

Roundtable meeting ahead of the CCW meeting on 'lethal autonomous weapons systems'

Briefing note prepared by Article 36
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*25 March 2015, 09.30-10.30
Room O, Portcullis House*

The All Party-Parliamentary Group on weapons and protection of civilians is convening a roundtable meeting ahead of the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons [expert meeting](#) on 'lethal autonomous weapons systems' (LAWS), which takes place in Geneva from 13-17 April 2015. The meeting is convening the UK delegation participating in the CCW expert meeting on LAWS with interested parliamentarians and civil society.

UK government position

The UK MoD stated in a 2011 Joint Doctrine Note that it "currently has no intention to develop systems that operate without human intervention in the weapon command and control chain, but it is looking to increase levels of automation where this will make systems more effective."

In Parliament in March 2013, the Government further committed that the "operation of weapons systems will always remain under human control".

In Parliament in June 2013, the Government stated that "the Geneva Conventions and additional protocols provide a sufficiently robust framework to regulate the development and use of these weapon systems", and therefore new international law is not needed to prevent the development of fully autonomous weapons systems.

In Parliament in November 2014, the Government has stated that, "meaningful human control is an emergent concept which the UK is mindful of and working to define with interested parties in step with technological and doctrinal developments ... in UK operations every target is assessed by a human, and every release of weapons is authorised by a human; other than in a very small number of instances, all targets are also acquired by a human. The exception is in a small number of defensive anti-materiel systems e.g. Phalanx. However, in those instances a human is required to authorise weapons release."

Key issues for discussion

UK policy and practice

The UK government has been broadly positive in its statements on the issue of autonomous weapons, asserting that the operation weapons systems will always remain under human control.

Clarification and greater detail is however needed on a number of points.

The government has referred to elements of human control that it applies in the operation of weapons systems, such as over targeting, but it has also stated that there are also exceptions to such controls. It should explain these exceptions and why they are acceptable.

The Government should also provide clarifications on its statement on 'weapons release.' In the context of future weapon systems that may have greater autonomy, it would be useful to know what level of subsequent 'decision making' computers might still make. For example, if a human commander has set a group of military vehicles as a 'military objective' for attack, is it acceptable for the weapon system to identify and direct its warheads at specific vehicles, in order to maximise the efficiency of the weapons operation?

Furthermore, the MOD's Joint Doctrine Note states that the UK has no plans to develop fully autonomous weapons systems, but it does leave open the possibility of developing such weapons systems in the future.

The UK has not yet developed a comprehensive policy on autonomous weapons systems to address all of these issues.

- At the CCW expert meeting, the UK should explain the key elements that allow human control to be applied in the operation of existing weapons systems, such as information on the context of the attack and the functioning of the weapon system, and controls on the space and time within which an attack will occur;
- The UK should provide examples of any systems that stand as exceptions to the usual levels of human control over weapons systems, such as the Phalanx anti-ship missiles, and explain why such exceptions are deemed acceptable;
- The UK should clarify, in terms of its existing policy, whether once a human has authorised the release of a weapon, whether the weapons system itself might:
 - a. Have the capacity to select a specific object to be struck from within a target established by a human operator;
 - b. Have the capacity to determine for itself what target it will strike; or
 - c. Whether it might acceptably have even more scope for action than this.

Meaningful human control

'Meaningful human control' will be a key theme at the upcoming CCW meeting. A growing number of states have expressed recognition that ensuring meaningful human control over individual attacks could form a useful basis for building consensus on this issue.

- Given its position that the operation of weapons systems will always remain under human control, the UK should support the principle of 'meaningful human control over individual attacks'. As baseline position, this appears to be in line with UK policy, whilst recognising that human control must be 'meaningful' – i.e. it must be more than a person pressing a button when instructed by a computer.

New law

Despite asserting that the UK has no plans to develop fully autonomous weapons systems, UK government representatives have stated that new international law is not needed to prevent the development and use of fully autonomous weapons.

The international civil society *Campaign to Stop Killer Robots* is calling for the development of a new international treaty to prohibit the development and use of fully autonomous weapons systems, where such systems can select and engage military objectives without human involvement.

- Having foresworn the development of fully autonomous weapons systems itself, the UK should support the development of new international law to prohibit the development and use of fully autonomous weapons systems globally.
- A first step towards this could be to build international consensus around the principle of meaningful human control over individual attacks.