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Algorithmic Aversion Revisited: Cross-national Experimental Evidence on Public Attitudes to Killer Robots

Lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), or killer robots, represent a significant yet controversial military innovation. Once activated, these systems can select and attack targets without further human input, offering certain advantages, such as a speed-based edge in combat. However, LAWS also pose legal, ethical, and security dilemmas, with advocates for banning them emphasizing public opposition expressed in opinion polls as a key rationale for prohibition. Previous experimental surveys involving U.S. citizens reveal that attitudes toward LAWS can be considerably elastic. When the public is presented with scenarios in which using killer robots against terrorists entails even a slightly lower risk of target misidentification compared to human-operated systems, opposition can shift to support. These findings might challenge the long-term sustainability of future regulations, contingent on LAWS becoming more reliable and precise as the technology matures, but their applicability to different publics and contexts remains uncertain. Our study aims to test the robustness of prior research by conducting the first cross-national survey experiment involving representative samples from Brazil, China, Germany, and the US (N = 4,000). Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions, varying the risk of target misidentification and the context of the use of force, and subsequently asked to indicate their preference for either remote-controlled or autonomous drones. Our results show that the effect of the risk of target misidentification is robust to the use of different contexts, whether counterterrorism or peace enforcement operations, and holds across all surveyed nationalities. In other words, public support for LAWS appears to be universally contingent on the risk of target misidentification. These findings contribute to the growing literature on public attitudes toward the use of military force and ongoing policy debates.

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

Security Studies

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Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?

Yes

Primary author: ROSENDORF, Ondřej (IFSH & PRCP)

Co-authors: Mr VRANKA, Marek (Charles University); Dr SMETANA, Michal (Charles University)

Presenter: ROSENDORF, Ondřej (IFSH & PRCP)

