

Military Perspective on Accountability In the Context of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems

Dear Chairperson,

We would like to share our understanding of accountability from a military perspective. The key point is, that it is too early in the process to make final judgements regarding the development and introduction of autonomy into certain parts of weapon systems, but it is of utmost importance to make sure that human beings remain accountable for use of their crucial functions.

As much as any doctrine remains a national affair it must be subject to external factors and one to be especially taken into account is the International Humanitarian Law. It is a commonly known fact that even if a national legal system does not perceive an activity as crime – such doing is a crime when considered a crime under IHL.

Several countries, including Poland, have introduced numerous hours of lectures and exercises as well as volumes of instructions on IHL into their military education and training system. The exercises and training in IHL have resulted in an increase in humanitarian awareness in the Polish Armed Forces in general and for each and every soldier in particular. A very positive trend that we should build upon.

There is a wide array of wrongdoings defined in the International Humanitarian Law for which a member of armed forces can be held accountable. But what is accountability? In terms of military activity, accountability is acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for decisions, actions and their consequences, needed to achieve an authorized military objective.

This is, however strongly associated with the level of authority and autonomy an individual is given. This is clearly visible when looking at the level of autonomy transferred down the chain of command. A commander of higher rank transfers part of his powers to a commander of a lower level. As a result we end up in a situation where an individual whose actions should be judged and penalized, if necessary, can always be identified.

We have already delegated certain decisions on weapons release to machines in defensive systems. As highly automated as they are, they are still far from being fully autonomous. They simply perform functions that have been incorporated into their highly sophisticated software.

Automation of combat systems does not mean they are out of human control. Use of lethal force, in every case has a responsible human behind it. The individual responsibility of commanders and soldiers for their decisions and actions including wrongdoings is exercised under any circumstances.

But, can a machine be allowed to decide whether to kill or not? The military answer to that question is simply NO, we want and have to be in control. Which functions can we securely and responsibly delegate to machines? We claim that other function could be performed automatically or even autonomously, utterly in line with the concept of Meaningful Human Control.

We have barely launched the debate, but from a military perspective it seems that the concept of exercising the human control over crucial functions of a Lethal Autonomous Weapons System satisfies both the trend of introducing the latest technologies into our inventories and to creating environment where humans may be held accountable for their decisions.

Poland, from the outset, perceived the concept as a tool to indicate which functions may and which may never be delegated to a machine, so that the possibility of indicating a human being behind the use of lethal force is never removed. We highly appreciate the UNIDIR's effort to shape LAWS related discussion with its extremely valuable papers on the Meaningful Human Control. Regardless of the fact that there may be some problems with the definition it is a useful framework to discuss the issue of autonomous weapons further, without any prejudice to the final result of our deliberation.