

FROM STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY TO STRATEGIC NORM-SHAPING: CHINA AND AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS

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ABSTRAK

Kata Kunci:

Ambiguitas strategis
Pembentukan norma strategis
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Tiongkok
Kontestasi norma

Perkembangan sistem senjata otonom telah menimbulkan kekhawatiran kemanusiaan, hukum, dan strategis yang semakin besar, sementara upaya pembentukan regulasi internasional masih menghadapi perbedaan kepentingan antarnegara. Tiongkok menempati posisi yang khas karena mendukung pembatasan senjata otonom, tetapi pada saat yang sama tetap mengembangkan kecerdasan artifisial militer dan kemampuan otonom. Artikel ini menganalisis bagaimana dan mengapa ambiguitas strategis Tiongkok berkembang menjadi strategi pembentukan norma pada periode 2022–2025. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif dengan menggabungkan process tracing dan analisis isi interpretatif. Data penelitian mencakup position paper Tiongkok, pernyataan resmi di Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa, dokumen yang disampaikan kepada laporan PBB, resolusi Majelis Umum, catatan pemungutan suara dan sponsorship, serta dokumen kebijakan mengenai AI militer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Tiongkok semakin aktif memengaruhi definisi, kategori regulasi, persyaratan negosiasi, dan prosedur institusional. Tiongkok menerima prinsip umum seperti tanggung-jawab dan kepatuhan manusia terhadap hukum humaniter internasional, tetapi memperdebatkan penerapannya. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa ambiguitas substantif Tiongkok telah berkembang menjadi ambiguitas strategis prosedural. Strategi ini memungkinkan Tiongkok mendukung regulasi internasional sambil mempertahankan fleksibilitas teknologi militer dan memengaruhi pembentukan kerangka tata kelola yang sedang berkembang.

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Autonomous weapons
China
Norm contestation
Strategic ambiguity
Strategic norm-shaping

The development of autonomous weapon systems has created growing humanitarian, legal, and strategic concerns, yet international regulation remains contested. China occupies a distinctive position in this debate because it supports restrictions on autonomous weapons while continuing to develop military artificial intelligence and autonomous capabilities. This article examines how and why China's strategic ambiguity evolved into strategic norm-shaping between 2022 and 2025. It employs a qualitative case-study approach combining process tracing and interpretive content analysis. The study analyses Chinese position papers, official statements at the United Nations, submissions to UN reports, General Assembly resolutions, voting and sponsorship records, and policy documents on military AI. The findings show that China has become more active in shaping definitions, regulatory categories, negotiation conditions, and institutional procedures. China accepts broad principles such as human responsibility and compliance with international humanitarian law, but contests how these principles should be applied. It rejects a blanket prohibition, distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable systems, and supports a legally binding instrument only under specific procedural conditions. The article concludes that China's earlier substantive ambiguity has evolved into procedural strategic ambiguity. This enables China to participate in international regulation while preserving military-technological flexibility and influencing the emerging governance framework.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly important in military systems, including surveillance, target recognition, decision support and autonomous control. Autonomous weapon systems (AWS) can identify, select and engage targets with limited human intervention, creating new questions about the role of human judgment in the use of force (Pramudia, 2022).

Their development has generated humanitarian, legal and ethical concerns. Autonomous systems may face difficulties in applying the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, especially in complex operational environments. Questions also arise over responsibility when an autonomous system causes unlawful harm, including whether accountability should rest with commanders, operators, developers or the state (Spadaro, 2023). Ethical debates additionally question whether decisions involving human life should be delegated to machines (Amoroso and Tamburrini, 2021).

Meaningful human control has therefore become central to international discussion. However, there is still no agreement on what such control requires. States and scholars differ on whether humans must approve each attack, supervise the wider mission or merely retain the

ability to intervene. Although meaningful human control offers common language for regulation, it has not yet produced a common operational standard (Williams, 2021). Despite continued discussion under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCCW), no universally accepted legally binding instrument specifically regulates autonomous weapons. States remain divided between those supporting prohibition, those favouring limited regulation and those arguing that existing international humanitarian law is sufficient (Sauer, 2020; Bode et al., 2023). The issue has also expanded beyond technical and legal discussion into broader international politics, including military competition, arms racing and the governance of emerging technologies.

China has maintained a distinctive position in this debate. It has acknowledged the humanitarian and legal risks of autonomous weapons and supported international restrictions. At the same time, it has resisted measures that would prevent research, development and production. Pramudia (2022) describes this position as strategic ambiguity, in which China supported restrictions on the use of certain autonomous weapons while continuing to develop military AI and autonomous capabilities. This ambiguity allowed China to maintain its image as a responsible rising power while protecting technologies considered important for military modernisation and great-power competition.

Recent studies also show that China's position cannot be classified simply as support for or opposition to AWS. China supports regulation but applies a narrow understanding of the systems that should be prohibited, allowing it to preserve broader military uses of artificial intelligence (Bode et al., 2023; Qiao-Franco and Bode, 2023).

After 2022, China's position became more specific. Rather than only expressing general humanitarian concerns, China increasingly addressed the definitions, categories, scope and institutional process of regulation. China supports prohibiting certain unacceptable AWS but rejects a blanket prohibition. It also distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable systems, supports risk-control measures and maintains that negotiations should continue within the CCCW. At the same time, China continues to protect military-AI research and development.

This suggests that China is no longer merely defending an ambiguous position. It is increasingly attempting to shape the form of international regulation. The central puzzle is

therefore: *What kind of regulation does China support, and how does China attempt to shape that regulation?*. Existing studies largely focus on the legality of AWS, accountability, meaningful human control, military capabilities and the difficulties of international negotiation (Spadaro, 2023). Other studies examine China's military-AI ambitions and the contradiction between its support for regulation and its continued technological development (Bode et al., 2023). However, less attention has been given to how China simultaneously; (1) accepts the general need for regulation; (2) contests the meaning and scope of regulation; (3) influences the procedure through which rules are created; and (4) preserves space for military innovation.

Describing China only as strategically ambiguous may therefore be insufficient. Its recent behaviour indicates a more active effort to influence definitions, regulatory categories, negotiation conditions and institutional forums. This article therefore tries to uncover how and why has China's strategic ambiguity on autonomous weapons evolved into strategic norm-shaping between 2022 and 2025?

This article argues that China's strategic ambiguity has not disappeared. Instead, it has evolved from substantive ambiguity concerning the use and development of AWS into procedural ambiguity concerning definitions, categories, negotiation conditions and institutional forums. Through this strategy, China can support international regulation while influencing its scope and preserving military-technological flexibility. China's position is therefore better understood as strategic norm-shaping rather than complete norm acceptance or simple resistance.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This article employs a qualitative case-study approach combining process tracing and interpretive content analysis to examine the evolution of China's diplomatic position on autonomous-weapons governance. The study focuses on the period from 2022 to 2025, while developments between 2016 and 2021 are used only as a historical baseline drawn from the author's earlier research on China's strategic ambiguity. Process tracing is used to identify changes and continuities in China's position across different stages of international negotiations, while interpretive content analysis is applied to examine how China frames

regulation, human control, acceptable and unacceptable weapon systems, negotiation conditions and institutional preferences.

The primary data consist of China's position papers submitted under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, official Chinese statements at the UN First Committee, Chinese submissions to United Nations reports, UN General Assembly resolutions, voting and sponsorship records, and official Chinese policy documents on artificial intelligence and military modernisation. These sources are compared across time to assess whether changes in diplomatic language are also reflected in China's formal behaviour. Secondary data are drawn mainly from verified peer-reviewed journal articles published within the period required by the journal, particularly studies on autonomous-weapons governance, strategic ambiguity, norm contestation, military artificial intelligence and China's defence modernisation.

This article develops an integrated framework connecting strategic ambiguity, norm contestation and strategic norm-shaping. Strategic ambiguity explains how states preserve flexibility when facing competing interests, while norm contestation explains how they may accept a general normative principle but dispute its meaning and application. Building on these concepts, this article proposes strategic norm-shaping to explain how a state participates in the development of an emerging norm while attempting to ensure that the resulting rules remain compatible with its interests. The technologically innovative imperative is treated as the structural condition that motivates China to protect its military-AI development.

First is strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity refers to the deliberate use of unclear, conditional or apparently contradictory positions to preserve flexibility and reduce the risks associated with a firm commitment (Pramudia, 2022). Ambiguity should therefore be distinguished from confusion or the absence of policy. When used strategically, it creates several plausible interpretations of an actor's intentions and allows the actor to pursue political objectives without fully revealing its preferred outcome. Ambiguity can be particularly useful under conditions of great-power competition because it reduces exposure to direct opposition, delays countermeasures and preserves room for adjustment (Mumford and Carlucci, 2023).

China's earlier position on AWS represented what this article calls substantive strategic ambiguity. China supported international restrictions and raised humanitarian concerns about AWS, but it limited its support primarily to prohibiting their use. At the same time, China continued to develop and produce autonomous military technologies as part of its military modernisation. This allowed China to maintain its claim of being a responsible and peaceful rising power while protecting its technological interests and ambitions in military artificial intelligence (Pramudia, 2022). Qiao-Franco and Bode (2023) similarly find that China repeatedly expressed support for a legal prohibition while adopting a narrow understanding of autonomous weapons that excluded what it regarded as beneficial military uses of AI.

This article extends strategic ambiguity by introducing the concept of procedural strategic ambiguity. Procedural strategic ambiguity is defined as the deliberate use of conditional or indeterminate commitments concerning how, when, where and under what conditions an international rule will be negotiated and implemented. While substantive ambiguity concerns the policy outcome a state supports, procedural ambiguity concerns the process through which that outcome may be reached.

Procedural strategic ambiguity can appear through unclear definitions, flexible regulatory categories, conditional support for negotiations, uncertain implementation requirements and an emphasis on lengthy consensus-building. A state may therefore support a legally binding instrument "in principle" while withholding agreement on its scope, timetable or implementation. Such ambiguity enables the state to claim support for regulation without immediately accepting legal restrictions. This argument is consistent with Linsenmaier et al. (2021), who demonstrate that international norms frequently contain multiple meanings and that actors can influence global governance by advancing different interpretations of the same normative principle.

Second, norm contestation explains why apparent acceptance of an international norm does not necessarily produce agreement over its meaning or implementation. Norms are not fixed rules whose implications are automatically understood in the same way by all actors. Their meaning develops through interpretation, negotiation and practice. Consequently, actors can endorse the general validity of a norm while disagreeing over how it should apply in circumstances (Linsenmaier et al., 2021).

This distinction is particularly relevant to AWS governance. China does not necessarily reject broad principles such as human responsibility, compliance with international humanitarian law, human control over the use of force or the prohibition of unacceptable AWS. Instead, it may dispute which systems should be classified as unacceptable, what degree of human control is sufficient, whether restrictions should cover development or only use, and when formal negotiations should begin.

This behaviour represents applicatory contestation rather than complete rejection of the emerging norm. Applicatory contestation occurs when an actor accepts the general importance of a norm but contests how it should be interpreted or implemented. García Iommi (2020) argues that contestation may continue even when a norm appears to have been accepted or internalised, because actors continue to debate its proper application.

Applied to China, this means that support for regulating AWS should not automatically be interpreted as acceptance of a specific prohibition. China may accept the principle that human beings should remain responsible for the use of force while contesting the operational meaning of human control. It may also support prohibiting AWS while defining the prohibited category narrowly enough to preserve systems that contribute to military effectiveness. Norm contestation therefore provides the link between China's general acceptance of regulation and its effort to protect strategic flexibility.

Third, essential to look it from strategic norm-shaping point of view. Building on strategic ambiguity and norm contestation, this article proposes strategic norm-shaping as its central analytical concept. Strategic norm-shaping is defined as: A state's deliberate effort to accept the general legitimacy of an emerging international norm while influencing its definition, scope, institutional venue, timing and implementation so that the resulting rules remain compatible with its strategic interests.

Strategic norm-shaping differs from both complete norm acceptance and direct norm rejection. It also differs from conventional norm entrepreneurship because the state does not necessarily create or promote an entirely new standard. Instead, it intervenes in an existing norm-making process and attempts to determine how broad, restrictive and enforceable the emerging norm will become. Research on competitive norm socialisation shows that rising and non-Western powers are not simply passive recipients of existing international norms.

They may engage with dominant norms selectively and use the process to improve their own position within the international system (Kobayashi et al., 2022).

Strategic norm-shaping can operate through four connected mechanisms. First, definitional shaping influences which technologies are included within the regulated category. Second, categorical shaping separates prohibited systems from those that remain acceptable. Third, procedural shaping attaches conditions to negotiations, including the need for technical clarification or consensus. Fourth, institutional shaping prioritises a forum whose rules and decision-making procedures provide the state with greater influence.

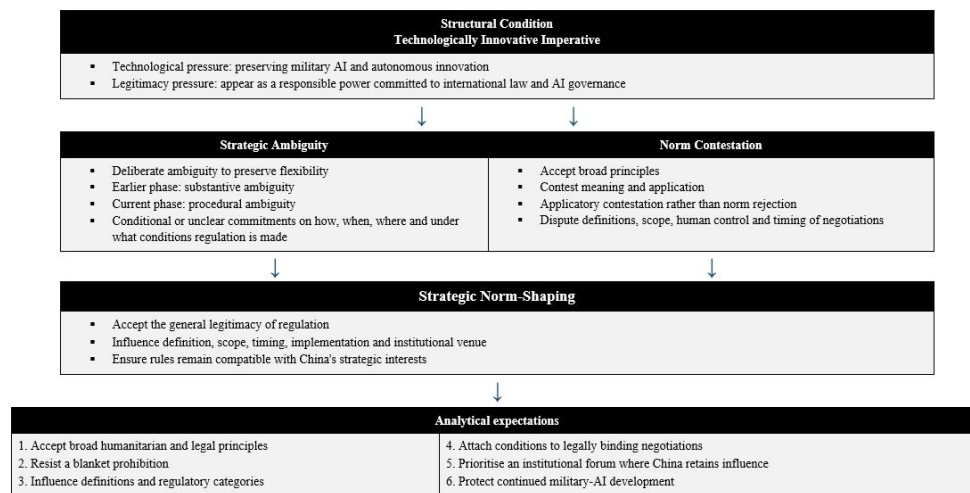
Through these mechanisms, China can support regulation while seeking to ensure that it applies only to narrowly defined systems, distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable AWS, preserves national discretion and does not prohibit military-AI research and development. China's position is therefore neither simple compliance nor opposition. It represents selective participation aimed at influencing the content and boundaries of the emerging norm.

Fourth, the technological innovative imperative as a structural condition. It provides the material motivation behind China's strategic norm-shaping. China considers advances in AI and AWS important for military modernisation, national security and international competition. Qiao-Franco and Bode (2023) identify the close relationship between China's scientific and technological policies, national objectives and the development of weaponised AI. These technological interests make China unlikely to accept regulations that could broadly restrict future military innovation.

At the same time, China faces international pressure to present itself as a responsible power committed to international law, humanitarian principles and global AI governance. It therefore faces two competing pressures. Technological pressure encourages China to protect access to military AI and autonomous capabilities, while legitimacy pressure encourages it to participate constructively in international regulation. Strategic norm-shaping enables China to manage both pressures by supporting the principle of regulation while contesting its practical boundaries.

Table 1

Shift in strategy: from substantive ambiguity to procedural ambiguity as a mechanism of strategic norm-shaping.



Hence, based on this framework, the analysis expects China to demonstrate six patterns. It is expected to accept broad humanitarian and legal principles, resist a blanket prohibition, influence definitions and regulatory categories, attach conditions to legally binding negotiations, prioritise an institutional forum in which it retains significant influence, and protect continued military-AI development. Evidence of these patterns would indicate that China's ambiguity has not disappeared but has shifted from a substantive contradiction between prohibition and development towards a procedural strategy for shaping the emerging international norm.

Result and Discussion

The Evolution of China's Position on AWS (2022–2025)

Between 2022 and 2023, China did not substantially abandon the position identified in the earlier study. China continued to acknowledge the humanitarian and legal risks of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) while preserving a narrow understanding of the systems that should be prohibited. Its position remained centred on restricting the use of weapons operating entirely beyond human control rather than prohibiting the broader development and production of military systems using artificial intelligence and autonomous functions. This distinction enabled China to support international regulation without closing the technological space needed for its military modernisation (Pramudia, 2022).

Research published in 2023 similarly identified continuing ambiguity in China's position. Qiao-Franco and Bode (2023) find that China repeatedly supported a legal prohibition on LAWS while defining such systems narrowly enough to exclude military applications that it considered beneficial. China's understanding of appropriate human-machine interaction therefore included both concern about excessive machine autonomy and recognition of the military advantages that autonomous capabilities could provide. Bode et al. (2023) also show that China's diplomatic participation in the CCCW coexisted with the continued development of weapon systems incorporating AI-based and autonomous features. These findings indicate that China's support for international regulation had not developed into a general rejection of military autonomy.

China's Global AI Governance Initiative, introduced in October 2023, reinforced this dual position. The initiative called for major powers to take a prudent and responsible approach to the research, development and application of military AI. It also stated that AI should remain under human control and supported risk-based, tiered and category-based management. However, it did not propose ending military-AI research or establishing a blanket prohibition. Instead, it combined language on responsibility and human control with opposition to barriers that might prevent states from developing and using AI technologies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2023). China was therefore beginning to place autonomous-weapons discussions within its broader vision of global AI governance while continuing to protect the principle that states have legitimate rights to technological development.

China's vote on the first United Nations General Assembly resolution specifically addressing LAWS further reflected its cautious position. Resolution 78/241 was adopted in December 2023 with 152 votes in favour, four against and eleven abstentions. China abstained rather than opposing the resolution, which requested a report representing the views of states and other stakeholders on the humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical challenges raised by these weapons. This abstention demonstrated that China did not reject wider UN engagement, but it was also unwilling to endorse the resolution fully (United Nations General Assembly, 2023). China thus remained engaged without committing itself to a regulatory process that could reduce the central role of the CCW or accelerate negotiations beyond the consensus-based framework it preferred.

The 2022–2023 period therefore represented continuity rather than transformation. China retained humanitarian and legal language, supported human involvement and remained open to regulation. At the same time, it protected military-AI development, avoided endorsing a comprehensive prohibition and continued to favour a gradual process under the CCW. China’s ambiguity still operated mainly at the substantive level: it supported regulating AWS but maintained considerable flexibility regarding which systems should be covered and which activities should remain permissible.

A clearer change appeared in 2024, when China moved beyond broad expressions of concern and provided a more detailed explanation of its preferred regulatory framework. Its submission to the United Nations Secretary-General’s report on LAWS presented four main positions. First, China identified the CCW as the appropriate forum and emphasised that international-security decisions should follow consensus. It warned that beginning discussions in alternative forums could fragment the process, widen differences between states and undermine the results already achieved within the CCW (China in UNGA, 2024).

Second, China placed definitions at the centre of future negotiations. It argued that states should first agree on the key elements and technical characteristics of LAWS before formulating targeted measures or negotiating a legally binding instrument. China also insisted that “lethality” should remain part of the regulatory concept. This position would prevent discussions from expanding automatically to all autonomous weapon systems or all military applications of AI. Definitions therefore became more than a technical concern; they established the boundary between technologies that could be regulated and those that would remain outside the future instrument (China in UNGA, 2024).

Third, China reaffirmed the relevance of international humanitarian law while maintaining that uncertainty remained over whether autonomous systems could distinguish between military and civilian targets or make proportional decisions in complex battlefield environments. It consequently called for responsible innovation and preventive measures that could reduce civilian harm. This maintained the humanitarian and legal concerns present in China’s earlier position, but connected them more directly to risk management rather than to the prohibition of military-AI development (China in UNGA, 2024).

Fourth, China proposed a tiered and categorised approach. It rejected blanket prohibitions on the grounds that they could weaken legitimate defence capabilities and restrict the peaceful use of related technologies. Instead, it proposed dividing lethal autonomous weapons into “acceptable” and “unacceptable” categories. Unacceptable systems could be prohibited through a legal instrument, while acceptable systems would remain permitted but subject to risk-mitigation measures. China also referred to five characteristics that could identify unacceptable systems, although the practical boundaries between the two categories remained open to further discussion (China in UNGA, 2024).

China’s October 2024 statement at the UN First Committee reinforced this position. It supported keeping military-AI weapon systems under human control and recognised the humanitarian, legal and ethical concerns associated with LAWS. However, it supported negotiating a legally binding instrument only “*when conditions are ripe*” and called first for consensus on definitions, characterisation and regulatory scope (Chinese Delegation, 2024). China therefore no longer relied only on the earlier distinction between use and development. It was beginning to identify the specific institutional, definitional and procedural conditions under which regulation would be acceptable.

Nevertheless, China abstained again when General Assembly Resolution 79/62 was adopted in December 2024. The resolution received 166 votes in favour, three against and fifteen abstentions. China’s second consecutive abstention showed that its greater participation in defining regulatory options did not yet amount to support for the broader General Assembly process (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). The important change in 2024 was therefore not complete regulatory acceptance, but greater specificity regarding the form of regulation China preferred.

China’s 2025 position continued this movement towards more active but conditional regulatory participation. At the UN First Committee, China called on states to exercise restraint in developing military-AI weapon systems, ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and prevent indiscriminate or malicious uses. It also promoted a governance mechanism intended to make military AI safe, reliable and controllable. These statements demonstrated continuing acceptance of the principle that autonomous weapons required international governance (Chinese Delegation, 2025).

However, China again attached procedural conditions to stronger legal commitments. It maintained that the CCW was the most appropriate forum and supported negotiations on a legally binding instrument only when conditions were mature. Before such negotiations, states were expected to reach consensus on working characterisations and regulatory scope. China also called for a balance between legitimate military-security needs and humanitarian concerns. Its support was therefore directed towards a future instrument whose definition, scope and institutional process remained open to negotiation rather than towards an immediate comprehensive prohibition (Chinese Delegation, 2025).

China's behaviour during the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 80/57 illustrates this conditionality particularly clearly. The official UN record lists China as an additional sponsor of the resolution, indicating a willingness to associate itself more directly with the international regulatory process. However, China subsequently abstained in the final plenary vote, in which the resolution was adopted by 164 votes to six, with seven abstentions (United Nations General Assembly, 2025). The combination of sponsorship and abstention suggests support for continued international discussion but continuing reservations concerning the specific direction or wording of the process. China was no longer positioned outside the development of the framework, yet it remained unwilling to provide unconditional support.

Table 2
Evolution of China's Position on Autonomous Weapons, 2022–2025

Period	Dominant Character of China's Position
2022	Continued substantive strategic ambiguity
2023	Cautious engagement with broader international governance
2024	More specific definitions, categories and regulatory preferences
2025	Conditional support and active participation in shaping the emerging framework

Across the 2022–2025 period, China therefore moved from cautiously defending its earlier ambiguous stance towards more active participation in designing the regulatory framework. Its substantive interests remained largely consistent: China continued to oppose a blanket prohibition, protect military-AI development and prioritise the CCW. What changed was the level of detail and procedural engagement. China increasingly sought to influence definitions, divide systems into acceptable and unacceptable categories, establish preconditions for

legally binding negotiations and preserve consensus as the basis of decision-making. This development does not indicate the disappearance of strategic ambiguity. Instead, it shows its gradual transformation into a strategy aimed at shaping the content, boundaries and procedure of the emerging autonomous-weapons regime.

China Strategic Norm-Shaping

China's post-2022 position demonstrates that its engagement with autonomous-weapons governance is no longer limited to expressing support or opposition. China increasingly seeks to influence how the emerging norm is defined, which systems it covers, when legal negotiations should begin and which institution should manage the process. This reflects strategic norm-shaping: China accepts the general legitimacy of regulation while attempting to ensure that the final framework remains compatible with its defence and technological interests. Such behaviour is consistent with the argument that rising powers do not simply accept or reject existing norms, but may participate selectively in their interpretation and development (Kobayashi et al., 2022).

Definitions are not merely technical elements of autonomous-weapons governance. They determine the regulatory boundary between prohibited weapons and technologies that remain available for legitimate military use. A broad definition could include systems with varying degrees of autonomy, including partially autonomous targeting systems and AI-enabled decision-support functions. A narrow definition centred on fully autonomous and lethal systems would exclude a wider range of military technologies that retain some form of human involvement. The meaning attached to "autonomous," "lethal" and "human control" therefore directly influences the practical scope of any future instrument.

China has consistently treated definitional agreement as a precondition for substantive regulation. In its 2024 submission to the United Nations Secretary-General, China argued that states should first agree on the key elements and technical characteristics of LAWS before developing targeted control measures or negotiating a legally binding instrument. China also insisted that discussion should remain connected to the element of "lethality," warning against conflating LAWS with the broader category of AWS (China in UNGA, 2024: 36–37).

This position has important regulatory consequences. Retaining "lethal" within the definition can limit regulation to weapon systems specifically designed or used to apply lethal force. It

may therefore leave partially autonomous platforms, intelligence systems, surveillance technologies and AI-enabled decision-support tools outside the main regulatory framework. Although these systems may influence targeting decisions and the wider use-of-force process, they would not necessarily qualify as lethal autonomous weapons under a narrowly constructed definition. China's definitional position consequently protects broader military-AI applications while allowing it to support restrictions on a smaller category of weapons.

Qiao-Franco and Bode (2023) similarly find that China's diplomatic position has consistently attempted to separate weapons that should be prohibited from autonomous capabilities considered militarily beneficial. Their analysis shows that China sets a particularly high threshold for identifying a system as a prohibited lethal autonomous weapon. The Chinese position has included characteristics such as the absence of human control and the impossibility of terminating the system, thereby excluding weapons that retain even limited opportunities for human supervision or interruption (Qiao-Franco and Bode, 2023). This produces what the authors describe as several shades of human-machine interaction rather than a clear distinction between human-controlled and fully autonomous systems.

China's distinction between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" systems further demonstrates categorical norm-shaping. In 2024, China rejected blanket prohibitions and proposed categorising lethal autonomous weapons according to their level of acceptability. Systems considered unacceptable could be prohibited through a legal instrument, while acceptable systems would remain permitted but subject to risk-mitigation measures (China in UNGA, 2024). This approach enables China to support prohibition in principle without accepting that all autonomous weapons or military applications of AI should be banned.

However, the boundary between these two categories remains insufficiently precise. China's 2024 submission referred to five characteristics of unacceptable LAWS that it had previously proposed, but did not restate or operationalise those characteristics in the document. Nor did it establish a clear method for evaluating the level of human control, the predictability of system behaviour, the types of targets that may be selected or the operational environments in which a system could be considered acceptable. The ability to terminate a mission is relevant to China's position, but it remains unclear whether this means continuous human supervision, a technical deactivation mechanism or intervention only under exceptional circumstances.

China also connects acceptability to compliance with international humanitarian law. It recognises uncertainty over whether autonomous systems can distinguish military targets from civilians or make proportional decisions in complex battlefield conditions. Nevertheless, it proposes responsible innovation and preventive risk management rather than a general prohibition on systems presenting such uncertainties (China in UNGA, 2024). Acceptability therefore remains dependent on a combination of technical characteristics, operational context and national legal assessment. This preserves substantial interpretive discretion for states.

The ambiguity surrounding these criteria is strategically useful. As Linsenmaier et al. (2021) argue, international norms may acquire several meanings through their application in different contexts. China can consequently accept the general norm that unacceptable autonomous weapons should be prohibited while continuing to influence what “unacceptable” means. Definitional and categorical shaping thus allows China to establish a narrow-prohibited core around which a broader field of permitted military autonomy can continue to develop.

China consistently supports the general principle that military AI should remain under human control. Its 2024 UN First Committee statement called for prudence and responsibility in developing military AI and stated that relevant weapon systems should remain under human control. The 2025 statement similarly emphasised that military AI should be safe, reliable and controllable and that its use should comply with international humanitarian law (Chinese Delegation, 2024; Chinese Delegation, 2025).

However, support for human control does not necessarily establish a common operational standard. Human control can be exercised at different points in a weapon system’s lifecycle. It may occur during design and programming, when commanders determine mission parameters, when operators approve targets or during an attack when humans retain the ability to intervene. Human control may also vary between direct approval of every target and broader supervision of a mission within predetermined geographical and temporal limits (Amoroso and Tamburrini, 2021).

China does not clearly specify which of these forms is required. Its statements do not establish whether a human must authorise every individual attack, whether supervision at the

mission level is sufficient or whether the technical ability to deactivate the weapon satisfies the requirement. China also does not define the quality of information that a human operator must possess before authorising force or the amount of time available for meaningful intervention. Qiao-Franco and Bode (2023) show that China's understanding of appropriate human-machine interaction is pulled in different directions. Diplomatic concerns about legal compliance and technological failure encourage stronger human control, while technological and military practices support increasing autonomy. China's position can therefore accommodate both direct human involvement and more limited supervision, depending on the system and operational context.

This interpretive flexibility serves two purposes. First, it enables China to support an internationally attractive principle without committing itself to a standard that could restrict the development of advanced military systems. Second, it preserves national discretion in determining whether a particular system remains under sufficient human control. China can thus maintain that human responsibility must not be transferred to machines while allowing autonomy in target identification, navigation, threat assessment or mission execution.

China therefore accepts the principle of human control but contests its practical meaning. This is a form of applicatory norm contestation: the general validity of the norm is recognised, but its implementation remains open to interpretation. The result is a principle broad enough to support diplomatic agreement but flexible enough to accommodate China's technological and operational objectives.

China's support for a legally binding instrument is consistently conditional. In 2024, China stated that such an instrument should be negotiated when the necessary conditions had been established and after states reached consensus on definitions, characterisation and regulatory scope. In 2025, it repeated that negotiations should proceed only when conditions were mature and again identified agreement on working characterisations and regulatory scope as a prior requirement (Chinese Delegation, 2024; Chinese Delegation, 2025).

These conditions appear reasonable because legal regulation requires clarity regarding the object being controlled. However, they also allow China to influence the pace of the process. Definitions, technical characteristics and regulatory scope are among the most contested

aspects of the debate. Making prior consensus on these matters a condition for negotiations creates a high procedural threshold.

The concept of mature or appropriate conditions is also not clearly defined. China does not establish how much technical understanding is sufficient, which areas require consensus or when disagreement should no longer prevent formal negotiations. The timing of legal commitment therefore remains open-ended. China can continue to support a future instrument while maintaining that the present process has not yet reached the necessary stage.

This illustrates procedural strategic ambiguity. China does not reject legal regulation; instead, it supports regulation whose starting point, content and schedule remain conditional. Such a position provides reputational benefits because China can present itself as supportive of international law while avoiding immediate obligations that may limit military innovation. It also enables China to monitor technological developments before accepting permanent legal boundaries.

China's continued preference for the CCW is also part of its norm-shaping strategy. China describes the CCW as the most appropriate forum and argues that parallel discussions elsewhere could fragment negotiations, widen differences and weaken previously achieved consensus (China in UNGA, 2024). It repeated the primacy of the CCW in both its 2024 and 2025 UN First Committee statements.

The CCW offers several advantages for China. It includes states possessing significant military and technological capabilities, ensuring that major military powers participate directly in the process. It also operates through consensus, giving states greater control over the adoption of substantive outcomes. A consensus-based process makes it difficult to impose rules strongly opposed by any major participant and allows China to resist definitions or prohibitions that conflict with its interests.

The same characteristics can slow progress. Sauer (2020) argues that regulation under the CCW is difficult because states must develop shared diplomatic language while major powers remain reluctant to abandon the military advantages associated with autonomy. Consensus can support broad legitimacy, but it can also produce limited outcomes when technologically advanced states disagree over the content of regulation.

China's forum preference should therefore not be understood as an administrative choice alone. By prioritising the CCW, China supports an institution in which it can influence definitions, prevent unwanted outcomes and ensure that regulation considers the interests of military powers. It can also resist efforts to move negotiations into forums where decisions may be adopted by majority voting or where humanitarian concerns carry greater weight than national-security considerations.

Taken together, China's definitional, interpretive, temporal and institutional strategies demonstrate active norm-shaping. China supports the broad objectives of human responsibility, international humanitarian law and regulation of unacceptable systems. At the same time, it seeks to control what counts as an autonomous weapon, how human control is understood, when negotiations may begin and where they should take place. China's position is therefore neither unrestricted opposition nor full acceptance. It is an effort to construct a regulatory framework that addresses the most politically unacceptable forms of autonomy while preserving space for national discretion and continued military-AI development.

From Substantive to Procedural Strategic Ambiguity

In the more recent period, China has become clearer in supporting some form of regulation, but remains deliberately flexible regarding definitions, regulatory categories, negotiation conditions and institutional procedures. This represents a shift from substantive strategic ambiguity to procedural strategic ambiguity.

Several elements of China's earlier strategy remain visible. First, China continues to protect military-AI development. Its support for regulation has not developed into support for a comprehensive prohibition covering all autonomous military systems or all uses of artificial intelligence in warfare. Instead, China continues to distinguish between a limited category of unacceptable weapons and a broader range of systems that may remain permissible under risk-control measures. This allows it to participate in arms-control discussions without closing technological options considered important for military modernisation.

Second, China continues to oppose a blanket prohibition. The position reflects both technological and strategic considerations. A broad prohibition could affect not only fully autonomous weapons but also partially autonomous systems, targeting support, surveillance, navigation and other AI-enabled military functions. China therefore supports selective

regulation that addresses the most problematic systems while preserving wider applications of military autonomy. This position remains consistent with the earlier distinction between prohibiting use and protecting development identified by Pramudia (2022).

Third, responsible-power rhetoric remains important. China repeatedly refers to human control, international humanitarian law, civilian protection and the need to prevent irresponsible military applications of AI. Such language supports China's claim that it is contributing constructively to global security governance. At the same time, it allows China to distinguish its position from states that reject new regulation entirely. The humanitarian language is therefore not necessarily insincere, but it also performs a strategic function by strengthening China's international legitimacy.

Fourth, China continues to express concern about whether autonomous weapons can comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. However, these concerns have increasingly been connected to risk management, classification and responsible innovation rather than to a complete ban. China's position therefore recognises the legal problem while leaving open the possibility that some systems can be designed, reviewed and operated in an acceptable manner.

Fifth, China retains its preference for gradual and consensus-based negotiations. It continues to prioritise the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and argues that agreement on definitions and scope should precede treaty negotiations. This approach can be presented as necessary for creating effective and widely accepted regulation. However, it also protects China from rapid commitments that may restrict future military capabilities. China therefore continues to seek strategic flexibility while presenting its caution as support for technically informed and inclusive regulation.

These continuities confirm that China's core interest has not fundamentally changed. It continues to balance international legitimacy with technological development. The new position does not replace the earlier strategy; it develops a more sophisticated method for pursuing the same broad objectives.

China now focuses on which systems should be prohibited, how human control should be understood, when negotiations should begin, which conditions should be considered sufficiently mature, where negotiations should occur and how a future instrument should be

implemented. This change is visible in China's increasing emphasis on definitions. Instead of simply supporting or rejecting a ban, China seeks to determine which technical characteristics bring a system within the prohibited category. The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable systems shifts the debate away from whether autonomous weapons should be regulated and towards how the regulatory boundary should be drawn. Because this boundary remains open to interpretation, China can support prohibition while protecting systems that do not meet the narrow threshold.

A similar shift appears in the discussion of human control. China accepts that military AI should remain under human control, but does not establish one precise operational requirement. Human control may refer to programming, mission approval, supervision, target authorisation or the ability to deactivate a system. By endorsing the principle without fixing its practical standard, China preserves flexibility over how the norm will apply to different systems and contexts.

China's support for a legally binding instrument is also increasingly procedural. It does not reject future negotiations but attaches conditions to their commencement. These include prior agreement on definitions, regulatory scope and technical characteristics, as well as the existence of sufficiently mature conditions. The use of open-ended procedural conditions enables China to remain supportive in principle while avoiding immediate commitment.

This article conceptualises this development as procedural strategic ambiguity. Substantive ambiguity obscures the policy outcome that a state ultimately supports. Procedural ambiguity, by contrast, allows a state to endorse a general goal while keeping unclear the process, conditions and boundaries through which that goal will become binding. China's ambiguity has therefore not disappeared; it has moved into the architecture of regulation.

This finding supports the broader argument that ambiguity may operate through the multiple meanings and applications of international norms. Norms often achieve general acceptance before actors agree on their precise interpretation (Linsenmaier et al., 2021). China's position demonstrates how an actor can accept the broad legitimacy of regulation while continuing to contest its application.

China should not be described simply as a norm supporter or norm opponent. It supports international regulation but rejects a comprehensive prohibition. It accepts humanitarian and

legal principles but contests how they should be translated into technical and operational standards. It participates in international institutions but prefers procedures that give major military powers significant control over the outcome. China is also not merely a passive norm-taker. Its recent submissions and statements indicate that it seeks to influence the emerging norm by proposing categories, prioritising definitional agreement and attaching conditions to legal negotiations. Nor should China be treated as a full norm entrepreneur promoting a strong prohibition regardless of its own material interests.

The more accurate description is selective norm shaper. A selective norm shaper accepts the general legitimacy of an emerging norm but seeks to influence its content so that the resulting rules remain compatible with national interests. China supports prohibition for a narrowly defined group of unacceptable systems, while protecting acceptable systems, military-AI research and national discretion.

This position is consistent with research showing that rising powers may engage selectively with existing norms and seek to reshape them rather than simply accepting or rejecting them (Kobayashi et al., 2022). China's participation should therefore be understood as an effort to gain influence within the governance process. By helping to define the categories and procedures of regulation, China can shape not only its own obligations but also the rules applying to other military powers.

China's participation creates both opportunities and risks for international governance. On the positive side, any future autonomous-weapons instrument would have greater political relevance if it included China and other major military powers. Regulation developed without the participation of technologically capable states could achieve strong humanitarian standards but remain limited in practical application. China's involvement may therefore increase the legitimacy, universality and long-term effectiveness of a future framework.

However, China's approach may also weaken or delay regulation. Narrow definitions may exclude systems with significant autonomous functions. Flexible categories may allow states to determine for themselves which systems are acceptable. Undefined standards of human control may produce inconsistent national practices. Requirements for consensus and mature conditions may delay negotiations indefinitely. As Sauer (2020) observes, multilateral

regulation is both necessary and difficult because technologically advanced states are reluctant to surrender potential military advantages.

The wider theoretical implication is that rising powers may shape international order without openly rejecting emerging norms. They may instead influence how norms are interpreted, which activities they cover, how quickly they develop and which institutions control their implementation. China's evolving position demonstrates that strategic ambiguity can operate inside international rule-making itself. Rather than remaining outside the regulatory process, China increasingly participates in it while preserving enough procedural flexibility to protect its military and technological interests.

Conclusion

This article examined how and why China's strategic ambiguity on autonomous weapons evolved into strategic norm-shaping between 2022 and 2025. The findings show that China has become more actively involved in international discussions on autonomous-weapons governance after 2022. Its participation has moved beyond general statements on humanitarian risks and now includes more detailed positions on definitions, regulatory categories, human control, negotiation conditions and institutional forums. However, this development does not indicate that China has fully accepted comprehensive regulation or a blanket prohibition on autonomous weapons.

China continues to support broad humanitarian and legal principles. It recognises that autonomous weapons may create difficulties related to distinction, proportionality, accountability and civilian protection. It also supports the principle that humans should remain responsible for the use of force and that military applications of artificial intelligence should comply with international humanitarian law. These positions allow China to present itself as a responsible major power that is willing to contribute to international regulation.

At the same time, China contests how these principles should be applied. Its distinction between acceptable and unacceptable autonomous weapons enables it to support prohibition selectively. Systems classified as unacceptable may be subject to legal prohibition, while other systems can remain permitted under risk-management measures. The practical boundary between these categories, however, remains open to interpretation. China has also supported the principle of human control without committing to a single operational standard

concerning when human intervention must occur, how direct that intervention should be or whether mission-level supervision is sufficient.

China's approach to legal negotiations is similarly conditional. It supports the possibility of a legally binding instrument but argues that negotiations should begin only after states agree on definitions, technical characteristics and regulatory scope, and when the necessary conditions are considered mature. These requirements may be reasonable from a technical and legal perspective, but they also provide China with considerable influence over the timing and direction of the process. By keeping the conditions for negotiation open-ended, China can support regulation in principle without accepting immediate legal restrictions.

China's continued preference for the CCW also reflects this strategic approach. The CCW includes major military powers and relies on consensus-based decision-making. These characteristics provide China with an institutional setting in which it can influence definitions, prevent unacceptable outcomes and ensure that national-security interests remain part of the regulatory discussion. China's institutional preference is therefore not merely procedural; it is part of its wider effort to shape the emerging regime.

The findings demonstrate that China's earlier strategic ambiguity has not disappeared. Instead, it has changed in form. In the earlier period, China's ambiguity was mainly substantive. It supported restrictions on the use of autonomous weapons while continuing their development and production. In the post-2022 period, China has become more clearly supportive of some form of regulation, but ambiguity has shifted towards the procedures of international norm-making. It now concerns which systems should be prohibited, what human control means, when negotiations should begin, which conditions are sufficiently mature, where negotiations should take place and how a future instrument should be implemented.

This article therefore introduces procedural strategic ambiguity as a mechanism of strategic norm-shaping. Strategic ambiguity can operate not only through unclear policy positions, but also through conditional commitments concerning the definition, timing, scope and institutional process of international regulation. This enables a state to accept the general legitimacy of an emerging norm while retaining flexibility over how that norm will apply.

Empirically, this study updates the earlier research on China's autonomous-weapons position by showing a movement from defending an ambiguous stance towards more active

participation in rule-shaping. China is no longer merely seeking to avoid restrictions created by autonomous-weapons governance. It is increasingly attempting to influence what autonomous weapons mean, which systems should be prohibited, how much human control is required and through which institution regulation should emerge. China's growing regulatory engagement therefore represents neither complete norm acceptance nor simple resistance, but a strategy of selective norm-shaping that protects military-AI development while increasing its influence over the emerging international framework.

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