



The question of lethal autonomous weapons

Summary

Weapons systems that select and engage targets without meaningful human control are unacceptable and need to be prevented. All countries have a duty to protect humanity from this dangerous development by banning fully autonomous weapons. Retaining meaningful human control over the use of force is an ethical imperative, a legal necessity, and a moral obligation.

In the period since Human Rights Watch and other nongovernmental organizations launched the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in 2013, the question of how to respond to concerns over fully autonomous weapons has steadily climbed the international agenda. The challenge of killer robots, like climate change, is widely regarded as a grave threat to humanity that deserves urgent multilateral action.

A growing number of legislators, policymakers, private companies, international and domestic organizations, and ordinary individuals have endorsed the call to ban fully autonomous weapons. Since 2018, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly urged states to prohibit weapons systems that could, by themselves, target and attack human beings, calling them “morally repugnant and politically unacceptable.”

Key thoughts

Since 2013, a total of 97 countries have publicly elaborated their views on fully autonomous weapons in a multilateral forum. Each countries’ opinion can be found at [this website](#):

Their active engagement in the CCW talks on killer robots demonstrates growing awareness of and concerns about removing human control from the use of force. There is widespread acknowledgment that technological developments are enabling militaries to incorporate autonomy into weapons systems. China, Israel, Russia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States are investing heavily in the development of various autonomous weapons systems, while Australia, Turkey, and other countries are also making investments.

Despite this development, the vast majority of countries that have spoken to date regard human decision-making, control, or judgment as critical to the acceptability and legality of weapons systems. There is now widespread agreement about the need to retain some form of human control over the use of force, including over individual attacks. In 2018, Austria, Brazil, and Chile recommended launching negotiations on a legally binding instrument to ensure meaningful human control over the critical functions of weapons systems.

Human Rights Watch calls on all states to:

- Work with other concerned states to launch and swiftly conclude negotiations on a new international treaty to retain meaningful human control over the use of force and prohibit weapons systems that lack such human control
- Adopt national laws and policies committing to retain meaningful human control over the use of force and establishing prohibitions on the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons.