



Addressing the Proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in Armed Conflicts

Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is our great pleasure to welcome you to the Disarmament and International Security Committee at this conference. We are honoured to serve as your Executive Board for DISEC and to guide you through an important and timely discussion on the agenda **“Addressing the Proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in Armed Conflicts.”**

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles have transformed modern warfare. While they may offer certain strategic advantages, their increasing use in armed conflicts has also raised serious concerns regarding civilian protection, accountability, escalation, and the wider impact of emerging military technologies on international peace and security. The rapid spread of UAVs across conflict zones and among a growing number of actors has made this a pressing issue for the international community.

This Background Guide has been prepared to assist you in understanding the issue from multiple perspectives. It is intended to provide a foundation for your research, but delegates are strongly encouraged to read beyond it and engage with credible sources, international law, and current developments relevant to the topic.

As members of DISEC, your task is to examine security threats, evaluate existing regulatory gaps, and develop balanced and practical responses. We encourage you to approach the agenda with seriousness, critical thinking, and a cooperative spirit, keeping in mind both the security implications and the humanitarian consequences of UAV proliferation.

Should you have any questions about procedure, research, or the agenda itself, please feel free to approach the Executive Board. We look forward to a productive, dynamic, and solution-oriented committee.

We wish you the best of luck in your preparation and look forward to an excellent conference.

Regards,

The Executive Board

Disarmament and International Security Committee

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The Rise of Armed UAVs

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, commonly referred to as drones, have moved from being niche reconnaissance tools to central instruments in modern warfare. Their development has been driven by advances in remote piloting, communications, miniaturization and sensors, allowing states and other actors to conduct surveillance and strikes with reduced risk to their own personnel.^{digitallibrary.}

In armed conflicts, UAVs are often valued for their ability to remain in the air for extended periods, collect intelligence, and conduct precision strikes. However, the same features that make them militarily attractive also raise concerns about escalation, surveillance intensity, and the normalization of lethal force at long range.

Strategic Appeal and Military Uses

Armed UAVs are used for a variety of military purposes, including target acquisition, battlefield surveillance, intelligence gathering, strike missions, and support for counterterrorism operations. They are often marketed as precise and efficient, particularly where conventional air operations may be too costly, risky, or politically sensitive.

Their appeal lies in their flexibility and relatively low operating cost compared with manned platforms. At the same time, the spread of commercially sourced components has lowered barriers to entry, making UAVs more accessible to states with limited resources and, in some cases, to non-state actors.

Humanitarian and Legal Consequences

The humanitarian consequences of armed drone use have been a major concern in UN discussions. Civilian casualties, psychological harm to populations living under persistent drone presence, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure have all been raised as serious issues.

Legally, drones are not prohibited as weapons in themselves, but their use must comply with international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. This means attacks may only be directed at lawful military objectives, and all feasible precautions must be taken to reduce civilian harm.

The UN Human Rights Council has also emphasized the need for the use of armed drones to be consistent with international human rights law and humanitarian law, especially in contexts involving targeted killings.

The Global Spread of Drone Technology

One of the most significant features of the drone issue is how widely the technology has spread. UAVs are no longer limited to a small number of major military powers; they are increasingly available through global markets, domestic production, reverse engineering, and the adaptation of civilian components for military use.

This diffusion has allowed armed drones to appear in a wide range of conflicts and has increased the risk that hostile actors, insurgent groups, and terrorist organizations may weaponize them. The proliferation of these systems therefore raises not only battlefield concerns, but also broader concerns about cross-border security, terrorism, and arms control.

Gaps in Regulation and Oversight

A central challenge is that there is no comprehensive global treaty specifically regulating armed UAVs. Existing international law provides important rules, but it does not yet create a dedicated control regime for proliferation, transfer, or deployment.

This creates gaps in oversight, especially when drones are acquired through dual-use civilian markets or modified from commercial technology. The absence of clear international standards also complicates questions of export controls, end-use monitoring, accountability for unlawful strikes, and transparency regarding operational doctrine.

Non-State Actors and Asymmetric Warfare

The availability of armed UAVs has changed the balance of power in asymmetric conflict. Smaller armed groups can now access technologies that were once limited to state militaries, allowing them to conduct attacks, reconnaissance, and intimidation with relatively modest resources.

This has made conflicts harder to contain and has increased uncertainty for both combatants and civilians. It also creates serious governance problems, since non-state actors are often outside formal arms-control systems and may not be deterred by the same legal or political constraints that apply to states.

Security Risks and Escalation Concerns

Armed UAV proliferation can lower the threshold for the use of force. Because drones reduce immediate risk to operators, they may make military action appear

more politically manageable, even when the humanitarian or strategic consequences are severe.

Their use may also increase the likelihood of misidentification, accidental escalation, and retaliatory violence. In regions already marked by instability, the spread of UAVs can intensify cycles of attack and response, making conflict resolution more difficult and increasing insecurity for civilian populations.

Pathways Toward International Control

Any serious response to UAV proliferation must combine regulation, transparency, and accountability. Possible approaches include stronger export controls, clearer reporting requirements, norms on civilian protection, and international standards governing the transfer and use of armed drones.^{digitallibrary}.

Delegates may also consider how multilateral frameworks can promote responsible behavior without preventing legitimate defensive or security uses. The challenge for DISEC is to design measures that reduce abuse, improve accountability, and prevent proliferation while still recognizing the realities of modern security environments.