

FORUM: GENERAL ASSEMBLY FIRST COMMITTEE (GA1 – DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY (DISEC))

QUESTION OF: REGULATING THE USE OF AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS SYSTEMS IN ARMED CONFLICT WHILE BALANCING NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN OBLIGATIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Description of the Issue**
- II. Definition of Key Terms**
- III. Major Countries and Organisations Involved**
- IV. Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**
- V. Possible Solutions**
- VI. Questions Delegates Should Consider during Research**
- VII. Relevant UN Treaties and Events**
- VIII. Useful Links**
- IX. Sources**

I. Description of the Issue

Since its establishment, one of the founding purposes of the United Nations has been to maintain international peace and security as enshrined in Article 1 of the United Nations Charter. Despite this fundamental goal, states continue to develop increasingly advanced weapons systems. To promote cooperation among Member States and prevent large-scale conflict, the General Assembly First Committee (GA1 – Disarmament and International Security, or DISEC) was established to facilitate debates, draft resolutions, and promote the founding principles of the United Nations.

With the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) experienced in recent years, the global arms industry is ramping up their development of advanced technologies, leading to the inception of Autonomous weapons systems (AWS). These systems incorporate AI and robotics to independently detect adversarial targets, navigate combat environments, and make battlefield decisions.

Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), autonomous weapon systems are not specifically regulated by existing treaties and therefore fall under existing IHL and Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) treaties applicable to all weapons systems. It is widely accepted that deployment of AWS in areas of conflict must be in full compliance with IHL and LOAC. AWS must be capable of distinguishing between hostile threats and civilians, as to prevent unnecessary suffering, and be capable of operating in accordance with IHL, LOAC, and ethics. The international community has emphasized the importance of such safeguards to prevent violations of IHL and erosion of human dignity.

A major challenge in international discussions remains the absence of a coherent and internationally recognized definition of autonomous weapons systems or lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). While some Member States consider an agreement on a definition or general characterization could be useful for future work, noting its value when formulating specific prohibitions, for example in the course of negotiating on a legally binding instrument. Other States maintain that an exact definition is not required to start negotiations.

This depicts a growing precedence in the international community: National interests of States often clash with proposed regulatory measures. AWS technology is constantly being developed. AWS has the potential to introduce new tactical capabilities, including the undertaking of operations previously not feasible while reducing military casualties. Consequently, some States may perceive restrictions on AWS as compromising their national security interests. Many also fear that adhering to limitations risks States falling behind strategic competitors, compromising technological sovereignty and challenging national defence. This acceleration in the development of AWS and fear of strategic competitors underscores the risk of an arms race.

Ethics also remains a large dilemma. One of the most pressing of ethical dilemmas is the human-loop dilemma. It consists of three possible solutions: Human-in-the-loop, human-on-the-loop, human-out-the-loop. If there is a human-in-the-loop, a robot can only select targets and use force when instructed to do so by a human. The human who makes the decision, meaning the system is not truly autonomous. In a human-on-the-loop system, robots are able to select targets and deliver force under the supervision of a human operator who can intervene and override the robots' decisions. In a human-out-of-the-loop system, robots are capable of independently selecting targets and delivering force without human involvement. The system is completely autonomous.

Ensuring the ethical use of AWS and encouraging cooperative regulations between Member States in accordance with international humanitarian law and the UN Charter is therefore a priority for the international community, in accordance with the UN's founding purpose of maintaining peace and protecting human dignity.

II. Definition of Key Terms

Autonomous weapons systems (AWS):

Autonomous weapon systems also referred to as Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are a nascent class of military systems that, once activated, can independently conduct military missions without human intervention. These systems incorporate advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics to independently detect targets, navigate in combat environments, and make battlefield decisions. Autonomous weapon systems are a type of military platform that, once activated, can independently conduct military operations without human intervention.

National security:

National security refers to the measures and strategies employed by a nation to protect its citizens, institutions, and interests from both internal and external threats. It is vital

for a State's survival that it is capable of defending its national sovereignty, territorial integrity, Political and civil legitimacy, and ability to operate and project power in accordance with its geopolitical environment.

Autonomy:

Autonomy is “the quality or state of being independent, free, and self-directing”

Autonomous weapons systems must therefore be fully self-propelled and act independently for human control to be considered “autonomous”.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL):

International Humanitarian Law, also referred to as the Law of War, refers to a set of rules designed to limit the effects of armed conflict by protecting those not involved in fighting and by restricting the methods and means of warfare.

III. Major Countries and Organisations Involved

During the UN meeting, several states highlighted human rights implications of autonomous weapons systems. Algeria said that such systems “fundamentally challenge the right to life by removing human judgement from lethal force decisions.” El Salvador and Ireland similarly expressed deep concern about the incompatibility of autonomous weapons systems with the right to life.

Austria, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and other countries raised concerns about the accountability gap created by autonomous weapons systems, as it is unclear

who could be held legally responsible if such systems violate international humanitarian law or human rights law. There are obstacles to holding individual operators criminally liable for the unpredictable actions of a machine they cannot understand. Additionally, there are significant legal challenges to finding programmers and developers responsible under civil law.

Human Rights Watch is a co-founder of the Stop Killer Robots campaign, a coalition of more than 270 nongovernmental organizations in 70 countries that calls for a new international treaty to prohibit and regulate autonomous weapons systems.

The United States, China, Israel, South Korea, Russia, and the UK are all developing weapons systems with significant autonomy in the critical functions of selecting and attacking targets. This represents a dangerous new arms race for autonomous weapons.

IV. Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

2014-Present	Since 2014, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) has convened meetings to discuss AWS, focusing on definitions, ensuring accountability, and potential restrictions on AWS. As of today, consensus-building is still ongoing with no binding treaties adopted.
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2021-Present	<p>Since 2021, the ICRC has called for heavy restrictions on all forms of AWS, a prohibition on unpredictable systems, and a complete ban of AWS designed to target humans.</p>
2023	<p>In 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) jointly appealed for negotiations on a legally binding instrument to establish clear prohibitions and restrictions on AWS to ensure compliance with international law and ethical acceptability. They urged for the establishment of this instrument by 2026.</p> <p>A debate in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly culminated in the first UN resolution on AWS, requesting the UN Secretary-General to collect and report states' views on the topic.</p>
2024	<p>In 2024, the First Committee adopted a resolution on responsible AI in the military domain that has implications for some types of AWS.</p> <p>2024 Vienna Conference on Autonomous Weapons Systems</p>

V. Possible Solutions

While no single solution can fully address the challenges posed by autonomous weapons systems, strengthened cooperation among Member States remains essential for non-proliferation of autonomous weapons systems as well as global accountability for states seeking to develop these systems for illicit purposes is

a good start. Developing minimum international standards for AWS to set universal requirements and restrictions, alongside supporting research on the ethical integration of AI in military contexts, would contribute to greater global coherence on the issue. Furthermore, resolving the question of the degree of human control over AWS is vital to ensuring compliance with International Humanitarian Law and maintaining ethical oversight.

VI. Questions Delegates Should Consider during Research

1. What are the purposes of AWSs as strategic instruments of war?
2. Why are some countries less inclined to impose restrictions or even outlaw AWS?
3. How can diplomatic efforts contribute to solving the issue and prevent misuse of AWS?
4. What agencies could ensure accountability if AWS violates international law?
5. How can AWS be regulated while balancing national security interests with compliance to IHL?

VII. Relevant UN Treaties and Events

Geneva Conventions (1949) & Additional Protocols (1977) – Core of International Humanitarian Law (IHL); cover distinction, proportionality, and precaution in armed conflict.

Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW, 1980) – Particularly the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on LAWS discussions; this is the primary forum where AWS regulation is debated.

VIII. Useful Links

<https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/autonomous-weapons>

<https://www.belfercenter.org/what-are-autonomous-weapon-systems>

https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file_list/autonomous_weapon_systems_under_international_humanitarian_law.pdf

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(<https://law.uq.edu.au/article/2020/09/are-autonomous-weapon-systems-prohibited>)

(<https://assembly.coe.int/LifeRay/JUR/Pdf/TextesProvisoires/2022/20221116-LawsApprehension-EN.pdf>)

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(<https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/icrc-position-on-autonomous-weapon-systems-icrc-position-and-background-paper-915>)

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(<https://autonomousweapons.org/solutions/>)

(<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-position-autonomous-weapon-systems>)

(<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomy>)