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“HUMANITAS V : RETROUVER NOTRE HUMANITÉ COMMUNE”

STUDY GUIDE

SECURITY COUNCIL

The laws of war regarding the use of autonomous weapon systems

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COMMITTEE INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is responsible for maintaining international peace and security by addressing global threats, authorizing peacekeeping operations, imposing sanctions, and ensuring compliance with international law. In an era where warfare is increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and automation, the UNSC must evaluate how emerging technologies such as lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS) affect global stability.

Autonomous weapons introduce significant challenges. While they may increase military efficiency and reduce risk to personnel, they also create ethical and legal dilemmas. If machines are allowed to make lethal decisions without human oversight, fundamental principles of human dignity, accountability, and proportionality may be jeopardized. As the rapid development of AI transforms modern conflict, finding an effective and humane regulatory framework becomes essential.

KEY TERMS

#1 LETHAL AUTONOMOUS WEAPON SYSTEMS (LAWS):

Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are weapons that, once activated, can independently select and engage targets without direct human intervention or control. Their autonomous functioning raises significant concerns regarding accountability, compliance with international humanitarian law, and the legality and ethical use of such systems in war, particularly due to the delegation of life-and-death decisions to machines.

#2 MEANINGFUL HUMAN CONTROL

Meaningful human control is a principle requiring that humans retain real, conscious, and informed authority over decisions involving the use of lethal force. Humans must be able to understand, supervise, and intervene in weapon system operations. Without such oversight, responsibility and accountability for harm become blurred or lost.

#3 WAR CRIMES

War Crimes are severe violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including acts such as intentional attacks on civilians, disproportionate or indiscriminate use of force, torture, and the destruction of protected infrastructure. These crimes are punishable under international law.

#4 INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is the body of international rules that regulate armed conflict with the aim of limiting human suffering. IHL protects civilians and other non-combatants and restricts the methods and means of warfare through principles such as distinction, proportionality, and precaution.

#5 ETHICS

Ethics are moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of states, institutions, and combatants during conflict. Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) challenge ethical norms by delegating life-and-death decisions to algorithms rather than human judgment.

#6 ARMS RACE

Arms race is a competitive buildup of military capabilities and technologies between states, often driven by security concerns and rivalry. The rapid development of autonomous weapon systems risks accelerating arms races and destabilizing global security.

#7 ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is the ability to clearly identify who is legally and morally responsible for the actions of a weapon system. Autonomous systems complicate accountability because failures or harm may result from algorithms, human operators, commanders, or system developers.

#8 CIVILIAN PROTECTION

Civilian protection is the obligation to safeguard non-combatants during armed conflict. Weapon systems, including LAWS, must comply with strict targeting standards to minimize harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.

#9 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Artificial intelligence (AI) are technologies that enable machines to perform tasks such as pattern recognition, learning, and decision-making. AI forms the foundation of autonomy in modern weapon systems. Through machine learning, neural networks analyze data, make predictions, and carry out tasks based on human-provided prompts and objectives.

#10 REGULATIONS

Regulations are rules, treaties, or guidelines that govern the development, deployment, and use of autonomous weapons. These regulations aim to ensure compliance with international law, uphold ethical standards, and prevent misuse or uncontrolled escalation.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Autonomous weapons represent one of the most controversial developments in modern warfare. Unlike traditional systems, LAWS rely on algorithms rather than human operators to identify and attack targets. This automation raises fundamental questions about humanity's role in conflict:
Can a machine adequately understand context, intent, or proportionality?
Who is responsible when an autonomous system commits an unlawful act?

These concerns reflect deeper ethical challenges. Allowing algorithms to make lethal decisions risks dehumanizing warfare by replacing moral judgment with technical processes. Moreover, the complexity of AI systems makes their behavior unpredictable, increasing the likelihood of unintended escalation or civilian harm.

From a military perspective, LAWS offer potential advantages such as faster reaction time, reduced personnel risk, and improved precision. However, if states deploy these weapons without shared norms or regulations, an arms race could escalate rapidly, undermining global stability.

International debates continue, but consensus remains difficult. Some states advocate complete bans, while others push for continued research. The UNSC's responsibility is to navigate these competing positions, ensuring both security and the preservation of human dignity.

KEY ISSUES

#1 HUMAN CONTROL AND AUTONOMY

Maintaining meaningful human control is central to preventing abuses in the use of autonomous weapon systems. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is built on the assumption that humans make deliberate and accountable decisions regarding the use of force. Without sufficient human intervention, autonomous systems may make unpredictable, or biased decisions, which could lead to violations of IHL such as distinction and proportionality. Delegates must therefore consider what level of human control is necessary over critical functions, including target selection, and how states can guarantee this control through legal frameworks, technical safeguards, and operational procedures.

#2 CIVILIAN PROTECTION AND INTERNATIONAL LAWS

Civilian protection is a fundamental pillar of International Humanitarian Law. Although Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are required to comply with existing legal principles, their ability to reliably distinguish between combatants and civilians remains uncertain. Technical malfunctions, limitations in sensors, or algorithmic biases may result in increased civilian casualties and damage to protected infrastructure. As a result, strict regulation, rigorous testing, and transparency in the development and deployment of these systems are essential to ensure compliance with international law and to uphold the obligation to minimize harm to civilians.

#3 ETHICS AND MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS

Autonomous weapon systems have the potential to enhance military effectiveness by increasing speed, precision, and operational efficiency. However, these advantages raise serious ethical concerns, particularly regarding the delegation of life-and-death decisions to artificial intelligence. Delegates must assess whether the military benefits provided by autonomous systems justify the moral and legal risks they pose. Balancing military effectiveness with ethical responsibility is crucial to maintaining legitimacy, accountability, and respect for humanitarian values in modern warfare.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS & EXISTING INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

The principal international rules governing the deployment of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) derive from enduring United Nations conventions established before the advent of modern artificial intelligence, yet remain pertinent today. The United Nations Charter imposes fundamental constraints on the use of force, while the Geneva Conventions detail how parties to conflict must protect civilians and exercise responsible decision-making during warfare. These principles apply to any weapon system, whether operated by humans or algorithms. The most active United Nations forum for discussing AWS is the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), where states explore concepts such as ‘substantive human control’ and deliberate on the necessity for a new treaty governing autonomous weapons. Although no specific treaty on AWS has yet been adopted by the United Nations, the Secretary-General has repeatedly warned that fully autonomous lethal systems pose grave risks and should be regulated before widespread deployment.

Human rights treaties define limits on autonomous weapon systems, especially beyond conventional battlefields. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the right to life, forbids arbitrary killings, and requires state oversight when using autonomous weapons. The Convention against Torture reinforces obligations to prevent cruel or inhuman treatment, raising concerns about autonomous systems in detention, policing, or peacekeeping. The Human Rights Council highlights risks like algorithmic bias and unclear liability. Collectively, these treaties stress that autonomous weapons must respect human dignity and remain transparent and controllable.

Regional approaches vary based on security concerns and political priorities. The EU strongly supports strict limits or a complete ban on fully autonomous lethal weapons, emphasizing human control. Most African Union members share these concerns and warn that such weapons could destabilize conflict zones. In the Americas, some Latin American countries advocate for an international ban, while the OAS continues to study the impact on regional security. In the Asia-Pacific, positions are mixed: some countries call for stricter regulations, while others prioritize technological advancement and prefer regulation over a total ban. In summary, most countries agree on the need for stricter rules, but the exact scope remains debated.

THE ROLE OF MAJOR COUNTRIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

SOURCE COUNTRIES

Source countries are nations with advanced military industrial systems and the technical capabilities to design, manufacture and export autonomous weapon systems. Countries such as the United States, Russia, China, Israel and several EU Member States are at the forefront of developing weapons with artificial intelligence and integrating them into their armed forces. These nations often use national security, strategic advantage and innovation to justify their position, and may be reluctant to accept binding restrictions on autonomous weapon systems. At the same time, they shape global norms through research standards, export controls, and positions in forums such as the CCW. Their choices (whether to advance regulation, to ban, or prioritise military competitiveness) significantly influence the trajectory of international negotiations.

TRANSIT AND DESTINATION COUNTRIES

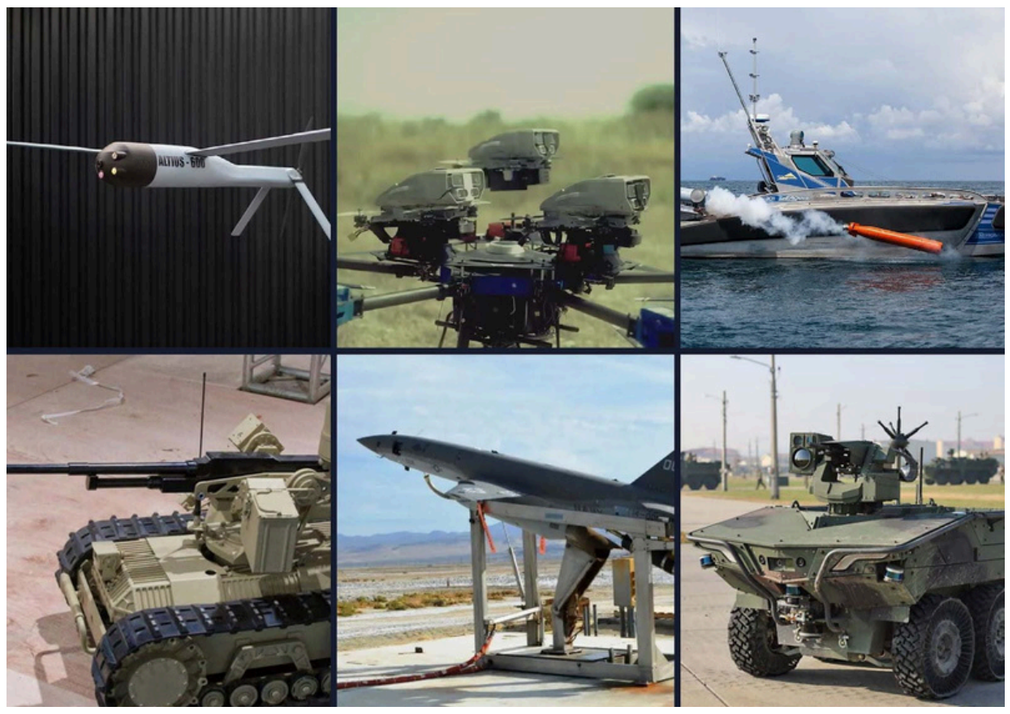
Transit and destination countries often lie in regions where AWS may be deployed, transferred, or tested, even if they do not produce them in their own country. Many states in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Asia are part this category. These countries may face pressure to accept foreign military assistance involving autonomous or semi-autonomous systems, or they may become testing grounds for new technologies used in counterterrorism or peacekeeping operations. Their main concerns typically lie around civilian safety, accountability, and the risk that AWS could escalate conflicts or be misused by non-state armed groups. As a result, many destination and transit countries tend to support stronger international rules or outright bans, arguing that they bear the greatest risks if global norms remain weak.

CIVIL SOCIETIES AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGO)

Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations play an important role in shaping public debate and promoting ethical boundaries for autonomous weapon systems. Groups such as the Stop Killer Robots campaign, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are campaigning for a global ban on fully autonomous weapons, arguing that transferring life-and-death decisions to machines violates human rights and international humanitarian law. Through research, the publication of reports and lobbying governments, these organisations are raising public awareness of the humanitarian, ethical and security implications of autonomous weapons. They also provide technical and legal expertise that influences negotiations under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and other UN bodies. Their activism remains crucial to keeping unmanned combat aircraft on the international agenda.

CASE STUDIES

The Middle East has become an important region for the use of autonomous and semi-autonomous drones by both state and non-state actors. Although these systems are often used to reduce personnel risk and operating costs, their use has led to concerns about civilian casualties, conflict escalation and accountability. In this region, which has long been plagued by conflict, the proliferation of autonomous drone technology may lower the threshold for the use of force and complicate efforts to maintain stability, posing an urgent problem for the Security Council.



Artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping the nature of cyber warfare, enabling faster and more autonomous responses to cyber threats. AI-driven cyber operations can target both military networks and civilian infrastructure, often without clear attribution or established legal frameworks. This poses challenges for the Security Council in determining responsibility, the proportionality of measures and appropriate countermeasures, and underscores the need for clearer international standards to prevent escalation in cyberspace.

Europe has played an active role in managing the risks associated with new military technologies, including autonomous weapons, building on its long tradition of arms control. Many European countries advocate transparency, ethical guidelines and meaningful human oversight, while continuing to invest in artificial intelligence for defence purposes. This balanced approach provides the Security Council with valuable insights into how the arms control framework can be adapted to regulate autonomous systems without hampering technological development.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- UN & SECURITY COUNCIL RESOURCES

HTTPS://WWW.UN.ORG/SECURITYCOUNCIL/
HTTPS://UNIDIR.ORG/PROGRAMME/SECURITY-AND-TECHNOLOGY

- INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW & ETHICS

HTTPS://WWW.ICRC.ORG/EN/DOCUMENT/ICRC-POSITION-AUTONOMOUS-WEAPON-SYSTEMS

- ACADEMIC RESEARCH

HTTPS://PILAC.LAW.HARVARD.EDU/
HTTPS://WWW.SIPRI.ORG/RESEARCH/ARMAMENT-AND-DISARMAMENT/EMERGING-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-TECHNOLOGIES

- POLICY & ADVOCACY

HTTPS://WWW.HRW.ORG/TOPIC/ARMS/KILLER-ROBOTS

- CASE STUDIES / CONFLICT REPORTS

HTTPS://DIGITALLIBRARY.UN.ORG/