Unpacking Australia's Arms Industry: Secrecy, Influence and Autonomous Weapons

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Lilly McKenzie: Welcome to SafeGround, the small organization with big ideas, working in disarmament, human security, climate change and refugees. I'm Lilly Mackenzie.

Thank you for tuning into our series 'Stay In Command', where we talk about lethal autonomous weapons, the Australian context, and why we mustn't delegate decision-making from man to machines.

Today I'm speaking with Michelle Fahy, independent researcher and expert on the connections between the weapons industry and government. She's written many articles on the Australian arms industry and autonomous weaponry for independent publications. I'll also be speaking with Matilda Byrne, the coordinator of the Australia Stop Killer Robots Campaign right here at SafeGround, who is currently completing her PhD at RMIT University, examining the responsibility to protect and responding to atrocity crimes.

Introduction and Episode Overview

Lilly McKenzie: Today they will discuss the secrecy of Australia's arms industry, particularly in the arena of lethal autonomous weapons systems or LAWS, and the importance of the Stop Killer Robots campaign.

Michelle, thank you for joining us.

Michelle Fahy: Hello, Lilly and thank you. It's good to be here.

Background on Australia's Defense Industry

Lilly McKenzie: So Michelle, can you give us some background on the Australian defense industry? What are we really dealing with here in terms of its size, funding, how it operates, and how it fits into the global arms industry?

Michelle Fahy: Yes, that's a big question, so I'll unpack that in a few bytes. The first thing I might just mention is that all through the media in Australia, we say 'defense industry'. And what I'm gonna do is call it the 'arms industry' because defense is a bit of a misnomer. In fact, the Australian Defense Force has been helping the US attack quite a lot in recent years. So it's, more accurate to call it the arms industry rather than defense industry, 'cause that's not all it does.

In terms of producing armaments, Australia is a pretty small player. There are no Australian owned companies in the top 100 arms companies globally. Globally, the industry is dominated by the top five arms giants. There are three names that some of your listeners might know; Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Raytheon, for example. Then in sixth place, there's the top British company, which is BAE systems and various European companies come further down the list. There's a Russian company in seventh place, and three Chinese companies make the top 10. But, details are quite sketchy on the Russian and the Chinese companies.

Where Australia plays a bigger role in terms of global trade is that there's a significant presence here of subsidiaries of the top 15 arms companies, particularly from the US, the UK, and Europe. There was a study done that I found in 2020, which found that Australia rank second in terms of the number of subsidiaries that are here, of those top 15 companies in the world. We've got 38 subsidiaries here of those 15 companies. The UK had the most, it had 56 and Saudi Arabia was third with 24. So we ranked second in the world on that measure. Why I mention that is because it shows that there's a lot of political influence going on in the background. A lot of largely hidden backroom influence and lobbying power in arms trade terms concentrated in Australia.

Influence and Secrecy in the Arms Industry

Lilly McKenzie: Why is that? What are they doing?

Michelle Fahy: Well, in a word: Sales! They're trying to get ongoing and long-term arms sales and contracts in their favor. This is a highly competitive industry. In the world, there's really only a certain number of large contracts on offer every year. So they really all need to compete hard to keep winning contracts, to stay in business. Because of the long-term nature of almost all the contracts, most run for at least several years and many run for decades. Like the frigates we've got in Australia at the moment, it's gonna be 30 years before they're all manufactured and in the water.

So because these contracts go for such a long time, the companies need to ensure that they can influence both sides of politics equally well. I mean, we have elections here every three years, so we can't have different sides of politics not liking certain contracts. So the industry needs to ensure it has equal influence with both sides of politics, and we certainly see that in Australia now. It's basically a situation of state capture here, which some of your listeners might have heard of that term. Just like with the mining industry where basically both sides of politics bend to the will of industry no matter what the Australian people might think of it.

Lilly McKenzie: Interesting. Okay, so Michelle, you've said there's not really much of a difference between either party and the fact that most of the Australian arms industry is foreign owned. Who's benefiting from this?

Michelle Fahy: Well, the benefit is to the, well, how can I unpack that? I think the clear benefit out of this scenario and all the arms deals and contracts that run through tens of billions of dollars year after year, the benefit is actually to the arms industry itself.

Now, then we can look at who's behind the arms industry then, 'cause that's actually changed quite a lot in recent years. So for starters, the Australian arms industry, as I've explained, is basically a foreign owned subset of the US and European arms industries. And the big players in those industries, particularly the USA, so say Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, all these huge arms multinationals, these days, most of them, their largest shareholders are US hedge funds and investment asset managers.

So who's benefiting from this scenario? It's the investors in those companies. And what is their priority? Their priority is making a profit. It's not even defense or security. They'll go with profit making every time. So that's really, when you're talking about the arms industry, it's a huge business and these really huge investment funds in America and also the UK are the ones that own the arms companies now.

So to come back to what I was just talking about a bit before, about why there are so many arms companies here. Australia has historically been a significant importer of weaponry. For many years we were in the top five globally for importers. We've also been a really big customer of the US arms industry for a long time, which is certainly worth bearing in mind whenever you hear the US calling us its very good friend. 'Cause of course we are, we spend a fortune with them on weaponry. And now of course with AUKUS, we're spending billions

for their shipyards without any strings attached at all. So I'm sure we are very, very good friends now.

The amount that's been spent on weaponry last year, for example, was $16 billion. Most of that money went to foreign arms multinationals. The Australian Defense Department budget overall is $56 billion a year, but that includes everything. That pays for the Australian Defense Force, the Defense Department, and the bases and catering and such and such. The actual arms expenditure side of it was $16 billion. Inside that $16 billion, about 4 billion of it was for maintaining our bases and things, which leaves 12. To show you what I mean by how much the foreign arms multinationals dominate, actually the top 15 arms makers got 11 billion of the 12. And they're all except one foreign owned. So, when we are talking about industry here, we're talking about the foreign arms industry, getting the money.

So what have we been importing? We've imported tens of billions of dollars of things like fighter jets, helicopters and transport aircraft for the Air Force. Warships, submarines for the Navy. Tanks, armored vehicles for the army. So those big items that cost billions of dollars. Australia has always also bought the very best top of the line stuff for the Australian Defense Force. And then usually we spend even more modifying it, to suit our precise needs. So this makes us a very attractive and profitable customer for these big arms companies. And that was why these companies originally started moving in, to be on the spot, boost their sales and lobby the politicians here.

Foreign Ownership and Sovereignty Concerns

Michelle Fahy: In more recent years, they're sort of expanding their presence. And the companies are setting up bigger operations here now, with financial assistance in many cases from the federal government, which is us, the taxpayers. And that also helps them boost their exports. So for example Lockheed Martin set up its very first research and development lab outside the US in Melbourne. BAE systems owns and runs a large chunk of our naval ship building enterprise down in Adelaide. We've got Boeing up in Queensland, with an aerospace and drone facility that's up there. Also in Queensland, Rheinmetall, a German arms company, has built a military vehicle manufacturing factory. Hanwha from South Korea has a manufacturing plant in Victoria. And of course, the French company, Thales has taken over Australia's small arms and munitions factories. That was back in 1999 when they were privatized. So on top of that too, more recently, I might quickly mention, the

government has just started a missile making enterprise in Australia, saying we need to be able to make our own missiles here. And they've handed over the establishment and management of that to Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, two huge American companies. And now also Thales is involved in that as well.

So all of these companies I just mentioned, all these examples, are foreign owned. The effect is that basically Australia is little more than a subset of the US, UK, and European arms industries. Despite this, of course, this is somewhat unpalatable to the public, and so the government doesn't say it as plainly as I just have, of course.

So what the Australian Defense Department does, it insists on describing all these companies as being, forming our sovereign Australian defense industry. Sovereign Australian defense industry. Now, this is obviously quite laughable. There's nothing the least bit sovereign about any of these multinational foreign companies. The profits go offshore. They're a hundred percent foreign owned. The government was forced to admit this fact last year in a parliamentary hearing, which I was listening to, and it twisted itself in knots saying although it agreed that they're not sovereign Australian companies, together, they said, they still somehow magically form a sovereign Australian industry.

It was like watching, oh, what was that show, 'Yes, Prime Minister' (Yes Minister) in our own parliament, just listening to the way they were twisting in knots over this. Anyway, I'm making a very big point about this because, being foreign owned means they are here in our country receiving financial assistance from us, taxpayers, but acting first and foremost in the best interest of their owners. Of course. And who are the owners of these companies? The shareholders of Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, BAE Systems, Thales, Rheinmetall, whoever, and the rest. Of course, they're acting in their shareholders interests as companies are legally obliged to do. So shareholder interests come first. And these companies are not primarily or solely concerned with Australia's best interests or our defense and security. So rather than adding to our sovereignty as the government tries to spin, actually there's a significant loss of sovereignty and independence for Australia in this situation.

Lilly McKenzie: Interesting. Okay, I think it's important to note that most of Australia's arms industry is in fact, foreign owned.

And how much do the arms industry get from Australia here?

Michelle take 2: It's a bit tricky to answer that. So there's no straight answer, obviously. As with everything with this industry, it's complicated. So I'll just

give you some background information first and then we can get down to some figures. Basically the industry is not adequately researched or scrutinized in Australia. It's very hard to get reliable regular data. It's my point of view that this is just a major failure of transparency from the government in making itself accountable to the Australian people for tens of billions of public funding. When you consider how much money goes through this industry and just the lack of information about it, it's a real failing.

So the only regular data that comes out each year is from Australian Defense Magazine, which does an annual 'top 40' survey of the top 40 contractors to Defense in Australia. So I must say, if it wasn't for them, I don't know where we'd be. We'd have nothing. So, that magazine actually provides a valuable public service by doing this survey every year. The catch with it though is that of course they can't compel everyone to fill in the survey and to do it. So for starters, all the data is self-reported by industry and it can't be independently verified. Also, if a company doesn't wanna participate in a given year, it just doesn't. So whether that's because its revenue has dropped and it's not a good look or whatever reason, that creates gaps in the data. Which means that we're not always using exactly the same data set every year.

There's also one significant company. It's one of the US Big Five, General Dynamics, which has operations in Australia. And as far as I'm aware, it also exports from here as well, but it chooses not to participate at all. So its figures aren't included in the data either. So the numbers I'm going to give you and the data that comes out of that survey is not comprehensive and they're also not verifiable. But they're all we got. So that's all we can use.

So for last financial year, 23-24 financial year, the top 15 arms manufacturers in Australia got about $11 billion in revenue from defense. The biggest, the top ranked one in the survey was the British company, BAE systems, which got 2 billion of that to itself. So BAE took not too far below one fifth of the total arms revenue to itself. The reason I focus on the top 15 in particular, well, that's where most of the big foreign subsidiaries are. But also, it was interesting in 2017, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a think tank, did a study that found on average, and it looked back a long way, so this was back in 2017, it did this work. For the 20 years, up until 2015, the top 15 contractors in Australia took 91% of the revenue. So, this has not been researched since, to my knowledge. However, this is the sort of work, especially given AUKUS, that we urgently need to get done: research on the industry so we know how much money it's getting and where it's going and what's happening.

My guess is that the same 91% really will still apply, that the top 15 will take, and which is all the foreign companies basically, will still take 91% of the revenue. It's probably even increasing slightly given AUKUS coming along now. And given how much money is flowing already to US shipyards, more billions. The thing to say then is all the Australian owned companies get left with the handful of crumbs, which is the 9%. That's the rest of the industry. So that's where the Australian companies are and that's what they get in terms of arms industry spend in Australia.

Employment and Economic Impact

Lilly McKenzie: So even if they are foreign owned, we're still seeing a lot of Australians working there. Isn't that an economic benefit?

Michelle Fahy: In fact, there are not nearly as many jobs as people think. This is a major area of government spin. The government and industry create what I call a deliberately false impression by emphasizing jobs at every media interview with figures that they never substantiate, I might add. And I believe they keep the truth in the shadows because it's actually a very small number of jobs.

The best information says that the industry employs about 50,000 people. The three biggest foreign owned arms companies here - so BAE Systems is the biggest, and then we've also got Thales and Boeing - together those three companies employ about 14,000 people. So just three companies are employing almost a third of the total arms industry in Australia. To give you, your listeners, some kind of comparisons: i n the mining industry in Australia, there's about 325,000 people employed. In banking and finance, there's about just over half a million. 700,000 working in postal and transport. 1.4 million people work in construction, 2.3 million in health. So 50,000 sounds like a much smaller number, and it is a small number. In fact, our total workforce is around 14.6 million. And of that, the 50,000 arms making jobs, represent 0.3% of Australia's workforce.

Lilly McKenzie: Wow,

Michelle Fahy: I should say yes. Sorry. Go. Lilly

Lilly McKenzie: No, No was just going to say that's definitely, a lot smaller than I would've thought, and I'm sure what most people would've thought when you put it down into percentages like that.

Michelle Fahy: The jobs are not a significant factor. In addition, manufacturing jobs are in high demand in Australia, and these are skilled manufacturing jobs. And Monash Uni did a study for defense actually a few years back that found that most of these people, if they got laid off from somewhere because they lost a contract or whatever, they would very quickly be reemployed elsewhere. So the employment factor really isn't a big deal in Australia. Indeed, most of the weaponry and war machines Australia buys is supporting jobs in the United States and Europe, and not in Australia. The genuinely Australian owned companies in the industry here, are mostly small to medium sized businesses. They operate as subcontractors in the supply chains of these foreign multinationals. Most of those small companies, a good number of them also have to work for other industries as well, 'cause they don't get enough work and they wouldn't make ends meet otherwise. A lot of these smaller companies aren't even fully employed in the arms industry.

To basically summarize and answer your question, there are reasons for having an arms industry, of course, but job creation is certainly not one of them.

Impact on Democracy and Public Accountability

Lilly McKenzie: Tell me a bit about what the impacts are for our democracy, particularly in Australia?

Michelle Fahy: Yes, that's a very good question. The impacts are pretty profound for Australia of this situation. As we've already been discussing, and that is the major impact, is this loss of sovereignty and independence. We're so hooked in and basically subservient to the global arms industry. There's a loss of sovereignty and independence in that.

But flowing from that, there's also other negative outcomes as well. The more the arms industry has moved in here and basically captured both sides of politics, there's really been a decline in scrutiny and public accountability at the same time as the expenditure has really seriously increased. So we've got lots of money, but a lot less transparency. We just simply don't know the details of how a lot of these arms deals are done, especially not around AUKUS. There just was no public consultation about that. It just came as a bolt out of the blue. So there was a whole lot of back room maneuvering around that, and the Australian public knows nothing about it. Nor do we know anything about what's being exported from here, where to, why, in our name. And with the wars and things going on, with abuses of human rights overseas, we've had exports going to

Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates when the Yemen war was going on. It's been reported recently that, despite the government insisting no exports have gone to Israel, that actually, an Australian company has sent something there to be demonstrated. And my own reporting has shown that of course Australia is still exporting into the F 35 fighter jet supply chain, which Israel has been using. So all this is left very murky and there's not a lot of details. But we do know that Australian parts, components and weapons made here are exported, and can end up in countries where war crimes are being committed, but we don't know anything about it. So that's a really negative outcome. That's unacceptable.

Also, the Australian National Audit Office does a very fine job every year, generally audits one defense program in detail. And we learn about the billions of dollars that can be wasted and the lack of transparency and accountability from the audit office, which does a fantastic job, on many defense 'dud deals' or contracts that run late, or that haven't been managed properly. This has been going on for decades and adds up to tens of billions of dollars which could have been allocated to others of great societal need and environmental need now with the climate crisis. Like with the climate crisis for example, that is also a national security issue. So the fact that there's so little transparency and so much money wasted in defense is actually a problem just because it's sucking resources from other areas that we really need it to be spent on in Australia. So this undermining of transparency and proper public governance and accountability - which invariably accompanies the arrival in a country of a large arms industry because of all the secrecy and backroom deals that are part and parcel of business with this industry - it's led to an increase in conflicted interests, also revolving door appointments in Australia, which is where people from the public sector, so they might be employed by defense or defense related public roles, move into the arms industry or, after they leave their public job or arms industry people are put into public roles in government. So this is another way the industry keeps its influence operating.

Corruption and Conflicts of Interest

Michelle Fahy: So these kinds of practices are increasing in Australia, conflicted interests, revolving door positions, and they're markers for corruption. So the likelihood is that behind the scenes and on some of the details, deals I've examined, there's a lot of eyebrow raising details in there... So it leads to increased corruption, and that's a known factor globally. The arms industry is one of the most corrupt on the planet. I don't think Australia is uniquely exempt from that. There's been many major arms cases overseas, and now that we have a national anti-corruption commission, we would expect that we're going to find that there's been corruption in this industry here too.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission isn't too forthcoming with details of what's been referred to it, but we do know that at least six Defense matters have been referred to the National Anti-Corruption Commission in the past 18 months. There'll be more than that. They're the ones that are, we don't know what they are, but we know there are six. But there'll be others that haven't been talked about as yet.

So I guess to finish off on this point, the arms industry and the government, why do I say there's a lot of corruption or secrecy? They can use this excuse of "national security" and they also use "commercial sensitivity" - because it's a small industry, they can't tell us things because it'd be easy to work out who they were talking about. So they use these two excuses routinely in order to apply blanket secrecy to the details of deals and exports and things that are done here. And unfortunately most of our media, pretty much meekly accepts these reasons and doesn't push the issue. It's a really overused excuse here, and it is just an excuse because in marked contrast to Australia, the Pentagon in the USA, they're vastly more transparent. They have a lot more robust media demanding information over there. This is good for me because so many of our deals are with America. So in my work I can often find things out by reading American media and sources because the Americans are a lot more transparent about this sort of thing. And it just simply isn't covered in Australia. Yes. So that pretty much covers off the major impacts we're talking about for Australia.

Lilly McKenzie: That's really interesting, Michelle. You're talking about things like, impacting sovereignty and impacting democracy, they're definitely scary concepts. Thank you for your time and your expertise today. It's much appreciated and I'm sure our listeners will appreciate it as well.

Michelle Fahy: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lilly McKenzie: Michelle has given us a great overview of the secrecy in the Australian defense industry and our country's international collaboration, particularly when it comes to research and development. A key area that Australia's defense industry is developing in, is that of lethal autonomous weapons or 'LAWS'.

Here to explain more is Matilda Byrne.

Growing autonomous military capabilities and Australia’s landscape

Lilly McKenzie: So Matilda, the Australian arms industry is very much involved and striving even in this development of AI (Artificial Intelligence) in defense. Can you explain a bit about autonomy and autonomous weapons?

Matilda Byrne: Yeah, absolutely. So the integration of AI and other advanced capabilities into warfare and into military technologies is something that we've been seeing rapidly advance over the last few years, and starting even a bit further back. And I guess it's important to know that this is something that's a worldwide trend that's happening for militaries all over the world. Those more advanced countries that have more investment in military capability are doing more of this research and innovation. But the trends that we're seeing are things like, drones, for instance, that were remote controlled, now, not needing that human operator to pilot them. And also, for instance, unmanned aircraft that we're starting to see emerge. And so where this becomes particularly problematic is when AI is starting to be integrated into the functions related to targeting. So that's selecting who and when to attack and the decision to deploy force.

So there is a lot of development happening across the defense landscape related to these kinds of technologies and capabilities. The landscape has actually got a lot of different components. So you have the Department of Defense itself and things like the Defense Science Technology group that sits within the Department of Defense. The Australian Defense forces, so the army, air force and navy. Arms companies, and this encompasses both the large multinationals that Michelle was referring to in her conversation with you earlier, as well as some of those smaller local Australian arms companies and also universities all across Australia that are involved in this defense research and various partnerships and project collaboration that all have different focuses. For example, things like computer vision or automated decisions. Also robotics across these kinds of kind of capabilities which come together to form different kinds of autonomous systems. And also then lead on this potentially slippery slope to autonomous weapons if, that's not controlled correctly.

And there's some big flagship projects as part of this as well. Some of these big investments are in fact in collaboration with large multinationals. So those companies that are foreign based but have sort of some kind of Australian entity. So we have Ghost Bat for instance, which is a partnership between the Air Force and Boeing. Ghost Shark, which is Anduril doing work with the Navy. So these kinds of projects.

Lilly McKenzie: Okay. So how do these projects link to the global arms industry and the overall expansion of multinationals?

Matilda Byrne: Well, if we take an example, for instance, the autonomous aircraft that's now known as Ghost Bat and previously referred to as Loyal Wingman. This is a partnership that's between the Australian Air Force and Boeing Australia, so the Australian entity of Boeing. But more significantly is that in order to deliver this new 'Ghost Bat', a precinct is being invested in, near out of Toowoomba. So a new aerospace development precinct. What is at the center of this precinct is a new Boeing manufacturing facility that can deliver 'Ghost Bats'. So whilst there is maybe broader aerospace initiatives and things involved, this is very much a vision of and tied to Boeing and Boeing's objectives in terms of advancing defense aerospace, and then having this specific kind of cutting edge project which is around an autonomous aircraft and needing to manufacture this has sort of created this landscape.

Lilly McKenzie: So you've mentioned these international collaborations between companies like Boeing and the Australian Air Force. What about other international collaborations that Australia is involved in, in the arms industry?

International Collaboration and AUKUS

Matilda Byrne: I think one key collaboration that's been intensified recently and is worth touching on is not directly to do with the arms industry, but rather is AUKUS. So the security alliance between US, UK, and Australia. Now the most commonly talked about aspect of AUKUS is the nuclear submarine deal, so that's known as pillar one. Pillar two of AUKUS is actually about advanced technology sharing and these kinds of collaborations and working between those countries on these areas. So it's unclear exactly what that collaboration means, or the extent of it, or what's being co-developed or co-tested and things like that. We've seen a autonomy trial happened between the defense forces of the UK, US and Australia, where essentially they had different autonomous systems that they were testing. So that happened recently, but like I said, the extent is not particularly clear. But actually I think AUKUS is also having other knock on effect now that it's been announced, with that clear emphasis on collaboration on technology sharing in pillar two. For instance, another multinational US based arms manufacturer, Anduril, who has now set up in Sydney, when doing so, actually sort of cited the AUKUS deal and the links and cooperation between US and Australia that are key to innovation and something that's now being prioritized even more than ever. And I guess the other thing that Anduril spoke to when they were expanding their operations into Australia were technologies like artificial intelligence, autonomous unmanned systems, and next generation networked weapons, which they can now understand are a top priority for the Australian Defense Force and investments. And in fact, there is a funding arrangement where Defense Science Technology group awarded

the now Australian branch of Anduril a contract for an autonomous submarine, which is called the 'Ghost Shark'. So to complement the 'Ghost Bat'.

Lilly McKenzie: Wow, that's interesting.

Australian arms companies and autonomous systems development

Lilly McKenzie: So as well as the AUKUS collaboration and these larger organizations like Boeing and Anduril, there's some smaller local companies as well involved in this, isn't there?

Matilda Byrne: Yes, that's right. So it's really important I think that we also talk about some of the Australian arms companies that are doing work in this area of autonomy. Because a lot of what we're seeing is actually some of those technologies really pushing the envelope in terms of what's happening militarily and with the autonomy.

So one such company is DefendTex and they've made a loiter ammunition called the 'Drone 40'. And there was actually some news coverage about this because it has been supplied over previous years, recently to Ukraine, during the conflict.

About some of these other arms companies in Australia, we have for example, Cyborg Dynamics and Skyborne Technologies. These have some capabilities they're focused on around unmanned backpack aerial systems, and also unmanned land vehicles. So these go overground and they can be equipped with a payload to attack, but at this stage there would be a remote control function where there's a human operator for doing any targeting.

But we also have something like Athena AI that's being developed by Australian companies. Athena AI is targeting software, so actually focusing on that component, actually selecting or identifying targets . So when you then imagine a possible future where they're getting integrated into some of these other systems that are being developed, then we're starting to see something much closer to an autonomous weapon that we're particularly concerned and very alarmed about and don't want to see being created by Australian companies or any companies in the world for that matter.

And actually one thing that is, important to note that there are conflicts in the world, Ukraine in particular, and some others, where there is essentially real

time testing occurring of these autonomous capabilities. Which has a lot of unprecedented risks associated with it, humanitarian risks as well.

Lilly McKenzie: Yeah, that's definitely interesting there, particularly with the AI targeting.

Ethical, Legal, and Security Concerns of Autonomous Weapons

Lilly McKenzie: But Tilly, can you explain to me and our listeners why is there concern about this technology and about this research?

Matilda Byrne: Yeah, I can give a bit of a brief overview of the myriad of concerns that autonomous weapons pose. All of the new unprecedented risks in terms of legal compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law, concerns around the ethical and moral questions related to having the delegation of life and death decisions to machines, as well as some of the security risks that come with the intensification and acceleration of conflict and lowered barriers to war.

And so what's really concerning is that where there is development in the area of autonomy occurring, there isn't sufficient regulation yet to ensure we have adequate guardrails in place. So we don't have any international law yet that dictates specific prohibitions and regulations. And in absence of that, in the Australian context, amongst all the development that's going on, there isn't clear enough policy to delineate between what's acceptable and what's not acceptable, both morally and legally.

These are key areas where we need transparency. And Michelle spoke earlier about the lack of transparency in the arms industry and in areas like arms exports in particular, and the secrecy and difficulty in getting information, which includes from the government. Now, this is particularly problematic when we are dealing with capabilities that are a combination of different components. So we have the hardware, software programs, and so on, and it will be difficult to always guarantee the end use of these. Similarly, these are technologies or capabilities that are dual use, so there is more than one application or way a particular system could be used.

This is particularly concerning in the area of exports, but also in development and within the advancements being made. An absence of clear policy makes a

really troubling situation where it hasn't been articulated what Australia is committed to doing, or more importantly, not doing.

Lilly McKenzie: So without concrete policy on what we are committed to doing or not doing, what are some of the consequences of that? Or what could be some of the consequences of not having that policy?

Matilda Byrne: Well, it means a few things. One thing is that there is then this slippery slope for what might get manufactured in Australia, developed here. It also means that for people working in these industries, they don't have the clarity around what's acceptable to develop and not. So obviously this is an issue within arms companies themselves.

But more to that, we also have researchers at universities that are involved in research and defense research projects that might not be about an autonomous weapon explicitly, but they might have concerns about their own work and how it's being used and may be used down the track.

And the other thing is that it's just wrong in terms of global norm making at this really critical time when we have so many states who are saying that we need to have new international law established, and we need to be thinking about the way that AI is used in terms of warfare and humanity more broadly. Australia should be on the front foot in contributing to those efforts that are really importantly needed, especially because we're undertaking work in this area.

Australia's Position on Disarmament Treaties

Lilly McKenzie: Definitely. I understand what you're saying there, Matilda. So, previously Australia has supported arms control treaties, so why are we not doing that in this instance?

Matilda Byrne: Yeah, great question, Lilly. So I think, what we've seen before, for instance, when the Arms Trade Treaty was established was a really positive and constructive role that Australia played in that process.

In terms of disarmament treaties, overall, Australia has had a history of generally adopting and then signing and ratifying those treaties. The exception at the moment would be the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. But in general, even though Australia has joined these incredibly important humanitarian disarmament treaties, that hasn't been without civil society

engagement, urging the government to join in on world progress and be part of positive change and shaping that. And that's something that we're seeing here again. So there are many states, in fact, the majority of states that want to see a new legally binding instrument created. So some kind of new international law or treaty that would have prohibitions and other regulations to address autonomous weapons. But Australia continues to be resistant to this, saying that it's not required, which in terms of a country that's doing a lot in the R&D space is really irresponsible. And not a positive role in terms of global norm setting that we were just talking about.

Civil Society and Advocacy Movements

Lilly McKenzie: Matilda, you've mentioned civil society and how important that has been in previous arms control treaties and similar defense campaigns. How is that being affected or how is that having an impact in the potential for autonomous weapons legislation?

Matilda Byrne: Definitely civil society is really active on the issue of autonomous weapons, and in fact, it was from civil society that concerns on robotics and AI being used in warfare first emerged. It was, researchers and other people from the tech industry concerned about this. So really, a warning from the experts developing this kind of technology about the harms. And there's also the Stop Killer Robots campaign. So, Stop Killer Robots was launched in 2012, but now is a coalition of over 250 different diverse organizations across more than 70 different countries. The Stop Killer Robots campaign's main goal is to see new international law on autonomous weapons that has specific prohibitions, in particular prohibition on autonomous weapons that target people because we see this as particularly abhorrent and also having issues, legally as well. And then also other kinds of regulations needed to maintain meaningful human control over the use of force.

And so SafeGround is a member of the Stop Killer Robots International Campaign Coalition and we focus on campaigning on Australia Stop Killer Robots activities within the Australian context.

So what our work has really been looking at is public awareness and engagement, and also parliamentary engagement. So really trying to push for more political activity on this issue and to really highlight the Australian position, the problems with it, and to insist that Australia commit like other countries to the establishment of a legally binding instrument and adopt clear domestic policies that can hopefully adequately regulate the complicated tapestry of development that we've spoken about today.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Lilly McKenzie: Right. So, Matilda, if we've got listeners from Australia here, what can they do if they are concerned? How can they get involved?

Matilda Byrne: Well, as a starting point, have conversations with your colleagues, friends, family. You can jump online to learn more. You can check out the SafeGround or Stop Killer Robots website and connect with us on social media channels.

Another key action you can take, especially as we have the election approaching, is to get in contact with your local MP afterwards. And let them know that this is an important issue and you want to see them engage in activity at Parliament to stop killer robots.

Lilly McKenzie: Great. Well, thank you so much for giving us that overview, Matilda. Really appreciate it and I'm sure our listeners do as well.

Matilda Byrne: My pleasure. Thank you very much.

Lilly McKenzie: Thanks for tuning into this episode of the SafeGround Podcast 'Stay in command'. I'm your host, Lilly Mackenzie. Thanks.