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CS 59866: Ethical, Legal, and Policy Issues in Technology and Cybersecurity

9/19/2022

Position Paper Week 4: Autonomous Weapons systems

As technology keeps advancing and we move towards an even more complex and interconnected world every day, these new inventions and discoveries have tremendously improved not only our lifestyle, but nearly every aspect of our life making a lot of things easier. However, it is also true that with all of these improvements we keep seen, along with them, unfortunately, there arrive new controversies regarding new technologies and inventions. One of which I’ve decided to expand and explore in this position paper, that is the topic of autonomous weapons systems.

Referenced from the article “Pros and Cons of Autonomous Weapons Systems”, by Amitai Etzioni and Oren Etzioni. In this position paper as the name of the article suggests, I plan to explore and expand on the positions taken as well give my take on both sides of the argument. The article mainly focuses on providing valid arguments to both areas, the ones in favor of the development and use of fully autonomous weapons systems and the ones against them.

Two groups of advocates are notorious when we talk about autonomous weapons systems. In one side are the ones that support the use of these technologies because of the great and obvious advantages that they provide to the miliary system. The other group believes that there are clear and moral justifications for the open use of these technologies.

One advantage that autonomous weapon systems offer to the military forces is the development and deployment of robots that can serve as “force multiplier”. That mean that military personnel, troops, and warfighters can be reduced and replaced by robots which are more suited for certain mission. This also implies that there are going to be a small number of casualties and injured soldiers. In addition, less expenses since deploying these robots is a lot cheaper that what cost the government of the USA to depend solely on soldiers.

Corroborated from the article each soldier costs roughly $850,000 per year. Where a robot that can mimic the functionalities of a warfighter, costs $230,000. Also, important to mention that these robots can sometimes be of more use that soldiers since they have the advantages to infiltrate in locations soldiers can’t, they are suited for dangerous missions allowing soldiers to not risk their lives, as missions with exposure to radiation and deactivating bombs.

Besides the physical and monetary advantages that these technologies can provide to the military, it is also brought up that there are moral justifications for the deployment of these. For example, it is difficult to believe that these technologies are going to stop improving, and therefore making possible for these machines to potentially be preferable to human fighters. Since these machines lack a self-preservation instinct and are not clouded by emotions such as fear or anger, and they can process a lot more sensory information than humans. It can also be said that it is ethically advantageous to replace humans from high-stress combat zones in favor of robots, since there is evidence that clearly supports the negative impact war can have in the mental health of soldiers.

That being said, now that we’ve seen the advantages of autonomous weapons systems, on the other hand, there are the ones that believe that the usage of these technologies as intended should be completely banned. One points against the use of these, is that there isn’t evidence that supports robots could, in the future, have the functionalities required to accurate target identification, situational awareness and use moderate force. As of now, it is said that autonomous weapons systems cannot easily determine between civilians and soldiers, and such decision can have serious consequences resulting in civilian casualties.

Another big problem that opponents of autonomous weapons systems bring up is the ethical issue regarding accountability. Since somebody has to be held responsible for the mistakes made by these technologies. Since these machines can make decisions on their own, it is difficult to determine who is responsible for the errors, whether it was an error in the program or in the autonomous deliberations of the machine. Therefore, any weapon for which it is not possible to determine any sort of responsibility for the death of people should not be used in war.

In response to this latter issue, that being the case it can be argued that the real problem with autonomous weapons systems should not be the ethics, but safety and reliability. Coming all down to ensuring that all possible risks, malfunctioning and problems these weapons can possibly have been addressed. Also note that these weapons do not have to be disregarded and banned as such, since it always depends in the context they are used and how they are used. These weapons could still be useful in situations where there are no civilians for instance.

It has been agreed to the limit of other lethal weapons, but it is still in question where exactly the line is drawn for autonomous weapons systems. Considering that nonautonomous and semi-autonomous weapons systems are deployed now on days, the main concern is how the possible flaws of fully autonomous weapons systems are going to be address or avoided. One can take two directions, a downstream regulation approach, which encourages the development of regulations as these technologies are deployed. I think taking a more upstream approach is crucial in this case, setting limitation up front to prevent the possible dangers and tragedies.

Despite these autonomous weapons systems being indeed beneficial in many aspects of the military. There also exist possible dangers and concerning issues as seen. However, I believe that in this case the benefits these technologies can provide outweigh the potential downsides. I think autonomous weapons systems can be used, but there must be limitations and restrictions to how and where they can be used, like being possible for these to be used in a setting with no civilians. Also, these technologies should be tested and optimized rigorously to ensure the best safety and outcome of their use.