



Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi

Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the Meeting of Experts on Lethal autonomous weapons systems of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects

13 May 2014

Mr. President,

Let me first commend you for the good preparation for this meeting, which is a very important one, even if the mandate is simply to discuss in an informal setting emerging concerns around new technologies which would not only impact the way of conducting war but more importantly would question the humanity of our societies in relying on machines to make decisions about death and life.

In 2013, this delegation expressed its deep concerns in relation with the use of drones and the troubling ethical consequences for users and victims alike.

While in many fields, autonomous technology may indeed prove beneficial to humanity, the application of autonomy to weapons technology is entirely distinct, insofar as it seeks to place a machine in the position of deciding over life and death. We are most troubled by emerging technologies of autonomous weapon systems which may move beyond surveillance or intelligence-gathering capabilities into actually engaging human targets. Good intentions could be the beginning to a slippery slope. When humanity is confronted with big and decisive challenges—from health to the environment, to war & peace—taking the time to reflect, relying on the principle of precaution, and adopting a reasonable attitude of prevention are far more suitable than venturing into illusions and self-defeating endeavours.

Autonomous weapon systems, like any other weapon system, must be reviewed and pass the IHL examination. Respect for international law, for human rights law, and

IHL is not optional. The Holy See supports the view that autonomous weapon systems have, like drones, a huge deficit which cannot be addressed only by respecting the rules of IHL. To comply, these systems would require human qualities that they inherently lack. The ethical consequences of such systems if deployed and used cannot be overlooked and underestimated.

The increasing trend of dehumanisation of warfare compels all nations and societies to reassess their thinking. The prospect of developing armed robots designed to engage human targets has the potential of changing the fundamental equation of war. Taking humans “out of the loop” presents significant ethical questions, primarily because of the absence of meaningful human involvement in lethal decision-making.

Mr. President,

For the Holy See the fundamental question is the following: Can machines—well-programmed with highly sophisticated algorithms to make decisions on the battlefield which seek to comply with IHL—truly replace humans in decisions over life and death?

The answer is no. Humans must not be taken out of the loop over decisions regarding life and death for other human beings. Meaningful human intervention over such decisions must always be present.

Decisions over life and death inherently call for human qualities, such as compassion and insight, to be present. While imperfect human beings may not perfectly apply such qualities in the heat of war, these qualities are neither replaceable nor programmable. Studies of soldiers’ experiences support that human beings are innately averse to taking life, and this aversion can show itself in moments of compassion and humanity amidst the horrors of war.

Programming an “ethical governor” or “artificial intelligence” to enable autonomous weapon systems to technically comply with the law of war in the areas of distinction and proportionality, even if possible, is not sufficient. The fundamental problem still exists: a lack of humanity, a lack of meaningful involvement by human beings in decisions over the life and death of other human beings. The human capacity for moral reasoning and ethical decision-making is more than simply a collection of algorithms. The human factor in decisions over life and death can never be replaced.

It is already extremely complex to apply the rules of distinction and proportionality in the context of war. Distinguishing combatant from civilian, or weighing military gain and human suffering, in the heat of war, is not reducible to technical matters of programming. Meaningful intervention by humans, with our unique capacity for moral reasoning, is absolutely essential in making these decisions.

Part of the justification for developing these weapons may be the idea that “if we don’t develop this technology, someone else will.” The development of complex autonomous weapon systems is likely out of the reach of smaller states or non-state

actors. However, once such systems are developed by larger states, it will not be extremely difficult to copy them. History shows that developments in military technology, from crossbows to drones, give the inventing side a temporary military advantage. The inevitable widespread proliferation of these weapon systems will fundamentally alter the nature of warfare for the whole human family.

Minimizing the risks to its own forces is understandable and legitimate. However, with no casualties or tales of horror from one side, the domestic political cost of waging war becomes less significant. This represents an important deterrent to overly-hastened military action, and is a deterrent that should not be lightly disregarded.

Autonomous weapon systems technology makes war too easy and removes its reliance on soldierly virtues. Several military experts and professional, who consider killing people a most serious matter, are deeply troubled by the idea of delegating these decisions to machines. Obviously these voices value the potential of robots to assist in bomb disposal, evacuation of the wounded, or surveying a battle scene, but the potential for robots to completely replace soldiers on the field remains of grave concern to them.

Furthermore, the delegation of the human decision-making responsibilities to an autonomous system designed to take human lives creates an accountability vacuum that makes it impossible to hold anyone sufficiently accountable for violations of international law incurred by an autonomous weapon system.

It is exactly these concerns that call for a multilateral approach to questioning the development and implementation of autonomous weapon systems. As in the case of actions like the Protocol on Blinding Laser Weapons, it is imperative to act before the technology for autonomous weapon systems progresses and proliferates, before such weapons fundamentally alter warfare into an even less humane, less human, affair.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that meaningful human involvement is absolutely essential in decisions affecting the life and death of human beings, to recognise that autonomous weapon systems can never replace the human capacity for moral reasoning, including in the context of war, to recognise that development of autonomous weapon systems will ultimately lead to widespread proliferation, and to recognise that the development of complex autonomous weapon systems which remove the human actor from lethal decision-making is short-sighted and may irreversibly alter the nature of warfare in a less humane direction, leading to consequences we cannot possibly foresee, but will in any case increase the dehumanisation of warfare.

