



International Regulation of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems: A Long Road Ahead

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Although the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) concluded a productive meeting in September, significant differences persist. Key areas of disagreement include defining what constitutes LAWS and how to ensure human control over such systems.
- Given the disagreements, it is likely that the GGE might not reach a consensus on outstanding issues. Even if it does, the international community might not begin the negotiation process for a legally binding instrument on LAWS until after 2026, missing the goal set by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres.
- Two key developments will be worth observing: whether the GGE can achieve breakthroughs and reach a consensus on outstanding issues; and whether states will adopt a resolution on LAWS at the upcoming UN General Assembly's First Committee meeting. Such a resolution might help to apply pressure on the GGE to reach a consensus.

COMMENTARY

On 5 September, the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) concluded a productive meeting. The five-day meeting was the GGE's second formal session of the year. The first took place in March. The Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) participated as an observer in both meetings.



The Military Transformations Programme at RSIS participated in the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) meeting from 1 to 5 September 2025.

Image source: Author.

Meetings of the GGE on LAWS have been convened under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) since 2016. The GGE serves as the primary forum for the international community to discuss the challenges posed by LAWS, which are commonly known as “[killer robots](#)”.

While the recent meeting was productive, a long road ahead remains before a legally binding instrument governing LAWS can be concluded. Currently, there is no international regulation that specifically governs these systems. This gap is a concern for civil society and leaders like the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, who have been calling for a legally binding instrument to regulate LAWS.

In a series of four virtual consultations between March and September 2025, the chairperson of the GGE, Ambassador Robert in den Bosch of the Netherlands, sought to better understand the positions of various delegations to the meetings and help bridge the gaps between them. However, despite these efforts, the GGE discussions were still hampered by disagreements on key issues. These include the definition of what constitutes LAWS and the question of how to ensure human control over such systems.

Given these disagreements, it is likely that the GGE might not reach a consensus next year. Even if it does, the international community might not begin the negotiation process for a legally binding instrument on LAWS until after 2026. This would miss the target of having a legally binding instrument on LAWS by 2026 – a goal [set](#) by the UN Secretary-General.

In the coming months, it will be worthwhile to observe two key developments. The first is whether the GGE can achieve breakthroughs on issues for which consensus has yet to be achieved. The second is whether states will adopt a resolution on these weapon systems in the UN General Assembly’s First Committee, which is scheduled to [meet](#) from 8 October to 7 November 2025. Previous resolutions on LAWS led to an international conference and an informal consultation that helped to bridge some differences in positions. Therefore, such a resolution might help to apply pressure on the GGE to reach a consensus before its mandate ends next year.

The GGE’s Mandate

The GGE’s [mandate](#), renewed in 2023, is to formulate a set of elements to address the challenges posed by LAWS. To help the GGE fulfil its mandate, the GGE

chairperson introduced a [document](#) in July 2024, which the group refers to as the “rolling text”. It lays out elements that could be incorporated into a future instrument governing LAWS. Identifying elements before formal negotiations can help the international community build a common understanding of the issues surrounding LAWS and may ease the subsequent negotiation process.

The latest version of the [rolling text](#), updated in May 2025, includes several elements, such as the definition and characterisation of LAWS; prohibitions and restrictions governing their development and use; and measures promoting the responsibility and accountability for developing and using them.

Disagreements at the GGE’s 2025 Discussions

The GGE continued its discussion on the elements during the meetings in March and September 2025. Although the September session was productive, significant differences persist.

On definition and characterisation, the GGE was still divided over two key points. First, whether the term “lethal” should be included in the definition, meaning whether these systems should be described as LAWS or simply autonomous weapon systems. This issue was hotly [debated](#) in March, and by September, it appeared that states opposing the inclusion of “lethal” were willing to compromise. This shift in position was most likely due to a broader definition of lethality being proposed. This broader definition now encompasses not just death to persons but also injuries to persons and damage to and destruction of objects. This wider scope addresses some states’ concerns by moving the focus away from human fatalities to a more comprehensive one that includes a broader range of effects of using LAWS.

However, observers attending the meeting [questioned](#) the legal basis in international humanitarian law (IHL) for including the concept of lethality in the definition. They argued that this concept does not exist in IHL. They also contended that IHL protects not only civilians against fatalities but also against injuries and damage to civilian objects. Therefore, focusing on “lethality” narrows the regulatory scope, thereby failing to address the broad range of effects caused by LAWS.

Second, there was a lack of consensus on which functions should be included in the definition. While there was general agreement to include the autonomous functions of “selection” and “engagement” in the definition, the GGE could not agree on whether to also include “identification”. The group also disagreed on whether these three functions, if included, should be cumulative. The differing views stemmed from varied interpretations of “identification”. Some states interpreted it broadly (from finding a new target to matching the intended one), while others viewed it more narrowly (as simply classifying a target as the intended one).

Another thorny issue faced by the GGE relates to human control over LAWS. Some states opposed the use of the term “context-appropriate human judgement and control”. These states were concerned about the ambiguity of the term. Others supported the term. They argued that while this term is not an established principle under IHL, the GGE should not shy away from further developing this body of law in order to address the challenges posed by LAWS.

Obstacles to A Legally Binding Instrument

Recognising that LAWS have the potential to “[significantly change warfare](#)” and may erode existing legal frameworks, the UN Secretary-General has [called](#) for a legally binding instrument by 2026. However, it is unlikely that such an instrument will be finalised next year.

As mentioned, there is no international legal framework that specifically governs LAWS. While the GGE is debating the elements in the rolling text, these elements may or may not be included in a future instrument governing LAWS.

The path towards a legally binding instrument, should the international community choose to pursue it, is complex. If the international community wants a legally binding instrument, the GGE would first need to reach a consensus on the elements. After that, the GGE would need to consider how to incorporate these elements into its report, which will be submitted to the 2026 Seventh Review Conference of the CCW. The GGE could incorporate the elements into its report in a few ways, depending on whether it reaches consensus.

First, if the GGE reaches a consensus on the elements, the group could include all of these elements in its report. The report could then recommend that states begin negotiations on a legally binding instrument on LAWS. However, this is unlikely given the current disagreements on the elements, as well as the disagreement among states on whether a legally binding instrument is necessary. Additionally, since CCW review conferences are typically held in November or December every five years, even if states agree on the elements and on starting negotiations, such negotiations could only realistically begin after 2026.

If consensus remains elusive, the GGE could include the elements in its report and state that, while they are not entirely agreeable to all its members, they could still be considered for a future legally binding instrument.

Lastly, if the GGE fails to reach a consensus on the elements and decides against including them in its report, one of the delegations could include them in a working paper and put it forward for a vote at the review conference. However, since the CCW forum, including its review conference and the GGE, works on a consensus basis, it is unlikely that such a paper would be adopted.

Conclusion

In the coming months, it would be worth observing whether the GGE can achieve breakthroughs on issues over which there is still no consensus. If the GGE fails to achieve breakthroughs and agree on the elements in the rolling text, it means that there is a possibility that its report to the review conference could omit the elements entirely. This outcome would imply that the international community has failed to build a common understanding of the key issues surrounding LAWS. Such a failure would constitute a major obstacle to beginning the negotiation process for a legally binding instrument. It would also indicate that the GGE may not be the most effective path forward and therefore the international community may need to pursue alternative processes to adopt a legally binding instrument on LAWS.

Also worth observing closely is whether the international community will adopt a resolution on LAWS in the UN General Assembly's First Committee, which is scheduled to meet in New York later this year. Austria led two resolutions on LAWS in [2023](#) and [2024](#). The resolution adopted in 2023 led to the [2024 Vienna Conference](#), which focused on the international regulation of LAWS. The 2024 resolution, on the other hand, led to a [two-day informal consultation](#) in New York in May 2025. Similar efforts could be undertaken this year in order to help bridge differences within the GGE and apply pressure on it to reach a consensus on the elements next year.

All eyes will be on the GGE next year. Should it fail to achieve breakthroughs and reach a consensus, the international community may need to consider alternative paths to advance the goal of establishing a legally binding instrument on LAWS.

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