



AI for Global Good Summit

Plenary 1: State of Play

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Distinguished panellists
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour to represent the Secretary-General at this Summit and to join this illustrious group of experts in the exciting frontier field of artificial intelligence (AI).

I have tackled many different challenges in my long UN service – from humanitarian actions to protect refugees to peacekeeping, from development cooperation to crises response – but I was thrilled to know that in my new capacity as the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, I get to deal with “frontier issues” such as Artificial Intelligence, which will have a profound impact on the future of humankind.

I want to admit upfront that I am not an AI expert. In fact, my children often refer to me as a ‘dinosaur’ when it comes to all things technological.

But I can imagine the exciting prospects that AI can bring to the world. And while I don’t want to dampen the inspiration and excitement expressed by many of today’s speakers regarding the possibilities of an AI-enabled future, I do feel that we must have a conscious path of AI development, eliminating the risk and maximizing the benefit that can bring to us.

So I’d like to take this opportunity to make a case for why we – the United Nations, governments, industry, academia, civil society, engineers, designers and others – should work together to ensure that the technology does not march forward without due consideration of whether it bolsters our core values and serves our shared ends.

State of Play – AI and its military and security applications

As my fellow panellists have described, AI technology is developing rapidly. There has been significant progress in recent years on AI that conducts specific tasks, sometimes termed narrow AI. Tasks such as speech recognition, object recognition, legged locomotion and autonomous navigation are now largely solved.

While it is important that we spend the majority of this Summit discussing how these and future AI innovations can be used for the betterment of all, it is also essential to ensure that these technologies, at a minimum, do no harm.

Others will discuss potential ethical and privacy concerns. I lead the UN's Office for Disarmament Affairs so I come at this issue from the perspective of considering the military and security applications of these technologies, particularly relating to weapons.

States and militaries are thinking about this too. Some are actively pursuing AI-enabled military technologies. To date, militaries seem most interested in AI technologies that augment human capabilities with specific skills, rather than broad based AI that could replace humans altogether. Examples in development or already in use include soldier support robots, autonomous transport and escort vehicles, mission command systems, planning and logistics tools, and autonomous weapon systems.

It is this last innovation – autonomous weapon systems – that I want to focus on today.

There are already autonomous weapon systems in service that are capable of selecting and attacking targets, generally in limited environments far from civilians.

Multiple States have deployed naval air defence systems that engage targets autonomously. Others employ loitering munitions designed to counter surface-based air defences and radars. Guard robots in the demilitarized zone between the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have an autonomous mode, although it has not yet been utilized.

I can think of at least three immediate issues regarding the development of technologies and their applications on weaponry:

First, there is no technical barrier to developing autonomous weapons that can operate in other environments. In other words, there is no technical barrier to the creation of machines or algorithms capable of making the “decision” to take a human life without direct human involvement.

Second, the prospect of fully autonomous weapon systems raises many fundamental concerns for international peace and security, and it might even have implications on the international norms and mechanisms that have been governing us in this field of “warfare”. The increasing automation of the battlefield and the growing separation between the user and subject of deadly force is likely to lower the threshold for the use of that force. It could also strain legal protections for civilians.

Third, these weapons technologies will also pose new, distinct proliferation challenges and will likely be sought after by unscrupulous actors with malicious intent. Some experts have predicted that, without proper constraints, autonomous weapons will have the capability to inflict massive human casualties at a fraction of the cost of existing military arsenals.

What can we do?

Ladies and Gentlemen

As they grow more sophisticated, military AI applications are likely to increase the speed and coordination of action on future battlefields. This exponential growth in speed and complexity of military action could lead to unforeseeable and potentially damaging consequences given the inherent unpredictability of AI outputs.

There are currently no multilateral standards or regulations covering military AI applications. Member States have not systematically considered the many challenges posed by current and prospective AI technology, through the United Nations or otherwise.

Without wanting to sound alarmist, there is a very real danger that without prompt action, technological innovation will outpace civilian oversight in this space. So what can we do about it?

We have to start our dialogues and discussions on various aspects of AI technology, and in particular how to eliminate negative impact of these technologies on our future security.

Fortunately, when it comes to the specific question of lethal autonomous weapon systems, the international community – thanks in part to the foresight of civil society, industry and the UN – has commenced a discussion on how to grapple with this potentially game-changing evolution in warfare.

A multilateral process known as a ‘Group of Governmental Experts’ will meet in November to formally discuss the issue of autonomous weapons under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – the treaty tasked with banning or restricting the use of weapons that cause unnecessary or unjustifiable suffering to combatants or affect civilians indiscriminately.

The Group is expected to discuss issues such as how to define what a lethal autonomous weapon system actually is, the adequacy of existing law to ensure accountability in their use, ethical considerations, humanitarian considerations and the impact of autonomous weapons on international peace and security.

States will also discuss what they consider to be the acceptable degree of human control over the lethal functions of a weapon system, and whether a specific international treaty or instrument is required to ensure that control is maintained.

I think the process in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons is a valuable one, in part because it demonstrates that the United Nations can play a convening role and provide a neutral and inclusive platform for taking forward deliberations on emerging technologies with global consequences.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen

New issues require new solutions. By seeking to address these concerns and challenges now, we can get ahead of the curve. We can begin to build the inclusive partnerships and networks required to tackle the challenges of the twenty-first century.

As we are at the very beginning of our conversations, let me suggest, as my concluding remark, two essential elements which I think should guide our future dialogues on these issues.

First, the tail must not wag the dog. Human-centred norms must frame our future.

Technology should be a tool toward that future, not its determinant. We must be guided by the overarching objective of upholding the universal values and norms which we have developed over the past few centuries, and of maintaining transparency and accountability in the use of force. Ensuring human dignity and human security must be the guiding principle in our dialogue in the space where international security and technologies intersect.

Second, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder exchange is crucial, and we need to create a broad partnership that goes much beyond governments. Our understanding of the potentially revolutionary implications of AI technologies is tentative at best. We must connect governments with the tech and academic industries, as we are doing here at this Summit.

Civil society activists, the scientific community and the private sector have been some of the loudest proponents of the need to address the issue of autonomous weapons.

They have also been instrumental in bringing global attention to the issue of the weaponisation of AI. A case in point is the open letter issued at the 2015 International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence calling for a “ban on offensive autonomous weapons beyond meaningful human control”, which today has over 17,000 signatories – I note that many of you here today are among them.

I think this illustrates the fact that the public and private sectors are on the same page when it comes to this issue. This is not a case of industry fearing government regulation but, rather, of industry seeking to work with governments to ensure its handiwork is not misused.

As the open letter pointed out, just as many physicists, chemists and biologists led efforts against nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the past, today’s AI researchers do not wish to see their field tarnished by its use to improve the ability of our species to kill one another.

With a long history of engaging with civil society, the UN is now endeavouring to strengthen its relationship with the private sector. The misuse of revolutionary technology with potentially catastrophic results should galvanise us into forming a serious and substantive partnership.

Through inclusive networks and partnerships we can begin not only to think about how to deal with potential dangers, but also devise innovative ideas for how we can utilise the great gains of AI to enhance and maintain international peace and security for the betterment of all humanity.

In this endeavour, I look forward to working with you all.

Thank you.