

UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (CSKR) submission to the 2020 Integrated Review

Submitted in September 2020 by UNA-UK on behalf of the UK CSKR

This submission is made on behalf of the UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (UK CSKR). We are a network of UK-based NGOs, tech experts and academics who are concerned with the risks associated with growing autonomy in weapons systems. The UK Steering Committee includes Amnesty International UK, Article 36, Drone Wars, United Nations Association – UK and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom – UK. Each member of the UK CSKR may not necessarily endorse or take a position on all points made in this submission.

In this submission we have addressed Call for Evidence Questions 1, 2, 4 and 6.

1. What are the key opportunities, challenges, threats and vulnerabilities facing the UK now? (Submissions focusing on rapidly evolving areas such as science, technology, data, cyber, and space are particularly welcome.)

Increasing technological capacity for autonomy in weapons systems raises a host of moral, legal, accountability, technological, and security concerns. Weapons systems that select and engage targets without meaningful human control—known as fully autonomous weapons, lethal autonomous weapons systems, or killer robots— would present a grave new threat to British citizens.

There is a risk that, without appropriate pre-emptive binding international law, as and when technology develops to the point that lethal autonomous weapons become widely available, the threats posed by such weapons to British citizens at home and overseas and to military personnel serving in Britain’s armed forces¹ would be severe and extremely difficult to mitigate retrospectively.

Tesla’s Elon Musk and Alphabet’s Mustafa Suleyman led a group of more than 100 leading robotics experts in a 2017 call to the international community to protect humanity from these weapons before it is too late²:

“Lethal autonomous weapons threaten to become the third revolution in warfare. Once developed, they will permit armed conflict to be fought at a scale greater than ever, and at timescales faster than humans can comprehend. These can be weapons of terror, weapons that despots and terrorists use against innocent populations, and weapons hacked to behave in undesirable ways. We do not have long to act. Once this Pandora’s box is opened, it will be hard to close.”

In this submission the UK CSKR urges the UK Government to protect national and global interests by working internationally for a legally binding prohibition on the development, deployment and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems.

2. What are the key global and domestic trends affecting UK international policy and national security out to 2030, and how should the government prioritise its efforts in response to these?

Everybody in the UK benefits from the international system – from laws that govern trade and protect our rights, to institutions that deal with shared challenges.

Over the past 75 years, the UK has successfully worked internationally to strengthen this system by developing treaties to prohibit the use of dangerous weapons. Biological weapons, chemical weapons, anti-personnel landmines, sight-blinding lasers and cluster munitions are less prevalent and, in some cases, non-existent, due to binding international treaties prohibiting their development.

The pace of technological development in weapons systems is giving rise to a new threat that, unless addressed through pre-emptive action, will present grave risks to the security of British citizens.

The use of lethal autonomous weapons would risk undermining the law, as well as being unlikely to meet international humanitarian law standards, including on distinction, proportionality, and military necessity. It is naive to think that the nature and circumstances of their use could be limited such that they would not threaten the fundamental right to life and the principle of human dignity.

Without effective human control, it would be unclear who, if anyone, could be held accountable for unlawful acts caused by a fully autonomous weapon: the programmer, manufacturer, commander, and machine itself. This would make it difficult to ensure justice, especially for victims. Fully autonomous weapons could also be used outside of armed conflict, such as in border control, policing, or by terrorists or other non-state armed groups. They could be used to suppress protests and prop-up authoritarian regimes.

The UK has already made it clear that it does not intend to develop or use these weapons³ (or at least, not the most sophisticated types of autonomous weapons that might in future emerge), however, this will not insulate the UK from external developments.

There is an opportunity for the UK to work with the international community to support the creation of a binding treaty to prohibit the development, deployment and use of these weapons and thereby protect its citizens before they are developed elsewhere.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots recommends that a new international legal instrument should: address a broad scope of sensor-based weapons; apply categorical prohibitions to systems that target people and that cannot be meaningfully controlled by a human; and apply positive obligations to regulate all other systems to ensure that meaningful human control is retained over the use of force.⁴

History shows that ban treaties are a successful way to reduce the threats caused by dangerous weapons. Fundamental to success is the creation of a global standard; the ease of proliferation of technology, software and dual-use hardware means that no state alone can address this risk. By leveraging its diplomatic influence the UK could assist a group of states pursuing a ban on lethal autonomous weapons, either through the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, or through a separate process following the examples of the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (to both of which the UK is a State Party).

4. What are the most effective ways for the UK to build alliances and soft power?

Diplomatic efforts on this issue could help the UK demonstrate its commitment to be a global “force for good”⁵ and help maintain the UK’s credibility as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. It could also assist the UK in its stated ambition to become a world leader in ethical AI⁶. By showing principled leadership on this issue and through relevant corresponding national legislation and

regulations to retain meaningful human control over all weapons systems, tech workers would be better protected and reassured that their products cannot be misused. Since tech workers are increasingly concerned about the ethical end-use of their products, a lack of UK action to reassure workers can result in talent going elsewhere⁷. This suggests that, far from stymying innovation, vocal Governmental support for a ban on lethal autonomous weapons could assist the UK in positioning itself as a leader in ethical AI and thereby help attract global talent.

6. How should the UK change its governance of international policy and national security in order to seize future opportunities and meet future challenges? (Submissions focusing on the engagement of an increasing range of stakeholders while maintaining clear responsibility, accountability, and speed of action are particularly welcome.)

The UK's stated intention to build "a whole of society approach" to tackling the challenges Britain faces requires a whole of society approach to developing a security strategy.

The security strategy of a democracy is a security strategy of the people; it therefore must be developed collaboratively with those people. Without this, public understanding for decisions will be reduced and the delegitimization of core institutions and elements of the UK's security apparatus may result.

We therefore welcomed the announcement of the "largest review of the UK's foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War" but as details emerged, it became less clear that it would be the large, whole-of-society national security development process we were hoping for. We have the following concerns and recommendations:

- The public consultation has lacked high-profile outreach by senior politicians, and, as far as can be ascertained, any largescale efforts to ensure the inclusion of marginalised communities. Such an approach will skew the outcome towards the perspectives of establishment think-tanks, academia and those working in the NGO sector and will exclude those vulnerable communities most likely to suffer insecurity here in the UK.
 - Recommendation: Spearhead a national conversation on the UK's security needs and adopt citizens assemblies and/or other representative feed-in mechanisms.
- The timetable for the consultation (less than one month) during a global pandemic and over the summer period allowed insufficient time for widespread participation. Further, the plan to conclude the overall process before the basic details of the post-COVID and post-Brexit recoveries are known, and to make key decisions such as the merger of the FCO and DFID divorced from the Integrated Review, appears illogical.
 - Recommendation: Extend the timespan of the Review to allow for a thorough consultation and to allow the UK's post-COVID and post-Brexit recoveries to become clearer.
- The consultation documents contain no clarity over how submissions from the public will be used or to what extent submissions will influence the overall Review. Such a lack of transparency and accountability can give rise to scepticism over the sincerity of the consultation.
 - Recommendation: Publish the methodology for how submissions from the public will be used.
- Rather than an ongoing dialogue between the Government and external actors, the consultation appears to be a stand-alone input into the development of a long-term security strategy. Without an iterative process, the opportunity to refine the strategy as circumstances change will be missed.

- Recommendation: Create an ongoing mechanism to allow for regular external reflection and feed-in to the UK's national security strategy.
- The framing of the consultation questions and the restrictive word counts could skew the results of the consultation away from holistic, human security-based responses.
 - Recommendation: work with all parts of society to adopt a collaborative strategy development process (informed by best practice elsewhere⁸) with greater scope to challenge foundational assumptions around UK security and consider the adoption of alternative approaches such as an explicitly feminist foreign policy⁹.

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/4785/default/>

² <https://futureoflife.org/autonomous-weapons-open-letter-2017>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/drones-robots-uk-autonomous-artificial-intelligence-ministry-defence-a8631211.html>

⁴ <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Key-Elements-of-a-Treaty-on-Fully-Autonomous-WeaponsvAccessible.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-is-leading-the-world-as-a-force-for-good-article-by-dominic-raab>

⁶ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/08/the-u-k-wants-to-be-the-world-leader-in-ethical-a-i.html>

⁷ <https://tech.newstatesman.com/business/tech-workers-ai-sector>

⁸ <https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/contrasting-narratives-march-2018.pdf>

⁹ <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy/>