Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

WATCHING BRIEF: WB20-2 LETHAL AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS

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.

May 2019

The emergence of new technology in weapons systems raises many issues. This Brief outlines the current trends and how Australian Friends might respond.

Background

According to Wikipedia, Lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) are "a type of military robot that can independently search and engage targets based on programmed constraints and descriptions". They are sometimes called 'killer robots'. They can operate in air, land, water, or space. At present they are largely controlled by human command.

Land mines were the original automated weapon. Current examples include radar-guided systems to defend ships and tanks by identifying and counteracting enemy threats according to criteria set by humans. Missile defence systems also include such automatic targeting capabilities. Offensive examples include drones that can identify targets and engage after human decision. Evidence is emerging that major powers (US, Russia, France, China, UK, South Korea, Israel) are developing capabilities for undersea automated weapons, missile platforms, robots, and unmanned vehicles.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, made the following statement on 11 November 2018: "I call on states to ban these weapons that are politically unacceptable and morally revolting". Under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the UN has convened a forum called the Group of Government Experts (GGE) to examine the issues involved. At a UN meeting on 29 March 2019, the majority of governments favoured a ban. Those opposed were Australia, Israel, Russia, the UK and the US.

Analysis/Comment

Toby Walsh, Scientia Professor of Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the University of NSW, has made the following points (*The Guardian*, 5 April 2019):

- If humans are removed from controlling weapons, the autonomous weapons will become weapons of mass destruction. After gun powder and nuclear weapons, this will be the 'third' revolution in warfare.

- The technology has already reached the point where a computer could replace a soldier in the decision to activate a drone. The same technology that will drive autonomous cars can drive such weapons.
- Autonomous weapons will destabilize the world order. A couple of 3-D printers and modest bank balance will avoid the need for a powerful army.
- We should act now to ban these weapons before they become widespread. The ban on chemical weapons has shown the value of such an approach.
- Over 50 AI and robot researchers from 30 countries have recently declared a boycott of KAIST, a Korean company opening a weapons laboratory to develop autonomous arms.

Major Kathleen McKendrick, former Chief of the General Staff in Britain, has argued that a simple ban 'misses the point' (*Chatham House*, 18 April 2019). The points she makes are:

- International agreement on the best way to address the ethical and legal implications of AI developments is hampered by exaggeration of their potential dangers. The UN's Group of Government Experts (GGE) is the right forum to address the issues, using all available evidence on best practices.
- There are legitimate concerns about the risks of new technologies, and many states already mitigate their use to conform with international humanitarian law and with national control measures over procurement and use.
- Well-designed automated systems under effective human control by well trained and informed operators can enhance adherence to the principles of international law.
- New machines lack moral agency, however sophisticated they are. They cannot assess whether harm and loss to civilians is excessive in relation to military advantage.

The Women's International League for Peace & Freedom (WILPF) has been active on this matter, making statements to UN meetings over several years. It has produced a Guide (see www.reachingcriticalwill.org) that makes these points:

- The laws of war and protection of human beings require that humans must be the ones to make decisions about the use of force.
- From a gender perspective, training men (and women) as warfighters tends to break down ethical and moral standards, glorify strength as violence, and remove empathy. Autonomous weapons would create a fighting force "stripped on the empathy, conscience, or emotion that might hold a human soldier back".
- The best solution is a legally binding international treaty to prohibit the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons. This is the best way to ensure that meaningful human control is retained over all targeting and attack decisions. The international treaty would also require national legislation from each country, to ensure against the development of killer robots.
- WILPF also believes that technology companies, tech workers, scientists, academics, and others involved in developing artificial intelligence or robotics should pledge to never contribute to the development of fully autonomous weapons. Final institutions such as banks and pension funds should also pledge not to invest money in the development or manufacture of killer robots.

Australia

Lorel Thomas (National Coordinator of SafeGround, and a Victorian Quaker) reports that, despite Australia's claim that it would not allow any weapon that breaks international humanitarian law, it has joined US, Israel, and the UK to be the only proponents of taking no action against these weapons. The Government is sponsoring the Cooperative Research

Centre for Trusted Autonomous Systems, and RMIT, the University of Melbourne, and UNSW are involved, along with business.

ABC News (27 February 2019) announced that a large drone designed for electronic warfare was being developed by the RAAF and the Defence Department in association with aerospace firm Boeing. The cost is not known.

According to Jake Evans (*ABC News* 1 March 2019) the Australian Defence Force has invested more than $5m in researching the possibilities of artificially intelligent weaponry in an effort to design ethical killing machines. The University of NSW (Canberra) is a partner in this six-year project, which will investigate public perceptions of AI weaponry, and the values of the people who would design it. The lead researcher Dr Jai Galliot said that technical designers "need to realise that in some scenarios these weapons will be deployed and the sense of ethics and legality is going to come from them". He said that AI weapons could make war more ethical, as drones could be taught not to shoot at protected symbols such as the Red Cross sign, or not to shoot at children.

Action

There is an international Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. Formed in 2012, it is a coalition of NGOs committed to ban fully autonomous weapons, to retain meaningful human control over targeting and attack decisions. It commissioned a poll in 26 countries in December 2018, with the result that 61% of those polled opposed killer robots. See www.stopkillerrobots.org

The European Parliament, the Holy See, 21 Nobel Laureates, 25,000 AI experts, and 86 NGOs have called for a ban, according to Human Rights Watch. Google has committed not to design or deploy AI for use in weapons. This decision followed a sustained campaign by 4000 'anonymous' Google workers. Human Rights Watch has itself issued a detailed report that concludes that killer robots would not meet the principles of international humanitarian law. See www.hrw.org/report/2018/08/21/heed-call/moral-and-legal-imperative-ban-killer-robots

British Quakers are part of the 20-member Drone Campaign Network which says that so-called precision strikes by drones are a fallacy, and that many innocent civilians have suffered. The threshold for initiating war has been lowered. The Campaign has called on the UK to ban armed drones that do not comply with international law, ban targeted killings, ensure transparency of drone use, and ensure greater control on drones and related technology. See www.dronecampaignnetwork.wordpress.com

Friends are encouraged to keep aware of reports of the development of lethal autonomous weapons and to take action in concert with other concerned citizens to alert politicians to the risks of Australia becoming involved in ignoring those risks. QPLC will keep this issue on our agenda.

Canberra

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