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Drones in the DRC: A Case Study for Future Deployment in United Nations Peacekeeping

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Abstract

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, are often associated with the American War on Terror in the Middle East due to the extensive use of the technology for armed strikes and intelligence. It is well known that UAVs have been deployed in Pakistan, Iraq, Israel, and Afghanistan; however, few are aware that drones have played an integral role in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) since 2013. This paper seeks to empirically explore the implications of UAV use in the DRC by examining issues related to data use, mandated use of force, costs, as well as the blurring of offensive and humanitarian action. By using MONUSCO as a case study to examine its successes and pitfalls, this paper concludes that although the technology provides significant benefits, there are major obstacles for scaled-up use of drones in other missions. Ultimately, costs, missions that are less politically palatable, optics, and reputational risk are major challenges for the UN to consider in order to ensure fully executed mandates and successful missions where drones are involved in the future.

Since the inception of United Nations peacekeeping, technologies behind missions have evolved as much as the conflicts have changed. Advancements like the internet or sophisticated military equipment have expanded the functions and effectiveness of peacekeeping missions in many ways. While most new technologies can be incorporated into Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) deployments with relative ease, few have created as much controversy and debate as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Commonly associated with military interventions, UAVs (drones) have recently assumed a role in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). By using the mission as a case study, this paper will demonstrate the utility of UAVs in the realm of peacekeeping by exploring the successes and concerns experienced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It will highlight some of the contentious issues related to drone deployment and analyze implications for further expansion of the technology into other missions related to data use, mandated use of force, costs, and mixing offensive and humanitarian action. Finally, a presentation of policy recommendations based upon each consideration will be provided to argue that drone use can immensely benefit peacekeeping, but there are important details to take into account to ensure successful deployments and fully implemented mandates.

Applications of Drones

Unmanned aerial vehicles have been a pillar of military technology during the 21st century (Thornton, 2007). Types range from the largest American-produced Global Hawk or Predator, to the tiny Nano Hummingbird or Switchblade (Andrews, 2016). Some models can remain in the air for over 34 hours and be flown by multiple pilots on the ground through satellite relays (United States Air Force, 2014). Others carry Hellfire missiles guided by sophisticated sensors and cameras (United States Air Force, 2015). The advanced technology provides a powerful, multi-purpose tool that can be applied to a range of operational requirements, including surveillance and strikes. Drones have been launched as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in support of regional community initiatives, as well as in multilateral operations as in the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya and unilaterally in Pakistan and Yemen (Andrews, 2016).

While UN use of drones has historically been limited, there are precedents for UAV support in peacekeeping. For example, the German military is slated to deploy Heron 1 surveillance types to support the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) starting November 2016 (Airbus Defence and Space, 2016). Furthermore, MONUSCO has used Italian produced drones to conduct surveillance since 2013 (United Nations Security Council, 2013). This

makes MONUSCO a useful case study to examine UAVs in peacekeeping based on the extent and length of deployment.

A Case Study in Drones & Peacekeeping

Conflict in the DRC

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has faced horrendous suffering and conflict in the eastern Kivu regions since a 1996 rebellion in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2014). The insecurity has been driven by proliferation of external and internal rebel groups, natural resource wealth, and a history of kleptocratic government. Human rights violations, "chronic humanitarian crises," as well as sexual and gender-based violence are characteristics of the instability plaguing the DRC (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2014).

In 1999, UN peacekeeping was deployed after the establishment of a ceasefire agreement between the DRC and regional states (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation, 2014). MONUC, the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was promptly begun, initially as an observation mission. Following UN-organized elections in 2006, it was given a more robust mandate, including capacity building of state institutions and conflict resolution around the country (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2014). After eleven years, MONUC was renamed to MONUSCO, signalling a new era in the mission with an even more robust mandate.

MONUSCO

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo was officially authorized under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter on July 1, 2010 (United Nations Security Council, 2010). Its mandate originally placed priority on the "protection of civilians in addition to stabilization and peace consolidation" but also supported Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) as well as other ancillary efforts (United Nations Security Council, 2010). At its inception, the mission did not utilize drones, instead relying on traditional sources for intelligence and support including the host government, DRC military personnel, and relevant interlocutors.

In 2013, the conflict and mandate were elevated to previously unprecedented levels. In the Kivus, multiple armed rebel groups, including the 23 March Movement (M23), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), were actively "destabilizing" the already "deteriorating security and humanitarian situation" in their perpetration of gross human rights abuses against civilians (United Nations Security Council, (2013). In order to respond to growing concerns, the Security Council renewed MONUSCO's

mandate, adding the "Force Intervention Brigade" (FIB) for a more robust set of priorities and functions.

The Brigade is an offensive battalion responsible for "neutralizing" the hostile armed groups around the country by taking all required measures. Its structure consists of "three infantry battalions, one artillery, and one Special force and Reconnaissance company" (United Nations Security Council, 2013). Interestingly, the FIB is also authorized to use unarmed UAVs for surveillance to monitor the arms embargo. The drones provide aid in the "seizure, collection, and disposal of arms" as it relates to DDR efforts (United Nations Security Council, 2013). Officially, this is the only section under which drone use by the mission is specifically identified and mandated. This has remained true in subsequent renewals of the mission up until March 31, 2017 (United Nations Security Council, 2016).

It is critical to note that the technology used by MONUSCO constitutes *unarmed* unmanned aerial vehicles. The UN received its five Falco drones from an Italian firm called Selex ES (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2014). This particular model has an endurance of up to 14 hours and is considered in the midsized range (Selex Ex, 2014). As per the mandate, it is used for surveillance purposes only. However, Falco is capable of being equipped with a payload up to 70 kg for targeted strike uses (Selex Ex, 2014). For this reason, the UN has stressed the nature of its systems as being unarmed "unmanned aerial systems" to dispel any concern about uses outside of surveillance and to reduce any negative connotations (United Nations Security Council, 2013).

Successes

The decision to mobilize MONUSCO's drones into peacekeeping was closely attributed to increased conflict and concern for proliferating armed groups on the DRC's eastern border. At the time, civilian populations were experiencing significant displacement (United Nations Security Council, 2013). "Summary executions and mass rapes" were common, and insurgents received support from external actors (O'Grady, 2015). Due to chronically "underdeveloped infrastructure, limited government authority, renewed violence," and dense terrain, the mission faced immense challenges in fulfilling its mandate, especially with tracking rebels. Drones presented a viable solution to the problem (Better World Campaign, 2013).

Shortly before the UAVs were sent to the mission in 2013, MONUSCO Force Commander General Santos Cruz remarked:

> With this equipment we combine information gathered in flight with information gathered on the ground by people. One can observe the movements of armed groups, movements of populations and can even see the arms carried by people on the ground, and it is also possible to see people in forested areas. (UN News Center, 2013)

Moreover, the technology is sophisticated enough to fly at different altitudes depending on operational requirements, both at night and during the day. Drones can fly "as low as needed, often seen or heard by the local population" as a powerful deterring force (O'Grady, 2015). In this way, they send the message: "we know where you are, surrender" (Pilgrim, 2015).

According to UN personnel, there was a noticeable improvement in DDR-related progress due to these advantages. In early 2014, there was an apparent increase in M23 rebel defections that correlated to the use of UAVs due to "perceptions that the situation was changing significantly" (UN News Center, 2013). The coordination of UN UAVs is associated with the ultimate disbandment of M23 rebels, enabling forces to target other factions like the FDLR and LRA. Between May 2014 and January 2015, "438 FDLR members voluntarily surrendered" to UN and Congolese forces (Pilgrim, 2015). An additional 415 members were neutralized and cantoned "during the forced disarmament phase" until July 2015 (Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations, 2015). It is clear that the deployment of the FIB and its drones contributed tremendously to the DDR efforts of MONUSCO.

Scalability for Wider UN Peacekeeping

Despite the formidable success of drone use for DDR efforts in the DRC, it is important to consider whether the same successes could be applicable in the context of other peacekeeping missions. Missions are created differently according to authorized mandate and contextual nuances of the given conflict. There are a number of considerations for determining scalability of potential future drone components in other missions. Four areas to consider based on lessons from the DRC case include:

i. Mixing offensive and humanitarian action;
ii. Mandated use of force;
iii. Costs and acquisition;
iv. Use of data.

Mixing Offensive & Humanitarian Action

Different UAVs can be armed and unarmed depending on the mission. In the context of MONUSCO, they have been exclusively unarmed but associated with the offensive military FIB. At multiple times, however, the UAVs were used beyond surveillance related to the arms embargo. In one example, MONUSCO drones were sent for rescue efforts to save "a sinking passenger ferry in Lake Kivu" (O'Grady, 2015). In another instance, in 2014, the mission offered its drones to NGOs to monitor their humanitarian projects. This offer was met with anger as there was a danger of "blurring the lines between military and humanitarianism" (O'Grady, 2015).

A similar issue could arise if multiple missions began using UAVs for mixed offensive and humanitarian purposes. This inconsistency in use

might alter perceptions of UN impartiality, causing distrust among local populations or host governments. This impact would be especially concerning in communities that have had previous exposure to militarized, armed drones.

To avoid these negative effects, DPKO should seek to strictly adhere to authorized mandate or risk degrading UN reputation in host countries. Only under exceptional circumstances should UAVs be deployed outside of the mandate. The UN should also seek to create a clear differentiation between how its drones are deployed to avoid confusion, perhaps undertaking in-country campaigns to facilitate education among the populations about the nature of drone use with emphasis on transparency.

Mandated Use of Force

When peacekeeping missions are launched under Chapter 7 and instructed not to use force "except in self-defence and defence of the mandate," to what extent should UAVs be used in self-defence (United Nations Security Council, 2016)? If a mission has access to drones and needed to defend itself, should all types of technology be used to defend the mission and UN resources? Furthermore, if the drone used is capable of armament, and the protection of civilians could benefit from the use of an armed drone, would the mission be justified in launching armed offensives, as the FIB is?

These are all very critical questions to answer if drones are to be used further for peacekeeping in complex, hostile conflicts. To avoid mistakes in the use of force, every mandate containing drones should include comprehensive rules of engagement and mandated use of force. As with the notion of drones blurring the lines between humanitarian and offensive actions, mandates involving UAVs must be clear and adhered to by personnel to avoid disastrous public relations, for example in the case of mistaken use of force. The UN should also consider if it would ever incorporate armed capabilities and consult stakeholders on the decision to maintain accountability and transparency.

Costs & Acquisition

As with all peacekeeping operations, equipment is provided based on what troop contributing countries (TCCs) are willing to supply. Therefore, the UN does not own drones and instead relies on states to provide them. By this model, missions are not created equal in the eyes of TCCs. Some missions are 'strategic orphans,' where states lack the political will to make contributions, and experience a lack in the requisite equipment contributions. This adds a challenging dimension to mandate creation and execution, as there is no guarantee that UAVs will ever materialize for deployment.

Furthermore, with so many different types of drones, there is a significant challenge in the interest of interoperability. Not all states have the capabilities to deploy the UAVs, analyze the data, and maintain the

systems—this is highly dependent on what states are contributing. In the event that drones can be provided by a state but the same state is unwilling to provide analysts and pilots, DPKO might be forced to turn to specialized contractors. These contracts increase mission costs and, combined with the already expensive technology, would add significant expenses that the UN might not have the budget to sustainably deploy.

Given the large costs associated with UAVs, DPKO and the Security Council should take into consideration the sustainability of using the technology in relation to the benefits and costs. They should also consider a wide range of possible TCCs with UAV capabilities in the interest of cost-saving, although never at the expense of good conduct, human rights, and required skills.

Data Use

All drones are equipped with cameras, sensors, and the endurance to remain in the air for hours conducting surveillance. The result is a huge amount of data being relayed, stored, and analyzed. Intelligence is a sensitive topic for sovereign states, and not all states are likely to accept the same agreement on use of data collected by the UN. This prompts the question of who owns or could reasonably own the intelligence collected: would the host state, UN, firm, or country deploying and analyzing the information have a claim?

With so much data collected and the unprecedented ability to view activities on the ground, the UN might have added liability when surprise ambushes, large-scale massacres, or lack of early warning occurs. It is not unprecedented for the UN to be criticized for failing to respond to these kinds of attacks in situations where drones were unavailable. The vast insights provided by UAVs in the field combined with lack of action by peacekeepers to undertake more offensive action against a discovered threat could draw significant criticism, even if intervention is unpalatable for UN personnel. The presence of so much data would make it difficult for battalions to operate and avoid scandals of inaction that in turn weaken the trust of civilians and the host government. If peacekeepers have advanced warning or reason to believe rebel movements threaten civilians and fail to do 'enough' as judged by society, mission rapport could be irreparably damaged. This adds elements of reputational risk and should be considered when using UAVs in particularly hostile and dynamic conflicts.

In order to manage these identified risks, DPKO and field staff should engage in extensive consultation and information sharing with relevant country authorities. It must be conveyed to the host government and military that while the UN can provide UAV intelligence to inform operations against militants, under no circumstances can the mission be assumed to accept sole responsibility for protecting civilians. It must also be understood that there is a limit to the data shared by the UN in the interest of privacy and optics of the mission; if the UN is viewed as an

informant for the military, the critical trust of civil society could be eroded. Any mission that deploys UAVs should ensure the host authorities fully agree to how data will be used.

Conclusion

Incorporating new technology in peacekeeping is critical for capacity building and executing robust mandates. The case study of MONUSCO's use of drones shows they are valuable, adding extended capability and success to efforts. Expanded use in future peacekeeping operations would likely also benefit forces, especially in dangerous conflicts. However, before increased deployments occur, the UN must consider, consult, and agree on the data use, costs and acquisition, use of force, and terms of use to preserve relations with actors and avoid reputational risk and controversy. UAVs have many positive aspects to bring peacekeeping, but only once they are implemented effectively and carefully.

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