Disarmament And International Security Committee

Topic A:

Regulating the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in armed conflicts/warfare.

I. Introduction

In recent decades, modern warfare has undergone a drastic transformation due to the introduction of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones. Their ability to conduct surveillance, gather intelligence, and carry out targeted strikes without placing military personnel directly at risk has made them an increasingly attractive tool for special missions. However, due to their rapid expansion and development, they have outpaced the development of international regulations governing their use.

Concerns regarding accountability, compliance with international humanitarian law, proportionality and the protection of civilians have been raised and remain at the centre of global debate.

The international community faces growing pressure to establish clear legal frameworks as these UAVs become more accessible and technologically advanced. These legal frameworks must balance military utility with ethical and humanitarian considerations.

II. Definition of Key Terms

Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)

An aircraft operated without a human pilot on board can be used for surveillance, reconnaissance, or armed strikes.

Proportionality

A rule stating that any attack must not cause excessive civilian harm in relation to the expected military advantage.

Precautions in Attack

Obligations to minimise harm to civilians, such as verifying targets or choosing weapons that reduce collateral damage.

Autonomous Weapon Systems

Weapons that can select and engage targets without human input. Some advanced drones blur the line between remotely controlled and autonomous systems.

Surveillance

Non-lethal drone activities are used to gather intel, track movements, or monitor conflict zones.

Transparency & Oversight Mechanisms

Systems to ensure states disclose drone policies, casualties, and investigations.

Export Controls

Regulations that govern which countries can buy or receive military drones or components.

ISR

ISR stands for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. It refers to the gathering, analysing and sharing of information to support decision making, usually in response to defence, security and emergency response operations in UAVs.

III. Background information

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (drones) evolved from the early 19th century balloon bombs to World War I target crafts.

Early Development:

For the first time in 1849, the Austrian army used unmanned balloon explosives against Venice. Although the Austrian army didn't utilise what would be considered a “drone” nowadays, they introduced the modern trend of deploying unmanned aerial vehicles to do work humans couldn't and/or didn't want to do.

Furthermore, in 1896, Alfred Nobel attached a camera to a rocket, which was then launched. This experiment was crucial for the development of UAVs as it marked the first time cameras were placed on an unmanned system.

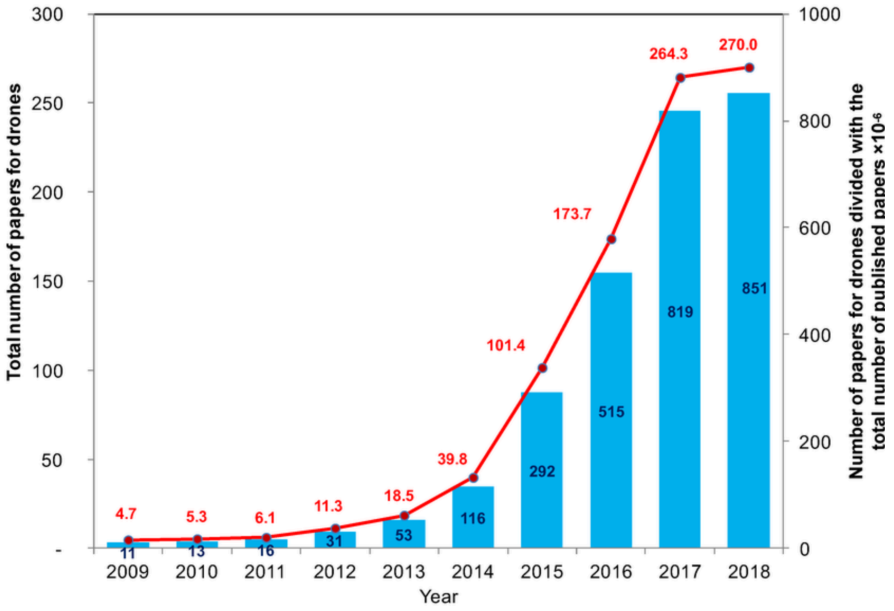
Vietnam Era and The 1970s - 80’s:

First, the Israeli army which in the 1970s started developing aircraft with glider-like properties. These aircraft were built with long, thin wings that could hold the plane aloft at altitude for hours.

The idea of these drones was to keep the pilot on the ground, which therefore makes them lighter than manned aircraft. They also don't have to land when they get tired, as they just switch crews who are controlling them. Furthermore, drones could stay on station for 24 hours at a time, keeping their unblinking eye on their targets.

In the 1980s, digital technology allowed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to be less expensive and much smaller. Moreover, during the Yom Kippur War, Israel used drones as decoys to distract the opponents.

Modern Era 2010 onwards



Nowadays, UAVs hold a transformative role on the battlefield. They provide ISR, as well as being able to target designated areas, along with communication relays and direct strikes, while also loitering over battlefields. With modern technology, we can adapt these drones to their environments. An example of this is the Ukraine-Russia war, where we have seen a rapid evolution in UAV technology, making them smaller, cheaper and autonomous.

IV. Main Issues

Accountability and responsibility

Both low-cost and sophisticated drones, used in war, bring about concerns of attribution, responsibility, and accountability.

Low-cost drones are difficult to trace and assign responsibility for the damage they cause due to their limited technology and affordability. As a result of their small size and light weight, they are difficult to trace, enabling unidentifiable attacks. This anonymity makes it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable for war crimes or other breaches of international norms.

High-tech drones, on the other hand, are equipped with advanced algorithms and AI, which uncover their own set of accountability issues. Responsibility in high-tech drones is spread amongst different factors, seeing as they operate autonomously. Several factors, including manufacturers, operators, and AI programmers, create accountability gaps that are challenging to address.

Effective attribution and accountability are essential for upholding the legitimacy of international justice and enforcing humanitarian laws.

International Humanitarian Law

IHL is designed to mitigate the impact of armed conflicts in societies with a clear focus on protecting civilians - non-combatants. IHL have set out principles of distinction, proportionality and necessity - which have been ignored by the use of inexpensive drones in conflict zones.

These basic drones often fail to distinguish between military targets and civilian entities due to their limited precision and targeting abilities. Consequently, in situations in which these drones fail to do so, indiscriminate attacks and increased collateral damage occur.

While those using such drones argue that they take necessary steps to avoid harm to non-military targets and non-combatants, such steps are often ineffective due to the inherent limitations of these weapons.

V. Possible Solutions

Urges for the development of a specialised international legal framework dedicated to governing the use of military drones, establishing clear mechanisms for transparency and accountability

Encourages strict compliance with IHL principles to distinguish between combatants and civilians, taking all feasible precautions to avoid or minimise civilian harm

Calls for the enhancement of transparency and oversight of drone operations, especially in covert targeted killing programs.

Declares for the establishment of clear accountability mechanisms that define responsibility for war crimes, regarding autonomous weapons systems, where human involvement in targeting decisions is reduced.

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