

## Human Control and Autonomous Weapons: Interview with Marcel Dickow



Marcel Dickow is the head of the Project International Panel on the Regulation of Autonomous Weapons (iPRAW) at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik / the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). His research covers: technological topics in the field of security and defence policy as well as related policy areas, robotics and autonomous systems, space and cyber policy and technology.

The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) covers a wide range of security issues. What are the Institute's main research initiatives in the field of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament?

The Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) is focusing on various topics in the field of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Beside the challenges arising from weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and especially the use of chemical weapons in Syria, we address questions related to nuclear stability, conventional arms control in Europe, missile defence and emerging technologies. The break-down of parts of the international order, particularly with regard to arms limitations and reductions regimes such as the INF treaty, the stalemate in the CFE realm and the future of the NewSTART agreement threaten international stability and drives new global and regional arms dynamics. SWP concentrates specifically on new weapons technologies in the domain of cyber, hyper-sonic and lethal autonomous weapon systems. Our research investigates not only the technological foundations but also the challenges to international law, in particular international humanitarian law.

SWP has recently published a working paper on "[Verifying lethal autonomous weapon systems \(LAWS\) Regulations](#)". What are the main challenges to verify human control and what are the prospects for a binding international regulation of LAWS?

The scientific community agrees on the importance of human control over weapon systems with autonomous functions as the main concept of a regulative approach in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). Yet, neither these autonomous functions in the critical steps of the targeting process (i.e. the selection of and engagement with targets), nor the exertion of human control during the use of force can be observed from the outside. Thus, verifying autonomous

functions in a weapon system cannot be done without deep understanding of the system's technology and design, which conflicts with the interest to maintain a certain level of military secrecy. Even if it could be verified that a system is designed to enable and enforce human control in use, particularly in the critical functions, it is not guaranteed that it will be exerted during the actual operation. The difficulties to verify human control in the use of such weapon systems is one of the obstacles on the way to a legally binding agreement regulating LAWS. Nevertheless, arms control regimes can work without verification by setting the norm for compliant behaviour. Obviously not all CCW High Contracting Parties, particularly P5 countries, have an interest in a legally binding regulation to safeguard human control as they fear restrictions in future military capabilities.

In your view, how can the European Union contribute to the efforts to regulate the use of autonomous weapons?

The European Union has already contributed to the CCW process with statements during the official Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) meetings. In addition, the draft version of the EU defence fund regulation defines LAWS as weapons without "meaningful human control" in the use of lethal force. This quasi-definition needs to be substantiated and should be transferred into a common position of all EU member states. The EU has put standards and norms in place on various topics such as privacy and ethical use of AI. Its normative power and market share are contributing to the projection of those norms. The CCW process would be significantly stimulated by an EU common position on the type and implementation of human control over the use of force. At the same time, such a position would facilitate clear guidelines for research and development and for arms exports by the European defence industry.

### The Iran Conundrum and the EU

The crisis over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) triggered by the US withdrawal from the agreement represents a litmus test for the credibility of European foreign policy. The EU has refused to join the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran, but has also criticised Iran's decision to scale back its commitments under the deal.

The JCPOA places significant constraints on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions. As such, its entry into force represented a commendable effort to preserve the non-proliferation regime. However, in May 2019, one-year after the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the US's unilateral re-imposition of sanctions, Iran began to diminish its compliance with JCPOA provisions. Its [recent announcement](#) in January 2020 that it would no longer put a cap on uranium enrichment added further strain to an already weakened deal. In response, France, Germany and the UK (the E3) triggered the [dispute settlement mechanism](#) envisaged under the agreement. This instrument, which gathers all state parties to the JCPOA, was established in the event that a party was perceived to violate its provisions. Eventually, if the E3 are not satisfied with Iran's compliance, they could decide to refer the issue to the UN Security Council.

Iran has [warned](#) that if the issue is brought to the Security Council, which could lead to a snapback of international sanctions, it would immediately withdraw from both the JCPOA and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This scenario, however, is not imminent as the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell has [announced](#) a timeline extension of the first phase of the dispute mechanism. This effectively puts the countdown on hold to encourage constructive diplomatic efforts aimed at reinvigorating the deal.

As the EU navigates between US pressures to abandon the deal and its multilateral non-proliferation agenda, domestic politics in Iran indicate a further [strengthening](#) of hard-line agendas within the country, as Iran's more moderate factions have been hard hit by the economic and political fallout from the US's withdrawal.

The EU should not become hostage to the twists and turns of US foreign policy. As emphasized by Borrell during the Munich Security Conference, the Union should instead continue to pursue its own diplomatic strategy aimed at de-escalating regional tensions and paving the way to renewed dialogue between all major actors.

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## EU INSTITUTIONAL NEWS

### The EU delivers opening statement at the Conference on Disarmament

On 21 January 2020, during the first session of the Conference on Disarmament (CD), the European Union delivered an opening statement reiterating its support for the Conference and its full commitment towards multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament processes.

While reaffirming that the CD is of “utmost importance” being the “world’s single multilateral disarmament negotiating body”, the statement stressed the need for a more pragmatic approach with respect to the rules of procedure as a way to address the Conference’s stalemate. The EU also noted that one of the Conference’s highest priorities should be to initiate negotiations on a [Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty](#), calling upon Nuclear Weapon States to “declare and uphold an immediate moratorium on their production of fissile material”. The EU furthermore reiterated its support for the enlargement of the CD, arguing that the expansion of membership is “long overdue”.

The statement was also an opportunity to reinforce the EU’s support for the three pillars of the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), in view of the 2020 Review Conference. Particularly on nuclear disarmament, the EU reaffirmed the “need for concrete progress towards the full implementation of Article VI”. The EU also called upon Annex-II states to sign and ratify the [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](#). The preservation of the [New START Treaty](#) and the creation of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East were also mentioned as priority.

Expressing concern over the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran’s latest steps to reduce its nuclear commitments and the repeated ballistic missile tests by North Korea, the EU stated that it would “continue to address all proliferation crises in a resolute way”. Finally, the EU once again emphasized the need to achieve equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, including in disarmament fora, and to engage younger generations and civil society in the CD.

For more information:

[EU Opening Statement at the Conference of Disarmament](#)

## NETWORK NEWS

### Call on European Think Tanks to offer EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Internships

The EU Non-proliferation and Disarmament Consortium will support 36 Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Internships between 2018 and 2021, as mandated in [COUNCIL DECISION 2018/299](#).

All members of the EUNPD Network are eligible to host interns. For each internship the host institute will be granted a fee for the supervision of the intern. The EU Non-Proliferation Consortium can provide limited subsidies (500 € / month) for a limited number of students for the duration of the internship.

Host institutes for the EUNPD Internship must meet the following requirements:

- ✓ Membership in the European network of independent Non-Proliferation and Disarmament think tanks
- ✓ Availability of office space/working place for intern
- ✓ At least one expert specialized in non-proliferation or disarmament affairs and corresponding EU policies
- ✓ At least one expert must have teaching/tutoring experience and serve as the general supervisor

For further details, please contact Sophia Wenzel from the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF): [wenzel@hsfk.de](mailto:wenzel@hsfk.de)

Please note this call is not directed at students, but to research institutes and think tanks