# International Regulation of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems

## Divergence and the Way Forward

*Mei Ching Liu and Manoj Harjani*

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Two key factors are driving the divergence within the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS): geopolitical tensions and defence industry interests.*

- *The starting point for addressing divergence within the GGE is to acknowledge what drives it, while leveraging both the intersessional period – ahead of the next GGE meeting in late August or early September 2026 – and other multilateral fora to bridge existing differences.*

- *A key question regarding the future of international regulation of LAWS is whether existing international humanitarian law is sufficient or needs to be developed further.*

## COMMENTARY

In a world where major conflicts continue to unfold – from Ukraine to Gaza, and now Iran – the fact that states gathered once again in Geneva, Switzerland, from 2 to 6 March 2026 to discuss the regulation of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS) might seem quaint.

But it is precisely this persistence of multilateral dialogue at the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on LAWS that should be acknowledged. For all their differences and disagreements, states remain committed to convening and discussing a pressing issue shaping the current and future conduct of warfare.

The challenges posed by the use of LAWS are far from theoretical. In February 2026, for example, the US military deployed the [Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System (LUCAS)](#) – a one-way attack drone that navigates autonomously towards a target and detonates on impact – as part of Operation Epic Fury, its war on Iran.

The GGE on LAWS now has one remaining meeting this year before its current mandate concludes. It has been 10 years since the inaugural meeting of the GGE in 2017, and considerable criticism has been directed at its limited output from a decade of multilateral dialogue.

Under the current mandate, which began in 2024, the GGE has been discussing a "[rolling text](#)" containing elements that could become the basis for a future legal instrument regulating LAWS. At its recently concluded meeting in early March, however, divergence among states continued to hamper progress towards consensus on the rolling text. This includes differences over fundamental issues such as how to characterise LAWS and the role of human judgement and control.

Two factors have sustained this divergence: geopolitical tensions and defence industry interests. A key question that remains for the future of international regulation of LAWS is whether existing international humanitarian law (IHL) is sufficient or needs to be developed further.

The GGE is running short on time. It is unrealistic to expect full consensus, but there is still an opportunity to work towards realising its current mandate.



The Military Transformations Programme at RSIS participated in the first meeting for 2026 of the GGE on LAWS in Geneva, Switzerland, from 2 to 6 March 2026. *Image Source: Authors.*

**Divergence**

The characterisation of LAWS and the role of human judgement and control remain fundamental issues where divergence has dogged the work of the GGE.

Regarding characterisation, one focal area of debate was the critical functions that must be ascribed to LAWS. States have disagreed for some time on whether target identification should be included as a critical function. At the recently concluded GGE meeting, consensus began to emerge to include the identification function. However,

the focus of the debate has now shifted to the precise way this function should be incorporated into the rolling text.

On the issue of lethality being a part of the characterisation of LAWS, states remained divided. The likelihood of a compromise has diminished, with states that desire including lethality as an attribute of LAWS pushing for further concessions that would scope it only in terms of impact on humans rather than impact on objects as well.

Finally, on the role of human judgement and control, the GGE has struggled to achieve consensus on the right way to represent these elements in the rolling text despite previously agreeing on their importance, as reflected in the 2019 and 2023 reports of the group. The major point of contention is the ambiguity in how these elements have been presented in the rolling text since they have not been previously defined in IHL.

**Drivers**

Two factors are sustaining the divergence among states within the GGE – geopolitical tensions and defence industry interests.

The first factor should not come as a surprise. It is impossible to keep politics out of the room at the GGE, and the extent to which states can engage in compromise often comes down to how they perceive one another. There is an additional layer of complexity to this, given that autonomous weapons are being deployed in various ongoing conflicts. Facts on the ground are evolving much faster than the dialogue between states, a development that will threaten the GGE's ability to fulfil its mandate.

Second, defence industry interests are evident even if the companies themselves do not participate in the GGE. There is an obvious dividing line in the room between states that have extensive defence industrial bases – which generate considerable income from the export of weapons – and states that are mere consumers. The former group of states has raised concerns indirectly during the debate that the GGE's work could potentially hamper innovation and access to technology.

**Realities**

Addressing divergence among states at the GGE does not mean trying to mitigate these factors, which would be unrealistic. Acknowledging what is hampering consensus at the GGE at least frames what is happening there in a way that is more accessible. Raising awareness of how important it is for the GGE to conclude its work successfully therefore remains essential.

The reality is that the GGE operates by consensus. Satisfying the concerns of all the states present in the room seems an impossible task when there is just one meeting remaining in 2026 before the current mandate expires.

There is still an opportunity for the GGE to work towards achieving its mandate in 2026. In particular, states can leverage the ongoing intersessional period to iron out their differences. Moreover, there are other multilateral dialogue platforms, including those focusing on military AI, that states can also utilise for this purpose.

**Looking Ahead**

A key question that remains for the state parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) – under which the GGE operates – is whether existing IHL is sufficient or needs to be developed further.

States agree that an important part of the GGE's work is to clarify how existing IHL applies to LAWS, but they disagree on whether the GGE should further develop IHL to address the novel risks posed by LAWS.

This question is likely to come up at the CCW Review Conference scheduled for November 2026, which will ultimately determine whether the GGE's mandate is to be renewed and, if so, what its exact scope will be.

*Mei Ching Liu is an Associate Research Fellow with the Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).* **Manoj Harjani** *is a Research Fellow and Coordinator of the MTP.*

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