



Autonomous Weaponry



The definition of autonomous according to the Cambridge dictionary, is “independent and having the power to make its own decisions”.

In recent years some of the most powerful nations and businesses have attempted, sometimes successfully, to create weapons which operate without needing direct human input; these are known as Lethal Autonomous Weapons or LAWs. Examples of these include: homing missiles, automatic UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) and automatic sentry guns.

Many autonomous systems are in early stages and require certain input but as time and technology advance, these systems are likely to become more independent, efficient and lethal. It is likely that in the future automatic drones may completely replace conventional weapons, or AI bomb disposal units may take the place of human operatives.

There are positives to these weapons. Firstly, they have vast potential to save human lives as soldiers will be out of the direct line of fire. Secondly reduced human error may mean that blue-on-blue situations and civilian casualties may become less prevalent.

However, there are downsides as well. Ethical questions may be raised as to the person responsible if an error does occur. There is also the issue that computers have no human feeling or morals. An autonomous weapon may make the right tactical decision but the wrong moral decision. Many people and nations are concerned about how an autonomous drone would differentiate between different targets, would it mistake a medic with a scalpel for a knife wielding insurgent?

In April of 2018, the UN committee on conventional weapons met to discuss whether to ban autonomous weaponry. No decisions were made yet there are currently twenty-six countries whom have stated that they are for the banning of autonomous weapons, key nations who have done so include: China, Brazil, Iraq, Pakistan, Argentina and Egypt.

There are five nations who have rejected proposals to ban autonomous weapons, these being: France, Israel, Russia, UK and the USA.

It is likely that as time progresses more nations and people will call for their banning as we have yet to realize the full potential of these technologies. Therefore, it is imperative that a solution to the problem is decided on as quickly as possible.

Points to consider:

- What restrictions, if any, should you place on autonomous weapons?
- How would you enforce any restrictions that you would put in place?
- Are there any benefits to autonomous weapons?
- If they are not being banned, what guidelines should be put in place?

Useful links:

<https://www.stopkillerrobots.org> Campaign to stop killer robots

<https://www.unog.ch> UNOG (UN office of Geneva)

<https://futureoflife.org> Future of life institute