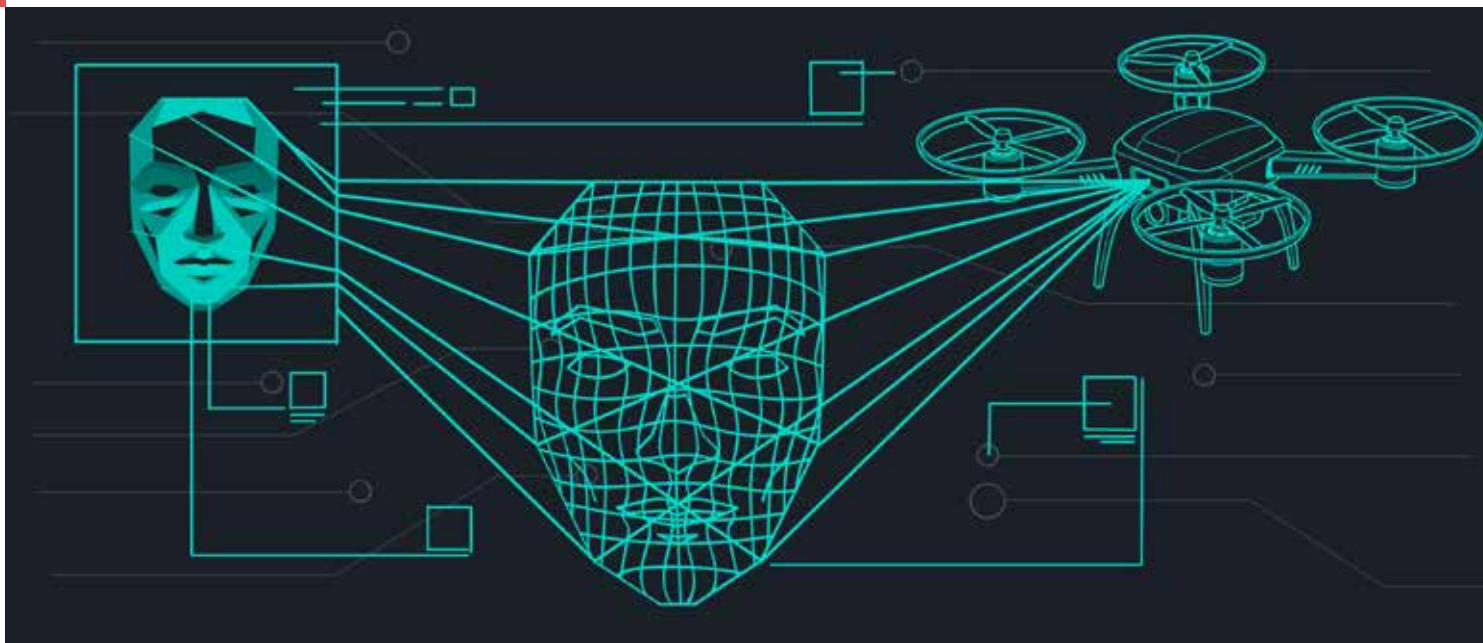


A Key Opportunity to Prevent the Development of Unacceptable Autonomous Weapons



The Seventh Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) takes place in November 2026, presenting a key opportunity to launch negotiations for a new protocol.

Autonomous weapons are here – and spreading fast

The number of armed conflicts across the world continues to grow alongside an arms race to develop and deploy new technologies of warfare. This is accelerating the widespread development and use of autonomous weapons. These weapons are no longer a distant threat – they are already a reality.

Autonomous weapons select and apply force to targets without human intervention. Users of this technology likely will not know who or what will be struck, or when and where. Integrating AI – particularly non-deterministic AI – exponentially increases unpredictability, heightening the risk of harm, especially to civilians. It is no longer a question of whether autonomous weapons will be used – instead, the focus should be on how to regulate these weapons to uphold the law and protect civilians.

A threat to people everywhere

Autonomous weapons give rise to deep humanitarian, legal and ethical concerns because they reduce a user's ability to control the use of force:

- humanitarian risks: increased harm to civilians and combatants
- legal challenges: difficulty ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law
- ethical dilemma: effectively delegating life-and-death decisions to machines.

Like any other weapon, **autonomous weapons will proliferate, cause widespread death and destruction, and be used in violation of international humanitarian law (IHL)**, including by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations.

International regulation: both essential and within reach

IHL already restricts the development and use of autonomous weapons, but it does not provide all the answers. New, legally binding rules are urgently needed. The aim is not to ban all autonomous weapons, but to prevent the use of the most unacceptable ones to ensure that 21st century conflicts remain under human control. New rules would also provide clarity for developers, avoid costly redesigns, reduce legal risks and promote shared standards across countries.

The groundwork for regulating the use of these weapons is in place after over a decade of discussions within the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems, under the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. The GGE Chair's "rolling text" offers a robust framework for developing a legally binding instrument based on a widely supported "two-tier" approach:

1. prohibit autonomous weapons that pose an unacceptable risk of violating IHL, including unpredictable autonomous weapons and those that target humans directly; and
2. restrict the development and use of other autonomous weapons, limiting the types of targets, and the geographic scope, duration, situations and scale of their use.

This approach ensures that human operators retain control and judgement over the use of force when employing autonomous weapons.

Acting before it's too late

The promoters of new battlefield technologies often claim that new weapons will be more humane, less lethal and more precise. However, in today's most technologically sophisticated conflicts, we have not seen better outcomes for civilians but rather widespread and indiscriminate devastation. History has shown that international treaties can successfully ban or restrict the most unacceptable weapons, including biological and chemical weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions.

Taking action early pays off. The CCW Protocol IV successfully prohibited blinding laser weapons before their use became widespread, showing how effective preventive regulation can be. The same can and must be done for autonomous weapons. Once these weapons are widely deployed, the risks to civilians and global security will be far harder to contain.

Seizing the opportunity in 2026

States Party to the CCW will meet in November 2026 for the Review Conference. A detailed draft framework already exists and a growing number of states are ready to negotiate. The International Committee of the Red Cross calls on states to:

- further strengthen the GGE Chair's rolling text;
- reaffirm, including through a UN General Assembly First Committee Resolution, the urgency of beginning negotiations to regulate autonomous weapons; and
- use the 2026 CCW Review Conference to launch negotiations on a new Protocol.

The risks of inaction are too great. The foundation has been laid and the need is urgent. Now is the time to act.

States must move decisively to ensure that the future of warfare is governed by humans, not machines.



ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross
19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
T +41 22 734 60 01
shop.icrc.org
© ICRC, June 2026

 www.icrc.org
 facebook.com/icrc
 x.com/icrc
 instagram.com/icrc

Scan for more information

