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REMOTE WARFARE AND FRAGILE ACCOUNTABILITY: ETHICAL AND LEGAL CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA'S DRONE COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

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ABSTRACT: In recent times, global counterterrorism efforts and strategies have been reshaped by drones, also known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). The security architecture of Nigeria has witnessed a significant shift owing to the deployment and use of drones in the present fight against Boko Haram insurgents. Understandably, the use of drones reduces risks associated with military personnel, accentuates precision strikes and enhances surveillance; their usage, however, is associated with some complex ethical concerns. This paper critically examines the ethical concerns surrounding Nigeria's drone usage and operations, focusing on accountability and transparency, civilian protection and adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL); and the broader implications of remote warfare for state legitimacy. The research design of this study is a qualitative, doctrinal, and normative research design, and the theoretical base is anchored on the Just War Theory, International Humanitarian Law, and Moral Responsibility in Human–AI Drone Warfare. The study examines operational and normative challenges associated with drone warfare and concludes that, despite the tactical advantages of Nigeria's drone programme, it is imbued with intelligence limitations, a lack of adequate regulations and ineffective accountability mechanisms. The paper recommends clearer legal frameworks, institutional restructuring and more transparency, which suggests that institutional reforms, clearer legal frameworks, and greater transparency are vital towards ensuring that drone deployment aligns with International Humanitarian Law, global normative standards and offers adequate protection to civilian populations.

Keywords: Drone Warfare, Counterterrorism, IHL Compliance, Military Ethics

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, counterterrorism efforts, especially by state actors, have assumed several novel dimensions. The emergence of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) has led to a change in the way contemporary counterterrorism is conducted, shifting UAVs from intelligence-gathering assets to the primary tool for conducting precision warfare remotely (Heyns et al., 2016; Okwara, 2025).

Dortbudak (2015) argues that UAVs have been used in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions, but the advent of drones led to their use in counterterrorism operations. Armed drones are known to provide operational efficiencies by continuously collecting intelligence, reducing risk to soldiers conducting ground operations, and creating operational opportunities in geographically difficult or inaccessible terrain. However, drones, in addition to providing these operational advantages, represent a broader shift in the normative framework of warfare; they have the potential, through their use, to redefine how force is used and how responsibility for its use is assigned.

The fight against terrorism by the Nigerian government has assumed diverse dimensions and has affected diverse segments of the Nigerian state, and this is due to the complex and adaptive nature of the Boko Haram sect. (Idowu et al., 2021; Nosiri & Ibekwe, 2021; & Owojori et al., 2021) The global shift in the fight against terrorism has been reflected in the Nigerian government's deployment of UAVs in its fight against Boko Haram insurgents (Hakeem & Adams, 2025). Abiodun (2020) avers that the protracted insurgency in Nigeria's northeast pushed the country to incorporate drone technology into its counterinsurgency architecture in order to build up intelligence, exert control and achieve targeted strikes. From a strategic viewpoint, this move appears rational as UAVs enhance state reach while decreasing battlefield exposure.

Worthy of mention is the fact that there are very significant ethical ramifications to this change. In the view of Heyns et al. (2016), rigorous adherence to the criteria of difference, proportionality and accountability is key to allowing for the use and deployment of force as allowed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This situation is further complicated by drone warfare. As evidenced in civilian casualties in some airstrikes conducted by the Nigerian state, where intelligence-driven targeting runs the danger of misidentification and wrong strikes in asymmetric conflicts, as insurgents integrate into the civilian population (HRW, 2023). Repeated civilian harm without proper scrutiny erodes the principle of distinction.

More fundamentally, drone warfare alters how responsibility is assigned. In the view of Dewitt (2022), the fact that drone operators are physically and psychologically distanced from their targets can dull the immediacy of lethal decisions, while human–Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems disperse accountability across layers of actors and institutions. This creates what he calls "moral crumple zones," where responsibility becomes blurred just when civilian protection demands clarity. In the case of Nigeria's where there is weak oversight, limited transparency, or near absence of it, such diffusion exposes and intensifies structural governance gaps.

Another important fact is the absence of a strong regulatory framework in the deployment of UAVs by the Nigerian military. In Nigeria, there are no clear laws surrounding armed drone use, civilian-harm assessments, authorisation procedures and post-strike accountability (Heyns et al., 2016; Okwara, 2025). This sort of ambiguity produces both administrative and normative fractures, as a lack of formal oversight mechanisms and prescribed guidelines makes the state's adherence to IHL difficult to verify with available data and makes its claim to lawful use of force challenging to verify.

It has been established that there are human rights-related issues associated with aerial surveillance operations. When there is the presence of drones in civilian territories, it makes such airspaces militarized, reduces the trust that civilians have in the military and also encroaches on their privacy (Mekdad et al., 2021; Devitt, 2022). This state of affairs raises some ethical questions that are not restricted to casualties on the battlefield but also advance the fear and trauma associated with civilian communities that constantly witness aerial monitoring.

This study is therefore a modest effort to examine how Nigeria's adoption and use of armed drones signify a leap in its counterterrorism bid and also a normative stress test of how the government adheres to international humanitarian law and maintains accountability and legitimacy in its use. Granted, drones have been proven to be accurate in targeting and intelligence gathering; Nigeria's drone programme has been characterised by regulatory ambiguities, lack of transparency, inadequate monitoring, and constant cases of harm to the civilian population, thus countering the whole essence of counterterrorism.

This paper examines whether ethical standards in warfare can be maintained amid remote warfare in volatile and fragile environments such as Nigeria. By anchoring Nigeria's drone deployment programme on Just War theory, IHL doctrine, and scholarship on moral responsibility in human–AI military systems, the paper advances counterterrorism discourse by interrogating the more profound normative outcomes of mechanised violence in present-day African security architecture and avers that while Nigeria's drone programme is strategically rational, it is encumbered by serious ethical and legal weaknesses due to regulatory ambiguity, weak accountability mechanisms and intelligence deficiencies.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and normative research design with the aim of critically evaluating Nigeria's drone operations against established ethical and legal standards.

Research Design

Owing to the exploratory and analytical nature of the study, the principal focus is on legal and ethical evaluations rather than on the statistical evaluation of strike data. The paucity of statistical data on the drone operations carried out by the Nigerian government necessitates an essentially interpretative and normative analysis.

Data Sources

Sampling was purposively obtained. Only prioritised literature of quality through peer review was used in terms of theoretical rigour, while only the empirical report of incidents by credible bodies such as Human Rights Watch was considered for incident data. Only media sources that provided credibility and corroborating evidence were used. Conversely, any sources that lacked transparency were not included.

Method of Data Analysis

The study's data were analysed through a thematic content analysis, in which open coding of texts produced groups based on normative and institutional categories, and then each group was compared across sources to identify patterns and divergences. This triangulation helped to enhance analytical validity.

Theoretical Framework: Just War Theory, International Humanitarian Law, and Moral Responsibility in Human–AI Drone Warfare

The study triangulates the normative convergence between Just War Theory, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and contemporary scholarship on moral responsibility in human–AI military systems. It is with these frameworks that the legal, ethical and institutional provisions for analysing Nigeria's drone deployment are drawn

Just War Theory: Moral Constraints on the Conduct of War

The writings of such classical thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo provided theoretical foundations for the Just War Theory. The works of such modern scholars as Michael Walzer also lend credence to the theory. The theory clearly demarcates between jus ad bellum (the justification for resorting to war) and *jus in bello* (the justice of war conduct). The crux and focus of this study are *jus in bello* , which regulates morality in the conduct of armed conflict. Granted, global counterterrorism efforts are concerned and, of course, raise matters relating to jus ad bellum; we consider such matters tangential, and the focus of this study will be on issues relating to jus in bello.

According to Walzer (2015), discrimination or distinction and proportionality are two basic principles that define the conduct of war. While discrimination expects combatants to differentiate between core military targets and the civilian population, proportionality, on the other hand, forbids excessive harm to civilians relative to whatever military gain that may be advanced. The key argument posited by Walzer is that moral legitimacy should guide the conduct of warfare, and that conduct should prevail over cause.

International Humanitarian Law: Legal Codification of Moral Principles

The Geneva Conventions and additional protocols provide the basis for the codification of International Humanitarian Law. The provisions of the convention allow for just war provisions to turn into legally acceptable obligations. In the view of Heyns et al. (2016), the use of armed drones in warfare is not unlawful; the legality of its use lies essentially with adherence to the laid out IHL norms.

From the foregoing, three essential intertwined legal principles are germane to this work. They include:

Distinction: This principle posits the need for parties to clearly distinguish between civilian and military targets during operations, and that offensives should be rendered only to military targets (counterforce)

Proportionality: In the case of uncontrolled or incidental harm to civilians, such harm should not be out of proportion when compared to the sought military gain

Precaution and Accountability: The onus lies on states to conduct feasibility studies in order to take measures to reduce harm, ascertain targets and when necessary, investigate provable allegations of strikes that are unlawful. Orend (2013) posits that just war morality and its institutionalisation find expression in the codification of modern humanitarian law. As such, when International Humanitarian Laws are violated, they lead to concomitant ethical failures and legal infractions

Moral Responsibility in Human–AI Military Systems

There is the integration of automated or semi-automated decision-support technologies in modern drone operations. As Devitt (2022) initiates the concept of "moral crumple zones". That makes for the diffusion of tasks within human-AI systems. In this situation, accountability may become blurred across operators, analysts, commanders and system designers when targeting decisions are informed by algorithmic systems.

There is s critical normative risk inherent in this framework. Clear lines of moral and legal responsibility may be weakened by technologically induced warfare. Although AI may be instrumental in targeting and surveillance, ultimate accountability remains within the purview of the state and human decision-makers.

Relevance and Theoretical Contribution

The integrated framework incorporating Just War Theory, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and studies related to the responsibility gap creates a multidimensional standard against which Nigeria's drone programme can be evaluated. The integrated framework provides ethical standards (discrimination and proportionality), binding legal benchmarks (distinction, precaution, accountability), and an analytical lens through which to assess the degree of civilian harm done, levels of transparency, and whether the use of AI introduces new levels of responsibility for harm caused. The integrated framework allows for scrutiny of both operational outcomes and investigative processes, not only with regard to strategic effectiveness but also with regard to legal compliance and moral permissibility. In theoretical terms, the use of drones will not only be seen in terms of tactical innovation but rather as a normative test of the ability of technologically mediated force to be used in such a way that does not.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Three strands of literature organized around three interrelated themes: (i) the international legal and ethical framework governing armed drones; (ii) drone proliferation and regulatory gaps in African

security contexts; and (iii) civilian harm, accountability deficits, and the diffusion of responsibility in Nigeria's operational environment were used to interrogate the growing scholarship on drone warfare. These strands highlighted the empirical and conceptual foundations for exploring the legitimacy of Nigeria's drone deployment.

Theme One: International Humanitarian Law, Just War, and the Ethics of Remote Warfare

Literature reviewed under this theme interrogates drone use under the law on the use of force (ius ad bellum), International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and international human rights law. Scholars argue that no separate legal regime governs drone strikes; rather, these strikes must fulfil all relevant and applicable legal standards regulating armed conflict (Heyns, Akande, Hill-Cawthorne, & Chengeta, 2016). The changing nature of warfare in recent times, according to Killmister (2008), has indeed had varied implications on just war theory, thus limiting the efficacy of International Humanitarian Law. Central to this framework are the principles of distinction, proportionality, necessity, and accountability.

The emphasis of Heyns et al. (2016) is that adherence with IHL is less dependent on the weaponry employed but basically on how it is used, and that technologically precise weapons risk unlawful application when there are no clear rules of engagement that are in tandem with International Humanitarian Law. This issue has been raised in other studies. Nonetheless, the legal compliance of drone use is often complicated by the opaque nature associated with its usage and deployment. This makes the principle of distinction, which obliges parties to differentiate between military and civilian targets, contentious in asymmetric conflicts, where targeting is often based on intelligence-based profiling rather than on visible participation in the conflict.

Beyond legality, scholars interrogate the ethical implications of technologically mediated killing. Scholars such as Mekdad, Al-Saidi, and Mansour (2021) contend that civilian protections and safety are hampered by constant drone surveillance. Lidynia et al (2017) therefore suggest that drones should be specified or marked, signalling what purposes they are meant for and should also have designated routes of deployment and use. In the same vein, Devitt (2022) advances the idea of "moral crumple zones" in human–AI military systems, where distributed decision-making diminishes individual responsibility for harm on the civilian populace. While automation and remote targeting do not remove accountability in principle, they often dilute it in practice. This position is corroborated by the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), which states that:

> Future weapons systems must preserve meaningful human control over the use of (lethal) force, that is, humans, not computers and their algorithms, should ultimately remain in control of, and thus morally responsible for, relevant decisions about (lethal) military operations. (Article 36, 2015)

Collectively, this literature establishes that the ethical legitimacy of drone warfare hinges not merely on operational success but on demonstrable compliance with legal norms and clear chains of responsibility.

Theme Two: Drone Proliferation and Regulatory Gaps in African Security Contexts

A second strand of scholarship examines the growing deployment of UAVs across African security landscapes. Okwara (2025) gives a vivid account of how states in Africa, Nigeria inclusive, have accommodated the use and deployment of drones in their security architecture in a bid to ward off terrorism, banditry and insurgency. Although drones are cost-effective force multipliers, Okwara (2025) decries such ever-present challenges in their deployment. Such challenges include, but are not limited to, poor public oversight, inadequate training, weak regulatory frameworks and structural challenges. National-level analyses reinforce these concerns. More recently, Hakeem and Adams (2025) aver that, notwithstanding the impact of drone technology in strengthening Nigeria's national security architecture, insufficient institutional and legal oversight, which are largely underdeveloped, diminish this gain. This view is further re-echoed by Oluwadamilola and Hakeem (2025), who stressed that although drones are known to offer persistent, cost-effective and relatively safer alternatives to conventional military operations, ethical concerns, regulatory gaps, technical issues, issues of civilian casualties, etc hamper their smooth operation in fragile states like Nigeria.

The foregoing demonstrates the fact that the lack of publicly accessible frameworks governing the authorisation of strikes, the absence of civilian-harm assessment mechanisms, and post-strike accountability frameworks, etc., generates normative complexities. Sparrow (2013) argued that the speed with which militaries have started using drones has exceeded the pace at which accountability measures have been implemented; therefore, the likelihood that international law will be violated due to a lack of distinction and proportionality is now greater than ever before. Niyitunga (2025) also noted that many armed drones and autonomous systems do not effectively discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, creating increased legal and ethical risks. Recent discussions also emphasised the difficulties of establishing governance structures for drones with artificial intelligence capabilities, as insufficient legal regulation or oversight will hinder their compliance with international law (i.e., international humanitarian law). The subsequent normalisation of drone warfare in Africa without any meaningful governance framework provides yet another example of the disparity that exists among technology innovations related to security and their corresponding institutional oversight. Thus, the deployment of drones in the African context, Nigeria inclusive, signals a widening governance gap between security innovation and institutional oversight.

Theme Three: Civilian Harm, Accountability Deficits, and the Diffusion of Responsibility in Nigeria

The third body of literature focuses on empirical documentation of civilian casualties, accountability deficits, and evolving conflict dynamics in Nigeria's operational environment. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2023) document incidents in which Nigerian military airstrikes, including drone-assisted operations, reportedly resulted in significant civilian deaths. In one widely reported 2023 strike, authorities acknowledged error but failed to provide timely transparency or

comprehensive reparations. Such cases raise concerns about intelligence verification, proportionality assessments, and post-strike investigations. Maigari (2025) provides systematic documentation of mistaken strikes and collateral damage resulting from Nigeria's internal military operations. The article highlights recurring lapses in target identification, inadequate protection of noncombatants, and the absence of comprehensive redress mechanisms for affected civilians

Journalistic investigations further underscore the scale of civilian vulnerability. A report cited by Al Jazeera (2025) estimates that nearly 1,000 civilians were killed in at least 50 drone strikes across Africa between 2021 and 2024, with Nigeria among the affected states. While such figures require careful verification, they signal a pattern of civilian exposure that demands ethical scrutiny. Ogbozor (2024) posits that civilian trust in the military eroded and instability heightened when Nigerian Air Force strikes intended to hit terrorist and bandit targets in the Northeast mistakenly landed on civilian targets. Issues like this arise in the Nigerian context without adequate compensation and legal frameworks to arrest such ugly incidents.

At the same time, the operational environment is becoming more complex. Insurgent groups such as ISWAP have reportedly begun deploying commercially modified drones in attacks against military positions (DW, 2025). This proliferation blurs the monopoly of advanced aerial technology once held by states and introduces new asymmetries in civilian risk exposure.

Within this context, Devitt's (2022) analysis of moral responsibility becomes particularly salient. When lethal decisions are embedded within distributed technological systems and opaque command hierarchies, accountability becomes institutionally diffuse. Combined with limited transparency in Nigeria's reporting practices (Okwara, 2025; Oluwadamilola & Hakeem, 2025), this diffusion undermines public trust and complicates independent legal assessment.

Literature Synthesis and Identified Gap

The literature reveals a constant conflict among three themes: the legal validity of drones as weapons under IHL is dependent upon being governed, regulated transparently, accountable to people, and protecting civilians through verifiable means. Current literature offers broad analyses of the law governing drones at the international level and regional levels (Okwara, 2025; Hakeem & Adams, 2025; Maigari, 2025), or documentation of civilian harm from the use of drones (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2025). Very little theoretically integrated literature exists that connects all three types of literature to the case of Nigeria, specifically regarding how regulatory deficiencies, accountability deficits, and moral issues interrelate to create the ethical basis for drone warfare. This gap is addressed by this study by fusing governance analysis, legal doctrine, and moral philosophy to interrogate if Nigeria's deployment of drones in its national security framework is in sync with human rights provisions and international humanitarian standards and practices.

DISCUSSION

The discussion is structured into the following dominant themes, namely, 1) compliance with Just War Theory and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), (2) the diffusion of moral responsibility in human-AI military systems, (3) the Realist Justification vs. Constructivist/normative warnings,

(4) the Blowback effect and the strategic Paradox of Drone Warfare and (5) The intelligence-Technology Gap: The Ethics of Precision without Insights.

Compliance with Just War Theory and International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

The ethical evaluation of Nigeria's counterterrorism operations rests fundamentally on the application of *jus in bello* principles, specifically distinction and proportionality. While the Nigerian military's acquisition of Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) such as the Wing Loong II and Bayraktar TB2 is framed as a modernization of state capability, the deployment of these "precision" technologies into the "imprecise" operational environment of the Lake Chad Basin and Northwest Nigeria creates a profound normative friction. The following analysis operationalises these challenges.

First, there is the distinction dilemma between technological precision and operational ambiguity. The Principle of Distinction, a cornerstone of Just War Theory codified in International Humanitarian Law, mandates that belligerents must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants (Walzer, 2015). In conventional interstate warfare, this distinction is often communicated visually through uniforms and defined front lines. However, the counterinsurgency against Boko Haram and armed bandits presents a hybrid battle space where such visual markers are absent.

The Nigerian Air Force (NAF) faces an adversary that deliberately weaponises the civilian population. Boko Haram and ISWAP combatants frequently embed themselves within rural settlements, utilise human shielding, and operate without distinctive insignia. In this regard, the optical sensors of a drone, which excel at identifying heat signatures, convoy movements, and geographic coordinates, struggle to discern intent and status. The technology provides high-resolution surveillance, yet it cannot inherently differentiate between a gathering of insurgents and a congregation of civilians without corroborating human intelligence (HUMINT).

This limitation was tragically illustrated in the December 2023 Tudun Biri incident in Kaduna State. In this case, drone operators misidentified a religious gathering as a bandit encampment, resulting in over 85 civilian deaths (Amnesty International, 2023). The strike demonstrates that while the delivery system (the drone) was capable of precision targeting, the targeting cycle itself failed the test of distinction. The imprecise enemy had successfully blurred the lines of the battlefield, and the reliance on remote aerial interpretation failed to re-establish them. Consequently, the distinct moral immunity of the civilian population, the very purpose of *jus in bello,* was violated not by malice but by an over-reliance on technological interpretation in a cluttered sociological environment.

The second critical dimension involves the Principle of Proportionality, which dictates that the incidental loss of civilian life must not be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. In Nigeria's military drone warfare, the assessment of proportionality is hindered by a systemic verification gap. Ethical adherence to proportionality requires a transparent accounting of two variables, namely, the military value of the target and the collateral damage incurred. However, public reporting on drone strikes in Nigeria is characterized by significant

opacity. Military communiqués frequently announce the neutralization of terrorists but rarely release detailed Battle Damage Assessments (BDAs) that quantify civilian harm or specify the tactical gains achieved. As noted by Human Rights Watch (2023), this lack of transparency renders independent verification impossible.

Without the publication of credible BDAs or the admission of error (outside of undeniable mass casualty events like Tudun Biri), proportionality becomes a rhetorical claim rather than a verifiable fact. The current governance model allows the state to assert that a strike was proportional without providing the evidence necessary to substantiate that judgment. This secrecy creates a moral hazard: if the cost (civilian lives) of a drone strike is hidden from public scrutiny while the benefit (dead terrorists) is amplified, the ethical calculus is artificially skewed in favour of lethal force. Thus, the secrecy surrounding NAF operations does not merely obscure the facts; it structurally undermines the possibility of ethical compliance (Orend, 2013).

Moral Responsibility in Human–AI Systems

The integration of semi-autonomous systems creates a governance deficit regarding agency. Devitt (2022) describes this as a "moral crumple zone," where individual operators disproportionately absorb liability for systemic failures. In Nigeria, this is exacerbated by distributed accountability, as the "kill chain" relies on foreign algorithms (Chinese and Turkish) and fragmented intelligence networks. When errors occur, liability is often diffused into the technological ether, allowing the state to evade institutional accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

This technological mediation also induces psychological distancing. Geographic separation and the "gamification" of the interface can erode the moral salience of lethal force, potentially lowering the threshold for authorizing strikes on ambiguous targets (Technology and Ethics Journal, 2025). In the absence of immediate physical risk, operators may prioritize kinetic action over precautionary restraint, exacerbating the risk of civilian harm in opaque environments like the Sambisa Forest

Realist Justifications vs. Constructivist/Normative Warnings

The driver of Nigeria's drone acquisition is best understood through dialectic of Realism versus Constructivism viewpoints. From a Realist perspective, the state prioritizes survival and force protection. Drones provide essential persistent surveillance over ungoverned spaces and mitigate the risks of IEDs and ambushes that have claimed thousands of soldiers' lives (Okpaleke, Nwosu, Okoli & Olumba, 2023)). Thus, the moral obligation to protect state forces drives the shift to remote warfare.

However, Constructivist analysis warns that these practices establish dangerous regional norms. As a West African hegemon, Nigeria's normalization of opaque, low-accountability drone warfare risks entrenching a "culture of impunity." This signals to neighboring states that IHL compliance is secondary to security imperatives, potentially eroding the rule of law across the Sahelian security complex (Okpaleke et al., 2023).

The Blowback Effect: The Strategic Paradox of Drone Warfare

While legal frameworks like *Jus in Bello* focus on the permissibility of specific acts of violence, a comprehensive ethical analysis must also consider the consequentialist outcomes of those acts. In counterinsurgency (COIN), the "Blowback" effect represents a critical strategic paradox. Here, the very weapon used to eliminate terrorists may, through collateral damage and psychological terror, generate more insurgents than it neutralises. This section moves the discussion beyond "Is the strike legal?" to a more pragmatic and ethical question: "Does the strike perpetuate the war?"

The fundamental premise of the Blowback thesis is that in asymmetric warfare, the centre of gravity is not the enemy force, but the civilian population. Counterinsurgency doctrine posits that the legitimacy of the state is its most potent weapon (Kilcullen, 2009). When a state utilizes high-lethality remote warfare technologies that result in civilian casualties, it risks validating the insurgent narrative that the government is hostile, indiscriminate, or foreign-influenced. In this scenario, a drone strike that successfully neutralizes a cell of Boko Haram fighters but simultaneously kills non-combatants or destroys critical infrastructure (such as markets or mosques) constitutes a tactical success but a strategic failure. The immediate threat is removed, but the grievance generated by the collateral damage serves as a recruitment catalyst for the insurgency, creating a cycle of violence known as the "hydra effect."

In the northeast of Nigeria, the Blowback effect is no longer merely theoretical but operational. Boko Haram and ISWAP have historically capitalized on state brutality and military errors to bolster their ranks. The insurgents frame their struggle as a defence of the local population against a corrupt and apostate state apparatus. Every erroneous drone strike, such as the incident at Tudun Biri or the bombing of the Rann IDP camp, provides the insurgency with potent propaganda material. Images of civilian bodies and destroyed homes are weaponised on social media and in local preaching to portray the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) not as protectors, but as oppressors. This validates the insurgents' claim that the state treats the lives of Northerners as expendable collateral.

The efficacy of drone warfare is heavily dependent on Human Intelligence (HUMINT) to verify targets. However, Blowback severs the link between the military and the community. If a community perceives the sound of a drone as a harbinger of indiscriminate death rather than security, they are less likely to collaborate with security forces. The fear of being targeted by a mistaken airstrike drives a wedge between the people and the state, drying up the very intelligence streams required to conduct precise operations. This perspective shifts the ethical analysis from a purely legalistic compliance checklist to a broader consideration of *Jus post Bellum* (justice after war). Even if a strike meets the minimum legal requirements of proportionality (i.e., the high-value target was worth the collateral damage in a strict utilitarian calculus), it may still be ethically and strategically unsound if it destabilizes the region further.

In prioritizing kinetic solutions (killing terrorists) over human security (protecting populations), Nigeria's drone strategy risks winning battles while losing the war for hearts and minds. The ethical imperative, therefore, aligns with the strategic one, which is that the protection of civilians is not just a legal obligation, but a prerequisite for final victory. Without integrating this understanding, the drone becomes a tool of perpetual conflict rather than conflict resolution.

The Intelligence-Technology Gap: The Ethics of Precision without Insight

A critical, yet frequently overlooked, dimension of the ethical debate surrounding Nigeria's drone warfare is the systemic mismatch between the sophistication of the weapon systems and the reliability of the intelligence network directing them. While the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) has successfully acquired 4th-generation military hardware, specifically the Wing Loong II and Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs, the intelligence architecture supporting these platforms often lags behind, relying on what might be characterized as 2nd-generation analysis. This creates a dangerous Intelligence-Technology Gap.

The fundamental ethical premise here is epistemic. The morality of a precision strike is entirely dependent on the accuracy of the information precipitating it. A UCAV is merely a delivery vector; it possesses high-resolution optical sensors and laser-guided munitions, but it lacks the cognitive capacity to understand social context (Walsh, 2013).

In the counterinsurgency against Boko Haram, the kill chain relies heavily on Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) data. However, in the vast, ungoverned spaces of the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad islands, reliable Human Intelligence (HUMINT) is scarce. The terrain is hostile, informants are often compromised by fear or double-dealing, and electronic Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) is frequently fragmented as insurgents adapt to avoid interception.

The ethical danger arises when the military attempts to compensate for this lack of solid intelligence by over-relying on the drone's optical sensors to interpret patterns of life. In the rural economy of Northern Nigeria, legitimate civilian behaviours often visually mimic insurgent activities. For example, a convoy of motorcycles moving through a forest track could be a Boko Haram raiding party, or it could be a group of traders travelling to a local market to avoid bandits. A gathering of people under tree cover could be a terrorist training camp, or a religious celebration (Maulud). Advanced drone cameras can detect the heat signature of the motorcycle engines or the size of the crowd with perfect clarity. However, they cannot detect intent. When the NAF authorises strikes based primarily on these visual signatures without corroborating independent intelligence, they are bridging the intelligence gap with speculation. The recurrence of accidental mass casualty events, most notably the bombing of Tudun Biri in 2023, is not a result of technological malfunction (the bomb hit exactly where it was aimed). Rather, it is a result of epistemic failure**.** The system worked as designed, but the intelligence input was fatally flawed (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Ethical Conclusion

This gap leads to a harsh ethical conclusion. It is inherently negligent to deploy high-lethality precision platforms without a commensurate investment in precision intelligence capabilities. From an ethical standpoint, possessing a smart bomb imposes a heightened duty of care to possess smart intelligence. If the state knows that its intelligence network in a specific sector is porous or unreliable, yet continues to authorise remote strikes based on that data, it moves from the realm of accidental collateral damage to reckless endangerment (Enemark, 2017). The persistence of this gap suggests that Nigeria has prioritized the *acquisition* of kinetic capability over the development of the analytical infrastructure necessary to use it ethically.

Conclusion, Recommendations and Policy Thrust Options

Nigeria's adoption and deployment of drones in its counterterrorism fight reflects a monumental leap in the country's security architecture. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles reduce risk to military personnel, enable precision and accuracy in strikes, and decrease risk to the military workforce, among other benefits. However, the foregoing reveals that extant implementation and enforcement of Nigeria's drone programme are bedevilled by normative, ethical, and legal challenges.

Limited transparency, weak accountability, lack of strong regulatory mechanisms, absence of documented civilian casualties and the availability of drone technology to elements in the country, such as non-state actors, diminish the long-term effectiveness and whatever moral legitimacy drone warfare may hold in Nigeria.

Nigeria must therefore outline and adopt accountability frameworks, very clear legal stipulations, set out oversight mechanisms and be committed to transparency in order to ensure the effectiveness and morally defensible status of its drone programme. In the absence of such well thought-out reforms, her drone programme is liable to compromise long-term peace and security, limit the legitimacy of the state, reduce public trust, and perpetuate a norm of violence that is enhanced by technology, which ignores human life.

1. There is a need for the Nigerian government to establish well thought-out systems that will help verify targets and conduct proportionality assessments, with a good oversight structure to align drone operations with legal and ethical principles

2. Clear protocols for ensuring that a human is in the loop throughout the entire chain of command, as well as properly training staff on ethical issues related to using drones, will help avoid diffusing accountability and maintain moral responsibility for AI-assisted operations.

3. Public transparency, community involvement, and cooperation between the different levels of government are necessary components in establishing norms that support the legitimacy of ethical use of drones and help mitigate the normalization of opaque and high-risk counterterrorism operations.

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