

Korea to Develop Combat Robots

The War of the Machines imagined in many a dystopian fiction came a little closer on Tuesday at the government's 10th annual meeting of science and technology ministers.

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The meeting decided to promote R&D cooperation between the Defense Ministry and Ministry of Information and Communication to develop a "dog/horse" military robot. It should be able to carry at least as much as their weight and would be equipped with cameras for surveillance and reconnaissance as well as a machine gun for blasting dangerous objects like mines.

The robot would be given both the guard role traditionally played by dogs and the munitions transport traditionally done by horses. Under the project, which will see investment of W33.4 billion (about US\$33.4 million) by 2011, the Defense Ministry's Agency for Defense Development (ADD) will handle development of the robot's mobility technology and system integration, while the Electronics and Telecommunications Research Institute (ETRI) will develop remote control and security technology.

A concept sketch released by the Defense Ministry shows the artificial creature taking two forms, one on wheels and another insect-like with six legs. An eight-wheeler is expected to weigh 200 kg, and a six-wheel or six-leg version 100 kg. They should be able to carry at least as much as their weight and would be equipped with cameras for surveillance and reconnaissance as well as a machine gun for blasting dangerous objects like mines.

A Defense Ministry official said the decision whether the wheeled or legged version is better would be made at the end of next year. The machines will be remote-controlled and linked to a communication network planned by ETRI that would allow thousands of the robots to exchange information and unite them in a kind of hive-mind.

The first step toward military use of robots in Korea was the ROBHAZ, test-operated to look for car bombs and perform nighttime reconnaissance with the Zaytun Division in Iraq in March. KIST researcher Kang Sung-cheol said several ROBHAZ would later this year be placed in driverless vehicles developed by a Korean defense firm and tested to see if it they can enter building during urban warfare.

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