Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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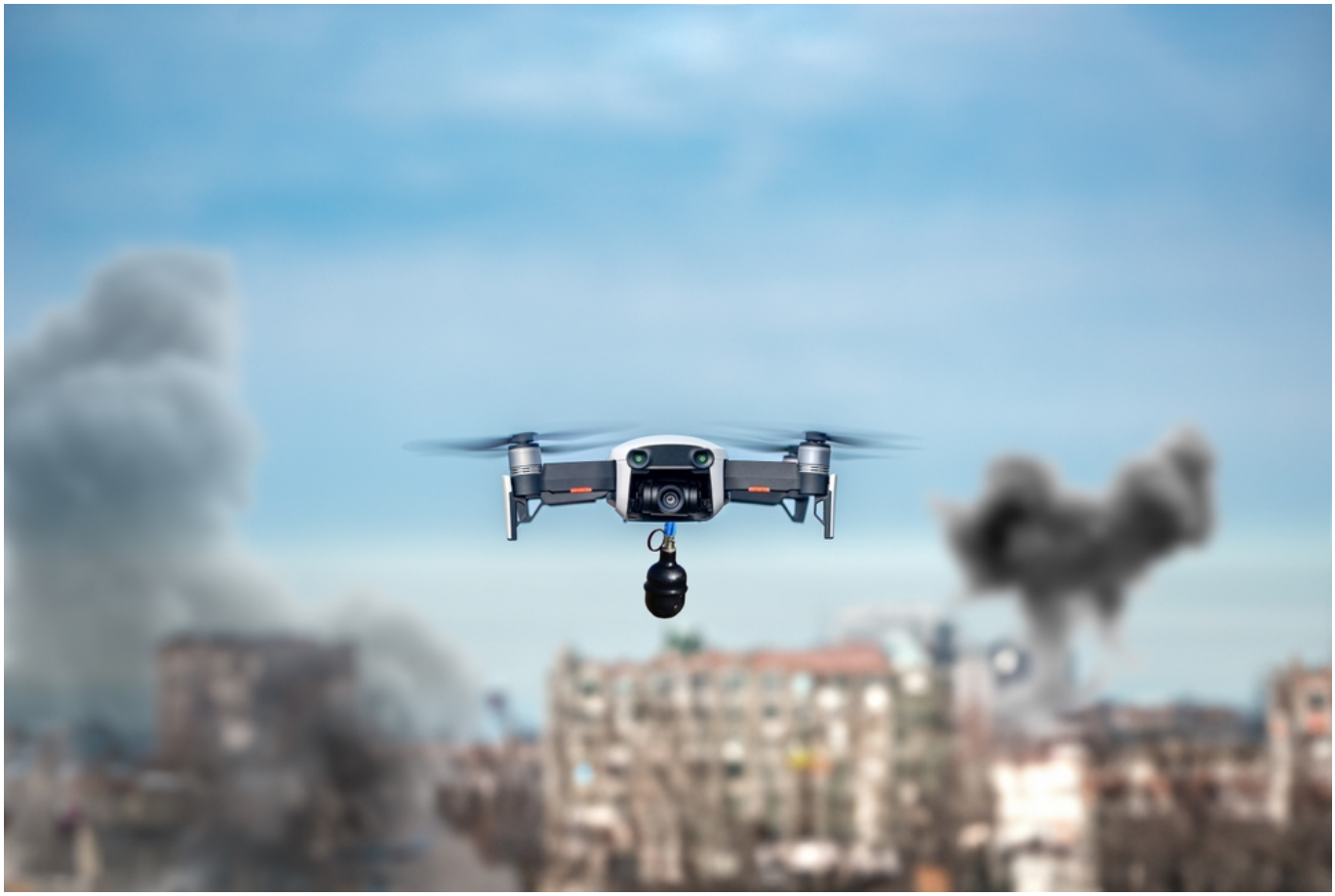
Keeping our skies safe



A few days ago, I wrote about drones as storytellers, painting the sky with art and wonder. This week, I tell the other side of the story.

Technology always has two faces, and drones are no exception. Behind the dazzling and magical light shows is a history deeply rooted in war, surveillance, and public safety.

And today, governments across the globe are struggling with what drones mean for both national security and individual freedom.

From War Machines to Civilian Tools

Drones are not new. Their history dates back over a century, with early versions, such as radio-controlled aircraft, developed in 1917 and tested and used during World War I.

They developed into effective instruments for military fighting and reconnaissance over the ensuing decades. Drones had become an essential component of contemporary warfare by the turn of the twenty-first century, and the US was at the forefront of developing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that could be used for both targeted strikes and surveillance.

It was during the Gulf War, when I was a child, that I first heard of "drones", even though they were not the friendly kind most people know today. The most famous drones from back then were "The Pointer" and "The RQ-2 Pioneer". It was at that time that drones showed their true potential for combat purposes.

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Drones started as remote-controlled machines for war but soon found civilian uses. By the 2010s, filmmakers, hobbyists, delivery companies, and even kids playing in their backyards were using drones.

I remember in the mid-2010s when I spoke at an event in Montenegro, and a fellow speaker brought his drone to take a few aerial shots of the beautiful city. A few of us scouted the area for the perfect location for a flight. We came across a local bridge, and the drone did what it does best: fly up in the sky.

Somewhere in my vault is a video of that day with us waving at the drone as it flew up and away. As more people gained access to this technology, new opportunities appeared, but so did new risks.

Drones and Security. A Growing Concern

The date is September 2025. Drones became one of the main sources of concern during US President Donald Trump's well-publicised visit to the UK.

Despite stringent no-fly zones being in place, authorities detained a number of people who were trying to fly drones close to restricted airspace in the London area.

The arrests show how simple it is for individuals with comparatively inexpensive technology to interfere with top-level security plans.

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Of course, this is not a one-time incident. Airports worldwide have had to shut down temporarily because unauthorised drones entered restricted airspace. Sometimes, flights were delayed for hours, resulting in millions of dollars in costs and causing significant problems for travellers.

To protect important events and infrastructure, governments are now spending

more on counter-drone systems like signal jammers and AI detection software. I do have a story about signal jammers, but I'll leave that one for another time.

The Dangers from a Government Perspective

The dangers are growing, and that is the reason they are a topic of conversation.

Terrorism and sabotage. Drones are weaponised to carry explosives or chemicals, creating risks for mass gatherings, political events, or critical infrastructure.

Espionage. High-quality cameras make drones practical tools for spying, raising concerns about both government secrets and corporate intellectual property.

Disruption. Even without weapons, a drone in the wrong place can halt air traffic, disrupt public events, or cause panic. We have countless examples of that making news.

Privacy violations. Drones equipped with cameras can very easily invade personal privacy, from neighbourhoods to sensitive locations.

Governments are aware of these dangers. Legislation is tightening, with stronger penalties for unauthorised flights. The UK's Civil Aviation Authority, for example, enforces strict limits on where drones can operate, and violations can result in fines or arrests. The Trump visit only reinforced the necessity of these measures.

But What About the Benefits?

It is always easy to focus only on the dangers or the negative side, when drones also offer governments and public institutions exceptional opportunities.

Disaster response. Drones can quickly assess damage after earthquakes, floods, or fires, providing real-time information to emergency responders.

Search and rescue. Equipped with thermal imaging, drones can locate missing persons in forests, mountains, or disaster zones faster than human search teams. It is an example of where technology can and is being used for good.

Law enforcement. Police forces use drones for crowd monitoring, accident scene documentation, and even hostage situations, improving both efficiency and safety.

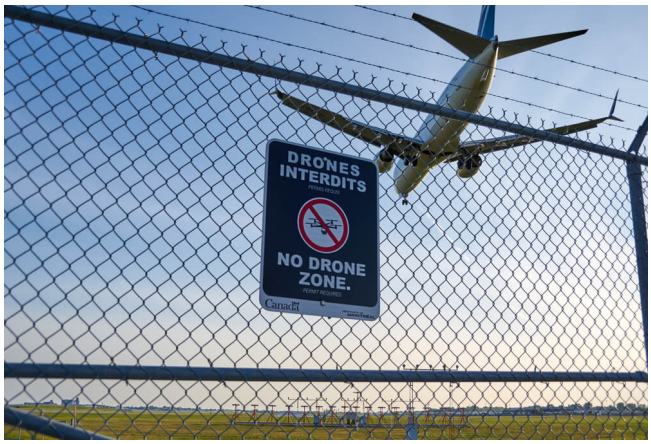
Border control and defence. Drones enhance surveillance over large and difficult-to-patrol areas, strengthening national security.

Environmental monitoring. From tracking wildfires to monitoring wildlife, drones offer another option of affordable, flexible tools for protecting ecosystems.

Each new use of drones needs to be balanced with strong rules to prevent misuse.

Freedom vs. Safety

Let's talk about the real challenge. Governments need to protect people from the misuse of drones, especially in sensitive or high-security situations.



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At the same time, they should avoid making rules so strict that they stop innovation or

make people feel watched all the time.

The bottom line is that drones are neither good nor bad; they are simply another technological tool. Like any technology, they reflect the intentions of those who use them.

The challenge on our table is creating frameworks that maximise benefits while minimising risks.

What Comes Next?

Counter-drone technology is advancing just as quickly as drones themselves. We'll see more geofencing, smarter detection systems, and new laws to make it easier to stop misuse. Meanwhile, businesses and governments will keep finding new ways for drones to help society.

The Trump visit to the UK showed us that the sky is a place where technology, security, and freedom all come together.

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Watching a drone light show, I see beauty and innovation. Reading about arrests during political visits, I see risks and responsibilities. Both of these realities are true but have very different outcomes.

Drones are not going away. They will keep changing, evolving, and affecting art, security, disaster response, and maybe even how wars are fought. How we decide to regulate, improve, and use them is what matters most now.

If our skies are no longer empty, how can we keep them safe for both creativity and security?