

A survey of the political debate over the acquisition and use of unmanned aircraft

Content

The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, has expanded enormously in the past 15 years. Often times they are used for strikes outside the international legal framework, they are conducted in secrecy, and have very likely led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians and injured thousands more. The Netherlands is planning to acquire the arms-capable MQ-9 Reaper drones.

In order to clarify the positions of political parties regarding the acquisition and deployment of armed drones, PAX has conducted a survey among relevant political parties currently seated in Parliament. The information gathered from this research can be used to inform voters on the positions of political parties, but it also contributes to a broader societal debate on the desirability of using armed drones in current and future conflicts and counterterrorism operations.

Research

The results of this research are as follows:

1. No single political party is principally opposed to the acquisition of unarmed Reapers. Positions on arming these drones vary from a moratorium on the purchase, to arming and deploying these drones as soon as possible.
2. With the exception of the PVV (Party for Freedom), all other parties have expressed their concerns about the use of armed drones and so-called “targeted killings”. The degree to which clarification of the judicial framework is considered to be necessary varies among parties.
3. Currently, a majority of the Parliament appears to be very critical about the possibility that the Netherlands contributes to extrajudicial killings by sharing intelligence and data. This majority calls for clear agreements with allied countries on data sharing and use, and more parliamentary oversight.
4. Most parties share the opinion that existing arms export control mechanisms should be strengthened and updated in order to catch up with relevant developments in the use and export of drones and related technologies.

Political relevance

The research shows that there is willingness amongst nearly all parties to strengthen international agreements regarding the use of armed drones. In line with these positions, PAX calls on the Dutch government to take the lead in the international discussion and take a strong national position regarding the use and proliferation of armed drones. For this purpose, we have made the following recommendations:

Recommendations

The Dutch government should clarify the following:

1. How it interprets the international judicial framework surrounding the use of armed drones, especially outside of conflict zones, and how this relates to international human rights and international humanitarian law.

◆ PAX calls on the Dutch government to follow a strict interpretation of international law, in order to push back on interpretations by States that stretch legal frameworks to facilitate the use of lethal force outside of conflict zones, in accordance with the calls of the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

2. How it will apply the recommendations made in the CTIVD's report on the sharing of data with foreign intelligence services and the possible use thereof for targeting.

◆ Guarantees regarding use and transparency towards the Dutch parliament must be at the forefront of the discussion.

3. How it will contribute to strengthening international law regarding the export of drones and drone-related technologies.

◆ PAX sees an unique opportunity for the Netherlands to contribute to a broad international process, which should lead to clear agreements regarding the use and export of armed drones.

In advance of the March 15th elections, PAX calls on the new Parliament to question and check the government on these issues. New military technologies and weapon systems like drones create new dilemmas regarding the use of lethal force and their role in military and counterterrorism operations. Apart from the government, the Parliament has an important role in shaping the discussion and promoting transparency and accountability that should fit within the broader Dutch tradition of defending human rights principles and strengthening international law.

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