

CTX

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Letter from the Guest Editors

We live in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape where unmanned and autonomous systems, with their diverse functionalities across land, air, sea, and space, are both a boon and a challenge. These advanced technologies have accelerated progress, provided strategic and tactical advantages, minimized risks, and maximized operational efficiency. However, they have also introduced new complications, including exploitation by adversarial powers and constraints arising from ethical, legal, regulatory, and safety frameworks. These factors are reshaping global security dynamics and presenting new realities in defense.

This special issue of *CTX* explores the critical challenges surrounding unmanned systems in hybrid and gray-zone operations. Its goal is to reinvigorate discussions on the numerous dilemmas posed by these systems and capabilities, while proposing collaborative strategies for the United States, its allies, and partner nations to effectively address them.

The issue begins with a joint research paper by Kristen Fletcher et al. examining the legal and policy challenges surrounding the design, development, and deployment of uncrewed maritime systems. The authors explore key legal considerations, including definitions, governance, and operational use, that shape the Navy's strategic approach to these emerging technologies.

Next, Scott Moreland discusses the growing threat of drones used by non-state actors in hybrid conflicts. His article examines the ways these actors deploy drones against better-equipped state forces, emphasizing the evolving nature of conflict and the need for decisive countermeasures to mitigate the risks posed by autonomous systems.

In the following essay, MAJ Ian McAlpine analyzes the changing role of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) through the lenses of doctrine, ethics, regulations, and defense. The author discusses the limitations of current counter-drone

measures and proposes innovative solutions to address UAS threats effectively in collaboration with allies and partners.

The next article examines how emergent technologies have democratized warfare and the implications for the US Navy's ability to project power globally. Cecilia Panella and LT Christopher Mears draw lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War and the activities of Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, providing key recommendations for the Navy's adaptation to autonomous systems.

Major Arian Sopiqoti and Zachary Klein's article emphasizes the critical role of ally and partner collaboration in the realm of unmanned systems. They explore how new technologies empower smaller nations to enhance their defense capabilities and stress the importance of strengthening alliances to maintain international order in the face of disruptive technological advancements.

Finally, the issue concludes with an interview of Colonel Omar Rabling Valdez. This insightful discussion explores the strategic importance of unmanned systems in today's geopolitical context. Drawing on his extensive special forces experience, COL Valdez addresses the challenges posed by transnational criminal organizations using UAS for surveillance, smuggling, and attacks. He proposes comprehensive solutions, including bilateral legal frameworks, advanced technological countermeasures, and joint US–Mexico collaboration, to bolster cross-border security.

As always, *CTX* welcomes quality contributions from professionals and researchers in irregular warfare and special operations. If you have valuable insights to share, we encourage you to submit your work to CTXeditor@GlobalECCO.org. Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis and will be published online upon acceptance. For more information about *CTX* and the Global ECCO project, visit <https://nps.edu/web/ecco>. If you have questions, please contact the Executive Editor, Amina Kator-Mubarez, at CTXeditor@GlobalECCO.org.

Tahmina Karimova and Lawrence Walzer
Center on Combating Hybrid Threats
Energy Academic Group
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