

WISMUNC I

The First Iteration Of Washington
International School's Model United Nations
Conference



Disarmament and International Security
Committee (DISEC)
General Assembly
Background Guide

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Letters from the Dais

Dear Delegates,

I'm Sienna, a senior at Washington International School and I've been doing Model UN since 9th grade! I have a younger brother in 9th grade. I'm Dutch American and speak English, Spanish, and Dutch. I love to travel and my favorite country I've visited is Laos. My favorite subject is history and I'm also interested in psychology, anthropology, and criminal law. I'm so excited to be able to participate in the first ever WISMUNC and to meet you all!

Sincerely,

Sienna Rapaport

Chair, DISEC

Dear Delegates,

I'm Ava, a senior at Washington International School and I've been attending Model UN conferences since 8th grade! My favorite committee I've participated in was a crisis committee about The Great Game in Afghanistan. I'm really interested in math and physics and want to pursue a career in engineering after high school. Most importantly, I look forward to hearing you all debate AI and space weapons!

Best,

Ava Saadi Yesil

Vice Chair, DISEC

Topic 1:

Regulating the Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Weapons

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems that can be programmed to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, including pattern recognition, learning and making inferences from data, and making predictions (“What is Artificial Intelligence”). In the 21st century, AI has become increasingly integrated into military operations. Governments can now use AI to analyze their intelligence, improve their cybersecurity and surveillance, and be used for weapons like drones. Militaries find AI favorable because it has the capability to transform modern warfare: militaries can find targets and strike faster and more accurately without using as many humans (Toh and Ayoub). AI can process data from satellites, drones, sensors, data brokers, and even social media for the military (Toh and Ayoub). While these capabilities have immense potential, they can be incredibly dangerous to civilians all over the world, particularly because this technology is rapidly evolving and widely unregulated.

One of the most controversial applications of AI is the development of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). Autonomous weapons are military systems that, once activated, can independently identify, select, and engage targets without further human intervention (“Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems”). Unlike remotely operated drones, which require continuous control by a human operator, autonomous weapons rely on sensors, algorithms, and AI to make decisions during combat.

International Organizations have raised questions on the legality of the militarization of AI, on the ethical concerns of substituting human decision-making regarding life or death with machines, and whether AI use in the military is in compliance with international humanitarian law (“ICRC Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems”).

One recent notable example involved the company Anthropic, which asked the U.S. military not to use its AI model, Claude, in fully autonomous weapons or for mass surveillance of Americans because it is merely a “foundational model” meant to “perform general tasks such as text synthesis, image manipulation, and audio generation” (Toh and Ayoub). In other words, Claude was not programmed to be used for military operations. However, the Pentagon declined these restrictions, excluded Anthropic from defense contracts, and subsequently used Claude in military operations in Venezuela, including the capture of President Nicolas Maduro (Toh and Ayoub). This highlights the tension between embracing the technology in modern warfare and the ethical responsibility to protect civilians. While AI has the potential to improve military efficiency and reduce risks to soldiers, its use in autonomous weapons questions the limits and ethicality of machine decision-making in armed conflict. The international community at DISEC must determine whether existing international law has a sufficient framework to regulate AI or whether new global standards are needed to ensure that AI is used ethically and in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Current Challenges

Regulation of Artificial Intelligence

The most significant challenge facing the United Nations is the lack of a legal framework regarding military use of artificial intelligence. International humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, applies to all weapons and methods of warfare. However, these were drafted long before AI-enabled military systems existed, and therefore does not outline a comprehensive framework on how to address and regulate them. As a result, nations disagree over whether existing law is enough to address AI or whether new rules are needed. The United States and other countries have argued that existing international humanitarian law can regulate military AI if it is developed and used properly, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Human Rights Watch, and other humanitarian organizations have called for new international limits, especially on autonomous weapons systems and the need for human oversight and control (Davison; Human Rights Watch).

Accountability

A second major concern is the question of who should take accountability for decisions made by an autonomous system. AI systems assist military personnel by analyzing surveillance data, supporting targeting decisions, and identifying potential threats. However, these systems can produce errors when training data is biased, incomplete, or inaccurate. The ICRC has emphasized that legal responsibility under international humanitarian law cannot be transferred to a machine, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) similarly argues that humans must retain responsibility for both the development and use of autonomous weapons systems (Davison; Bo, Bruun, and Boulanin). If an AI-assisted strike unlawfully kills civilians or damages protected objects such as hospitals or schools, it can become difficult to assign responsibility among commanders, states, developers, and contractors. That uncertainty has fueled concern about an accountability gap in the use of AI by militaries. (Davison; Bo, Bruun, and Boulanin).

The role of private companies

The growing role of private technology firms has also complicated military AI development. Much of the most advanced AI research is now carried out by private companies, rather than nations themselves; firms such as Google, Microsoft, Palantir, OpenAI, and Anthropic have become central to the broader AI ecosystem. This also raises hard questions about who is responsible when private companies build the systems that governments use on the battlefield. It is not always clear whether companies should be able to limit how their technology is used, especially when AI systems are involved in decisions that can affect life and death. Human Rights Watch notes that when military AI works like a “black box,” it becomes much harder to understand how decisions were made, which can hide bias, make discrimination harder to detect, and leave victims with little chance for meaningful remedy (Human Rights Watch). “Black box” refers to an AI system whose decision-making process is hard to understand, which makes discrimination and responsibility for harmful events harder to identify.

Technological Arms Race

Lastly, military AI contributes to fears of an international technological arms race. States increasingly treat AI superiority as a national-security priority, and current arms-control debates reflect concern that competition may encourage rapid deployment before adequate testing, transparency, or safeguards are in place. The ICRC has warned that autonomous weapon systems must be predictable, reliable, and subject to legal review, while broader verification research has stressed that software-driven systems are especially difficult to monitor because capabilities can change without visible physical modification (Davison; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory). Without agreed transparency measures or confidence-building mechanisms, AI competition could increase instability during crises.

Autonomous Weapons

The most controversial issue surrounding autonomous weapons is meaningful human control. Although there is broad agreement in international humanitarian law that humans must remain responsible for lethal decisions, there is no universally accepted definition of what “meaningful” control requires. The ICRC notes that States generally agree on the need for “meaningful,” “effective,” or otherwise sufficient human judgment, but disagree on how much human involvement is required before, during, and after a strike (Davison).

The use of autonomous weapons also challenges two core international humanitarian law principles: distinction and proportionality. Parties to a conflict must distinguish between civilians and combatants, and may attack only lawful military objectives. The ICRC has warned that autonomous systems may struggle to make the kinds of contextual judgments required to apply these principles reliably, especially in complex or rapidly changing environments (Davison). Proportionality presents an additional difficulty because it requires a context-sensitive judgment about whether expected civilian harm would be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage, a determination that many scholars and humanitarian organizations argue is fundamentally human in nature (Davison; Human Rights Watch). If an autonomous weapon causes more civilian than combatant harm, the question again is raised of7 who would bear the responsibility?

Another challenge is the proliferation of such systems. Commercial drones, facial-recognition tools, and machine-learning systems are increasingly affordable and widely available, making it easier for non-state actors to adapt dual-use technologies for milita or terrorist purposes. Unlike nuclear weapons, many AI-based systems depend on software and commercially accessible hardware, which makes it significantly more difficult to control its propagation.. Human Rights Watch has also warned that autonomous weapons are likely to worsen human-rights risks because they reduce people to data points and can embed bias into life-and-death decisions (Human Rights Watch).

Verification is another major obstacle to regulation. Software can be updated remotely without changing the physical weapon, and states may resist disclosing military AI capabilities because of strategic secrecy. The ICRC has emphasized that legal reviews under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I are especially important for new weapons, but it also notes that autonomous systems raise unique predictability and testing problems (Davison). For that reason, even if states negotiate a future treaty, verifying compliance would likely be more difficult than monitoring many conventional arms-control agreements.

Bloc Positions

Advocates for a Legally Binding Treaty

Many countries in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Europe support negotiating a legally binding international treaty restricting or prohibiting fully autonomous weapons (“International Discussions”). States including Austria, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa have repeatedly expressed concern that machines should never independently decide to take human life (Check “International Discussions” to see what other countries support a ban on autonomous weapons). These countries generally advocate preserving meaningful human control over all uses of lethal force and argue that existing international humanitarian law does not adequately address autonomous weapons.

Major Military Powers

The United States, China, and Russia are among the world's largest investors in military artificial intelligence, but they hold different positions regarding regulation. The United States believes that existing international humanitarian law is capable of governing AI-enabled weapons and generally opposes broad prohibitions that could hinder technological innovation or national defense (“International Discussions”). Russia has consistently opposed negotiating legally binding restrictions, arguing that such regulations are premature and could disadvantage states developing advanced military technologies (“International Discussions”). On the other hand, China has publicly expressed support for regulating or prohibiting fully autonomous lethal weapons but continues investing heavily in AI research for military purposes (“International Discussions”).

Middle Powers

Countries like Israel, India, The United Kingdom, Australia, South Korea, France, Spain, Germany, and Turkey oppose a ban on autonomous weapons. These countries voice that autonomous weapons could actually have humanitarian benefits by being able to "strike military objectives more accurately and with less risk of collateral damage or civilian casualties" than traditional systems (“International Discussions”). Many support continued discussions within the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), increased transparency, information sharing, and voluntary best practices rather than an immediate global ban. In addition, most of these countries have advanced defense industries they would like to advance and therefore seek regulations that protect both national security interests and continued technological development.

Guiding Questions:

Overall, delegates should focus the debate on the following guiding questions, while centering their perspectives on both their assigned position and DISEC's goals of preventing conflict and promoting responsible cooperation:

1. Should DISEC negotiate a legally binding treaty to regulate or prohibit autonomous weapons in the military?
2. How should "meaningful human control" be defined?
3. Who bears the legal responsibility for when an AI-assisted or autonomous weapon violates international humanitarian law: the military commander, the state, the software developer, etc?
4. What measures should the international community take to ensure that autonomous weapons and military AI don't fall into the hands of terrorists and non-state actors?
5. How can the United Nations verify compliance with future agreements regulating AI, given that software can be modified rapidly and military AI programs are often highly classified?

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Topic 2:

Preventing the Weaponization of Outer Space and Ensuring Peaceful Development of Outer Space Activities

Introduction

Human activity in outer space is entering a new era of exploration and development. While humanity's journey in outer space began as a Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, spatial exploration and settlement is no longer limited to two actors. Today, an ever-expanding number of national governments, international partnerships, and private companies are pursuing scientific, commercial, and strategic objectives in outer space. More than ninety countries now operate satellites, while commercial entities have transformed access to space through reusable launch vehicles, satellite constellations, and plans for long-term habitation beyond earth (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs). Such developments have greatly accelerated humanity's transition from exploring space to considering the establishment of permanent settlements on the Moon and Mars.

The coming decades are expected to see significant progress towards sustained human presence beyond Earth. Through the Artemis program, the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and its international partners aim to establish long-term human presence on and around the Moon, while the European Space Agency (ESA), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), and numerous other organizations contribute to lunar exploration initiatives (NASA; European Space Agency). Meanwhile, China and Russia have announced plans to collaborate on the International Lunar Research Station, illustrating that multiple geopolitical blocs are preparing for and initiating permanent lunar infrastructure (China National Space Administration). At the same time, lunar activity is not limited to state actors; private companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin have proposed technologies intended to support regular lunar missions and, as an end goal, human settlement (SpaceX; Blue Origin).

Alongside these ambitions, space is becoming increasingly significant to national security. Modern militaries rely extensively on satellites for communication, navigation, intelligence gathering, missile warning, and reconnaissance. Several states have also demonstrated anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities, while the development of dedicated military organizations such as the United States Space Force reflects the growing strategic importance of the space domain (Secure World Foundation). Additionally, as civilian and military technologies increasingly overlap with the development of space settlements, distinguishing between peaceful infrastructure and military capability is becoming more complex (Secure World Foundation).

The prospect of permanent space settlements introduces new international security challenges that existing frameworks were not designed to address. Questions surrounding territorial claims, resource utilization, the role of private companies, and the permissible use of defensive technologies remain unresolved under current international law (Outer Space Treaty). Without clear governance mechanisms, competition over strategic locations and critical resources could spark conflict among states, undermining the longstanding principle that outer space should remain the province of all humankind.

Background

The current governance of outer space is primarily shaped by a series of international treaties developed during the Cold War, when space exploration was dominated by state actors. The foundation of space law is the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, commonly known as the Outer Space Treaty, which entered into force in 1967. Created during a period of intense competition, the treaty established that outer space shall be explored for the benefit of all countries and prohibited national appropriation of celestial bodies through claims of sovereignty, occupation, or any other means (Outer Space Treaty). Additionally, the treaty prohibits placing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit, on celestial bodies, or in outer space. However, the treaty allows the use of space for peaceful purposes, including certain military activities such as satellite operations (Outer Space Treaty). As space technology has advanced, the treaty's limited guidance on commercial space activities and new military capabilities have created uncertainty regarding activities such as military activities, resource extraction, and the establishment of permanent infrastructure.

Additional agreements have expanded the legal framework governing space activities. The 1968 Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts, and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space (the Rescue Agreement) requires states to assist astronauts in distress and return them safely to their countries of origin. Furthermore, the 1972 Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects (the Liability Convention) establishes responsibility for damage caused by space objects launched by states or their nationals. Similarly, the 1975 Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space (the Registration Convention) requires states to register objects launched into outer space, increasing transparency for space activities (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs). Altogether, a limitation of these agreements is that their primary purpose is to regulate individual space missions and state responsibility rather than address the complex security challenges associated with commercial space operations or competition over extraterrestrial resources.

Current Developments

In recent years, outer space has evolved from being a domain focused primarily on scientific exploration to one characterized by increasing geopolitical competition, commercial investment, and long-term infrastructure development. Both national governments and private companies are pursuing ambitious projects that could establish a sustained human presence beyond Earth, while military dependence on space-based assets continues to grow. These various developments have placed ramping pressure on the international legal framework governing outer space, particularly as new technologies and actors emerge.

One of the most significant developments is the renewed international focus on lunar exploration. The United States' Artemis Program aims to return astronauts to the Moon with the goal of establishing a sustainable human presence through the Lunar Gateway space station and surface infrastructure. Over fifty nations have endorsed the Artemis Accords, a set of non-binding principles intended to promote the peaceful exploration of outer space (NASA). In response, China and Russia have proposed the International Lunar Research Stations (ILRS), a multinational collaborative initiative that seeks to¹⁴ establish a permanent scientific research base on the Moon during the 2030s (China National Space Administration).

The emergence of multiple large-scale lunar programs has raised concerns that competing governance models and interests could increase geopolitical tensions as states expand their activities beyond Earth. At the same time, military activity in space has expanded considerably. Space-based systems have become the basis of modern defense technology for capabilities ranging from communication to navigation. Consequently, many states have invested heavily in protecting their space assets while simultaneously developing technologies capable of disrupting others'. In addition to the emergence of dedicated extraterrestrial military organizations, several countries, including the United States, Russia, China, and India, have demonstrated ASAT capacities, highlighting the possibility of conflict extending into outer space (Secure World Foundation).

Commercial space activity has also expanded rapidly in the twenty-first century. Companies including SpaceX, Blue Origin, Rocket Lab, and others have dramatically reduced launch costs while also providing satellite deployment and transportation for both governments and private consumers (SpaceX; Blue Origin). Such companies have also proposed commercial lunar landers, resource extraction technologies, and privately operated orbital stations. As commercial plans continue to expand, governments face the challenge of ensuring private actions remain consistent with international obligations while fostering innovation and economic growth.

Guiding Questions:

Overall, delegates should focus the debate on the following guiding questions, while centering their perspectives on both their assigned position and DISEC's goals of preventing conflict and promoting responsible cooperation:

1. How might the international community distinguish between the peaceful use of outer space and the militarization of space infrastructure, especially when technologies have both civilian and military applications?
2. How should the United Nations regulate resource extraction on the Moon, Mars, and other celestial bodies to prevent potential conflict?
3. Should "safety zones" surrounding lunar or extraterrestrial facilities be internationally enforced, and how can they be prevented from becoming veiled territorial claims?
4. How can developing and emerging space nations be ensured equitable participation in future space exploration, when infrastructural projects (such as Artemis, for example) have already been established?
5. What mechanisms should be established to peacefully resolve disputes over extraterrestrial infrastructure or access to resources?

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