

PHSMUN 2026 Conference: GA1

TQO The Use of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS)

What are LAWS?

While no universally accepted legal definition exists for a Lethal Autonomous Weapons System (LAWS), they are generally understood to be weapons systems that, once activated, can select and engage targets with little to no further human intervention.

Autonomous weapons themselves are not entirely new—examples such as missile defence systems and naval close-in weapon systems have existed for decades. However, recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, computer vision, and sensor technology have significantly increased the capabilities of these systems.

Modern LAWS may include:

- Autonomous drones
- Unmanned ground combat vehicles
- Autonomous naval defence systems
- Missile interception systems
- AI-assisted targeting systems

The central issue is the degree of human control: whether humans remain responsible for final decisions involving the use of lethal force.

Historical Background

The debate around autonomous weapons began long before modern AI. Defensive systems such as the US Navy's Phalanx CIWS and Israel's Iron Dome already use high-speed automated targeting because human reaction times are often too slow.

However, unlike purely defensive systems, modern LAWS can be used offensively and may independently identify, track, and eliminate targets without immediate human supervision.

As AI capabilities have improved, states have begun integrating machine learning into military systems for surveillance, target recognition, and battlefield decision-making. This has caused growing concern among diplomats, legal experts, and humanitarian organisations.

In 2013, the issue gained major international attention when Human Rights Watch and Harvard Law School published the report *“Losing Humanity”*, warning against the development of “killer robots.”

Since 2014, discussions have taken place under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) at the United Nations, where states continue debating whether LAWS should be banned, restricted, or regulated.

The Issue Surrounding LAWS

Most weapons classified as LAWS today are only partially autonomous, rather than fully independent. For example, the Shahed drones used extensively in the war in Ukraine and more recently during the Iran conflict can autonomously navigate and strike targets after launch, although humans still choose initial targets.

During the recent Iran conflict, approximately 2,000 of these drones were launched within just six days, demonstrating how large-scale autonomous warfare is becoming increasingly feasible.

The low level of human input involved creates serious concerns:

- Civilian casualties caused by targeting errors
- Lack of accountability for unlawful killings
- Difficulty distinguishing combatants from civilians
- Escalation of warfare due to faster decision-making
- Lower political cost of war, making conflict more likely

In 2018, a United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) stated that:

“Human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapons systems must be retained.”

This principle argues that fully autonomous lethal systems should never replace meaningful human control.

However, examples suggest this line may already be crossed. During the 2020 Turkish intervention in Libya, reports indicated that Kargu-2 drones were capable of identifying and attacking retreating forces without direct operator control, representing one of the first alleged uses of fully autonomous lethal force in combat.

LAWS are not limited to drones. They also include:

- Autonomous sentry guns
- AI-controlled missile defence systems such as Israel’s Iron Dome support systems
- Naval autonomous defence platforms
- Robotic combat vehicles under development by major military powers

This raises a fundamental question for the international community:

Should machines be allowed to make life-and-death decisions?

Key Considerations

Consider:

1. Should fully autonomous weapons be banned entirely?
2. What qualifies as “meaningful human control”?
3. How can international law regulate rapidly developing AI weapons?
4. Who is legally responsible when a LAWS commits a war crime?
5. Should non-state actors be prevented from accessing autonomous weapons technology?
6. How can verification and enforcement of LAWS treaties be achieved?

Useful Links

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)

<https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/lethal-autonomous-weapon-systems>
[Campaign to Stop Killer Robots](https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/)

Stop Killer Robots

<https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/>

ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross)

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

SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)

<https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/emerging-military-and-security-technologies>

Human Rights Watch

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/28/a-hazard-to-human-rights/autonomous-weapons-systems-and-digital-decision-making>

UN Group of Governmental Experts on The Use of Certain Conventional Weapons

<https://docs.un.org/en/CCW/GGE.1/2018/3>