

INDIA AND THE CHALLENGE OF AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS

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The introduction of autonomous weapons will profoundly change the nature of war and will also affect the understanding of laws of war. A small but fierce international debate has started over the legality and use of such weapons. India is uniquely placed to take a lead in the global discussion about this issue. India should view development and deployment of autonomous weapons through the prism of its security needs and national interests.

The Emerging Debate

- A number of parties, such as the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions and Pakistan, have called for a preemptive ban on the development of autonomous weapon systems. They argue that these systems would be unable to adhere to the current laws of war and that it is unclear who would be liable in the case of wrongful death of civilians, for example.
- Other parties, such as the U.S. Air Force, have argued that autonomous weapons have benefits, including reducing casualties and improving efficiency in defensive capabilities.
- Autonomous weapons may help India undertake certain tasks with minimal human loss and in a more effective manner. The country faces threats from both states and nonstate actors, and a substantial portion of its international borders consist of rugged terrain. Unmanned systems could be more effective in such areas.
- Indigenous development of autonomous weapons could boost India's domestic arms industry and export potential.

Next Steps for India

Develop autonomous weapons. Given India's security needs, the potential benefits of autonomous weapons cannot be overlooked. Autonomous weapons could prove to be beneficial in a range of areas, from border patrols to protecting space assets.

Advocate for comprehensive international regulations. A preemptive ban on the development of autonomous weapon systems would be premature. India must instead advocate for international regulations that cover the development, use, and trade of these systems because this approach will be more effective in addressing the myriad issues associated with such weapons and will also be more likely to ensure compliance by the major powers. As a potential weapons-exporting state, India must ensure that the regulations not only are fair and balanced but also address its concerns about proliferation to nonstate actors.

Take the lead with domestic regulations. With the international debate still nascent, autonomous weapons may be developed and deployed before an international regime is established. India can use this opportunity to influence global standards by adopting domestic regulations that comprehensively address the development and use of autonomous weapons.

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