



Reducing impacts of war

AUSTRALIA AND AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS 2025



Increasing autonomy in weapons

There are many reports from Ukraine that loitering munitions with autonomous functions are being used in the conflict by both sides.

Such weapons are designed to loiter in an area while using sensors to look for targets to kill. These weapons are examples of how militaries worldwide are developing increasingly autonomous weapons equipped with artificial intelligence (AI).

Autonomous weapons which can detect, identify and fire to kill their targets without meaningful human control are often called ‘killer robots.’

They would detect and apply force to a target based on the processing of data from sensor inputs. A human operator would not have to determine where, when or against what the weapon’s force is applied. We urge Australia to ensure meaningful human control over the use of force and reject a future with killer robots.

Moral, Legal, Tech and Security Risks

Deploying killer robots would delegate the decision over life and death to machines.

This crosses a moral red line.

Such weapons also pose significant problems for compliance with international humanitarian law, specifically principles of distinction between combatants and non-combatants, proportionality and precaution in attacks, and human rights law.

Autonomous weapons will escalate and intensify conflicts, facilitating unprecedented speed and scale of killing and reduce barriers to war.

Machine errors could have catastrophic consequences, including triggering unwanted conflict.

Autonomous weapons can become powerful instruments of violence and oppression, including as a tool for nonstate actors or regimes instigating political violence.

We are at a crucial moment where regulation is essential and urgent, otherwise we risk an arms race with no winners and dangerous dehumanisation.

Don't turn people into code.

Machines cannot make complex ethical choices; they cannot comprehend the value of human life.

Machines don't understand contexts or consequences.

Global Calls for Action

States, industry and civil society worldwide have voiced concerns, and more and more voices express the need for an urgent response.

UN Secretary-General Guterres called on states to establish a new treaty in *A New Agenda for Peace*, urging for negotiations which should conclude by 2026. Guterres said fully autonomous weapons are “morally repugnant and politically unacceptable.”

The International Committee of the Red Cross also urge new law is needed to address autonomy in weapons and has called for a treaty combining prohibitions and regulations.

The majority of states support establishing a legally binding instrument to address autonomous weapons but Australia insists new international law is not required.

Thousands of AI and robotics experts have warned against fully autonomous weapons supporting an international prohibition, as well as the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The Stop Killer Robots campaign coalition, formed in 2012, has grown to more than 240 member organisations working across 70 countries. In Australia, members include Digital Rights Watch, Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), Medical Association for the Prevention of War, Pax Christi Australia, Religious Society of Friends – Canberra and Region Quakers; Victoria Regional Meeting, and SafeGround.

United Nations Progress

Autonomous weapons have been discussed in dedicated meetings at the United Nations since 2014. The main forum where talks take place is within the Convention of Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) through the 'Group of Governmental Experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems.'

The Group has proven unable to reach a meaningful outcome. There has been some progress towards common understandings of weapons characteristics, human control and risk mitigation measures. However, a small handful of states abuse the consensus requirement to obstruct agreement.

The Group was mandated to recommend a policy option for LAWS by 2021 but failed to do so. The Group continues to meet, tasked with developing elements of a possible instrument. However, no decisive progress can be made in the CCW. Yet, Australia insists it is the only avenue to pursue discussions.

In 2023 to 2024, momentum intensified with regional conferences organised by Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Trinidad and Tobago, the Philippines and Sierra Leone. Austria hosted a multilateral conference, the first of its kind on autonomous weapons in April 2024.

The UN General Assembly adopted resolutions on autonomous weapons in 2023 and 2024, reflecting the attention on the issue. The ambition of the 2024 resolution was curtailed by certain states, including Australia, that sought to reduce its scope.

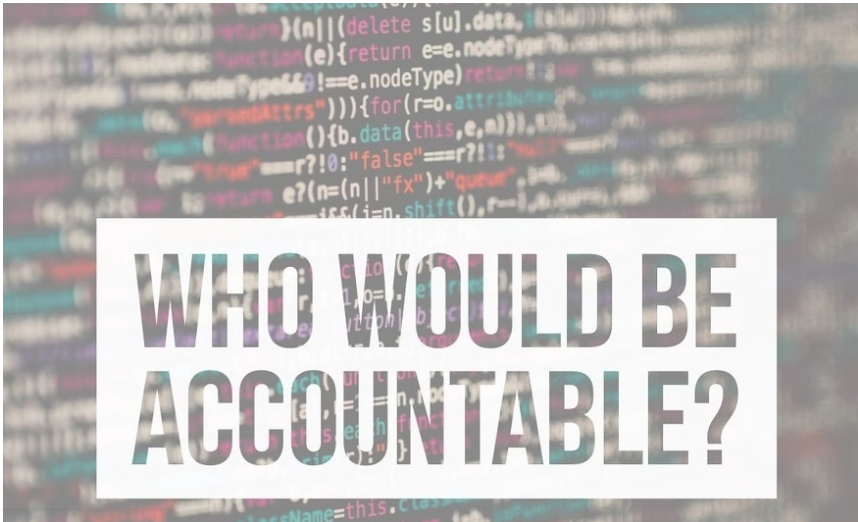
Rather than resist new law and only promote the Group of Governmental Experts, Australia should commit to supporting a new legally binding instrument in an inclusive forum, in step with global progress.

Australian Defence Context

Australia is investing in the innovation and development of autonomy in defence and should therefore welcome new international law to guide work and development.

Australia's RnD landscape includes the Department of Defence, the Australian Defence Force, local and multi-national arms companies and Australian universities all striving forward with developments. This necessitates clearly articulated limits to autonomy and requirements for meaningful human control, currently missing from policy in all these sectors.

Notable Australian projects include autonomous aircraft Ghost Bat (formally Loyal Wingman) - a partnership between the Royal Australian Air Force and Boeing and autonomous submarine Ghost Shark - a contract from Australian Defence Force's Next Generation Technology Fund to Anduril.



Australian arms companies are also involved in developing autonomous loitering munitions, land vehicles and targeting software. Since the Defence Cooperative Research Centre, Trusted Autonomous Systems, was awarded \$50million in 2017 for its initial 7 years, collaboration between Department of Defence, arms companies and universities involving AI in military technology has grown rapidly.

It is essential Australia delineates unacceptable autonomous weapons, given its involvement in development and procurement. Meaningful human control must be guaranteed to address legal and ethical concerns.

The Department of Defence has undertaken some consideration of AI ethics for defence. However, this work does not acknowledge the core ethical problem of delegating life-death decisions to machines if humans are removed from the critical functions of selecting targets and choosing to attack.

In a survey of ADFA, Australian cadets' willingness to deploy with autonomous systems decreased in scenarios with reduced human control.

Australia must explicitly rule out fully autonomous weapons, establish limits to autonomy and support new international law to this end.



Key Elements of a Treaty

The treaty should include three main elements to overcome the dangers posed by autonomy in weapon systems.

①

Obligation to Maintain Meaningful Human Control

A general obligation to ensure meaningful human control over the use of force is needed to alleviate concerns about weapons systems that use sensors to detect and engage targets. 'Meaningful' captures the degree of human control required to mitigate operational and ethical hazards and to ensure that existing laws can be substantively applied.

②

Prohibitions

Certain autonomous weapon systems are fundamentally unacceptable and should be prohibited. These include:

a. Autonomous weapon systems that target people

These systems would undermine human dignity, converting people into data, to be sensed, sorted and attacked by a machine, open to biased data sets and prejudicial algorithms.

b. Autonomous weapon systems that cannot be used with meaningful human control

Certain autonomous weapons systems are intrinsically incapable of meaningful human control and should be prohibited, including systems where the location and duration of their functioning cannot be limited, and systems where the external conditions and circumstances that will trigger an application of force cannot be predicted or understood.

③

Positive Obligations

Autonomous weapons systems that are not prohibited should be subject to positive obligations to ensure meaningful human control. These obligations will need to highlight key components that, taken together, are necessary to ensure human control, including decision-making, technological and operational components.

Taking Leadership

Join parliamentarians in Australia and worldwide in committing to take action on this issue by signing the Parliamentary Pledge. The pledge is open to any current member of a national, state or regional parliament. To join, email pledge@stopkillerrobots.org from your official parliamentary account indicating that you wish to endorse the pledge.

“We, the undersigned parliamentarians are deeply concerned about the ethical, legal and humanitarian risks posed by the development and use of autonomy in weapons systems.

**Machines should not kill people.
We pledge to support our governments to negotiate new international law on autonomous weapons systems that rejects the automation of killing and ensures meaningful human control over the use of force.”**

It is imperative the government addresses this issue decisively, joins others in support of negotiating new international law and establishes clearer limits in domestic policy.

This issue does not only have defence and foreign policy implications, but has broad consequences for society, at a time where technology is rapidly changing our lives, and humanity must choose what we wish to advance to improve our world and what we should reject.



SafeGround is an Australian not-for-profit focused on reducing the impacts of legacy and emerging weapons.

SafeGround is a member of the Stop Killer Robot coalition, comprising 240+ organisations in 70 countries, and is the coordinator of the Australian Stop Killer Robots campaign.

<https://safeground.org.au/tag/stop-killer-robots/>



Stop Killer Robots is part of a global effort to recognise the impact of the technology we create and our responsibility to ensure it is used within limits and with accountability. This strong and growing movement is working to build a society in which technology is developed and used to promote peace, justice, human rights, equality and respect for law - not automated killing.

Join us in calling for a treaty that prohibits and regulates autonomous weapon systems, to ensure we don't allow autonomy to replace human decision making where it should be most present.



www.stopkillerrobots.org