

The Ethics of AI in Warfare

Major powers including the USA, China, and Russia are rapidly developing AI-powered lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), sometimes called "killer robots." These are AI-controlled drones or ground-based robots that identify and kill military targets without any direct human action.

LAWs are being developed to react faster than humans, operate without fatigue or hesitation, and reach targets with more accuracy and precision. In recent trials, AI systems have outperformed humans: in one US military simulation, an AI pilot defeated an expert human pilot 5/5 times.

Supporters claim it's only a matter of time before these systems outperform human soldiers across the board, which could be a decisive advantage to win a war. They compare this to past advancements in warfare, like gunpowder, where nations that refused to adapt were defeated. If one nation refuses to deploy "killer robots" due to morality, their nation and people could be defenseless against another warring country that uses LAWs. They argue that use of killer robots would take human soldiers off the battlefield, leading to fewer casualties and lives lost at war. Additionally, unlike human soldiers, machines cannot commit atrocities like torture or sexual violence. Since machines do not suffer from fatigue, panic, or revenge, they may actually follow the rules of war more consistently than humans. They claim that LAWs could theoretically reduce unlawful killings rather than increase them.

Some opponents, though, argue that machine algorithms should never be given the power to end lives. Others claim that LAWs could make unpredictable errors and execute innocent civilians. If there is faulty programming, civilians may be killed by the AI before the error is found. Additionally, AI has been shown to exhibit racial and gender biases, favoring lighter skin tones and males. Critics say these hidden biases could result in the death of innocents just for the way they look. LAWs also may make war easier and more frequent, as fewer fatalities at war could reduce public pressure that would normally deter war. Finally, LAWs could be especially susceptible to sabotage or hacking, both from the inside by domestic terrorists or from an enemy. If killer robots are hacked, the consequences could be catastrophic, possibly even more so than not using them at all.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it ethical to use AI weapons in warfare?
2. If enemy countries deploy killer robots, should survival and national security outweigh any ethical worries about deploying similar weapons in response?
3. If an AI weapon kills a civilian, who is responsible? The programmer, the commander, or no one at all?

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