Mr. Chair,

Let me congratulate you, Ambassador Gill upon the assumption of the chairmanship. I assure you of the full support of the Austrian delegation.

Austria fully aligns itself with the EU Statement delivered earlier. In our national capacity I would like to add the following remarks.

We are living in an area of unprecedented scientific and technical advances. Many technologies involving high level of autonomy and automation are already available. Many of these technologies have long entered everyday life and will in the long run alter human life drastically. Notwithstanding civilian benefits, we have come to realize that with regard to weaponry and warfare the ongoing advances have the potential to challenge the most basic principles of human rights, international humanitarian law and international law.

In this context we recall that the choice of means of warfare is not unlimited. The basis for the assessment of lawfulness of new weapons is inter alia enshrined in Article 36 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention. We encourage all States to strenuously conduct legal weapon reviews for all possible future weapons.

After three Informal Meetings of Experts Austria welcomes entering a new phase by establishing the GGE on LAWS. This possibly emerging new technology of warfare needs to be urgently addressed, due to its potential ethical, legal and destabilizing implications. We thus regret that the lack of funding prevented us from starting our work earlier this year. Still, we are confident that by being focused on critical aspects, we will be able to foster our common understanding of legal, ethical and policy questions and to agree upon recommendations to ensure a solid basis to continue our work next year. We hope to have a more focused debate on decisive questions such as a clear conceptualization of LAWS and a common understanding of the necessary human control required to ensure compliance of relevant emerging technologies with IHL.

Preservation of meaningful human control over all weapons systems must remain at the core of our deliberations. All new weapons need to comply inter alia with the principle of proportionality, distinction and precaution. In combat circumstances the assessment of compliance with the standards and rules has to be taken in light of concrete circumstances that means on a case by case basis. We cannot envisage that the human complexity required
for such decisions could be lawfully exercised by mere algorithms or even deep learning applications.

Austria holds the view that we should focus on parameters that meet broad agreement among States. Through our previous debates we identified the need to retain meaningful human control over the critical functions of weapon systems to be the most outstanding broadly accepted parameters.

Though legal challenges might seem more evident, the human element cannot be underestimated. All deliberations on LAWS should be underpinned by the fundamental ethical and moral concerns and implications.

Mr. Chair,

From a technical point of view LAWS seem more imminent than ever. If LAWS were operationalized, they would most probably entail significant destabilizing effects as well as the risk of a global arms race with unpredictable consequences. Decreasing the amount of human combat involvement possibly lowers the threshold for military engagement. Given the substantial risks to human security, it is important to find answers. In this regard, let me underline Austria’s appreciation for contribution of ICRC, civil society, scientists and academia to the debate.

Both, Robotics and Artificial Intelligence learning is progressing at fast pace and diplomacy risks to be outpaced. Often disarmament and arms control frameworks and norms were established in a reaction to inhumane experiences with particular weapon types. But in other cases the international community acted preventively. It is timely and appropriate to identify the best approaches to address the ethical, legal and policy concerns to ensure that also in the future the Spirits that we’ve cited remain under human control.

Thank you.