

The moral hazard of bloodless air battles

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A trend has appeared in modern warfare in 2025 – short conflicts between nations primarily through uncrewed long-range strikes. Uncrewed weapon systems are becoming more prevalent on the modern battlefield for good reason; however, there is little discussion about the moral hazard these systems are creating in reducing the barriers to entering a conflict and how this use of force is undermining international peace and security efforts.

The trend in uncrewed long-range strikes has occurred between several nations. Pakistan and India exchanged long-range airstrikes while not crossing each other's borders with crewed aircraft in May ([Clary](#), 2025). The United States (US) conducted an extensive campaign of airstrikes against the Houthis in Yemen over 52 days in March to May in response to the Houthi's use of anti-shipping missiles and one-way attack drones (Johnsen, June 2025). The '12 day war' in June saw Israel and the US launch airstrikes on Iran to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions while Iran responded in kind with one-way attack drones and ballistic missiles ([Mehvar](#), 2025). Thailand and Cambodia exchanged rockets, airstrikes and drones due to a long running territorial dispute in July ([Mon](#), 2025).

Uncrewed long-range strike is no longer just a great power capability. As seen from the nations using these systems above, the cost of acquiring and using uncrewed long-range strike has notably decreased. Undoubtedly, some nations are more effective at long-range strike through better targeting capabilities; however, there are generally key infrastructure or less mobile elements that can be easily targeted. Also, advances in drone and sensor technology are increasing the precision and adaptability of uncrewed systems, as seen in first person view (FPV) drones being readily utilised in conflict. With the threat from uncrewed long-range strike proliferating, nations can expect retaliation through long-range strike.

Using these weapon systems to decrease the risk of injury or death to one's own force makes sense. Some argue that it is an ethical imperative to apply the principle of unnecessary risk (PUR) in that 'it is wrong to command someone to take an unnecessary potentially lethal risks in an effort to carry out a just action for some good' (Strawser, 2010, p. 344). As seen in the recent conflicts, the forces conducting offensive operations suffered relatively few casualties.

This is where the moral hazard¹ becomes evident. The use of these weapon systems are not putting the attacking forces at substantial risk but the retaliatory strikes hit where they can. The military is able to offer their government an offensive action with the consequences limited to the returning long-range strikes from their opposition. Political redirection can also spin the retaliation as a loss of life caused by inhumane and inhuman attacks from a senseless and callous foe; definitely not as a direct result of the military's own actions...that were legally justified as well. The moral hazard then falls on someone else to bear, such as another part of the military, the government or the nation's population.

The moral hazard also has consequences on international relations. There has been little conversation about the risks these behaviours are building into international relations. The UN Charter Article 2 (4) states that 'all members shall refrain in their international relations from

¹ A moral hazard is a situation in which people or organisations do not suffer from the results of their bad decisions, so may increase the risks they take.

the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purpose of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945).’ Nations undoubtedly have legal arguments justifying their actions and why they are not contrary to the UN Charter, however flimsy or robust. But the trend appears to be that nations are becoming comfortable in using force against each other.

While this modern form of combat has extended well beyond border regions, there has been a degree of respect regarding borders. The India/Pakistan border was not crossed by serving members of the respective forces. Iran only used uncrewed weapon systems in crossing borders. Israel crossed Iran’s border with only special forces while their aviators used stealth technology and other means to avoid interception while flying over Iran. The US Air Force did likewise. Regardless of appearing to be respectful of borders, the long-range strikes struck far into the depths of the respective nations and cannot be considered as low-level border incidents. This modern type of conflict can only be considered as an International Armed Conflict ([International Committee of the Red Cross](#), 2015, pp. 7-8).

From a UN perspective, the international armed conflicts described above enable nations to utilise their ‘inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs’ under Article 51. (United Nations, 1945) Given the involvement of nuclear-armed nations, this should be of great concern to all nations. There may be many reasons why this risk has not materialised. Maybe the territorial separation between Israel and Iran makes an enduring ground conflict highly unlikely. The reluctance of the US to become embroiled in a land conflict in Yemen may also be apparent. The calculations by both Pakistan and Indian leadership to avoid nuclear confrontation by ‘respecting’ borders may be limiting the conflict. However, the risk of vertical escalation to an enduring war remains and is real.

Normalising long-range strike as an acceptable form of messaging expectations and behaviours in international relations is exceptionally problematic. How will other powers interpret and understand this new norm? If a great power uses uncrewed long-range strikes to deter a nation from engaging in a regional conflict or piracy, what or who will stop other nations from employing the same strategy? Should it be accepted that a new international norm has been created where any nation, in particular great powers, can repeat the same strategy of messaging their desires to other nations using uncrewed long-range strike options? Realism may be a fundamental theory of international relations but few would want to see a world where use of force occurs frequently between nations instead of diplomacy.

Unfortunately, the liberalism that saw the creation of the UN following World War II and envisioned the UN as being able to resolve international conflict is metaphorically dead or on life support. Few appear to have heeded the warnings from the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres after the US bombing of Iran ([United Nations](#), 2025). The two World Wars that preceded the creation of the UN are now moving out of living memory. Nations may be seeking to avoid the horrors of the wars of old where thousands of young combatants died in bloody battles but the modern bloodless battlefield of uncrewed long-range strike may be a false hope. Worse still, the undermining of the UN may have removed a safe guard to avoid escalation in a future conflict.

The Gabriel Garcia Marquez quote ‘it is easier to start a war than end it’ remains true as the risk of escalation continues to build in international relations. The recent use of long-range strikes demonstrates a trend in warfare where leaders have brought their nations much closer to realising this risk. Worse still, international measures to constrain the use of force have been thoroughly undermined and are failing to do so. There is no incentive to put human lives at more risk than necessary but the lack of risk to humans through uncrewed long-range strike has created a moral hazard that normalises the use of force between nations. This issue has and will become worse as drone and missile technology advances and proliferates. This is not a trend we want normalised in international relations.

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