



DAEMUN V

General Assembly: Chair Report

Issue: Addressing the issue of Lethal Autonomous Weapons (L.A.W.s)

Committee: United Nations General Assembly

Student Officer: Assistant President, Kate Han

Introduction

Although a commonly agreed upon definition of Lethal Autonomous Weapons (L.A.W.s) is yet to be developed ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)), most countries and organisations define them as a type of self-governing military system that can use programmed algorithms to independently search for and identify targets ([United States, Congress 1](#)). The use of L.A.W.s has been growing with the growth of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, and due to its unpredictable potential, nations have been developing conflicting perspectives.

Due to its nature of being deeply related to modern technology, the introduction of L.A.W.s to the international community dates back recently. However, since their first introduction, they have been developing at an overwhelming rate. With their development, opinions for and against them and corresponding extreme actions have been followed too. For example, there has been an ongoing Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, standing strongly against L.A.W.s.

Aware of the major controversy surrounding L.A.W.s, the international community made several efforts to resolve the issue of L.A.W.s. Several organisations, prominently the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) established by the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) have been conducting yearly meetings, even remotely, when the global pandemic struck ([“GGE on lethal”](#)). However, no definite consensus has been reached, and a legal framework specific to the issue of L.A.W.s is thereby yet to be established.

Meanwhile, some countries are not as willing to participate in the corresponding diplomatic discussions, and other countries such as the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom (UK) claim that a new legally binding instrument is unnecessary to discuss the issue of L.A.W.s, being redundant to existing international law ([Stauffer](#)). Simultaneously, technology is continuously advancing at a rapid speed, so finding an agreeable solution has thereby been more difficult than ever.

The issue of L.A.W.s that continue to rapidly change directly aligns with the theme of DAEMUN V, “Adapting to a Rapidly Changing World”. This continuous rapid development of technology urges suggested solutions to be not only feasible but also adaptable.

Definitions of Key Terms

Lethal Autonomous Weapons (L.A.W.s)

As of 2023, there is no commonly agreed definition for L.A.W.s ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)), so there are no set criteria to identify these weapons. However, the general impression is that L.A.W.s respect the following requirements:

- a. are military systems used to injure, defeat, or destroy ([“Weapon”](#)),
- b. are self-governing by a programmed algorithm (i.e. capable of identifying a “target profile”, triggered by its sensors, and striking accordingly ([“What you need”](#)),
- c. are independent, and not requiring any human intervention when functioning.

Examples of L.A.W.s include those such as but not limited to land mines, naval mines, AI missiles, drones, and medic robots. Other names L.A.W.s are known for include lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), autonomous weapons systems (AWS), robotic weapons, or killer robots.

United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)

Officially referred to as The Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, as amended in 2001, the CCW was adopted “to ban or restrict the use of specific types of weapons that are considered to cause unnecessary or unjustifiable suffering to combatants or to affect civilians indiscriminately” ([“The Convention”](#)). It is an important humanitarian law instrument, especially when discussing the issue of L.A.W.s.

Human-in-the-Loop (HITL)

The most human-dependent category out of the three classifications used to determine the degree of human control in L.A.W.s. HITL weapons are not fully autonomous, being able to identify targets and input force only under human command ([Docherty](#)).

Human-on-the-Loop (HOTL)

A term used to classify the degree of human control in L.A.W.s. HOTL weapons can exercise the capabilities of HITL under the oversight of a potent human operator. Human control can override the robots' actions ([Docherty](#)).

Human-out-of-the-Loop

The most independent category out of the three classifications used to determine the degree of human control in L.A.W.s. No human intervention is present when operating Human-out-of-the-Loop robots ([Docherty](#)).

Timeline of Key Events

2007 USA's Introduction of Military Drones

The USA introduced the MQ-9 Reaper, a larger and more powerful military drone compared to the initial MQ-1 Predator that was launched in the mid-90s as a result of The Predator program ([Percepto](#)). Equipping a Hellfire anti-tank missile on its wings, these drones operated remotely and thereby raised questions regarding the potential of autonomy in military systems ([Percepto](#)). With the Predator and Reaper drones being what most individuals picture when they think of military drones even to this day, the USA's introduction of military drones acted as one of the first introductions of L.A.W.s to the international community ([Percepto](#)).

2012 Losing Humanity

Bonnie Docherty, Arms Division of Human Rights Watch and senior clinical instructor at the International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) at Harvard Law School, published "Losing Humanity", a 50-page report outlining the concerns of fully autonomous weapons ([Docherty](#)). The report generally stands strongly against the development and use of L.A.W.s, claiming that

technology “inherently lack[s] human qualities that provide legal and non-legal checks on the killing of civilians”, and several questions would have to be addressed regarding the turmoil of accountability ([Docherty](#)). Ultimately, the report argues that L.A.W.s would violate international humanitarian law and thereby urges for a preventive ban on such weapons.

2014 First Informal Meeting of Experts

The CCW called for an informal meeting of experts “to discuss the questions related to emerging technologies in the areas of lethal autonomous weapons systems in the context of the objectives and purposes of the Convention” (“[GGE on lethal](#)”). The first of these meetings was conducted in 2014, and two more of these meetings followed annually in the following years (“[GGE on lethal](#)”). Each year, the meetings produced reports summarising the discussions, but no major consensus was reached.

2016 CCW’s Establishment of the GGE

Following the informal meetings of experts that were conducted from 2014 through 2016, in 2016, at the Fifth CCW Review Conference, it was decided to establish the GGE, where open-ended discussions would occur to continuously discuss the issue of L.A.W.s (“[GGE on lethal](#)”). The GGE meetings followed up on the previous informal meetings of experts, and since then they held iterations annually up to this day (“[GGE on lethal](#)”).

2023 2023 GGE Sessions

Two GGE sessions were conducted in 2023, with the latest session having taken place on 15 May 2023 through 19 May 2023 (“[GGE on lethal](#)”). Both sessions were chaired by Ambassador Flavio Damico Soares of Brazil at the Palais des Nations in Geneva (“[GGE on lethal](#)”). No major consensus was reached, except for some simple conclusions that were outlined:

- a. due to their rapid rate of advancement, the potential future development of these technologies must be considered,
- b. all military systems must comply with international humanitarian law,

- c. the types of targets, as well as the duration and range of operations the military systems can engage with, should be limited,
- d. all human operators must be adequately trained,
- e. no military systems should be deployed if they cannot comply with international law ([“GGE on lethal”](#)).

Positions of Member States

United States of America (USA)

While recognising the rapid growth of the research and development of AI technology, the USA is against developing any weapon systems, notably those in the field of L.A.W.s, that could cause any harm to the human population ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)). In other words, although the USA does not currently own any L.A.W.s in its inventory, its policy does not forbid the development or employment of L.A.W.s ([United States, Congress 1](#)). Due to this reason, the USA is willing to develop L.A.W.s if its competitors choose to do so ([United States, Congress 1](#)). Meanwhile, an increasing number of states and NGOs are appealing to this stance and rather requesting a regulation or even a ban on L.A.W.s due to ethical concerns ([United States, Congress 1](#)). In general, the USA maintains a rather natural stance on the issue of L.A.W.s, insisting that “it neither encourages nor prohibits the development of such future systems” ([Stauffer](#)).

People’s Republic of China (PRC)

In 2018, the PRC defined L.A.W.s as military systems respecting all of the following basic characteristics:

- a. are lethal,
- b. are autonomous, meaning the complete absence of any type of human intervention,
- c. are impossible to terminate, meaning the absence of media to terminate the system once commenced,
- d. cause indiscriminate effect, meaning the system will conduct military tasks regardless of conditions, scenarios, and targets,

- e. can evolve, meaning owning the ability to learn autonomously, developing its capabilities and functions through interaction with the environment ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)).

Through this definition, the PRC called for a ban on L.A.W.s, but it later amended this definition in 2022, defining the military systems falling under the aforementioned criteria as unacceptable L.A.W.s. It clarified that its ban solely referred to the use of L.A.W.s, and not its development and production ([Stauffer](#)). It also added that L.A.W.s stand acceptable if they are always kept under human control while complying with the basic principles of international humanitarian law. ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)).

Russian Federation

The Russian Federation defines L.A.W.s as military systems that are fully autonomous, involving no type of human intervention ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)). Meanwhile, it disagrees that a new legally binding instrument is necessary to discuss the issue of L.A.W.s, and it claims that existing international law includes sufficient provisions that cover military systems with high degrees of autonomy ([Stauffer](#)). In 2019, it criticised the concepts of “human control” and “human involvement”, claiming that their nature is subjective, thereby difficult to assess, and irrelevant ([Stauffer](#)).

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)

The UK shares a similar stance to the USA on the issue of L.A.W.s, recognising the rapid growth of the research and development of AI technology, while remaining against developing any weapon systems, notably those in the field of L.A.W.s, that could cause any harm to the human population ([“Lethal Autonomous”](#)). Similarly to the Russian Federation, the UK considers existing international humanitarian law to be “sufficient to regulate the use” of L.A.W.s ([Stauffer](#)). Additionally, it explicitly stated that it “has no plans to call for or to support an international ban on them” ([Stauffer](#)). Meanwhile, it is researching for media to integrate autonomy into military systems solely up to the extent to which it will benefit the corresponding systems and increase efficiency, while still requiring human intervention ([Stauffer](#)).

French Republic

Under the GGE, the French Republic claims that states should outlaw fully autonomous military systems and regulate other L.A.W.s (“[Lethal Autonomous](#)”). In 2013, the French Republic explicitly stated that it is not in possession of, nor is it intending to acquire autonomous military systems capable of executing military tasks ([Stauffer](#)). Since then, it has remained a strong stance against L.A.W.s, defining them as military systems that do not involve human intervention including supervision once activated ([Stauffer](#)).

Suggested Solutions

Improved Diplomatic Discussions

The first and most evident step to resolving the issue of L.A.W.s would be developing an international framework that is mutually agreed upon. However, seeing that previous diplomatic discussions have not been successful in meeting definite consensuses, it is important to analyse and identify why such problems were faced during these previous efforts. First, several countries were unwilling to participate in the corresponding conversations, with some arguing the redundancy of the development of an entirely new legally binding instrument. Additionally, previous discussions have not been entirely consistent and thereby usually showed little or no progress. Therefore, it is crucial to first incentivise the corresponding nations to join in the corresponding discussions attempting to resolve the issue of L.A.W.s. Ensuring the maximum contribution of willing nations would be the foremost step to cover before even attempting to resolve the issue of L.A.W.s. Ensuring the effectiveness of the content covered in individual meetings and sessions would then follow. This next step could be facilitated by setting a definite agenda to discuss so that conversations will not fluctuate and focus on multiple concepts at once, or even introducing third-party mediating bodies to professionally moderate the discussions. As well, these methods would allow accountability and transparency to be facilitated.

Increasing Awareness and Engagement of the General Public

Meanwhile, a non-diplomatic and informal solution that could function as equally effective, is increasing awareness and engagement of the general public on the issue of L.A.W.s. With public

opinion playing a major role in influencing policy decisions and industrial practices, it is crucial that even the general public has a comprehensive understanding of the issue of L.A.W.s. This solution can be facilitated by many means, including simple yet less effective ways such as distributing pamphlets, up to complex yet more effective ways such as organising informal workshops in collaboration with NGOs. These media will also further encourage the general public to conduct more research on the issue of L.A.W.s.

Development and Use of HITL Systems

Finally, a more extreme solution would be promoting the development and use of HITL systems. HITL systems, while remaining autonomous to a considerable extent, require human intervention in their facilitation. With HITL systems, humans have control over making critical decisions, which technology is often seen to inherently lack. HITL systems also directly address the question of accountability. Therefore, HITL systems function as more agreeable and approachable ways to integrate L.A.W.s into society at this time. However, this solution will first require the aforementioned diplomatic discussions to outline and develop a comprehensive international framework in order for it to be facilitated. It is also important to acknowledge that many countries may be unwilling to implement any type of L.A.W.s in their land, along with individuals part of anti-L.A.W.s campaigns.

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