

From unmanned to autonomous weapons: how the EU is adrift

Later this week the European Defence Agency hosts its annual conference: *'From unmanned to autonomous systems: trends, challenges and opportunities'*. The event is the annual get-together of the EU establishment and the representatives of the defence industry. We, a group of xxx European scientists, are alarmed about the military turn the EU is taking. Both the massive amount of public funds that the EU is allocating for military research and the potential development of autonomous weapons should worry us all.

Defence policy in Europe remains a national jurisdiction. What wars to wage, what equipment to buy, they remain questions to be answered by every government independently. But as an economic union the EU has a listening ear for every industry, including the defence industry. This is how, in 2017, the European Union took the unprecedented step of setting up a military research programme worth 90 million euros. In 2019 the European Parliament will vote on the much larger European Defence Fund, a 13 billion euros military funding scheme.

The Fund is already controversial. The European Ombudsman has slammed the European Commission on several instances for its lack of transparency. There are also concerns about the murky [involvement of the defence industry](#) in its set-up of the Fund. [Research](#) shows that some policy proposals from the European Commission were almost literally copied from position papers of the defence industry.

EU funding of military research will not be without consequence. It will likely fuel an arms race. The military technologies developed today will be the ones bought tomorrow to fight the wars of the future. In the meantime, scientific research which might actually contribute to preventing violent conflict is being neglected. Furthermore, EU citizens' tax money isn't financing just any kind of weapon technology. The focus of EDA's annual conference later this week suggests the EU wants to follow the trend, after drones, toward autonomous weapons. Fully autonomous weapons, also known as *killer robots* would be able to select and engage targets without human intervention. As such they will be unable to meet international humanitarian law standards, including the rules of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity, while they would threaten the fundamental right to life and principle of human dignity.

The line between unmanned and autonomous systems is often a thin one. Since the beginning of this year the European Union has started funding the military project Ocean 2020. This is a project that will integrate enhanced air, naval surface and underwater unmanned systems into fleet operations to build up a recognized maritime picture of developing situations for military commanders. Another [controversial project](#) which is rumored to be in the pipeline is an "armed ground drone" [developed by Estonia, Latvia and Finland](#). As a semi-autonomous companion for soldiers on the ground, it can identify and track targets at ranges of up to 5km. In addition to the actual vehicle, the project would develop an autonomous control system, cyber defence capabilities and an integrated network of sensors.

Because of their controversial nature, civil society, researchers, the European Parliament and a group of states are advocating a ban of autonomous weapons. Governments should prohibit their use and development, as they did in the past with chemical weapons, anti-personnel mines and cluster munition. But the initiative in favor of a ban is being undermined by countries that are exploring the development of such weapons, including the European Union.

For the last four years, we have been commemorating the horrors of the first World War, the war that led to the call 'never again'. Are we, 100 years later, really going to fuel a new arms race?