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Harmonizing Drone Regulation for Security

Expert Speaker: Captain Alexander Schäbler

Chairs: Perline Bustarret and Mark Labous

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of drone technology has created urgent security, legal, and ethical challenges that remain largely unresolved at the international level. In a world increasingly governed by cybersecurity, technical and diplomatic concerns, this challenge regarding regulation is an issue yet to be resolved. Drones, specifically called unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) or unmanned aerial systems (UAS), are aircraft that operate without a human pilot on board, thus often being commandeered at a distance; although automation is a growing phenomenon in the military domain. Indeed, drones are often separated into two categories: military and civil; the latter, as the name suggests, being used for non-armed force initiatives such as leisure or the transportation of goods. However, a crossover exists, as with the use of medical drones (civil) on combat sites (military) for instance.

Drones, while a longtime piece of futuristic imagination, were only really perfected in the 2010s for military use, despite primitive forms of unmanned flight dating back to the mid 20th century. This is a key point of the study of drones' security concerns, because they are an extremely new technology (where the civilian use was originally much more advanced). Hence, states face the difficult task of regulating a very recent technology constantly on the move. This makes the topic at hand particularly interesting to study.

There are a multitude of security concerns, and the domains they impact are very contrasted. Notably, civilian drones could impact anything from commercial flights to personal privacy, and military uses of course being caught in human rights legislations and war ethics. While UN member states often address some of these issues in their national legislation, most countries do not act upon all of them and international cooperation and debate is needed: hence this discussion at the heart of the Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC).

Together, member states are encouraged to find common ground, to progress on the international security cause and to reflect upon their country's perspective, all whilst maintaining an open mind. Drones, when delimited adequately, have a cornucopia of positive outcomes: like dealing with environmental crises, border security, or agriculture amongst others. As the topic is so new, delegates take on the role of pioneers of technical change, and safety progress.

Definition of Key Terms

A. European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)

The European Union Aviation Safety Agency, or EASA, is responsible for developing regulations and ensuring civil aviation safety within the European Union. Regarding drones, the establishment of standardized technology and operating standards (which all member countries must comply with) is an essential role that the EASA serves. In regard to risk classifications for drone operation, design standards and regulations, drone registration, and drone identification, as well as the certification process for higher risk operations, these are all tasks that the EASA perform to support member country aviation authorities in implementing these standards.

B. Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) / Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)

"Unmanned Aircraft" means any aircraft operating or designed to operate autonomously or to be piloted remotely without a pilot on board. This definition includes all types of aircraft without a pilot on board.

The Drone Regulations use the term "unmanned aircraft system" (UAS) to refer to a drone, its system, and all the other equipment used to control and operate it, such as the command unit, the possible catapult to launch it, and others.

A UAV refers specifically to the unmanned aerial vehicle or drone, while a UAS encompasses the entire system that supports and controls the UAV, including ground control stations, software, and communication systems.

C. Open / Specific / Certified Categories

In the scope of application of the European Union (EU), UAS operations are included within a regulatory framework focused on risk according to the type of operation. This new approach was proposed by EASA in December 2015 at the request of the European Commission (EC), Member States and other stakeholders, in order to create a regulatory framework focused on operations, proportionate and risk-based for all unmanned aircraft (UA). A general concept was proposed establishing three categories of UAS operations: "Open", "Specific" and "Certified", each with different security requirements proportional to the risk:

- The "Open" category, considering the risks involved, does not require an authorization from the competent authority or a declaration from the UAS operator prior to the operation.
- The "Specific" category requires authorization from the competent authority prior to the operation, taking into account mitigation measures identified through an operational risk assessment, except for certain standard scenarios where an operator declaration suffices or when the operator holds a Light UAS Operator Certificate (LUC).
- The "Certified" category requires certification of the UAS, a licensed remote pilot, and an operator approved by the competent authority, in order to ensure an adequate level of safety.

D. Counter-UAS (C-UAS)

Counter-Drone Aerial Systems, also known as C-UAS (Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems), are integrated technologies that detect, track, identify, and neutralize unauthorized drones operating in restricted or sensitive airspace. These systems combine radar, radio frequency (RF) sensors, electro-optical cameras, acoustic detectors, and artificial intelligence to provide layered situational awareness and enable effective drone mitigation.

E. Remote ID

Unmanned aircraft system (UAS) Remote Identification, informally called drone remote ID, is defined by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as the ability of an unmanned aircraft (UA) or drone in flight to provide identification information that can be received by other parties.

Direct Remote Identification is defined by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) as a system that ensures the local broadcast of information about a UA in operation, including the marking of the UA, so that this information can be obtained without physical access to the UA.

F. Harmonization (of regulations)

The act of making systems or laws the same or similar in different companies, countries, etc. so that they can work together more easily.

G. U-Space

The U-space, a set of services deployed in airspace where more traffic is anticipated, such as in urban areas, will be used to regulate drone traffic. To avoid aircraft collisions and reduce air and ground dangers, the U-space Regulation sets and harmonizes the standards for manned and unmanned aircraft to fly safely in the U-space area. The EU approved the U-Space Rules in April 2021.

H. Dual-use technology

In politics, diplomacy and export control, dual-use items refer to equipment, machines, goods and technology (both hardware and software) that can be used for both civilian and military applications.

General Overview

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or unmanned aerial systems (UASs), are unmanned aircraft more than ever present in our day-to-day life. While they were originally developed for military purposes, drone technologies have evolved rapidly over the last two decades, with a notable explosion of their popularity in the 2010s. They have become increasingly prevalent in civilian, commercial and governmental settings alike. Technological progress in the fields of miniaturization, battery efficiency, satellite navigation and artificial intelligence (AI) have reduced costs significantly, hence rendering drones much more accessible. Nowadays, they are widely used by states, companies and private individuals.

In the civilian and commercial sector, drones are used across a wide scope of industries and fields. For instance, they aid in agricultural efficiency and monitoring, infrastructure inspection, environmental surveilling, disaster response, journalism and delivery services. Individuals also purchase drones for photography, advertising or simple leisure. At first, drones were mainly imagined in non-human-dense occupations like agriculture; today, the scene is rather different. At-home delivery services are gaining popularity and the implementation of drone technology is imagined as a great gain of time, human energy and capital (if not for the construction of the UAVs themselves). Indeed, these recent applications offer significant benefits, such as reduced costs, increased efficiency and improved operational safety by minimalizing human presence and interference. However, the integration of drones in civilian airspace has raised several safety concerns that remain largely untackled and at an international level. For instance, the risk of collisions with manned aircraft, privacy violations, loss of communication control and interception are very prominent and concerning as drones become more popular. As a result, at national levels, states have introduced limiting legislation on drones: like altitude maximums, pilot certification and new restricted airspace.

In the meantime, drones continue to play a critical role in military and governmental operations. Drones are often used for recognition and surveillance missions, border monitoring and targeted strikes. Their ability to quietly and easily operate for extended periods of time and to avoid

risks to the offensive military personnel has made UAVs very attractive in modern warfare. For instance, in the midst of the Russia-Ukraine war, according to ABC News and both country's releases, Russia claimed to have launched 5131 drones in December 2025, while Ukraine says that they have shot down or downed 81% of them. Indeed, in military fields, drone advancements also mean defense innovation. This is particularly the case with Electronic Warfare (EW) systems that effectively jam the drones' signals. Ironically, civilian drones are very often used on the military field for reconnaissance tasks. The Chinese-made DJI Mavic device is regularly implemented on the Ukrainian front, a quadcopter originally made for videography costing between $1500 and $3000 according to Reuters. However, long range devices, often made to hit targets at over 700km distance are exclusively military and are imagined to cost around $100000 for each model. Drone use in these settings presents significant challenges for international legislation, as it blends national sovereignty, state security, accountability and civilian protection. Moreover, organizations fear the use of drones could lead to escalation, miscalculations and unintended victims.

Globally, UAV regulation remains fragmented. Some international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) have developed guidelines for the safe use of drones in civilian airspace, however these standards are largely non-binding and primarily focused on civilian aviation. Because military drone policies are largely a case of national security, information is very scarce (highlighting the importance of being on the avant garde of this new technology). At the EU scale, the European Parliament has called for "transparency, adherence to international law and a ban on LAWS (Lethal Autonomous Weapons), while supporting defense innovation and proposing an EU drone package to stimulate joint procurement and industry participation". This regulatory divide between the civil and military legislations has created prominent legal ambiguities and many gaps to fill by delegates.

Major Parties Involved

A. European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)

The main organization responsible for developing uniform technical and operational regulations for civil drones in the EU is the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA). With Regulations (EU) 2019/945 and (EU) 2019/947, EASA created risk-based categories to classify drone operations and established EU-wide minimum levels of safety regarding the design of drones, remote identification and obligations of operators. Even though EASA does not focus on internal security; all

future security/counter-drone measures will be built upon this framework as it forms the foundation of all safety regulation, aligning future security requirements with current European regulations.

B. European Commission (EC)

In 2023, the Commission has launched certain measures to minimize the threats from civilian drones. These proposals include improved procedures on risk assessment, guidelines on securing critical infrastructure, and the potential establishment of an EU-wide regulatory framework on counter-drone technologies, which would result in more homogeneity of rules in every Member State. The Commission faces difficulties in ensuring that national security concerns of Member States are addressed, on one hand, while establishing a competitive internal market on the other.

C. France

France has been an early adopter of both drones and counter-drone technologies, with a particular emphasis on large public events and sensitive or secure areas. The French legal system has addressed a number of issues, notably the regulation of drone use by law enforcement agencies and the circumstances under which counter-drone measures are permissible, leading to debates on privacy and proportionality. As an influential Member State with strong defense and security sectors, France's approach continues to shape what other states and the EU consider acceptable when seeking to standardize the security-related aspects of drone regulation.

D. Germany

With a large aviation and technology market in Europe, Germany has implemented the EU regulatory framework as well as developed its own national security framework for drone operations. The German authorities have established national guidance documents for drone operations, designated no-fly zones around sensitive sites and are investigating the deployment of counter-UAS systems to secure critical infrastructure as well as public events. Germany's regulations and investment priorities are significant influences upon EU dialogues relative to the establishment of minimum standards and best practices. The differing approaches between Germany and the EU reflect the difficulties of achieving universal regulations regarding drones.

E. United States of America

The United States is one of the leading users and innovators of drone technology worldwide and its early lead on policies such as Remote Identification, No-Fly Zones, and counter-drone policing has played a significant role in shaping global debates on drone security policies. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) oversees these policies for civil operations, including Remote ID, but its mandate over security remains limited. Ongoing debates over federal budgets and institutional power raise concerns about the strength of long-term FAA oversight. At the same time, advanced military drone development is primarily driven by U.S. defence spending and competition between major (sub)contractors such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing, meaning innovative progress is more influenced by strategic economic priorities than by civilian regulation. Debates in the United States on counter-UAS technologies for infrastructure protection are closely followed in Europe, both as inspiration and as cautionary examples. As the EU and the United States continue to cooperate on security issues, the U.S. experience exerts an indirect influence on how far European states consider standardising drone-related security policies to be feasible (not only through regulation, but through the realities of military funding and competition).

F. China and major drone manufacturers

China is currently the leading manufacturer of civil drones, with DJI being the most widely used brand in Europe. DJI's design and data-management practices directly affect the ability of European operators and authorities to comply with EU requirements, including Remote Identification, geo-fencing, and cybersecurity standards. As concerns grow regarding supply-chain dependence and data security, Chinese manufacturers have become major external stakeholders in discussions on harmonizing security-focused drone regulation within the EU.

Timeline of Key Events

2002	The European Union Aviation Safety Agency is established, providing a basis for future regulation of unmanned aircraft within the civil aviation framework of the European Union.
Pre-2015	The regulations for drones are almost entirely a national matter in each of the EU Member States, resulting in a lack of harmonization in terms of security.

2015	The Commission adopted an aviation strategy for Europe, proposing a basic legal framework within which the European aviation industry could develop and remain competitive on the global market. This framework was to include new emerging technologies, such as drones. The Commission tasked EASA with preparing more detailed rules on drone operations, developing industry standards, and collecting, analysing and publishing safety information concerning drone operations.
2015-2018	With the growth of the use of civilian and commercially operated drones, there has been much concern raised concerning airspace safety and security, especially where airports and other sensitive locations are involved.
March 2019	The European Union issues Regulations (EU) 2019/945 and 2019/947, which provide the first-ever equal framework for the civil use of drones that all Member States are obliged to follow. They require the establishment of common technical standards, classes, and CE-marking for most drones sold on the market within the EU, as well as remote ID functionality. These regulations also set the open/specific/certified categories, operational rules for drone pilots/operators, among other requirements.
31 December 2020	The regulations for drones in the EU come into effect and replace each country's regulations, providing harmonized regimes in terms of categories, registration, and operational requirements for the operator.
2021-2022	Growing interest in counter-UAS capabilities as drones are increasingly employed for unauthorized surveillance, smuggling, and attacks on critical infrastructure.
2022-2023	The conflict in Ukraine illustrates the military as well as dual applications of drones, which impact security debates in the EU.

2023-2024	U-space service development and Remote ID are needed for enhancing airspace surveillance, situational awareness, and coordination between civilian and security authorities.
2024-Present	Growing debate within the EU regarding an EU-wide drone regulation framework and cooperation between security and defense, including cooperation with NATO, to protect EU borders and infrastructure.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

As drone technology has expanded, regulatory efforts have increased, though they remain uneven. Most reforms have focused on the civilian side of drones, while military usage continues to be primarily governed by national policies. This creates gaps in safety, accountability and international relations.

At an international level, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has developed guidelines to safely implement drones in the civil airspace (including registration and operator certification standards). However, as discussed in the general overview, these guidelines are non-binding and do not apply to military drones in this case.

Furthermore, at a more national scope, some notable frameworks stand out. This is the case with the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which have both improved domestic safety with licensing, altitude limits or restricted airspace. Yet, differences between national regulations complicate international operations and make a unified international policy difficult to agree upon.

Finally, military drone regulation is much more limited and/or difficult to find. Some discussions within the United Nations, particularly through the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), have focused on compliance with international humanitarian laws and civil protection. These initiatives remain largely voluntary, because states are reluctant to accept binding resolutions that would restrict their own military drone capabilities.

Possible Solutions

Today, possible reforms increasingly aim to bridge the gap between military and civil drones, all whilst respecting each state's sovereignty and right to innovation. These regulations typically strive to favor deescalation, as drones, on the contrary, are an easy conflict escalation tool. Organizations such as NATO favorise sharing technology for mutual protection amongst allies, especially within the military domain. Civil drones however are also concerned by possible reforms. One could imagine a global piece of international legislation limiting drones to certain altitudes or excluding them from specific airspaces; although once again, the issue of non-binding resolutions within the United Nations is a barrier to this proposal. To this end, delegates must henceforth find common ground to apply powerful legislation, without it having an optional or unnecessary connotation.

Conclusion

Drones have proven invaluable in civilian, commercial, and military activities but generate growing risks for airspace security. In Europe, EU Regulations 2019/945 and 2019/947 ensure harmonisation on the civilian side of UAS security. However, security-specific issues relating to counter-UAS measures, the use of dual-use technologies, and military purposes remain regulated in far more fragmented and non-homogeneous ways. Bridging this gap will therefore require more than technical specifications: it demands clearer legal rules and stronger coordination between civilian aviation authorities, security agencies, defence institutions and international legal frameworks.

What is currently missing from this debate is sufficient recognition of the accelerating military drone arms race, particularly between the United States and China, and the serious implications this rivalry has for harmonisation at a global level. Both powers are rapidly developing autonomous, AI-enabled, long-range, and swarm-capable drones for combat, surveillance, and electronic warfare. These developments driven by strategic competition rather than regulatory cooperation, make common and shared international norms increasingly difficult to achieve.

Consequently, Europe is no longer able to primarily treat drone security as a domestic or civilian issue. Military-grade drones backed by entire states present a far more complicated and destabilising menace to airspace security than commercial or recreational systems. Their ability to cross borders, evade detection, and conduct hybrid or covert operations means that existing civilian-focused frameworks are insufficient for the strategic risks now emerging.
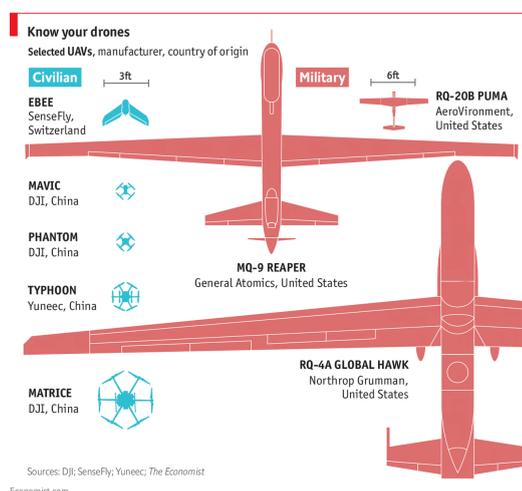
Any future harmonised system must henceforth extend past civilian aviation rules and explicitly address the geopolitical and military realities shaping drone technology progress today. Without acknowledging the strategic rivalry between major powers and the advanced capabilities of modern military drones, regulatory efforts will remain limited in scope and effectiveness. It is solely by integrating civil regulation with defence policy, international security cooperation and counter UAS strategies that technological progress and security can be balanced, within the scope of a truly comprehensive and resilient framework.

Questions to consider

- What type of drones should be regulated (all civil, commercial, and military)?
- How can drone policy for safety be expanded internationally without infringing on national sovereignty?
- Should new systems be put in place to overlook both civil and military drones simultaneously?
- What measures need to be taken to provide for a diplomatic yet global safety standard around drones?
- What does the future of drones look like? How should the UN tackle technological progress?
- Are single-use lethal military drones susceptible to violating international law? If so, how should states respond?
- Are drones a promise of innovation and performance, or conflict and war?
- Should access to civil drones be made easier (noting all the benefits they could have)?

Appendix

Know your drones
Selected UAVs, manufacturer, country of origin

Civilian

EBEE
SenseFly,
Switzerland

MAVIC
DJI, China

PHANTOM
DJI, China

TYPHOON
Yuneec, China

MATRICE
DJI, China

Military

RQ-20B PUMA
AeroVironment,
United States

MQ-9 REAPER
General Atomics, United States

RQ-4A GLOBAL HAWK
Northrop Grumman,
United States

Sources: DJI; SenseFly; Yuneec; The Economist
Economist.com

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