

ISSUE BRIEF

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U.N. Conference Debating a Ban on Autonomous Weapons: Understanding Key Issues

Steven Groves

This week, a ban on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) is being debated at the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) in Geneva. The U.S. delegation has been non-committal on such a ban, and U.S. policy currently permits the Department of Defense (DOD) to pursue the development of LAWS in a responsible manner.

At the conference, the United States should oppose any new protocol that would ban or regulate the development or use of LAWS by U.S. armed forces. The U.S. delegation should take particular care to identify nations that are inclined to support a ban or moratorium on LAWS and persuade those nations against that course of action. Moreover, the U.S. should align itself with nations who are committed to the responsible development and use of LAWS.

For its part, Congress should fund the research and development of autonomous technology. The capabilities of LAWS to increase U.S. national security have yet to be fully explored, and a preemptive ban or moratorium on such research is against U.S. interests.

The following publications by Heritage Foundation staff shed light on these and other LAWS-related issues:

The U.S. Should Oppose the U.N.'s Attempt to Ban Autonomous Weapons

Steven Groves

Backgrounder No. 2996

March 5, 2015

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/03/the-us-should-oppose-the-uns-attempt-to-ban-autonomous-weapons>

As many as 40 nations are currently developing military robotics. Some weapons already in use may be considered “autonomous” (or may be easily modified to be autonomous). Once activated, LAWS can select and engage targets without further human input. As the prevalence of LAWS has grown, so has a concerted effort to ban them. The United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, and even some nations have coalesced to ensure that LAWS are no longer developed or deployed by any nation. These parties will meet in April 2015 at the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in Geneva. The United States should attend the CCW and make clear that it has no intention of banning LAWS or supporting a moratorium on their development. The United States should oppose attempts at the CCW to ban LAWS, and should continue to develop LAWS in a responsible manner in order to keep U.S. armed forces at the leading edge of military technology.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4385>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Autonomous Military Technology: Opportunities and Challenges for Policy and Law

James Jay Carafano, PhD

Backgrounder No. 2932

August 6, 2014

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/08/autonomous-military-technology-opportunities-and-challenges-for-policy-and-law>

Autonomous technologies may well be a defining characteristic of future generations of military systems. In order to address these challenges prudently, three things are necessary: (1) to define autonomous technology clearly and assess its current capabilities and limitations; (2) to appreciate the ethical implications of developing and employing autonomous technologies, as well as which safeguards might be put in place to avoid abuse; and (3) to understand the current legal framework addressing their employment. Autonomous technology is a promising area of development and has the potential to greatly increase U.S. military capacities. Congress should encourage research on autonomous technologies by providing adequate funding, creating clear policies for autonomous capabilities and use, and supporting a sensible legal framework to govern such systems.

Robotics and the Next Steps for National Security

Jena Baker McNeill and Ethel Machi

Backgrounder No. 2344

November 30, 2009

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/11/robotics-and-the-next-steps-for-national-security>

When it comes to robotics technology, the future is here. Robots across the world now traverse hazardous terrain, carry out surveillance missions, and perform remote surgery. They are becoming ever more sophisticated and autonomous. Robots easily and safely perform tasks that would otherwise endanger human lives and do so faster and more efficiently than is possible by conventional methods. Robots are used by private industries and by the federal government. Robots play a vital role in maintaining the competitive edge in national security. This Heritage Foundation analysis explains why it is vital that Congress continue to fund robotics research and development in the U.S.

The Pentagon's Robots: Arming the Future

James Jay Carafano, PhD, and Andrew Gudgeon

Backgrounder No. 2093

December 19, 2007

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2007/12/the-pentagons-robots-arming-the-future>

Robots have stepped out of the science fiction pages and onto the battlefield. Thousands have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, supporting military operations on land, at sea, and in the air. As technology advances, robots will become increasingly autonomous, providing new cutting-edge national security applications that could give the U.S. military significant competitive advantages. The U.S. government should continue prudent investments in robotic technologies, particularly for autonomous operations. Congress can help by establishing a framework that will facilitate national security research and development programs and by addressing concerns about the risk to humans with legislative guidelines for liability and safety issues in research, development, and procurement.

—**Steven Groves** is *Bernard and Barbara Lomas Senior Research Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*