

Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons
Informal Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems

General Debate
Statement by Austria
13 May 2014

Mr. President,

Austria is pleased with the decision of last year's meeting of States Parties of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons to convene this expert meeting on lethal autonomous weapons systems. The decision reflects a growing awareness among States that it is high time for the international community to engage with the matter in a structured and comprehensive way. We cannot afford to ignore any longer a development that is revolutionising warfare with manifold far-reaching consequences before our eyes.

We are grateful to France to take on the task of presiding over this debate. Let me assure you of the full support of the Austrian delegation in the conduct of the meeting.

Mr. President,

Many of the pertinent questions about lethal autonomous weapons have been asked already in last year's Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions of the Human Rights Council, Christof Heyns. Later that year, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Emmerson, presented another report that contains many relevant points, as do publications provided by civil society representatives such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Stop Killer Robots. Austria would like to use the opportunity to thank these contributors for their important input to the discussion.

There seems to be a vague common denominator for the various definitions for the different kinds of weapons that could be subsumed under the term "lethal autonomous weapons", whether existing or not yet existing. These are weapons that, in contrast to traditional, inert arms, are capable of functioning with a lesser degree of human manipulation and control, or none at all. To come closer to a more substantive, agreed definition of what we are actually talking about would be one desirable outcome of this meeting.

Austria is concerned about the consequences of the availability of lethal autonomous weapons on international peace and stability. Putting soldiers' lives at stake makes States think twice whether to engage in armed conflict. Autonomous weapons

remove such restraint from the use of military force. Further, once the technology is in place, proliferation to irresponsible users, among them certain non-state actors, will inevitably become a danger.

It is crucial, in our view, that any use of a weapon in armed conflict complies with international humanitarian law. Among roboticists and lawyers alike, there is serious doubt that autonomous weapons can ever be programmed in a way to guarantee this compliance. One further consideration: While in the case of a war crime perpetrated by a human actor legal responsibility can be, at least in principle, established, it is fundamentally unclear how to resolve the issue once the autonomous decision of a machine is at the root of the crime.

Finally, in discussing lethal autonomous weapons, the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the issue have to be taken into account. The fundamental question here seems to be: how much of a role for robots in human society are we ready to accept, taking as a measure the security and well-being of humankind as a whole?

Mr. President,

Austria would, at this stage, make a plea for a real joint international effort to look for common responses to the concerns mentioned. This effort would benefit greatly from increased transparency by States currently engaged in the development of lethal autonomous weapons. Austria would also make a plea for great caution, at this stage, to push technological developments forward the implications of which seem yet not to be sufficiently understood.

This meeting initiates a debate which will, given the complexity of the issues involved, clearly have to be continued beyond the coming four days. We favour therefore further discussion and work on those issues both in relevant international fora as well as in public debate. The multi-stakeholder format for debates has proved beneficial in other areas of major technological change with implications for society. Consequently, this debate should encompass not only technological, military and legal experts, but also civil society and a broader public. We encourage NGOs to raise public awareness and to take actively part in this debate.

Thank you, Mr. President.