FACT SHEET

AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS SYSTEMS

Autonomous weapon systems have been described as “weapon systems that, once activated, can select and engage targets without further human intervention” (see the report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (A/HRC/23/47) of 9 April 2013). There are already weapon systems in service today that are capable of selecting and engaging targets (often described as a weapon’s ‘critical functions’) without human intervention, once activated or launched.

Increasing autonomy in the critical functions of weapon systems could impact international security, including by potentially sparking new arms races and increasing perceptions of casualty-free warfare that could affect calculations for resorting to the use of force. Growing reliance or inappropriate use of autonomy could have negative implications for escalation control. It should also be noted that some degree of autonomy in military systems could have benefits by, for example, reducing instances of human error.

It has been argued that autonomous weapons systems and the issue of autonomy in warfare more broadly will have both direct and indirect effects across the spectrum of disarmament and international security issues, including nuclear weapons doctrines, outer space security, and the use of cyber capabilities to carry out hostile acts.

The prospect of autonomous weapons also raises ethical and legal concerns. While technological advances may indeed be able to improve the accuracy of some weapons and reduce collateral harm, autonomous systems currently remain far from the point where they can reliably make decisions and judgments necessary for compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law. It has also been argued that no weapon system could ever be capable of performing such judgments in conformity with humanitarian principles, as the application of international humanitarian law is predicated on human judgment and accountability.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been seized of this issue since it was first raised at the Human Rights Council in 2013, and then at the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in 2014. There has been strong civil society engagement on this topic, including from the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. The broader research community and representatives from the private sector have also been active, including through a 2015 open letter calling for a “ban on offensive autonomous weapons beyond meaningful human control”, which has now been signed by over 4,500 artificial intelligence and robotics researchers and more than 26,000 from other disciplines.

Secretary-General António Guterres has placed particular importance on addressing the possible impacts of new technologies on international peace, security and stability. At the 2018 Web Summit in Lisbon, he said that “machines that have the power and the discretion to take human lives are politically unacceptable, are morally repugnant, and should be banned by international law”. In his disarmament agenda, the Secretary-General committed to support the efforts of
States to elaborate new measures to ensure that humans remain at all times in control over the use of force.

**Discussions within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons**

The 2016 Fifth Review Conference of High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) established a Group of Governmental Experts to examine the possible challenges posed by emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems. The Group is open to all High Contracting Parties and States non-parties (which may participate as observers) of the CCW, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Prior to the deliberations of the Group, three informal discussions on the topic were held by CCW High Contracting Parties in 2014 to 2016.

The Group met for five days in 2017, ten days in 2018 and seven days in 2019. The Group has produced consensus outcomes each year of its deliberations. In 2019, this outcome comprised eleven guiding principles (building on its 2018 outcome), a series of thematic conclusions and areas identified for further work, and a recommendation that the Group focus on the clarification, consideration and development of aspects of the normative and operational framework on lethal autonomous weapon systems going forward. The 2019 Meeting of High Contracting Parties to the Convention extended the mandate of the Group for two years, with a view to reporting to the Sixth Review Conference of the CCW in 2021.