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In the crosshairs? Addressing military drone use and proliferation

Event Summary

On 18 October 2023, the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, PAX, Stimson Center and UNIDIR organized a side event to the UN General Assembly First Committee, entitled “**In the crosshairs? Addressing military drone use and proliferation**”.

The event convened representatives of governments, international organizations, and civil society to take stock of the recent developments around the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones, in various conflict areas. During the event, expert discussants shared insights on the use of drones by state and non-state actors based on the new research and addressed ongoing policy discussions around export controls mechanisms.

Opening remarks were provided by **H.E. Robert in den Bosch, Disarmament Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Geneva**. Ambassador In den Bosch set the scene for the discussion by outlining the role that UAVs play as part of a modern geopolitical instrument of power, which, combined with the multifaceted nature of UAVs, has made agreements on new arms control measures among states, including major international UAV actors, quite difficult. Ambassador In den Bosch underscored that the diversity of drone systems necessitates nuanced, tailored approaches to mitigate associated risks and enhance security protocols. He presented the key pillars of the Netherlands’ approach towards UAVs, including reinforcement of export controls; protecting civilians from malicious use of armed drones; engagement with civil society while developing the government’s policy on drones; advocacy for transparency and international standards for UAVs’ exports and use; engagement with the industry and continuing sustained international cooperation to address security and ethical challenges emanating from drone proliferation.

Ms. Rachel Stohl, Vice President of the Stimson Center, who moderated the side event, opened the panel discussion by stating that over 90 countries and non-state groups operate drones - for military, intelligence, and counter-terrorism operations, and more than 20 countries are believed to have armed drones, according to estimates by academics and civil society. Ms. Stohl noted that states have sought to integrate drone technology into their armed services in part because of the perception that the costs and risks of using drones for a given objective are comparably lower than for other weapons systems, which lowers the threshold for engaging in armed conflict and using armed drones outside traditional battlefields. Ms. Stohl highlighted that new technological developments may also lead to increased demand and hence, states must assess the impact of increasing drone proliferation and put the mechanisms in place to regulate their transfer and use. Although there have been several attempts to better regulate UAVs in a variety of international forums, differing standards or rules guiding drone transfers and use can lead to confusion for states, both exporters and importers, over which rules and standards to follow or to apply.

Mr. Paul Holtom, Head of the Conventional Arms and Ammunition Programme at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), presented an overview of the ongoing technological developments and innovations with regards to advanced materials for the structure of uncrewed aerial, maritime, and ground systems, their power source and propulsion, communications and electronics for data collection and degree of autonomy. According to Mr. Holtom, these developments require a new approach for arms control



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processes and existing instruments. For example, unarmed uncrewed maritime systems could be used in ways that could pose a threat to critical infrastructure and thus for international security, challenging the current thinking regarding international disarmament and conventional arms control instruments. Mr. Holtom echoed the view regarding the lower threshold for developing and producing uncrewed systems, including via licensed production and technology transfer arrangements, arguing that the democratization of access to uncrewed systems should be better accounted for in the international arms control instruments. Mr. Holtom underscored that the time is ripe to reinvigorate discussions among states on the development of standards to increase transparency on acquisition and responsible use of UASs in line with international law and norms of accountability.

Mr. Wim Zwijnenburg, Humanitarian Disarmament Project Lead at PAX, presented PAX's new report on the evolving role of drone warfare in Iraq, entitled "[Between terror strikes and targeting killings](#)." According to the report findings, Iraq has become the staging ground for shaping novel military tactics in drone use by multiple state and non-state armed groups over the last decade, including what concerns the weaponization of commercial drones, geopolitical power projection with loitering munitions, and targeted killings campaigns. However, as underscored by Mr. Zwijnenburg, drone strikes often came with civilian casualties which are rarely investigated and accountable for. Mr. Zwijnenburg emphasized that it is very important for states to clarify the legal position on the use of force through armed drones and the justifications for their use outside of armed conflict. He called upon states to engage in a multilateral process for building robust, progressive and implementable standards on the use of armed drones and for filling the gap between commercial technologies, dual-use technologies, and military drones.

Mr. Rob Hunter-Perkins, Head of Research at Conflict Armament Research (CAR), presented key findings from an upcoming global report on the acquisition, weaponization, and deployment of UAVs by non-state actors, including for terrorism-related purposes. This report is the product of a joint research initiative between CAR and the Autonomous and Remotely Operated Systems (AROS) Programme of the Special Projects and Innovation Branch (SPIB) in the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT). The report finds that: non-state armed groups are primarily exploiting commercial sources to access UAVs and UAVs components; that while more advanced capabilities lie outside the reach of these actors, there is evidence of localized industrial efforts to produce and weaponize existing systems; that some groups may be sharing this knowledge with other organizations; and that while these systems are most commonly used currently for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, a growing number of non-state armed groups may be able to conduct attacks with weaponized UAVs. These findings were illustrated with case studies from CAR's frontline field investigations in Iraq and Yemen.

Ms. Anietie Ewang, Researcher in the Africa division at the Human Rights Watch, elaborated on human rights abuses associated with the use of drones in Nigeria. While drone technology was initially used in the fight against Boko Haram by the Nigerian military for surveillance or targeted killings, the Human Rights Watch also documented numerous civilian casualties as a result of the Air Force's drone strikes. Ms. Ewang highlighted that while civilian harm stemming from other types of abuses from the military, including erroneous air strikes, have been part of conversations around accountability, drones are often used by the military forces with no oversight. In various parts of Nigeria, dozens of civilians were killed by drone strikes, which are often unreported as they occur in remote areas and responsibility for which are rarely acknowledged. Ms. Ewang raised concerns about the lack of clear legal and ethical guidelines for the use of drones, both on national and international levels, and called for oversight,



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monitoring, and accountability mechanisms for security forces. She also called for more controls in terms of the manufacturers and states that export of UAVs to countries like Nigeria in order to limit access in cases where there are concerns of human rights abuses.

Interventions from the floor

Representative from **the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation** used the right to reply on the remark provided by the Netherlands in the opening remarks about Iranian drones used by Russia against civilian targets in Ukraine, commenting on the lack of balance in that statement. In response, the Disarmament Ambassador In den Bosch indicated that Ukraine is entitled to its right to self-defense against Russian aggression and that Ukraine is allowed to target relevant military objectives in Russian-occupied Crimea.

Representative of **the Permanent Mission of Portugal to the UN** raised the point that despite almost omnipresent acquisition and use of armed UAVs, drones have traditionally not been a subject in the multilateral deliberations in disarmament bodies. Portugal highlighted the need to hold multilateral exchanges on potential peace and security challenges associated with armed drones and stated its readiness to facilitate such exchanges. Portugal is planning to organize a side event on the topic either towards the end of 2023 or in the early 2024, with an idea to have a discussion on the ways to improve transparency for the acquisition and use of armed UAVs.