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# Swarms Over the Savannas: How Drones are Gaining More Traction in Africa

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**Drones continue to play important roles in conflicts around the world. In Africa, drones have been tested for civilian projects, but they have been largely absent from miltary operations. But will this always be the case?**

With the enormous role drones have started playing in conflict areas around the world, it would not be unreasonable to think that, by now, African skies would be buzzing with them. There are many drones being tested for civilian projects in Africa, but for military purposes they are largely absent. Rather than being drones developed in Africa, these eyes in the skies can be traced back to French or American origin, with the occasional imported Chinese drone buzzing by. Why is this? Time for a short assessment on the state of drones in Africa and the challenges that lie ahead for local development and use of military drones.

**Doing Good**

Large parts of Africa are signified by vast distances and large swaths of difficult terrain combined with a lack of infrastructure. No wonder, then, that drones, with their ability to glide in a straight line over the jungles, hills, rivers and deserts for hours on end, have been considered part of a solution to many of Africa's problems.

And they have solved some problems. Drones keep an eye out above herds of elephants and rhino's in order to stop poaching, they help farmers tend their crops, and they deliver blood and medicine to remote hospitals.
Even Facebook is using drones to bring internet to dark spots in Sub-Saharan

Africa. So what about military purposes?

**Security in Numbers**

Africa's security problems are heavily influenced by the aforementioned geographic factors. Securing remote villages is an incredibly difficult task. International crime organizations, guerilla movements, and terrorist groups can all cross the long porous borders that many African countries have, only to disappear in enormous areas of seemingly impassable terrain. For security too, the surveillance capabilities of drones can be very beneficial to African states. This idea is supported by UN peacekeeping chief Hervé Ladsous, who expanded the use of drones to peacekeeping missions throughout Africa after testing them above the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But aside from the UN, a few African states have taken control of their own drone deployment. Using the US Department of Defense categories, which separates drones according to their performance and capabilities, we can summarize the state of drones in Africa as follows:

- Not one country on the African continent uses drones that have medium altitude, long distance capability, such as the Reaper or Predator drone.

- Currently, 14 of 54 African states have used so called 'Tactical' drones, meaning drones that have low altitude and low endurance. These are mostly used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, such as the Scan Eagle.

- Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa have claimed that they are now developing their own drones. South Africa is the only African country

with a significant history of developing and deploying them.

- Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa now have drones with lethal capability, while more states seek to acquire them. Egypt and Nigeria bought these from China, South Africa developed an armed version of its Seeker 400 line.

For security, then, the use of drones is expanding too, but overall, drone acquisitions remain relatively limited. It might be tempting to explain this lack of wide-spread drone use by pointing to the idea of a cash strapped African government, but the real reason lies with the way in which the money is being spent.

**African Ways**

Military budgets throughout Africa have been expanded significantly in the past eleven years, only to be interrupted by low oil prices. According to SIPRI, Chad and Uganda recently invested in Russian MiG fighter jets, Ethiopia purchased 200 Ukrainian T-72 tanks, and Somalia and Nigeria invested in tanks, planes, armored vehicles and fighter jets. Interestingly enough, investments in military drone systems are largely absent, even though these systems are providing a growing tactical advantage for modern armed forces. Armed drones have seen a particular use in intrastate conflict as their loitering and intelligence capabilities enable forces to effectively monitor areas for insurgents. This choice for conventional weapons can be explained in part by the different solutions African governments have for conflicts, compared to the West.

According to Prof. Ralph Rotte of the Aachen University, conventional weapons are favored over drones because they are better suited to the ways African governments fight civil wars. Western warfare is usually done by destroying the

enemy while winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local population. This occurs less often in African civil wars, where military forces focus on outmaneuvering and disrupting each other in order to sap morale and willpower, only to incorporate the exhausted enemy in a system of patronage. This kind of low-intensity fighting does not require the destruction of troops or long-loitering surveillance capability through highly advanced technology. Hence, drones have taken a backseat in military spending in favor of small arms and conventional weaponry.

Even in the few cases where African countries have tried to employ drones, a lack of maintenance, and limited institutional capability for intelligence sharing have grounded the few drones they had. This restricts the capability African states have in terms of tracking and identifying the locations of terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, AQIM, ISIS and Al-Shabaab, which subsequently impacts the fight against these terror groups.

No wonder, then, that Western states have stepped in the counter-insurgency vacuum with their own drones. France now operates drones from Chad, Nigeria and Mali, and the United States (US) flies them from 14 locations throughout Africa, while in the process of constructing a drone base with a 100$ million dollar price-tag in Niger. But the Western drone-monopoly will likely not be a permanent fixture of Africa.

**Drone Troubles**

Despite the shamble state of African drones, it is only a matter of time before they do become widespread and used effectively by African governments. As mentioned previously, five African nations are already developing their own.

Several others, such as Algeria, are looking to acquire armed drones from China.

Interest in using drones in Africa is growing, and the US has recently adopted a joint-statement together with 40 other countries on drone-exports, which will smooth the export of drone-technology. Even if Washington demands high regard for human rights from the countries that seek to acquire armed drones, Beijing won't. Proliferation, then, either via import or local development, is bound to continue.

That drones still have a future in Africa is exemplified by Nigeria as well, which, after having its Israeli drones grounded by corruption, and its Chinese drone crashing while carrying missiles, finally committed a successful drone-strike on Boko Haram.

With the advent of African drones, the flaws of drones will also become a risk to security in Africa. The US has set dangerous precedents with its seemingly unlimited, obscure extra-judicial executions. In fact, UN Special Rapporteur Christof Heyns has warned that US drone strikes are undoing 50 years of international law. African states might be tempted to follow Washington's lead, sending drones to neighboring states to stop those groups that abuse porous borders, without risking the lives of their own military forces. In turn, this cross-border activity might exacerbate conflict between states. Sounds farfetched? Just a few weeks ago India attacked terrorists in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, with the help of a drone. This surgical strike worsened the already poor relationship between the two countries.

Though current advanced strike-capable drones are reliant on a complex technological infrastructure, including satellites, and thus limit the number of

States able to use them, other developments in the defense industry are focused on making smaller tactical drones capable for either armed use, or use them as loitering munitions that turn into kamikaze drones. These types of drones are more accessible for States that do not rely on high-tech networks to deploy them.

It's also not difficult to imagine what armed drones can do in the hands of oppressive governments. If Barack Obama can take out people without due process, there is no reason why the likes of Omar al-Bashir or Robert Mugabe cannot do the same to their political opponents under the guise of "security".

Then there is the question of whether drone-strikes can bring long-term security. New evidence suggests that more innocent civilians are being killed by drone strikes, and that communities are getting traumatized *en masse*. This might actually lead to an increase in militancy and terrorist activity, and thus only exacerbate the problem. African governments will have to be able to avoid the trap of drones as an 'easy solution', in order for drones to become a positive addition to stability and security.

**Drone Danger Ahead**

Drone development and imports are set to rise across Africa. With time, and through cooperation with the West and China, African military forces might develop the necessary technical know-how, organization and doctrine to deploy drones effectively. Because of the drone's unique features, they might contribute greatly to security and stability across Africa.

But there is also an incredible risk of escalating conflict if drones are used wrongly. The low threshold for use of force that armed drones bring, combined

with the cross-border nature of criminal and terrorist organizations in Africa, can pit countries against each other if drones are used recklessly in each other's territory. Drones might also appeal to African states that seek to eliminate rebels or dissidents, without full realization that drone strikes can actually worsen a conflict both internally and with neighboring states.

The current use of drone strikes by the West sets the precedent for future abuse by African governments. The recent Joint Declaration on use and export of armed drones contains too many caveats, and the only African countries to sign it were Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa and the Seychelles. China was not a signatory to this declaration, even though it is the largest exporter of armed drones to Africa. Therefore, it's imperative that the West becomes transparent about its use of drones, and that it (re-)establishes judicial norms and boundaries through which states can hold each other accountable. Stronger export control regimes, that include China, will be essential too. This will be necessary to prevent drone-chaos that we might otherwise see unfold in Africa in the near-future.

Image by Times Asi/Wikimedia.

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