

UNGA Resolution on Autonomous Weapons Systems

Frequently Asked Questions



A resolution on Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) will be tabled at the First Committee of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in October 2023. The resolution requests the United Nations Secretary-General to seek the views of states and stakeholders on addressing the legal, ethical, humanitarian, and security risks posed by AWS. These are brief answers to some frequently asked questions on the issue.

What are Autonomous Weapons Systems?

Autonomous Weapons Systems are systems that select and apply force to targets based on the processing of data from sensor, rather than human, inputs. The specific target of attack, and the exact time and place of the attack, are determined by sensor processing, instead of an immediate human command. This means the human operator does not determine specifically where, when, or against what force is applied.

Do they involve Artificial Intelligence?

While not all AWS rely on artificial intelligence (AI), AI enables AWS to become more complex, raising heightened concerns around predictability and understandability of systems. Through AI, vast amounts of data can be rapidly processed and used to execute force against a target without additional human involvement. AWS designed and used with AI have the potential to disempower, dislocate, and disconnect humans in the use of force through replacing the role of human operators of weapons systems with machines.

Do these weapons already exist?

While some types of weapons with autonomous functions have existed for decades, they have generally been used with meaningful human control. The types of target, duration of operation, geographical scope and environment in which such systems have been deployed have been limited. However, with advancing AI and other emerging technologies, AWS that are capable of use without meaningful human control are now being developed and used in contemporary conflicts.

Why are they a problem?

Autonomous weapons systems, especially when they lack meaningful human control or target people, raise moral, legal, and ethical concerns, which include causing digital dehumanization, undermining accountability and responsibility for the use of force, and threatening international peace, security, and stability. These risks are serious and affect the whole of humanity, which is why the UN Secretary-General has described AWS as 'morally repugnant and politically unacceptable'.

What's the solution?

The best solution is an international legally binding instrument with a combination of both prohibitions and regulations to ensure meaningful human control over the use of force and to reject the automation of killing. This would provide a durable framework offering the benefit of legal certainty and stability. To achieve this, states must urgently launch negotiations.

Who supports a legally binding instrument?

Over 90 states have now declared support for an international legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons systems. The number of states confirming support has continued to increase each year, demonstrating clear political momentum recognising the urgent need to launch negotiations. The call is also supported by the UN Secretary-General, the International Committee of the Red Cross, experts in technology and artificial intelligence, faith leaders, military veterans, and civil society organizations around the world.



What international discussions have taken place already?

International discussions have taken place for over 10 years. Within the UN, the issue has been addressed in meetings of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Human Rights Council and in statements delivered at the First Committee of the General Assembly.

A range of regional conferences have also been held resulting in international support for the urgent launch of negotiations on a treaty on AWS. These produced statements including a Communiqué at the Latin American and the Caribbean Conference of Social and Humanitarian Impact of Autonomous Weapons agreed by 33 Latin American and Caribbean States in Costa Rica in February 2023; a Special Statement on the social and humanitarian impact of autonomous weapons made by 22 Heads of State at the 28th Ibero-American Summit adopted in Dominican Republic in March 2023; and a Joint Communiqué of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Central American Integration System (SICA).

What's happening at the First Committee of the UN General Assembly?

A resolution will be tabled at the First Committee requesting the UN Secretary-General to seek the views of states and stakeholders on addressing the legal, ethical, humanitarian and security risks posed by AWS. This is the first time a resolution will be tabled on the issue and provides an opportunity for world leaders to demonstrate they are able and willing to safeguard the rights and dignities of humanity in the face of rapidly advancing technological change.

Which states are sponsoring this Resolution?

The resolution is being tabled by Austria and supported by a diverse group of states including Belgium, Costa Rica, Germany, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Switzerland. Additional states can co-sponsor the resolution up until the time action is taken on it in the First Committee.

What are the benefits of supporting the Resolution?

There are a range of significant benefits. The resolution will directly engage all states on this urgent issue and promote a comprehensive assessment on how to collectively address the risks posed by AWS, and ensure that appropriate rules and regulations are considered. While other forums have been limited in scope and inclusivity, the resolution will enable a wide range of concerns to be evaluated with states and stakeholders from all regions able to contribute.

What happens if it passes?

The UN Secretary-General will seek views on addressing the risks posed by AWS. This enables states to actively develop perspectives on the issue and promote multidisciplinary and international collaboration on the issue. The Secretary-General will also submit a substantive report ahead of the subsequent UNGA session in 2024, enabling views to be evaluated and for policy coherence to be developed.

Will this lead to the launch of international negotiations?

The resolution does not explicitly call for negotiations of a legally binding instrument, and it will be for states to collectively determine how and when to proceed at a later date. However, the resolution builds international confidence towards the launch of negotiations, and signals that urgent political action must be taken to safeguard against the serious risks posed by AWS.

Will the resolution impact discussions at other UN fora?

AWS have been discussed in various fora, both within and outside of the UN. For 10 years, High Contracting Parties to the CCW have considered the issue, but outcomes have failed to reflect widespread demands for substantive progress to be made. Building upon existing work, including the range of individual and group working papers already submitted by states at the CCW, the resolution offers the potential for states' positions and areas of convergence to be fully captured in a concrete report of the UN Secretary-General. This process would not only serve to clarify and substantiate existing work, but would provide a guiding vision for the future discussions in all fora.

How can states support the resolution?

States should promote, co-sponsor and vote in favour of the resolution at the First Committee of the UNGA in October 2023. In addition, states should recognise in national statements at First Committee and the UN General Assembly High Level week that AWS present serious challenges to ethics, law, security and the protection of civilians, acknowledge the need to maintain meaningful human control over the use of force and reject the automation of killing.

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