The Necropolitics of Drone Bases and Use in the African Context

This paper critically evaluates the establishment of drone bases and the use of drones in several countries in Africa by Western and Arab nations. Despite the significant financial commitments needed, external forces continue to invest heavily in drone bases and operations across the continent, often promoted for the security of Africans. Using secondary sources, this paper employs the concept of ‘necropolitics’ to argue that these drone bases, along with the technologies emanating from them represent the deployment of ‘necropolitical technologies of domination’. The paper posits that such technologies enable external forces to control African airspaces and determine who lives and dies, thereby ensuring their acquiescence and subjugation under ‘aerial colonialism’. This paper challenges the prevailing discourse that drone operations primarily serve African interests, advocating for a critical reassessment and renegotiation of such partnerships guided by a pan-African strategy and protocol for drone deployment in African countries.

Keywords: Drones, Sahel, Necropolitics, Africa, Aerial Colonialism

Introduction

The quest for and exploitation of human and material resources in Africa by external forces and countries has persisted for centuries. The trans-Saharan slave trade, which lasted for centuries till recent times, involved the capture, torture, and enslavement of people from communities across Africa, particularly in the Sahel and East African regions (Lovejoy, 2011; Saleh and Wahby, 2022). These individuals were taken to the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Palestine, where they were exploited for labour and sex and subjected to inhumane torture, such as castration (Gaudio, 2014, p. 324; Kehinde, 2023). Another such inhumane treatment began approximately 1526 and is known as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, involving the capture and transportation of Africans as commodities across the Atlantic Ocean (Muhammad, 2003; Eno *et al.*, 2012). These individuals were enslaved for labour and sexual exploitation, among other reasons, primarily in the Caribbean and the Americas, by Western countries such as Portugal, France, Britain, and Spain (Eno *et al.*, 2012). As the Transatlantic Slave Trade began to decline, another form of exploitation emerged: the forced labour of Africans on their lands. This forced labour was exemplified by the plantation system and the genocide in the Congo under King Leopold II of Belgium (Weisbord, 2010). Such exploitation intensified with European countries scrambling for Africa's land, minerals, and water resources, including Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, and others (Griffiths, 1986; Gonçalves, 2021). This scramble led to colonisation and the creation of artificial borders across Africa (Gonçalves, 2021).

Post-independence, the dependency of African countries on their former colonisers decreased for some of the Anglophone countries, while Francophone countries experienced a deepening of these exploitative colonial ties (Vallin, 2015; Yates and Yates, 2019), necessitating the situation of which Kwame Nkrumah termed neo-colonialism. The struggle for resources and political power in Africa during the 1990s and 2020s, along with the successive coups and prolonged civil wars in resource-rich countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo, resulted in hardship and suffering for millions of people across the continent. These hardship is yet to stop. Currently, the trend involves leveraging debt to gain control over resources, political influence, and access (Nyerere, 1985; Bagwandeen, Edyegu and Otele, 2023; Brown, 2023) and using military aid and grants to rent land for military bases (Anyadike, 2017). The battle for control of African countries extends beyond material resources, with a growing effort to govern African airspace. This effort is not limited to Western nations but also includes

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countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even India, all of which have established drone bases in Africa (Anyadike, 2017; Turse, 2020; Bashfield, 2021; Phillips, 2024).

The extant literature has focused primarily on the nature and extent of drone deployment in Africa by both state and non-state actors, examining the implications and impacts on people, warfare, and the future of warfare. Numerous studies have addressed the impact of drone usage in Africa (Whitlock, 2012; Ajala, 2018; Haugstvedt, 2020; Cannon, 2023), particularly regarding U.S. military operations in the Sahel (Tankel, 2020) and aspects such as drone base locations and management and their influence on counterinsurgency tactics and global security (McCorMick, 2015; Turse, 2020, 2023). Other research has linked drone use with exploitation and domination (Vasko, 2013; Satia, 2014; Allinson, 2015; Tahir, 2015; Espinoza, 2018; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2021), often critiquing it as a form of neo-colonialism and state terrorism. However, the role of drone bases, the deployment of technologies from these facilities, and their impact on power dynamics, particularly in determining who lives and dies within the African context, still need to be explored To address this gap, this paper explores how drone bases in Africa, notably in the Sahel region by Western and Arab nations, contribute to necropolitical control over life and death across the continent. The lack of insight into the experiences and viewpoints of the global south, particularly Africa, on drone technologies, acquisitions, capabilities, deployments, utilisations, and performance (Oyewole, 2023) underscores the need for this research. Therefore, this study aims to illuminate these underrepresented perspectives, shedding light on the implications of foreign military presences and their impact on African sovereignty and social dynamics.

This paper, informed by secondary sources, synthesises ideas from Mbembe's 'Necropolitics' and concepts of colonialism to reflect on the necropolitical impact of drones on countries in Africa, mainly focusing on how technologies emerging from these bases ostensibly for counterinsurgency operations in regions such as the Sahel function as instruments of necropolitical control, determining who lives and who dies. The concept of necropolitics depicts the various ways powerful states use weapons to maximise killings and subjugations, whereby states exert their sovereignty through occupation and colonisation and decide who lives and dies (Mbembe, 2003).

The paper also draws upon the concepts of 'necropolitical logic of distinction' (Espinoza, 2018) and 'neocolonial Administration of Life and Death' (Vasko, 2013) to introduce the term 'necropolitical technologies of domination'. The notions of 'necropolitical logic of distinction' and ‘neocolonial Administration of Life and Death’ depict that the use of drones creates a logic of distinction, where those under drone surveillance differ from those controlling them, exerting control over the life and death of the former, reflecting a neo-colonial sort of administration where one side submits to the other’s authority, thereby turning the drone programme into a tool of state terrorism, as it categorises certain populations as expendable (Vasko, 2013; Espinoza, 2018).

This paper, building on Mbembe’s framework, argues that the deployment and use of drones from bases located in African countries, operated by external forces, both represent and reinforce the use of necropolitical tools of control and domination from the skies, subjecting people under their gaze to a form of aerial surveillance and authority. Thus, ‘necropolitical technologies of domination’ refer to tools and strategies employed to exert control over the life and death of specific populations, as well as the affairs of their countries, ultimately increasing the likelihood of their acquiescence to subjugation and domination by those who wield such technologies. This paper also argues that this state of affairs constitutes a form of colonialism from the skies or aerial colonialism. In this paper, aerial colonialism is defined as a system wherein one country exerts control and domination over another country’s airspace using ‘necropolitical technologies of domination’ to the extent of determining who lives and dies within the subjugated countries and exerting influence over other aspects of their affairs.

This paper contributes to the critical discourse on foreign military interventions in Africa by examining the implications of establishing drone bases and operations in African countries by external forces on sovereignty and the well-being of the people. It analyses the role of necropolitical technologies in shaping power dynamics and sustaining systemic inequality and advocates for a pan-African approach to counter aerial colonialism on the continent. The focus of this paper is strictly on airspace and not outer space. The distinctions between both, as well as the Karman line, which has been extensively addressed by (Sgobba and Gupta, 2022), are beyond the scope of this paper.

Following this introduction, this paper employs the concept of necropolitics as a critical framework for analysing the control and domination of African airspaces in the context of drone bases and operations while further explaining the concept of aerial colonialism. This segment will be succeeded by a comprehensive review of the literature on drone deployment and its significance in Africa. Subsequent sections delve into the current status and characteristics of drone bases and deployment in Africa. Finally, the paper utilises the lens of necropolitics to elucidate how these drone bases and operations establish a regime of domination, exploitation, and subjugation for the peoples of Africa.

Necropolitics and Drone Warfare: Theoretical Foundations of Aerial Colonialism

As stated earlier, this article draws from Professor Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics* to argue that drone bases facilitate 'necropolitical technologies of domination'. These technologies represent and reinforce principles of control and domination from the skies, akin to aerial colonialism.

> … the notion of necropolitics and necro-power to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead* (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40, italics in original).

Allinson (2015) posits that the utilisation of drones can be interpreted through the prism of necropolitics, wherein a state asserts its authority to dominate others, extending to the determination of who lives and who dies. Vasko (2013) explains that drones, often justified by the principle of precision strikes, are used by powerful countries such as the United States in their dealings with the Global South. These drones represent a new method of exerting control over life and death, reflecting a modern colonial-like relationship or 'neocolonial Administration of Life and Death', especially between the U.S. military and the countries in the Global South (Vasko, 2013). The consequence of this necropolitical logic of distinction is the assimilation of those living under the drone's gaze to a population that can be put to death, leading the drone programme to operate as a form of state terrorism (Espinoza, 2018, p. 377). 'The death camps in particular have been interpreted variously as the central metaphor for sovereign and destructive violence and as the ultimate sign of the absolute power of the negative' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). Similarly, these technologies can be viewed as the highest depiction of 'the absolute power of the negative', where a state, due to its military and economic interests, can dictate who lives and dies anywhere.

Drawing from these arguments and the literature on drone use in Africa, this paper defines *aerial colonialism* as a system wherein one country controls the airspace of another. This control allows the dominating country to deploy 'necropolitical technologies of domination', such as drones, to conduct airstrikes without oversight. Such actions often lead to the loss of life; destruction of property; and the subsequent physical, emotional, and psychological subjugation of the targeted population, along with the exploitation of their human, aerial, and natural resources.

Thus, Western and Arab states effectively appoint themselves as judges and executioners in extrajudicial killings within Africa, thus instilling fear in both the populace and their leaders, leading to their control and subjugation. While these countries invest millions of US dollars in such ventures, often framed as being in the interest of Africans, these 'necropolitical technologies of domination' primarily protect their imperial interests. African politicians, driven by a combination of self-interest and survival instincts, often ignore the issues experienced by their people and become susceptible to manipulation by those who offer them benefits.

For example, McCorMick (2015) reported that U.S. special operators indirectly supported '...an interim regional administration presided over by a notorious warlord and former member of al-Shabab, Ahmed Mohamed Islam, better known as "Madobe" – whose Ras Kamboni militia hosted al Qaeda training camps in the 1990s'[1]. Consequently, the U.S. gained unfettered access to resources beneficial for its drone operations within the Horn of Africa, specifically in the Jubaland State of Somalia, where 'Madobe' served as president from 2013 to 2023. Despite years of lethal drone attacks by several countries in the Horn of Africa, particularly from drone bases in places such as the Jubaland State of Somalia and Djibouti, it remains one of Africa's 'twin hotspots' (Anyadike, 2017) plagued by rampant violence; as such, it is those who build and operate the bases and individuals such as 'Madobe' who benefit from such drone operations.

Such operations that involve drone bases and operations depict a form of aerial colonialism. However, Balbon (2022) and Akhter (2019) described this phenomenon as neo-colonialism rather than traditional colonialism. Balbon (2022, p. 3) notes, 'The similarities between the necropolitics during the time of formal colonialism and current necropolitical forms of drone warfare can therefore be seen as an instance of the neo-colonial instrumentalization of drone technology'. In contrast to this view, Allinson (2015, p. 121) suggested that the criteria for drone strike targets in Afghanistan align with a colonial mindset, stating that it is '… consistent with the colonial apparatus of knowledge in the occupation of Afghanistan as a whole'. In light of the ongoing dynamics in the Sahel, it is unclear whether there has been a sincere effort to relinquish control over African airspace since the end of classical colonialism. In 2018, the US

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[1] These examples were included here to clarify the phenomenon.

Department of Defense's proposal for a $20 million Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Ghana to expand its military presence sparked widespread protests (Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2021). This proposal raised concerns about establishing a U.S. military base, as reported by the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (2021), who noted that despite denials from the Ghanaian government and the U.S. about the establishment of a drone base in Ghana, 'At the Kotoka airport, the U.S. maintains a cooperative security location. This is a base in all but the name'.

In the classic colonial era, colonial entities often directly relied on local subjects and institutions for their enterprises. For instance, in northern Nigeria, British colonialism and subcolonialism were somewhat successful, mainly due to support from the traditional ruling elite of the Sokoto Caliphate (Ochonu, 2008, 2014). Similarly, aerial colonialism is supported directly by current ruling elites, making it more akin to colonialism than neocolonialism. In 2018, the U.S. announced that the Nigerien government had permitted the operation of armed Reapers from bases owned by the U.S. located in Niger, which include Air Base 101 in Niamey, Air Base 201 in Agadez, and a drone outpost near Dirkou in northeastern Niger (Gettinger, 2019, p. 237). It would be unthinkable for the U.S. to partner with, or even allow, another country to operate drones across its overseas territories unilaterally, let alone within a U.S. state. The handover of African airspace from imperialistic states to Africans has yet to occur, indicating the absence of a postcolonial era in this domain. Most African states show limited agency in controlling their airspace due to technological constraints and exploitation by Western and Arab states.

The concept of aerial colonialism, as defined in this paper, encompasses several key aspects: the establishment and occupation of drone bases by external forces without broad population consent; direct control and rule over airspace; unilateral airstrikes within African territories; military aid predominantly supporting illegitimate regimes and undemocratic governments; and the killing of citizens within their own countries without African judicial sanction. These factors justify characterising the situation as colonialism, not neo-colonialism, due to the direct rule over some African countries' airspace, as opposed to indirect control. Such domination allows external countries to conduct airstrikes unilaterally, often without judicial oversight, inflicting fear and shaping behaviour towards acquiescence to domination.

Thus, aerial colonialism is the direct control of one country's airspace by another, enabling surveillance and drone attacks that lead to destruction and loss of life within the sovereign territory of the subjected nation, often without judicial oversight, culminating in necropolitical domination over the people and their government by the perpetrators of aerial colonialism.

Literature Review

The literature concerning drone deployment and its role within the African continent represents an emerging field. While this review does not cover the entire body of literature on the subject, it categorises the available related research into three primary areas: studies that elucidate the nature and extent of drone deployment in Africa by both state and non-state actors; research focusing on(Whitlock and Greg, 2011; McCorMick, 2015; Anyadike, 2017; Turse, 2020, 2023) the implications and impacts of these drone deployments; and analyses that predict the influence of drones on the future of warfare.

The phenomenon of drone deployment in Africa, with a specific focus on the Sahel region, has primarily garnered attention from news reports and various news agencies (Whitlock and Greg, 2011; McCorMick, 2015; Anyadike, 2017; Turse, 2020, 2023). In 2011, Craig Whitlock reported that the U.S. Air Force had secretly been flying drones armed with Hellfire missiles and satellite-guided bombs from an airfield in Arba Minch, Ethiopia, which the U.S. had upgraded with millions of dollars for their counterterrorism efforts against al-Shabab (Whitlock and Greg, 2011). At that time, the extent of drone use and its influence on modern warfare were largely unknown. A month prior to that publication in The Washington Post, Craig Whitlock and Greg Miller also reported on the establishment of US drone bases in Djibouti for counterterrorism operations across the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as on the drone bases in the Republic of Seychelles for counterpiracy surveillance (Whitlock and Greg, 2011). According to Whitlock and Greg (2011), ‘Overall, officials said, the cluster of bases reflects an effort to have wider geographic coverage, greater leverage with countries in the region and backup facilities if individual airstrips are forced to close’.

In essence, the secret ‘cluster of bases’ mentioned by Whitlock and Greg (2011) served as a strategic initiative funded by U.S. taxpayer money, which ‘officials’ suggest is purposed to ‘wider geographic coverage’, thus extending U.S. operational reach far beyond its borders and enhancing the ability of the USA to influence and engage with countries in the region. Furthermore, these bases provide leverage for regional governments and act as resilient operational points, thereby maintaining a presence that can support American interests when necessary. Essentially, this network of bases serves as tools for the U.S. to gain influence over

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airspaces and leadership – consequently, the people – within geographical areas, ensuring the sustenance of American national interests.

While the initial establishment of these bases, as outlined by Whitlock and Miller (2011), might be seen as a period of strategic moderation funded by U.S. taxpayer money, the landscape of drone base deployment in Africa has evolved significantly since then. Recent reports indicate that, in addition to the United States, several other countries have established drone bases across the continent of Africa. These include China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the UAE, the UK, India, and Turkey (Anyadike, 2017; Oyewole, 2017)(Anyadike, 2017). Specifically, the United States operates on approximately 27 bases in 15 African countries (Turse, 2020). According to a January 2024 report by *The Wall Street Journal*, the U.S. is seeking to establish more drone bases in 'Coastal West Africa'; these bases are planned to be located at Ghana's Air Force Base in Tamale, an airfield in Parakou, Benin Republic, and potentially at three airfields in the Ivory Coast (Phillips, 2024). These types of reports suggest an increasing trend in the establishment of drone bases and deployments within Africa by countries such as the United States and France. Such a trend is likely to persist if current patterns remain unchallenged and in the absence of a pan-African consensus on these matters.

It is not just the state actors who are deploying drones in Africa; violent non-state actors such as al-Shabaab, the Libyan Liberation Army, ISIS-Mozambique (Ansar al-Sunna), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) are deploying drones for many tactical purposes, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and propaganda video making (Haugstvedt, 2020; Haruna, 2022; Olumba *et al.*, 2022; Dass, 2023). According to Haruna (2022), in Gubio town, approximately 96 km northwest of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno in Northern Nigeria, an attack by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgents on July 18th, 2022, led to the death of five members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a government-backed military; it was claimed that the attack occurred following the observation of a drone over the position of counter-insurgency forces.

It has been argued that violent non-state actors in Africa are not currently deploying armed drones for offensive attacks but are using them for other tactical purposes (Haugstvedt, 2020, p. 94; Dass, 2023). Most drone use by these terrorists is for passive defensive purposes, primarily to conduct ISR prior to attacks and to create propaganda videos; these drones also serve as symbols of airpower, status, and technological prowess, potentially aiding in recruitment (Dass, 2023) and possibly securing donations. However, many scholars have noted that non-state actors will soon arm their off-the-shelf drones with IEDs or use armed drones for aerial attacks (Zwijnenburg, 2016; Haugstvedt, 2020; Aworinde, 2023).

Violent nonstate actors in Africa have gained access to drones through various means: the affordability and availability of hobbyist drones, trafficking of technology and weapons from other conflict zones, and confiscation of equipment, including drones and specialised gear, from government forces (Dass, 2023). A situation that could be increasingly observed is the supply of armed drones to non-state actors in Africa by state actors, either from within or outside the region. Libya represents a notable case in which non-state actors are supplied with armed drones by external state actors. Additionally, the conflict in Libya provides drone companies with a platform for testing new drone technologies; this assertion is substantiated by a 2021 United Nations report detailing the operational use of AI-equipped drones in Libya (Cramer, 2021).

Notably, the Kargu-2 drone, produced by the Turkish defense firm *STM*, was deployed in a conflict involving Tripoli-based government forces and militia forces led by Khalifa Hifter (Cramer, 2021). According to Cramer (2021), drones operate without human control; ‘The fighters “were hunted down and remotely engaged by the unmanned combat aerial vehicles or the lethal autonomous weapons systems,” according to the report’. The Tripoli-based Government of the National Accord, headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, is backed by the UN (Wintour, 2020; Cramer, 2021), whereas Khalifa Hifter is supported by Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and France (Cramer, 2021).

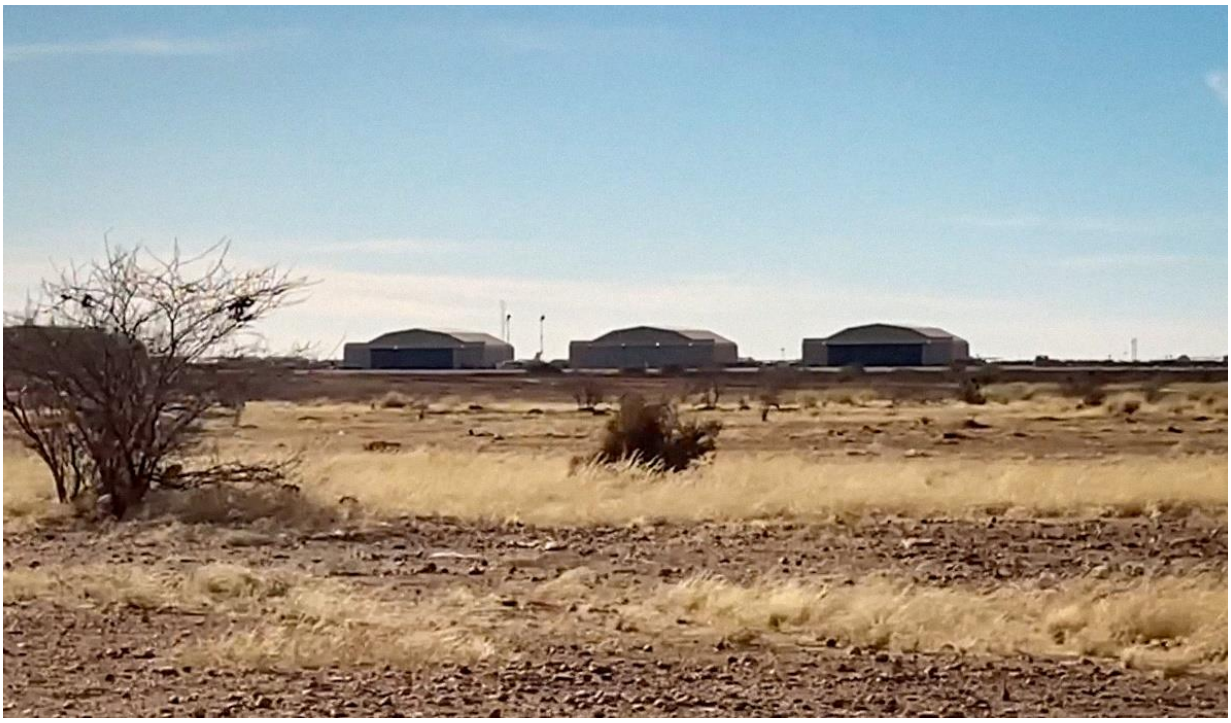

Figure 1. An image of the U.S. drone base 'Base Aerienne 201' in Agadez, Niger (Turse, 2023)

Whether the Government of National Accord qualifies as a non-state actor is debatable; however, the LNA, led by Gen Khalifa Haftar, is a violent non-state actor. In August 2019, a drone strike in the town of Murzuq, southwestern Libya, carried out by forces loyal to Gen Haftar, resulted in 42 deaths and 60 injuries (Aljazeera, 2019). *This incident represents one of the first and most significant examples of a non-state actor conducting an offensive drone strike in Africa, resulting in many fatalities.* The LNA has deployed Chinese-made Wing Loong drones from the Al Khadim airbase in eastern Libya that are capable of delivering precision-guided missiles and bombs across the country (Gatopoulos, 2020).

The impact and implications of drone bases and deployment on people, countries and warfare in Africa have also received scholarly attention (Donnenfeld, 2019; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2021; Balbon, 2022). Drawing on the impacts of drone warfare in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria, where operations have led to increased civilian casualties and no end to terrorism, Ajala (2018) argued that the drone base in Niger might backfire, potentially escalating terrorism in the Sahel. This prediction has materialised: the US-owned Base Aerienne 201 – a $110 million drone base in Agadez, Niger (see Figure 1), which requires $30 million annually for maintenance – has failed to ensure even local security. Highlighting this, Turse (2023) reports a daring incident where armed bandits, just less than a mile from the base, stole approximately $40,000 in cash intended for the payroll of employees at the base. This heist illustrates that the security provided by such bases often fails to benefit the local population and primarily serves the interests of those in distant locations.

Nonetheless, some argue in favour of the US deploying drones in Africa, provided there is explicit consent for disclosure, responsible usage by America, and transparency and cooperation between America and African nations (Attuquayefio, 2014). Furthermore, Attuquayefio (2014, p. 11) states, ‘Africa is now a hub of terrorism. Unfortunately, the continent is inexperienced and underprepared to fight wars, unlike America. Allowing Africa to fight terrorism in a handicapped manner is risky’. Such an argument, however, risks oversimplifying the situation by depicting Africa as a single entity or a country, consequently and unfairly diminishing the capacities and efforts of individual countries in Africa in managing their security challenges. Others call for states in the Sahel to increase their deployment of armed drones to combat insecurity in the region (Okpaleke *et al.*, 2023).

A report by the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research (2021) contends that the establishment and deployment of drone bases in Africa are contrary to the interests and sovereignty of African nations. The report states, ‘The enduring presence of foreign military bases not only symbolises the lack of unity and sovereignty; it also equally enforces the fragmentation and subordination of the continent’s peoples and governments.’ Focusing on Ghana, the report highlights how Ghanaian politicians and the US government kept agreements for establishing military drone bases secret, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among Ghanaians.

In addition, several other studies have also examined the link between drone use and the exploitation and domination of others (Vasko, 2013; Satia, 2014; Allinson, 2015; Tahir, 2015; Espinoza, 2018), with much of this scholarship criticising drone use as a form of colonialism or neo-colonialism and state terrorism. For Vasko (2013, p. 88), the deployment of drones to combat perceived 'terrorist' threats in the Global South, among other applications, exemplifies a biopolitical process of coding bodies as targets for elimination and epitomises a ‘neocolonial Administration of Life and Death’. Espinoza (2018, p. 377) contends that the drone programme represents a form of orientalism imbued with racial undertones, paralleling it with *state-sponsored terrorism*. The spread of armed drones has led to the creation of two types of global spaces; the first type, neo-colonial spaces, consists of economically and militarily weaker regions in the global periphery that are dominated and exploited by more powerful states. The second type emerges within the territories of states that deploy militarised drones, creating internal peripheries; these internal peripheries often become sites of resistance against colonial power (Akhter, 2019, p. 65).

The impact of drones on conflicts in Africa has been examined (Rotte, 2016; Cannon, 2023). While most African countries rely on imported ready-made drones, South Africa can produce sophisticated drones, and Egypt and Tunisia are developing their drone technology – the demise of Gaddafi halted similar advancements in Libya (Rotte, 2016, p. 88). Cannon (2023, pp. 267–268) notes that despite the effectiveness of medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) drones in other regions, factors such as vast distances, extreme environments, and dynamic battlefields reduce their effectiveness in Africa. Additionally, the suboptimal maintenance of modern military equipment by African militaries and a lack of support systems such as combat aircraft, helicopter gunships, and airmobile forces, which could utilise information from UAVs, might limit the influence of drones in Africa compared to other regions (Rotte, 2016, pp. 88–89).

The potential for drone use and its implications for future conflicts in Africa have recently garnered increased attention. The possibility of terrorist groups such as ISWAP, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram weaponising off-the-shelf drones or acquiring advanced armed drones is a significant concern (Haugstvedt, 2020; Olumba, 2022; Olumba *et al.*, 2022; Aworinde, 2023).

According to Bulama Bukarti:

> They [ISWAP] have started to experiment how to put explosives on those drones and if they've succeeded in doing that, then we would start to see attacks unfortunately from the air, which would not require any fighters or suicide bombers and that would be deadly and would prolong the crisis in the Lake Chad region (Aworinde, 2023).

Nonetheless, Haugstvedt (2020) argues that despite the transfer of human and material resources from the ISIS-influenced ISWAP, there is currently little motivation for these groups to share their expertise on weaponised UAVs; however, this situation may change soon. The potential influence of drones on future conflicts is well acknowledged. Small, weaponised drones represent a significant tactical advancement, providing non-state actors with a cost-effective, precision-guided weapon system capable of bypassing most defences and targeting virtually any military asset (Jacobsen, 2017). While there is an increasing argument in favour of the impact and influence of drones in contemporary and future warfare (Eslami, 2022; Rossiter and Cannon, 2022; Devore, 2023), some contend that drones are not a radically new technology. Instead, they represent a notable development in airpower, accompanied by challenges for states in building and operating them (Joshi *et al.*, 2013, p. 53). Nonetheless, the psychological impact of drone use is a notable advantage for terrorist factions; with the decreasing difficulty of acquisition and a rising inclination among militants to procure or readily available drones, this technology is entrenched in modern warfare (Dass, 2022).

Arguments support increased drone usage by African states and advocate for the active involvement of African policymakers in shaping drone policies and security in the Sahel (Olumba, 2022; Cannon, 2023; Okpaleke *et al.*, 2023). Olumba (2022) argues that African nations should not rely solely on purchasing ready-made drones but also develop their drone industry to prepare for future warfare, emulating Turkey. A future which is here with us now. As barriers to the adoption of drone technologies diminish, to the extent that cost-effective do-it-yourself (DIY) drones, such as those in cardboard models such as SYPAQ, have demonstrated the ability to damage MiG-29 and four Su-30 fighters in Russia's Kursk Oblast, such tools and tactics are likely to become routine features of future warfare (Jacobsen, 2023).

Despite the extensive literature on the use and deployment of drones in Africa by both state and non-state actors, there is a need for further exploration into how drone bases and deployment by external forces, particularly in the Sahel by Western and Arab countries, facilitate necropolitical domination. This paper explicitly examines their impact on power dynamics within the African context, particularly in determining life and death, potentially entrenching *aerial colonialism*.

Drone Bases and Deployment in Africa

Aerial control of other people's lands has long been an imperial tool extensively used by the British colonial administration as early as 1920; instead of relying on costly and unpopular troop deployments, the British employed the RAF to patrol areas and gather information, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of bombarding subversive villages and tribes, thus reducing costs and increasing the efficiency of their domination (Satia, 2014, p. 2). 'Drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere not only suppress the wretched consequences of previous 'air control' regimes *but also yearn for the swagger and seemingly effortless domination that they imposed'* (Derek, 2013, italics in original). In essence, drone strikes not only represent a continuation of the colonial practice of aerial control but also exhibit a pursuit of dominance and the associated bravado.

Initially, developed for military reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence in the early twentieth century as part of the colonial airpower strategy, drones were armed with bombs and missiles by the US during World War II to counter Japanese kamikazes (Parks and Kaplan, 2017, p. 3). The authors further stated that in the early 1980s, the United States and Israeli Air Force fully integrated drones into their battle plans, leading to their extensive use for military operations and targeted killings by Israel and the United States by the 1990s. France was among the first countries to deploy drones in recent years. According to Gettinger (2019, p. 101), from 2008 to 2009, France deployed CL-289 in Chad for surveillance and tactical support to the European Union Force Chad (EUFOR Chad).

Since then, various European and Asian countries have not only deployed drones across Africa but also established drone bases from which they can conduct surveillance operations, targeting and killing at will (Anyadike, 2017; Donnenfeld, 2019; Turse, 2023). This power to target and kill people, lacking any oversight, represents a clear example of necropolitical control and domination over the people of subjected countries. This approach is underpinned by the necropolitical logic that considers the ‘Military Aged Male’ as inherently threatening and thus justifies meeting them with lethal violence – a ‘beautiful target’ (Allinson, 2015, p. 123).

India’s strategic presence in the Indian Ocean has expanded since 2007 when it established its first ‘foreign listening post’ in northern Madagascar, primarily to monitor ship movements and sought a broader strategy that included plans to build a naval base in Seychelles to counter piracy and balance China’s influence (Anyadike, 2019). However, recent satellite imagery has revealed that India has built a military outpost in Agalega; this outpost, situated in Mauritius, an African country in the southwest Indian Ocean, features a new airport with a 3000-meter runway and port, logistics and communication facilities (Bashfield, 2021). Essentially, it is more than a drone base.

According to Anyadike (2019), the following countries operate military bases with drone capabilities in these African locations:

Military Bases	Host Countries
France	Chad, Gabon, Cote d’Ivoire, Djibouti
USA	Djibouti, Chad, Niger, Cote d’Ivoire, Gabon, Cameroon, Somalia, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Democratic

	Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Senegal, South Sudan, Uganda.
India	Madagascar, The Seychelles
Turkey	Somalia
UAE	Somalia, Eritrea, Libya
Japan	Djibouti
China	Djibouti
Saudi Arabia	Djibouti

In contrast, no African country currently has a drone base, nor is any in the process of acquiring one among the countries mentioned above. The issue concerns not only the establishment of these bases but also the unrestrained power and authority these countries possess to conduct surveillance operations and to target and kill within many African nations, effectively acting as judges, juries, and executioners. Between April and August 2011, the United States conducted 101 strikes in Libya using armed drones, such as the RQ-1 Predator and Global Hawk, from NAS Sigonella, Italy; these drone strikes were part of the *Operation Odyssey Dawn*, a NATO intervention in the Libyan Civil War (Gettinger, 2019, p. 237). The operations aimed at weakening the government of Libya's then-president Muammar Gaddafi destroyed the country's airpower assets and infrastructure and culminated in his death after a drone strike decimated his convoy.

On day 5 of *Operation Odyssey Dawn*, a total of 336 flying missions and 108 raids were reported. Additionally, 212 such flying missions were carried out by U.S. planes, and the rest were carried out by planes from France, the UK, Italy, Canada, Spain, Belgium, and Denmark, which rendered the Libyan Air Force (LARAF) almost completely defenseless (Cenciotti, 2011). Unlike the invasion of Iraq, *Operation Odyssey Dawn* was backed by a resolution from the United Nations Security Council. This distinction is crucial, as the latter lacked UN sanction; the legal status of the Iraq invasion was further questioned by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who declared it illegal (MacAskill and Borger, 2004). A common thread in both scenarios is that brute power matters in the international arena rather than adhering to international rule and the disproportionate suffering that civilian populations endure. Had both countries had the power and opportunities to resist invasion, as Syria did, the news would have been different.

Unlike other drone strikes and operations in Africa, the drones used during *Operation Odyssey Dawn* were drawn from NAS Sigonella and Trapani Air Bases in Italy (Gettinger, 2019). Nonetheless, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which belongs to the U.S., plausibly provided some support, considering the hundreds of sorties and raids conducted during the *Operation Odyssey Dawn*. The U.S. has more than 27 bases in approximately 15 countries in Africa; nonetheless, it still uses spaces at 'host nation facilities', such as airbases or airports in Thiès, Senegal, and Singo, Uganda, that remain unofficial (Turse, 2020). Italy, Sweden, and the Netherlands have also been active in drone operations within Africa. In 2011, Italy deployed MQ-9 Reaper drones from its Trapani Air Base to Libya as part of the Operation Odyssey Dawn; as part of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Sweden and the Netherlands deployed armed drones, including the ScanEagle, Shadow, and Puma drones, to Timbuktu from 2014 to 2016 (Gettinger, 2019). Additionally, operating from the Chabelley Air Base in Djibouti between 2014 and 2015, Italy conducted an eight-month drone campaign under Operation Atalanta, which is part of the counter-piracy mission of the E.U. off the Horn of Africa; the Italian drones completed 28 missions, totaling more than 300 flight hours (Gettinger, 2019, p. 119).

No matter where it is deployed, by whom, or who is subject to it, the operation of deploying drones always amounts to an act of restriction (Espinoza, 2018, p. 387). In the case of Libya, the deployment of drones impinged on national sovereignty, leading to the destruction of national assets. It eroded peace and created conditions for insurgents to rise, both against and in support of the invasion, ultimately plunging the country into a brutal civil war. Overall, these drones served as 'necropolitical technologies of domination', where those wielding them possessed the power to determine who lives or dies. In essence, these technologies are killing machines that facilitate the domination and subjugation of those machines under their gaze.

Necropolitics of Aerial Colonialism in Africa

As stated *earlier, aerial colonialism* is a system of domination where one country controls another country's airspace, enabling the controlling country to unilaterally deploy 'necropolitical technologies of domination', such as drones, to conduct surveillance and airstrikes without oversight, leading to the killing of people and destruction of property and subjugation and the exploitation of those under the gaze of these technologies. Thus, with its increasing deployment, the drone programme acts as a form of state terrorism, targeting economically and militarily weaker regions, often dominated by more powerful states, and creating both external and internal peripheries subject to colonial power dynamics (Espinoza, 2018, p. 377; Akhter, 2019, p. 65).

While citing Grégoire Chamayou‘s ‘Théorie du drone’, Derek (2013) stated:

> They have transformed the meaning of ‘going to war’; the traditional model of combat is now being displaced by an altogether different ‘state of violence’ that degenerates into slaughter or hunting. One no longer fights the enemy, Chamayou contends, the enemy is simply eliminated as though one were shooting rabbits.

When applied to realities in Africa, especially in the Sahel, the drone programme, which involves establishing drone bases by external forces and their use without oversight, has numerous implications. The most severe implications border the ethics of drone use and highlight how one group arrogates the power to ‘slaughter or hunt’ another, mirroring Chamayou’s critique of modern warfare. This ‘slaughter and hunting’ has further implications related to undermining the territorial integrity of such countries, as well as the emotional, psychological, and physical violence to which people and their leaders are susceptible. This scenario exemplifies the ‘necropolitical logic of distinction’ (Espinoza, 2018), delineating those who control from those who are subjugated and reflecting the ‘neocolonial administration of life and death’ (Vasko, 2013), determining who lives and who dies.

Another implication concerns the erosion of the sovereignty of both the host country and its neighbouring nations by entities operating drone bases. None of the Western or Arab countries operating drone bases in countries in Africa would ever permit another state or external force to navigate their airspace without authorisation. The contentious issue of allowing the construction and operation of a drone base unilaterally on its territory by another country would be a no-go area. This epitomises the zenith of aerial colonialism, underscoring enduring and profound systemic power disparities between peoples and, now, countries within Africa, all of which have suffered centuries of exploitation and subjugation. The legacy of domination manifests through various historical episodes, including the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave trades, the machinations of the Berlin Conference, the colonial era, and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), among others. These episodes collectively reveal a fundamental truth: the determination of life and death, fundamentally shaped by the vested interests of those wielding brute power, reflects these historical patterns of domination and control.

For instance, the use of the drone bases in Niger, which may at most violate the sovereignty of the various countries overflown by these drones, could be seen as treating these countries not as distinct sovereign entities but as a single unit. This idea has colonial roots, according to Ikime (1973, p. 104):

> To suddenly observe strangers surveying their land, backed by soldiers armed with rifles and supported by maxim guns, must have filled the Tiv with justifiable consternation. Lugard apparently assumed that the fact that he had proclaimed 'Northern Nigeria' a British protectorate gave him the right to traverse any territory with impunity.

The British colonial enterprise erroneously believed that, with their proclamation and agreement with the Sokoto Caliphate, they had uncensored access to lands in what was then 'Northern Nigeria'. However, the Tiv people challenged this assumption and went to war with the British colonial enterprise, even though it was to their own detriment.

The approach is used in planning and executing drone operations; these countries are effectively merged into a single operational zone, inadvertently reinforcing the stereotype of Africa as a single country rather than recognising it as a diverse continent composed of multiple nations. This perspective is exemplified by the unending 'Italy/Africa Summit', 'U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit', 'India-Africa Forum Summit', 'Russia-Africa Summit', and 'UK-Africa Investment Summit', where African presidents are frequently summoned by a single head of state from another country. The persistence of a colonial mindset, as evident in invitations to these summits, underscores the type of leadership prevalent in many African countries. This situation, in turn, reinforces the narrative supported by existing literature that views Africa through a lens of historical subjugation and dependency, shaping military and strategic studies with a focus on the dominance of foreign powers (Oyewole, 2021). Consequently, when African leaders are summoned to Western capitals for such summits or events, they comply, sometimes facing demeaning treatment, such as being transported to venues in buses (Adu-Gyamfi, 2022), highlighting their diminished stature and self-respect. It is not surprising that the wave of coups d'état continues unabated across several African nations, given this context.

Another related implication is that these drone bases and the technologies that fly from them foster 'regime security' for dictators, as seen with Idriss Déby in Chad, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh in Djibouti (Anyadike, 2017), Mahamat Déby in Chad, Paul Biya of Cameroon and the Ali Bongo dynasty, which includes the current dictator in Gabon, among others. Many of these leaders are influenced and controlled by external forces, which disregard the demands for good governance by the populace, focusing instead on security cooperation and aid. It is thus not surprising that African leaders who defy the directives imposed by former colonial states often face regime change and death.

Several African leaders have been assassinated, either directly or indirectly, by colonial and neo-colonial powers; notable examples include Muammar Gaddafi, Patrice Lumumba, and Thomas Sankara. In a recent book review of Stuart Reid's book in the New York Times, Chotiner (2023) stated:

> Reid describes this in vivid detail. "You're going to kill us?" Lumumba asked; Frans Verscheure, a local police commissioner, simply answered, "Yes." After the men were dead, the killers poured sulfuric acid on the bodies. One of the Belgians present, Gerard Soete, brought home Lumumba's molars and a finger as trophies.

The quoted narration of Patrice Lumumba's tragic death exemplifies necropolitics, where colonial administrations determine life and death, conveying a deliberate message through the administration of life and death. This case illustrates the extent of control over life, death, and even the bodies, underscoring a necropolitical desire to exercise power that transcends mere governance to assert dominion in its most absolute form and, if possible, in the afterlife. These narratives and their consequences often render many African leaders susceptible to external influences and willing to align with those who possess these technologies of domination to maintain power and survive.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper argues that the establishment of drone bases by external forces and their use in Africa, along with the resulting transactional relationships, undermines the sovereignty of African nations. In addition, it imposes a regime of unilateral use of necropolitical technologies of domination, which determines who lives and dies, thus prioritising security over good governance and the rule of law, thereby perpetuating the notion of Africa as a monolithic entity or a 'country' in need of Western support. This situation represents a form of aerial colonialism underpinned by necropolitical technologies where external states exert power to determine life and death.

The paper recommends that African countries, particularly under the auspices of the African Union (AU), collaborate to renegotiate alliances that could undermine their aerial sovereignty and resist when such efforts are thwarted. A continental drone strategy could protect African nations from being at the mercy of external powers. Highlighting the risk of Africa being used as a testing ground for new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, Mr Seydina Moussa Ndiaye, President of the Senegalese Association for Artificial Intelligence and a UN Advisory Body member on Machine Learning, underscores the potential for AI to evolve into 'digital colonialism' (Bello, 2024; Burt, 2024; UN News, 2024). He advocates for a pan-African strategy to provide a unified AI vision, safeguarding against practices that could endanger African interests in AI development (Bello, 2024; Burt, 2024).

The pan-African approach, as suggested by Mr Ndiaye and currently under development, aims to protect African countries from 'digital colonialism' and should be adopted by the African Union (AU) to address the issue of aerial colonialism affecting several African countries. This paper advocates that the AU embrace this strategy in the airspace domain to counter aerial colonialism. This finding emphasises the necessity of re-evaluating alliances that undermine African aerial sovereignty, cautioning that advancements in AI and drone technology could pose significant risks to the sovereignty and well-being of African nations without proactive measures. Consequently, this paper calls for an 'African Drone Conference' dedicated to establishing protocols that should guide the use of the airspace of African countries.

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