

KILLER-DRONE FOR HIRE

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Foreword Warning

Ukraine team is in Washington this week to share battlefield-tested drone experience and discuss joint production and technology agreements.

October 3, 2025 reports say Ukrainian officials are negotiating technology transfers and production partnerships with U.S. industry and defense partners — a legitimate and important effort to help Ukraine and to strengthen allied defenses. At the same time, those discussions make one fact painfully obvious: battlefield experience — including tactics, doctrine, and techniques that enabled lethal strikes — is being codified and exported. If any of those lessons include the fine-grain “how-to” of remotely killing people more cheaply and anonymously, and if those techniques spread without robust ethical, legal, and control frameworks, the consequences will be grim.

Russia–Ukraine war

The Russia–Ukraine war will end. That should be a relief. But history and common sense warn us: the end of a war does **not** erase the skills, habits, networks, or tools built during it.

Think Prohibition: 1920–1933. A lawful ban created a vast illegal industry—bootlegging—populated by armed, organized men who learned how to smuggle, bribe, intimidate, and kill. When liquor was legalized, those people didn’t vanish. Many shifted into racketeering, protection rackets, and other criminal enterprises. The violence and organization survived the change in law—and in many places metastasized into permanent crime structures.

Now imagine that pattern in the age of drones.

The new, immediate worry — bluntly put

Across both sides of the Ukraine conflict there are thousands of combat-hardened drone operators and a national-scale industry of low-cost, combat-proven UAV systems. Governments and militaries in the West are eager to harvest those lessons — for good reason: Ukraine’s experience is teaching allied forces about affordability, tactics, and massed drone concepts. But that same experience includes a set of human-focused killing techniques perfected under fire: remote target identification, stalking and targeting of individuals, coordinated swarm tactics for lethal effects, electronic-tradecraft to evade defenses, and psychological operations to normalize remote killing. When the war ends, those operators — highly skilled, often young, and sometimes with few peacetime job prospects — will be available on the market.

This is not abstract. Western policymakers are already listening and adapting doctrine based on Ukrainian practice; industry is eyeing production partnerships and exports. Those are sovereign choices with real security upside — but they also accelerate the diffusion of methods that made remote killing cheaper and more anonymous.

From Prohibition to Proliferation — the analogy restored

Prohibition taught us an important economic and social lesson: outlawed or wartime skills are portable. The Tommy-gun gangster who learned supply chains, bribery, and violence in one black market could

repurpose those capabilities in another. Drone operators learn remote murder, covert operations, and electronic tradecraft. They will pivot too — unless society intervenes.

The core danger (again, blunt): trained killers out of work

When demobilization arrives, the arithmetic is simple and terrifying:

1. **Supply of talent.** Combat experience + low-cost hardware = a new labor pool of trained, lethal operators.
2. **Remote, deniable violence.** Killers don't need to cross borders or be photographed. A screen, a signal, a contract.
3. **Recruitment & networks.** War-time networks, informal handlers, and private contractors can be repurposed as syndicates or recruitment hubs.

This will not primarily be about blowing up equipment. The salient and most chilling fact is about **people being killed** — anonymously, cheaply, and at a distance. That became the metric of “success” in battlefield narratives; that is what a clandestine market will buy.

Where they could be hired — and why it matters

- **Organized crime and cartels:** targeted assassinations, witness intimidation, surveillance of rivals.
- **Terrorist or extremist cells:** deniable remote attacks on civilians or soft infrastructure.
- **Corrupt actors and political contractors:** targeted killings of critics, opposition, or inconvenient witnesses with plausible deniability.
- **Private mercenary services:** state and non-state actors contracting for covert operations.

Each scenario drastically increases civilian risk. The nature of the weapon — remote, precise in human targeting, and anonymous — is what makes this so dangerous.

Why the current Washington exchanges matter for this narrative

Ukrainian teams in Washington are not merely shopping for parts. They bring *operational lessons* — what works in practice against a peer adversary, how to coordinate surveillance-to-strike chains, and how to scale low-cost attack packages. These operational lessons will influence doctrine, procurement, and industry. That diffusion can improve defensive posture — but without ethical and export guardrails, it also lowers the barrier for malign actors to learn and replicate lethal methods. Policymakers must therefore treat knowledge transfer as a dual-edged sword: valuable for defense, dangerous if uncontrolled.

The mundane economics of violence

Markets respond to incentives. If demand appears for precision outsider killing (for money, for terror, for political ends), supply will respond. Cheap commercial platforms, mass production, and the prospect of hiring seasoned operators will create an efficient, deniable market. We do not need fanciful imagination to forecast this; we only need to follow incentives and historical patterns.

Concrete steps — now, practical, and urgent

1. **Demobilize with purpose — paid retraining and guaranteed civilian jobs.** Fund transition programs that offer real alternatives: civilian drone work (infrastructure inspection, agriculture, search & rescue), licensed UAV maintenance, and formalized roles in regulated industries. Do not rely on ad-hoc charity programs; pay for transition.
2. **Certification & licensing tied to work.** Create internationally recognized certifications that require background checks, ethical training, and verified employment. Make freelance “operator for hire” harder and less anonymous.

3. **Control knowledge diffusion with policy.** When operations and tactics are transferred in bilateral meetings or international seminars, require classification rules, redaction of “how-to” lethal techniques, and formal oversight on doctrine sharing. Distinguish what is defense-enhancing (counter-UAS lessons, identification techniques) from operational killing tradecraft.
4. **Harden sales & telemetry.** Mandate tamper-resistant IDs, telemetry back-channels, and registration for high-capability airframes. Track aftermarket modifications and parts flows that enable weaponization.
5. **Crack down on recruitment channels.** Watch for encrypted recruitment hubs, private contracting intermediaries, and informal handlers. Expand international intelligence-sharing on recruiters who traffic in ex-combatants for illegal operations.
6. **Make mercenary drone services a major crime.** Treat commercialized deniable killing as a felony with extraterritorial enforcement, sanctions, and aggressive financial prosecution of intermediaries.
7. **Create economic sinks for talent.** Subsidize and scale civilian industries that can absorb drone skills with paid contracts: disaster response, environmental monitoring, infrastructure inspection, and regulated logistics.
8. **Mandate aftercare & deradicalization.** Provide long-term psychological support for operators who performed lethal missions; killing from a screen wounds minds and can perpetuate cycles of violence. Reintegration must include prolonged counseling and civic programs.

Policy lever examples (what good looks like)

- Industry standards requiring ID & telemetry on prosumer and higher-tier drones used commercially.
- International certification programs (think “ICAO for drones”) that tie cross-border operator privileges to verified legal employment and oversight.
- Financial-tracking and sanctions tools aimed at handlers and brokers who monetize ex-combatants.
- Training subsidies and placement guarantees in infrastructure, logistics, and humanitarian roles to absorb talent.

The Department of Defense and allied policy documents have already prioritized counter-UAS investment and doctrine changes; that’s essential. But the policy conversation must expand beyond kinetic defense to include demobilization economics, export controls on doctrine, and legal frameworks for mercenary drone services.

Final blunt note

If we fail to act, markets will supply what buyers want. The skill set honed in war—anonymity, distance, lethality—will be repurposed by actors with no moral scruples. The result will not be black-market equipment being swapped for cash; it will be bodies, fear, and the erosion of public safety in places far from any frontline.

We can prevent this. But prevention requires money, will, and international coordination — now, not later. The Prohibition lesson is stark: closing a market or ending a war doesn’t automatically eliminate the violent organizations and skills that grew within it. If we want a different ending, we must choose it and invest in it **before** the killers find their customers.

Envision with horror — then act.