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When Drones Become UN Peacekeeping Staple

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SUMMARY

The UN authorized the use of drones in peacekeeping for the first time in 2013 in the eastern DRC to enhance the capacities of peacekeepers in the field. This policy brief argues that beyond the narrow consideration of policing armed groups and protecting civilians in the peacekeeping field, drones could also serve as deterrence to armed groups and providing panoramic observation of conflict context. It is suggested that these prospects would drive a greater integration of drones in future peacekeeping operations. However, for a smooth mainstreaming of drones in UN peacekeeping, it is recommended that the UN addresses key challenges the drone program has encountered thus far. Among these are the development of a policy that speaks to contentious issues such as handling, management and storage of surveillance data; and satisfactory handling of political fallouts resulting in opposition to deployment by national governments of peacekeeping terrains.

Introduction

When it began in 1948 as a flagship instrument of peace and security for the nascent world organization, United Nations peacekeeping operations were designed to suit the context of prevailing international conflicts, which were inter-state. Peacekeepers then were deployed to serve as symbolic presence and to monitor armistice agreements between warring states.¹ But since the end of the Cold War, the dynamics of conflicts have changed, becoming more intra-state, involving non-state armed groups not given to conventional military stratagem, and without any regard for international humanitarian law, wreaking massive human rights violations against civilians.² Over the years, the structure of UN peacekeeping operations has evolved to accommodate the changing dynamics of international conflicts. For instance, based on the recommendations of initiatives such as the Brahimi Report of 2000, the Peace Support Operations 2010, the New Horizon Initiative, among

others, various aspects of UN peacekeeping missions have evolved, including the incorporation of institutions of rule of law and the strengthening of military and police dimensions.³ However, there has not been a corresponding change in the approach to peacekeeping, without commensurate improvement in the capacity of men and women to better protect civilians and guarantee their own safety and security.⁴ There have been many discussions in UN circles to adopt new approaches of peacekeeping, including the use of technology to improve the capacity of men and women to cope with the difficult terrains today's conflicts take them.⁵ Such discussion reached a crescendo in January 2013 when the UN Security Council permitted,⁶ and subsequently through its resolution 2098, authorized the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), popularly called drones, to be used in its DRC mission, MONUSCO.⁷ The UN argued that arming MONUSCO with drone capability would give MONUSCO troops the capacity to monitor the movement of armed groups and the flow of arms and related materiel,⁸ thereby

¹ United Nations, "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Guidelines and Principles", United Nations, 2008

² Muzaffer Ecan Yilmaz. "UN Peacekeeping in the Post-Cold War Era." *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 22, No. 2. 2005, pp. 13-28

³ United Nations, Report of the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping. December 2014

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Secretary- General's Remarks at the Security Council Open Debate on Trends in United Nations Peacekeeping", Available at <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=7769> Accessed on October 8, 2015

⁶ United Nations, Letter dated 22 January 2013 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2013/44) Available at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/44

⁷ United Nations, Security Council Resolution 2098 (2013) Available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2098.pdf Accessed on October 15, 2015

⁸ Letter dated 27 December 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2012/43) Available at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/43 Accessed on October 15, 2015

enabling the troops to circumvent the huge landmass and rugged, mountainous terrains of the DRC that doggedly infringed on the capabilities of peacekeeping troops while invariably provided havens for armed groups to launch attacks on rural civilian populations.⁹ The UN has assessed favorably the MONUSCO use of drones in the DRC, and has expressed intentions to replicate the experience in other peacekeeping operations.

The MONUSCO Experiment and Future UN Peace Operations

After their use in the DRC, there are indications drones would be used regularly in UN peacekeeping missions. Already, the government of Mali has approved for their use in the UN's mission in Mali, MUNISMA, where Dutch and Swedish troops are already supporting the mission with drones capability. Similarly, the government in Bangui has given the approval to the UN to use drones in its mission in Central African Republic, MINUSCA.¹⁰

The UN is obviously full of enthusiasm for the application of drone technology in its future peacekeeping missions, and proponents have advanced benefits to be derived from the use of the drone platform, that their application would improve the situational awareness of the peacekeepers; enhancing the safety and security of troops and strengthening command and control in the field.¹¹ However, there are many dimensions of drone capability beyond their direct and targeted benefits that would drive their application in future UN missions. First, drones provide essential information on events occurring in conflict zones that go unnoticed. Recent history of post-Cold War theatres of conflict suggests that a cocktail of activities are often at play in the background of the raging conflict below the radar of peacekeeping troops. For instance, criminal activities such as arms smuggling, resource theft and resource smuggling, which often fan the conflict. The history of African civil wars attests to this. For example, in the DRC, Angola or Sierra Leone, mineral theft and cross border smuggling of arms and minerals by armed parties to the conflict, perpetuated the flames of conflict in those countries for many years. There is a unique philosophy associated with drones that would put peacekeepers at a vantage position to keep tabs on all activities happening in conflict regions. Drones are analogues to the CCTV camera; beyond their immediate targets (armed groups) they capture all other activities happening in the conflict field, some with significant bearing on the conflict. For instance, during the MOUNUSCO mission, a drone's maritime radar

along the DRC's border with Rwanda discovered a gold smuggling syndicate operated via small boats in the night. Peacekeepers did not know that such illicit operation that funds armed groups, was happening around them. Drones, however, produce a different impact when the purpose of surveillance is paramilitary in the context of border control. In such contexts, it is feared that it could result in mission creep as it is able to gather sensitive, unrelated and private data on citizens.

Drones can also be deployed in the peacekeeping field for reasons beyond granting access to inaccessible terrains. They provide a psychological effect of deterrence – i.e. the perception that a warring party's clandestine maneuvers are already known to their opponents through the intrusive power of drones. Thus, drones in the peacekeeping field reverses the sense of superiority in the minds of armed groups over their opponents. Having drones hover in line of sight of rebel areas, signaling that their moves are being watched, deters them into wanting to lay down their arms. This unique advantage of drones was leveraged in the MONUSCO mission where peacekeeping troops were instructed to fly the drones far below their 5km altitude capacity to hover in the line of sight of militants.¹² The use of drones for deterrence in peacekeeping is interestingly dissimilar to the psychological effects of their use in the battlefields of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where their use is associated with the 'Pak-syndrome', arising from high civilian casualties and, therefore, left civilians in constant apprehension of when next the debilitating hellfire missile would drop from America's reapers and predators.¹³ In the peacekeeping field, the psychological burden of drones shifts onto the opposing armed groups.

The cost-benefit consideration of the use of drones is also important for the UN. Its application makes more economic sense when compared to their manned counterparts, such as helicopters. When it deployed it in the DRC in 2013, the UN did not have its own fleet of drones – and still doesn't have. The five fleet of drones used for the mission were leased from the Italian commercial firm Selex Ex at a cost of \$15 million, which included not only hardware but also technical expertise. This amounts to about one per cent of MONUSCO's \$1.46 billion annual budget. Its cost effectiveness is obvious. For example, when drones were authorized in MONUSCO, the M23 rebels surrendered months after the drones arrived. The M23 were a group that had terrorized civilians in the eastern provinces of Kivu. Its disbandment was among the priorities of UN Security Council Resolution 2098 that

⁹Attuquayefio, P. and Yekple, M. "Drones in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: A New Direction in U.N Peacekeeping Operations." *African Peace and Conflict Journal* (forthcoming)

¹⁰ O'Grady, S. "How a U.N. Drone Crashed in Congo and Was Promptly Forgotten." Available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/how-a-u-n-drone-crashed-in-congo-and-was-promptly-forgotten/?wp_login_redirect=0 Accessed on October 15, 2015

¹¹ UN Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping Operations, Op. Cit.

¹² "Are UN drones the future of peacekeeping?" Available at <http://www.france24.com/en/20150409-un-drones-future-peacekeeping-democratic-republic-congo-fdr-humanitarian-drc> Accessed on October 19, 2015

¹³ Attuquayefio, Philip. "Drones, the US and the new wars in Africa." *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 3 (2014).

authorized the use of drones in the DRC.¹⁴ Considered in this context, there is credible justification supporting advocates' view of greater integration of drones in future UN operations.

Greater reliance on drones, or smart technology generally, in future UN peace operations would alter current configuration of troop contribution patterns in UN peacekeeping missions. For example, since the 1990s, wealthy countries have rolled down considerably troop contribution to UN missions (they would support UN peacekeeping with financial resources instead) leaving a bulk of the blue-helmets constituted by troops from poor countries of the Global South; but who are incidentally poorly trained and poorly equipped. A trend for which some observers believe need to change to improve the quality of UN operations by bringing into the field adequately trained troops from wealthier countries. Drones are western dominated technology. Technical expertise of drone use in peacekeeping missions would first emanate from troops from the ranks of the Western coalition forces who perfected their skills on the austere battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. If wealthier countries would not contribute troops they can help provide technical expertise by way of drones to help strengthen the capabilities of UN peacekeeping missions.

Therefore, the benefits the UN could derive from the application of drone technology would augment the physical efforts of peacekeepers to cope with the demands of inaccessible terrains. From the above perspective, drones could become UN peacekeeping staples.

Challenges the UN Needs to Address

In the use of drone technology, there are challenges that must be addressed before the UN can maximize its benefits. The dint on their reputation created by their military antecedent would not go away soon. This accounted for some member states' initial objection to their use in the DRC. Rwanda who sat on the Security Council as non-permanent member at the time the council discussed the matter was vehement in opposition to the idea, citing that Africa is being used as a laboratory for a Western intelligence device.¹⁵ Similarly, some permanent Security Council members such as China and Russia also raised reservations.¹⁶ South Sudan persistently turned down UN request to deploy drones in UN's South

Sudan mission, UNMISS, citing security concerns.¹⁷ More recently, Juba questioned the UN's motivations to deploy drones, as it claims that there are no terrorists in South Sudan to deploy drones against.¹⁸

Second, there are no standardized operational guiding principles for the deployment of drones in UN missions. A major concern in this regard is management of data. Drone application would generate volumes of data, and how the data is handled and stored, and who can have access, and under what circumstances, for instance, would remain contentious, but also, constitute subject of apprehension among Council members who raised reservations when the Security Council considered the issue in January 2013.¹⁹ Also, national jurisdictions of UN's current peacekeeping engagements are those whose legal regimes are not robust as those in developed countries capable of protecting populations against privacy violations associated with surveillance drones. The legislative and legal lacuna raises questions of whether the UN would not be handed a *carte blanche* which could be abused to violate the rights of populations whom they are supposed to protect.

The ultimate objective of the application of drone technology in UN peacekeeping operations is to help meet its mandate of protection of civilians. But the use of drones towards that objective could get murky and counterproductive. First, civilian populations need to be adequately educated and informed on the drone program. This is necessary for the civilian populations to approve the use of the drones. MONUSCO's experience does not suggest that civilian populations were adequately informed about the drone program and how the drones worked and the purpose for which they were intended to achieve. The local population, therefore, expressed misgivings about them.²⁰ Second, UN use of drones in its missions would have implications for other parties such as humanitarian agencies who share in the goal of protection of civilians and work closely with the UN towards that objective in the peacekeeping field. It has emerged from the UN MONUSCO experience that MONUSCO's drones were being used both for military operations and for humanitarian aid delivery. It does not only harm humanitarian agencies' core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence, blurring the distinction between humanitarian and military action, but also exposing humanitarian actors to risks as armed groups

¹⁴ "Are UN drones the future of peacekeeping?" <http://www.france24.com/en/20150409-un-drones-future-peacekeeping-democratic-republic-congo-fdlr-humanitarian-drc>

¹⁵ "Rwanda opposes use of drones by the UN in eastern Congo." Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/09/us-congo-democratic-un-rwanda-idUSBRE90802720130109> Accessed on October 14, 2015.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "How a U.N. Drone Crashed in Congo and Was Promptly Forgotten." Available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/how-a-u-n-drone-crashed-in-congo-and-was-promptly-forgotten/?wp_login_redirect=0

¹⁸ "South Sudan: UN Doesn't Need Drones, Attack Helicopters." <http://www.voanews.com/content/south-sudan-un-drones-chapter-7-unmiss-herve-ladsous/2827947.html> Accessed on October 14, 2015

¹⁹ "Rwanda opposes use of drones by the UN in eastern Congo." Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/09/us-congo-democratic-un-rwanda-idUSBRE90802720130109> Accessed on October 14, 2015

²⁰ "Unmanned Drones Used by Peacekeepers in the DRC", Available At <http://www.worlddivision.org.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/2014/july/unmanned-drones-used-un-peacekeepers-drc/> Accessed on October 15, 2015

now see them as parties to the conflict.²¹ In 2014, a coalition of aid organizations working in the DRC protested against this development while declining MONUSCO’s offer to support them with its drones in humanitarian aid delivery.²²

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recent developments suggest that drones would become integral to peacekeeping missions in the future. Drone capability is appealing to the world body because it is useful for meeting the mandates of peacekeeping troops in complex peacekeeping missions in the post-Cold War period.

The drone platform is undoubtedly valuable for UN missions. However, the UN needs to address critical issues that would confront greater application of the technology in other missions. The UN first needs to do further work in addressing the political concerns raised among member

states in order to improve widespread acceptability of drone use among member states.

Secondly, the UN needs to develop a clear, robust guiding principles and operational procedures that would guide the application of drones in its missions. It should be elaborate to encompass issues including who can have access to surveillance data and under what circumstances.

The UN also needs to institute a system of transparent handling and storage of surveillance data, ensuring that mechanisms are adequate to ensure no other party has access to surveillance data.

The UN must further engage in a thorough education of populations on the intended purposes and the operation of the drones before they are deployed. This is necessary to alleviate citizen’s apprehension and fears regarding the activities of the drones.

²¹ Ibid.
²² “NGOs against MONUSCO drones for humanitarian work.” Available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100391/ngos-against-monusco-drones-for-humanitarian-work> Accessed on October 15, 2015.

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