

The Globalization of Drone Warfare: Towards a US-Led “International Control Regime” on Armed Drones?

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The United States has begun moves to develop what amounts to a new international control regime on the proliferation and use of armed drones. US officials presented details of a [‘Proposed Joint Declaration of Principles for the Export and Subsequent Use of Armed or Strike-Enabled Unmanned Aerial Systems \(UAS\)’](#) to international export control officials during the arms trade treaty review conference in Geneva this week.

US officials told Defense News, who first revealed the initiative, that the joint declaration - to be signed by as many nations as possible - is the first of [a two-stage process](#). The declaration, official stated, would address “the misperceptions” about the use of armed drones, as well as “the complicated, sensitive and controversial aspects”. Although the draft joint declaration has not been made public, it appears to echo the US’ own [policy guidance](#) on the export of armed drones put in place in Spring 2015. Defense News reports that the current draft

“lays out five key principles for international norms, including the “applicability of International law” and human rights when using armed drones; a dedication to following existing arms control laws when considering the sale of armed unmanned systems; that sales of armed drone exports take “into account the potential recipient country’s history regarding adherence to international obligations and commitments”; that countries who export unmanned strike systems follow “appropriate transparency measures” when required; and a resolution to continue to “ensure these capabilities are transferred and used responsibly by all States.”

The second stage of the process is the establishment of an international working group on armed drones for those who sign the declaration, which will devise “a voluntary Code of Conduct for exporting and importing nations.”

Why is this happening?

Over the past three years, as we have [written previously](#), there has been a real rise in the proliferation of drones by Israel, the US and in particular by China. Iraq, Nigeria, and apparently [Egypt](#) have all gone on to launch drone strikes over the past two years utilising armed drones bought from China.

On the one hand US [drone industry lobbyists have long argued that their industry is hampered by the US membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime \(MTCR\)](#) which

controls the export of larger drones as neither China nor Israel are members (although Israel says it abides by its rules voluntarily). The drone industry has argued that the MTCR rules need to be 'relaxed' in order for the US to gain its fair share of the market. This new initiative seemingly therefore arises in part from drone industry lobbying to put in place a process which they want to see as levelling the playing field.

On the other hand, the outgoing Obama administration is also legacy shopping. Stung by international criticism of its use of armed drones over the past decade it wants at least the appearance of putting in place international rules to restrict the proliferation and use of such technology

It seems these two disparate and contrary ideas have come together in this new process.

Prospects for success?

Although a number of countries are working individually or jointly to develop an advanced drone industry, currently the US, Israel and China are the market leaders. While China is unlikely to be involved in this new US-led initiative, US officials apparently believe that they can persuade Israel to join. Israel has never even confirmed that it operates armed drones, so Israeli officials often refuse to talk on the record about the issue but early reports indicate a great deal of [scepticism and alarm](#) from Israel about the initiative.

Israel and China however will not be the only nations suspicious of any drone control initiative led by US, fearing that it is simply about the US promoting its own commercial and political interests. Campaigners and the human rights community too will need convincing that such an initiative is a genuine attempt to curb proliferation and use beyond the bounds of international law. After all, we have spent the last decade watching the US "interpret" (i.e. bend and break) international law in this area in its own interests.

However, despite genuine suspicions, the seeming acceptance of the need for an international control regime on the proliferation and use of armed drones is to be welcomed.

Armed drones are [a real and genuine danger to international peace and security](#). While there is a long, long way to go and many - if not most - will need to be convinced, that this is the right process, failure will also play into the hands of those who argue that there should not and cannot be such controls.

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