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DISEC

Study Guide

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Regulating the Use of Surveillance Drones: Balancing National Security and Individual Privacy

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Letter From Executive Board

Dear Committee Members,

This guide is designed to provide you with a starting point for your research and to offer a brief overview of the subject matter. It's essential to view this document as a reference for further research rather than a final resource. Additionally, it's crucial to understand that your success in this committee will depend on your willingness to conduct thorough research and transform that research into innovative ideas.

Both the Executive Board and the organizers are committed to ensuring your comfort throughout this experience. Your well-being is our top priority, and we encourage you to approach us with any questions or concerns you may have. No question is too trivial, as we've all been beginners at some point and had our own doubts. Your confidence will grow gradually as you become more familiar with your committee environment. Approach this opportunity with an open mind, a spirit of observation, and, most importantly, a willingness to participate. You may find that public speaking becomes somewhat addictive; take that first step, and it will become more comfortable over time.

I extend my best wishes to all of you and hope that we can make this experience enriching for everyone. We are available around the clock to address any doubts or questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Sourish Bhardwaj

Content Warning

This guide discusses military conflicts, warfare technologies, and surveillance activities. It includes descriptions of armed drones, civilian casualties, privacy intrusions, and psychological impacts on populations. Some readers may find these topics disturbing.

Definitions of Key Terms

- **Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) / Drone:** An aircraft operated without a human pilot on board, controlled remotely or autonomously. Drones vary from small quadcopters to large high-altitude systems.

- **Surveillance Drone:** A UAV equipped primarily for gathering information (e.g. high-resolution cameras, sensors, or signals intelligence) rather than carrying weapons. This includes both military reconnaissance drones and smaller police or civilian models.

- **National Security:** The protection of a state's sovereignty, territory, infrastructure, and citizens from external threats (military, terrorist, or cross-border) and internal threats (insurgency, criminal activity).

- **Individual Privacy:** A fundamental human right entailing protection from unauthorized observation or data collection. It includes privacy of the home, communications, and personal data. Article 17 of the ICCPR states that *"no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence"*.

- **Civil Liberties:** The basic rights and freedoms guaranteed to individuals (e.g. privacy, free speech) that may be affected by government surveillance measures.

- **Sovereignty (Airspace):** Under the 1944 Chicago Convention, *"every State has complete and exclusive sovereignty over the airspace above its territory"* . Foreign drones overflights without permission thus violate international airspace law.

- **International Humanitarian Law (IHL):** The laws (e.g. Geneva Conventions) that apply during armed conflict, requiring distinction between combatants and civilians and proportionality in the use of force.

- **International Human Rights Law (IHRL):** Legal instruments (e.g. ICCPR, UDHR) that protect rights like privacy at all times (including during war, to a large extent).

DISEC Mandate and Structure

The Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC) – also known as the UN General Assembly First Committee – is responsible for global disarmament and related security issues. Under Article 11 of the UN Charter, the General Assembly "may consider... the principles governing disarmament and regulation of armaments". DISEC implements this by discussing disarmament and threats to peace, and recommending solutions to the Assembly. It is one of the six main GA committees (alongside Political, Economic & Social, Special Political & Decolonization, Legal, and Administrative & Budgetary). DISEC typically meets annually (in October during the GA session) to debate topics like weapons proliferation, new military technologies, cybersecurity and peacekeeping tools.

Within the UN system, DISEC works under the GA's overall mandate: it drafts resolutions on disarmament and arms control which the General Assembly may adopt. It does not itself authoritatively enforce laws (that is the Security Council's role) but it sets norms and can request studies from the Secretary-General and disarmament bodies (e.g. UNODA, UNIDIR). The Secretariat support comes from the Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters (ABDM). DISEC's work often overlaps with other organs: for instance, proposals from DISEC may be taken up by the Security Council, and DISEC cooperates with UN treaty bodies (CCW, Arms Trade Treaty) and specialized agencies (ICAO on aviation safety, ITU on frequencies). Its jurisdiction covers all conventional and non-conventional weapons – from small arms to emerging military technologies – and thus includes questions of regulating surveillance drones and autonomous weapons.

Surveillance Drones: Definitions and Dual-Use Character

Surveillance drones (also called **Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance – ISR – drones**) are equipped with cameras, sensors, radar or signals-intelligence equipment to monitor areas, collect imagery or intercept communications (SIGINT). If armed with missiles or bombs, they become **Armed UAVs** or **UCAVs** (unmanned combat aerial vehicles).

Military and civilian uses: UAVs have both military and civil applications. Militaries use UAVs for border patrol, battlefield reconnaissance, target acquisition, and precision strikes. For example, the U.S. Predator and Reaper drones, Israel's Hermes or Chinese Cai Hong ("Rainbow") series, carry cameras and sometimes weapons. Drones first saw wide military use in the Vietnam War for recon and expanded rapidly after the 2000s. Since 9/11 the U.S. dramatically increased drone operations, often in counterterrorism. Civilians use drones for agriculture (crop monitoring), disaster management (surveying flood/damage), scientific research (atmospheric measurements), photography, and delivery services. Police and border agencies deploy drones for crowd monitoring, search-and-rescue, and anti-terror patrols.

Dual-use nature: A core challenge is that surveillance drones are **dual-use**: the same technology can be for security *or for* civilian benefit. The UN notes that "export control is difficult, because of the dual-use nature and the variation in payload" on drones. For example, a long-endurance UAV may carry either wildfire detection sensors or ground-attack missiles; a high-resolution camera drone used by farmers can also monitor protesters. This dual-use quality complicates regulation: items that are "civilian" can be easily converted for military or intelligence purposes. Accordingly, arms-control regimes (like the **Arms Trade Treaty**, **Missile Technology Control Regime**, **Wassenaar Arrangement** or regional export controls) try to cover UAVs in their lists of controlled technology. However, experts warn that these are "imperfect instruments" since definitions and technology rapidly evolve.

Historical Evolution of UAVs

The concept of pilotless aircraft, now widely known as drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), has a history nearly as long as manned flight itself, evolving from rudimentary aerial torpedoes to sophisticated, multi-functional systems.

Early Developments and Inspirations: The dawn of pilotless flight saw experimental designs like the British "Aerial Target" and the American "Kettering Bug" during World War I. While primitive, these precursors demonstrated the potential for unmanned aerial operations, primarily as testing platforms or early forms of guided missiles. The interwar period marked a significant step with the development of radio-controlled aircraft specifically for anti-aircraft gunnery practice. These target aircraft, often referred to as "drones" due to their buzzing sound, ultimately gave the entire category its enduring name.

From Niche to Mainstream: Large-scale deployment of reconnaissance UAVs in the Vietnam War underscored their value in intelligence gathering, demonstrating their ability to operate in high-risk environments without endangering human pilots. This operational success spurred further international interest and investment in UAV technology. The post-Vietnam era saw a concerted effort by numerous countries to enhance UAV capabilities, focusing on critical performance metrics such as increased flight endurance and higher operational altitudes.

The Modern Drone Revolution: The 2000s ushered in a transformative period for drone technology, driven by several key technological leaps. The widespread availability and precision of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology revolutionized navigation, allowing for autonomous flight paths and pinpoint accuracy. Advancements in miniaturized sensors (e.g., electro-optical, infrared, synthetic aperture radar) provided drones with enhanced data collection capabilities. Furthermore, robust and high-bandwidth data links enabled real-time transmission of critical information, facilitating immediate analysis and decision-making.

These innovations collectively paved the way for the development of long-endurance drones capable of sustained operations over vast distances.

Diverse Classes of Modern Drones: Today, the drone landscape is incredibly diverse, with various classes designed for specialized missions and operational environments. These classifications often overlap but generally consider factors such as size, range, endurance, payload capacity, and intended application:

- **Micro and Mini Drones:** These are typically small, lightweight, and highly portable, often used for personal recreation, aerial photography, or confined-space inspections. Their limited range and payload capacity are offset by their maneuverability and ease of deployment. Examples include consumer camera drones and tactical reconnaissance micro-UAVs for urban environments.

- **Small Tactical UAVs (STUAVs):** Larger than micro-drones but still relatively compact, STUAVs are designed for short-range military reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition at the platoon or company level. They offer improved endurance and payload options compared to mini-drones, often carrying advanced electro-optical/infrared (EO/IR) sensors.

- **Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) UAVs:** Characterized by their significant endurance (typically 24-48 hours) and operating altitudes up to 30,000 feet, MALE UAVs are workhorses for persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions. They can carry a variety of sophisticated sensors and are increasingly armed for strike operations. Examples include the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator (though largely retired) and MQ-9 Reaper.

- **High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) UAVs:** Operating at very high altitudes (above 60,000 feet, often in the stratosphere) and with endurance extending to several days, HALE UAVs are used for wide-area surveillance, communications relay, and scientific research. Their

ability to remain airborne for extended periods and cover vast geographical areas makes them invaluable for strategic ISR. The Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk is a prime example.

- **Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs):** This class represents the convergence of drone technology with offensive capabilities. UCAVs are designed for strike missions, often carrying precision-guided munitions. They integrate advanced stealth features, electronic warfare systems, and autonomous targeting capabilities, signifying a major shift in modern aerial warfare. Development in this area is ongoing, with examples like the Dassault nEUROn and BAE Systems Taranis being testbeds for future designs.

- **Vertical Take-Off and Landing (VTOL) Drones:** These drones possess the ability to take off and land vertically, eliminating the need for runways. This flexibility makes them ideal for operations in confined spaces, urban environments, or naval vessels. VTOL designs range from multi-rotor consumer drones to larger tilt-rotor military systems.

- **Specialized Drones:** Beyond these general categories, there are numerous specialized drones tailored for specific applications, such as:
  - **Agricultural Drones:** For crop monitoring, spraying, and surveying.
  - **Delivery Drones:** For logistics and last-mile delivery services.
  - **Inspection Drones:** For infrastructure inspection (bridges, power lines, wind turbines) in hazardous or difficult-to-reach areas.
  - **Search and Rescue Drones:** Equipped with thermal cameras and other sensors to locate individuals in disaster zones.
  - **Underwater Drones (ROVs/AUVs):** While not aerial, these share the "unmanned" characteristic and are used for marine exploration, inspection, and military applications,

Because UAVs can loiter for hours and operate in difficult terrain, they offer "unparalleled flexibility in aerial surveillance". However, this new capability also raised legal and ethical questions: UN researchers note that drones' use for ISR and strikes "has raised a number of legal
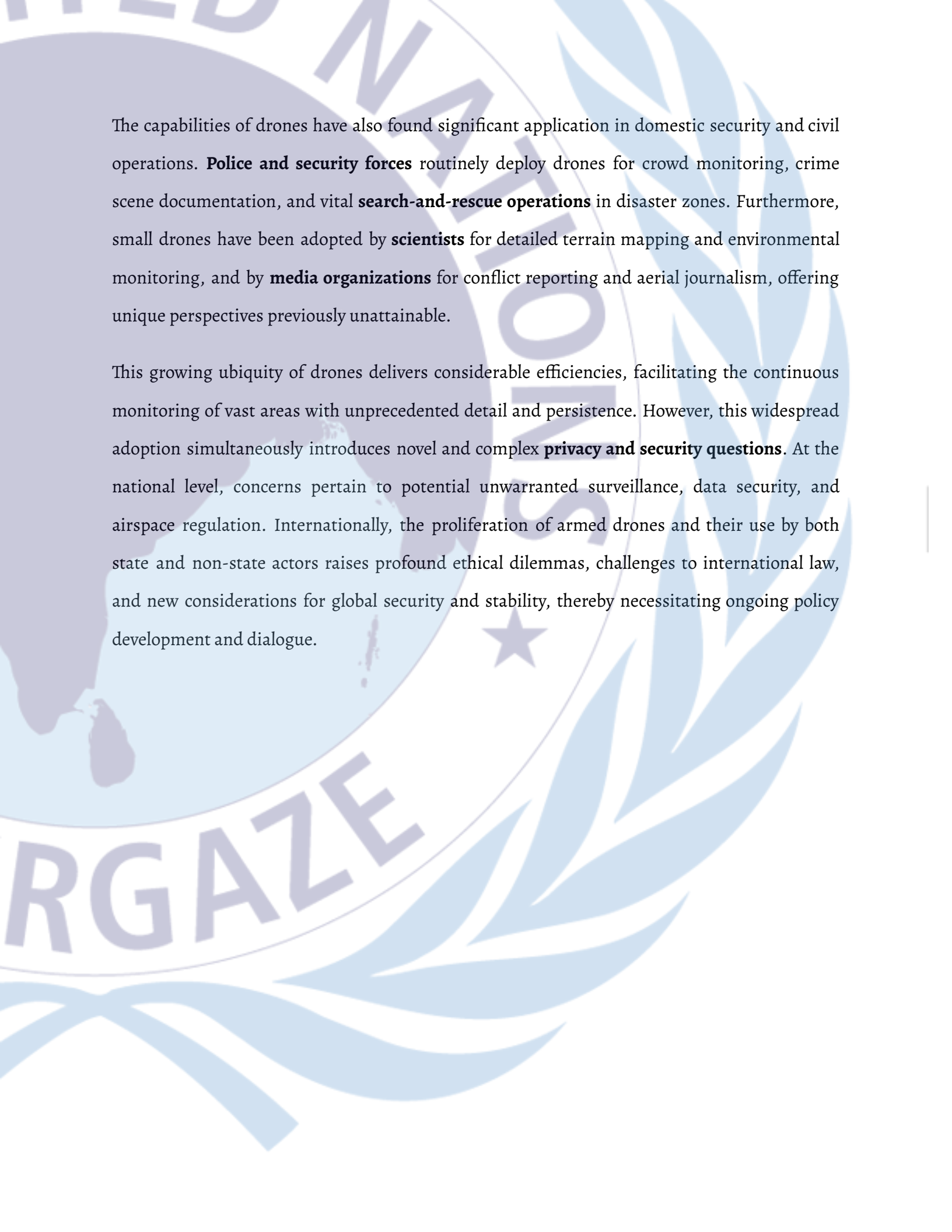
and political challenges" and challenges "widely held legal understandings in humanitarian law, human rights law and [general international law]".

Global Proliferation and Diversifying Applications

Over the past two decades, drone technology has experienced an unprecedented global proliferation, fundamentally reshaping military and civilian operations. This rapid dissemination extends beyond traditional aerospace powers, with states of all sizes, from the United States, China, and Russia to India, Iran, and numerous NATO members, now deploying extensive drone fleets. This accessibility is partly attributable to the fact that nations without advanced aerospace industries can readily acquire or construct unmanned systems, often by leveraging commercially available components, thereby lowering the barrier to entry.

Recent estimations highlight this global trend, projecting that by 2025, the United States will lead with approximately **13,000 military drones**, significantly surpassing other nations. However, the phenomenon is not exclusive to the U.S.; countries like Turkey (~1,400), Poland (~1,200), and Russia (~1,050) also field substantial fleets. This widespread adoption has even extended to **non-state actors**, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and ISIS, who increasingly employ small drones for reconnaissance or direct attacks. This burgeoning availability has prompted researchers to describe the emerging reality as a "**drone-saturated**" future, necessitating critical examination of the implications of such widespread access for both state and non-state entities.

As drone technology has matured, its utility has diversified exponentially, transitioning from specialized military applications to becoming a routine tool across various sectors. Militaries globally extensively utilize surveillance drones for comprehensive **Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR)** operations, providing critical real-time data. Beyond traditional warfare, drones are integral to **border and coastal patrols**, enabling more efficient detection of infiltrators and smugglers while minimizing risk to personnel.

The capabilities of drones have also found significant application in domestic security and civil operations. **Police and security forces** routinely deploy drones for crowd monitoring, crime scene documentation, and vital **search-and-rescue operations** in disaster zones. Furthermore, small drones have been adopted by **scientists** for detailed terrain mapping and environmental monitoring, and by **media organizations** for conflict reporting and aerial journalism, offering unique perspectives previously unattainable.

This growing ubiquity of drones delivers considerable efficiencies, facilitating the continuous monitoring of vast areas with unprecedented detail and persistence. However, this widespread adoption simultaneously introduces novel and complex **privacy and security questions**. At the national level, concerns pertain to potential unwarranted surveillance, data security, and airspace regulation. Internationally, the proliferation of armed drones and their use by both state and non-state actors raises profound ethical dilemmas, challenges to international law, and new considerations for global security and stability, thereby necessitating ongoing policy development and dialogue.

Navigating the Legal and Ethical Landscape of Drone Operations

Sovereignty and Aviation Law

The foundational rule of airspace sovereignty is found in the **Chicago Convention (1944)**. Article 1 affirms that every State has "complete and exclusive sovereignty" over the airspace above its territory. Specifically, **Article 8** states that *"No aircraft capable of being flown without a pilot shall be flown without a pilot over the territory of a contracting State without special authorization by that State"*. Thus, unmanned flights across a border without permission violate international aviation law. In practice, any **surveillance drone** (state or civilian) crossing into another country's airspace requires that state's consent, or it breaches its sovereign airspace rights.

Use of Force (UN Charter)

The **UN Charter** (Articles 2(4) and 51) governs the use of force. Article 2(4) prohibits "the threat or use of force" against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, except as permitted by the Charter. Article 51 preserves the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defence" if an armed attack occurs. In drone context, a state often justifies a cross-border drone strike (on a terrorist target in another country, say) as a self-defence measure against an imminent attack. Human rights organizations and analysts stress that any use of force abroad must meet strict conditions: it must be in **response to an armed attack or imminent threat** on the state (Article 51), and the force must be **necessary and proportional**. Outside an armed conflict, lethal force in another country's territory (e.g. killing a terrorist in Pakistan by a U.S. drone) can only target someone posing an immediate danger to life, as a last resort. In armed conflict (e.g. a war zone), drones are treated as ordinary weapons subject to IHL (see below).

No international treaty explicitly authorizes or forbids armed drones. Instead, they fall under general legal principles. In recent years, some states (notably US) have claimed their drone

strikes comply with Article 51 (self-defence) and with IHL. Others (and many legal experts) challenge this, arguing for tighter constraints on extra-territorial strikes.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

When drones are used in warfare, IHL (the law of armed conflict) applies just as to any weapon. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols require parties to distinguish civilians from combatants and to avoid disproportionate civilian harm. Armed UAV strikes must therefore comply with the **principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution**. A drone is not by itself unlawful; its use is judged by the circumstances of each strike. For example, deliberately targeting civilians with a weaponized drone would be a war crime. Drones can also gather intelligence to support lawful military operations. The **Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare** (2013) does not explicitly cover drones, but it affirms that weapon delivery methods (cyber-controlled or otherwise) must obey existing IHL norms.

International Human Rights Law (IHRL)

In peacetime or non-war contexts, surveillance drones implicate human rights. Article 17 of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** – echoed in Article 12 of the UDHR – protects the right to privacy: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence". Data collected by drones (video, metadata, signals) can infringe on privacy if done without legal basis. The UN Human Rights Committee has interpreted Article 17 to cover mass surveillance. In 2013, the UN General Assembly noted that "unlawful or arbitrary" digital surveillance may "contradict the tenets of a democratic society," reaffirming the *human right to privacy*. Thus, domestic use of surveillance drones (e.g. police monitoring public gatherings) must meet legal standards – typically requiring a lawful purpose, necessity, and appropriate oversight or warrants.

Other International Instruments

- **Wassenaar Arrangement (1996)**: A voluntary export control regime that includes lists of dual-use and military tech. Its "Munitions List" and "Dual-Use List" cover certain UAVs and components.

- **Arms Trade Treaty (ATT, 2013)**: Regulates international trade in conventional arms. The ATT defines **"combat aircraft"** to include armed UAVs delivered with weapons or launching mechanisms. Thus transfers of armed drones fall under the ATT's scope.

- **UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA)**: Member states are encouraged to report transfers of major conventional weapons, including combat aircraft and missiles – categories that can include UAVs when armed or adapted.

- **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)**: Article 8 protects privacy. The European Court of Human Rights has yet to rule on drone-specific cases, but ECHR law on surveillance is relevant.

- **Tallinn Manual 2.0 (2017)**: Though not a treaty, this NGO-developed manual on international law in cyberspace remarks that existing laws (like IHL) apply to new tech. By analogy, many experts view drones under the same international law as conventional weapons.

- **UN Resolutions**: The Human Rights Council and General Assembly have passed non-binding resolutions on surveillance and privacy (e.g. HRC Resolution 48/4 on right to privacy in the digital age). These reaffirm legal standards but do not create new binding rules.

Evolving State Practice and Customary International Law

Given the absence of a dedicated treaty governing drones, the nuances of state practice and *opinio juris* (the conviction that a practice is legally required) are crucial in shaping customary international law in this domain. Major military powers have articulated distinct positions, contributing to an evolving global discourse.

United States: A pioneer in widespread armed drone use abroad (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya), the U.S. consistently asserts the legality of these strikes under **Article 51 (self-defense)** against terrorist threats. U.S. doctrine, notably **DoD Directive 3000.09 on autonomous weapons**, emphasizes "appropriate levels of human judgment" in drone targeting. While President Obama introduced some transparency measures in 2016, much policy remains classified, drawing criticism from human rights organizations regarding a lack of transparency and oversight. NGOs have documented thousands of casualties in Pakistan and Yemen, urging investigations into civilian harm. Domestically, the U.S. employs drones for border patrol and police surveillance, strictly adhering to **Fourth Amendment** principles, which typically mandate warrants for private property overflights.

China: Rapidly expanding its UAV capabilities, China approaches regulation with a distinct emphasis. Internationally, Beijing staunchly defends **state sovereignty and non-interference**, likely condemning cross-border drone strikes by other states as violations. Domestically, China extensively deploys surveillance drones for public security, with reports of Chinese-made drones (e.g., by DJI) being used for monitoring Uyghur populations in Xinjiang. Public discourse on privacy rights in China is limited. As a major drone exporter (e.g., Wing Loong UAVs to the Middle East and Africa), China's international proposals are likely to prioritize "counter-terrorism" (to legitimize its own domestic policies) and state security concerns.

European Union and Member States: The EU has adopted a proactive regulatory stance on civilian drones, enacting **Regulations No. 2019/945 and 2019/947 in 2019**. These create a unified system for UAS safety and operations across member states, categorizing drones by weight (C0 to C4) with tiered requirements. Notably, drones over 250g (Class C1–C4) require registration and operation by a licensed pilot, and by late 2023, all EU drones must broadcast a "remote ID" for accountability. While most EU countries have refrained from procuring armed drones or maintain tight national controls, the UK and France do operate armed UAVs. The EU consistently champions human rights norms, co-sponsoring privacy resolutions in UN forums and advocating for strong data-protection safeguards through the European Parliament.

Israel: As one of the world's most experienced users of armed drones, Israel has deployed UAVs for surveillance and strikes in various contexts, including Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Israeli legal interpretations permit extra-territorial "targeted killings" of terrorists under strict criteria, typically characterizing strikes as military operations against immediate threats. However, international observers and Palestinian advocates often label many Israeli drone killings as "extrajudicial executions," citing incidents of civilian harm and questioning due process. Israel generally resists international investigations, citing security imperatives. In UN debates, Israel emphasizes its right to self-defense and counter-terrorism efforts, while others urge adherence to IHL and human rights obligations.

Russia: While historically lagging behind the U.S., Russia's drone capabilities have been significantly deployed in recent conflicts, notably in Syria and Ukraine (e.g., Lancet loitering munition). Officially, Russia frames its foreign drone strikes as defensive. Similar to China, Russia underscores sovereignty and frequently challenges Western interpretations of targeted killings. It actively participates in **CCW talks on autonomous weapons**, often aligning with China in resisting rapid regulation. Russia has made few explicit public statements on domestic

drone privacy, reflecting a broader trend of increased surveillance tools with limited public debate.

United Nations: The UN Secretary-General and various UN bodies have consistently addressed drone issues. UN Special Rapporteurs on extra-judicial executions have repeatedly cautioned against secretive strikes. In 2013 and 2014, they emphasized that states conducting lethal drone strikes "must disclose the legal and policy standards" for such operations and ensure compliance with international law (e.g., imminent threat, proportionality). Human rights experts also advocate for transparency and victim compensation. The **UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)**'s 2015 "Study on Armed UAVs" recommended greater transparency and adherence to existing law. More recently, UN Human Rights Council resolutions have reaffirmed the right to privacy in the digital age, reflecting growing concerns about modern surveillance. While no specific UN treaty on drones has been adopted, discussions continue in fora like the CCW and new General Assembly Working Groups on emerging technologies.

Customary international law regarding drones remains in development. A nascent norm appears to be forming, supported by many legal scholars and states, suggesting that **unconsented drone strikes in another state without an imminent threat are illegal**. However, opposing views from drone-operating states contribute to an elusive consensus. What is clear is that general principles i.e. sovereignty, self-defense, IHL, and human rights, are actively being applied to UAVs, even as international delegates continue to debate the necessity of new rules or instruments for the unmanned era.

Case Studies: Real-time Drone Issues in Global Conflicts

US Drone Operations and Sovereignty in the Middle East

America's extensive use of drones in its Middle East counter-terrorism efforts has deeply affected civilians and challenged national sovereignty. Take the May 2016 strike that killed Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in Pakistan; Pakistan called it a direct violation of its sovereignty, highlighting the ongoing friction between a nation's right to defend itself and another's territorial integrity. More recently, an April 2025 strike on a Yemeni detention center reportedly killed 68 African migrants, a tragic echo of a similar 2022 incident. These events raise serious questions about whether principles of international humanitarian law, like distinguishing between combatants and civilians, are being upheld.

Even how the US conducts these operations, with "signature strikes" (targeting based on patterns of behavior) and "follow-up strikes" (hitting those who come to aid victims), has drawn widespread criticism. This persistent lack of transparency creates an "accountability vacuum," leaving victims with no recourse and no US official has ever been held responsible for unlawful drone killings. The US often justifies these strikes by citing a "continuing imminent threat," which fundamentally clashes with the strict demands of international humanitarian law, often seeming to prioritize eliminating a perceived threat over minimizing civilian harm.

Contrasting Drone Warfare: Israel-Palestine vs. Russia-Ukraine

While both the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts heavily feature drones, their strategic uses and ethical dilemmas are strikingly different. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the Israeli military heavily relies on drones for widespread surveillance, intelligence gathering, and precise targeting in densely populated areas like Gaza. A particularly concerning trend is the repurposing of readily available commercial drones, like Chinese-made DJI models, for military applications. Al Jazeera has documented instances of DJI Avata drones being adapted to

carry bombs for attacks on hospitals and shelters, and even more controversially, to track Palestinian prisoners forced to act as human shields (a practice outlawed by international law). Despite these documented military uses, DJI, which stopped sales to Russia and Ukraine, has not done the same for Israel or imposed "flight blocks" over Gaza, revealing a significant gap in controlling weaponized technology. Recent incidents, like the June 2025 attack in Rafah where Israeli quadcopter drones reportedly caused 27 deaths and 90 injuries near aid distribution, underscore the devastating civilian impact. While Israel maintains a technological edge, Palestinian militant groups like Hamas have shown evolving drone capabilities, notably using them for "shaping operations" before their significant rocket barrages on October 7, 2023.

In stark contrast, the Russia-Ukraine conflict showcases drones as central to both offensive and defensive military operations, characterized by their widespread and diverse applications. UN human rights investigators have concluded that Russian armed forces' drone attacks in Ukraine's Kherson province (from July 2024 onwards) constitute war crimes, intentionally targeting civilians, and even crimes against humanity. Reports detail how Russian drone operators used real-time video feeds to clearly target civilian objects, including ambulances, with explosives, reflecting a deliberate strategy to "spread terror among the civilian population." Russia has reportedly used commercially available quadcopter drones (DJI, Autel, and Russian-made Sudoplatov) modified for weaponization in these attacks. On the other hand, Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) executed "Operation Cobweb" in June 2025, a large-scale, covert drone attack deep inside Russia involving 117 domestically made Osa brand FPV drones. These drones reportedly damaged 41 strategic aircraft at four Russian airbases, demonstrating Ukraine's innovative use of drones for audacious, deep-strike military operations against high-value strategic assets.

This comparison reveals that while both conflicts extensively use drones, Israel's approach often focuses on pervasive surveillance and precision strikes in urban counter-insurgency, even controversially repurposing commercial drones. Russian forces, meanwhile, have been

documented using drones for deliberate civilian targeting and psychological warfare, and Ukraine for innovative strategic strikes. This divergence underscores that effective regulation must consider not only the technology itself but also the strategic doctrines and intentions behind its deployment. The widespread weaponization of off-the-shelf commercial drones by both state and non-state actors in these conflicts presents an unprecedented regulatory challenge. Their global accessibility and easy modification bypass traditional arms control mechanisms, highlighting a critical loophole in international efforts to prevent misuse and ensure accountability.

The India-Pakistan Drone Conflict: A New Era of Border Warfare

In May 2025, the long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan took a dangerous turn, ushering in what has been called the world's first drone war between nuclear-armed neighbors. This escalation immediately sparked mutual accusations of drone incursions, adding a critical new layer of complexity to managing their enduring conflict. India accused Pakistan of launching waves of drones and missiles at three military bases in Indian territory and Indian-administered Kashmir, an allegation swiftly denied by Islamabad. Conversely, Pakistan claimed to have shot down 25 Indian drones, reportedly Israeli-made Harop drones, over its territory, including major cities like Karachi and Lahore. These drone exchanges followed earlier missile strikes by India and accusations of militant attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir. Sadly, civilian casualties were reported on both sides.

The inherent characteristics of drones being "silent, remote, and deniable" introduce a perplexing paradox. While this deniability might initially seem to lower the threshold for military action, allowing states to test boundaries without immediate, overt attribution, it ironically fuels uncertainty and miscalculation. The prevalence of "accusations and counter-accusations" without clear, undeniable evidence obstructs traditional ways to de-escalate tensions. This increases the risk of unintended escalation, as each side might react

based on incomplete or unverified information, potentially leading to a dangerous cycle of tit-for-tat actions.

Both India and Pakistan possess sophisticated and diverse drone fleets. India's capabilities are largely built around Israeli-made reconnaissance UAVs like the IAI Searcher and Heron, with the Heron serving as "high-altitude eyes in the sky." India also uses Harpy and Harop loitering munitions for autonomous reconnaissance and precision strikes, and is significantly enhancing its strike capabilities with a recent $4 billion deal to acquire 31 MQ-9B Predator drones from the US, alongside developing swarm drone tactics. Pakistan's "extensive and diverse" drone fleet includes models from China (e.g., CH-4), Turkey (e.g., Bayraktar Akinci), and indigenous Burraq and Shahpar drones, also incorporating loitering munitions and "loyal wingman" drones designed to coordinate with manned aircraft. Experts suggest that drones lower the political and operational threshold for military action, offering surveillance and strike options while potentially reducing immediate escalation risks compared to manned aircraft. However, this new dynamic also creates novel escalation risks, where every drone shot down or radar blinded becomes a potential flashpoint in the tense environment between these nuclear powers, fueling an ongoing arms race. While recent drone activity has been characterized as a tactical response, the ease of use of drones may lead to a higher frequency of overall conflict and a more militarized border environment, increasing long-term regional instability and the risk of a more significant conflict.

Recent Developments

The United Nations has shown growing concern over privacy and surveillance, particularly in the digital age. Since 2013, the General Assembly and Human Rights Council have consistently adopted non-binding resolutions recognizing the "human right to privacy," emphasizing protection against "unlawful or arbitrary" surveillance and its potential to undermine democracy. This concern extends to aerial and digital surveillance, reflected in mandates for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to report on new technologies. These resolutions, though not legally binding, establish a strong normative framework guiding international discussions and highlighting the collective desire among UN member states to address the ethical and legal implications of emerging surveillance capabilities.

Despite these efforts, reaching binding agreements on advanced military technologies, especially autonomous weapons that include armed drones, remains challenging. Discussions under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) have spanned over a decade, with a significant majority of states advocating for negotiations on a ban or strict human control. However, powerful "militarized" states, notably the U.S., Russia, and China, have consistently resisted substantive language, arguing that existing international law is sufficient. This deadlock means that formal bans on autonomous drones or requirements for "kill switches" are unlikely without broader international intervention. Nonetheless, various UN working groups and high-level panels continue to signal a growing appetite for rules on technology, with the Secretary-General himself repeatedly urging responsible use and greater transparency regarding military technologies like UAVs. These ongoing dialogues, while often non-binding, are crucial for shaping future norms and expectations in this rapidly evolving field.

Potential Factional Alignments

Security vs. Privacy: A core tension exists between nations prioritizing national security and counter-terrorism (e.g., US, Russia, China) and those emphasizing civil liberties and individual privacy (e.g., EU, Canada). Debates will center on the sufficiency of **existing international law (human rights and International Humanitarian Law)**, the necessity of surveillance tools, and calls for enhanced accountability, data limits, and transparency in drone strikes.

Drone 'Haves' vs. 'Have-Nots': States with advanced UAV programs (e.g., US, Israel, China) aim to protect their operational flexibility, potentially resisting bans or strict export controls. Conversely, nations without significant drone capabilities may advocate for stringent international norms to safeguard sovereignty or seek access to the technology, debating the expansion or reform of **arms control measures like the ATT or Wassenaar Arrangement**.

Developed vs. Developing Country Perspectives: Developing nations often stress sovereignty and non-intervention, scrutinizing how counter-terrorism strikes, such as the **UK's past policies on remote targeting**, might violate territorial integrity. Developed countries, confident in their technological edge, may promote their domestic privacy standards like **GDPR in the EU**, while resisting stronger international privacy language, as seen in **Five Eyes' negotiations on UN privacy resolutions**.

Autonomous Weapons: Diverse Stances: A clear divide exists regarding autonomous drones. Some nations and **NGOs**(e.g., Germany, Belgium, the **'Stop Killer Robots' coalition**) advocate for new treaties to ensure human control or outright bans. Others, particularly those with major defense industries (e.g., US, Russia, China), tend to resist such restrictive measures, aligning with existing divisions within the **Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)**.

Multilateral vs. National Solutions: Delegates will differ on the preferred regulatory approach. Some nations (e.g., Brazil, Japan) may call for new multilateral instruments, potentially

suggesting amendments to the **Chicago Convention** or new UAV treaties. Others (e.g., US, Russia, China) may prefer relying on national laws and **existing UN principles**, resisting new binding international commitments on drone usage and control.

Key Conflict Lines: Debates will likely revolve around balancing law enforcement with national security, respecting state sovereignty amidst cross-border threats (like concerns over "extradition of extrajudicial executions"), and the trade-off between military utility and human rights/privacy. Specific discussions may include an international UAV registry, mandatory transparency for drone strikes, and controls on surveillance tech exports.

Guide to Source Credibility

Tier 1: Highest Credibility (Primary Legal & Official)

These sources form the bedrock of factual claims and legal arguments due to their direct, official nature.

- **UN Documents:**
- **Resolutions & Reports:** General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, official reports (e.g., UNODA Study on UAVs), and studies from UNODA (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs) are authoritative.
- **Agency Publications:** Reports from UN agencies like OHCHR (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) and UNIDIR (UN Institute for Disarmament Research) offer expert analysis.
- **International Treaties & Conventions:**
- **Legal Texts:** Documents like the **ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)** text and various **International Humanitarian Law (IHL) treaties** are foundational legal sources.

- Specialized Treaties: Agreements such as the **Chicago Convention** or the **Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)** are directly relevant to specific topics.
- **International Organizations:**
- **Authoritative Analysis:** Publications and commentaries from organizations like the **ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross)**, **UNESCO**, or **ITU (International Telecommunication Union)**, along with statements from **UN Special Rapporteurs**, provide expert interpretations of international law and norms.
- **Specific Bodies:** Reports from organizations like the **IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)** are highly credible for their specific areas of expertise.

Tier 2: High Credibility (National & State-Backed)

These sources provide official government positions and policies, crucial for understanding national stances.

- **Government Documents:**
- **Policy Papers:** Publications from **Ministries of Foreign Affairs** and **Defence policy papers** outline a state's official position.
- **Official Statements:** Official press releases or statements regarding national policies, such as a **U.S. Department of Defense directive** or a published **US drone strike policy document**, are highly reliable indicators of a state's intent and legal framework.
- **State-Backed Media:**
- **Official Narratives:** Media outlets directly supported by a government, like **The Hindu** or **Times of India** for India, provide insight into that nation's official narrative and priorities. Similarly, **US Government reports** are direct governmental communications.

Tier 3: Moderate Credibility (Major Media Reporting)

These sources are useful for up-to-date information on current events and can provide illustrative case studies, especially when primary official sources are limited.

- **Major Media Outlets:**
- **Current Reporting:** Credible international news organizations such as **Reuters, BBC, and Al Jazeera** are valuable for recent developments and factual reporting. Always consider cross-referencing information when using media reports.

*Avoid: **Wikipedia, random analyses, media blogs**, or any **AI-generated content**. All committee work must be original and authentic.*

Questions to Think Upon

- How should the committee define "surveillance drone" and distinguish it from other UAVs or weapons systems?

- Should armed vs. unarmed drones be treated differently under discussion?

- Are existing international laws (UN Charter, IHL, human rights law, Chicago Convention) adequate to regulate drone use, or is new legislation/treaty needed?

- What mechanisms (e.g. investigations, reporting requirements, compensation funds) should be implemented for alleged civilian harm by drones?

- What privacy protections (legislated limits, warrant requirements, data minimization) should apply to domestic and cross-border drone surveillance?

- Under what conditions, if any, should a state permit another state's military or police drones to operate in its territory (e.g. for joint counter-terrorism)?

- Should the international community establish an export control regime specifically for drones or surveillance tech?

- How to prevent proliferation to non-state actors (terror groups, criminal gangs)?

- Should there be international limits on autonomous targeting in drones (AI weaponry)?

- If so, what level of human oversight is necessary for legality and ethics?

- How might your country's security concerns and human rights values shape its stance?

- Identify allies and opponents based on technology access, domestic law enforcement needs, and civil liberties traditions.

- If new rules are agreed, how would compliance be monitored?

- For example, should there be an international register of UAVs or transparency reports on drone strikes?

- Beyond law, what ethical principles (e.g. proportionality, dignity) should underpin any regulation, and how can delegates ensure they are reflected in resolutions?