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Shadows in the Sky: Thai Perspectives on Drone Warfare

Fabio Calzolari[1]* and Wipa Phantanaboon[2]

[1]*School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University, 57100 Chiang Rai, Thailand*
[2]*Faculty of Law, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, 57100 Chiang Rai, Thailand*

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), also known as drones, has reconfigured the nature of warfare. Unlike human soldiers, who require rest and sustenance, these machines can operate ceaselessly. In the early stages, the United States (US) had a near-monopoly on them. However, in recent years, numerous nations have either acquired or plan to integrate such technologies. Despite the significance of all this for global stability, the international literature has often overlooked public perceptions, especially those from the Global South. This paper attempts to bridge this gap via online qualitative interviews with adult individuals who identified as Thai nationals or as being of Thai descent. It also assesses how Just War Theory (JWT) and international law impose limitations or fail to provide explicit constraints on drone deployment. The authors built their arguments on Posthuman Buddhism, a synthesis of Buddhist thought and Posthumanist theory, which unsettles anthropocentric premises. They construed data collection and analysis on Interpretative Phenomenology, chosen for its ability to elicit participants' experiential interpretations and meaning-making processes. Findings reveal that although most individuals acknowledged the tactical advantages UAVs offer to armies, they pointed out the substantial risks to society, such as the possibility of turning anyone into a target. Furthermore, there was unanimous concern that drones reduce the weight of lethal decisions, transforming them into video game-like acts. The manuscript concludes with a proposal for legal measures grounded in religious ethics, urging decision-makers to pursue nonviolent alternatives and to require public audits before resorting to armed responses.

Keywords: Buddhism, drones, international law, Just War Theory, Thailand

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E-mail addresses:
Fabio.Cal@mfu.ac.th (Fabio Calzolari)
Wipa.pha@crru.ac.th (Wipa Phantanaboon)
* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), or drones, ranging from large models like the Predator RQ-1 and Reaper MQ-9 to smaller reconnaissance platforms, has conferred a strategic advantage upon the United States of America

(US) over other nations (Sacchi, 2019). UAVs are formidable instruments, but they also manifest limitations, primarily in-flight endurance and operational efficiency, arising from their relatively modest speeds and the considerable burden of their armaments. Nevertheless, they permit the engagement of targets without exposing human personnel to direct risk. Moreover, they have become pivotal to hybrid warfare, wherein conventional, unconventional, and cyber methodologies intersect with Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Lushenko & Raman, 2024). The proliferation of drones across conflict theatres has not been without controversy. Civilian casualties in regions such as the Middle East, Ukraine, and beyond have catalysed debates on their legitimacy and justifiability (Ling, 2024). Furthermore, legal scholars and human rights advocates have cautioned against a troubling trajectory: drones are normalising the resort to lethal force, presented as self-defence and shielded by operational opacity and the impunity enjoyed by sender governments (Dickey & Gleason, 2024). This paper draws on qualitative interviews with adult Thai individuals to document the repercussions of UAV proliferation, situating their perspectives within the framework of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Incorporating the philosophical insights of Posthuman Buddhism—which destabilises anthropocentric boundaries between humans and non-humans—and the religious principles of interdependence and non-violence, it reimagines the governance of military technologies. It also addresses a lacuna in the international literature concerning non-Western perspectives on UAVs. No portion of this work is intended to interfere with or comment adversely upon the national security policies of any sovereign state. The analysis is offered in the spirit of academic contributions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study was conducted by two individuals: the first, an Italian national residing in Thailand, led the interviews and recruitment process; the second, a Thai citizen, contributed to the design and adaptation of interview protocols and supported the cultural and linguistic contextualisation throughout. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected for its dual orientation: it enables a giving voice—through detailed attention to participants' expressed concerns—and a making sense, achieved through engagement with the relational and contextual dimensions of the material. IPA permits sufficient discrimination between the most personal aspects of experiences, their associated meanings, and the socio-cultural underpinnings of phenomena. It entails continuous exchange between researchers and researched, even throughout the interpretative phases of the data (Worthington, 2024). The unit of analysis is the discursive treatment of UAVs, with attention directed to remotely operated and semi-autonomous drones in military contexts. The authors agree with

Sollund (2008) that data from qualitative methodologies are generated rather than collected.

Theoretical Framework

This study orients itself around three research questions: How do drones challenge existing legal and ethical frameworks, and in what ways might Buddhist jurisprudence contribute to an alternative model of regulating warfare? Furthermore, what social frictions accompany the proliferation of UAVs, particularly concerning surveillance practices, privacy intrusions, and the attenuation of individual accountability in military conduct? Posthuman Buddhism supplies the heuristic schema to answer these conundrums. Like Roberts (2023), the authors used the term not as a fixed doctrinal stance but as a critical heuristic. The philosophy draws from both Posthumanism (primarily relational ontologies and critiques of human exceptionalism) and Buddhist concepts (such as *anatta* or non-self, suññatā or emptiness, and dependent origination) to interrogate how modernity (re)structures spaces, times and human life's characteristics (Gould & Walters, 2020; Tachibana, 2021; Wright, 2009). Gray (2000) unveils a paradox inherent in technology: it empowers and weakens people. Ubiquitous devices, such as mobile phones, tablets, and computers, have redefined daily life, rendering their absence almost unimaginable to many. However, such reliance introduces risks. For instance, they cause diminished critical thinking, social disconnection, and dependency. Cudworth and Hobden (2013) uncover how wearable exoskeletons designed for American soldiers can restore and amplify bodily abilities while blurring the line between human and non-human. They also render users conditioned by third parties—state or private corporations—for spare parts and batteries. Bennett (2001) and Latour (2012) unsettle prevailing distinctions within the human–non-human spectrum. Precisely, they locate actorness and its attached qualities within relational configurations or matrixes rather than in discrete entities.

Bennett's idea of the 'assemblage' posits that agency arises not from an object's materiality alone but through its situated interactions with other entities. Latour employs the notion of 'chains of associations' to contend that value—whether of a person, an entity, or the relational interface between them—is configured through ever-changing linkages across layered systems rather than through individuated elements. Braidotti (2017) also rejects linear causality and individualist logic. She claims that meanings are not fixed or singularly imposed. Rather, they are formed through the entangled actions and interrelations of various agents (people, machines, discourses, systems) within unstable environments (contingent ecologies). Boyle (2016) uses the expression 'metastable orientation' to refer to a condition temporarily stable yet susceptible to transformation—a concept borrowed from physics but used in posthuman and systems theory to describe a flexible, adaptive shared universe. Buddhism's doctrine of *anatta* (non-self) complements posthumanist

thinking by disavowing the notion of a fixed, intrinsic identity in favour of a fluid model of the self where the inside is the outside and the outside is the inside (Zheng, 2024). Within the domain of drone warfare, these formulations converge in treating senders, weapons, and targets as one within vast moral, legal, and epistemological collectives moving around borders (Fairchild, 2019). However, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) remain based on anthropocentric presumptions and prioritise static state sovereignty over fluid and hybridised models. The Martens Clause presupposes a rational, bounded legal subject—misaligned with drone warfare. Likewise, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) assumes discrete privacy violations by identifiable actors, whereas drones operate through ambient surveillance and dispersed accountability.

Enrolment

The first author sought to recruit adult individuals residing in Thailand and abroad who identified as Thai citizens or ethnic Thai (defined as having at least one parent born in Thailand) and who possess a high level of fluency in the English language. They were further expected to demonstrate familiarity with the internet and the topic under scrutiny, especially its socio-legal characteristics. Recruitment began through purposive sampling on platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), Reddit, and Line. Posts were bilingual (Thai and English). They explained the study's aims, qualitative orientation, and the first author's positionality as an Italian national and the second as a Thai citizen. An online participant information sheet (PIS) and informed consent form (ICF) were linked directly in each post and recruitment email. They remained accessible throughout the data collection period, allowing prospective individuals to assess and review their rights, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw at any stage. Though candidates were encouraged to decide before data analysis began, no restrictions were placed on withdrawal. He used snowball sampling to enlarge the sample universe. The first author invited early participants to refer others interested in sharing their perspectives. No rigid criteria were imposed. De facto, participants were simply asked to refer people with unconventional viewpoints. Recruitment materials were worded to avoid partisan terminology. Furthermore, they ensured space for mainstream and dissenting voices across ideological lines. The final sample comprised thirty-three participants. While the initial cohort was recruited during the primary research phase, several additional interviews—incorporated into the same analytic frame—were conducted between 2024 and 2025 during the article's review period. Twelve participants were based in Thailand; the remainder resided abroad. All stakeholders held at least an undergraduate degree. Most identified as non-practising Buddhists. This distribution was unsurprising as it was consistent with national patterns and religious trends across Thai migrant

communities. Although the study did not aim at representativeness, the sample size followed the methodological expectations of IPA, which stresses idiographic engagement over numerical expansion. The first and second authors acknowledged that the sample skewed toward middle-class professionals. They defended this as a methodological necessity, driven by the interview protocol's reliance on abstract political, religious, and technological reasoning, as well as reflexive debates over national and international law.

Concerning snowball sampling, the first author deemed it compatible with IPA. This is because it worked as a mechanism for accessing individuals within discursive orientations that would have been less accessible through purposive strategies alone. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that voices outside higher education remain underrepresented and could be better placed in future IPA works. The authors previously published a related survey of Italian stories about drone warfare, which can be read as a companion text (Calzolari & Phantanaboon, 2025). The current endeavour was conducted using a discrete theoretical remit and data set. Nonetheless, it confirmed the effectiveness of the enrolment procedures in reaching individuals across various national contexts. They do not claim that participants explicitly identify with Posthumanist Buddhist positions; philosophical tenets were employed to assess how people approached UAVs. Moreover, individuals were selected not because of UAV exposure but because of their values as grassroots narrators. Their accounts clarified how non-Western, non-combatant observers conceptualise techno-moral dilemmas from foreign policy and transnational warfare. Including US drone strikes in the introduction was a referential anchor widely referred to by the interviewees rather than an assertion of their global salience. This recruitment protocol follows the same methodological guidelines they adopted in previous IPA research.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first author conducted one-on-one, semi-structured online qualitative interviews between 2023 and 2025. All the meetings were conducted in English and audio-recorded with prior written and verbal consent. They were also transcribed *verbatim*. They ranged from 35 to 90 minutes in length. Prior to each interview, participants were sent a digital information sheet outlining the study's focus. They were reminded of their right to anonymity, withdrawal, and transcript review. He opened each session by reiterating the project's aims and inviting any clarifying questions. His role was to create a conversational space that permitted deliberation, hesitation, and ambiguity. Although he carried out the interviews in English, he made space for explanatory digressions, primarily when stakeholders utilised Thai idioms or Buddhist vocabulary. The interview guide centred on four thematic clusters directly linked to the topic of drone warfare: (1) perceptions of legitimacy in targeted killings and remote military technologies;

(2) emotional and moral responses to UAV use; (3) the relevance of (Posthuman) Buddhist principles to judgments about military violence; and (4) possible and alternative futures comprising autonomous weapons and the human-machine relationship. Before and during the interviews, it was underlined that the project was a normative intervention, not a political, religious or legal denunciation. The goal was not to accuse but to assess and, in some circumstances, propose a new way of thinking.

The first author examined the transcripts and worked with the second to identify patterns in the texts' latent and manifest content, focusing on respondents' assumptions and insights formed during the interviews. The process featured reading and coding, with related ideas grouped into categories. The authors identified three main themes. The first, which they nominated as 'distributed agency', was linked to interviewees' reiteration of a relational model of guilt encompassing drone operators, their superiors, and the wider collective of individuals and procedural mechanisms that enabled the deployment of weapons beyond the parameters of domestic and international legal norms. The second, 'technological alienation', was associated with the epistemological and affective detachment of remote killing. Participants described drone warfare as disorienting. For them, physical distance from the battlefield can make the liquidation of targets a videogame-like experience. The third, 'alternative legal imaginaries', conveyed the informants' aspirations for a juridical order not grounded in proportionality, retribution, or geopolitical calculus. Instead, they wanted future laws and enforcement to be premised upon restraint, compassion, and harm minimisation ideas. Many of the arguments and people's statements are interwoven. The names used in this section are aliases. Ages are indicated in brackets. Because opinions often traversed religious, legal and political registers, their insights could not be neatly compartmentalised. Thematic boundaries remained porous in the discussion section, and many statements overlapped multiple domains. After the analysis, stakeholders reviewed a summary of the findings and thematic groupings. The authors edited some citations for stylistic consistency in communication with the participants.

RESULTS

The interviewees alleged that UAVs preside over most contemporary battlefields. For them and the authors themselves, discussing drones was akin to commenting on monsters (from the Latin *monstrum* meaning an omen or prodigy) like ยักษ์ (*yaksha* or ogre) and รากษส (*rakshasa* or shape-shifting man-eater) from local and regional epics. This analogy accentuated the disquieting reality of modern warfare, in which creatures born of myth-technological fusion demonstrate that we humans, made of blood and bones, still bound by breath and sorrow, are dispensable (Ago, 2016). Although the interviewees' accounts were inherently partial and might not reflect the entirety of the Thai and diaspora populations , they offered valuable

insights. Several subjects advanced the view that the proliferation of drones dissolves the (Smithian) conceptual and juridical boundary between *amici* (friends) and *inimici* (enemies) (Chamayou, 2015), thus depoliticising or, better, reinventing the 'art of fighting'. Participants posed a thought-provoking question: could Buddhism, with its attention to interconnectedness, compassion, and the dissolution of the ego, help us to transcend cyclical arms races? Perhaps, they argued, but only if people rethink complicity, volition, and the consequences of their actions.

DISCUSSION

Killing by Remote Control

Drones gained prominence during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Since then, they have encroached on many more war theatres, from Bosnia to Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. While research and development programs were confined to the national defence industry before the 1960s, many private firms now pursue them (Shaw, 2016). Mayer (2015) acknowledges the advantages of UAVs' 'more-than-human' attributes. Nonetheless, Gregory (2015) dispels the idea that they are invincible. They can undertake sorties almost autonomously, but they are not flawless and can make mistakes during tasks such as tracking hostile targets or assisting with search and rescue operations. In the two decades since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT)—a transnational campaign targeting non-state actors deemed to pose threats of terrorism—has impacted drone operations. It has also prompted renewed engagement with Just War Theory (JWT), a doctrine of military ethics (Hajjar, 2019). Before 9/11, security functioned as one among several benchmarks of public administration. Following the event, it became the primary criterion for evaluating state legitimacy. Agamben and Emcke (2001) highlight that when a government prioritises security above all else, it becomes a fragile entity that is susceptible to becoming terroristic itself. From the interviewees' speeches, it was also apparent that there was a consensus: President George W. Bush launched a military campaign to dismantle the militant group al-Qaeda, apparently unencumbered by the constraints of the American Constitution. Furthermore, the principles underlying his GWOT coalesced into the so-called Rule-Based International Order (RBIO), a set of regulations parallel to international law (Dugard, 2023). The White House defended the operationalisation of aerial robotics in foreign countries as an act of self-defence under RBIO. Unsurprisingly, this rationale faced rebuttals inside and outside the US for violating International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), as Krieger et al. (2019) remind us.

For the participants, the appearance of UAVs signals an experiment in thanatology, where entire communities are liable to be erased by machines based on algorithms that associate patterns of behaviour and appearance with unlawful activities. In 2013, in Yemen, drones misinterpreted

a wedding party as an al-Qaeda convoy and eliminated the attendees (Rinehart, 2016). Further examples comprise the Russian destruction of Ukrainian public infrastructures (Chávez & Swed, 2023). The informants elucidated that the peril intrinsic to military technology lies in the possibility that the relentless mechanised hunt could ignite a worldwide war, rendering any form of peaceful coexistence unattainable. In other words, with the eclipse of classical warfare between sovereign states, the pursuit of enemies—real or imagined—at home and abroad appears to culminate in the globalisation of fear, an endeavour that, rather than establishing law and justice, intensifies disorder. There is another issue, as Agamben (2008) explicates. Security measures, which frequently rely on resorting to a 'state of exception', contribute to the increasing depoliticisation of society. Over time, they become incompatible with the principles of democracy. To fully understand this, one must consider the dual nature of the distribution of UAVs' offensive capabilities—the accompanying spread of vulnerability. The same factors that grant broad access to offensive power also increase the likelihood of becoming a victim of that power (Zulaika, 2014). However, this vulnerability does not simply stem from the increased offensive potential of drones to governments and those non-state actors who can afford them; it also materialises from the heightened exposure these machines create (Wittes & Blum, 2015).

Tom (45) expressed unease with Thailand's reported interest in UAVs. He said, "*People can become bloody desensitised to violence because drone strikes are often conducted remotely* [apropos of US sorties in the Middle East]." In a WhatsApp conversation, Paul (38) added another layer: "*The issue with drones isn't just the immediate risk of civilian casualties, although that is a grave concern. It's also about the long-term impact. What happens when they fall into the hands of terrorists? That's game over!*" Niraporn (34) remarked that the advent of UAVs nourished what she described as 'overcautiousness' among state personnel. Her critique resonates with Zulaika's (2020) account of 'cavalier detachment.' Alternatively, a fantasy of clinical war where UAV actions are rhetorically sanitised (people are terminated or liquidated, not killed). Hasian (2016) and Enemark (2013) write that historical warfare was epitomised by the duel, in which two contenders put their lives in jeopardy while acknowledging each other as *justi hostes* (legitimate enemies), that is, as subjects bearing rights. UAVs, conversely, simply execute, often from above and in swarms (SFERRAZZA PAPA, 2016). Niraporn's concerns were intriguing for the authors because they echoed Sci-Fi tropes (McFarlane, 2016). The metaphorical phantasma looming over her was Skynet—the sentient supercomputer network from the American film *Terminator*. It embodied the consummate, or more precisely, the consummately terrifying de-anthropomorphised assassin. Like Hambling (2023), Oliver (40) commented: "*Most countries are investing millions*

in developing weapons, funds that could instead be directed toward assisting refugees, vulnerable populations, and others in need […] *I am* [expletive] *upset*!" He also insisted that misallocating resources creates a double burden, both in the loss of trust and the potential for unrest among those who feel disenfranchised.

All Good Drones Go to Heaven, and the Bad Ones Stay on Earth

Jonathan (35), a Buddhist lay practitioner who occasionally stayed in a monastery and regularly read 'canonical' texts, brought a doctrinally informed lens to the discussion. He explained, "*For Buddhism, every action has consequences."* He also cautioned that drones may generate terrible karmic effects." He also elaborated, "*A computer cannot substitute the spiritual guidance and wisdom our consciousness offers*." Like Rae (2015) and Carr (2010), most participants speculated that UAVs might eventually breach the boundary between military application and civilian governance. Under these settings, Kim (27) noted that they exhibit a capacity for continuous self-improvement, achieving what could be seen as robotic self-perfection. Paradoxically, she observed, this trajectory aligns with Buddhist ideals of mastery (Hughes, 2019). Yet, Shaw (2016) and Clarke (1978) champion the idea that drones do not merely improve human capabilities; they recalibrate our imaginaries of the divine. Therefore, Thananya (46) submitted that religions cannot remain confined to a human-centric universe but must begin discussing hybridisation and intermixture between humans and non-humans, flesh and cables. Five other people speculated that science, when exploited by soldiers, brings in a new kind of fatalism governed not by karma but geopolitical imperatives. They implied that death as a 'fate fulfilled' acquires a new significance in this context. Just as childhood folklore locates destiny at a crossroads—where choices unfold in tandem with forces beyond individual control—UAVs bring about a new threshold, where human intention, machine autonomy, and the boundary between life and non-life converge with often unforeseeable effects. Some people are killed, while others are subjected to physical or psychological trauma. Some are assimilated into the system via the videos and audio harvested during combat. Kanta (28) said that it is well-known that Ukrainian and Russian troops used recordings with added background music and slow-motion effects to produce social media posts, which, for him, was terrifying. To make matters worse, Gregory (2012; 2014) describes an incoming spatial regime in which coercive power is no longer confined to specific territories. Instead, it evolves into a spiritual presence, manifesting here through surveillance, there through cross-border strikes, and nowhere through legal accountability. For the authors, such a triangulation resembles the Buddhist portrayal of *suññatā* (Emptiness), wherein phenomena lack inherent location or identity. To move a step forward, they zeroed in on their conviction that the drone's gaze is not bound to the site it spies. It also occupies

the liminal interstice between the observer and the observed (in-betweenness is one of its most relevant features for asymmetrical warfare), as the systems guiding its sensors can infiltrate its target's mobile phones, smart watches, or even the GPS inside their car. In this sense, robotic activities realise a form of *karma* (action) that circulates without locus; it is a trace unmoored from any agent, recipient, or place.

Testing the Intersection of Just War Theory and International Law

Evans (2020) traces how JWT relies on legislation to substantiate its philosophical underpinnings, whereas international law incorporates ethical principles to inform the rules governing military conduct. Much of the norms applicable to drone attacks derive from JWT. Elshtain (1992) divides this theory into three critical components: *jus ad bellum* (right to go to war), *jus in bello* (right conduct in war) and *jus post bellum* (right after war). These principles collectively guide warfare, balancing the rights and responsibilities of combatants and states. *Jus ad bellum* governs the initiation of hostilities, mandating substantial justification for war (Cannizzaro, 2006). It asserts that while states exercise sovereignty within their territories, stringent criteria—such as just cause, right intention, probability of success, proportionality, and last resort—must be met before starting an armed conflict. In parallel, just cause demands morally and legally acceptable reasons, such as self-defence or protecting innocents in imminent peril (Ratner, 2002). Although enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, interpretations of this provision remain contentious. For instance, the US justified its 2003 invasion of Iraq by citing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)—a claim later discredited (Scott & Ambler, 2007). Right intention requires the primary motive for standoffs between countries to abide by the just cause, avoiding ulterior agendas like economic gain or territorial conquest. Similarly, the criterion of probability of success discourages confrontations that are unlikely to achieve their objectives, thus preventing unnecessary loss of life and resources. Proportionality demands that the anticipated benefits of a campaign outweigh the potential harm it causes. The last resort insists on exhausting all diplomatic alternatives before resorting to manoeuvres. A notorious case is the Cuban Missile Crisis, where diplomacy averted a nuclear clash between the US and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Butler, 2003), which would have had catastrophic consequences. *Jus ad bellum* also circumscribes armed conflicts geographically. Neutral states must remain uninvolved and ensure their territories are not used for hostilities (Haines, 2009). The 1907 Hague Conventions codify these tenets, with the UN Security Council reaffirming them after the 1986 US bombing of Libya. While *jus ad bellum* tolerates pre-emptive strikes in cases of immediate aggression, it strictly prohibits preventive actions against speculative menaces (Stahn, 2006). The Caroline incident (1837) established that threats must be immediate

and overwhelming, leaving no room for alternative measures or deliberation. *Jus in bello*, or IHL, organises conduct during clashes to protect combatants and non-combatants. Combatants must limit civilian harm, guaranteeing protections to non-combatants unless they directly participate in hostilities. Pivotal to *jus in bello* are the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 (Ohlin, 2013).

Between Just War and Legal Silence

The Martens Clause, formulated in the 1899 Hague Convention, safeguards individuals when existing treaties do not explicitly cover the situation on the ground (Ticehurst, 1997), as can be the case with UAVs. Ticehurst identifies three readings of the clause: one that maintains the continued applicability of customary law alongside treaty law; a second which denies that legal silence implies permission; and a third which holds that humanitarian conduct must conform to ethical standards beyond formal agreements, including obligations derived from natural law. Shahabuddeen, in his dissenting opinion at the International Court of Justice (1996), endorsed the latter, proclaiming that the Martens Clause supersedes the Lotus Principle (magnifying state geographical and juropolitical sovereignty) and binds the conduct of hostilities to the 'requirements of public conscience.' Whereas his argument was formulated apropos of WMD, a similar logic may be adopted for drone warfare.

The concept of *jus post bellum* represents a substantial evolution in JWT. First articulated by scholars such as Walzer (2015), it goes beyond the justification for entering war to address the sustainability of peace. Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter prohibits the use of force, except in cases of self-defence or with the authorisation of the Security Council (Doswald-Beck & Vité, 1993). However, *jus post bellum* has been invoked to move attention away from the legality of starting an armed conflict toward its post-war outcomes, such as establishing democratic or stable governance. This outlook unsettles the principle that actions must be lawful at the time they occur, regardless of later developments. Referring to *jus post bellum*, Orend's (2013) widely cited typology sets out requirements for reconstruction, criminal accountability, and economic restitution. Evans (2020), however, critiques the power asymmetries embedded in post-war settlements, which often distort the implementation of these normative principles. He contends with transitional justice, occupation law, and institutional legitimacy (or the lack thereof), demanding that post-conflict arrangements uphold the rights and dignity of affected populations rather than serving the interests of the victors.

He also warns us against exploitative reconstruction framed as humanitarian aid—a critique shared by Orford (2011) and Klein (2020). Cortright et al. (2017) and Chamayou (2015) theorise that drones impose military rationalities upon periods nominally defined as peace, subverting *ius post bellum*. Turning our attention to the interviewees' perspectives, we can

give weight to John (36), who referenced Asimov's (2004) analysis of justice in his robot book series and the Three Laws of Robotics. "*He's saying that normal rules break down when you're dealing with machines instead of people*." He added, "*Our governments must proactively redefine what is right and wrong to safeguard* [raising the voice] *HUMAN INTERESTS.*" Raksamon (37) and Somchai (50) mentioned that exploiting remote-controlled devices has become more attractive because they are low-risk (in terms of human casualties), cost-effective, and less likely to incite domestic opposition. Hence, their very existence may create legal grey zones or ambiguity within the law where enforcement is unclear, inconsistent, or incomplete (Carr, 2010). Outside war theatres, missions like the liquidation of a terrorist group member in failed states (where there is no sovereignty) or across borders (where the exercise of sovereignty is limited), once carried out only occasionally, can calcify into tactical procedures, which, for Siriwan (35), begs the question: "*Who owns the airspace above us? When and where does the war end*?"

Toward a Post-Buddhist Jurisprudence of Drone Warfare

Recent scholarly work highlights tensions between Southeast Asia's normative conventions (Wyatt & Galliott, 2018). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is increasing its defence budgets and arms acquisitions, which could perpetuate the culture of militarism rather than the region's stated culture of peace (Kliem, 2024). Such dynamics coexist with ASEAN's consensus-driven governance: even amid crises such as the Myanmar coup, South China Sea disputes, and the US-China rivalry, the informal ASEAN way of non-intervention and consultation remains the default mode of security governance (Cook, 2021). Contemporary dialogue between Buddhist ethicists and legal experts suggests that religious and philosophical teachings can buttress how countries operate within and around the battlefield (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020; Bartles-Smith, 2021). Thailand has several statutes governing UAV operations. The primary one is the Thailand Air Navigation Act BE 2497 (1954) (พระราชบัญญัติการเดินอากาศ พ.ศ.2497), which, along with subsequent norms, creates the legislative bedrock. One of these directives is the 2015 Notification from the Ministry of Communication, based on Section 24 of the 1954 Act. It outlines licensing requirements (ประกาศกระทรวงคมนาคม เรื่อง หลักเกณฑ์การอนุญาตและเงื่อนไขในการบังคับหรือปล่อยอากาศยานซึ่งไม่มีนักบินประเภทอากาศยานที่ควบคุมการบินจากภายนอก พ.ศ.2558). The Act also stipulates penalties under Section 78(1). Operating a pilotless aircraft without the Minister's written consent may result in imprisonment for up to one year, a fine of up to forty thousand Baht, or both. The military and the police are exempt from registering their UAVs under Section 5 of the Act. However, private drone operators, unless affiliated with the military, must be licensed by two regulatory bodies: the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) and the National Broadcasting Telecommunications

Commission (NBTC). NBTC is responsible for managing frequency allocation, while CAAT oversees the licensing and supervision of drone pilots (if any). State-operated UAVs are subject to a separate authorisation regime under existing Thai legislation.

This article outlines a supplementary blueprint inspired by Posthuman Buddhist precepts. The model comprises three legal instruments: the Law of Compassionate Defence (LCD), the Law of Non-Violent Engagement (LNVE), and the Law of Interconnected Security (LIS). These are intended to operate within Thailand's legal system through amendments to the 1954 Act or via a new statute governing scrutiny of military technologies. The Law of Compassionate Defence mandates karuṇā (Compassion) and sīla (Moral Discipline) as normative thresholds for authorising drone use. It reinterprets proportionality by requiring demonstrable minimisation of dukkha (Misery or Suffering) for civilians, as well as long-term social stability. Logically, the implementation of LCD requires an amendment to Section 24 of the 1954 Act, demanding a distinct authorisation process for armed drones. A Compassionate Oversight Committee (COC), comprising military, legal, and Buddhist scholars, would conduct pre-authorisation reviews. These may be binding or advisory, depending on the circumstances. The COC functions analogously to a weapon review body under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I. Commanders seeking UAV approval could complete training in Buddhist ethics, forming part of an administrative due diligence procedure.

The Law of Non-Violent Engagement codifies a duty to pursue non-lethal options before resorting to drone deployment. The proposal draws on *mettā* (Kindness) and *sammā-vācā* (Right Speech) to mandate that surveillance and humanitarian functions be distinguished from kinetic operations. For the authors, only the latter would require scrutiny and justification. CAAT and Ministry of Defence registries would classify UAV operations under new technical guidelines. LNVE requires that all kinetic drone authorisations be preceded by documentation showing that peaceful options—diplomatic, economic, or legal—have failed. LNVE also mandates that national policy align with Article 6 of the ICCPR and Sections 70 and 78 of the 2017 Constitution. Implementation could occur through ministerial regulation or executive policy. While not displacing self-defence rights, LNVE imposes a higher evidentiary burden for drone-based intervention. The Law of Interconnected Security adopts *paṭicca samuppāda* (Dependent Origination) to redefine national security as a relational phenomenon. It codifies a legal requirement for an anticipatory review of UAV operations regarding ecological and regional impact. LIS is influenced by the Environmental Quality Act B.E. 2535 (1992). It proposes a comprehensive audit involving the Ministry of Defence, CAAT, and Natural Resources and Environment. Authorisations for UAV use would include environmental and socio-political assessments as preconditions. It complies with the UN Charter and ASEAN Charter while reinforcing Thailand's constitutional mandate to ensure sustainable

development. It may be a national white paper or an administrative guideline before later codification. Each instrument targets a specific domain: LCD relates to use-of-force thresholds; LNVE tackles procedural restraint; and LIS clarifies system-level checks.

To merge these into existing legislation, the authors suggest amending provisions of the 1954 Act. They realise there will be feasibility constraints, such as institutional resistance and constitutional boundaries on discretion. Thus, they recommend a staged approach: issuing ethical training standards, updating licensing classifications, and requiring review protocols. These can be operationalised without displacing current treaty-based duties and would increase doctrinal clarity and accountability. Since discourse on UAV warfare in Thailand remains limited, the authors realise the necessity of norm internalisation via participatory mechanisms. These comprise civic education, policy consultations, and stakeholder dialogue convened by academic, religious, and regulatory institutions. The authors argue for creating feedback procedures via top-down and grassroots deliberation. Over time, Buddhist precepts could inform legal reasoning, paralleling IHL and IHRL.

Brunstetter and Férey (2021) and Martins (2017) are correct to underscore that most targeted killings in recent years have occurred in states with which the sending country is not formally at war. This circumstance carries legal consequences. Chief among them is that the conduct of drone operations bypasses the constitutional procedures designed to preserve the exceptional nature of war, making the exception the rule. Whereas international law does not outright prohibit targeted killings, it permits them only under specific conditions. In practice, these criteria are frequently disregarded. Thailand is not formally at war, yet while its Air Navigation Act BE 2497 (1954) and subsequent notifications regulate ownership and operation, they do not address intent, targeting, or civilian impact. The Thai case is not an exception to the global pattern—it is a variation within it. The proposed instruments—LCD, LNVE, and LIS—are not symbolic supplements but necessary legal correctives. They contribute doctrinal content where the law is silent, embed Buddhist ethics where constitutional discretion is unbounded, and propose institutional procedures for domains where oversight mechanisms remain underdeveloped. These guidelines do not negate the dedication or discipline of those serving in the armed forces. Rather, they affirm that the courage displayed by military personnel should be matched by an equally courageous legal setup in times of automation. War has changed. The law must follow suit.

Theoretical Conclusion

The authors demonstrate that UAV operations erode the applicability of individualised culpability under established legal doctrine. Interviewees described decision-making as multi-nodal, with intent, execution, and consequence distributed across human and

automated agents. This operational structure complicates attribution under IHL, which presupposes unified agency and spatial-temporal contiguity. Moreover, they noted that physical detachment reduces moral restraint. In this context, the authors referred to Bennett (2001), who conceptualises agency as arising from assemblages rather than sovereign will. Latour (2012) similarly tracks causality through associations, not legal subjects. By the same token, they highlight the value of Gregory's work (2012; 2014). The latter demonstrates how spatial/temporal disjunction between UAV pilots and their 'victims' conceals the exercise of lethal force. Lastly, the authors reiterated the value of Thai Buddhist concepts as they reject fixed identity and linear causation within and between humans and non-humans, offering an ontological model better suited to the juridical opacity of drone warfare. Table 1 below shows the conceptual flows for a post-buddhist legislation, table 2 shows the ASEAN and UAV-based offensive, and table 3 shows Western vs. ASEAN Approaches to Drone Warfare.

Table 1
Conceptual flows for a post-Buddhist legislation

Category	Concept	Details	Flow
Theoretical Framework	Posthumanism	Relational Ontology, Critique of Human Exceptionalism (Bennett, Latour)	Assemblage Theory → Distributed Agency
	Buddhism	Anatta (Non-Self), Suññatā (Emptiness), Dependent Origination	Mixed Human-Nonhuman Ethical Models
	Technological Critique	Gray's Paradox (Empowerment/ Weakening), Boyle's Metastability, Cudworth & Hobden's Human-Nonhuman Blurring	Fragile Hybrid Security Models
Empirical Findings	Distributed Agency	Guilt and responsibility dispersed across actors (pilots, operators, states)	Breakdown of Individual Accountability
	Technological Alienation	Emotional detachment in remote executions, dehumanisation of violence	Videogame-like Warfare Experience
	Alternative Legal Imaginaries	Participants desire compassion, restraint, long-term ethical responsibility	Aspirations for New Legal-Ethical Standards
Historical Analysis	Killing by Remote Control	Vietnam → GWOT → RBIO; Security becomes dominant governance metric	Depoliticisation of Violence
Legal Analysis	Just War Theory (JWT)	Jus ad Bellum, Jus in Bello, Jus post Bellum strained under drone warfare conditions	Legal Gaps and Ambiguities
	International Humanitarian Law (IHL)	Anthropocentric limitations: Martens Clause demands conscience-based regulation	Inadequacy in Drone Context
Legal Reform Proposals	Law of Compassionate Defence (LCD)	Compassion and Moral Discipline thresholds for UAV use; COC oversight inspired by Article 36 API	Reinforced Restraint in Use-of-Force Thresholds

Table 1 *(continue)*

Category	Concept	Details	Flow
	Law of Non-Violent Engagement (LNVE)	Exhaustion of peaceful options, proof before kinetic deployment; Ethical Scrutiny	Strengthened Duty to Pursue Peaceful Solutions
	Law of Interconnected Security (LIS)	Anticipatory environmental and social audits of UAV impacts; Relational Security Model	Context-sensitive Security Governance

Table 2
ASEAN and UAV-based offensive measures (inspired by Kliem, 2024; Suzuki, 2021)

ASEAN Principle	Definition in ASEAN Practice	Implications for Drone Warfare
Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity	Emphasis on non-intervention and respect for state borders.	UAV intrusions are likely framed as sovereignty violations; drone policy focuses on non-encroachment.
Neutrality and Non-Interference	Avoidance of involvement in external armed conflicts or condemnation of other states.	Limited regional appetite for extraterritorial drone sanctions or collective UAV doctrines.
ASEAN Centrality	Attention to ASEAN as a diplomatic convenor in the Indo-Pacific.	Lack of regional cohesion on drone ethics weakens ASEAN's actorness in military AI governance.
Economic and Energy Security	Policy shaped around essential imports and supply chain continuity.	Drone procurement potentially prioritised for economic or logistic utility over legal-ethical scrutiny.
Strategic Autonomy	Commitment to independent, non-aligned policy choices.	States adopt UAV policies tailored to their domestic security interests, often decoupling them from multilateral norms and standards.
Hedging Between Powers	Simultaneous cooperation with competing global actors.	Drone technology acquired from multiple sources complicates interoperability, legal harmonisation, and ethical standards.
Diplomatic Resolution over Sanctions	Preference for persuasion, consultation, and consensus mechanisms.	UAV misuse is unlikely to trigger regional punishment regimes; governance is pursued through soft law or informal oversight.
Disunity in Collective Action	ASEAN members often diverge in national responses despite shared rhetoric.	No unified ASEAN drone doctrine; UAV norms remain state-driven.
Commitment to International Law	Public support for UN Charter principles is inconsistently enforced.	In drone policy, references to IHL and IHRL are often symbolic (in some ASEAN nations like Myanmar/Burma or during coup scenarios) (see Doffegnies & Wells, 2022); enforcement mechanisms might be underdeveloped.
Resistance to Western-style Diplomacy	Preference for regional mechanisms over bloc-led or coercive frameworks.	ASEAN drone governance is likely to favour homegrown ethical models (e.g., Buddhist or local legal norms) over NATO-aligned military jurisprudence, especially in high-risk areas like the Indo-Pacific (Yoshimatsu, 2023).

Table 3
Western vs. ASEAN approaches to drone warfare

Dimension	*Western (NATO/EU) Practice*	*ASEAN Practice*	*Implications for Drone Governance*
The typology relies on ideal-type distinctions to delineate doctrinal orientations in UAV governance across regional blocs. The contrasts carry no prescriptive connotation and do not assert the primacy of one model over another.			
Legal Infrastructure	Enacts codified regimes: NATO operational codes, EU mandates, ICC statutes	Entrusts legal discretion to state institutions; no supranational mechanisms	Western models constitutionalise UAV policy; ASEAN counterparts adjudicate it within sovereign parameters
Ethical Foundations	Derives principles from secular moral theory, Just War ethics, and humanitarian jurisprudence	Construct normative reasoning on pluralist traditions: Buddhist, Islamic, or nationalist	Western ethics advocate doctrinal coherence; ASEAN ethics accommodate culturally contingent frameworks
Institutional Capacity	Mobilises command architecture via NATO hubs and EU defence organs	Participates in episodic coordination absent a standing military authority	Western institutions streamline joint deployment; ASEAN structures function through intergovernmental consultation
Decision-Making Culture	Delegates authority through hierarchical security bureaucracies	Fosters consensual deliberation, privileging national policy autonomy	NATO protocols enable expedient implementation; ASEAN deliberations emphasise distributed decision-making
Transparency and Oversight	Facilitates external review through parliamentary scrutiny and legal adjudication	Regulates information under national security frameworks with selective disclosure	Western systems embed procedural accountability; ASEAN regimes administer oversight through internalised controls (that might vary across nations)
Public Discourse	Channels ethical engagement via civil organisations, academics, and public media	Frames UAV narratives primarily through ministerial or elite-led forums/think-tanks	Western publics instigate ethical debate; ASEAN publics can sometimes encounter institutional boundaries to normative intervention
Technological Origin	Create UAV platforms domestically, drawing on embedded legal systems	Acquires systems from international producers (e.g., China and Russia), with limited modification or customisation	Western designs incorporate ethical jurisprudence; ASEAN imports adapt to prevailing geopolitical and technological constraints
Operational Doctrine	Codifies engagement procedures via multilateral standardisation protocols	Assembles national directives in the absence of regional coordination	Western militaries administer shared tactical procedures; ASEAN operational models reflect jurisdictional divergence
Norm Diffusion	Disseminates regulatory norms via treaty mechanisms, doctrinal exchange, and jurisprudential alignment	Circulates ethical positions via informal diplomacy and multilateral dialogue	Western blocs externalise legal standards; ASEAN forums cultivate soft normative presence through negotiated consensus

CONCLUSION

For the participants, UAVs weaken legal and moral sensitivity and accountability. On the one hand, they accepted drone deployment for intelligence gathering and mine clearance. On the other hand, they rejected their use for distant execution. Ling (2024) and Walzer (2016) opine that proportionality is often applied permissively, enabling civilian harm through speculative military calculations. The authors submit that it lacks a mechanism to weigh harms unfolding across time and borders. For them, a Posthuman Buddhist-informed legal reform would bring about a temporal audit, incorporating karmic consequences such as displacement, ecological damage, and psychosocial harm. This would shift scrutiny from numeric thresholds to how violence alters social relations. It could also recast proportionality as a non-quantitative test, where necessity cannot outweigh social and individual harm. Thailand, given its long-standing commitment to peaceful coexistence, holds unique normative resources to help redefine military governance in the age of automation. By merging Posthuman Buddhism with domestic and international legal standards, the country could position itself as an exemplar of doctrinal restraint and 'humane' security.

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