Future of Autonomous Weapons

What is the issue?

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- The UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) recently met in Geneva to discuss on the future of autonomous weapons.
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- With polarized opinions among countries for its use and ban, it is essential to understand the validity of the demands.
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What are autonomous weapons?

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- Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are designed as weapons, that once activated can select and engage targets without further human intervention.
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- They are also called the Lethal Autonomous Robots (LAR), robotic weapons, or killer robots.
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- LAWS are operable in the air, on land, on water, under water, or in space.
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- Reportedly, at least six states - the US, UK, Russia, China, Israel and South Korea - are already developing and testing autonomous weapons.
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- Another 44 countries, including India, are exploring their potential.
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Why is there a call for its ban?

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- It is feared that countries would be driven to engage more frequently in

military standoffs.
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- This is because, in autonomous weapons era, the fear of combat fatalities would no more be a deterrent for military engagements.
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- There is also a fear that rapid proliferation of these weapons would ultimately leave them in the hands of authoritarian regimes.
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- Furthermore, these weapons could develop as instruments of power and trigger countries to indulge in an Artificial Intelligence arms race.
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- The call for a ban draws support from the fact that the international community had, in the past, banned devastating weapons, such as biological ones.
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Why is the call for a ban not fully justified?

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- **Military Engagements** - Political, geographical and historical drivers are far more likely to influence a state's decision to enter into an armed conflict.
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- Autonomous weapons themselves are less likely to be either a deterrent or a driving force for military conflicts.
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- These weapons can, in fact, increase the cost of aggression, thereby deterring conflict in a way.
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- **Authoritarian control** - The argument that a ban might prevent such weapons from landing in the hands of a dictator is unconvincing.
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- LAWS rely on advancements in AI and machine learning.
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- And most of these developments are taking place in the civilian sector, with the potential for "dual-use" military capabilities.
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- **Regulation** - Autonomy will be introduced gradually into various functions of weapon systems, such as mobility, targeting and engagement.
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- It is thus currently impossible to define which kinds of autonomous weapons need to be banned given the absence of functioning prototypes.
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- **Destructive weapons** - Biological, or even nuclear weapons, by their very nature, are incapable of distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants.
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- LAWS, on the other hand, with its technological sophistication and time, can meet the established International Humanitarian Law (IHL) thresholds of distinction and proportionate response.
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- **Arms Race** - It is undeniable that arms race has been under way for some time now and not going to be introduced newly by the autonomous weapons.
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- **Inequality** - A pre-emptive ban is only likely to compound inequity in military capability, with the bigger powers employing these weapons anyway.
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- Every member of the UN Security Council refused to consider a ban on autonomous weapons in the GGE.
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- This is a powerful indication of how unsuccessful a ban is likely to be.
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What lies ahead?

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- Ultimately, the future of autonomous weapons will pivot more around questions of strategic value and less on morality.
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- Rather than mischaracterizing LAWS as new weapons of mass destruction, it is critical to develop principles to govern their use.
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- The focus must necessarily shift from controlling autonomy in weapons to controlling the lethality of their use.
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- Consequently, degree of necessary human control has to be identified and frameworks of accountability and military necessity should be considered.
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Source: Livemint

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