

ENGAGING MILITARY PERSONNEL

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Gaining the support of serving and retired military personnel is important to achieving a ban on fully autonomous weapons because of their specific knowledge, background and ability to engage and influence other military personnel. The military community, particularly retired personnel or veterans, will engage in this issue because of their concern over leaving life and death decisions to a machine. Often decision makers think they know what military personnel want without asking; as the Campaign we should ask and support those who share our goals.

This guide aims to assist campaigners in the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots to engage with military personnel, retired or serving, in their countries and to provide suggested messages when such engagements occur.

It is important to remember that serving military personnel are in general not permitted to actively support the Campaign whereas retired military personnel are not as constrained. As a consequence any campaigner should approach these two categories differently.

In very general terms, serving military should not be approached outside of their formal chain of command.¹ This may not be necessary when a government has formally indicated its support for the goal of a ban treaty and aligned its position with the Campaign. If that is the case, approaches to senior personnel, through their chain of command, would be useful with an aim of urging foreign militaries to support a ban on autonomous weapons. A senior serving uniformed member could be particularly useful in this role. An approach to serving military should be attempted at as high a level that can be achieved as possible (the most senior rank). The aim of this approach is to gain support at the level of entry and seek more senior level support.

In some countries the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces are one organization, in others they are very separate organizations. In the latter case it would also prove useful to engage the Ministry of Defence as well as the armed forces. Again in the latter case, engaging the Ministry, which often involves uniformed military as well as non-uniformed personnel, should be approached through their chain of command.

In most countries approaching retired military personnel is somewhat simpler. That can be done on an individual basis or through a host of veterans associations. From the perspective of retired military it is very useful to initially “target” former high ranking officers and if possible to have at least one such officer champion the issue to his or her former colleagues. Similarly, a retired Minister of Defence as a champion could also be very helpful.

While the name of the Campaign is well known within the UN system, media, academia and the general public, the term “killer robots” may not be as well-known or accepted within military circles. It is probably best to be cautious with your language when approaching professional militaries. The CCW term “lethal autonomous weapons systems” or “autonomous weapons systems” are more descriptive of what it is that we are actually trying to prohibit.

In the view of the authors, we are all attempting to prohibit a machine, no matter how sophisticated, from engaging any targets with lethal fire or intent when that fire is not directly or expressly controlled by a person. The person, not the machine, is then practically, legally and morally responsible for the results of that engagement. For these and other reasons the Campaign also calls for meaningful human control over the use of force.

ENGAGING THE SERVING MILITARY

The overall aim of this engagement is to convince the serving military to support a prohibition on autonomous weapon systems. As discussed, engaging serving military on an individual basis is unlikely to be successful given constraints normally placed on individuals.

Usually it is easier for NGOs to meet with middle or senior members of the foreign affairs ministry than it is to meet with the military. The approach with the most likelihood of being successful is to engage the military chain of command at as high a level as can be reached and then encourage support from the highest level. Securing a meeting could be problematic and campaigners should use every resource to set up such a meeting. In

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general an NGO cannot expect to meet very senior military decision makers without involving some sort of person of influence (see “door knockers” below) but can expect to engage in discussion with those who can present recommendations to those who make such decisions. In the event this meeting occurs it is important to clarify who it is that you want to meet with. It is recommended that you seek meetings with operations staff (generally those with responsibilities that include the development of operational requirements for acquisition staff to pursue) at as senior a level as possible and avoid meetings with public relations staff, scientific staff and logistic staff.

Someone to knock on the door (or break it down). In order to secure meetings with senior decision makers it would be best to secure the support of

at least one individual, normally retired, who has such access. Let’s call this finding a “door knocker” with enough influence to gain access to appropriate decision makers. An example of this is Canada’s engagement of a former Chief of the Defence Staff to promote universalization of the Ottawa Convention banning landmines. His efforts were aimed at defence ministers, ministers of foreign affairs and very senior military commanders. Another example of a high level “door knocker” was a former Canadian Minister of National Defence who was engaged by the Canadian Red Cross to promote the same treaty, among many other things. Significant other examples include Prince Mired of Jordan and Princess Astrid of Belgium who regularly promote the Ottawa Mine Ban Convention. This same model can be employed using national or international people to support NGO efforts to advance work on the prohibition of autonomous weapon systems.

Finding a “door knocker” may not be a simple process. In general, retired general officers or retired senior military civil servants offer the best opportunity. These people can normally be found through veteran’s organizations or even through social media. Maybe you have already worked with someone who could be a “door knocker” on a different issue, or you could ask any of your contacts for suggestions.

If you are not be able to find a “door knocker” entry point, another approach is to send a letter to the Minister of Defence requesting a meeting and making it clear that the objective of the meeting would be to discuss a prohibition on lethal autonomous weapon systems. A similar letter to the Chief of Defence could also yield results. Direct contact with military officials that are known through international meetings could also provide

an entry point. Remember that elected members of parliament could also be useful contacts.

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What about outside the Chain of Command?

Having said that engagement of serving military should best be done inside the chain of command, there may be opportunities to engage serving military outside of that formal structure. An example of this is engaging military delegates attending international meetings which may or may not be held specifically to discuss “killer robots.” Some of these meetings include the Ottawa Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons or any other disarmament or humanitarian disarmament meetings. You might even encounter serving military personnel at conferences, meetings and workshops in your own country.

What about Foreign Affairs?

In addition to the foregoing regarding serving military, NGOs may want to engage their ministers or secretaries of foreign affairs or retired ministers/secretaries to encourage or influence their government or their military to adopt a policy to prohibit the development or deployment of autonomous weapon systems. In very general terms, in most countries this Ministry tends to be more supportive of humanitarian disarmament efforts than the Ministry of Defence. But it is important to remind everyone that good soldiers do not deserve bad weapons.

ENGAGING VETERANS AND VETERAN’S ASSOCIATIONS

While engaging serving military personnel is best done through their chain of command, engaging retired personnel can be done on an individual basis or through a myriad of national veteran’s associations. It is suggested that NGOs approach these associations through

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their national headquarters. As an alternative, if NGOs are aware of individuals that have influence within these associations they should pursue them as a way to generate support.

The arguments for soliciting support are well known within the Campaign and include ethics, law of war, accountability, threat from hackers, limiting friendly casualties among others. There may also be a requirement to address the common response of “who cares if robots destroy robots” with an explanation of how unlikely that situation would be.

A significant outcome of engagement with veterans and their associations would be having them individually and as an association indicate their support for the Campaign’s goals by signing onto

the military letter found [here](#)². Signing the letter would oblige the veteran and/or association to “join the call for a ban on the development, deployment and use of weapon systems in which the decision to apply violent force is made autonomously”. Although the names could be made public it should be emphasized that signing would not call for any commitment to take further action.

KEY MESSAGES

A number of key messages may be particularly useful when advocating for a ban with military, both serving and veterans. This list is not exhaustive:

- Campaigners should stress that the aim of the campaign is to ban lethal autonomous weapons more or less defined as weapon systems that can identify and fire on targets without a human controlling them. That is, machines that would decide whether or not to kill without human making the decision. We are not seeking to ban weapons that are under significant human control (drones and automatic defensive systems as an example).
- The Campaign is not opposed to artificial intelligence (AI) or robotics nor is the Campaign opposed to the use of AI or robotics by the military, but the Campaign does believe there is a line which should never be crossed.
- The Campaign is also not proposing a ban on systems without weaponry designed to save life such as an autonomous explosive ordnance disposal system which may operate with or without human control.
- We believe that development or deployment of autonomous weapons systems will lower the political threshold for entering into armed conflict through the mistaken belief that it will result in less human casualties i.e. robots fighting robots or perhaps robots fighting an enemy that does not have robots.
- It is our understanding that no military commander wants to cede control on the battlefield to an autonomous weapon. Robots should not make kill decisions.
- The Campaign believes that once one nation deploys an autonomous system other nations will follow suit. A “robotic” arms race must be avoided.
- We also believe that non-state armed groups could deploy such systems.
- The Campaign believes any such system that is deployed can be “hacked” with an enemy then turning the weapons on friendly troops or civilians.
- We believe that if such systems were deployed a machine would decide if a target was a combatant based almost solely on programming developed in a sterile laboratory years before the decision to kill is made or perhaps if the target is an individual, based on facial recognitions programmes.
- The Campaign believes that abrogating life and death decisions to a machine is morally, ethically and legally wrong.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The definition of a chain of command is an official hierarchy of authority that dictates who is in charge of whom and of whom permission must be asked. An example of chain of command is when a soldier reports to a sergeant who reports to a lieutenant who reports further upward in the chain. That progression of reporting (and advising), and receiving orders downwards is common throughout the military structure.
- 2 https://killerrobots-minesactioncanada.nationbuilder.com/military_letter.