Side event Killer Robots at CCW, May 15 2014

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Thank you all for coming to this session. There are many interchangeable words for autonomous weapons systems: Lars, Laws or Flaws, to name a few. During my presentation I will just use the word killer robots. For PAX the issue of killer robots is first and foremost – and perhaps even more so than with other disarmament issues - an ethical one. We believe humanity should not surrender meaningful human control over decisions of life and death to machines.

This issue is not about carefully striking a balance between military gain and civilian harm. The very heart of the issue is human dignity. I was pleased to hear so many states mentioning ethical concerns over the last three days and thought we had an excellent session yesterday on ethics. Having a session devoted to ethics is btw not always the case at disarmament forums and the active participation yesterday of so many states reinforces the centrality of ethics in this discussion.

PAX just issued a report called Deadly decisions, 8 objections to killer robots, there are some copies at the back. Many of the objections we detail in the report have been mentioned over the last days, but in short our 8 objections to Killer Robots are:

1. Killer Robots are by nature unethical, because there is no longer a human in the loop deciding over target and attack. War is about human suffering, the loss of human lives, and consequences for human beings. Killing with machines is the ultimate demoralization of war. I will come back to this issue later.

2. Killer robots will lower the threshold of going to war. There is an unacceptable transfer of risk from a nation's own soldiers to civilians and soldiers from the nation you fight. There will be radical asymmetry. Why would war be a last resort, when the only thing to lose is some hardware? What is the moral and ethical impact of emerging technologies that allow nearly full impunity on one side while the other still suffer the terrible human costs of war? And in addition, the public will experience an even greater distance to war. We will no longer hear from soldiers coming back home and telling about the horrors of war. This will negatively influence democratic control.

3. A killer robot cannot be programmed in such a way that it will be able to apply the rule of distinction. Their mechanical or binary intelligence makes it impossible to do so.

4. Killer robots cannot apply the rule of proportionality. The weighing of military gain against anticipated civilian costs requires multi faceted and often complex balancing, machines are not capable of making these delicate and balanced decisions.

5. Killer robots complicate the chain of responsibility. This may lead to an accountability vacuum that makes it impossible to hold anyone sufficiently accountable for possible violations of international law.

6. The development and use of killer robots will decrease transparency as they can easily be used in anonymous and clandestine operations. Given the lack of transparency and consistency of information in drone warfare, it is hard to imagine that governments would be transparent about the use of killer robots.

7. Killer robots will terrify local populations and will likely increase animosity and invoke retaliation, putting endurable peace even further out of reach. And thinking about long term effects, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be...

8. Killer robots may become relatively cheap and easy to copy, which would lead to worldwide proliferation of the technology, including to non-state actors.

Let's go back to the first objection, the ethical one. Can and do we want to delegate the power to make life and death decisions to a machine? Can and do we want to outsource morality? We believe these machines go against the principles of human dignity. Not only the dignity and right to life of those who will be directly affected, but also the dignity of soldiers and civilians in whose name killer robots will be deployed.

We believe the ethical objection is so important that even if these machines would be able to comply with IHL, which we believe will never be the case, we should not allow these machines to be developed, let alone deployed.

By only focusing on the legal framework, we neglect the larger and far more important realm of moral and ethical issues. Political intellectual Michael Ignatieff once said that there are habits of the minds that encourage the view that if you have legal coverage you have moral coverage, but what is legal is of course not necessarily moral. We should not reduce complex issues of morality into purely technical issues of legality.

Legality represents only a minimum standard for the behavior of soldiers in the chaos of combat. It is about doing what is required, but also about doing less than is permitted (to restrain oneself). We expect reluctant professionalism from soldiers.

But why is it unethical to take the human out of the loop? As UN special rapporteur Heyns stated in an article in the Guardian, human beings are frail, flawed and, indeed, can be "inhumane"; but they also have the potential to rise above the minimum legal standards for killing. By definition, robots can never act in a humane way. But more importantly, does it not demean the value of the lives of each one of us to know that it has become part of the human condition that we could potentially become collateral damage in the calculations of a machine?

All of us instinctively feel there is a difference between robots and humans. The difference lies in the fact that humans are moral agents able to think and reflect. Or in the words of philosopher Immanuel Kant, the ability to set and pursue ends for themselves. And especially in war ends cannot be set beforehand in some hard and fast way.

Over the last year we saw a rapidly growing number of states and other actors expressing concerns about the trend towards fully autonomous weapons. The European parliament recently adopted a motion calling upon European Union member states "to ban the development, production and use of fully autonomous weapons which enable strikes to be carried out without human intervention."

We also see many states expressing ethical concerns. To mention a few: Brazil stated at the HRC last year: *if the killing of one human being by another has been a challenge that legal, moral and religious codes have grappled with since time immemorial, one may imagine the host of additional concerns to be raised by robots exercising the power over life and death over humans*. Two days ago at the CCW Ecuador questioned how LAWs could replace human combatants that feel compassion. And Switzerland said that a battlefield with machines entrusted with the power to decide who lives and who dies would raise ethical concerns.

At PAX (with its Ecumenical background) we see fully autonomous weapons as an affront to human dignity and the sacredness of life. We recently initiated an interfaith letter that religious leaders and faith-based groups can sign, to express their ethical concerns and to call for a ban. We already received many positive reactions from various bishops, including Desmond Tutu, from the Quakers, from Islamic groups, and many others. Over the next months we will continue this discussion within religious communities and collect as many signatures as possible.

To mention a few statements from religious communities. Holy See stated here at the CCW last year: "*Decisions over life and death are uniquely difficult decisions, a heavy responsibility for a human being, and one fraught with challenges. Yet it is a decision for which a person, capable of moral reasoning, is uniquely suited.*"

And also the Organisation of Islamic Conference expressed – at the Human Rights Council - serious concerns on FAWs.

In Busan the World Council of Churches issued a statement recommending that governments *"Declare their support for a pre-emptive ban on drones and other robotic weapons systems that will select and strike targets without human intervention when operating in fully autonomous mode".*

Of course religion has no monopoly on ethics, and it is just one of the many voices in the debate. And there are other powerful concerned voices as well, for instance from the military. Sometimes people say *'what can be more moral than saving the lives of our service members, or being able to be more precise in targeting'*? But why are there then as I believe quiet a few (former) military people against fully autonomous weapons? I did not do any research on this, but during conferences and in my country the Netherlands I came across many military or former military staff having serious problems with this new development.

Some argue that their worries derive from fear of unemployment, but I think it stems more from knowing how complex combat situations are; from a better understanding that decisions can not be programmed: that individual responsibility should always be present. Individual responsibility to for example disobey orders on moral grounds: let's say if a regime asks a soldier to kill its own citizens.

Some within the military say that this is a technology for cowards. Others worry about what these developments do to the entire moral meaning of being a warrior; and to so-called warrior ethics.

For example former US Major General Robert H. Latiff stated and I quote *"Surely death by algorithm is the ultimate indignity. The problem is that robotic weapons eventually will make kill decisions on the battlefield with no more than a veneer of human control. Full lethal autonomy is no mere next step in military strategy: It will be the crossing of a moral Rubicon. Ceding godlike powers to robots reduces human beings to things with no more intrinsic value than any object".*

Summing up:

For the first time in history the very identity of who is fighting will change. The 5,000 year old monopoly of humans over the fighting of war is over. This changes warfare completely.

It's high time we ask ourselves if such a development is desirable, before it is too late to even ask that question. This is not about what technological possibilities can offer us, but what kind of possibilities we want to explore and use and which ones we don't want to use.

The current prospect of entering a world where machines are explicitly mandated to kill humans should give pause to all of us. While technology rushes forward, we need to take a time out to ensure that not only lives, but also a concept of the value of human life, are preserved in the long term. I am glad we are having this important debate right now and sincerely hope it will be the start of multilateral discussions leading to negotiations, and eventually a ban on killer robots.

Thank you,

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