



*Dawson College Model United Nations Conference*

Disarmament and  
International Security  
Committee:  
Addressing the Rise of  
Autonomous Weapon  
Systems  
Background Guide

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HONORABLE MENTION TO VAISHNAVI SELVARAJAH



## Land acknowledgment

We would like to begin by acknowledging that Dawson College is located on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today. Tiohtià:ke (Montréal) is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today, it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We respect the continued connections with the past, present and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.

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## Reconnaissance des territoires traditionnels

Nous aimerions commencer par reconnaître que le Collège Dawson est situé en territoire autochtone, lequel n'a jamais été cédé. Nous reconnaissons la nation Kanien'kehá: ka comme gardienne des terres et des eaux sur lesquelles nous nous réunissons aujourd'hui. Tiohtià:ke (Montréal) est historiquement connu comme un lieu de rassemblement pour de nombreuses Premières Nations, et aujourd'hui, une population autochtone diversifiée, ainsi que d'autres peuples, y résident. C'est dans le respect des liens avec le passé, le présent et l'avenir que nous reconnaissons les relations continues entre les Peuples Autochtones et autres personnes de la communauté montréalaise.

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**Welcome to DISEC!**

## INTRODUCTION

# Letter from the Chair

Welcome delegates to the first ever iteration of Dawson College's Model United Nations conference.

My name is Emma Quỳnh Liên Wong, and I am honoured to be your chair for the Disarmament and International Security Committee. As a Dawson alumni and former delegate, I am beyond excited to see what you all have in store for this weekend's debate. I speak from experience when I say that Model United Nations is an exceptional hobby, designed to test and foster our personal growth through the stimulation of challenges that push us in ways one would never expect.

Despite the stress it may induce, MUN offers invaluable opportunities to enhance our communication and teamwork skills, especially in high-pressure situations. Nevertheless, the true joy of MUN lies in the connections we form with remarkable individuals along our journey—friends who enrich our lives and remain steadfast companions for years to come. I have made many friends from these experiences, ones who I know I can depend on no matter what. Maybe DCMUN's conference can offer these same opportunities to you all.

In a world where hard skills increasingly take centre stage, it is essential to recognize the significance of soft skills such as, but not limited to, teamwork, gentle leadership, and emotional regulation. Distinguished delegates, please bear in mind: while performance, learning, and knowledge are crucial, respect, kindness, and social adeptness are *invaluable*. So, embrace the experience, have fun, and relish every moment!

Regards,  
Emma Quỳnh Liên Wong



## INTRODUCTION

# Letter from the Vice-Chair

Esteemed delegates, it is with great pride and palpable excitement that I welcome you to the first iteration of the DCMUN conference.

My name is Thomas Villarreal Avila and I have the honour of serving as your Vice-Chair for this year's DISEC General Assembly committee. I am in my first year of the Law, Society and Justice program at Dawson. Needless to say, I am also a first year DCMUN delegate. I entered the MUN sphere in high school, where I participated in the SimNUQ conference organized by Symposium Jeunesse.



Since then, I have had the privilege of being the assistant head-delegate at SSUNS 2024 and founder of the Model UN club at my former highschool (a work that is still in progress). Some may simply perceive Model UN as a group of students roleplaying diplomats in business casual attire, but as a dedicated and passionate delegate, I can attest that we are not "acting" like diplomats, we are diplomats. You all have the power and the will to be catalysts for the change that our world needs. Model UN allows us to practically utilize our potential to spark transformation and create a space that will foster the flourishing of future leaders.

It is with intellectual rigor, tenacity and passion that I wish to see you all tackle this incredibly critical issue. In the face of growing international instability, the use of automated weapons systems in combat is tremendously worrisome. And with the rising integration of AI to supplant human judgement in contemporary warfare, delegates must find a way to discuss the ethical and humanitarian implications of such weapons systems while simultaneously addressing the inevitable advancement of our technologically-driven world.

But always remember to enjoy yourselves. Your well-being is sacrosanct: do not let your desire to perform well in committee impede on it. After all, we're all just roleplaying, right?

Sincerely, and with much enthusiasm,

Thomas Villarreal Avila

## INTRODUCTION

# Letter from the Under-Secretary-General of General Assemblies

Dear delegates,

Welcome to the Dawson College Model United Nations Conference 2025! It is my honour to extend this letter to you as you embark on this exciting journey through diplomacy, negotiation, and international collaboration.

As the Under-Secretary-General of the General Assembly, I am incredibly proud of the work each of you has already invested in preparation for this conference. Your dedication, research, and commitment to understanding complex global issues do not go unnoticed, and I am certain you will approach this experience with the enthusiasm and intellect needed to drive impactful discussions and solutions.

In particular, I would like to recognize the delegates of the DISEC committee and the UNCQR. Each of these committees represents critical challenges that the world faces today, and your contributions have the potential to inspire fresh approaches to ongoing issues. Through your work, you not only gain deeper insights into the dynamics of diplomacy but also add your voices to a legacy of young leaders shaping a better future.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to the chairs of each committee. Your leadership, dedication, and countless hours of preparation have created an environment where delegates can thrive. Your expertise and guidance are invaluable in creating thoughtful debate and ensuring that every delegate has an opportunity to contribute meaningfully. It is through your efforts that the vision of this conference comes to life, and I am truly proud of the work you have done to make DCMUN a success. Thank you for your unwavering commitment and exemplary service.

I urge each of you to remain open to diverse perspectives, to be respectful yet bold in expressing your ideas, and to stay resilient in the face of challenges that inevitably arise in diplomatic discourse. You are the future leaders and policymakers of tomorrow, and DCMUN is your platform to shine.

From an avid MUN delegate herself,  
Alexandra Williams (she/her)  
Under-Secretary-General of the General Assembly  
Dawson College Model United Nations (DCMUN)



# Letter of Equity

### **Equity Statement**

The Dawson College Model United Nations (DCMUN) Conference is steadfast in its commitment to fostering a safe and welcoming environment for all participants. Upholding the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion is a shared responsibility among delegates, the Dais, the Secretariat, and faculty members. Consequently, DCMUN maintains a zero-tolerance policy toward any actions or behavior that promote hatred, discrimination, disrespect, or conduct deemed inappropriate by the Dais or Secretariat. The commitment to these values aligns with the guiding principles of the United Nations, which emphasize that “the principles of equality and non-discrimination are part of the foundations of the rule of law.” Through this, DCMUN ensures that its conference remain inclusive and respectful spaces where meaningful dialogue and collaboration can thrive.

To uphold this standard, DCMUN reserves the right to impose disciplinary measures on individuals who engage in behaviors including, but not limited to:

- Any form of speech, written work, language, communication, action, behaviour, or resolution that demeans, excludes, or harms individuals or groups based on nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other personal characteristics. This includes microaggressions, stereotyping, and any behavior that creates a hostile environment.
- Any unwanted sexual advances, comments, gestures, or actions, as well as other forms of harassment that create an unsafe or uncomfortable environment for others.
- Any form of speech, language, communication, written work, action, behavior, or resolution that perpetuates prejudice, stereotypes, or discrimination based on race or ethnicity. This includes but is not limited to racial slurs, offensive jokes, cultural appropriation, and behavior that marginalizes or undermines individuals or groups based on their racial or ethnic identity.
- Any form of speech, language, communication, written work, action, behaviour, or resolution that invalidates the experiences of individuals or groups, or trivializes or makes light of sensitive topics such as racism, sexual harassment, violence, war, genocide, or other forms of oppression and discrimination.
- Any other behavior deemed inappropriate by the members of the DCMUN Secretariat.

Disciplinary measures may include, but are not limited to, verbal warnings, disqualification from award consideration, or removal from the conference entirely. While this list is not exhaustive, it serves as a framework to ensure all participants uphold the highest standards of equity and respect. These guidelines reflect our commitment to creating a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all delegates, staff, and attendees throughout the duration of the conference.

Sincerely,  
Kenneth Clarence Oledan and Victoria Ormiston  
Directors of Equity



## INTRODUCTION

# An Introduction to Autonomous Weapon Systems

Autonomous weapons systems represent a significant advancement in military technology, one that progressively reminds the world of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the the 1960s. The recent use of AI in warfare raises ethical, legal, and security concerns that need urgent international attention. Delegates will debate balancing technological progress with humanitarian considerations and international law.



## INTRODUCTION

# Cuban Missile Crisis: A Case Study

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a unique and globally dangerous face-off between the United States of America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and was the closest the two global superpowers engaged in nuclear war. By the 1960s, the United States was on red alert: a communist threat to the East and a threat to the South - crystallised by the Cuban Revolution, a military communist coup that shook America.

In October 1962, an American U-2 spy plane photographed mass nuclear missile sites being built by the USSR in Cuba. President Kennedy, recognizing the advantage he had been presented with, deliberately concealed his discovery of the missiles in Cuba, understanding that keeping this secret would provide a significant strategic edge over the Soviet Union and Cuba. American forces decided upon a naval blockade (i.e., a ring of ships), which was dubbed a "quarantine" to surround Cuba, to prevent the Russians from continuing their military plans. Kennedy spoke to the nation in a televised address saying: "For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal"; a demand and plea for the Russians to remove their military supplies.

Uncertainty surrounded Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's response to the naval blockade and US demands, but both superpowers, aware of the catastrophic risk of nuclear war, reached a public agreement where the Soviets would dismantle the missile sites in return for a US pledge not to invade Cuba. Although the Soviets removed their missiles from Cuba, they intensified the expansion of their military arsenal, signalling that while the missile crisis had ended, the arms race continued.

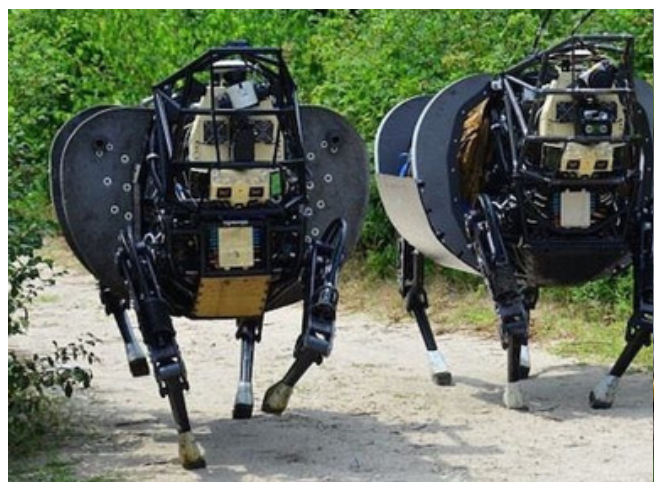


## INTRODUCTION

# Cuban Missile Crisis: A Case Study

Today, the arms race, though less publicised, is ongoing. Countries around the globe have reached a point where, if all nuclear weapons were deployed at once, the planet would be destroyed. In the past, nations understood: avoiding global annihilation was the one thing everyone could agree on. This silent agreement kept military development in check. Unfortunately, this accord was silently broken. Key arms control treaties have been suspended or abandoned, which exacerbates the risk of a renewed arms race. For example, Russia's suspension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in early 2023 indicates a shift away from cooperative disarmament efforts, highlighting a broader trend where nuclear deterrence is viewed as essential to national security.

With the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which stands as a groundbreaking technological achievement, nations around the world should be more concerned than ever. Whilst AI has the potential to propel humanity into an era of unparalleled innovation and connectivity, it has also introduced new challenges, notably in the realm of ethics and decision-making. AI teaches the machine, which learns, becomes smarter, and functions to help us. **How long until arms are no longer in our (i.e., human) arms?**



<sup>1a</sup> "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962," U.S. Department of State, accessed September 27, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>, para. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Cuban Missile Crisis," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/cuban-missile-crisis>, para. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., para. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., para. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., para. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., para. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., para. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., para. 4.

# The Ethical Conundrum of AI in Warfare

One of the most striking expressions of the increasing capabilities of computer technology is the impending future: when robots may soon be responsible for making decisions regarding the use of force, both in the context of armed conflict and in law enforcement, whether lethal or non-lethal. Human-replacing weapon systems initially emerged as armed drones and remote-controlled devices that enabled human operators to be physically absent from the battlefield, yet decisions to deploy force were still made by these human operatives, albeit from a distance. With weaponry gaining autonomy, we are approaching an era where human beings are allowed the choice to be both physically and psychologically absent; the victor would be based on who has the more advanced technology, as computers would be the ones to determine when, where, and against whom force is deployed.

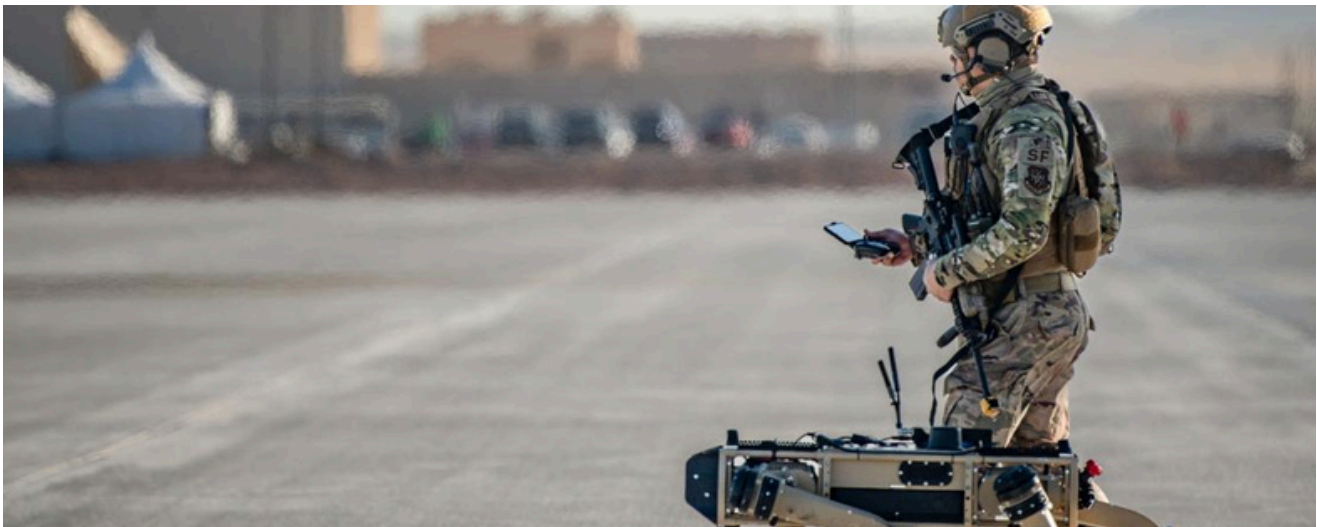
Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) are gauged and considered on their levels of autonomy. While some AWS operate at lower levels of autonomy (i.e., are closer to human control), some AWS will be able to operate at high levels of independence; these have since been dubbed “fully autonomous”. An example of low level of machine autonomy, which is clearly subordinate to human autonomy, would be the computer programs that suggest targets and angles of attack to drone operators. Conversely, there are weapons that effectively remove targeting decisions from human control, with full machine autonomy not yet deployed against human targets; however, we have reached a point where this possibility is becoming increasingly tangible.

As international security scholar Frank Sauer has observed, “There are serious doubts about the compliance of autonomous weapon systems with requirements of international humanitarian law, especially the distinction between civilians and combatants or the proportionate use of military force.” Additionally, the idea of transferring the essential human judgement required by law to a machine raises significant ethical concerns, irrespective of the machine's effectiveness. Ultimately, the fundamental principle of respecting human dignity suggests that machines should not be entrusted with making decisions that affect life and death.

# The Ethical Conundrum of AI in Warfare

## A Case Study: The Ultimate Cautionary Tale

Recognized for likely preventing a potential nuclear crisis, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov in 1983 “called into question” an alert from the Soviet early-warning system that indicated a US nuclear attack by choosing not to escalate the alert to his superiors. Petrov later clarified his decision, which ultimately proved accurate since the alert was indeed a false alarm. He noted that the Soviet warning system was newly implemented, that the limited number of US missiles reported did not align with the logic of a first strike, and that his intuition led him to question the validity of the alert. This example illustrates that human judgement involves the capacity to assess and integrate various nuanced contextual factors. The technology we have at our disposal at the moment should only be entrusted with very specific and defined tasks; “human-level decision-making competence as displayed by Petrov will not be reproducible in machines in the foreseeable future.”



<sup>9</sup>Jon Letman, “Are Nuclear-Armed Nations Entering a New Arms Race in 2024? Experts Weigh In,” Truthout, January 22, 2024, <https://truthout.org/articles/are-nuclear-armed-nations-entering-a-new-arms-race-in-2024-experts-weigh-in/>, para. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Nehal Bhuta, Susanne Beck, and Hin-Yan Liu, eds., *Autonomous Weapons Systems: Law, Ethics, Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>16</sup>Frank Sauer, “Military Applications of Artificial Intelligence: Nuclear Risk Redux,” in *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk: Volume I Euro-Atlantic Perspectives*, ed. Vincent Boulamin (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24525.16>, 87.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 88.

# Types of Autonomous Weapons: Proliferation and Flaws

The collective understanding of what constitutes an Autonomous Weapons System is still debated; which hinders the process of addressing the dangers posed by these weapons internationally. The International Committee of the Red Cross defines them as “any weapons that select and apply force to targets without human intervention.” (21) However, these weapons are not always devoid of any and all human involvement: oftentimes, this involvement varies from one device to the next. Autonomous Weapons Systems should also be distinguished from automated weapons, like rudimentary landmines or trip-wire sentry guns. In contrast to these purely reactive systems, Autonomous Weapons Systems gather and process data from their environment to reach independent conclusions about how to act.

During the Second World War, the US military introduced the first Automated Weapons Systems. These weapons were still semi-autonomous and were not able to complete their tasks without human control (22). Eventually, the development of artificial intelligence led to the increasing autonomy of Automated Weapons Systems, enabling the emergence of Autonomous Weapons Systems.

In the case of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), they can be guided either independently or by remote control. Some UAVs require the permission from their human controller before conducting an attack. Others rely exclusively on sensors and software to autonomously fire and drop munitions (23). Currently, smaller drones (such as those used for recreational purposes) have been put to use in military settings, making up for countries’ lack of resources or technological prowess (24).

<sup>21</sup> Neil Davison, “What You Need to Know About Autonomous Weapons,” June 26, 2022, International Committee of the Red Cross, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-you-need-know-about-autonomous-weapons>

<sup>22</sup> Robert O. Work, “A Short History of Weapons Systems with Autonomous Functionalities,” in *Principles for the Combat Employment of Weapon Systems with Autonomous Functionalities* (Center for a New American Security, April 1, 2021), 5–7, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep321464>.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Sauer and Niklas Schörnig, “Killer Drones: The ‘Silver-Bullet’ of Democratic Warfare?” *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2012): 363–380, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010612450207>.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Schumann, “Fact Sheet: Autonomous Weapons,” *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, November 15, 2023, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-autonomous-weapons/>.

# Types of Autonomous Weapons: Proliferation and Flaws

Similarly to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, Loitering Munitions, commonly referred to as “suicide-drones”, involve little to no human guidance. Once the device is launched, it possesses a degree of self-governance that allows it to perform the attack sequence on its own. Basically, it will loiter and track down for hours to stealthily descend and explode once a target has been identified.

Both of these examples are used in combat for similar or even identical purposes: intelligence operations, decoying, surveilling or delivering explosive attacks. The main reason for their use becoming so widespread is efficiency. Essentially, drones, and other automated weapons, are “generally cheaper and easier to produce than other highly technical and intensive means of delivery, and do not require extensive training or dedicated personnel to operate. (25)”

Unlike a soldier, an Automated Weapons System can process vast amounts of quantitative data in a fraction of the time it would require the soldier to compute that same amount of information. Nevertheless, even with AI systems being incorporated in UAV and Loitering Munition softwares, these machines still lack in the realm of qualitative analysis: reading body-language, determining whether a group of individuals carrying weapons are civilians or military adversaries, deciding whether a vehicle serves a military or a civilian purpose (26)...

Furthermore, AI augmented weapons have a direct impact on receding levels of human control. These programs are developed by hundreds of computer scientists writing millions of lines of code, meaning that not a single developer can predict with certainty the effect of any given command. These flaws in training data lead to issues such as algorithmic bias and unpredictability (27).

**And such issues lead to deadly consequences.**

<sup>25</sup> Ingvild Bode and Hendrik Huelss, “Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 393–413, Cambridge University Press, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/autonomous-weapons-systems-and-changing-norms-in-international-relations/8E8CC29419AF2EF403EA02ACACFCF223>.

<sup>26</sup> Dominika Kunertova, “Drones Have Boots: Learning from Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 576–591, Taylor and Francis Online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2262792>.

<sup>27</sup> David P. Copeland, “The Article 36 Weapons Review of Autonomous Weapon Systems,” *Australian National University College of Law*, June 4, 2023, OpenResearch Repository, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/53fef9f5-26fb-4e89-a060-52ecc501eeaf/content>.

# Existing Laws, Infrastructure, and Weaknesses in the Current System

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is a set of rules that seek to mitigate the effects of armed conflicts. Its key principles are military necessity, proportionality, distinction and humanity (28). The current status of IHL is the result of constant evolution and reform that started at the first adoption of the Geneva Convention (1864). The Convention works collaboratively with the agreed understanding of IHL to outline the rules and norms countries engaging in warfare must abide by. Additionally, since 2014, member-states to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) have strived to regulate the rising threat of Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS).

However, there is yet to be any specific legal framework that either restricts or prohibits the usage of autonomous weapons systems in combat. This is not to say that autonomous weapons systems are completely unregulated: Additional Protocol 1, article 36 of the Geneva Convention stipulates that, "In the study, development, acquisition or adoption of a new weapon, means or method of warfare, a High Contracting Party is under an obligation to determine whether its employment would, in some or all circumstances, be prohibited by this Protocol or by any other rule of international law applicable to the High Contracting Party (29)." This requires that states put in place a parliamentary or third party review system that'll ensure any new autonomous weapons system's legality and ethical standing. Although this process can keep technological military development in check, Article 36 poses some major equity concerns. Some countries may not have the "technical expertise" nor the resources to put such a system in place and properly comply with their legal requirements.



<sup>28</sup> Ibid., para. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., para. 16.



# Existing Laws, Infrastructure, and Weaknesses in the Current System

Furthermore, autonomous weapons systems with incorporated AI complicate the task of determining the lawfulness of these weapons, “The traditional weapons review process relies on a presumption that the human weapon operator, who is legally responsible for his or her actions in armed conflict, will use a lawful weapon lawfully. However, this presumption is not possible where algorithms and artificial intelligence (‘AI’) replace or inform human decisions (30).” Therefore, the existing review process of automated weapons systems is not yet a comprehensive and ethical legal framework that is successful in limiting their proliferation and accounting for their constant evolution.

If an autonomous military submarine accidentally sinks a cruise ship, who would be legally liable for the mistake? Would it be the machine operator? Would it be the operator’s superior? Would it be the weapon’s manufacturer? Would it be the machine itself? **Who is accountable for the acts of Autonomous Weapons Systems in combat?**

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., para. 16.



# Questions to consider

- What ethical frameworks should guide the development and deployment of autonomous weapons systems to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law?
- How can we balance the advancement of military technology, such as AI and autonomous weapons, with the need to protect civilian lives and uphold human dignity?
- In what ways can the international community strengthen arms control treaties to prevent a new arms race, especially in light of recent suspensions of key agreements like the New START treaty?
- What mechanisms can be implemented to ensure human oversight in the decision-making processes of autonomous weapons systems, particularly regarding lethal force?
- How can lessons learned from historical events, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the actions of Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov, inform our approach to modern military ethics and technology?
- What role should international organisations play in regulating the development and use of AI in warfare to ensure that nations prioritise humanitarian considerations over technological advancements?
- What legal frameworks can be implemented to assure accountability for Automated Weapons Systems' actions during combat?
- How can existing legal frameworks be amended to fit a more inclusive model for regulation?
- How can the UN encourage countries' compliance with existing international regulations?

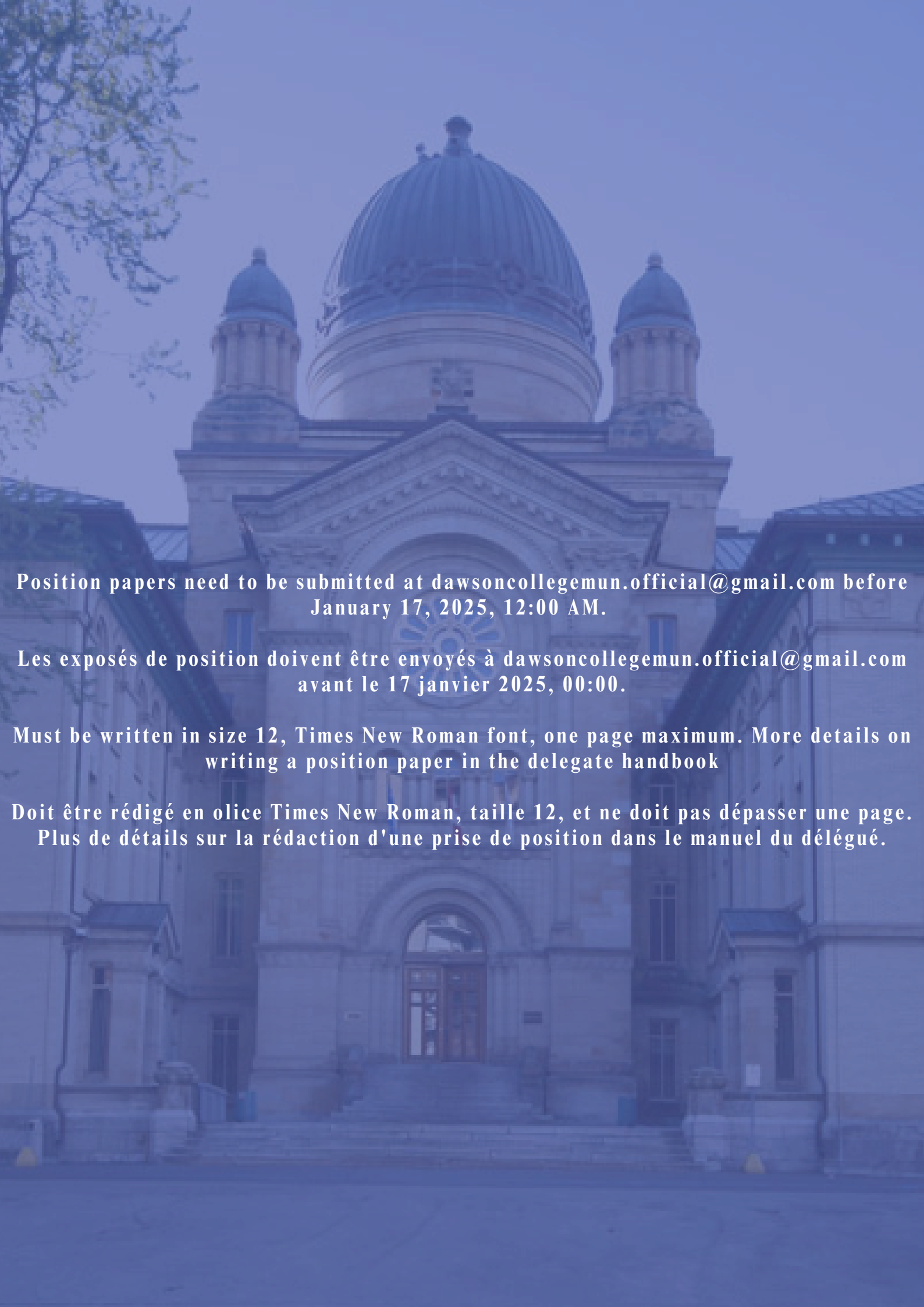
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**Position papers need to be submitted at [dawsoncollegemun.official@gmail.com](mailto:dawsoncollegemun.official@gmail.com) before January 17, 2025, 12:00 AM.**

**Les exposés de position doivent être envoyés à [dawsoncollegemun.official@gmail.com](mailto:dawsoncollegemun.official@gmail.com) avant le 17 janvier 2025, 00:00.**

**Must be written in size 12, Times New Roman font, one page maximum. More details on writing a position paper in the delegate handbook**

**Doit être rédigé en olice Times New Roman, taille 12, et ne doit pas dépasser une page. Plus de détails sur la rédaction d'une prise de position dans le manuel du délégué.**