Book Review: Drones in the African Battlespaces[1][2]

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The growing use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) has changed the way of modern wars. Most studies and research on drone warfare mainly focus on the United States, Russia, Ukraine or the Middle East. However, Africa has received much less attention, even though military drones are becoming increasingly important across the continent. Drones in the African Battlespaces, edited by Wayne Stephen Coetzee and Dries Putter examines the strategic, geopolitical, operational and legal aspects of military drone use in Africa. The authors highlight that the African continent has its own complex security environment. Different geopolitical interests, domestic security problems, technological developments and governance challenges all shape the way drones are used. As the volume demonstrate, drones are not only military tools but also technologies that influence state sovereignty, regional security and the changing character of armed conflict.

The introductory chapter outlines the main ideas of the volume. Coetzee and Putter identify three themes that appear throughout the book: the strategic and geopolitical impact of drone proliferation, the operational role of drones in African conflicts and the ethical and legal issues connected to their increasing use (pp. 1–8). These themes provide a clear structure and help connect the different chapters despite the wide range of topics and case studies.

In the second chapter, Graeme Plint and Dries Putter argue that drones should not be viewed only as unmanned aircraft. They suggest a broader approach that includes autonomous systems operating in the air, on land and at sea, instead. They explain that military effectiveness today depends not only on individual platforms but also on the integration of autonomous technologies, artificial intelligence, communication systems and command-and-control capabilities (pp. 9–16). This broader perspective helps take drone technology within the wider process of military innovation.

The geopolitical aspects of drone proliferation are examined in detail by Francis Okpaleke and Samuel Oyewole. Their discussion of "drone colonialism" is one of the most interesting chapters in the volume (p. 29). The authors argue that drone exports should not be seen only as commercial deals but also as instruments of geopolitical influence. According to their analysis, countries such as the United States, China, Türkiye

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and Iran use drone exports to strengthen their strategic partnerships with African states (pp. 30–39). These transfers are closely connected to broader military cooperation, including training, intelligence sharing and political cooperation. At the same time, the authors do not present African states as passive recipients of foreign influence. Instead, they show that many governments actively seek drone capabilities to improve counterterrorism operations and border security while balancing relations with competing global players (pp. 40–51).

The operational use of drones is another important theme of the book. In their chapter on the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 in Sub-Saharan Africa, Brendon Cannon and Ash Rossiter question the common view that armed drones are game changers on the battlefield (pp. 51–55). They argue that the effectiveness of drones depends on several local factors, such as geography, logistics, environmental conditions and the availability of trained personnel. For this reason, the authors describe drones as force multipliers that can improve military operations but cannot guarantee strategic success on their own (pp. 56–62).

Arinze Ngwube takes a similar approach in his analysis of France's use of drones during Operation Barkhane (p. 64). He recognises the important role of drones in intelligence gathering, surveillance and precision strikes against jihadist groups operating in the Sahel. At the same time, he discusses the ethical and strategic challenges linked to technology-based counterinsurgency operations (pp. 68-69). The chapter examines issues such as civilian casualties, state sovereignty and the long-term impact of military intervention. Ngwube concludes that advanced military technology alone cannot solve the political and socio-economic causes of instability in the region (pp. 74–80).

The volume also looks beyond combat operations and explores the institutional and governance aspects of drone adoption. Using the so-called Securitisation Theory (ST) (pp. 81–82), Kyle John Bester and Danille Elize Arendse examine how drone technology has been introduced into the South African military (pp. 92–94). They argue that military innovation is shaped not only by technological developments but also by political debates, legal frameworks, institutional capacity and budget limitations. The chapter shows that the successful integration of new military technologies depends as much on governance and state capacity as on technological capability itself (pp. 95–97).

The maritime use of drones is discussed by Tshegofatso Johanna Ramachela, who examines a topic that has received much less attention in the literature on drone warfare in Africa. The author argues that unmanned systems can improve maritime surveillance and support efforts against piracy, illegal fishing and maritime trafficking (pp. 99–110). At the same time, the chapter points out that many African countries still depend on foreign suppliers for these technologies. This raises important questions about regional cooperation and local defence industries (pp. 110–123).

In the next chapter Karen Allen focuses on the growing use of drones by violent non-state actors (p. 126). The author argues that, although drone use in Africa has not yet reached the level seen in Ukraine or the Middle East, the increasing availability of commercial drones and open-source technical knowledge is likely to change the security

environment in the coming years (pp. 127–133). The author shows that these groups already use drones for intelligence gathering, surveillance, propaganda, recruitment and potentially offensive operations (pp. 139–141). The chapter illustrates how easily available technologies are changing the nature of asymmetric warfare (pp. 135–145).

In the concluding chapter, Wayne Stephen Coetzee and Dries Putter bring together the main findings of the volume and present several policy recommendations (pp. 154–155). They discuss the need for stronger regulatory frameworks, greater investment in local technological development, closer regional cooperation, ethical governance, cybersecurity and the wider civilian use of drone technologies (pp. 155–161). By connecting academic research with practical policy recommendations, the authors make the volume relevant not only for researchers but also for policymakers and security practitioners.

Overall, one of the main strengths of the book is its multidisciplinary approach. The contributors combine perspectives from political science, strategic studies, military studies, intelligence, security policy and technology studies. As a result, the book goes beyond a purely technological discussion and places drone proliferation in the broader context of sovereignty, geopolitical competition, hybrid warfare and technological dependence. Another important strength and aspect is its balanced approach. The authors do not present drones either as revolutionary weapons or simply as instruments of foreign influence. The volume also reminds the reader that technological innovation alone does not determine success in war. As with other emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), drones are most effective when they are integrated with sound strategy, effective institutions and trained personnel. The authors show that drones are dual-use technologies that can support surveillance, counterterrorism, maritime security and humanitarian operations while also creating new ethical, legal and security challenges.

The volume is valuable for scholars, policymakers and practitioners interested in the growing role of drones in Africa's security environment and in the changing nature of modern warfare and new technologies. At the same time, the book has some limitations also. Although it provides a detailed discussion of the major external suppliers of drones, including the United States, China, Türkiye and Iran, it pays less attention to African defence industries and domestic innovation. A more detailed discussion of drone production in countries such as South Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger and Nigeria would have strengthened the analysis by showing whether African states may become producers as well as users of these technologies. In addition, although the book focuses on Africa, more comparisons with recent conflicts in Ukraine or the Middle East would have provided a broader perspective and placed the African case studies within a wider discussion on military innovation.