical fixes.

This brief analysis suggests that there is much material that can be used, interrogated, and built on by states towards constructing an effective international framework for regulation to address the systems and concerns under discussion at the LAWS Group of Governmental Experts (GGE). It is now up to all involved to take the opportunity to push these building blocks forward, towards a common solution.

NEW REPORT OUTLINES NATIONAL POSITIONS ON FULLY AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS

Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

In August, Human Rights Watch released a new report authored by Campaign coordinator Mary Wareham entitled, “[Stopping Killer Robots: Country Positions on Banning Fully Autonomous Weapons and Retaining Human Control](#).” The 55-page report reviews the positions of 97 countries that have publicly commented since 2013 on calls to ban fully autonomous weapons.

The survey of 97 countries finds that many governments share the same serious concerns over permitting machines to take human life on the battlefield. Their desire for human control provides a sound basis for collective action as an international treaty is now widely regarded the only effective way to deal with the serious challenges raised by this dangerous development.

The report shows how certain countries that are investing heavily in civilian robotics and emerging technologies—such as Austria, Brazil, Canada, Germany, and Japan—are now highly motivated to resolve the killer robots threat. To avoid a technology backlash and retain a competitive edge, these nations see an urgent need for fully autonomous weapons to be regulated.

This marks a paradigm change for the Campaign as previous treaties banning landmines and cluster bombs only came about after political leaders in key countries seized ownership of the challenge and came together to provide the necessary regulatory response.

The report is the first of its kind to draw close attention to where countries stand on the killer robots challenge. The report findings have spurred parliamentary questions, media scrutiny, and public interest. Campaign to Stop Killer Robots members worldwide are using it as a tool to press for political leaders to commit to work with like-minded states in launching negotiations on an international treaty.

The full report is available in [English](#) and [French](#), and the press release is available in [English](#), [French](#), [Japanese](#), [Russian](#), and [Spanish](#).



YOUTH SUPPORT A BAN ON KILLER ROBOTS

Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Since the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots participated in the World Scout Jamboree in July 2019, it has received multiple requests from children and young people asking for information on the killer robots threat as well as how to help the Campaign. In response, the Campaign is producing holding consultations and developing new resources as part of a new youth-driven effort to help ban fully autonomous weapons and retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

The Campaign used 12 August which is International Youth Day, to launch a webpage outlining how youth and university students can get involved: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/youth/>. The Campaign also published a Medium blog entitled “[Five Reasons Why Millennials Need to Ban Killer Robots](#)” and launched its Youth Network, a new web platform for youth leading and participating in the Campaign.

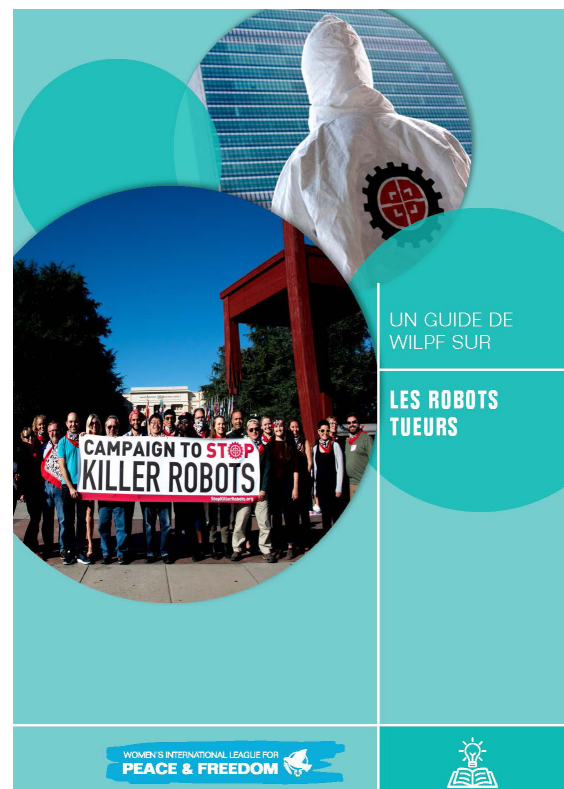
The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots was announced as the winner of the [2020 Ypres Peace Prize](#), which is unique due to the role that children played in deciding the award.

Since 2002, the Belgian city has awarded its prize every three years to individuals and organizations working for peace. The city and surrounding region have direct experience with armed conflict and experienced the first large-scale use of chemical weapons during World War I, by German forces.

Thousands of [students](#) in Ypres and across the region studied the Campaign and four other shortlisted nominees over the 2019-2020 school year before voting on the winner. Ninety percent of those who voted for the prize were age 18 or younger.

WILPF'S GUIDE TO KILLER ROBOTS NOW AVAILABLE IN MORE LANGUAGES

<https://www.wilpf.org/wilpf-publications/>



CCW REPORT

Reaching Critical Will (RCW) is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organisation in the world. RCW works for disarmament and the prohibition of many different weapon systems; confronting militarism and military spending; and exposing gendered aspects of the impact of weapons and disarmament processes with a feminist lens. RCW also monitors and analyses international disarmament processes, providing primary resources, reporting, and civil society coordination at various UN-related forums.



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The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of WILPF or the Campaign.