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Lethal autonomous weapon systems

Regulatory momentum or global disconnect?

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Summary

- Lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), or autonomous weapons, have raised concerns in the international community. While the majority of states have called for regulation, civil society organizations have advocated a pre-emptive ban on the use of autonomous weapons. In his 2023 *New Agenda for Peace*, the UN Secretary-General urged states to conclude a legally binding international agreement by 2026.

- Time is of the essence, as technological development is advancing rapidly and autonomous weapons have the potential to become a prominent feature of modern warfare. Conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza serve as testing grounds for these weapons, contributing to the normalization of automated warfare and their integration into military structures.

- Great powers are reluctant to regulate autonomous weapons, as they seek to avoid restrictions amid geopolitical rivalry and competition in strategic technologies. Innovation, military advantage and the preservation of great power status appear paramount.

- A cross-regional group of states has called for the launch of international negotiations to regulate lethal autonomous weapon systems, following a decade of discussions under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). Some momentum for progress is visible, but the CCW's consensus-based decision-making allows individual great powers to block decisions.

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Introduction

In September 2025, 42 states, including the Nordic countries, declared their conviction that there was a "need for urgent action" to regulate lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), also referred to as autonomous weapons. This aligns with the views of UN Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres, who stated that 2026 would be decisive for the regulation of autonomous weapons. In December 2024, Guterres appealed to the UN Security Council to regulate LAWS, arguing that "[h]umanity's fate can't be left to algorithms" and warning that delays in establishing international regulation "could heighten risks to global peace and security".[1] Rapid technological advancement is raising concerns that existing international law may be insufficient to govern emerging technologies with profound implications for humanity. As a result, the opportunities and challenges posed by technological progress are widely debated in the field of security and defence.

To date, it remains unclear whether fully autonomous weapons have been used on the battlefield to kill humans. Incidents usually mentioned in international reports by the UN, for example, include the alleged hunting and killing of Libyan National Army forces in 2020 by Turkey with the STM Kargu-2 drone, and Israel's use of the AI-assisted system Lavender to identify, track and attack suspected Hamas terrorists. States and the commercial companies developing these capabilities seem unwilling to take a stance on whether these cases represent examples of the use of fully autonomous weapons or not. However, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has effectively created a testing laboratory for military technological development, making it increasingly evident that human oversight is decreasing in some weapon systems currently in use.

This Briefing Paper explores the regulatory efforts undertaken within the UN on autonomous weapons, focusing in particular on the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). The paper assesses whether sufficient momentum exists to advance international regulation, or whether the great powers leading the development of such weapons will ultimately thwart the will of the majority of states. The importance of this question is accentuated by the prospect of autonomous weapons being deployed on the battlefield. Geopolitical dynamics are central to the analysis. Finally, the paper examines alternative avenues for the majority of states seeking regulation.

Autonomy as the divisive property

Autonomous weapons are a use case of artificial intelligence (AI) in the military domain, designed to locate and attack targets independently. There is no common definition of LAWS,[2] reflecting not only the rapid pace of progress in the field but also the future-oriented nature of AI-enabled military applications. It should be noted, however, that LAWS should not always be equated with the use of AI, although they often benefit from it. Autonomous capabilities can also be achieved through "predefined tasks or sequences of

1 Mishra, Vibhu (2024) "Humanity's Fate Can't Be Left to Algorithms, UN Chief Tells Security Council", UN News, 19 December. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158376.

2 For a study on the variation in definitions, see Mariarosaria Taddeo & Alexander Blanchard, "A Comparative Analysis of the Definitions of Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS)". https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/20210721-Autonomous-Weapon-Systems-Definitions-TO-SHARE.pdf.

actions based on specific parameters".[3] One example is Perimeter, developed by the Soviet Union to launch a nuclear weapons attack. While great powers lead the development of autonomous weapons, states such as Israel and the Republic of Korea are also heavy investors in LAWS.

"The global debate on LAWS is not only about different shades of grey, but also encompasses completely opposing views on the desirability of robotic warfare."

The essential and divisive feature of LAWS is autonomy, particularly in targeting and attack. They differ from remote-controlled drones or robots in that the weapon system can function on its own, that is, without a human in the loop. With the assistance of pre-programmed algorithms and sensors, the system can identify targets, fire at them, and kill. In fully autonomous weapons, the human is needed solely to switch on the system. However, the levels of autonomy can vary. Humans can be *out of the loop*, with no possibility of intervening once the system is activated; *on the loop*, where a human monitors the system and can intervene; or *in the loop*, meaning that a human must approve decisions involving the use of lethal force.

The states engaged in developing LAWS argue that autonomy offers military advantages and thereby increases security. These weapons can save soldiers' lives and free up manpower.[4] LAWS can analyze data faster than any human, act in situations where communication may be lost due to jamming or difficult environments, and arguably attack with greater accuracy than human-controlled systems. Some governments and pundits even claim that machines can follow the rules of international humanitarian law better than humans.[5]

There are, nonetheless, widespread debates over both the structural properties and intrinsic features of LAWS. Many states, civil society organizations (CSOs), and initiatives such as the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots dread leaving decisions on the use of lethal force to machines. In other words, it is disputed whether LAWS will in fact increase security or make the world more insecure instead. Several legal, ethical and security risks have been identified, such as losing control over the system or causing unintended killings. In addition, leaving the use of lethal force to AI dilutes responsibility – another thorny issue related to their use.

The global debate on LAWS is not only about different shades of grey, but also encompasses completely opposing views on the desirability of robotic warfare. In terms of regulation, this entails anything from "full prohibition to no action at all".[6] Thus, multilateralism plays a crucial role: it provides a framework for prohibiting or restricting this particular use case of AI, which has so far remained in the hands of only a few states.

Decade-long negotiations

In 2012, the global coalition Campaign to Stop Killer Robots was launched with the aim of ensuring human control over the use of force. From the start, it has advocated pre-emptive regulation – that is, a treaty on autonomous weapons before their use becomes common or widespread. Its hundreds of member organizations argue that existing international law pertinent to autonomous weapons, such as international humanitarian law or the rules of state responsibility, is insufficient to address the risks posed by such systems.

The first time autonomous weapons were discussed in an international forum was before the UN

3 United Nations, Office of Disarmament, "Autonomous Weapons Systems", https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/lethal-autonomous-weapon-systems.

4 UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, Cristof Heyns, UN Doc. A/HRC/23/47, para. 51.

5 Sassoli, Marco (2014) "Autonomous Weapons and International Humanitarian Law: Advantages, Open Technical Questions and Legal Issues to be Clarified". 90 *International Law Studies* 308; United States of America (2018) "Humanitarian Benefits of Emerging Technologies in the Era of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems", 3 April, UN Doc. CCW/GGE.1/2018/WP.4.

6 Carlsson, Moa Peldán & Vincent Boulanin (2020) "The Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons", *SIPRI Yearbook* 2020, p. 510.

Human Rights Council in 2013. Special Rapporteur Christof Heyns's report on *Lethal Autonomous Robots* initiated the international debate on LAWS. He called for national moratoria prohibiting the development, testing and deployment of LAWS pending the start of international discussions on the matter. States, however, considered arms control and disarmament fora more appropriate venues for international discussions on autonomous weapons, and hence the topic was removed from human rights institutions. Before long, several states expressed their concern over the matter at the UN General Assembly's First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, and it was eventually decided that the appropriate forum for opening discussions on autonomous weapons was the 1981 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 (CCW). In accordance with its title, the aim of the Convention is to limit or prohibit weapons that cause unnecessary suffering to combatants or have indiscriminate effects on civilians. The CCW had previously been successfully used to achieve a pre-emptive ban on another weapon of military importance, namely laser weapons specifically designed to cause permanent blindness.

Since 2014, robotic warfare has been a recurring topic at the intergovernmental CCW annual meetings of the states parties and review conferences in Geneva. The original idea was to create a sixth protocol to the CCW or negotiate a treaty under UN auspices, but progress has been slow and hindered by the CCW's consensus principle. In 2016, the CCW states parties established the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Emerging Technologies in the area of LAWS with a broad mandate. This body, composed of state and civil society experts, has met annually and has produced 11 guiding principles, as well as discussing the application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to autonomous weapons more broadly. The principles confirm, for example, the application of IHL to autonomous weapons and the necessity of maintaining a human decision-maker, given that accountability cannot be transferred to machines.

The GGE's mandate has since been expanded to include the development of a basis for draft rules. In 2024 and 2025, the GGE worked under the leadership of its Dutch Chair on a so-called rolling text, which outlines the basic consensus on several formulations. The aim of the rolling text has been to narrow down disagreements, and today it represents an evolving document containing necessary elements, such as definitions, prohibitions and human oversight requirements, for moving forward towards LAWS regulation.[7]

Geopolitics versus a global majority

Despite the slow progress in the CCW framework, most states have expressed their determination to pursue some kind of new international regulation on autonomous weapons, although national positions may have changed over time and still appear to be in transition (for a broad overview, see Table 1). Two separate aspects of potential regulation remain open: its content and its format – whether it will be adopted in treaty form or as a political declaration. Recently, the so-called two-tier approach has gained traction. This approach entails, on the one hand, the prohibition of unacceptable autonomous weapons that cannot be used in compliance with IHL and, on the other, regulation of acceptable ones with human involvement. In December 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 79/62 on LAWS by 166 votes in favour, following the adoption of the draft resolution in the First Committee. The resolution noted calls for urgent measures to be taken to move forward with regulation based on a two-tier approach. The usual disruptive powers – Russia, Belarus and North Korea – voted against, while China, Israel, India and Iran, among others, abstained.

Great powers seem unwilling to accept the will of the majority to move towards negotiations on an autonomous weapons treaty or some other form of instrument. Moreover, by confining deliberations on the matter to the CCW, they can stymie efforts to advance the majority position. China has issued vague statements advocating a legally binding international LAWS treaty when "conditions are mature", but only once consensus has been reached on "working

7 Minor, Elisabeth & Richard Moyes (2025) "Key comments on the current CCW GGE 'rolling text' on autonomous weapons". https://article36.org/updates/key-comments-on-the-current-ccw-gge-rolling-text-on-autonomous-weapons/.

Broad overview of positions on LAWS regulation

	Pre-emptive prohibition	Two-tier approach	Status quo
Desired content of regulation	Full prohibition of all LAWS	Prohibition of IHL-incompatible weapons and regulation of other LAWS	No new binding regulation needed
Desired form of regulation	Treaty	Treaty or soft law	Existing international law or political declaration
Leading supporters	African, Latin American and Caribbean states; Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)	Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands	US, Israel, Russia

Table 1. Broad overview of positions on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems regulation.
Source: Author's compilation based on https://automatedresearch.org/state-positions/?_state_position_negotiation=no.

characterisations and the scope of regulation".[8] In fact, as in many other sectors of multilateral cooperation, China seems to prefer pragmatic cooperation based on information and experience sharing. Beijing nevertheless accepts the two-tier regulatory approach in principle.[9] According to China's policy statements, any acceptable category of autonomous weapons must encompass human control.

The country nevertheless continues to develop autonomous weapons, reportedly also in cooperation with Russia. In 2024, China presented a robot dog with a machine gun, which raised the question of whether its actions match its official statements. Its rhetoric and voting in various UN fora allow China to portray itself as a responsible great power while simultaneously investing heavily in autonomous warfare. One concrete result of this is Jiutian, a swarm mothership drone that completed its first successful flight in December 2025.

The United States has not supported a ban on LAWS. The US places a strong emphasis on continued military innovation, particularly in light of its strategic competition with China. Indeed, some experts have asserted that China is developing autonomous weapons at a pace four or five times faster than the United States.[10] Indicating a readiness to fully utilize autonomous weapons, the Department of Defense (DoD) updated its Directive 3000.09 in 2023 to provide guidance on autonomy in weapon systems. The 2023 Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy also signals US reluctance to accept any legally binding international instrument on LAWS.

Recent developments further testify to the determination of the US administration to fully engage with military AI. In January 2026, the second Trump administration adopted an "AI Acceleration Strategy" aimed at securing America's military AI dominance. By focusing on innovation and the removal of bureaucratic hurdles, an "AI-first" warfighting force will reportedly be developed. This approach has already translated into concrete action. In February 2026, the Pentagon ended its cooperation with Anthropic, a leading US AI company, after the firm refused to allow its technology to be used for mass surveillance or fully autonomous weapons. President Trump subsequently

8 "Working Paper of the People's Republic of China on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems", July 2022, https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Working-Paper-of-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China-on-Lethal-Autonomous-Weapons-Systems%EF%BC%88English%EF%BC%89.pdf.

9 Ibid.

10 Cameron, Hugh (2024) "China's Killer Robots Are Coming". *Newsweek*, 26 June. https://www.newsweek.com/china-killer-robots-unitree-robotics-1917569.

ordered all federal agencies to stop using Anthropic's products, and the company was designated a supply chain risk, illustrating the administration's resistance to binding limits on military AI.

Russia has, for its part, strongly opposed any efforts to circumvent the CCW and its consensus-based decision-making. In its view, the CCW discussions in Geneva allow for a balanced assessment of LAWS that does not merely see autonomous weapons as a threat to humanity. Russia highlights the many benefits of LAWS and argues that existing international law is sufficient to deal with them. Accordingly, Russia "oppose[s] any artificial prohibitions on the development and use of such systems and technologies used to create them".[11] The Kremlin is against any kind of regulation – be it in the form of hard law or soft law. Its main concerns pertaining to LAWS are instead securing its equal right to participate in the debates and promoting multipolarity, both of which are visible signs of great power identity.[12]

Regulatory momentum in 2026?

In the 2023 New Agenda for Peace, UNSG Guterres issued a recommendation to the international community: "[b]uilding on the progress made in multilateral negotiations, conclude, by 2026, a legally binding instrument to prohibit lethal autonomous weapons that function without human control or oversight, and which cannot be used in compliance with international humanitarian law, and to regulate all other types of autonomous weapons systems". The deadline of 2026 was set because it was seen as a temporal tipping point at which technological development would outpace any governance efforts. In any case, the gap between regulation and reality continues to widen.[13] In 2026, the mandate of the CCW GGE on LAWS also expires.

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Statement of the Representative of the Delegation of the Russian Federation in the Explanation of Vote on a Draft Resolution 'Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems', L.77 in the First Committee of the 79th Session of the UNGA, New York, 6 November 2024, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1979940/.

12 Nadibaidze, Anna (2022) "Great Power Identity in Russia's Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems". 43 *Contemporary Security Policy* 407.

13 Kmentt, Alexander (2025) "Geopolitics and the Regulation of Autonomous Weapon Systems". Arms Control Association, January/February 2025. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-01/features/geopolitics-and-regulation-autonomous-weapons-systems.

"Ongoing militarization, geopolitical rivalry and mistrust do not bode well for achieving tangible results in a sector driven by large-scale investment and innovation."

The call by 42 states to start negotiations based on the two-tier approach suggests that some momentum exists to move forward along the lines of the UNSG's vision. Increased attention to the issue may, in itself, help to build momentum, and some commentators appear optimistic about the prospects for launching negotiations.[14]

However, even if negotiations based on the rolling text were launched, the nature of the final instrument would remain uncertain. Moreover, convincing great powers to take part in global negotiations might prove difficult if the focus is on hard regulation. States advocating stricter regulation of LAWS would certainly make more progress with great powers through soft-law approaches than through hard regulation.[15] It is also unclear whether the United States has moved closer to the Russian position, which vehemently objects to any kind of regulation. Ongoing militarization, geopolitical rivalry and mistrust do not bode well for achieving tangible results in a sector driven by large-scale investment and innovation. The military advantage of great powers and technologically advanced states is thus clearly at odds with the political will of the global majority.

By 2023, frustration had grown over the GGE's slow progress on LAWS. As a result, some countries took the issue to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) First Committee. Taking the discussions to the UNGA allows for greater inclusivity and opens the door to circumventing the consensus-based decision-making of the CCW. For three years in a row, the First Committee has adopted resolutions on LAWS with overwhelming support from states. The persistent objectors have been Russia, North Korea and Belarus, while the Baltic states, among others, have abstained. While some states may have hoped

14 Perrin, Benjamin (2025) "Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems & International Law: Growing Momentum Towards an International Treaty". *ASIL 29*(1). https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/29/issue/1.

15 Heller, Kevin Jon (2025) *The Great Powers and the Formation of International Law: Implications for Denmark*. Djof Publishing, 10.

that multilateral cooperation under the UNGA First Committee would prove more successful than the disarmament dynamics under the CCW GGE process in achieving (binding) international regulation on LAWS,[16] the First Committee resolutions mainly refer back to the GGE negotiations, with the exception of UNSG-led informal consultations. Turning to alternative fora may nonetheless duplicate efforts and further alienate the most militarily and technologically advanced states, which would be crucial to keep within the remit of any possible regulation.[17]

An alternative to the stalling global negotiations could be regional regulation of LAWS. However, in the European context, the EU not only lacks the competence in the military domain but is also internally divided on the issue. The Baltic states, Romania and Poland, which are part of NATO's eastern flank, have abstained in the UNGA First Committee's voting on LAWS, probably due to their aim to keep all options open in responding to threats posed by Russia. Estonia objects to a LAWS treaty, and Finland has failed to state its position clearly on a potential treaty, although it supports the two-tier approach. On the other hand, states such as Austria, which has a long tradition of disarmament, are pushing hard for LAWS regulation together with France and Germany, to name a few. Most European states are willing to draw a red line on the use of autonomous weapons.

In stark contrast to the EU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been pushing for a regional treaty banning LAWS, with Sierra Leone in the lead. In the Freetown Communiqué of the 2024 Regional Conference on the Peace and Security Aspects of Autonomous Weapon Systems, ECOWAS states recognize that the African context, which includes terrorism, criminal networks and armed conflict, makes the continent more vulnerable than others to the dangers of autonomous weapon systems. African states also support UN efforts to enact regulation. The Belén Communiqué similarly demonstrates the commitment of 33 Latin American and Caribbean states to a treaty on LAWS. These regional efforts demonstrate political will and help build momentum.

Conclusions

The international community is arguably approaching the so-called Oppenheimer moment, namely a critical juncture when it comes to autonomous weapons. There are great expectations and concerns surrounding 2026, as the UNSG has warned that time is running out to make regulatory progress. While most states desire regulation of some sort, great powers with the greatest military capabilities do not. A cross-regional group of states has nevertheless called for negotiations to begin within the CCW on the basis of the GGE rolling text. Whether such nascent momentum can be utilized to move forward remains uncertain, given the current unsupportive international political climate and disruptive behaviour by powers such as Russia. The 2026 sessions will reveal whether progress can be made.

The emphasis of international discussions on autonomous weapons has shifted from a pre-emptive ban to a two-tier approach, whereby autonomous weapon systems without human control would be banned and others regulated. As time passes and the uptake of these weapons spreads, it will become difficult to remove them from military structures once they are integrated. Regional agreements and practices may be easier to reach than truly global ones, but the CCW GGE on LAWS must be supported until its mandate ends or it is renewed. However, should that process fail to deliver, piecemeal or new multilateral approaches outside the UN should be valued, as most states recognize the need to develop new rules on this specific matter.

16 Javadi, Onderco & Vanhoonacker argue that one of the defining features of efforts seeking to regulate military AI more broadly is forum shopping. See Javadi, M., Onderco, M. & Vanhoonacker, S. "The European Union's missing voice: member states' forum shopping in military AI governance". *European Security*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2570806.

17 Blanchard, Alexander, Vincent Boulanin, Laura Bruun & Nette Goussac (2025) "Dilemmas in the Policy Debate on Autonomous Weapon Systems", *SIPRI Commentary*, 6 February. https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2025/dilemmas-policy-debate-autonomous-weapon-systems; see also Thomas Linsenmaier, "Contesting LAWS: The normative positioning of the states of the Nordic-Baltic region in the multilateral debate on the governance of lethal autonomous weapons systems". Appendix 3 in *Deliverable 3.3 Report on empirical research papers on the different norms as case studies.*

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