



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Counter Proliferation & Arms Control Centre
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Executive Director
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Managing Director
Article 36

8 December 2017

Dear Ms Samarasinghe and Mr Moyes,

Thank you for your letter of 9 November 2017 to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP regarding Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). This has been passed to me to reply.

Please let me assure you that the UK takes this issue very seriously. We are therefore fully supportive of the Group of Government Experts' (GGE) renewed mandate, under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), to discuss the issue of LAWS. The first meeting of the GGE was an important step towards deepening international understanding of the subject. We welcome the progress made and will continue supporting the GGE in 2018. The Minister for the Armed Forces, Mark Lancaster set out our position clearly in Parliament on 27 November: "The task in hand is absolutely to get an internationally agreed definition, and we believe that the UN CCW is the right forum in which to do so." It was deeply regrettable that the first planned meeting was cancelled due to a lack of funds. As President of the CCW for 2017, the UK worked hard to bring greater financial stability and so prevent any future cancellation of meetings.

You raised the issue of the UK definition of LAWS. As you note, the UK defines such systems as those capable of understanding higher level intent and direction allied to a sophisticated perception of its environment. Such a system would be capable of deciding a course of action, from a number of alternatives, without depending on human oversight and control. The UK commits to maintaining human control over its weapon systems as a guarantee of oversight and accountability. The UK does not possess fully autonomous weapon systems and has no intention of developing them.

The UK does not judge that our definition of LAWS permits development of future weapons systems with an unacceptably high degree of autonomy. The UK assesses that existing International Humanitarian Law is sufficient to control and regulate LAWS. Whatever the characteristics of such weapons they would not be capable of satisfying International

Humanitarian Law in the critical areas of proportionality and discrimination, and it is therefore highly likely they would be de facto illegal under existing regulations.

As you are no doubt aware, the GGE affirmed that International Humanitarian Law applies to LAWS and that states remain accountable for the use of all weapons systems, including emerging capabilities. The GGE heard from technical experts that 'strong' AI is not as close as many believe, and from military experts that most advances in the field of AI are happening in the civil sector. Nonetheless, autonomy is a complex and evolving technological challenge, with commercial developments playing a large, often public, role. There was broad agreement by states at the GGE that the use of lethal force should remain under human control.

It has been the UK's consistent view that the GGE should focus on establishing working definitions of LAWS and Meaningful Human Control. It is therefore important that High Contracting Parties to the CCW agreed on 24 November 2017 that the LAWS GGE should continue to meet for 10 days of discussions in 2018, and that work should focus on three elements: the characterisation of LAWS, the human element in the use of force, and the interaction between humans and machines. The debate on 'characterisation' of LAWS will aid the international community in its discussions.

Looking ahead, I can assure you that the UK is and will remain engaged across the spectrum in consideration of the legal, ethical, technical and military aspects of LAWS as reflected by the range of experts who joined our delegation to the GGE and the UK's participation in the panel session on Military Effects.

Yours sincerely,

Annabel Jenkin

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