

Will the current diplomatic divergence between states advocating for new binding treaties versus those relying on existing international humanitarian law create a patchwork of operational standards that destabilizes conflict dynamics, or will strategic competition naturally drive convergence toward standardized autonomous warfare doctrines across major powers?

October 3, 2026 | SnugLab Research

Executive Summary

The evidence suggests that strategic competition among major powers will naturally drive convergence toward standardized autonomous warfare doctrines, largely overriding diplomatic divergence over new binding treaties. While a significant number of states advocate for new legal instruments to ensure meaningful human control, the imperative of military dominance and the decisive advantages of machine-speed decision-making compel major powers like the U.S., China, and Russia to adopt similar technical and operational standards. This competitive emulation will likely define operational predictability and conflict dynamics more than formal legal fragmentation.

Key Findings

Diplomatic Divergence and Legal Fragmentation Persist

A significant diplomatic divergence exists regarding the regulation of autonomous weapon systems (AWS). Over 120 countries have endorsed a new international treaty on AWS emphasizing "meaningful human control" (MHC) [2]. These states, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs, argue that existing International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is insufficient for AWS due to algorithmic unpredictability and accountability gaps [2, 6]. They advocate for strict MHC thresholds to prohibit fully autonomous lethal systems [2, 6].

In contrast, major military powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, resist new binding international restrictions. They assert that existing IHL is sufficient if AWS

comply with established principles, preferring voluntary national guidelines over multilateral constraints [2, 5, 6]. This diplomatic split introduces uncertainty regarding the legality and accountability of autonomous actions across different state blocs, creating a risk of a destabilizing patchwork of international operational standards [2, 5, 6].

Strategic Competition Drives De Facto Doctrinal and Operational Convergence

Despite diplomatic fragmentation, strategic competition is a more powerful force compelling major powers toward de facto standardized autonomous warfare doctrines. Great power rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia is accelerating the development and integration of autonomous systems into core military strategies [3, 13, 15]. The decisive military advantages of AWS, such as machine-speed decision-making that outpaces human cognition, reduced troop exposure, and enhanced precision, are central to modern conflict [2, 6].

To secure "technological and military dominance," major powers are rapidly integrating autonomous capabilities into their core doctrines [10, 12]. The U.S. established the Autonomous Warfare Command (AutoWarCom) on September 30, 2026, to fuse procurement with operations at scale, with a four-star commander slated to take command by October 1, 2027 [1, 10]. This initiative, alongside emerging frameworks like the "Convergence Doctrine," emphasizes decentralized, AI-enhanced command structures where strategic necessity dictates technological implementation [13]. Similarly, China's People's Liberation Army prioritizes "informatized and intelligentized warfare," and Russia pursues integrated domain warfare [13]. This competitive dynamic naturally drives these powers toward similar operational behaviors and doctrines to ensure parity or superiority [13, 14].

Operational Standards are Defined by Technical Performance, Not Legal Thresholds

Operational standards in autonomous warfare are practically defined by interoperable technical performance and algorithmic decision-making speeds that states adopt for military advantage, rather than by unified legal thresholds of meaningful human control [2, 6]. While MHC serves as a central legal threshold for states advocating new treaties, it has not dictated actual battlefield operations [2, 6]. Instead, military superiority depends on information advantage and rapid kill-chain compression, compelling major powers to

converge on standardized operational standards based on shared technical behaviors and machine-speed interoperability [2, 5, 6, 13, 14].

The research does not identify specific millisecond thresholds for algorithmic decision-making speeds publicly adopted by major powers. However, it emphasizes that autonomous systems offer a decisive advantage by enabling "machine-speed decision-making" that outpaces human cognition and traditional command chains [12]. Operational predictability emerges from these shared technical behaviors and algorithmic efficiency, rather than from harmonized diplomatic agreements [13, 14].

Historical Precedent for Doctrinal Convergence Through Competitive Emulation

The historical track record of high-tech weapons adoption reveals that military necessity compels convergence through competitive emulation, overriding diplomatic fragmentation.

- **Cold War Nuclear Arms Race:** The rapid nuclear development between the United States and the Soviet Union, including the symmetrical adoption of atomic and hydrogen bombs, led to the shared strategic doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) [16, 17]. This demonstrated how rivals mirror each other's capabilities and converge on shared doctrinal understandings [17].
- **NATO's 1999 Intervention in Serbia:** NATO's use of aircraft and missiles against Serbia prompted a major revision of Russia's National Security Concept and Military Doctrine in April 2000 [18]. This reactive adaptation demonstrated how a rival alliance's operational actions can force doctrinal convergence [18].
- **Modern Operational Concepts:** Contemporary strategic competition has driven a broader convergence in operational concepts among the U.S., Russia, and China. All three nations view future conflict as a system confrontation, emphasize the immediate pre-war period, blur the boundary between peace and war through gray zone tactics, and stress deep multi-domain attacks involving kinetic, electronic, and cyber capabilities [19].

Real-World Conflicts Demonstrate Impact on Battlefield Decisions

Recent conflicts and multinational operations have shown that diplomatic divergence over autonomous weapon standards materially alters battlefield command decisions, rules of engagement (ROE), and targeting algorithms in practice.

- **Operation EPIC FURY (Iran War, February-March 2026):** The U.S. and Israel deployed the Maven Smart System, integrating Anthropic's Claude AI model, which accelerated target processing from under 100 per day to up to 1,000 per day, compressing the kill chain from days to seconds [8, 11, 21]. A U.S. Tomahawk missile struck an Iranian elementary school due to outdated intelligence processed at machine speed before human verification could catch it, exposing the diplomatic lack of standardized testing and certification for AI targeting [8, 9, 11].
- **Russia-Ukraine Conflict (Since 2022):** Ukraine's Delta system fused multi-source intelligence to reduce the kill chain from 72 hours to 2 minutes [22]. The U.S. also had to rapidly retrain Maven algorithms when they failed to recognize Russian tanks in snow, illustrating how operational needs drove algorithmic adaptation outside formal international standards [21].
- **Israel-Gaza Conflict (Since October 2023):** The IDF deployed the Lavender AI targeting program to rapidly identify tens of thousands of individuals, raising significant concerns regarding IHL principles of distinction and proportionality [22]. This operational use intensified the diplomatic debate over "meaningful human control," a concept championed by the ICRC but rejected by flexible U.S. policy [3, 10, 12].
- **NATO Multinational Operations:** Diplomatic divergence directly impacted coalition command decisions. While NATO achieved "engineering interoperability," it struggled with "authority interoperability" due to differing national thresholds for human control [20]. For example, Germany's coalition agreement rejects lethal autonomous systems without human control, whereas U.S. policy permits them with "appropriate levels of human judgment" [1, 6, 10]. This creates a risk where one ally's permissive threshold could commit the entire coalition to consequences its more cautious members never authorized [20].

Minor Powers Maintain Distinct Standards, Creating Vulnerabilities

While major powers converge, some minor or non-major power states deviate by maintaining distinct operational standards based on their diplomatic treaty positions. Over 120 countries advocate for new binding treaties emphasizing "meaningful human control" [2]. In contrast, a minority of states, including India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Israel, rely on existing IHL and voluntary constraints [2, 5, 6]. This creates accountability gaps and oversight vulnerabilities in conflict zones, as the lack of harmonized legal accountability mechanisms means adversaries cannot reliably anticipate rules of engagement [13].

Implications

The findings indicate that the structural stability of high-tempo conflicts will be increasingly determined by technical performance and algorithmic decision-making speeds, rather than unified legal thresholds. The accelerating development of autonomous weapon systems compels major powers to adopt interoperable, machine-speed decision cycles to maintain parity or superiority, compressing diplomatic warning times and enabling machine-to-machine decision cycles that often bypass deliberate human intervention [2, 7, 10]. This integration of AI shifts humans from active evaluators to procedural approvers, increasing the risk of unintended escalation due to algorithmic brittleness and expanded cyberattack surfaces [1, 2, 4, 7]. Consequently, mutual predictability in autonomous conflict will rely on shared technical interoperability and algorithmic optimization driven by strategic competition, rather than harmonized legal frameworks.

Limitations and Caveats

The report's conclusions are based on a moderate level of confidence, as the topic involves future predictions and the interplay of complex forces. While the evidence strongly favors competition-driven convergence, the full extent and timeline of this de facto standardization remain subject to ongoing technological development and geopolitical shifts. Specific machine-speed thresholds for algorithmic decision-making were not identified in the research, limiting the ability to quantify the exact pace of operational convergence. Furthermore, while real-world conflicts demonstrate the impact of diplomatic divergence on battlefield decisions, the long-term destabilizing effects of a patchwork of standards, particularly among non-major powers, require continued monitoring.

Sources

- [1] [gov] Secretary Hegseth Announces Six Major Initiatives At Quantico - war.gov - <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4615424/secretary-hegseth-announces-six-major-initiatives-at-quantico-speech/>
- [2] [edu] Legal Accountability Ai Driven Autonomous Weapons - lieber.westpoint.edu - <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/legal-accountability-ai-driven-autonomous-weapons/>
- [3] [edu] Strategic Competition For Emerging Military Technologies Com - ndupress.ndu.edu - <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2053499/strategic-competition-for-emerging-military-technologies-comparative-paths-and/>
- [4] [edu] Viewcontent.Cgi - digital-commons.usnwc.edu - <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=ils>

- [5] Diplomatic Debate Over Autonomous Weapons Heats - armscontrol.org - <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-04/news/diplomatic-debate-over-autonomous-weapons-heats>
- [6] Considering A Legally Binding Instrument On Autonomous Weapo - lawfaremedia.org - <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/considering-a-legally-binding-instrument-on-autonomous-weapons>
- [7] Autonomous Weapon Systems And International Humanitarian Law - harvardnsj.org - <https://harvardnsj.org/2013/02/05/autonomous-weapon-systems-and-international-humanitarian-law-a-reply-to-the-critics/>
- [8] Navigating Humanitarian Law In The Age Of Autonomy - unidir.org - <https://unidir.org/navigating-humanitarian-law-in-the-age-of-autonomy/>
- [9] [gov] ViewDetails.aspx - treaties.un.org - https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=26&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=XXVI-2&src=TREATY
- [10] Hegseth Announces Autonomous Warfare Command - defensescoop.com - <https://defensescoop.com/2026/09/30/hegseth-announces-autonomous-warfare-command/>
- [11] [peer-reviewed] Article - academic.oup.com - AUTHORS UNAVAILABLE - <https://academic.oup.com/jcsl/article/27/1/1/6513626>
- [12] International Humanitarian Law And Lethal Autonomous Weapon - cms.polsci.ku.dk - https://cms.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/folkeretten-og-doebringende-autonome-vaabensystemer/International_Humanitarian_Law_and_Lethal_Autonomous_Weapon_Systems.pdf
- [13] The Convergence Doctrine Shattering The Battlefield Paradigm - genesysdefense.com - <https://genesysdefense.com/intl/the-convergence-doctrine-shattering-the-battlefield-paradigm/>
- [14] [peer-reviewed] Full - tandfonline.com - AUTHORS UNAVAILABLE - <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13876988.2025.2529277>
- [15] [peer-reviewed] 403017949 AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS SYSTEMS IN GREAT POWER COMPETIT - researchgate.net - AUTHORS UNAVAILABLE - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/403017949_AUTONOMOUS_WEAPONS_SYSTEMS_IN_GREAT_POWER_COMPETITION_A_COMPARATIVE_ANALYSIS_OF_UNITED_STATES_AND_CHINA_DEVELOPMENT_TRAJECTORIES_2020-2026
- [16] [gov] Pubs - 2001-2009.state.gov - <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/85895.htm>
- [17] [edu] Viewcontent.Cgi - cupola.gettysburg.edu - https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer&httpsredir=1&article=1542&context=student_scholarship
- [18] [edu] Armsracesymmetry - ondisc.nd.edu - <https://ondisc.nd.edu/assets/637101/armsracesymmetry.pdf>
- [19] Rethinking Nuclear Transparency A European Model For Engagin - thebulletin.org - <https://thebulletin.org/2026/06/rethinking-nuclear-transparency-a-european-model-for-engaging-china/>
- [20] Capt KS Vikramaditya AI Paper 02 Apr 26 Ed 05 Apr 26 - maritimeindia.org - <https://maritimeindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Capt-KS-Vikramaditya-AI-Paper-02-Apr-26-Ed-05-Apr-26.pdf>
- [21] [peer-reviewed] Full - onlinelibrary.wiley.com - AUTHORS UNAVAILABLE - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1758-5899.70117>
- [22] Project Maven Military Ai Katrina Manson - theverge.com - <https://www.theverge.com/ai-artificial-intelligence/917996/project-maven-military-ai-katrina-manson>