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Background Guide

Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC)

Topic: Regulating Autonomous Weapons Systems and Military AI

Chairperson: Haig Kendirjian (hkendirjian@pilibos.org)
Dias: Luna Balian (lbalian@pilibos.org) & Alique Bardakian (albardakian@pilibos.org)

Committee Background

The Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC) is the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly and is responsible for addressing issues related to international security, arms control, and disarmament. In recent years, DISEC has increasingly focused on the security implications of emerging technologies, particularly the development and deployment of Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) and military applications of artificial intelligence. These technologies raise serious concerns regarding accountability, compliance with international humanitarian law, and the risk of lowering the threshold for armed conflict by reducing direct human involvement in warfare.

DISEC has engaged with this issue primarily through discussions under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), where states have debated possible regulations on lethal autonomous weapons systems, including proposals for bans, moratoriums, and requirements for meaningful human control. While no binding international treaty has yet been adopted, DISEC has supported confidence-building measures, transparency initiatives, and the reaffirmation that existing international humanitarian law applies to all weapons systems, including those using AI. The committee now faces the challenge of determining whether current frameworks are sufficient or if new global regulations are necessary to prevent destabilization and unintended humanitarian consequences.

Introduction

The rapid advancements in artificial intelligence have fundamentally altered the nature of modern warfare. Among the most pressing developments are lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), weapons capable of selecting and engaging targets without meaningful human control. These systems represent a significant departure from traditional and remotely piloted weapons, raising unprecedented ethical, humanitarian, and legal concerns. As militaries incorporate automation into targeting, surveillance, cyberwarfare, and decision-support systems, the international community faces a critical debate: How can states harness technological innovation while preventing destabilization and protecting themselves?

LAWS challenge the foundations of international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity. Machines operate without human judgment, contextual reasoning, or moral responsibility, yet would be tasked with

life-and-death decision-making. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warns that autonomous weapons may be fundamentally unable to meet the legal and ethical expectations that govern armed conflict. At the same time, supporters argue that autonomous systems could reduce battlefield errors associated with human fatigue, emotional stress, and bias. This debate underscored the urgency for delegates to establish norms, regulations, or bans as military AI development accelerates worldwide.

Defining Autonomous Weapons And Military AI

A. Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)

According to the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, LAWS are systems that, once activated, can independently identify, select, and attack targets without human intervention. Current examples are mostly prototypes, though several states already employ semi-autonomous systems with automated target recognition or autonomous systems.

B. Distinction From Remotely Operated Systems

Unlike drones or piloted aircraft, LAWS remove humans from the final targeting decision. This absence of human judgment raises questions about legal accountability, reliable, contextual assessments, and moral agency.

C. Broader Military AI Applications

Military AI is not limited to weaponry. As noted by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, AI is increasingly used for:

- Surveillance and reconnaissance
- Logistics and automated supply chains
- Cyber operation
- Predictive decision-support systems

These applications blur the distinction between civilian and military uses and complete regulatory approaches.

III. Ethical and Legal Challenges

A. International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

IHL requires parties to armed conflicts to distinguish between combatants and civilians, act proportionally, and act in accordance with the principle of military necessity. Many experts agree that machines cannot make these nuanced judgments. The IDRC highlights contextual

decision-making as identifying surrendering soldiers or civilians under dress, which algorithms cannot replace.

B. Accountability and Responsibility

If an autonomous system commits an unlawful killing, who is responsible?

- The Programmer?
- The commanders who deployed it?
- The state?

C. Algorithmic Bias and Reliability

AI can inherit human or data-driven biases, producing discriminatory outcomes or misidentifying targets. Technical failures, hacking, spoofing, or unpredictable machine behavior also pose threats to escalation control.

IV. Strategic and Geopolitical Concerns

A. Acceleration of Military AI Development

Over 30 countries are actively investing in autonomous weapons research. This creates a potential AI arms race, in which states feel compelled to pursue autonomous systems to avoid falling behind adversaries Such competition threatens strategic stability and increases the risk of global

B. Offense–Defense Balance

Autonomous systems may shift military balance toward offensive operations by enabling faster, cheaper, and more precise attacks. This could reduce incentives for diplomacy and increase the likelihood of preemptive strikes.

C. Escalation Risks

An AI-driven system operating at machine speed may misinterpret signals or act unpredictably in rapidly changing environments. Errors in early warning systems or cyber interference could trigger unintended conflict.

V. International Efforts and Current Gaps

A. The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)

Since 2014, the United Nations has convened meetings under the CCW to discuss LAWS. These decisions have focused on:

- Definitions of autonomy
- Meaningful human control
- Ethical and legal implications,
- Potential limits or bam

B. Divisions Among Member States

Countries generally fall into three groups:

1. States advocate a preemptive ban
   These states argue that LAWS are inherently incompatible with IHL and must be prohibited before deployment becomes widespread.
2. States are seeking strict regulations but not total bans.
   This group supports defining meaningful human control, limiting autonomous targeting, and establishing monitoring mechanisms.
3. States opposing binding restrictions
   These nations, often major military powers, prefer flexible national regulations, citing strategic advantage, innovation, and verification challenges.

C. Absence of Binding International Law

There is currently no treaty that explicitly governs or restricts fully autonomous weapons. Without clear norms, states risk escalating development without safeguards, increasing global instability.

VI. Key Questions for Delegates to Address

1. **How should "meaningful human control" be defined?**
   - Should humans always approve of lethal force? Monitor systems? Be able to intervene?
2. **Should LAWS be banned, regulated, or allowed under strict guidelines?**
3. **How can verification mechanisms be implemented?**
   - Autonomous systems may be classified, software-based or subject to tampering.
4. **How can the international community prevent an AI arms race?**
5. **Who is accountable for wrongful actions committed by autonomous systems?**
6. **How can states ensure that AI systems comply with IHL and human rights laws?**
7. **What safeguards should exist to prevent system failure, cyberattacks, or misuse?**

VII. Potential Avenues for Resolution

While no single solution will satisfy every nation, delegates may explore options such as:

A. A Global Ban on Fully Autonomous Lethal Weapons
A preemptive prohibition modeled after chemical or biological weapons bans.

B. A Regulatory Framework Under the CCW
Including:

- Mandatory human oversight
- Restrictions on autonomous targeting of humans
- Transparency and reporting obligations
- Safety-testing requirements

C. Technology Safeguards and Design Principles
Examples include:

- Fail-safe shutdown mechanisms
- Predictability and reliability standards
- Bias testing and system audits

D. International Monitoring and Verification Body
A new or expanded UN mechanism to review compliance, oversee investigations, and provide technical guidance.

E. Confidence-Building Measures
Information sharing, scientific exchange, and transparency to reduce arms-race pressures and miscalculations.

VIII. Conclusion

Autonomous weapons and military AI represent one of the most consequential technological shifts of the 21st century. Whether LAWS will reduce battlefield casualties or undermine global security depends on the choices made by policymakers today. For DISEC delegates, this topic presents an opportunity to shape the future of warfare, reaffirm the principles of international humanitarian law, and establish a framework that ensures innovation does not come at the expense of humanity.

Delegates are encouraged to approach the issue with a balance of technological awareness, legal reasoning, and diplomatic compromise. Your task is not simply to debate the risks and benefits of AI in warfare, but to articulate a path forward that protects civilian lives, maintains international stability, and upholds the moral responsibility at the core of global governance.

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