Hosted by The Mayflower School

SharkMUN
Model United Nations Conference

TOPIC A

Autonomous Weapons in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Security Council

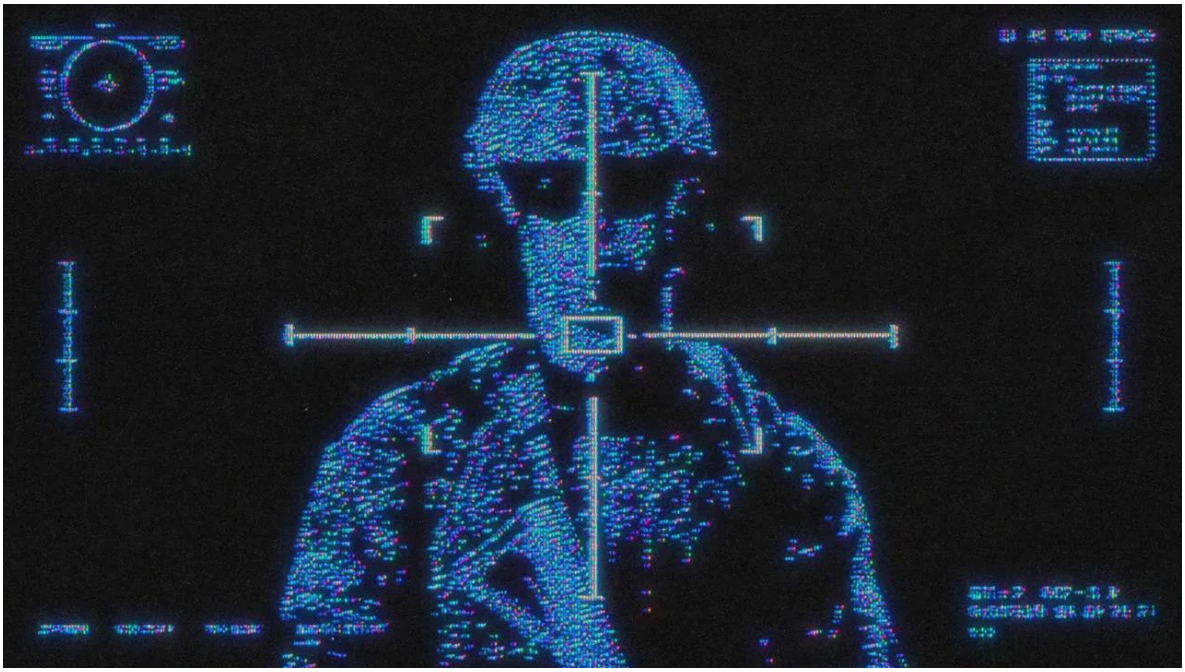
Head Chair: Julieta Cárdenas
Deputy Chair: Sebastián Martínez

Security Council

Topic A: **Autonomous Weapons in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

Introduction

The deployment of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) in the Russia-Ukraine war has introduced a new perspective to modern conflict; one that poses direct challenges to international peace and security. As countries test the boundaries of artificial intelligence and robotics in warfare, the UNSC faces the challenge of determining how to respond to the strategic, legal, and humanitarian implications of these systems on the battlefield. With Russia directly involved in the conflict, and Ukraine receiving support from several Council members, discussions on AWS intersect with sensitive geopolitical realities. Addressing the use of AWS in this war requires careful navigation of sovereignty, state accountability, and the integrity of international agreements.



Definition of Key Terms

- **Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS)**
  Systems capable of independently selecting and engaging targets without human intervention.

- **Loitering Munitions**
  Drones that wait in the air before autonomously attacking targets Sometimes classified as AWS.

- **International Humanitarian Laws (IHL)**
  Rules governing the conduct of war, including principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity.

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**
  Computer systems that can perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence, like learning, reasoning, and problem-solving

- **Rules of Engagement (ROA)**
  Military directives that define when and how force may be used. AWS challenge traditional ROE frameworks.

- **Accountability Gap**
  The uncertainty about who is responsible. If an autonomous weapon commits a war crime, this can be the state, commander, programmer, manufacturer, etc.

- **Moratorium**
  A stopping of an activity for a determined period of time

Background information

The Russia-Ukraine War, which began in February 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion, has rapidly evolved into one of the most technologically advanced conflicts in modern history. Among the most alarming developments is the reported use of autonomous weapons systems (AWS). Both Ukraine and Russia have utilized drones, loitering munitions, and AI-enhanced systems in combat. Ukraine has been supported by Western allies who have provided advanced technology, while Russia has deployed homegrown systems like the KuB-BLA loitering drone and experimented with AI-driven battlefield tools. The use of AWS in this context presents major legal, ethical, and security dilemmas. These systems challenge the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly regarding distinction, proportionality, and accountability. Adicionaly, AWS may increase the speed of combat and reduce the window for human decision-making, leading to escalation risks and unintended civilian harm. Given the strategic use of emerging weapons in a high-profile conflict involving a Permanent Member (Russia) of the UNSC, the debate over AWS has gained urgency. The UNSC must balance state sovereignty, military innovation, international security, and humanitarian protections as it considers possible responses.

Major Parties Involved

- **Ukraine**

Ukraine uses semi-autonomous drones and AI-assisted surveillance systems for defense against Russian aggression. Many of its systems are modified commercial drones or Western-supplied technologies. Ukraine supports international regulation but opposes restrictions that could weaken its ability to defend itself. It emphasizes human oversight in AWS use and advocates for legal accountability for their deployment

- **Russian Federation**

Russia is a central actor in both the conflict and the AWS debate. It has deployed loitering munitions such as the KUB-BLA and potentially other semi-autonomous systems. While its full use of AWS remains somewhat opaque, Russia continues to integrate AI in reconnaissance and targeting. It firmly opposes international restrictions on AWS, seeing such weapons as essential to maintaining military and strategic superiority.

- **United States of America**

The U.S. is Ukraine's largest military supporter and a leader in AI and autonomous military technologies. It promotes "responsible" use of AWS and insists on maintaining human control in lethal operations. However, the U.S. opposes bans or moratoriums, arguing they would hinder technological advancement and national defense. It prefers non-binding norms and best practices developed through diplomacy and multilateral discussions.

- **China**

China takes a cautious approach to the AWS debate. While it supports global talks, it resists binding agreements that might limit its growing military capabilities. China is actively developing AI-enhanced systems, including drones and maritime platforms. It also seeks to counterbalance Western influence in setting international standards, calling for equitable participation in discussions on military AI ethics.

- **Private Military and Tech Companies**

Non-state actors, particularly tech companies and defense contractors, play a growing role in AWS development. Firms in the U.S., Europe, and Israel have provided software, drones, and targeting tools to both Ukraine and other nations. Their involvement raises major concerns about accountability, especially when systems are used in war zones without international oversight.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. **Geneva Conventions and Article 36 Reviews**

   Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions mandates that states review new weapons to ensure compliance with international law. However, the application of this provision to AWS remains inconsistent, with challenges in assessing the legality of autonomous systems due to their complexity and the rapid pace of technological advancement. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has published analyses discussing the challenges posed by emerging technologies, including AWS, in the context of Article 36 reviews. These publications stress the need for enhanced international cooperation and transparency in assessing the legality of new weapon systems.

2. **Campaigns to Stop "Killer Robots"**

   Initiated in 2013, this coalition of non-governmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the International Committee of the Red Cross, advocates for a preemptive ban on fully autonomous weapons. The campaign highlights concerns about accountability, ethical implications, and the potential for unlawful killings without human oversight.

3. **Resolution 79/62 (2024)**

   The resolution was co-sponsored by 27 countries and passed with 166 votes in favor, 3 against (Belarus, North Korea, and Russia), and 15 abstentions. This resolution establishes a new forum under UN auspices to discuss the serious challenges and concerns raised by autonomous weapons systems and to explore potential regulatory measures. It also requests the UN Secretary-General to seek member states' views on AWS and submit a report reflecting these perspectives .

4. **Resolution L.56**

   This resolution emphasized the urgent need for the international community to address the challenges posed by autonomous weapons systems. It called for further dialogue to create a common understanding of the terminology and wider challenges associated with such weapons. The resolution also requested the UN Secretary-General to seek member states' views on AWS and submit a report reflecting these perspectives .

Possible Solutions

1. **Establishing a Moratorium on Autonomous Weapons Systems**

   This moratorium, enforced through UNSC recommendation or multilateral agreements, would prevent further deployment of systems that lack meaningful human control over life-and-death decisions. Such a measure would not only uphold humanitarian protections but also allow time for the development of robust legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms. While achieving consensus may be difficult due to geopolitical divides, especially among P5 members, a moratorium could still garner broad support among non-permanent UNSC members and the General Assembly.

2. **Strengthen Article 36 Weapons Reviews and Introduce Transparency Mechanisms**

   Under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, states are already obligated to review new weapons for compliance with international humanitarian law. However, many such reviews are not transparent or standardized. The UNSC could encourage the establishment of a global reporting system under the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), where states must submit declassified summaries of their weapons reviews, particularly for systems involving AI or autonomy. This mechanism would increase international trust, reduce the risk of unlawful deployments, and create pressure for compliance from private developers and defense contractors as well.

3. **Create a New UN Committee for Emerging Military Technologies**

   The UNSC could recommend the formation of a UN Task Force on Emerging Military Technologies, including AWS. This body would consist of experts in AI, international law, ethics, and military strategy, and it would be tasked with monitoring the use of autonomous weapons in active conflicts and issuing regular reports. The task force could also investigate potential violations of international humanitarian law involving autonomous systems and recommend accountability measures to the Security Council. This would help close the current oversight gap and improve the UN's capacity to respond to new security challenges.

References

- SIPRI. (2015, December 16). Implementing Article 36 weapon reviews in light of increasing autonomy in weapon systems. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. https://www.sipri.org/publications/2015/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/implementing-article-36-weapon-reviews-light-increasing-autonomy-weapon-systems
- Human Rights Watch. (2025, April 28). Killer robots threaten human rights during war and peace. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/28/killer-robots-threaten-human-rights-during-war-peace
- United Nations. (2023, December 5). General Assembly adopts resolution on autonomous weapons systems. https://press.un.org/en/2023/gadis3731.doc.htm
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2016, May 6). Autonomous weapons systems: Profound implications for the future of warfare. https://www.icrc.org/en/document/autonomous-weapons-systems-profound-implications-future-warfare
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2019, November 12). Autonomous weapons: ICRC recommends new rules. https://www.icrc.org/en/document/autonomous-weapons-icrc-recommends-new-rules
- Human Rights Watch. (2024, December 5). Killer robots: UN vote should spur treaty negotiations. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/05/killer-robots-un-vote-should-spur-treaty-negotiations
- United Nations. (2023, December 5). General Assembly adopts resolution on autonomous weapons systems. https://press.un.org/en/2023/gadis3731.doc.htm
- United Nations. (2023, December 5). General Assembly adopts resolution on autonomous weapons systems. https://docs.un.org/en/A/C.1/78/L.56

-Images-

- The Economist. (2024, April 8). How Ukraine is using AI to fight Russia. https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/04/08/how-ukraine-is-using-ai-to-fight-russia
- Tokariuk, O. (2023, November 20). Ukraine's secret weapon – artificial intelligence. Center for European Policy Analysis. https://cepa.org/article/ukraines-secret-weapon-artificial-intelligence/
- Financial Times. (2024, April 8). How Ukraine is using AI to fight Russia. https://www.ft.com/content/d852a1cf-2b4e-4189-99d6-6032a65b1302
- Wouters, P. (2023, April 11). *Strategic priorities for the Russian PMC Wagner: Geopolitics, propaganda and mercenary business*. Egmont Institute. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/strategic-priorities-for-the-russian-pmc-wagner-geopolitics-propaganda-and-mercenary-business/
- SpaceNews. (2023, August 21). *Lockheed Martin selected to deliver 36 small satellites to advance Space Development Agency's communications network*. https://spacenews.com/lockheed-martin-selected-to-deliver-36-small-satellites-to-advance-space-development-agencys-communications-network/
- All country flags are from Wikipedia