

**Using Duty Ethics to Examine the Use of One-Way Drones
by Russian Ground Forces in the War in Ukraine**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction:

Russia Ground Forces invaded Ukrainian territory on February 22, 2022, entering into what would become a costly and protracted war that has continued into the present. The War in Ukraine is strategically different from all other modern wars in terms of scale, being the largest and bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II, and the implementation of new technologies. The most revolutionary and the most scrutinized technology has been the use of one-way drones, armed with a payload that detonates near impact and is more maneuverable and cheaper to produce than typical missile systems. The drone warfare's ethical standing has been examined warily since its first appearance in modern conflicts because of its ability to remove the actor from being fired upon in return for weapons deployment. However, this research is outdated as the high-altitude drones of the War on Terror, used to deploy ordinance on single-targets for the destruction of assets and assassinations based on extensive intelligence gathering, are not characteristic of the War in Ukraine. Iranian HESA Shahed 136 drones, maneuverable one-way drones that fly autonomously towards targets and detonate in proximity, are now the preferred strike method of Russian Ground Forces in their prolonged conflict with Ukraine, slowly replacing other kinetic weapons.

Some authors have recognized the misalignment with literature on drone warfare and implore continued research from policy, technology, and strategy perspectives, but there is a blind spot in academic literature examining the morality of the current drone warfare strategies. This blind spot must be addressed in order to fairly examine and judge the morality of one-way drone usage in war so proper norms can be established and missteps are not repeated. This paper's purpose is to begin to bridge a gap in academic literature, examining the ethics of the implementation of Shahed platform drones under a duty ethic framework. In duty ethics, actions

of actors are evaluated based on whether or not the actions adhere to the universality principle and the equality postulate. The universality principle and equality postulate create constraints for actions based on whether the actions are good and treat humans with due regard. This paper uses different perspectives through first hand accounts, news articles, technological reporting, and academic military literature to comprehensively address the ethics of Russian Ground Forces' drone usage in the War in Ukraine. In what follows, I will show that the strategic method by which Russian Ground Forces have employed Iranian HESA Shahed 136 one-way drones in Ukrainian urban centers is morally wrong because it violates ethical notions of duty, specifically the equality postulate and self-evident norms of warfare.

Literature Review:

As is becoming increasingly true of modern conflicts, information about the Russia-Ukraine War is disseminated globally and near instantaneously by government resources, media agencies, and eye witnesses. Additionally, researchers are performing real-time data analysis to inform both decision-makers and the public. Drone usage is a frequently covered topic as the technology is challenging long-established warfare norms, opening the door to new infantry tactics, and terrifying soldiers and civilians. Despite the wealth of information available concerning drone warfare in Ukraine, academic analyses of how ethical frameworks are being applied to use cases of new weapon systems often lags behind the use. This has been especially true of the revolutionary usage of one-way drones in this conflict.

Most scholarship on the ethical implications of drones in warfare is from the American War on Terror, which ended before the War in Ukraine began. In 2016, Michael L. Walzer compared a drone to a sniper rifle—a precision strike at low threat to the user against an individual target. During the War on Terror, drones were used to target individuals and assets

selected by intelligence gathering, operating alone and at high altitudes (Walzer, 2016). The Russian-used HESA Shahed 136 drone is a much different weapon system, more akin to artillery than a sniper rifle. The Shahed is much cheaper, smaller, and has broader utility than the high-altitude drones that preceded it.

Dominika Kunertova, quite correctly, assesses that these small drones now “have boots.” There is a new logic of drone warfare: “a cheaper way to deliver explosives...operated by individual soldiers on the ground” (Kunertova, 2023). This new use case leaves Walzer’s work outdated, yet the popular understanding of drone warfare still reflects his assessments. Kunertova argues security studies literature must reexamine drone warfare and keep policy-makers informed on the evolving technology-security nexus. However, Kunertova does not make a compelling case for whether or not drone warfare in the War in Ukraine is ethically legitimate. My goal in this paper is to make such a case, delineating between ethical and unethical drone use in a modern context, drawing upon previous work on duty ethics and the current state of drone warfare in the War in Ukraine.

Conceptual Framework:

My analysis draws upon duty ethics, which allows me to explain the universal duties that constrain the actions of Russian Ground Forces in their Ukrainian campaign and their failure to uphold these duties in drone warfare. Duty ethics evaluates actions based on moral rules that are applicable as moral rules themselves, independent of the action’s consequences. For duty ethics, an action is right simply because it is the right thing to do, not because it makes the actor or others “happier” or is aligned with religious tenets. People, as reasoning beings, have an obligation to choose the right action rather than the wrong one; it is their duty. The most influential writer on duty ethics is Immanuel Kant. Kant created a framework through which an

action can be evaluated as right or wrong. Kantian ethics is formed on the universality principle: “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law” (Van De Poel & Royakkers, 2011, p. 90). This means that a person should judge whether or not their action, if everyone took the same action every time, would result in a society that was contradictory and would cease to function. An additional Kantian principle is the equality postulate, which states that all persons should be treated as equals, with equal concern and respect, as all persons are rational beings who possess free will (Van De Poel & Royakkers, 2011).

A primary issue philosophers have with Kantian theory is that Kantian theory does not allow for bends in moral rules to bring about a greater good, therefore not meshing well with an ambiguous and imperfect world. William David Ross developed a theory that can better frame the ambiguous. Ross states that there are two types of norms, prima facie (universal) norms and self-evident norms. For most cases, the prima facie norms are the self-evident norms, but in certain cases situational factors may override the norm that fulfills the universality principle (Van De Poel & Royakkers, 2011). My analysis will focus on the equality postulate and self-evident norms, explaining how both are adapted into the universal law of war, and how Russian Ground Forces have failed to uphold both in their use of drones in the Russian-Ukrainian War.

Analysis I: Immoral by Equality Postulate

Russian Ground Forces utilizing Iranian HESA Shahed drones have acted immorally because they have violated the equality postulate. The Geneva Conventions states: “Attacks shall be limited strictly to military objectives. In so far as objects are concerned, military objectives are limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in

the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage” (Pilloud et al., 1987). The Geneva Conventions have separated objects and peoples that can be harmed during open conflict, and those that shall not be harmed during open conflict. This allows for Kantian Theory to apply to noncombatants even in times of war. The humanity principle of the law of war is “the civilian population’s immunity from being made the object of attack because their inoffensive and harmless character means that there is no military purpose served by attacking them.” Thus, individuals in war, under international law and the equality postulate, are expected to treat noncombatants with respect, as equals to themselves and noncombatants at home since they have fundamental value as human beings. Russian Ground Forces have failed to uphold this postulate by causing undue harm to civilians, targeting infrastructure necessary for the sustainment of civilian life.

This harm has largely come through attacks on power infrastructure. Noone and Beta report, “on November 23, 2022, Russia conducted 75 missile and drone strikes on power infrastructure in Ukraine” (2023). Power infrastructure is a justifiable military target if it provides a military advantage, but must also outweigh the harm caused to civilians. Russian Ground Forces in the late fall of each of the last three years conducted large scale and persistent drone attacks on key power infrastructure. The attacks in 2022 caused many civilians great anguish with 10 million losing heat and power, roughly half of the population. Physicians turned to headlamps to perform surgery and the elderly heated their homes with gas powered stoves to avoid freezing in the winter months (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Ukrainian officials and Western analysts have argued these vast outages are the intended consequence (Mayer & Smith, 2024). The timing of these attacks brings into question whether the attacks are meant to achieve a military purpose or psychologically cripple the general

population so that they would convince their representatives to sue for conditional surrender. Such attacks fail to treat humans with due regard as they use civilians as mere means for political and military gain, violating the equality postulate. The impact these attacks have had on civilians is revealed most clearly in first hand accounts, such as this interview with a citizen of Kherson, Ukraine whose husband had recently been killed when his car had been struck by an errant artillery shell:

Budiukh spoke to NPR on a clear winter morning in a market square where elderly couples and families with children were out doing their shopping. She and a friend, Natalia Savchenko, volunteer in Kherson, delivering food and other supplies to people trapped in their homes by the threat of Russia's relentless attacks. They told NPR the drone strikes escalated last summer and are now viewed by residents as a grim part of life. "When it happens you look for anywhere to hide," said Savchenko, 68. "We run under the trees or into a shed or a garage. My God, we hide anywhere we can find" (Mann, 2025).

Noncombatants in Ukraine are suffering under these incessant waves of drone attacks that have increased dramatically as the war has progressed.

The international community responded to these attacks with outrage and open condemnation (Mayer & Smith, 2024). Russian officials have had questionable responses to the adverse effects of the drone attacks, celebrating the harm caused to Ukrainian citizens with one parliamentary member going so far as to say the Ukrainian civilians should "rot and freeze" (Human Rights Watch, 2022). By saying ordinary civilians should "rot and freeze," this government official is using a form of moral neutralization called denial of victim. Denial of victim is often used in warfare to convince actors their actions are not immoral because the

enemy and its civilians are less than human and therefore forfeit any claim to equality and potentially life itself (DeTardo-Bora et al., 2019). Denial of victim is the antithesis of the equality postulate. This quote is a striking example of how due respect to civilians may not be entering the mind of the Russian policy-makers who determine the politics that necessitate the strategy of ground forces. By failing to uphold the equality postulate, the conduct of Russian Ground Forces in their employment of Shahed drones can be classified as concretely immoral.

Analysis II: Immoral by Self-Evident Norms

Russian Ground Forces have acted immorally by failing to uphold self-evident norms of warfare in Ukraine, utilizing HESA Shahed drones for a strategic purpose not in line with the core principles of the law of war. This has been demonstrated through a blatant disregard for civilians by not balancing harm to noncombatants with military advantage. Kantian Theory is historically considered incompatible with war outright, as intentionally harming another person violates the universality principle. However, Kant himself was able to recognize our reality saying:

The state of peace among men living side by side is not the natural state (status naturalis); the natural state is one of war. This does not always mean open hostilities, but at least an unceasing threat of war. A state of peace, therefore, must be established, for in order to be secured against hostility it is not sufficient that hostilities simply be not committed; and, unless this security is pledged to each by his neighbor (a thing that can occur only in a civil state), each may treat his neighbor, from whom he demands this security, as an enemy (Kant, 1795/2008).

It is important to recognize that Kant is confident war and the threat of war will remain our reality unless a “state of peace” is established, where every person trusts a pledge of security

from his or her neighbor. This state does not exist. In order for Kantian Theory to be applicable to certain aspects of war, his principles must be clarified, showing individuals how to best live out universal duties when much greater harm can result from not harming others. This means William David Ross' self-evident norms are more applicable to warfare as refusing to commit violence to protect others or gain a military advantage for a cause considered just enough to go to war for can itself result in a contradiction. Gaining military advantage must be justified through adherence to the universal and self-evident norms of warfare, which make up the key principles of the law of war: necessity, humanity, proportionality, distinction, and honor (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016). Humanity, distinction, and honor all fall under prima facie norms as actions can follow each principle without contradiction as no violence is necessary to uphold these principles. Necessity allows for violence against valid military targets to gain military advantage. Proportionality is the self-evident norm that allows for violence, but limits attacks based on both expected harm and risk to nonmilitary targets.

The risk to civilians is not being taken into account by Russian Ground Forces. Russian Ground Forces are using Shahed drones as a strategic in-between of long-range artillery and guided missiles (Kurnetova, 2023). These drones, however, have issues that are not associated with the other weapons systems. The Shahed-136 lacks the supplementary field intelligence of artillery, making target identification much less accurate. The Shahed also lacks the tested guidance and aeronautical systems of traditional missile systems. The resulting use case is potentially unreliable drones with large explosive payloads being sent by the hundreds into populated urban centers to strike a few valid targets. The consequences have been devastating.

According to reporting from the United Nations, 139 civilians were killed and 738 were injured in January 2025 alone with short-range drones accounting for almost 30 percent of

incidents. Danielle Bell, Head of UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine said “short-range drones now pose one of the deadliest threats to civilians in frontline areas” (United Nations, 2025). On January 6, 2025 a Shahed drone struck a passenger bus in Kherson, Ukraine, killing one and injuring eight others, all civilians (Zadorozhnyy, 2025). On January 30, 2025 a Shahed drone struck an apartment building in Sumy, killing nine and injuring thirteen, all civilians. President Zelensky’s chief of staff accused Russia of “launching Shahed drones charged with shrapnel to increase the number of civilian casualties” (AFP, 2025). The recent uptick in civilian casualties on nonmilitary targets calls into question the validity of these attacks and their morality.

Military necessity is a frequent defense for immoral strikes. Vladimir Putin described a particularly destructive wave of drone attacks on power infrastructure as “retaliation for Ukraine’s using American-made ATACMS missiles to strike inside Russia” and that “the assault targeted military sites” (Mayer & Smith, 2024). These statements appeal to military necessity by claiming drone attacks in Ukraine are a measured response to prior Ukrainian aggression and target military sites. Each wave of Russian drone attacks is defended by similar statements. Against the words of Russian officials, Noone and Beta report of the November 2022 attacks on power infrastructure, “while the precise role that each target may have played in support of Ukrainian military operations is nearly impossible to assess, experts agree that it is highly unlikely that all of these targets would qualify as military objectives” (2023). This statement demonstrates the military necessity of these attacks is tenuous. Even if each target offered a military advantage, the self-evident norm of proportionality must be taken into consideration to protect the other principles of humanity, distinction, and honor. The proportionality being claimed by Russian officials in their drone attacks is being challenged by the volume of one-way

drones sent into Ukraine, the civilian losses to-date, and the technological adaptations Russia is making to the Shahed to increase destructive capacity.

Russia is slowly implementing improved autonomous navigation capability to increase likelihood of strike success with the goal of eventually developing autonomous drone swarms that can network and destroy targets synchronously. While this is a concerning future, this technology does not yet exist. However, the small improvements are forcing Ukraine to continue to develop improved drone countermeasures and drones continue to slip through the cracks in their air defense capabilities (Bondar, 2025). Additionally, Russia is seeking ways to increase the damage output of the Shahed drones. Ukraine's military intelligence reported on February 18, 2025 that Russia had replaced the Shahed's 50 kilogram warhead with a 90 kilogram warhead (Bandouil, 2025). The increase in capability and risk of errant drones from untested integration of the new navigation system on the Shahed poses an even greater risk to civilians.

The risk to civilian life has not been properly taken into account in the recent Russian drone attacks in the War in Ukraine. The attacks are not proportional, using minimum force to achieve an objective and minimizing risk to civilians, as the attacks themselves intend to cause a level of harm that impacts Ukrainian civilians as much as the combat effectiveness of the Ukrainian army. Technological developments are being adapted into the platform as they are developed, not as they are proven reliable and risk-averse. These choices violate self-evident warfare norms and civilians have lost their lives as a result. The applications of untested technology and the natures of these attacks show Russian Ground Forces have little regard for the self-evident norm of proportionality, clearly violating duty under the guise of seeking a military advantage.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I demonstrated that the Russian Ground Forces' use of Iranian HESA Shahed 136 one-way drones is morally wrong because it has violated ethical notions of duty. Duty ethics are an important framework to evaluate how new technologies of war are implemented as duty ethics govern our actions, providing a minimum standard to uphold people's natural rights in all circumstances. The life-threatening consequences to noncombatants from Shahed drone attacks on power infrastructure in Ukraine violate the equality postulate, failing to treat noncombatants with due respect, but rather as mere means to achieve political goals. Russian officials have defended these attacks by appealing to their military necessity, claiming to have only targeted military sites. This perspective has been debunked by analysts and eye-witness accounts. Even if every target was legitimate, military action should fulfill the self-evident norm of proportionality, minimizing risk to civilians and doing the least harm necessary to achieve the objective. This is not an achievable standard with the current technological state of the Shahed drone with its heavier payload and its pathway into untested autonomous navigation systems, the number deployed, and the frequent mishaps and mistargetings. Decision-makers planning on using one-way drones to achieve a strategic military purpose must understand all possible ramifications for noncombatants and how to use the drones effectively while also holding true to duty ethics.

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