Madam Chair

Let me first congratulate you on your election as Chair of this Committee and assure you of my delegation’s full support.

In our General Statement yesterday, I said that my delegation was disappointed with the fact that this year’s Group of Government Experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems was unable to reach agreement on a set of consensus conclusions and recommendations. Not only was this an important opportunity to reflect the valuable work of the GGE, but also to provide this Review Conference with a clear set of recommendations to focus debate on the way forward. Although significant differences exist, the debate within the GGE has increased the understanding of all involved and, in the opinion of my delegation, demonstrated that there is more that is agreed upon than disagreed upon.

We have therefore reached a critical juncture in the CCW’s work on LAWS. We recognise – along with all High Contracting Parties – that the CCW continues to provide the right framework for discussions on LAWS. We must therefore seize the opportunity at this Review Conference to try to capture those areas of consensus that have emerged from the GGE’s work, and to provide a clear, ambitious, credible new mandate for the Group that builds on this good work and allows for meaningful progress in the coming years.

The UK is of the view that the section of the final declaration of this Review Conference dealing with LAWS should recognise the value of past conclusions and recommendations of the GGE. Most importantly, it should underline the primacy of International Humanitarian Law in questions concerning autonomy in weapons systems – as indeed with all weapons – and the obligation to comply with it; and that
human responsibility and accountability cannot be transferred to machines. The UK remains convinced that autonomy offers potential benefits in terms of States’ compliance with International Humanitarian Law, such as reducing the risk to the civilian population.

On the future mandate, the GGE should focus on building norms of use and positive obligations to demonstrate how degrees of autonomy in weapons systems can be used in accordance with international humanitarian law – with suitable levels of human control, accountability and responsibility. The UK remains of the view that our discussion has not matured to the point where the commencement of negotiations on a legally binding instrument is feasible or indeed required, and we remain firm in our belief that the flexible and principle-based approach of IHL means that it is ideally suited to cover developments in autonomy. But we have learned much from the last five years of discussions, and my delegation believes that there are things we can do, now, to set out our understanding and best practice on how emerging technologies in the area of LAWS can or cannot be used in the framework of applicable international law, to build norms of use, and to advance positive obligations. And there are a range of tools we can use to do this, which are flexible enough to take account of rapid technological advancement and will not quickly become obsolete.

The UK’s preference would therefore be for this Review Conference to adopt a mandate that commits High Contracting Parties to work together to address the risks around autonomy in weapons systems, and to build norms of use and positive obligations. This could include four specific areas of work:

- First, the development of a compendium or manual of best practice that considers the practical implications that arise out of both the ethical and legal discussions that we have had in the GGE. Examples of such exercises from other fields of international law include the Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies, the San Remo Manual on Armed Conflicts at Sea, and the Tallinn Manual on Cyber Warfare. These documents each provide substantive and authoritative positions on the application of the law in their respective areas of operation.

- Second, the voluntary sharing of information and good practices relating to all aspects of the lifecycle of a weapon system that incorporate autonomy.

- Third, it could also consider and articulate acceptable levels of human control within a weapon system, taking into account different situations and environments; the military processes and chains of command that govern the use of a weapon system; its ability to learn or change objectives or mission
parameters without human input; and the overall human understanding of the weapon system.

- Fourth, it could identify and set out any further characteristics of weapons systems that may make compliance with International Humanitarian Law inherently impossible.

The UK would also welcome the establishment of an independent network of experts to work through the technical, legal and ethical implications of autonomous weapons systems. This would report into the GGE, with the aim of assisting them to articulate a clear understanding of the implications of developments in technology in this area for real-life military applications.

I look forward to a fruitful discussion and a positive outcome, and urge all parties to engage fully to ensure we demonstrate the good work already carried out in this area and pave the way for substantive progress over the coming years.

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