The Ukrainian Marine Drone Found in Greece and the War Losing Control

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At first, it might seem like just an incident, one of those strange episodes that quickly end up in technical news or geopolitical curiosities at the end of the day; a marine drone found inside a cave in Greece by some fishermen, apparently of Ukrainian origin, with the engine still running, communication systems active and, according to various sources, also loaded with explosives, something that is instinctively perceived as an anomaly, almost a navigational error, yet perhaps the most interesting and unsettling part of the whole affair is hidden right here. Because the real problem is not the drone itself, nor is it even understanding if it was truly headed towards a target or if it simply lost signal, lost course, or lost operational control; the real problem is realizing that we are entering a historical phase in which autonomous or semi-autonomous armed systems begin to move within increasingly large civilian, commercial, and maritime spaces without yet having a real regulatory, technical, and legal architecture capable of managing what happens when something inevitably goes wrong.

In fact, until today, we have continued to think about war as if it were still tied to a relatively linear concept of control, decision chain, and human presence, where there is a soldier, a commander, an identifiable responsibility, a choice, an order, and above all a fairly clear boundary between the battlefield and the rest of the world, but drones are slowly dissolving all this, not only because they can strike from a distance, something that has been happening for some time now, but because they can continue to operate even when direct control degrades, when the connection is interrupted, when the mission changes geographical context, or simply when no one knows exactly where the system is or what it is doing.

And it is precisely here that the discovery in Greece becomes something much more important than a simple technical episode, because it shows us for the first time in an extremely concrete and pragmatic way what a future might mean in which armed autonomous systems begin to get lost in the real world.

The Loss of Control

What would have happened if that marine drone had exploded when the fishermen decided to approach? What would have happened if a boat of tourists or vacationers had encountered it at sea?

This is precisely the point that is still completely missing in the public debate, because we continue to discuss drones almost exclusively in terms of military effectiveness, operational costs, or technological innovation, while much less is said about saturation, that is, the moment when these systems will stop being relatively rare or ideally controlled tools and will instead start to become numerically much more widespread, economical, replicable, and expendable, because when hundreds or thousands of naval, terrestrial, or aerial drones begin to circulate simultaneously within enormous operational theaters, the problem will no longer be the single human error or limited collateral damage, but the statistical loss of control, and this is a huge, almost philosophical difference compared to traditional warfare, because if a soldier can make a mistake individually and in a relatively “contained” manner, a distributed system can replicate the same error on an industrial scale and above all can continue to propagate the consequences of that error much faster than a human structure can react, all in a decidedly uncontrolled way.

And it is here that the issue stops being purely military and becomes structural: every commercial port, every oil tanker, every civilian ship, every tourist beach, or maritime energy infrastructure could progressively transform into a potential risk space, not necessarily because

someone has deliberately decided to hit it, but simply because armed autonomous systems can lose orientation, signal, navigation, or operational context and still continue to exist within the real environment.
In fact, a drone does not really understand the context; it executes a command. It does not interpret, does not doubt, does not truly distinguish between intention, error, fear, or innocence, but applies a logical sequence as effective as it is aseptic. A sniper who must engage a target, or a military pilot operating in a real context, is still theoretically able to distinguish between target and innocent, between threat and presence not involved in the conflict, while a drone executes a command string devoid of real interpretative or discretionary capacity.

This is the real conceptual challenge for those who still today see drones as simple “remote-controlled weapons,” because we are no longer facing evolved bullets or latest-generation missiles constantly guided by humans, but real persistent, autonomous operational entities beyond the real safe control of those who employ them, systems capable of stationing, analyzing the environment, reacting, and continuing a mission even in the absence of continuous real-time human control.

The Problem of Responsibility

And it is perhaps precisely here that the most important question emerges, a question that is no longer just technological but above all legal and political, given that all modern international law, including the Geneva Conventions, rules of engagement, and the very concept of military criminal responsibility, has been built around the idea that there is always an identifiable human being in the kill chain, someone who decides, orders, evaluates proportionality, interprets the context, and who can eventually be accused of having committed a war crime; but what happens when this chain begins to fragment within autonomous networks, decision algorithms, loss of signal, tactical automations, or distributed swarms? Who is responsible if an out-of-control drone hits a civilian port, a commercial ship, or a populated area? The programmer, the manufacturer, the commander, the politician who authorized its use, or no one, because the system simply “lost operational control”?
And it is precisely here that the concept of accountability gap stops being an academic theory and becomes the real problem.

In fact, the truth is that incidents are already beginning to appear: drones crossing NATO borders, systems crashing out of area, accidental incursions, signal losses, and border crossings that until a few years ago would have been considered exceptional events if we talk about drones, or prosecutable crimes if we talk about airplanes, tanks, or other traditional means, but which are slowly becoming part of the new background noise of modern warfare, and perhaps the real mistake would be to continue considering them temporary anomalies instead of the first symptoms of a much deeper change, because every new military technology in history has been used long before there was a real regulation capable of containing its side effects and, if we do not start immediately to bring this problem to the international discussion table, drones will probably not be an exception.

When War Exits State Monopoly

And perhaps there is another even more unsettling question, a question almost absent from the public debate: what would have happened if that drone had not been recovered by the Greek authorities, but by a criminal network, a terrorist organization, or simply by actors interested in studying its components, communications, architecture, and operational logics?
Because every truly effective military technology in history inevitably ends up being observed, captured, copied, simplified, and redistributed well beyond the original control of those who developed it, and relatively economical, replicable, and industrializable autonomous systems could accelerate this process in an unprecedented way, drastically lowering the technological threshold necessary to transform capabilities once exclusively military into tools accessible even to non-state actors.

A Mine Waits. A Drone Seeks You.

Let's try to think about mines; precisely because of their characteristic of being effectively abandoned in a territory and therefore capable of hitting anyone who passes and activates them, they have been progressively limited, regulated, or banned in many international contexts, but this happened only after hundreds of thousands of civilian victims and decades of humanitarian consequences.
With drones, however, the risk could become even greater and much faster, because while you have to walk over or accidentally navigate near a mine, a drone can come looking for you, can move, adapt, continue to operate and reach you even when you were not at all the intended

target.

The risk, therefore, is not only that machines will fight the wars of the future, but that the world will slowly get used to the idea that autonomous armed systems can circulate, fail, disappear, reappear, or strike without there yet being an international structure truly ready to manage the consequences of this new normality, and perhaps the drone found in Greece is unsettling precisely for this reason, not because it represents a revolutionary weapon, but because it probably represents one of the first concrete signs of what happens when a war loses its front and begins slowly to disperse into the civilian world.

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