**Committee: Special Commission**

**Topic: The Question of the Ethics and Legality of Autonomous Weapons**

**Chair: Tamara Joseph**

**School: Haberdashers’ Girls’ School**

**Summary**

The issue of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) has become a critical topic in international discourse due to advancements in artificial intelligence and military technology. AWS are capable of identifying, targeting, and engaging enemies without human intervention, raising significant concerns about their ethical and legal implications.

This issue requires cooperation among states, international organizations, and experts to create frameworks that balance technological advancement with the preservation of human rights and security. As such, it is essential for the United Nations to play a central role in discussing the future of AWS and establishing clear regulations that prevent misuse and protect civilians in armed conflicts.

**Definition of Key Terms**

* **Autonomous Weapons/AWS (Autonomous Weapons Systemes) –** weapons that select and apply force to targets without human intervention
* **International Humanitarian Law -** a set of rules that seeks, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects persons who are not, or are no longer, directly or actively participating in hostilities, and imposes limits on the means and methods of warfare.
* **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)** **–** drones used for surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeted strikes. Some drones have semi-autonomous capabilities, allowing them to process real-time data and make decisions about where to strike.

**Background Information**

With the rise of AI, the question of autonomous weapons is more prevalent than ever. Only two years ago, Chat Gpt was released, with it taking the world by storm, and there is no doubt that soon the same thing will happen with AI in warfare. The use of autonomous weapons is close to becoming a reality and in some areas of the world, AI is already being used to supplement warfare, such as in Unmanned Ariel Vehicles (drones). There are a variety of ethical and legal issues surrounding the use of autonomous weapons.

Ethical concerns: the absence of human oversight could lead to unintended consequences, including targeting errors and biases in machine algorithms (these biases could, for example, be in place due to subconscious actions of the person who trained the AI), as well as potential violations of human rights.

Legal concerns: the key question is whether AWS can comply with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which requires that all weapons systems distinguish between combatants and civilians in order to avoid causing unnecessary suffering. The rise of AWS also complicates the issue of accountability, as it is unclear who should be held responsible for violations of IHL—the developers, military commanders, or other parties. Not only this, but lots of the time regulations that have been drawn up refer to ‘meaningful human control’, but it is unclear what this means and how it can be guaranteed in practice.

There are also concerns that AWS could be deployed in ways that escalate conflicts, as they may act too quickly or autonomously in high-stress situations, potentially leading to unintended consequences.

The international community is divided on how to regulate these systems. Some advocate for a complete ban on fully autonomous weapons, while others emphasize the need for strict regulations and oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. There is also an argument that the use of autonomous weapons could minimise the use of humans in warfare, which would (if argued correctly!) lead to less loss of human life.

**Major Countries Involved:**

**United States -** The U.S. is one of the leading developers of autonomous weapon systems, particularly in drone technology and AI-powered military applications. The US Department of Defense (DoD) has been conducting research into autonomous systems like drones, robots, and AI-powered surveillance tools. The US has been cautious about endorsing a blanket ban on autonomous weapons, advocating for regulations that allow for human oversight in targeting decisions.

**Russia -** Russia is also heavily involved in the development of autonomous military technologies. It has announced plans to integrate AI into military systems and has developed autonomous drones and robotic vehicles.Russia has been resistant to binding international regulations on autonomous weapons, preferring instead to rely on national regulations and military innovations. Forbes and Other Media Reports suggest that Russia has been developing and testing AI-powered drones for surveillance, reconnaissance, and combat roles.

**China -** China has made significant investments in AI and autonomous weapons systems, focusing on military drones, autonomous tanks, and naval systems.China is often seen as advocating for a more flexible regulatory framework that balances technological innovation with military needs. It has not been vocal in supporting an outright ban on autonomous weapons, preferring voluntary standards.

**Israel -** Israel has been at the forefront of autonomous weapons technology, particularly in the development of loitering munition systems (e.g., the Harop drone) and automated defence systems (e.g., Iron Dome).Israel has expressed concerns about fully banning autonomous weapons, citing their effectiveness in countering threats and enhancing national security.

**Major Organisations Involved:**

**UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) –** aims to ban or restrict the use of specific types of weapons that are considered to cause unnecessary or unjustifiable suffering to combatants or to affect civilians indiscriminately.

**International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) -** The ICRC is one of the most vocal organisations on the issue, stressing the need for compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the principles of distinction, proportionality, and necessity. The ICRC has raised concerns about the potential for AWS to violate the protection of civilians in conflict and has advocated for a ban on fully autonomous lethal weapons. The ICRC has also called for a clear definition of "meaningful human control" in relation to AWS to ensure accountability.

**European Union (EU) -** Several EU member states, particularly Germany, France, and the UK, have voiced strong concerns about the ethical implications of autonomous weapons. Germany has called for a ban on fully autonomous lethal weapons that operate without meaningful human intervention.The EU has advocated for the development of international frameworks to regulate autonomous weapons, focusing on ensuring compliance with IHL and human rights principles.

**Timeline of Events**

**1972**: The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment debates the implications of technological advancements but does not specifically address autonomous weapons.

**1980s**: The debate around the implications of automated warfare begins to gain traction, particularly with advancements in robotics and artificial intelligence.

**1990s**: The use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) increases, particularly in military applications. The ethical implications of remote warfare begin to be discussed in academic and military circles.

**2000s – Emergence of Autonomous Systems:**

**2001:** The U.S. military begins deploying more advanced UAVs, leading to discussions about the ethics of remote killings and targeting.

**2004:** The U.S. Army deploys the robotic ground vehicle, the "Big Dog," which raises questions about autonomy in ground warfare.

**2012:** The International Committee for Robot Arms Control (ICRAC) is formed, advocating for a ban on fully autonomous weapons.

**2013:** The UN begins discussions on autonomous weapons systems. A report by the UN Human Rights Council calls for a moratorium on lethal autonomous weapons.

**2015:** A coalition of over 1,000 AI researchers, including notable figures like Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking, sign an open letter calling for a ban on autonomous weapons.

**2016:** The UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) holds discussions on lethal autonomous weapons

**2022:** The CCW holds further discussions on autonomous weapons, emphasizing the need for international cooperation and the establishment of ethical guidelines.

**2023:** Discussions about the ethics and legality of autonomous weapons continue at various international forums, with growing recognition of the potential risks involved in unregulated military AI. New proposals and initiatives are being considered to address the ethical concerns surrounding these technologies.

**Relevant UN Treaties and Events**

**CCW Meetings** – meetings at least twice a year since 2010, the summaries can be found on their website (linked in bibliography below)

The **Campaign to Stop Killer Robots** was officially launched in April 2013 at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. The coalition of NGOs aims to raise awareness about the potential dangers of autonomous weapons and to promote international regulation.

**There have been no treaties passed by the UN on the matter, although the CCW meetings are held every year, in which many countries have raised concerns about a lack of regulations on the issue, whilst others have opposed the regulation of these weapons, such as due to claims that they are needed for national security.**

**Previous Attempts to solve the Issue**

There have been no specific binding treaties exclusively governing the use of autonomous weapons at the United Nations level. However, discussions and initiatives regarding the regulation of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) have been ongoing in various forums, particularly within the framework of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, launched in 2013 by a coalition of NGOs, has advocated for a pre-emptive ban on fully autonomous weapons. This campaign has garnered support from various nations and civil society organizations.

Some countries have begun to develop national policies and regulations regarding the development and deployment of autonomous weapons. For example, as of 2023, countries like Germany and France have expressed intentions to establish ethical guidelines for the use of AI in military applications.

The U.S. Department of Defence has issued directives regarding the use of AI in weapon systems, emphasizing the need for human oversight.

Activist organizations and scholars have been working to raise public awareness about the dangers of autonomous weapons. They argue that these systems could lead to unintended escalations in conflict, loss of human control, and ethical dilemmas regarding the value of human life.

**Possible Solutions**

Some people call for a complete ban on the use of autonomous weapons in warfare, but this seems like a highly unlikely possibility. Given this, there are a range of possible solutions to this issue that include (but are not limited to):

1. **Regulatory Frameworks:**

* **International Treaties -** Develop binding international treaties similar to those for chemical and biological weapons, focusing specifically on the development, deployment, and use of autonomous weapons.
* **National Laws -** Encourage countries to implement national regulations governing the research, development, and use of AWS to ensure compliance with international norms.

1. **Human Oversight:** Require that human operators maintain meaningful control over autonomous systems, particularly in life-and-death situations (although it is unclear what ‘meaningful control’ means so this would have to be outlines with clear definitions and guidelines)
2. **‘Kill Switches’** that allow human operators to deactivate AWS in emergencies or unintended situations.
3. **Transparency and Accountability:** Implement transparency measures that allow for auditing and accountability in the deployment and decision-making processes of AWS. Set out clearly who is held responsible for the actions of AWS, as well as possible consequences for these actions, etc.
4. **Education and Training:** Educate military personnel and policymakers about the ethical and operational challenges posed by AWS.
5. **Limit Funding and Development:** Encourage governments and organizations to limit funding for the development of fully autonomous weapons and prioritise research on ethical AI and human-centred technology.

**Bibliography**

**About the CCW:** [**The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – UNODA**](https://disarmament.unoda.org/the-convention-on-certain-conventional-weapons#:~:text=A%20unique%20and%20important%20character%20of%20the%20CCW)

**CCW Meetings:** [**Home | United Nations**](https://meetings.unoda.org/)

[What you need to know about autonomous weapons | ICRC](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-you-need-know-about-autonomous-weapons)

[What does the future of autonomous warfare look like? Four critical questions, answered. - Atlantic Council](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/automating-the-fight/what-does-the-future-of-autonomous-warfare-look-like-four-critical-questions-answered/)

[On the warpath: AI's role in the defence industry - BBC News](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-66459920)

[Autonomous Weapon Systems: A Moral Discussion and Considerations for Regulation - Modern Diplomacy](https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/08/12/autonomous-weapon-systems-a-moral-discussion-and-considerations-for-regulation/)

[Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) – UNODA](https://disarmament.unoda.org/the-convention-on-certain-conventional-weapons/background-on-laws-in-the-ccw/)

**Fun Science Fiction Book** – Dogs of War by Adrian Tchaikovsky (quite a lot in there about ability to distinguish between civilians/combatants, talks about use of AI in war, etc)