

FORUM:	Disarmament Commission
ISSUE:	Measures to Establish Comprehensive International Frameworks for the Regulation of Armed Drone Deployment and the Mitigation of Civilian Harm
STUDENT OFFICER:	Soeun (Cecil) Jang
POSITION:	Head Chair of Disarmament Commission

Introduction

Armed drone deployment describes the military use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to conduct operations against opponents who exist beyond conventional military zones. Since 9/11, the United States has intensified its reliance on armed drones for counterterrorism missions in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, which has ignited significant discussions about legal frameworks, operational transparency, and civilian casualties. The use of armed



A US drone exhibited in Afghanistan during an air show in 2018

drones by states and non-state entities has been escalating as non-state actors utilize drones to attack civilians and critical infrastructure, resulting in more casualties, primarily affecting the Middle East. The rising conflict has resulted in more numerous and deadly attacks, along with difficulties in telling combatants from civilians, and the movement of militant operations into cities, which elevates civilian exposure to danger.

The mitigation of civilian harm has become a key issue, with many advocating for a better definition of international legal standards, transparency, and accountability for drone operators. Some drone proponents believe they may reduce civilian deaths relative to other military tools; however, critics cite political and social costs that drones may carry, such as undermining local governments' legitimacy, fueling anti-American views, and likely cultivating an increase in recruitment to militant organizations. As for various views on the deployment of armed drones, proponents as well as critics appear divided: proponents of drone depictions seem to laud their precision, thus effectiveness as a counterterrorism tool;



TIANMUN

critics are more focused on the potential lack of oversight, ambiguities of law, and the generations of destabilizing effects in war-torn regions that armed drones are likely to have.

Background



The Queen Bee, a radio-controlled drone that was one of the models the British produced in 1935

The initial pilotless vehicles emerged from Britain and the United States during World War I. The British military created several radio-controlled aircraft during 1935, which served as training targets for their forces. The term "drone" likely emerged during this period. The Vietnam War marked the beginning of drones performing various new functions, including combat decoy missions and missile strikes against stationary targets and psychological operations that involved distributing leaflets. Then, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers triggered a substantial increase in drone

deployment primarily throughout the United States.

Previously, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Bush Administration initiated "personality" strikes targeting identified terrorists whose identities had been definitively established by intelligence collected through, including visual surveillance as well as human and electronic intelligence. But in 2008, the CIA began a policy of "signature strikes" against individuals outside of named kill lists, targeting them based on "pattern of life," or their patterns of suspicious daily activity. This led to the unnecessary killing of innocent civilians. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that, at a minimum, there were 14,040 identified strikes from Jan. 2002 to Jan. 2019, resulting in the deaths of between 8,858 and 16,901 individuals, including between 910 and 2,200 civilians, of which 283 to 454 were children.

A historic inflection point for the employment of drones is the Russia-Ukraine war. The tactics and strategy of warfare shifted dramatically, given that both sides are using a multitude of military and commercial UAVs for surveillance and direct attack. The war introduces drone warfare at an unprecedented scale, which identifies compelling gaps in international humanitarian law, especially in the areas of distinction and proportionality, as the way in which many drones operate autonomously -- and in some cases dual-use methods -- raises questions of accountability and increases risk to civilians. The situation created by the war has raised awareness regarding updated legal frameworks and export controls regarding drone use in armed conflict, and the significant need for better accountability measures adapted to investigate and limit civilian tangential harm. Therefore, the war is establishing the future trajectory of



drone regulation and ethical practices on these technologies in warfare. It emphasizes the need for an international dialogue to ensure that UAVs are responsibly and humanely used in armed combat.

Problems Raised

Lack of Transparency in Targeting Practices

The principal challenge with armed drone strikes is the lack of transparency and accountability, which makes it difficult to determine whether drone strikes are conducted in accordance with international law and who is accountable for resulting civilian harm. Many states do not publish the legal basis for targeted operations, the criteria for targeting, or evidence of whether targets were indeed struck during armed drone operations. The high levels of autonomy associated with the complexity of drone technology complicate accountability for specific attacks. These factors render the international community and affected people unaware of how decision-makers are formulating decisions or who is accountable for incidents that may be committed by operator misjudgment or operator abuse. The conflict in Ukraine demonstrated the outcomes of having limited accountability: with evidence that drones have been deployed in respects that are inconsistent with the principles of distinction and proportionality, the investigations or accountability for these illegal acts are limited or nonexistent. The limited oversight associated with the use of armed drone technology erodes the rule of law, trust in international norms, and can ultimately destabilize security if states' misapplication of armed drone technology is left unquestioned.

Psychological Trauma on Civilian Populations

The deployment of weaponized drones is psychologically traumatizing to civilian populations due to the persistent potential for surveillance and strike. Civilian populations in Afghanistan who live in areas of drone deployment reported social isolation, with behavior modifications—avoiding people, not going out at night, not attending social events—out of fear of being targeted. This created an omnipresent anxiety and feeling of being observed ("self-objectified") by distant warlords. This perpetual insecurity, or psychological colonization, is a detriment to community life and mental health.

Furthermore, a recent study of children and their parents in Ukraine documented the relationships between exposure to drone attacks and the elevated rate of mental health disorders. The study reported 21.8% of children aged 3-6 years and 17.6% of children aged 7-17 years who were exposed to post-invasion trauma had clinically relevant levels of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology. In addition, 46.7% of parents met the criteria for depressive disorder and 24.5% for PTSD. Among parents, those exposed to high-intensity drone attacks reported an even higher prevalence of PTSD



(28.9%) than parents who lived in lower-intensity drone attack areas. As well, if a parent also suffers from depression, anxiety, or PTSD, the odds of the child developing PTSD symptoms also significantly increase. The overall data point to the increasing need for mental health provisions in communities exposed to drone warfare and the deep psychological injury that drones leave behind, much further than any physical threat.

Subversion of the Legitimacy of Local Government

In instances of the deployment of armed drones, there is the potential for the local governments to lose their legitimacy with the civilian populations if the drone strikes are thought to be carried out with little regard for accountability or are delivered by foreign state actors. Thus, when local authorities have no control and cannot defend or regulate the drone operations, especially when carried out by foreign militaries or at a government level that is not local, the civilians will lose trust and confidence in the government's ability to protect citizens and enforce the rule of law. When the United States launched unilateral drone strikes in various theatres, such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, it was often able to do so without the full-throated consent and involvement of local authorities. This makes the local governments appear impotent at fulfilling their duties to protect their citizens or complicit in the foreign states' actions that result in the death of civilians.



Protests in Pakistan against drone operations

International Actions

2016 Joint Declaration for the Export and Subsequent Use of Armed or Strike-Enabled Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)

The 2016 Joint Declaration for the Export and Subsequent Use of Armed or Strike-Enabled Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) was an international agreement signed between the United States and its 44 counterparts. This represented the start of the first arms control body with a focus on drones. The purpose was to promote responsible use of armed drones, and signatories would agree to principles of transparency, accountability, and oversight in both the export and use of the same technology. Signatories were encouraged to raise their responsibilities not just with other states, but considering their citizenry, intended and unintended victims of the use of armed drones and other military personnel with it, to minimize injustice and civilian harm. Although the declaration made steps to address the risks of drone

proliferation and the risk of civilian casualties, it has been criticized. The declaration's language around "responsible use" remains ambiguous, and it is unclear how such commitments were acted on.



Secretary of State, John Kerry, signing the ATT at its establishment in 2013

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a global treaty adopted by the United Nations in 2013; the treaty came into effect in 2014. It is intended to regulate international trade between states of conventional arms and technologies that can be incorporated into armed drones. The treaty requires state parties to conduct risk assessments or country and end-user

assessments before an arms export is authorized. Risk assessments must determine whether the transfer of arms will contribute to human suffering, violate international humanitarian law, or facilitate human rights abuses. If the arms trade treaty can ensure accountability, transparency, and promote mechanisms for effective national control systems that also curtail illicit arms trade while curbing the flow of weapons and components for armed drones into conflict zones, where they could be deployed against civilians, it could be effective. However, relinquishing the ability to arm and fund conflicts with weapons systems like armed drones looms as an existential threat to countries engaging in armed conflict with not only illegitimate non-state actors, but also state-based actors. The ATT cannot stop the illicit arms trade by non-state actors excluded from its scope, not considering its export controls on emerging technologies.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is the legal system that governs the conduct of armed conflict, including the use of armed drones, and is primarily aimed at protecting civilians in armed conflict. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provides guidance to states and armed groups, and advocates for the respect of IHL, including the principles of distinction (distinguishing combatants from civilians) and proportionality (not



International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)



causing excessive civilian harm in relation to the military advantage anticipated). Those principles of proportionality and distinction apply equally to drone warfare, as acknowledged by the ICRC, and impose an obligation on drone operators to do everything feasible to design their operations to minimize civilian casualties and damage. Despite IHL and the guidance from the ICRC regarding these issues, in practice, a substantial proportion of drone strikes have resulted in civilians being harmed because there has been a failure to comply with the principle of distinction and/or the principle of proportionality.

Key Players

The United States

The U.S. plays a significant role in the issue of armed drone use and is the primary leading user of armed drones for counterterrorism operations in particular since 9/11. From a strategic perspective, U.S. drone strikes are used as a tool of counter terrorism, as well as a way to leverage power against other states. However, the effectiveness of armed drone strikes raises questions, as there could be political ramifications for their use, such as undermining local governments' legitimacy and exacerbating anti-Americanism. In general, the U.S. government sees armed drone strikes as an efficient, precise, and riskless way to target threats against the United States. Critics of armed drones argue that these strikes' unintended civilian harms and lack of accountability undermine both legal and ethical standards.



A member of the ISIL holding its flag in the middle of the desert

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The relevance of the Islamic State to armed drones can be explained, specifically, as the largest non-state drone actor in the world, and also notably for their drone assaults in the Middle East. Between 1970 and 2020, the Islamic State of Iraq, an affiliate of the Islamic State, was responsible for over 60 percent of all known violent non-state actor drone assaults. A majority of these drone assaults were

violent attacks on civilians and civil infrastructure with aerial improvised explosive devices on drones. Given the rate of injuries and deaths from drone assaults, they seem to be willing to use drone technology to kill civilian populations and create chaos in areas. Unlike states, the Islamic State would not consider relevant international humanitarian law or ethical norms to protect civilian populations and refrain from shouldering ethical responsibilities in causing the deaths of innocents.



Pakistan

Since 9/11, the US has used Pakistan as the primary staging area for drone strikes on militant groups. Historically, these strikes have led to significant civilian casualties, particularly in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and scholars in some studies argue that while drone strikes can displace insurgent violence in some targeted locations, such operations risk moving militancy to the city's urban population centers and perhaps lead to increased terrorist attacks against civilian populations in other locations. Both Pakistan's government and citizens generally consider such operations illegal under national law and international law, sowing resentment domestically, and occasionally, further destabilizing the situation in Pakistan, and producing additional anti-American sentiment.

Russia

Russia is now at the core of issues related to the regulation of armed drones and reducing civilian harm through its widespread and rapidly developing armed drone usage in the Ukraine conflict. Although Russia has been investing heavily in advanced drones, like the Shahed-136, and often modifying the technology to maximize effectiveness and autonomy, the state security apparatus has a historical reputation for overlooking key IHL principles (like distinction and proportionality) in drone military operations. Rather than adhering to international regulation or reporting, Russia uses its military use as an advantage that leads to pressuring on the rest of world to share in the consequences and hindering the process of figuring out a common solution to mitigate civilian harm.

Ukraine

Analogous to Russia, Ukraine has been taking a proactive approach to revising its legal and regulatory frameworks for armed drone use to comply with IHL and European Union requirements, placing special emphasis on civilian rights and responsible drone use. The Ukrainian governmental policy discussions have indicated the importance of operator certification, identifying drones, adding drone enforcement powers to law enforcement, being transparent and accountable, and the ethical use of drones for both military and civilian application. However, national and international legal frameworks are often incongruous during modern warfare steeped in drone proliferation, making compliance and enforcement very difficult. Empirical studies indicate that in spite of Ukraine's steadfast efforts to govern drone operations, there have been instances resulting in civilian harm, as well as prohibited or unethical conduct violating IHL principles to include distinction and proportionality, which reflects the complexity of ensuring strict compliance during active warfare. Ukrainian authorities and scholars are fully aware of these issues, and they work to include recognition for the need of clear mechanisms to investigate events,

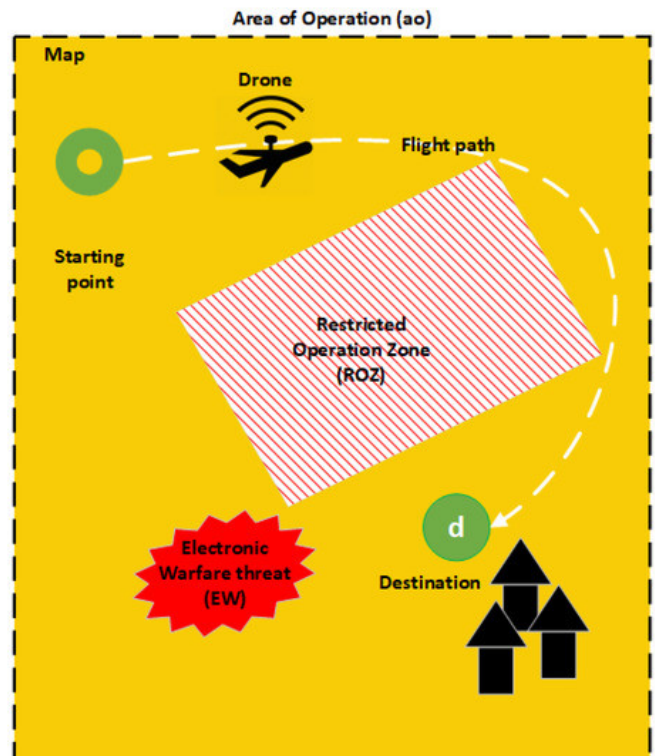


for accountability, and further harmonization of domestic laws with international laws and norms reflecting their commitment to improvement to develop ethical norms for drone warfare.

Possible Solutions

Establishment of a clearer accountability mechanism

Setting up clear accountability measures to oversee the use of armed drones would entail creating systems and processes for identifying, overseeing, and holding those responsible for drone operations accountable. This process would involve enhancing transparency regarding drone use, including, for example, public reporting on targeting decisions, civilian casualties, and the legality of strikes. Having transparency and public reporting helps build public trust and allows for independent oversight. Accountability measures are comprehensive and need to be organized at a number of levels: technical (whether the drone has operated as intended), socio-technical (were humans still in control and held responsible), and governance (are there clear legal and policy frameworks).



A visualization of a conceptual framework to integrate comprehensive human oversight in drone deployment

Capacity building of local institutions

While the legitimacy of local governments is diminished and anti-American resentment is rising in the host countries of these US strikes, it is imperative that local institutions improve their ability to bolster public trust and show that the government is accountable to citizens, not simply to foreign interests. The way to do this is to support local efforts through partnerships, sharing resources, and consulting on policy standards will improve responsiveness while building overall resilience and lessen disparities that can be improved.

Glossary



Drones

Aircraft that are operated without human pilots onboard, typically for surveillance or military strikes

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)

Technical term for drone

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)

An international treaty that regulates the global trade in conventional arms, including those of drones, in an effort to prevent and eliminate illicit transfers of arms

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

A body of rules that seek to protect civilians and limit the means and methods of warfare during armed conflict, and allude to principles like distinction and proportionality

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

An independent, neutral humanitarian organization that works towards upholding and monitoring compliance with IHL and provides aid in conflict areas

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

An extremist organization that operates mainly in Iraq and Syria and commits acts of terrorism and armed conflict

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)

A former semi-autonomous tribal area in northwest Pakistan that is often referred to in discussions of drone strikes and counter terrorism operations

Sources

- ArchiveOrganization. "A Brief History of Drones." *Imperial War Museums*, www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-brief-history-of-drones.
- Borrie, John, et al. *Increasing Transparency, Oversight and Accountability of Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles*. December 1 2017, <https://doi.org/10.37559/caap/17/wam/04>.
- Boyle, Michael J. "The Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare." *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12002>.
- Brewster, Murray. "Air Force Will Have to Wait Even Longer to Get Armed Drones, Defence Department Says." *CBC*, October 24 2023, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mq-9-reaper-drone-canadian-forces-1.7005625.
- Center for Civilians in Conflict. "Homepage | Center for Civilians in Conflict." *Center for Civilians in Conflict*, civiliansinconflict.org.
- EdDaran, Driss. "The Legality of Drone Use Under International Humanitarian Law: Theoretical Perspectives and Case Law Insights." *Access to Justice in Eastern Europe*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. 2025, pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.33327/ajee-18-8.3-r000101>.
- . "The Legality of Drone Use Under International Humanitarian Law: Theoretical Perspectives and Case Law Insights." *Access to Justice in Eastern Europe*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. 2025, pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.33327/ajee-18-8.3-r000101>.
- . "The Legality of Drone Use Under International Humanitarian Law: Theoretical Perspectives and Case Law Insights." *Access to Justice in Eastern Europe*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. 2025, pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.33327/ajee-18-8.3-r000101>.
- "Foundation for the ICRC." *International Committee of the Red Cross*, June 13 2025, www.icrc.org/en/what-we-do/foundation-icrc.
- Fox News. "American Anti-war Activists in Pakistan to Protest Drone Strikes." *Fox News*, March 27 2015, www.foxnews.com/world/american-anti-war-activists-in-pakistan-to-protest-drone-strikes.



- Franke, Ulrike Esther. "Drones, Drone Strikes, and Us Policy: The Politics of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles." *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, vol. 44, no. 1, Mar. 2014, pp. 121–31. www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-372883765/drones-drone-strikes-and-us-policy-the-politics.
- Haugstvedt, Håvard. "Wounding Local Hearts? Evidence From an Empirical Study of UAV Attacks by State and Non-state Actors Harming Civilian Populations." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, vol. 15, no. 2, Oct. 2021, pp. 153–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2021.1983853>.
- Lushenko, Paul, and Shyam Raman. *The Legitimacy of Drone Warfare*. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032614267>.
- Olabuenaga, Pablo Arrocha. "Why The Arms Trade Treaty Matters – and Why It Matters That the US Is Walking Away." *Just Security*, April 28 2020, www.justsecurity.org/63968/why-the-arms-trade-treaty-matters-and-why-it-matters-that-the-us-is-walking-away.
- Raval, Dimpal, and Sani Chauhan. "ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF THE ARMS TRADE TREATY ON HUMAN SECURITY: REGIONAL INSIGHTS." *VIDYA - a JOURNAL OF GUJARAT UNIVERSITY*, vol. 3, no. 2, Dec. 2024, pp. 52–64. <https://doi.org/10.47413/vidya.v3i2.476>.
- Technical Difficulties*. October 26 2016, 2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/262811.htm.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) | History, Terrorism, Definition, and Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 1 2025, www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant.
- The Editors of ProCon. "Drones | Pros, Cons, Debate, Arguments, Controversy, Warfare, Military, Bombs, Missiles, and War on Terror." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 8 2024, www.britannica.com/procon/drones-debate.
- Verdiesen, Ilse, et al. "Integrating Comprehensive Human Oversight in Drone Deployment: A Conceptual Framework Applied to the Case of Military Surveillance Drones." *Information*, vol. 12, no. 9, Sept. 2021, p. 385. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info12090385>.



Vodolaskova, Kateryna. "LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE USE OF UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS FOR MILITARY PURPOSES." *Scientific Works of National Aviation University Series Law Journal Air and Space Law*, vol. 1, no. 70, Mar. 2024, pp. 16–20.
<https://doi.org/10.18372/2307-9061.70.18475>.

