Mr Chair,

As this is the first time I am taking the floor let me congratulate Ambassador Karklins on the assumption of the chairmanship and assure you of the full support of my delegation. Austria aligns itself with the EU statement. Let me add the following points in our national capacity.

We thank you Ambassador Gill for the presentation of the report. Under your excellent leadership the GGE has made progress on further outlining the issue at hand and importantly the GGE agreed by consensus possible guiding principles. We have invested much time in the useful elaboration of consensus guiding principles. We understand that this year we prioritized the agreement of guiding principles rather than the adaption of the mandate.

Mr. Chair,

Our efforts need to be seen in the context of rapid, probably exponential scientific progress. The need to ensure a minimum of human control is urgent. It is the shared responsibility of all states to seize the opportunity to prevent, rather than react once that such systems are deployed on the battlefield. Do we want to trigger a new arms race, on an entirely new type of warfare to the detriment of us all? Autonomous weapons systems beyond human control would disempower humans. For an assumed possible short term military advantage of a few states, this seems very little. Lack of human control, lack of human judgement, lack of possibilities to intervene and lack of human responsibility would not only fundamentally undermine international humanitarian law, but also raise existential ethical questions. The maxim of prevention is effective and efficient. We have succeeded in the elaboration of a preventive prohibition in the framework of this convention before.

Earlier this month the Secretary General outlined at the Lisbon Web Summit that “the existence and use of autonomous weapons with the discretion and capacity to take human lives is politically unacceptable, morally repugnant, and should be banned by international law.” Many states have realised the urgency and called for a preventive legally binding prohibition.

Discussions within the GGE demonstrated that we have identified as critical a minimum level of human control. Austria believes it is time to move forward. Austria believes it is time to
start negotiations. That is why at the last GGE my country together with Brazil and Chile presented a proposal for a new mandate to focus on negotiating a legally binding instrument to ensure human control over critical functions in autonomous weapons systems. We thank the many colleagues that have supported our proposal. Austria is disappointed that the proposal is to merely continue discussions on the basis of the identical mandate of previous years. This neither reflects the progress achieved within the CCW, nor does it take into account the urgency of the matter for international security. However, as we enter the sixth year of deliberations within the CCW, we expect next year’s programme of work to reflect first the generally agreed focus on human control as the decisive characteristic and second to focus on possible options how to actually respond to current developments and enter the negotiation stage.

There is widespread agreement that the decisive characteristic of any autonomous weapon of concern is the level of human control in critical functions, rather than the level of autonomy per se. So we should concentrate on this pathway and avoid to preempt the negotiations by seeking a total agreement on all details even before a start of negotiations. History has shown, that in the negotiation of most disarmament and non-proliferation treaties the scope was subject to intense negotiations during the negotiations rather than a predefined given.

We agree with others that LAWS is a complex issue and that we possibly need a broader, more inclusive approach. We welcome contributions by the ICRC, civil society and from industry. Austria welcomes the latest Working Paper by the ICRC submitted to this Meeting of High Level Contracting Parties. It clearly outlines the reasoning behind the focus on human control. The relevant questions in para 9 should guide our work in 2019.

The work in this year’s GGE has demonstrated that a majority of States are ready to enter the negotiating phase. We have identified the baseline human control. And we are ready to start negotiations.

I thank you.