Background
It has been 16 years since the first armed drone strike was carried out by the United States. Since then, drones have become a central feature of the military landscape. Best estimates suggest that twelve states have conducted military strikes with armed drones, with around 30 states in possession of this technology.

Their capacity to loiter, remain undetected, and negate the risk of physical harm to the attacker make drones a seemingly attractive asset. The UN Secretary-General observed that it is those same “unique characteristics that make them particularly susceptible to misuse.”

Over time, it has become clear that the use of armed drones by a small number of states has resulted in significant harm to communities, leaving an ever-growing trail of injury, death, destruction of property, and psychological harm and displacement of people—despite the narrative of surgical precision that surrounds them. The use of armed drones to conduct “signature strikes”—which take advantage of intelligence gathering capabilities to attack individuals apparently matching a particular profile—is a strategy of “algorithmic killing” that has resulted in mis-identifications and represents an affront to human dignity.

The rise of drone use has also been characterised by an unacceptable lack of transparency, including a failure to account for casualties—which, in turn, has implications for respecting victims’ rights. Lack of public and democratic accountability in user states raises the risk that activities are being carried out which would be rejected as reprehensible if their scope and impact was revealed.

Armed drone use such as the US practice of targeting individuals outside of armed conflict has also raised legal concerns. While numerous states have acknowledged that international human rights and humanitarian law apply to the use of drones, some have offered divergent interpretations of core legal concepts in their use of drones, and many have not yet articulated a detailed position.

Current context
In 2017, seven states raised armed drones in their interventions to the First Committee (Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Ireland, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Portugal), variously raising humanitarian, human rights, legal, transparency, and accountability concerns and calling for further dialogue and regulation. There were no proposals for resolutions regarding drones.

The US-led process to develop new international political standards for the “responsible export and subsequent use of drones,” that was initiated following a 2016 political declaration is still reportedly underway. The risk remains that these standards, if developed, will be less restrictive than export control frameworks that are already...
in place. As of yet, civil society has received no meaningful engagement on this issue.

The UN Secretary-General asserted in his 2018 Disarmament Agenda that armed drones “pose well-known and documented implications for humanitarian and human rights principles,” and pledged that the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) will, “support member states in exploring common standards for the transfer, holdings and use of unmanned aerial vehicles.”

UNIDIR’s 2017 report Increasing Transparency, Oversight and Accountability of Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles provided analysis of the issues associated with armed drones and concluded that there is a “patchwork of measures that does not add up to an effective response to issues.”

Beyond the condemnation of current unacceptable practices, an international policy response is needed that addresses the role of drones in the use of force. Multilateral dialogue will be vital to the development of appropriate and effective international standards to address harm from drones and prevent the erosion of existing legal frameworks.

**Recommendations**

During First Committee, delegations should:

- Recognise the ethical, legal, and humanitarian concerns that drones bring to the use of force in the contemporary landscape, and state commitment to reducing and addressing harm and ensuring the protection of rights;
- Recognise the grave risk that international legal frameworks could be eroded through the use of armed drones, in the context of practices that challenge existing norms;
- Assert the need for transparency in the use of drones by any and all states, for the recording of casualties and the addressing of victims’ rights, and for accountability and democratic oversight; and
- Recognise the need for a broader multilateral conversation about what role drones should play in the use of force and the specific limits and standards for their use.

Beyond First Committee, states should:

- Raise these issues in all relevant forums international and regionally, including human rights-focused forums. Ensure that issues related to export control are pursued in relevant forums, such as the Arms Trade Treaty;
- Develop progressive, detailed policies on the use of drones that align with and strengthen international norms; and
- Explore how international standards can be pursued effectively.

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8 “Joint Declaration for the Export and Subsequent Use of Armed or Strike-Enabled Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs),” US Department of State, 2016, https://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/2017/274817.htm