

## The Time to Adopt a Treaty on the Prohibition of Fully Autonomous Weapons is Now

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The stark reminder of the fragility and vulnerability of our world, and our own mortality, brought about by the COVID-19 coronavirus, is also, perhaps, an opportune moment to recall, and reflect, on another dark episode in the history of civilization. On August 6th, 1945, ['A bright light filled the plane,' wrote Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the first atomic bomb. We turned back to look at Hiroshima. The city was hidden by that awful cloud . . . boiling up, mushrooming." For a moment, no one spoke. Then everyone was talking. "Look at that! Look at that! Look at that!" exclaimed the co-pilot, Robert Lewis, pounding on Tibbets's shoulder Lewis said he could taste atomic fission; it tasted like lead. Then he turned away to write in his journal. "My God," he asked himself, "what have we done?"](#)

This short-lived burst of excitement, turned to unbridled horror, was not confined to the cockpit of the Enola Gay, that fateful morning above Hiroshima when 'Little Boy' descended from the skies. ['I am become death, destroyer of worlds.'](#) remarked [Robert Oppenheimer](#) only 3 weeks earlier, drawing (a bit out of context) from a piece of Hindu scripture, as he witnessed the first detonation of a nuclear weapon on July 16, 1945 in the desert of Los Alamos, New Mexico, home of the Manhattan Project.

Decades followed, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty were duly adopted, the first with a decidedly mixed track record of success (North Korea?) and the latter, still not in force to this day. But it was only in September 2017, just over 72 years after Hiroshima, that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was finally adopted.

The old adage that *'Prevention is Better Than Cure'* seems particularly fitting in the context of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). When the proverbial horse has already bolted and is entering into the final furlong, it's a bit late to try and get it back into the starting blocks or stable. Similarly, it was only many decades after the full devastation of biological and chemical weapons became apparent that the international community belatedly adopted the Biological Weapons Convention and Chemical Weapons Convention. Two Conventions also not without their own serious challenges in their respective enforcement and implementation.

With increasing calls now for the adoption of a treaty on the prohibition of fully autonomous weapons, the global community has a unique opportunity 'this time round' to do things rather differently. To ban fully autonomous weapons which, once fully developed, if they go awry, facilitated by an absence of human control, and if carrying a WMD payload, easily have the same potential to generate the same level of human devastation and destruction as any nuclear, chemical or biological weapon. If the global community takes this decisive step to preemptively ban FAWS now, while such weapons are just a 'twinkle in the eye' or at least still at a relatively early stage of development, the world will not have to spend the next 70 years, desperately, and undoubtedly unsuccessfully, trying to curtail their potential for worldwide

carnage. Helplessly playing 'catch-up' long after the chicken has flown the coop, only to adopt a treaty decades 'after the fact' in the woefully belated realization that containment/non-proliferation efforts can only go so far - already, firmly, on the back foot.

When it comes to Fully Autonomous Weapons, there is no need for another post-facto 'what have we done?' moment. Not another, tired 'déjà vu '. We have to get out in front of this now. As was the case for WMD, when or if Fully Autonomous Weapons become a terrifying reality, it will, already, *de facto*, be too late - a situation from which it is impossible to truly, effectively retreat from the precipice of oblivion. And where even the most well-meaning and concerted efforts to do so will likely ultimately prove futile.

*'Those who do not learn history, are doomed to repeat it'.*

Compelling evidence to date suggests that writer and philosopher George Santayana had it right. But we at least have another, rare opportunity to learn from history. Whether we are doomed to repeat, or to depart, from it, is a choice for us to make. The time to adopt a Treaty Prohibiting Fully Autonomous Weapons is now.

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<https://www.newsweek.com/my-god-what-have-we-done-184696>

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