

The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Informal Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems

U.S. Delegation Opening Statement As Delivered by Michael W. Meier Geneva, April 13, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman. First, the United States Delegation would like to congratulate you on your assumption of the chairmanship of this meeting and we can assure you of our full support. We would also like to express our appreciation for the work you have done preparing us for this important informal meeting, especially with your “Food for Thought” paper, on the challenges associated with lethal autonomous weapon systems; we look forward to productive discussions this week that build on the substantive discussions held last year under the able leadership of France. The U.S. delegation is prepared to participate fully in this week’s discussions and while we will make specific comments during the upcoming sessions, we want to take this opportunity to provide some initial thoughts about the work ahead of us.

First, we remain in the beginning stages of this important discussion. The first informal meeting of experts on LAWS held last May provided a useful forum for discussing the various technical, legal, operational and ethical issues surrounding increased autonomy in weapon systems. However, it remains clear from that meeting and the subsequent discussions in which the United States has participated along with other states, civil society, scientists, roboticists, lawyers, and ethicists, that more work still needs to be done to establish a common understanding of lethal autonomous weapons systems. We also want to be clear that we are here to talk about future weapons, or in the words of our mandate, “emerging technologies.” Therefore, we are not referring to remotely piloted aircraft, which as their name implies are not autonomous weapons, or other existing weapons systems. We believe our discussion here in CCW, a forum focused on international humanitarian law, remains the relevant framework for this discussion.

Second, we expect this week’s discussion to deepen our understanding of the complex issues surrounding LAWS as our program of work will allow us to more fully explore this topic. That said, we believe that it is important to focus on increasing our understanding versus trying to decide possible outcomes. It remains our view that it is premature to try and determine where these discussions might or should lead.

Finally, as we highlighted last year, the United States believes that a robust policy process and methodology can help mitigate risk when developing new weapon systems. The United States has a process in place, applicable to all weapon systems, which is designed to ensure weapons operate safely, reliably and are understood by their human operators. Throughout the week the United States intends to elaborate on the review processes and standards we utilize to ensure these standards are met.

The United States has established, through our Department of Defense Directive 3000.09, an additional framework for how the United States would consider proposals to develop lethal autonomous weapon systems. We would like to make clear that the Directive does not establish a U.S. position on the potential future development of lethal autonomous weapon systems – it neither encourages nor prohibits the development of such future systems.

The framework establishes a deliberative approval process by senior officials, sets out the technical criteria that would need to be satisfied in order to develop autonomous weapon systems, and then assigns responsibility within our Defense Department for overseeing the development of autonomous weapons systems. The Directive imposes additional requirements beyond what is normally required during our weapons acquisition process. These additional requirements are designed to minimize the probability and consequences of failure in autonomous and semi-autonomous weapons systems that could lead to unintended engagements and ensure appropriate levels of human judgment over the use of force.

Mr. Chairman, as we have said previously, issues surrounding LAWS are complex. We look forward to sharing our thoughts in what we hope is a robust discussion this week, but more importantly we are looking forward to hearing and learning from other delegations as well as the important contributions on this topic that civil society provides us here in CCW.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.