Autonomous Weapons Project

law of autonomous warfare

A project to understand autonomous technologies from the intersection of law, technology, and military application.

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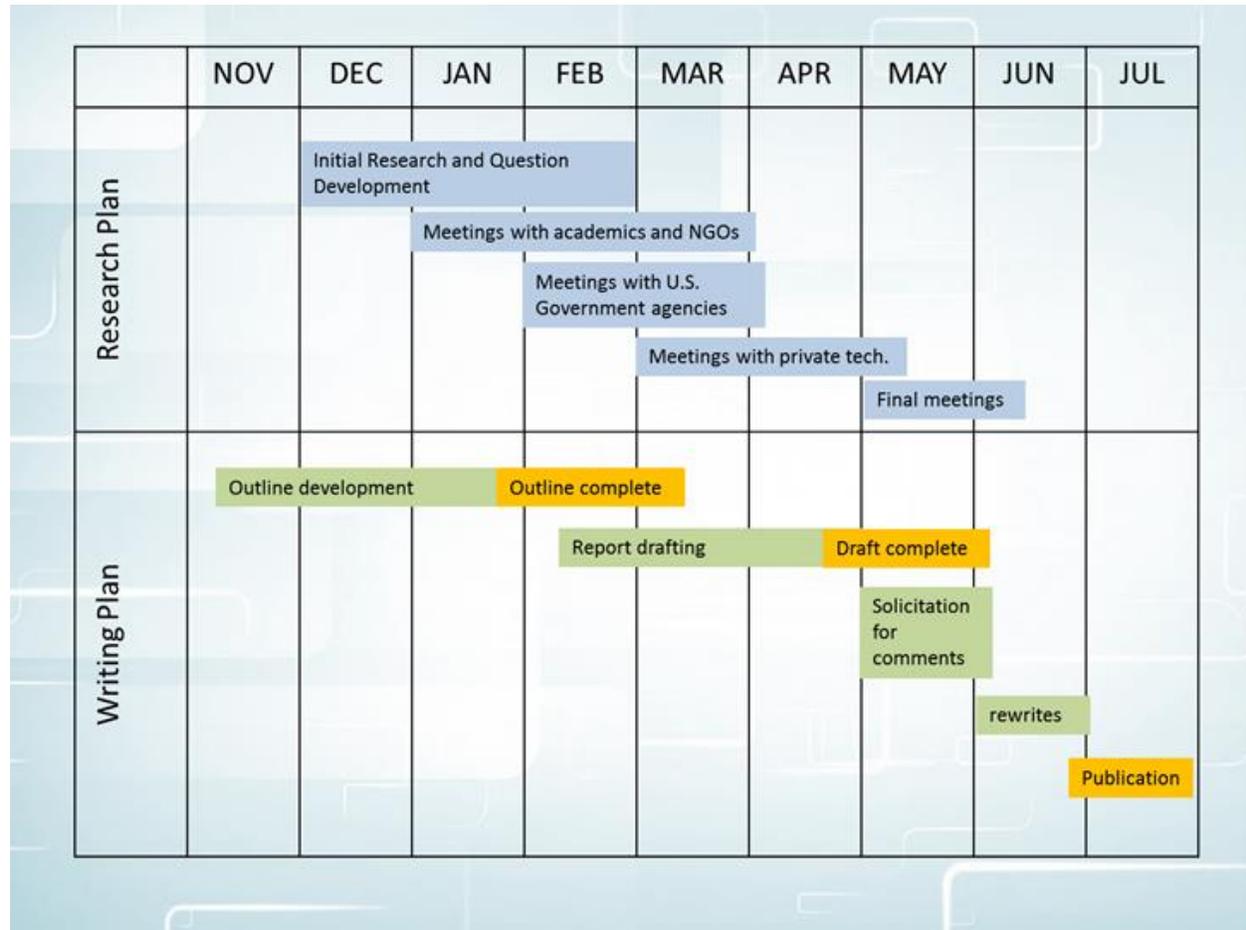Chris Ford, Legal Research
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— The Stockton Center for the Study of International Law —

Project Description

The development and employment of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) in armed conflict is perhaps the most fundamental change in warfare in a generation. More than 50 countries and hundreds of firms are currently developing AWS. Science fiction offers an alarming vision of these systems. This combined with the breathtaking pace of actual development has led to a robust and highly-charged debate regarding how the law of armed conflict (LOAC) will apply to AWS. This debate, unfortunately, is largely untethered from reality. Much of the debate currently relies on hypothetical scenarios and capabilities and evidences a lack of clear understanding or agreement regarding the terminology involved in AWS. Further, the current LOAC discussion is distracted, in part, by non-legal issues including policy and ethics.

This project seeks to explore and identify the foundational LOAC issues implicated by the development and employment of AWS. To this end, we hope to focus the debate by distinguishing LOAC issues from policy and ethical concerns. Notably, this project will be firmly grounded in the science of autonomy. Input from government agencies and private firms will ensure our legal conclusions rest on solid technical footings. This input will also serve another of the project's goal to develop clear and concise terminology to guide future conversation.

Project Timeline

	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL
Research Plan		Initial Research and Question Development	→	→					
			Meetings with academics and NGOs	→	→				
				Meetings with U.S. Government agencies	→	→			
					Meetings with private tech.	→	→		
							Final meetings	→	
Writing Plan	Outline development	→	→	Outline complete					
				Report drafting	→	Draft complete			
							Solicitation for comments		
								rewrites	
									Publication

Project Updates

Between 8-11 December, 2015, members of the Stockton Center's Autonomous Weapons project met with various groups and individuals in Geneva, Switzerland. This trip included meetings with the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Professor Marco Sassoli of Geneva University, the United Nations office of Geneva, the Geneva Academy, and the International Committee for the Red Cross. The meetings proved to be extraordinarily successful. The meetings were intended, in part, to discuss the Stockton Center project and other groups' research efforts into the issue. We discussed a variety of legal issues concerning autonomous weapons including the ability of such systems to comply with the Law of Armed Conflict, issues of accountability for autonomous systems and the question of Article 36 weapons reviews. A host of non-legal issues were also discussed including related ethical issues, concerns about technology proliferation, the prospect of an autonomous weapons arms race, and the implications of autonomous technology on lowering the barriers to conflict.