# Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS)

- The concept of human control and the related legal and ethical challenges

  - 19 September 2025

# Agenda

**Autonomous Weapon Systems**

Definition

Human control

Legal challenges

Ethical challenges

Joint Statement GGE LAWS

**Definition**
Human control
Legal challenges
Ethical challenges
Joint Statement

"An autonomous weapon system (AWS) **selects and applies force** to targets without **human intervention** in the sense that after initial activation by a person, it self-initiates strikes in response to information from the environment received through sensors and on the basis of a generalized "target profile."

*This means that the user of the AWS does **not choose the specific target** and **the precise timing** or **location** of the resulting application of force*

- Autonomy in weapon systems cannot be unlimited

- What kind of human control is needed
  - to ensure compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL)
  - To be ethical acceptable
  - To retain operational utility



*Reuters / K. Kyung Hoon*

Definition

Human control

**Legal challenges**

Ethical challenges

Joint Statement

- Principle of distintion

- Principle of proportionality

- Principle of precautions

- Human judgement

- Qualitative continuous assessment of the context

- Foreseeability

- Life-and-death decisions?
    - Human judgement , morality,
    - Sensors, software, algorithms

- Distance between the human decision and the results
    - Feeling of responsability

# Summary

**1. Humans must stay in control** of using force and weapons for legal, ethical, and practical reasons.

1. Legally, it's hard to follow international laws when machines act unpredictably or rely too much on data.
2. Ethically, letting machines decide can remove human responsibility and harm respect for human dignity.
3. Operationally, while AWS can be fast and work where humans can't, their unpredictable results can cause safety problems.

**2. Human control needs to happen in three ways:**

1. **Control the weapon itself:**
   Set clear limits on what the AWS can do, where and when it can operate, what targets it can attack, and have safety features like fail-safes or shut-offs.
2. **Control the environment:**
   Use AWS only where civilians aren't present, use barriers, signs, or restricted areas (e.g. no-fly zones)
3. **Control through human-machine interaction:**
   Make sure humans supervise the AWS, can intervene, stop or override its actions whenever needed. Example: Air defense systems can act fast but still allow humans to monitor and stop them, AWS can detect targets, but the decision to fire goes to a human.

Definition

Human control

Legal challenges

Ethical challenges

**Joint Statement**

**2013, November** – Parties to the CCW agreed to start discussions on autonomous weapons

**2014, May** – the CCW Group of Governemental Experts (GGE) is established to specifically discuss the potential implications of AWS

**2019, November** – the CCW GGE establishes 11 guiding principles to understand and guide the challenges posed by AWS

...

**2023, October** – joined statement by UNSG Antonio Guteresses and ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric

**2023, December** – first UNGA Resolution on autonomous weapons systems

...

**2024, November** – Second UNGA Resolution

**2025, September** – **Joint statement to the September 2025 session of the CCW GGE Laws***

- 39 High Contracting Parties
- *'...sufficient basis for negotiations of an instrument on lethal autonomous weapon systems... Ready to move ahead...'*

Thank you