

Committee: Security Council (SC)

Issue: Ensuring Accountability in the Age of Unmanned Warfare: Strengthening International Regulation of Unmanned and AI-powered weapons for Peace in the Middle East — The Case of the U.S. – Iran Conflict

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Introduction

The rapidly evolving proliferation of unmanned warfare and autonomous systems poses a critical challenge to global peace, international law, and regional stability. Once restricted to high-altitude surveillance, unmanned platforms and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven targeting systems have become central to modern military strategy. These technologies offer military operators unprecedented operational reach with minimal risk to personnel, yet their deployment frequently bypasses traditional avenues of state responsibility, blurring the line between peace and open conflict.

Nowhere is this crisis more pronounced than in the Middle East, particularly within the context of the enduring geopolitical conflict between the United States and Iran. In May 2024, the U.S. Department of State formally sanctioned several Iranian entities involved in the mass production and export of Shahed-series loitering munitions, highlighting how low-cost unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have transformed asymmetric warfare across the region. Conversely, regional observers and international monitors have repeatedly raised legal concerns regarding U.S. autonomous targeting algorithms and long-range drone strikes, pointing to recurring instances of civilian casualties and ambiguous attribution.

Military analysts report that the strategic reliance on unmanned systems in the Middle East has intensified significantly, with state actors and affiliated non-state groups conducting hundreds of drone and missile strikes against commercial shipping lanes, diplomatic outposts, and military installations. Unmanned systems allow belligerents to maintain plausible deniability while conducting kinetic operations, undermining conventional deterrence and severely straining International Humanitarian Law (IHL) frameworks designed around human command chains.

These developments represent a profound threat to the international security architecture established under the Geneva Conventions and discussions surrounding Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). The escalation of unmanned warfare in the U.S.–Iran framework threatens to normalize unmonitored gray-zone hostilities and break down global consensus on military AI accountability. The situation demands urgent diplomatic intervention to establish robust international regulations, clarify state liability, and safeguard regional peace in the Middle East.

Definition of Key Terms

Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)

Sensor-to-shooter weapon systems capable of independently searching for, selecting, tracking, and engaging targets with lethal force without human intervention. Unlike traditional remote-controlled unmanned platforms, true LAWS utilize artificial intelligence algorithms, computer vision, and machine-learning models to determine target validity. Within international governance debates, LAWS represent a fundamental shift in warfare, raising core questions over whether non-human systems can satisfy ethical standards or properly execute the subjective human judgments required by International Humanitarian Law (IHL), such as evaluating proportional civilian collateral damage before executing a strike.

Meaningful Human Control (MHC)

The operational requirement that human operators maintain sufficient oversight, decision-making power, and temporal context over a weapon system's target selection and lethal engagement. Established as a fundamental pillar in disarmament negotiations—including discussions within the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)—MHC requires that a human remain legally responsible for lethal decisions. This concept is operationally structured either through "Human-in-the-Loop" setups, where an operator directly authorizes every strike decision, or "Human-on-the-Loop" systems, where an autonomous platform operates independently while a monitor retains real-time authority to override or terminate the command.

Loitering Munitions ("Suicide" or "Kamikaze" Drones)

A category of low-cost unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) equipped with integrated explosive warheads that fly over a target area, search for targets, and detonate upon striking their objective. Loitering munitions—such as the Iranian Shahed-series—bridge the technical gap between cruise missiles and traditional surveillance drones by orbiting ("loitering") passively while awaiting a target, providing low-cost precision-strike capability over long distances. Their mass production, low radar signatures, and ability to be deployed in saturation waves present severe defensive challenges for regional security architectures.

Gray-Zone Warfare

Coercive political and military actions conducted just below the threshold of open, conventional war to achieve strategic objectives while avoiding direct military confrontation. Gray-zone operations leverage ambiguous aggression, cyber operations, maritime harassment, and the strategic deployment of unmanned assets. In the Middle East, the use of unflagged or proxy-operated unmanned aerial platforms allows state actors to execute precision strikes against critical infrastructure, commercial shipping lines, or diplomatic outposts while maintaining plausible deniability, making conventional military response or legal accountability difficult.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

The body of customary international law and treaty law—primarily the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols—regulating the conduct of armed conflict and protecting non-combatants. In the context of unmanned and autonomous warfare, IHL imposes binding obligations regardless of the technology deployed, anchored by the core principles of distinction (distinguishing combatants from civilians), proportionality (prohibiting strikes where expected civilian harm outweighs concrete military advantage), and precaution (taking all feasible measures to minimize civilian harm).

Principle of Command Responsibility

A legal doctrine under international military law establishing that military commanders bear criminal accountability for unlawful acts committed by their subordinates if the commander knew, or had reason to know, about the crimes and failed to prevent or punish them. The deployment of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems introduces complex legal challenges to this rule, as an algorithmic targeting error that results in a war

crime makes establishing whether legal fault lies with the commander who deployed the system, the technician who trained the model, or the developer who wrote the code an unresolved legal question.

Dual-Use Technologies

Goods, software, raw materials, or components originally engineered for commercial or civilian applications that can be adapted for military purposes or weapons development. Advanced unmanned warfare relies heavily on dual-use commercial items, including off-the-shelf microprocessors, global satellite navigation receivers, commercial optical sensors, and open-source artificial intelligence libraries. Because these commercial components are widely traded globally, standard export control systems—such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—face severe limitations in restricting their weaponization.

Asymmetric Warfare

Armed conflict between belligerents whose relative military power, tactical strategies, or technological resources differ significantly. Low-cost unmanned platforms have altered traditional military asymmetries, allowing non-state actors and smaller regional states to construct mass-produced attack drones costing thousands of dollars to destroy multi-million-dollar air defense infrastructure or radar installations, forcing advanced militaries to expend costly interceptor missiles against inexpensive threats.

State Attribution

The legal and evidentiary process of formally identifying and holding a sovereign state accountable under international law for an internationally wrongful act. Establishing state attribution for drone and autonomous strikes requires clear proof connecting the hardware, command infrastructure, or launch site directly to a specific state government. This process is frequently complicated by proxy forces, unflagged systems, electronic signal spoofing, and decentralized launch networks, limiting the international community's ability to impose formal legal sanctions or remedies.

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

Planned diplomatic, military, or legal actions undertaken by adversarial states to lower tensions, enhance transparency, and reduce the risk of accidental military escalation or misunderstanding. In regions characterized by high geopolitical tension, CBMs regarding unmanned systems can include establishing regional crisis hotlines, setting operational buffer zones along international maritime corridors, or negotiating voluntary agreements for pre-notification of military drone deployments.

History

Early Operations & Surveillance (1980s – 2000s)

1985 - Iran fields its first indigenous unmanned aircraft during the Iran–Iraq War. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps establishes Qods Aviation Industries and produces the *Mohajer-1*, a piston-engine reconnaissance platform used for battlefield surveillance behind Iraqi front-line trenches, while the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company begins serial production of the *Ababil* from September 1986. These primitive systems establish the doctrine of unmanned self-sufficiency that continues to drive Tehran’s UAV industry today.

October 2001 – November 2002 - Following the September 11 attacks, the United States arms its *MQ-1 Predator* fleet. The first armed Predator strike is conducted over Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, and on November 3, 2002 a CIA-operated Predator kills al-Qaeda operative Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi in Yemen, the first American drone strike outside a declared theatre of armed conflict. The precedent of medium-altitude remotely piloted lethal force applied beyond conventional battlefields is established, and with it the questions of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and state attribution that define this agenda item.

Intelligence Gathering & Capture of Stealth Tech (2011 – 2018)

December 4, 2011 - An American stealth *RQ-170 Sentinel* drone comes down largely intact near Kashmar in eastern Iran. Washington attributes the loss to a system malfunction, while Tehran claims that its electronic warfare units spoofed the aircraft’s satellite navigation and guided it to a controlled landing. The cause remains disputed, but the airframe passes into Iranian hands.

2014 – 2016 - Iranian engineers reverse-engineer the captured platform and unveil two derivatives, the jet-powered *Shahed-171 Simorgh* and the propeller-driven *Saeqeh*, the latter

displayed in 2016 carrying precision-guided munitions. Reverse-engineering compresses Iran's development timeline for low-observable airframes by several years. Delegates should note that the *Shahed-136* loitering munition discussed below belongs to a separate design lineage and is not a derivative of the RQ-170.

February 10, 2018 - An Israeli attack helicopter shoots down a *Saeqeh-2* that had crossed from a base in Syria into Israeli airspace. The Israeli Air Force publicly identifies the airframe as an RQ-170 derivative, the first combat confirmation that the 2011 capture had translated into deployed operational hardware and an early illustration of how captured technology diffuses across an entire region.

Direct Confrontation & Asymmetric Reach (2019)

June 20, 2019 - Iranian air defences destroy a United States Navy *RQ-4A Global Hawk* near the Strait of Hormuz. Iran states that the aircraft violated its territorial airspace, while United States Air Forces Central Command states that it was operating approximately thirty-four kilometres from the nearest Iranian coastline in international airspace. President Trump approves retaliatory strikes on three Iranian sites and then cancels them roughly ten minutes before execution, judging an estimated one hundred and fifty deaths disproportionate to the loss of an unmanned aircraft. The episode demonstrates that the absence of a human crew materially alters escalation thresholds, a central question before this Council.

September 14, 2019 - Drones and cruise missiles strike the Abqaiq and Khurais oil processing facilities in Saudi Arabia, temporarily halving Saudi production. The Houthi movement claims responsibility, while the United States and Saudi Arabia attribute the attack to Iran. No binding Security Council finding of attribution is ever produced, providing an early demonstration of the evidentiary gap that unmanned systems create for this body.

Targeted Strikes & Proxy Proliferation (2020 – 2021)

January 3, 2020 - A United States *MQ-9 Reaper* executes a targeted strike on a convoy leaving Baghdad International Airport, killing IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani and Popular Mobilisation Forces deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Iran retaliates on January 8 with ballistic missile strikes against the Al-Asad air base in Iraq. The incident highlights the ability of unmanned platforms to carry out high-profile decapitation strikes with zero immediate risk to operating personnel.

July 2020 - The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions reports to the Human Rights Council that the Soleimani strike constituted an arbitrary killing in violation of the Charter of the United Nations. The United States rejects the finding. This remains the clearest instance to date of an unmanned decapitation strike being formally contested under international law, and it crystallises the debate over state attribution, sovereignty, and International Humanitarian Law that frames this committee's mandate.

July 29 – 30, 2021 - One-way attack drones strike the tanker *Mercer Street* off the coast of Oman, killing the ship's Romanian master and a British security officer, the first fatalities caused by a drone attack on commercial shipping. United States Central Command concludes that Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles conducted the strike, the United Kingdom and Israel concur, and Iran denies any involvement.

Mass Proliferation of 'Kamikaze' Drones (2022 – 2023)

September 2022 - Iranian *Shahed-136* loitering munitions appear over Ukraine and are used in mass strikes against Kyiv and Ukrainian energy infrastructure from October 17, 2022. Russia subsequently manufactures the design domestically as the *Geran-2*. Iran acknowledges transferring drones while disputing the timing of those transfers.

The strategic significance is twofold. Airframes costing in the tens of thousands of dollars compel the expenditure of interceptors costing millions, making the cost-exchange ratio a strategic variable in its own right. Equally important, the principal operator in this case was a permanent member of this Council rather than a non-state proxy, establishing that Iranian export capacity, and not only Iranian proxy networks, drives global proliferation.

October 18, 2023 - The missile and unmanned aerial vehicle restrictions contained in Annex B of Security Council resolution 2231 (2015) expire on Transition Day. The E3 and the United States retain national measures, but the Council loses its dedicated legal instrument for restricting Iranian UAV transfers. This is arguably the single most consequential regulatory development on the agenda before this committee.

Escalation in Regional Maritime Corridors (October 2023 – June 2024)

October 17, 2023 - Iran-aligned militias begin a sustained campaign of one-way attack drone and rocket strikes against United States positions in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, with more than one hundred and seventy attacks recorded over the following months.

October 19, 2023 - USS *Carney* intercepts cruise missiles and drones launched from Houthi-controlled Yemen over the Red Sea, opening the maritime phase of the crisis.

November 19, 2023 - Houthi forces seize the vehicle carrier *Galaxy Leader* near Hodeidah with twenty-five crew aboard, beginning a campaign against international shipping that continues for more than a year.

December 3, 2023 - Three commercial vessels are struck in the southern Red Sea, and USS *Carney* destroys three Houthi attack drones in the same engagement. On December 18 the United States announces Operation Prosperity Guardian, a maritime coalition of more than twenty states mandated to protect commercial shipping.

December 23, 2023 - A one-way attack drone launched from Iranian territory strikes the chemical tanker *Chem Pluto* approximately two hundred nautical miles off the coast of India. The Pentagon describes the incident as the seventh Iranian attack on commercial shipping since 2021, a rare case of direct rather than proxy attribution.

January 9, 2024 - The Houthis launch their largest single barrage to that point, a combined salvo of missiles and one-way attack drones directed at shipping lanes and United States naval vessels, which American and British forces intercept.

January 10, 2024 - The Security Council adopts resolution 2722 (2024) by eleven votes in favour to none against, with four abstentions from Algeria, China, Mozambique, and the Russian Federation, condemning the Houthi attacks and demanding their immediate cessation. United States and United Kingdom strikes against Houthi launch and radar infrastructure in Yemen begin on January 11 and 12.

January 28, 2024 - A one-way attack drone strikes Tower 22, a United States logistics outpost in north-eastern Jordan, killing three United States Army Reserve soldiers and wounding approximately forty-seven. Reporting indicates that the drone was not engaged because it approached as an American drone was returning to base and was consequently misidentified, a direct illustration of how unmanned systems degrade attribution and defensive decision-making in real time. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claims responsibility,

and on February 2 the United States strikes more than eighty-five targets linked to the IRGC Quds Force and affiliated militias across Iraq and Syria.

June 12, 2024 - An uncrewed surface vessel strikes the bulk carrier *Tutor* in the Red Sea, flooding the engine room. One seafarer is killed and the vessel later sinks. It is the first successful USV strike of the campaign, extending the unmanned challenge from the air domain to the sea surface and to a category of weapon that existing regimes such as the Missile Technology Control Regime do not address at all.

Gray-Zone Normalization & Modern Warfare (2024 – Present)

April 13 – 14, 2024 - In Operation True Promise, Iran launches approximately one hundred and seventy *Shahed*-type one-way attack drones alongside more than one hundred and twenty ballistic missiles and roughly thirty cruise missiles directly at Israel from Iranian territory, in retaliation for the April 1 strike on its consular compound in Damascus. Israeli, American, British, French, and Jordanian forces intercept the overwhelming majority. It is the largest single drone attack ever conducted by a state, and it removes any remaining presumption that Iranian unmanned systems are a proxy-only instrument.

September 2024 - Houthi surface-to-air missiles down two United States *MQ-9 Reaper* aircraft within five days, on September 10 and September 14. Houthi claims place cumulative American Reaper losses over Yemen in the double digits, although the United States has not published a total. A non-state actor is now able to contest American unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, reversing the monopoly established in the 2000s.

Both sides increasingly integrate machine-learning tools into intelligence gathering and targeting. United States Central Command has publicly acknowledged using Project Maven machine-learning target recognition to assist in identifying strike targets in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, while investigative reporting has described Israeli AI-assisted target generation systems used at scale in Gaza. These developments shift the accountability question from who launched the platform to who bears responsibility for the algorithmic recommendation that selected the target, precisely the gap that Meaningful Human Control and the Principle of Command Responsibility are intended to close.

June 13 – 24, 2025 - During the twelve-day Israel–Iran war, Iran launches several hundred *Shahed*-type drones alongside ballistic missiles against Israel. On June 22 the United States strikes the Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan nuclear sites in Operation Midnight Hammer, and on

June 23 Iran fires approximately fourteen ballistic missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar after giving advance warning to Doha and Washington. Delegates should note that this exchange was delivered predominantly by manned aircraft and ballistic missiles rather than unmanned systems; its relevance to this agenda item is that the drone salvos of 2023 and 2024 normalised the escalation ladder that the 2025 war subsequently climbed.

The cumulative effect of this trajectory is that unflagged, proxy-operated, and semi-autonomous unmanned systems have lowered the threshold for kinetic action to a historic low. State and non-state actors alike are now able to conduct precision strikes while preserving plausible deniability, leaving the Security Council without a reliable mechanism for attribution and therefore without a reliable mechanism for accountability.

Key Issue

Asymmetric Proliferation

The widespread availability of low-cost, mass-produced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and loitering munitions to non-state actors and smaller regional states poses a severe threat to international security. Unlike conventional military assets that require massive industrial bases, inexpensive attack drones can be assembled using commercial dual-use components. This proliferation alters regional power dynamics, allowing non-state proxy networks and smaller states to conduct long-range precision strikes against critical infrastructure and commercial corridors at negligible cost.

Non-State Warfare and Proxy Aggression

The strategic transfer of unmanned systems and AI-assisted targeting technologies to non-state armed groups creates extreme volatile conditions across regional conflict zones. Because non-state actors operate outside the constraints of traditional state sovereignty, formal military treaties, or international law, traditional methods of diplomatic deterrence are largely ineffective. Illicit supply networks, weak border security, and gray-market hardware acquisition make preventing the transfer of these weapons exceptionally difficult, raising the risk of unmonitored escalation.

Regulatory and Verification Deficits

Existing multilateral arms control agreements—such as the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—were engineered for large, human-crewed military platforms and struggle to govern modular unmanned systems or software-driven AI algorithms. Verifying compliance remains a fundamental hurdle, as software updates can convert a civilian drone into an autonomous weapon. States may secretly deploy algorithmic targeting tools or evade export controls by sourcing open-source code and commercial microprocessors.

Strategic Deterrence vs. Escalation Dynamics

There is an intense debate over the role of unmanned and autonomous systems in regional security. Proponents argue that high-precision unmanned surveillance and remote strike capabilities enhance deterrence by allowing militaries to eliminate specific threats with surgical accuracy. Opponents contend that removing human soldiers from direct physical danger dramatically lowers the political cost of initiating conflict, encouraging continuous "gray-zone" strikes that erode traditional deterrence and vastly increase the risk of accidental open war.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

The United States opposes preemptive, legally binding global bans on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), advocating instead for non-binding codes of conduct, voluntary political declarations, and responsible AI deployment. Operating under *DoD Directive 3000.09* ("Autonomy in Weapon Systems"), Washington mandates appropriate human judgment over kinetic force while allowing autonomous targeting development subject to senior military review. In the Middle East, the U.S. relies on high-precision AI integration and long-range UAVs (such as the MQ-9 Reaper) for counter-terrorism and regional deterrence, maintaining that existing International Humanitarian Law (IHL) offers a sufficient legal framework if strictly enforced.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom maintains that existing International Humanitarian Law is fully equipped to regulate autonomous systems, rejecting the need for a new legally binding

international treaty on LAWS. British military policy requires that a human retain operational oversight and moral responsibility for any lethal engagement, defining autonomous systems as those capable of understanding higher-level intent rather than operating completely without human oversight. As a key NATO member, the UK actively collaborates on counter-drone platforms and AI-enabled surveillance architectures in the Middle East to protect maritime navigation routes and counter proxy drone threats.

France

France supports a "two-tier" regulatory framework within the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), distinguishing between fully autonomous weapons operating entirely outside human command (which it supports banning) and semi-autonomous systems operated under meaningful human control. Paris opposes blanket prohibitions on military AI development, arguing that autonomous functions—such as target identification assist and incoming missile interceptors—are vital for defensive capabilities and precision strikes. French defense strategy in the Middle East emphasizes counter-drone technology transfers and enforcing maritime security against low-cost loitering munitions.

Russian Federation

Russia rejects any preemptive global bans or restrictive new treaties on LAWS, maintaining that current IHL frameworks are completely sufficient. Moscow considers military AI and autonomous weapons essential tools for preserving strategic military balance against NATO forces. In practice, Russia heavily incorporates low-cost loitering munitions and dual-use UAV tactics into its military operations while actively opposing Western-led sanction regimes and export controls targeting dual-use technology supply chains.

American Society of International Law

People's Republic of China

China maintains a posture of "strategic ambiguity"—publicly endorsing a global prohibition on the *use* of fully autonomous weapons while simultaneously opposing restrictions on their *development* and manufacturing. As a major global supplier of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) drones and dual-use microelectronics, Beijing insists that

international discussions remain strictly within the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) framework, where decisions require full consensus.

Austria

Austria strongly advocates for a legally binding international instrument within the UN framework to restrict Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), maintaining a firm commitment to meaningful human control over kinetic military decisions. Aligned with its tradition of active neutrality and nuclear/conventional disarmament leadership, Vienna views algorithmic targeting and unmonitored proxy drone proliferation in the Middle East as a direct violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), urging strict compliance with accountability measures and preventive diplomacy to avert gray-zone escalation.

Bahrain

Bahrain prioritizes immediate regional stability, maritime security, and defense cooperation across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to counter low-cost loitering munition threats targeting energy infrastructure and commercial shipping lanes. Positioned on the frontlines of regional security dynamics, Manama emphasizes the urgent need to curb illicit dual-use component transfers and proxy drone capabilities, supporting international enforcement mechanisms while advocating for regional dialogue to prevent accidental confrontation between Western allies and Iran.

Colombia

Colombia focuses on strict adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights protection, voicing deep concern over the human cost of remote kinetic warfare and unflagged drone strikes. Representing Latin America, Bogotá warns against the unchecked, asymmetric proliferation of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technology to armed non-state groups, calling for transparent verification mechanisms and global consensus on command responsibility to ensure that state and non-state actors alike face accountability for civilian harm.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo emphasizes sovereign equality, non-interference, and the containment of asymmetric weapons proliferation that destabilizes developing nations.

Grounded in its own challenges with non-state armed groups utilizing low-cost aerial technology, the DRC supports Global South initiatives calling for binding regulations on autonomous weapon platforms, warning that the unchecked spread of dual-use strike systems fuels regional proxy warfare and undermines international peacekeeping operations.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan pursues a balanced, non-aligned posture within the Security Council, emphasizing peaceful conflict resolution, state sovereignty, and regional stability through diplomatic dialogue. Cautious of taking sides in major-power rivalries or unilateral sanction regimes, Bishkek stresses that international arms control frameworks for dual-use technologies and uncrewed systems must respect national sovereignty while preventing terrorist or extremist groups from acquiring advanced aerial strike capabilities.

Latvia

Latvia aligns closely with EU and NATO postures, highlighting the threat posed by proxy drone networks, state-sponsored gray-zone escalation, and dual-use supply chain evasion. Given its acute focus on regional security and international law, Riga supports a combination of strict export control enforcement (such as the MTCR) and clear legal accountability frameworks for semi-autonomous systems, urging the Council to take decisive action against illicit technology transfers that fuel Middle Eastern instability and challenge global norms.

Liberia

Liberia advocates for conflict prevention, humanitarian protection, and adherence to the UN Charter, aligning with the African Group's posture on disarmament and human rights. Monrovia expresses strong support for binding legal frameworks that govern AI and autonomous systems, emphasizing that remote warfare lowers the barrier to military force and risks converting the Global South into testing grounds for high-tech, unmonitored weapons systems lacking human oversight.

Portugal

Portugal advocates for a two-tier approach to regulating military AI and autonomous weapons, distinguishing between fully autonomous weapons (which should be banned) and regulated semi-autonomous systems operated under meaningful human control. Leveraging

its commitment to multilateralism and IHL, Lisbon supports strengthening export control regimes for dual-use microcomponents while promoting human rights protections and clear command responsibility in complex theater environments like the U.S.–Iran conflict.

Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago focuses on small state security, peacebuilding, and stopping the illicit trafficking of dual-use technologies to non-state actors. Representing the Caribbean community, Port of Spain warns against the dangerous precedent set by gray-zone proxy drone attacks, calling on the Security Council to establish clear state liability norms and reinforce multilateral legal agreements to prevent high-tech proliferation from destabilizing vulnerable maritime regions.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe aligns with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the African Union (AU) consensus, advocating for a legally binding global treaty prohibiting fully autonomous weapons and criticizing unilateral Western sanctions. Harare emphasizes non-interference, peaceful negotiation, and sovereign equality, arguing that primary responsibility for gray-zone escalation rests with high-tech military powers conducting remote targeted strikes, while demanding global protection against asymmetric high-tech warfare.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Foundational Treaties & Legal Frameworks

Year	Event/Treaty	Description
1949	Geneva Conventions & Additional Protocols	Established fundamental principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including distinction, proportionality, and precaution in military targeting.

1980	Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)	Key multilateral treaty framework prohibiting or restricting conventional weapons deemed excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects.
1987	Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)	Multilateral export control regime established to limit the proliferation of uncrewed delivery systems capable of delivering WMDs, later applied to long-range UAVs.
1998	Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court	Codified command responsibility and individual legal liability for war crimes resulting from unlawful military targeting and indiscriminate attacks.

Key UN Actions & Global Resolutions on Unmanned & Autonomous Warfare

Year	Resolution / Action	Description
2014	Establishment of CCW Informal Expert Meetings	UN CCW state parties formally began expert consultations in Geneva to examine legal, technical, and ethical issues surrounding Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS).

2017	CCW Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) Formed	Formal establishment of the GGE on LAWS under the CCW to negotiate normative frameworks, though progress remains slowed by consensus requirements.
2019	CCW Guiding Principles on LAWS	Adoption of 11 non-binding guiding principles, affirming that IHL applies fully to autonomous systems and human responsibility cannot be transferred to machines.
2023	UNGA Resolution 78/241 on LAWS	Landmark UN General Assembly resolution mandating a formal report by the Secretary-General on state positions regarding autonomous weapons.
2024	UNGA Resolution 79/62 on LAWS	GA resolution passing with overwhelming support to launch formal consultations on establishing binding bans and regulations for autonomous weapons.

U.S.–Iran Unmanned Warfare & Regional Events

Year	Event	Description
2011	Capture of U.S. RQ-170 Stealth Drone	Iranian forces captured an intact U.S. reconnaissance drone, accelerating Iran's

		domestic reverse-engineering and stealth UAV development.
2019	Downing of U.S. Global Hawk & Abqaiq-Khuraib Attacks	Downing of a U.S. RQ-4 drone over the Strait of Hormuz and drone/missile strikes on Saudi oil facilities highlighted low-cost asymmetric strike reach.
Jan 2020	Targeted Strike on IRGC Commander	U.S. MQ-9 Reaper strike outside Baghdad killed IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani, accelerating debates over remote targeted killing and state accountability.
2022–2023	Mass Export & Deployment of Shahed Drones	Proliferation of Iranian Shahed-series loitering munitions across regional conflicts demonstrated how low-cost UAVs bypass traditional deterrence.
2024	Tower 22 Attack & Regional Escalations	Proxy drone strike in Jordan killed three U.S. service members, triggering retaliatory strikes against drone command nodes and deepening regional tension.

Recent Governance Initiatives & Disarmament Developments

Year	Event	Description
Feb 2023	REAIM Summit & Political Declaration	Netherlands hosted inaugural Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain; U.S. launched the Political Declaration on Military AI.
Sept 2024	Second REAIM Summit (Seoul)	Co-hosted by South Korea, focusing on operationalizing risk-mitigation measures, voluntary information-sharing, and preventing algorithmic accountability gaps.
2025	Informal UN Consultations on LAWS	UN-led intersessional consultations convened to draft framework elements for a potential two-tier regulatory treaty on autonomous systems.
2026	CCW GGE Sessions & Treaty Target	Ongoing GGE sessions in Geneva targeting consensus guidelines ahead of the Secretary-General's timeline for an international instrument on LAWS.

Possible Solutions

The increasing use of unmanned and AI-powered weapons requires the Security Council to address not only the technology itself, but also the conditions that allow these systems to

proliferate, escalate conflicts, and evade accountability. Rather than imposing a single restriction on all unmanned systems, the international community should establish a framework that distinguishes between legitimate defensive applications and systems that create unacceptable risks to international peace and security.

First, the Security Council should strengthen the principle of Meaningful Human Control over the use of lethal autonomous weapons. States should ensure that humans retain the authority to approve, modify, or terminate lethal engagements, particularly when civilian areas or other sensitive targets are involved. Clear chains of command should also be established before autonomous systems are deployed so that responsibility cannot be transferred to an algorithm following an unlawful attack. This would reinforce existing obligations under International Humanitarian Law while addressing the accountability gap created by increasingly autonomous weapons.

Second, stronger measures should be introduced to prevent the illicit transfer of unmanned weapons and their dual-use components to non-state armed groups. The Council could encourage Member States to improve end-user verification, monitor high-risk supply chains, and strengthen controls on the transfer of components that can be readily adapted for military use. Particular attention should be given to preventing proxy groups from acquiring advanced UAVs and autonomous targeting technologies through illicit networks. Such measures would reduce the ability of relatively small actors to conduct attacks capable of destabilizing entire regions.

Third, the Security Council should establish greater transparency and verification mechanisms for unmanned military operations. States could be encouraged to report the development and deployment of high-risk autonomous weapons, including information regarding their level of autonomy and human oversight. In regions experiencing repeated drone attacks, states could also establish communication channels and incident-reporting mechanisms to distinguish accidental incidents from deliberate attacks. Greater transparency would reduce miscalculation and make attribution more reliable when violations occur.

Fourth, international cooperation should be strengthened for investigating attacks involving unmanned and AI-powered systems. The Security Council could support cooperation among national authorities, relevant UN bodies, and technical experts to preserve evidence, identify

the origin of unmanned systems, and determine the chain of command behind their deployment. This is particularly important in cases involving unmarked or proxy-operated systems, where uncertainty regarding attribution can prevent effective international action.

Finally, regional confidence-building measures should be promoted in areas where unmanned warfare has become a recurring source of escalation. These measures may include military-to-military communication channels, advance notification of large-scale drone exercises, designated safety zones around civilian infrastructure and international shipping routes, and agreements to avoid deploying unmanned systems in ways that could be mistaken for an imminent attack. Such measures would not eliminate legitimate military capabilities, but would lower the risk of unintended escalation and preserve channels for diplomatic intervention.

The Security Council should pursue a balanced approach that does not treat all unmanned technology as inherently unlawful. The objective should be to prevent autonomous weapons from operating without meaningful human responsibility, restrict their destabilizing proliferation, improve accountability for attacks, and reduce the possibility that technological advantages become catalysts for wider conflict. Through stronger oversight, responsible transfer controls, transparent investigation, and regional confidence-building, the international community can adapt existing security mechanisms to the realities of modern unmanned warfare.

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