

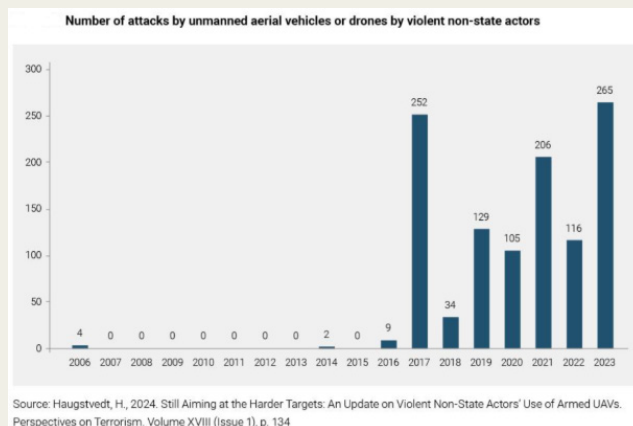


DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY COMMITTEE-RESEARCH REPORT II

Countering drone proliferation and use by Non-State Actors.

Introduction to the Topic:

The proliferation of drones by Non-State Actors (NSAs) poses great security issues for states. The increasing accessibility to these drones is intensifying conflict dynamics since they provide a cheap, easy way to conduct surveillance, collect expertise, propagandize videography, and execute accurate strikes. This ground-breaking technological advancement allows these groups to strategize with new approaches. They are used to identify routes and guide attackers, often without government intervention.



Background information

A drone (or Uncrewed aerial system- UAS) is a remotely piloted or autonomous aircraft used for surveillance, inspection, and precision strikes, acting as a cheaper, pilot-free alternative to manned aircraft. Uncrewed aerial systems are very versatile and are therefore used more commonly. The design can be easily adjusted to suit desired wing type, size, and durability, with each design having its own use depending on the context. For example, NSAs can decide between fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) equipped with explosives that detonate on or near targets, and quadcopters featuring four or more horizontally aligned rotors, which allows them to hover above specific targets.

Thanks to scientific advancements, the technology used to make drones is becoming lighter and more compact, vertical take-off and landing, along with other features that do not need a pilot or advanced training to operate, become cheaper and more feasible. This comes along with lower infrastructure requirements. This increases their flexibility and makes it easier for NSAs to begin acquiring aerial power, and real-life threats have already begun emerging. For example, as reported by



the BBC, Nicolás Maduro, the president of Venezuela, was attacked in an assassination attempt by two light-weight drones armed with explosives, demonstrating how even small drones can greatly threaten public safety.

Multiple NSAs strive to acquire drone technology to increase their influence. They may also be used to spread propaganda to intimidate enemies and lower enemy morale, recruit supporters, and make the group look strong and advanced. This is especially common among groups linked to the Islamic State and Al-Qaida.

Some NSAs are supported by state governments, though evidence suggests that the majority of non-state armed groups use commercial or homemade drones. These allow for experimentation and customization. A lot of drones can be changed to carry explosives and some can drop the explosives using drop mechanisms sold by several online retail websites. This is particularly encouraged because of the transfer of expertise between armed groups which may also occur online. Numerous African nations have seized manuals containing guidelines on drone operation, indicating the exchange of information between non-state armed groups is also becoming a relevant issue to tackle.

The Houthis provide a great example of expertise sharing for operational strategy, whose drone use has been very skilled thanks to their links with Iran. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has received drone formation from the Houthis, aiding in their use of weaponized drones since 2023. Furthermore, according to UN reporting, Al-Shabaab has sent multiple fighters to Yemen to be trained by AQAP and to allow for weapons acquisitions.

According to Lawfare, a non-profit organization aiming to impartially analyse ongoing legal and political issues, multiple NSAs in Africa started using drones around 2020 as well. At least nine different African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Congo, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan) house Non-State Actors that possess drones. Islamic State affiliates, including the Islamic State-Mozambique and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabaab, were among the first to adopt such technology, using the drones to provide real-time intelligence during the attacks. For instance, in May 2020, the Islamic State-Mozambique identified ground targets and coordinated ground assaults on Mocimboa da Praia and Palma in March 2021. The earliest reports of ISWAP's use of drones for ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Recognition), as well as for attack support are from 2020. A propaganda video which showed aerial footage that was filmed using drones was released in 2022. Various African NSAs use drones to retaliate against government forces. Non-state armed groups seem to prefer hard targets, seeing as in recent years (2020 onwards), drones' strikes tended to focus on energy infrastructure, international shipping ports and airports, and capital cities, while targeting civilians was uncommon.

African NSAs benefited from external parties sending them technology and expertise, since they have integrated drones into their weaponry. Territorial strongholds of African NSAs have facilitated them to establish logistical supply routes and smuggling channels for the importation of hardware and expertise. The Islamic State utilized a big territory in Iraq and Syria for drone operations often during the peak of its reign, allowing groups including ISWAP and the Free Lybia Army and Al-Shabaab to hold influence over a considerable amount of territory that they use as safe havens. This provides the group with space and time to experiment with drone technology, emphasizing the need for immediate action.

Countries in Africa have invested substantially in drone technology, and Turkey is the country which supplies them with the most drones. At least 31 countries in Africa have drones and nine of them have domestic drone production programs of their own.



Concomitantly, drug trafficking organizations from Mexico started deploying drones for surveillance and dropping packets with illicit drugs across the border between Mexico and the United States since the 2010s. The drones often fly during the night at low altitudes, in isolated areas, allowing them to fly undetected by conventional methods of enforcement. There have been treaties signed to criminalize drug trafficking and encourage international cooperation to combat it, for example, the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Vienna Convention). These treaties, however, assume that actors are traditional and use manual methods of transport. They are not effective when the trafficker is an autonomous system, which is the case for a significant number of drones being used. If an autonomous drone is launched from one place and recovered by accomplices on the other side, the principle of territoriality weakens, and jurisdictional boundaries become less distinct.

Most of the drone strikes operated by NSAs consist of around one to three centrally controlled drones. However, drone swarm technologies seem to emerge as a future threat. In these situations, hundreds and perhaps even thousands of drones run autonomously, through artificial intelligence and sensors, with limited human involvement.

Current situation

As of April 2024, more than 65 Non-State Actors across the world are known to own drones. This number is predicted to keep growing due to the minimal extent to which drone usage is regulated. Modern warfare today has entrenched the usage of drone technology. This practice has soared primarily in the Russia-Ukraine war, Myanmar's civil war, conflicts in the Middle East, and conflicts in Africa. The use of drones for ISR and transporting narcotics by Mexican trafficking organizations has been increasing, too.

The scale of the security threat posed globally by the proliferation of drones by NSAs is highlighted by recent events. These include armed groups' responses to Israel's attacks on Gaza, including over 170 attacks, from October 2023 to February 2024, on United States bases in Iraq and Syria, which injured almost 200 people. Furthermore, the Houthis in Yemen have used drones to target international shipping in the Red Sea.

Recently, there has been a strategic change in how African NSAs use drones. They now employ offensive methods, carrying out attacks using weaponized drones, rather than relying on passive methods. Organizations such as ISWAP and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Azawad Liberation Front (ALF) have transitioned from utilizing drones mainly for surveillance to performing continued, offensive operations with armed drones. JNIM is one such group that stands out because of its progress in the weaponization of drones. Since late 2023, it has launched more than a dozen remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs) in attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Togo. The growth of technical complexity is apparent, with groups making use of numerous commercial and modified drones. One reason for the change in operations of NSAs, including the adoption of technology as a means of counterattack, may be the use of drones in counterterrorism missions targeting them.

Drones from government arsenals have been captured by ISWAP and Al-Shabaab and used to add to their supply of drones obtained commercially. This ever-growing availability, combined with the increasing abundance of information online, which is now more accessible due to internet networks like Starlink, has contributed to the rise in drone use in that region.



Past UN Actions

UNSCR 1540 (2004): Resolution prohibiting all states from supporting Non-member states in acquiring weapons (i.e. the delivery of the weapons or the weapons themselves, including drones).

UNSCR 1977 (2011): Resolution passed to strengthen Global efforts against Mass weapon proliferation. This acts as an extension of the committee formed by UNSCR 1540.

UNSCR 2617 (2021): Resolution aimed at strengthening Counter-Terrorism Architecture by renewing the mandate of the Counter-Terrorist Committee Executive Directorate.

UNSCR 1540 (2004): Resolution commonly used on international grounds to stop non-State entities (such as terrorist organizations) from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

Creation of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) in 2017: Office dedicated to help raise awareness and prevent drone weaponization by Non-State Actors.

Significant Parties

United States: The United States is a major player in international counter-drone policy. It spearheads research into the threats of drone proliferation and offers various forms of technology, training, and funding to counter the use of drones by Non-State Actors. U.S. strategic guidance identifies drone proliferation as one of the big security challenges facing the nation, guiding policy debates on how the country can effectively limit access to combat drones and develop effective counter-UAS systems. The U.S. also collaborates with allies on intelligence sharing and cooperation against drones.

African States: Across conflict zones in Africa, there are several countries confronting drones operated by non-state violent actors. In places like Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Libya, and Sudan, these armed groups have acquired both commercial and military drones to conduct reconnaissance and, at times, offensive operations. The proliferation of such technology has reshaped battlefield dynamics in these countries, with national security forces being forced to invest in counter-drone tactics or foreign support.

Middle Eastern and Sahel Non-State Actors: While not states, the violent Non-State Actors are central to the issue. Its affiliates, such as ISWAP and Islamic State-Mozambique, use drones to conduct reconnaissance, coordination, and attacks.

Haiti: Against the larger collapse of security in Haiti, both the government and armed gangs have used drone technology. The transitional government has hired private operators to conduct armed drone strikes against gangs in Port-au-Prince, which the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights says is likely illegal under international law as it causes civilian harm. That makes accountability, questions about legality, and the challenge of how to regulate drone use in fragile states all very serious.



Glossary and Key Terms:

UAV- Unmanned Aerial Vehicle

ISR- Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

RPAS- Remotely Piloted Aircraft System

1540 Committee- Committee dedicated to monitoring how Member States implement their resolutions.

AWS- Autonomous Weapons System (Weapon that can act without human intervention)

Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs):- New technology that significantly changed war dynamics.

Risk Mitigation Framework- A plan to reduce risk.

Focus of the Debate

The use of drones by Non-State Actors for intervention in warfare and in other disputes has resulted in the loss of many lives, as well as in large economic damages.

The unregistered trade of drones between Non-State Actors continues to happen, and the framework for distinguishing between commercial-use drones and military drones is somewhat blurry, facilitating the acquisition of drones by Non-State Actors. This allows any non-state actor with enough funding and a bad intention to result in a persistent terrorist threat.

One other issue is that of determining accountability for the damage caused by a drone attack. Is it the manufacturer who takes the blame? Would it be the country from where it was launched or the group that is suspected of launching it? The lack of traceability in modern drone technology makes it difficult to discover who the true aggressor is. Accountability is thus an important aspect to be taken into account, in order to effectively punish and help prevent misuse.

Additionally, the rate at which technology is developing far outpaces the creation of UN laws (or any other type of laws to that matter). It is therefore important to establish a framework that accounts for technological developments in the long run as well, ensuring prolonged effectiveness of the resolution.

Delegates must take these factors into consideration when coming up with a solution. The objective is a comprehensive framework that allows for commercial drone trade to continue as normal and regulates drone trade to Non-State Actors. Delegates may also choose to attempt to regulate the production of drones itself, try to improve detection and effective intervention methods or modify existing frameworks to match the current reality.



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