Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), which once activated select targets and apply force without further human intervention, raise concerns from legal, ethical and security perspectives. Fundamental challenges relate to the nature of human control, accountability and the overall compatibility of such systems with international law, including international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). They raise ethical concerns regarding the dignity of the person and face moral demands from the principles of humanity and requirements of the public conscience.

AWS also present global risks to peace and security, including risks of proliferation, also to non-state armed groups. Autonomous weapons systems that promise the advantage of speed may not allow for meaningful human control, and risk destabilizing international security. A dangerous autonomy arms race looms. These risks concern all states and all parts of society, and have disproportionate effects on those more vulnerable.

New technologies hold great promise for the advancement of human welfare. It must empower people, not dehumanize them. How we regulate against harms from technology has a bearing also on our ability to reap the benefits of such technologies. Human control must prevail in the use of force. The delegation to machines of decisions over choice of targets and life and death is an issue that concerns all of us. It profoundly challenges our global social contract and the UN Charter.

The need to address AWS is demonstrated by the ongoing and valuable discussions in the GGE established in the framework of the CCW, the regional conferences on AWS organised by Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Trinidad and Tobago, the Philippines and Sierra Leone, as well as related processes on the broader issues of AI in the military domain.

There is strong convergence that AWS that cannot be used in accordance with international law or that are ethically unacceptable should be explicitly prohibited. All other AWS should be appropriately regulated (the so-called two-tier approach). The UN Secretary-General (UNSG), and the President of the International
Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have emphasized the urgency of negotiating and adopting an international legal instrument to set clear prohibitions and restrictions on autonomous weapons systems and to conclude negotiations by 2026. The preventive window for such action is closing. Many states and other stakeholders have supported this call.

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The following points emerged from the panel discussions, which the Conference Chair considers to be of central importance for future prohibitions and regulations to comprehensively address AWS:

- The rules of IHL and IHRL are addressed to people, individually and collectively. Accountability is central to legal systems and cannot be transferred to machines. Effective governance is necessary to avoid an accountability gap.
- The informed, moral engagement of human decision-makers is the basis of our legal frameworks governing the use of force. It is what makes people responsible and accountable for the outcomes that occur.
- Legal judgements regarding the use of AWS require sufficient understanding of both the weapons systems, the conditions in the context where they may be used and their predicted outcomes.
- Systems that cannot be adequately understood or limited to a specific context cannot be subject to human control and so would not be compatible with legal use and accountability.
- The seriousness of risks regarding AWS require us to clarify the application of existing legal rules and to establish clear prohibitions and regulations to preserve the human element in the use of force.
- AWS raise concerns in relation to IHRL, human dignity and foundational ethical principles and ethics should be a force that drives our response.
- Ethics have been the main engine in the creation and development of law with regards to conduct in war.
- Targeting people is a most pressing ethical issue. Furthermore, AWS that would function by distinguishing certain groups of people from others would be liable to problems of bias in the datasets and algorithms that they are built on.
- Such problems of bias reflect societal structures and can disproportionately affect already marginalised groups and lead to grievous error.
- Increasing levels of autonomy in weapons systems also raise serious challenges with regard to international peace and security.
- Distance and dehumanisation, the risks of lowering the political threshold to use force as well as escalation risks, including by machine-to-machine interaction, raise further concerns.
- AWS may present challenges in attributing responsibility for attacks. Further proliferation of AWS to non-state armed groups and other violent actors may escalate security risks in armed conflict as well as in law enforcement.
- In the civil space, countries and regions have developed new legal and regulatory regimes to address concerns that autonomous decisions that harm people, without recourse to a human explanation, threaten to undermine human dignity.
- The Martens Clause in IHL recognizes that the law can develop in relation to societal concerns and the dictates of public conscience and is, thus, of particular relevance to the AWS issue.
- Artificial intelligence has the potential to fundamentally change our relationship with technology, for good or for bad. The challenge of AWS is also an opportunity, through their regulation, to establish shared norms and guardrails for the role of AI in society in order to prevent the most negative outcomes.
- We have a responsibility to act and to put in place the rules that we need to protect humanity.
These points underline the crucial moment we find ourselves in. Humanity is at a crossroads.

This is our generation’s “Oppenheimer Moment” where geopolitical tensions threaten to lead a major scientific breakthrough down a very dangerous path for the future of humanity. We must heed the warning of experts and show the political leadership and foresight that this challenge demands of us.

The fact that the international situation is difficult does not absolve us from the political responsibility to address the challenges of autonomous weapons systems. This requires us to build partnerships across States and regional bodies, UN entities, international organisations, civil society, academia, the tech sector and industry.

Austria will submit this Summary to the UN Secretary-General for consideration for the report mandated by the 2023 UNGA Resolution on “Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems.” We urge all states and stakeholders to make use of the opportunity provided by that resolution and to submit their views to the UN Secretary-General. We encourage all states and stakeholders to consider these points for inclusion in their views. We also invite states to associate themselves with this Summary.

This Chair’s Summary affirms our strong commitment to work with urgency and with all interested stakeholders for an international legal instrument to regulate autonomous weapons systems.

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