

Lethal Autonomous Weapons: The Stance of the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the societal implications of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). The Philippines' position in its policy on LAWS is to support a specific ban on fully autonomous weapons systems with regulated oversight of human-supervised and semi-autonomous systems. This decision balances adherence to international humanitarian law and ethical military technology use, ensuring human involvement in critical warfare decisions and minimizing unintended harm. The policy enables the Philippines to utilize technological advancements in defense responsibly, which is in line with ethical standards and international law. Influenced by the insights of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, it harmonizes its diplomatic and military considerations, upholding humanitarian and legal standards while addressing strategic military needs. Lastly, it provides policy recommendations for regulating LAWS to prevent the proliferation of such technologies that could destabilize global peace and security.

Keywords: Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS), killer robots, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Warfare, and military ethics

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a drone flying over a battlefield. Instead of a human operator deciding where it should go and what it should do, the drone itself chooses to launch an attack. If it makes a mistake or is hacked, it could accidentally hit a school or hospital.

Lethal Autonomous Weapons (LAWs), also called autonomous weapon systems (AWS) or killer robots, are military systems that can autonomously identify and attack targets without any human involvement. These systems employ cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and robotics to make instantaneous decisions on the battlefield. LAWs function with a significant level of self-governance, thereby minimizing or eradicating the requirement for direct human supervision (Sayler, 2024).

This position paper is vital to the mission of the Societal Impacts Journal as it addresses ethical, legal, and humanitarian challenges that arise from the development and deployment of these technologies. The work contributes to the broader effort of improving society by fostering a critical dialogue on the regulation and ethical use of advanced military technologies, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

Additionally, this paper discusses whether the Philippines should support the ban on LAWS or advocate for regulation. These include determining the threshold, ethical considerations, and responsible practices for banning or regulating the conditions in which LAWS can be utilized and which among these international standards and definitions the Philippines can adapt and support in crafting a policy framework. It includes diverse inputs from key informant interviews and existing literature, supplying a broad spectrum of knowledge and perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The research on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) was conducted through key informant interviews, and policy analysis to understand the ethical, legal, and societal implications of these technologies. The research design included qualitative methods, primarily focusing on these expert interviews with policymakers and the military which provided diverse perspectives on the regulation and ethical considerations surrounding LAWS.

The paper proceeded by analyzing the positions of various stakeholders, including the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, to gauge the national stance on LAWS and potential policy recommendations. This involved assessing the feasibility and implications of different regulatory approaches, such as outright bans on fully autonomous systems and strict regulation of human-supervised and semi-autonomous systems.

To ensure replicability, the study evaluated the societal impacts of LAWS through literature review, focusing on ethical considerations, economic implications, military consequences, political repercussions, psychological effects, and legal concerns. The tools used included a combination of thematic analysis for qualitative data and policy analysis techniques to identify key trends and gaps in existing regulations.

Implications

The findings of this research underscore the critical need for comprehensive regulation of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) to prevent potential societal harms and promote ethical standards in military applications.

Ethical Considerations

The delegation of life and death decisions in warfare to AI poses a threat to human agency and morality. This development will challenge traditional notions of moral responsibility during warfare since it blurs the boundaries of accountability and raises important questions regarding the ethical implications of such non-human agents making such decisions (Blanchard, 2024). However, the problem of accountability remains complex. When autonomous weapons systems operate without human control, they have the potential to cause unintended harm or violate international law. In such cases, there will be questions of whom to hold accountable for their actions: developers, operators, military commanders, or political leaders who authorized their use. The lack of transparency in this context opens up the door for many more legal and ethical issues because the current mechanisms for accountability via responsible entities may be inadequate to accommodate the distinct characteristics found in autonomous systems (Boulain & Bo, 2023).

Economic Issues

Developing, deploying, and supporting LAWS requires significant financial investment. The economic burden of maintaining an autonomous weapons program can be onerous to defense budgets and siphon resources from other critical areas (Shaw, Shaw, Agarwal, & Mitra, 2020).

Military Implications

LAWS can lower war costs by reducing the number of soldiers on the battlefield. As political and social costs decrease, this may increase international wars. Less human cost of war may lead to a more careless attitude and more frequent and longer conflicts. In complex and dense environments, autonomous systems may struggle to distinguish combatants from non-combatants and identify conflict and safety zones, and these identification errors can increase civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. It can make conventional warfare asymmetric, faster, more effective, and less predictable. These systems' autonomy

allows for new strategic and tactical considerations that were previously impossible. This change could render military doctrines obsolete and destabilize defense planning (Etzioni & Etzioni, 2017).

Political Repercussions

The proliferation of LAWS is seen as a setback to world peace and security, shattering the existing balance of power among nations (Klare, 2024). The collateral damage from countries using LAWS could work against the legitimacy of such activities and call for international censure. Countries will not only be forced to respond but may feel compelled to develop or acquire the same weapons. This can initiate an arms race in which every country tries to outdo the other to develop more advanced and effective autonomous weapons. This will, therefore, bring about swift advances in military technologies, thus increasing global instability. In the hands of oppressive governments or non-state actors, LAWS can be used to undermine civilian populations. The precision and lethality of these weapons make them potent tools for enforcing authoritarian control. In this setting, their deployment can lead to human rights abuses and further strengthen repressive systems.

Psychological Effects

The psychological impact of lethal autonomous weapons on the battlefield encompasses soldiers and civilians alike. The fear and uncertainty that robotic opponents will bring can eventually develop stress, anxiety, and trauma. In one way or another, the impersonal characteristic of these weapons, in reducing human life to a state of no value, alters the psychology of war (Salinas, 2024).

Legal Concerns

Ideally, the development of LAWS should be made under a strong international humanitarian law framework that includes the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law since this weapon has autonomy, making it complex to achieve distinction, proportionality, and necessity. All these could add to even more complexity in implementing humanitarian laws and seeking justice for war crimes due to the vagueness of such legal situations (Davison, 2017).

Perspective from the Department of Foreign Affairs

The multilateral conversation about LAWS continues because governments need a way to regulate them. Technology moves quickly, so governments must adapt. As with any issue that affects global well-being and requires international consensus and collective action, the Philippines' approach to this conversation is driven by its national interest. As a developing nation, the Philippines believes technology should benefit the Filipino people in all economic progress and security areas, not harm them. The Philippine public pronouncements on all issues, including cyberspace and space, reflect this theme. The country does not develop or use LAWS, so its voice and those of similar countries are crucial.

The Philippines' strong humanitarian tradition of putting people first, especially regarding weapons, enriches these discussions. This is why the Philippines signed the UN Charter, created the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ), initiated the Manila Declaration for the Peaceful Settlement of International Disputes, joined the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and led the fight for migrant workers', displaced people's, refugees', and PWDs' rights. This principle of always putting people first requires that weapons be under human control to uphold humanitarian law.

The Philippines' emerging position is that LAWS should remain under human control. Meanwhile, Philippine government inter-agency consultations continue to define and refine the national position to meaningfully engage in the global conversation and shape the issue's narrative and international norm.

Perspective from the Armed Forces of the Philippines

The Armed Forces of the Philippines is currently in its modernization program and has limited provisions or plans concerning LAWS. Though there is already a plan about the concept and procurement of lethal autonomous weapons systems outside the modernization plan through special procurement, its scope is only limited to arming unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and loitering munitions. Topics about LAWS are seldom discussed and have not reached the consciousness of decisionmakers.

1. The AFP's LAWS position should be based on existing and international humanitarian law laws. This prohibition should be applied to all combatants to avoid collateral damage, as regional wars worldwide increase the likelihood of armed conflicts.
2. LAWS that are designed to inflict injury or death on humans should be forbidden. Advanced weapons systems that operate without human control should not be given authority over decisions involving human life.
3. Humans should be accountable for weapons and weapon systems. They should effectively control the operational aspect of LAWS, specifically in the decision-making process. Humans make wars tolerable and controllable.
4. For all states to emplace safeguards to prevent the illegal purchase of LAWS and its proliferation. This will prevent major powers from conducting proxy wars and allow non-state actors to use this advanced weapons system for unlawful use.

Banning or regulating LAWS will boost national security. With current AFP capabilities, the Philippines relies on treaties and alliances to protect its sovereignty. LAWS could change alliances and wars if major powers develop and use them. If so, the Department of Defense must change its AFP modernization plan, which has political budgetary implications. This may delay or accelerate modernization, affecting doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy. Disarmament of LAWS will be beneficial given the current state and perennial regional security conflicts, but the Philippines should include LAWS in its plans to protect its interests and the well-being of all Filipinos.

The Stance of the Philippines on LAWS

Support a Specific Ban on Fully Autonomous Weapons Systems with Strict Regulation of Human-Supervised and Semi-Autonomous Systems

This position is consistent with the 11 fundamental principles outlined in the CCW GGE 2019 Report. The primary principle underscores the universal applicability of international humanitarian law (IHL) to all types of weapon systems, necessitating the establishment of regulations to ensure adherence. The second and fourth principles emphasize the importance of upholding human responsibility and accountability in decisions regarding the use of weapons. While fully autonomous systems cannot guarantee this, they can be maintained in systems humans supervise. Principle 3, which emphasizes the importance of human-machine interaction, advocates for using human-supervised systems to adhere to International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Principle 4, which emphasizes accountability and a responsible chain of command, provides additional evidence against fully autonomous systems. Principles 5 and 6 necessitate the evaluation of legal and security aspects for novel weaponry, specifically focusing on the dangers of widespread adoption and improper utilization by prohibiting the use of fully autonomous systems. Principle 7 involves conducting risk assessments and implementing mitigation measures to ensure that semi-autonomous systems operate within the boundaries of laws and ethical standards. The need for stringent controls is justified by the principles of upholding International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and avoiding the attribution of human characteristics to technologies (Principles 8 and 9). Aligning with regulating human-involved systems over fully autonomous ones, ensuring that policies within the CCW framework (Principles 10 and 11) do not impede peaceful technological advancements while striking a balance between military necessity and humanitarian considerations is important. Therefore, the principles strongly advocate prohibiting fully autonomous

weapons systems and rigorous control over human-supervised and semi-autonomous systems (UNODA, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The Philippines' position in its policy on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) is to support a specific ban on fully autonomous weapons systems with regulated oversight of human-supervised and semi-autonomous systems. The decision, influenced by insights from different agencies, ensures the responsible use of technological advancements in defense by balancing international humanitarian law, ethical military technology use, and strategic military needs with human involvement in critical decisions to minimize unintended harm.

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