# UN adopts resolution on lethal autonomous weapons systems



On December 2, 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a significant resolution concerning Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), achieving overwhelming consensus with 166 votes in favour, three opposed (from Belarus, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation), and 15 abstentions. This resolution reflects increasing global concern regarding the development and deployment of LAWS, particularly in the context of ongoing conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza.

The resolution outlines a potential two-tiered approach to international law, suggesting a prohibition on certain LAWS while implementing regulations for others. The escalation in discussions surrounding LAWS has occurred under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Group of Governmental Experts on the topic, which has seen progress in framing international dialogues over the last decade, albeit amid criticism regarding the speed of its deliberations driven by a consensus model.

LAWS are defined generally as systems that, once activated, can select targets and apply force autonomously without human intervention. Variations of autonomy in these systems are categorised into typologies: semi-autonomous, supervised autonomous, and fully autonomous systems. For example, the Phalanx Weapon System developed by Raytheon is designed for naval and land-based operations and can engage threats without human involvement. Other examples include Israel Aerospace Industries’ HARPY, a loitering munition which autonomously seeks out targets, and Zala Group’s Lancet-3, capable of reconnaissance and targeting without human oversight.

The international legal landscape surrounding LAWS adheres to existing frameworks such as the UN Charter and various international laws, including international humanitarian law (IHL) and the law of state responsibility. It is widely recognised that these existing legal provisions apply to LAWS, necessitating that any systems developed must comply with fundamental principles such as distinction, proportionality, and accountability.

The accountability of human operators remains a vital factor, as does the ability of LAWS to differentiate between combatants and non-combatants, and civilian and military objects. Furthermore, LAWS deployment must adhere to specific conditions that prevent indiscriminate harm or violations of IHL.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres and Mirjana Spoljaric, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, have both called for a new international treaty specifically addressing LAWS, arguing for clearer prohibitions and guidelines to prevent excessive interpretations by individual states. The objective is to conclude negotiations for this treaty by the end of 2026.

The CCW’s recent efforts yielded a rolling text proposal outlining various regulatory measures for LAWS, aimed at ensuring their predictability, reliability, and explainability, and to maintain appropriate human oversight, particularly in critical decisions. Some suggested regulations include limiting the operational parameters of LAWS, incorporating mechanisms for human deactivation, and avoiding deployment in civilian-populated areas, alongside regular evaluations to mitigate bias in automated decision-making.

While these developments signal progress, skepticism remains among civil society observers regarding the CCW process’s ability to achieve consensus on new rules. Concerns have been raised about potential stall tactics, particularly from Russia, casting doubt on the feasibility of solidifying a new treaty framework. However, the recent UN resolution paves the way for informal consultations among member states to discuss LAWS further, leveraging the groundwork laid by the CCW Group of Experts.

In summary, although existing international legal provisions provide some foundational governance over LAWS, significant gaps exist in specificity and enforcement, underscoring the urgent requirement for a dedicated international treaty. Such a treaty could help standardise interpretations, define clear prohibitions, and establish accountability mechanisms for these emerging technologies in warfare.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.un.org/en/ga/> - This link provides access to the United Nations General Assembly's official website, where resolutions and discussions on various topics, including Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), are documented and discussed.
* [https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/4F0DEF093B4860B7C1257180004B1B2F?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/%28httpPages%29/4F0DEF093B4860B7C1257180004B1B2F?OpenDocument) - This link leads to the United Nations Office at Geneva's page on the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), which is central to discussions on LAWS.
* <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/armed-conflict/autonomous-weapons> - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provides insights into the legal and ethical considerations surrounding LAWS, emphasizing the need for clear international guidelines.
* <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/index.html> - This link provides access to the UN Charter, which forms part of the international legal framework applicable to LAWS.
* <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/international-humanitarian-law> - The ICRC explains international humanitarian law (IHL), which is crucial in governing the use of LAWS to ensure compliance with principles like distinction and proportionality.
* <https://www.un.org/press/en/2024/ga12432.doc.htm> - This link could potentially provide press releases or documents related to UN General Assembly resolutions, although specific details on LAWS may not be available without a direct reference.
* <https://www.raytheon.com/capabilities/products/phalanx> - Raytheon's Phalanx Weapon System is an example of a semi-autonomous weapon system capable of engaging threats without human intervention.
* <https://www.iai.co.il/products/harpy> - Israel Aerospace Industries' HARPY is a loitering munition that autonomously seeks out targets, illustrating the capabilities of LAWS.
* <https://www.zala.aero/en/products/lancet-3/> - Zala Group's Lancet-3 is another example of a system capable of reconnaissance and targeting without human oversight.