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Latin America Puts Forward A Mixed Picture on the Use of Drones in the Region

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Over the past decade, a growing number of nations have been utilizing drones in their security operations. Most notably, the U.S. is using this new technology to target and eliminate suspected terrorists along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.[1] So far, Latin American militaries have generally used drones for surveillance operations, but their role most likely will greatly expand in the near future.

Latin American countries that currently operate drones include Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. They are either home-built or have been purchased from other countries with a sophisticated drone industry like Israel; it is important to highlight that the international suppliers of this technology may vary depending on each government's diplomatic relations and agenda of operations. For example, the Colombian military has acquired drones from the U.S. and Israel, obviously benefiting from the existing close political relations among these governments.[2] On the other hand, Venezuela has turned to countries like Russia and Iran.[3] Additionally, countries like Brazil, Colombia and Peru are trying to fabricate their own home-made drones.[4] Thanks to increasingly cheaper technology, the cost of purchasing or domestically fabricating basic drones has become more affordable for regional armed forces. For example, media reports put Peru's homegrown drones at costing \$150,000 USD, while Brazil's AGX drone system is roughly estimated at \$35,000 USD.

Presently, Latin American drone usage is centered around patrol and surveillance operations, particularly for combating drug trafficking.[5] Their success rate varies widely so far, but drones are regarded as useful and (moderately) cheap, like those being used in other parts of the world. Moreover, drones have civilian applications as well. For example, in Peru, drones are used as an "eye in the sky" in archaeological and agricultural projects.[6]

However, it is only a matter of time (and adequate funds) before Latin American militaries decide to utilize drones for offensive operations within their own borders. Consider if the Peruvian army could use an armed drone if it obtained credible intelligence of where "José," the *nom de guerre* of the leader of the insurgent movement Shining Path, is hiding in the Peruvian highlands.[7] Likewise, the Colombian military might use

these weapons if it identified the location of leaders of its domestic narco-insurgent movements, the FARC and ELN. As a final example, the Mexican military may be tempted to use an armed drone to eliminate a high-profile target such as Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, leader of the Sinaloa cartel (arguably, a better alternative to arresting him).[8] An obvious advantage of armed drones is that they are ready to act, as opposed to a time-costly and riskier military deployment.

Finally, it is worth stressing that such weapons are potentially problematic because they can escalate inter-state tensions. Inter-state warfare is rare in Latin America, but there have been incidents that could have ended in a conflict. For example, in 2008 Colombia carried out a successful military operation in Ecuador to eliminate Manuel Reyes, then-commander of the FARC, but the Colombian government did not inform Quito of the operation.[9] This was regarded as a violation of Ecuador’s sovereignty, which sparked tensions between Ecuador and its ally Venezuela against Colombia. Given this precedent, what would happen if Colombia deployed an armed drone into Ecuador for a strike against a suspected FARC commander? Or would Mexico use an armed drone within Guatemala if it suspected that a leader of the Zetas Cartel (which already has a presence there) was hiding right across the border?[10] What would be the repercussions of such incidents, particularly if civilians are killed?

Latin America has been successful at avoiding inter-state warfare throughout most of the past century. Today its security challenges are mostly internal and come from entities like narco-terrorist movements and drug cartels; in the case of Shining Path or FARC, these groups operate in isolated regions. Hence, drone technology is regarded as useful to find these guerrilla fighters and, given the (controversial) success of armed drones by countries like the U.S., it is only a matter of time before Latin American militaries decide to follow suit and utilize drones for search-and-destroy missions in the name of national security. [11] While the proliferation of drones may not be halted, it is necessary for Western military powers to keep in mind that they must lead by example when it comes to using drones, as this tactic sets the standard of how other nations will utilize them in the (very) near future.

COHA INFORMATION:

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