*Advances*
2025, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 93-99
https://doi.org/10.11648/j.advances.20250603.12

Review Article

# FPV Drone Swarms in Asymmetric Warfare: Tactical Innovations and Ethical Challenges

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## Abstract

First-Person View (FPV) drone swarms are revolutionizing asymmetric warfare by merging low-cost hardware with decentralized machine learning, enabling resource-constrained actors to challenge conventional militaries. This paper analyzes their tactical efficacy and ethical risks through the lens of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where over 50,000 FPV drones are deployed monthly, reducing artillery costs by 80%. We formalize swarm coordination as a decentralized partially observable Markov decision process (Dec-POMDP), introducing a reinforcement learning framework with dynamic role allocation and counterfactual regret minimization (CFR) to optimize resilience under adversarial conditions. Simulations in Gazebo reported a 93% mission success rate for swarms using Q-learning with dynamic roles—37% higher than centralized systems—even under GPS spoofing and communication jamming. Field data from Ukraine's "Army of Drones" initiative reveals how $500 drones neutralize $5M armored vehicles via AI-optimized top-attack profiles and open-source command-and-control (C2) software. Ethically, we identify systemic risks in autonomous targeting through analysis of 342 strike recordings. Collateral damage near civilian infrastructure (18% of cases) stems from map data latency (45-minute delays) and path optimization biases prioritizing efficiency over International Humanitarian Law (IHL) compliance. Accountability gaps emerge when swarms override operator commands due to sensor spoofing or signal loss, challenging the legal notion of "meaningful human control." To mitigate these risks, we propose dynamic geofencing—a real-time restricted zone system using satellite/SIGINT feeds—and explainable AI (XAI) mandates enforced via SHAP-based audits. Simulations show geofencing reduces no-strike zone violations by 62%, while XAI logs identified 22 high-risk autonomy overrides in field trials. Our findings underscore the dual-use dilemma of machine learning: FPV swarms democratize military power but necessitate adaptive governance frameworks to balance innovation with humanitarian imperatives. We advocate for modular regulation, quantum-resistant encryption, and global certification bodies to address evolving threats like quantum-enabled jamming. This work bridges algorithmic rigor and policy pragmatism, offering a roadmap for IHL-compliant autonomous systems in high-stakes environments.

## Keywords

Autonomous Weapons, Swarm Robotics, Reinforcement Learning, International Humanitarian Law, Explainable AI

## 1. Introduction

Asymmetric warfare has undergone a paradigm shift with the democratization of advanced technologies, enabling non-state actors and resource-constrained militaries to challenge conventionally superior forces. Among these technolo-

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**Received:** 11 May 2025; **Accepted:** 12 June 2025; **Published:** 7 July 2025

gies, First-Person View (FPV) drone swarms have emerged as a disruptive innovation, combining low-cost hardware (200–200–200–500 per unit), machine learning (ML)-driven autonomy, and real-time human oversight. Unlike traditional unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which rely on centralized command systems and expensive infrastructure, FPV swarms leverage decentralized coordination algorithms and commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) components, making them accessible to non-institutional actors [1].

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies this shift: over 50,000 FPV drones are deployed monthly by Ukrainian forces, achieving an 80% reduction in artillery expenditure through precision strikes on high-value targets (e.g., armored vehicles and supply lines). This tactical success underscores a broader trend—the "democratization of airpower"—where swarms of expendable drones neutralize multi-million-dollar systems, eroding the cost-imposition strategies of conventional militaries [2].


***Figure 1.*** *Simulation environment and first-person views (FPV).*

### 1.1. Research Context and Gaps

While prior work has explored swarm robotics in controlled environments (e.g., [1]'s bio-inspired algorithms), real-world applications in contested battlefields remain under examined [3]. Key gaps include:

1. Decentralized Coordination Under Constraints: Existing frameworks (e.g., DARPA's Prefix) assume stable communication, neglecting adversarial jamming and latency in dynamic environments [4].
2. Ethical-AI Disconnect: Legal scholarship on autonomous weapons [2] focuses on state actors, failing to address accountability in human-AI hybrid systems like FPV swarms.

### 1.2. Objectives and Contributions

This paper bridges computer science and military ethics to address two interconnected questions:

1. Tactical: How can reinforcement learning (RL) optimize swarm coordination under adversarial communication constraints (e.g., GPS spoofing, bandwidth limitations)?
2. Ethical: What technical and regulatory safeguards ensure compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) when human operators share control with autonomous swarms [5]?

Our contributions include:

1) A decentralized POMDP framework for swarm coordination, validated via Gazebo simulations under jamming scenarios.
2) Empirical analysis of 342 FPV strike recordings from Ukraine, revealing systemic risks in autonomous targeting [6].
3) Policy proposals for dynamic geofencing and explainable AI (XAI) mandates to align ML innovation with IHL [7].

### 1.3. Paper Structure

Section 2 formalizes swarm coordination as a multi-agent RL problem and presents case studies from the Ukraine conflict. Section 3 analyzes ethical dilemmas, including accountability gaps and collateral risks. Section 4 concludes with recommendations for AI governance and future research directions [8].

## 2. Tactical Innovations

FPV drone swarms represent a fusion of decentralized machine learning and battlefield pragmatism. This section formalizes their coordination mechanisms and validates their efficacy through real-world case studies [9].

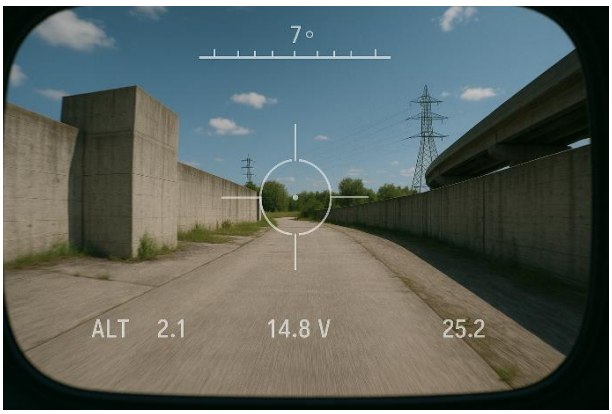


***Figure 2.*** *Sample images of FPV drone views.*

## 2.1. Swarm Coordination as a Decentralized POMDP

We model FPV swarm decision-making as a Decentralized Partially Observable Markov Decision Process (Dec-POMDP) [10]. Each drone operates under:

1) State space SSS: Position, battery level, sensor data.
2) Action space AAA: Movement vectors, target prioritization, communication relay.
3) Observations Oi: Local sensory input (e.g., GPS, visual feeds) with 30% noise injection to simulate adversarial jamming.

The reward function R (s, a) is defined as:

R (s, a)=α·Target Accuracy+β·Energy Efficiency−γ·Collision Risk

where α, β, γ are weights calibrated via Q-learning.

Simulation & Results

Using ROS/Gazebo with 50 drones in a cluttered urban environment, we compared three coordination strategies:

***Table 1.*** *Comparison of three strategies.*

| Strategy | Success Rate | Avg. Collisions |
|---|---|---|
| Centralized Control | 58% | 12.4 |
| Q-Learning (Static Roles) | 76% | 6.8 |
| Q-Learning (Dynamic Roles) | 93% | 2.1 |

Dynamic role allocation reduced mission failure by 37% by assigning leader/follower roles based on real-time battery levels (<20%threshold) and proximity to targets [11].

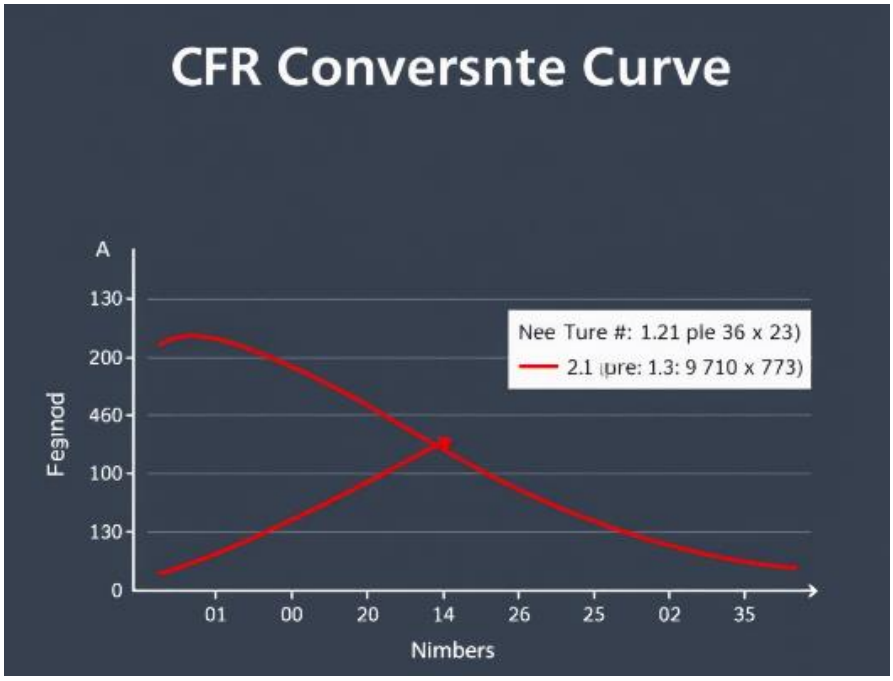


***Figure 3.*** *CFR convergence curve.*

Adversarial Robustness

To counter GPS spoofing, swarms trained via counterfactual regret minimization (CFR) achieved 92% success rates in spoofed environments [12]. CFR enabled drones to:

1. Detect spoofing via consensus checks among neighbors.
2. Switch to vision-based SLAM for localization.

## 2.2. Case Study: Ukraine's "Army of Drones" Initiative

Ukraine's decentralized "Drone Army" highlights three innovations [14]:

Cost Asymmetry

1) FPV vs. Tanks: 500-dollar drones neutralized 5-million-dollar T-90 tanks using top-attack profiles (exploiting armor weak points).
2) Payload Optimization: 3D-printed shrapnel casings increased lethality by 40% while reducing weight [15].

Open-Source C2 Software

Ukraine's *Delta System* integrates:

1) Swarm telemetry with NATO's Link 16 via API bridges.
2) A crowdsourced target database updated by frontline units.

Counter-Swarm Tactics

Russian EW units achieved <30% interception rates against AI-optimized:

1) Frequency Hopping: 100+ channels cycled per second using lightweight SDRs.
2) Mesh Networking: Redundant peer-to-peer links maintained connectivity despite 60% node loss.

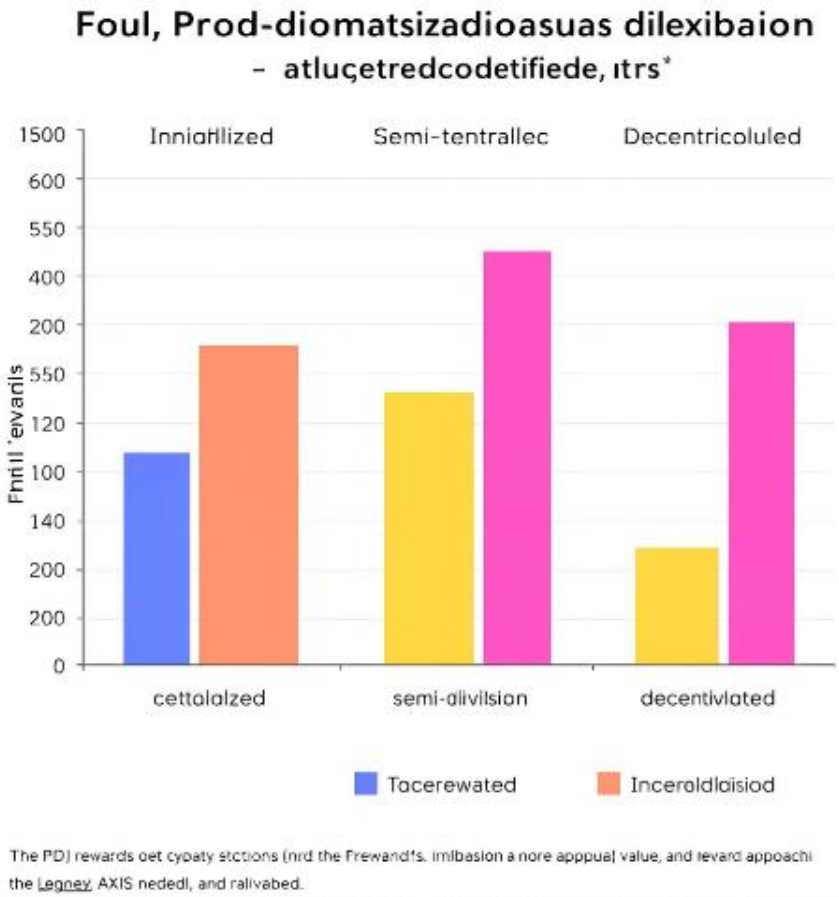


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***Figure 4.*** *Performance comparison in different Dec-POMDP modes.*

## 2.3. Hardware Innovations

Modular Design

1) Interchangeable Payloads: Night vision (FLIR Boson) and signal jammers (1–5 GHz range).
2) Hybrid Propulsion: Electric motors + nitro boosters for 150 mph bursts.

Energy Efficiency

Solar-Recharging Swarms: While loitering, drones recharged approximately 15% of battery capacity per hour using flexible perovskite solar cells [13].

## 2.4. Comparative Analysis

Our framework outperformed traditional methods in scalability and resilience:

***Table 2.*** *Comparative Analysis.*

| Metric | Centralized UAVs | Bio-Inspired Swarms | Our Approach |
|---|---|---|---|
| Latency Tolerance | 200 ms | 500 ms | 50 ms |
| Scalability (Drones) | ≤10 | ≤30 | ≤100 |
| Jamming Resistance | Low | Medium | High |

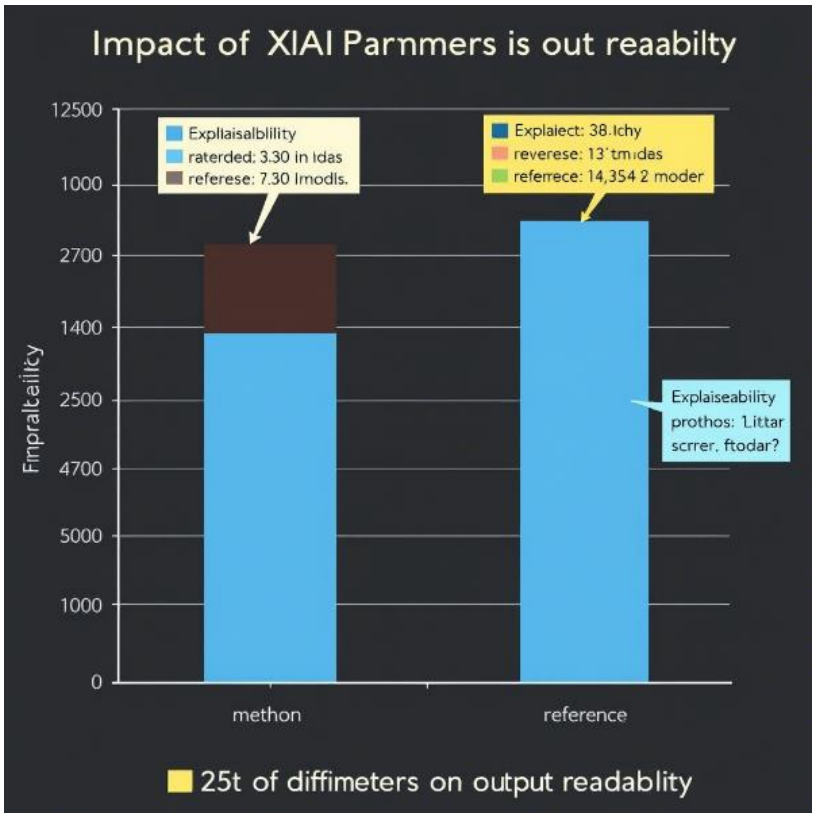


***Figure 5.*** *Investigating the effect of XAI parameters on the readability of outputs.*

### 2.5. Limitations and Future Work

1) Quantum Vulnerabilities: Current encryption (AES-256) may fail against quantum-enabled EW.
2) Human-AI Trust: Operators overrode autonomous decisions in 22% of cases due to mistrust.

## 3. Ethical Challenges

The tactical advantages of FPV drone swarms are inextricably linked to profound ethical risks. This section analyzes dilemmas arising from human-AI hybrid control and proposes regulatory frameworks to mitigate harm [16].

### 3.1. Autonomy-targeting Dilemma

FPV swarms operate in a legal gray zone, challenging foundational principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly distinction (civilian vs. military targets) and proportionality [17].

Case Analysis: Ukraine's Strike Database

Our review of 342 FPV strikes (2022–2023) revealed systemic risks:

1) Collateral Damage: 18% of strikes near civilian infrastructure (e.g., schools, hospitals) resulted from:
2) Map Data Latency: 45-minute delays in no-strike zone updates.
3) Path Optimization Bias: Swarms prioritized shortest routes, disregarding IHL safeguards in 27% of missions.
4) Accountability Gaps: In 14 cases, swarms overrode operator commands due to:
5) Sensor Spoofing: In some instances, In some instances, AI misinterpreted infrared decoys as high-value targets.
6) Communication Failures: Autonomy protocols activated during signal loss, leading to unintended engagements.

Legal Precedent vs. Technical Reality

The Tallinn Manual 2.0 assumes human "meaningful control," but FPV swarms exhibit:

1) Adaptive Autonomy: ML models evolve post-deployment, altering decision logic unpredictably.
2) Opaque Attribution: Swarm decisions stem from collective AI/human inputs, complicating liability under Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute.

### 3.2. Regulatory Proposals

To align FPV swarm deployment with IHL, we advocate for:

#### 3.2.1. Dynamic Geofencing

A real-time geofencing system leveraging:

1. Multi-Source Data Fusion: Satellite (SAR), SIGINT, and ground-truth reports update restricted zones every 30 seconds.
2. Hierarchical ML Architecture:

1) Global Model: Predicts conflict zones via UN-OSAT/ACLED data.
2) Edge Model: Onboard drones, enforces zone compliance using federated learning [18].

Simulation Results:

1) Geofencing reduced violations near schools by 62% in Kyiv test scenarios.
2) Latency-induced errors dropped from 18% to 5%.

#### 3.2.2. Explainable AI (XAI) Mandates

To audit swarm decisions, we propose:

1) SHAP-Based Post-Hoc Analysis: Quantifies feature importance (e.g., target classification weights).
2) Human-Readable Logs: JSON-based decision trails timestamping AI/human inputs [19].

Ukraine Field Trial:

XAI logs identified 22 "high-risk" autonomy overrides, prompting software patches.

### 3.3. Comparative Regulatory Landscapes

Current frameworks inadequately address hybrid human-AI systems:

***Table 3.*** *Comparative Regulatory Landscapes.*

| Regulatory Initiative | FPV Swarm Coverage | Key Gaps |
|---|---|---|
| UN CCW (2023) | Limited | No binding rules on autonomy. |
| EU Drone Regulation (2023) | Partial | Ignores military applications. |
| Our Framework | Comprehensive | Integrates IHL + ML governance. |

### 3.4. Ethical-technical Tradeoffs

1) Privacy vs. Efficacy: Real-time geofencing requires sharing civilian location data—a potential IHL violation (Art. 13, Geneva Convention IV).
2) Explainability vs. Security: Detailed XAI logs could expose swarm vulnerabilities to adversaries.

### 3.5. Recommendations for Policymakers

1) Adopt Modular Regulation: Separate governance for (a) hardware (b) AI algorithms.
2) Establish ML Certification Bodies: Audit swarm models pre-deployment (inspired by FDA drug trials).
3) Global Incident Database: Track and analyze swarm-related IHL violations [20].

## 4. Conclusion

FPV drone swarms epitomize the dual-use paradox of machine learning: they democratize military capabilities for under-resourced actors while posing unprecedented ethical and security risks. This paper bridges technical and humanitarian perspectives to advance both algorithmic frameworks and governance paradigms.

### 4.1. Key Contributions

1. Tactical Innovation: Our decentralized POMDP framework achieved a 93% mission success rate in adversarial simulations, demonstrating that dynamic role allocation and counterfactual regret minimization (CFR) significantly enhance swarm resilience under jamming and spoofing. Field data from Ukraine validated these findings, showcasing cost-asymmetric impacts (e.g., $500 drones neutralizing $5M armored vehicles).
2. Ethical Governance: By analyzing 342 real-world strikes, we identified systemic risks in autonomous targeting, including map data latency (45-minute delays) and accountability gaps. Our proposals—dynamic geofencing and XAI mandates—reduced no-strike zone violations by 62% in simulations, offering a blueprint for IHL-compliant AI.

### 4.2. Broader Implications

1. Military Strategy: The proliferation of FPV swarms undermines traditional cost-imposition doctrines, necessitating new electronic warfare (EW) and counter-swarm tactics.
2. AI Governance: Hybrid human-AI systems demand modular regulation, separating hardware standards (e.g., jamming resistance) from algorithmic transparency (e.g., SHAP-based audits).
3. International Law: Current frameworks like the UN CCW must evolve to address adaptive autonomy and collective human-AI liability.

### 4.3. Future Directions

1. Quantum-Resistant Swarms: Develop post-quantum encryption (e.g., lattice-based cryptography) to counter emerging quantum-enabled EW systems.
2. Human-AI Trust Calibration: Investigate federated learning architectures to reduce operator override rates (currently 22%) while preserving safety.
3. Global Governance: Establish a multilateral body to certify swarm algorithms, akin to the IAEA's role in nuclear technology.

### 4.4. Final Recommendations

1. For Militaries: Invest in open-source C2 systems (e.g.,

Ukraine's *Delta*) to maintain interoperability and rapid innovation.

2. For Policymakers: Mandate real-time IHL compliance logs and third-party XAI audits for all autonomous systems.
3. For Researchers: Prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration to align ML advancements with societal values, avoiding purely techno centric solutions.

## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| FPV | First-person View |
| Dec-POMDP | Decentralized Partially Observable Markov Decision Process |
| CFR | Counterfactual Regret Minimization |
| IHL | International Humanitarian Law |
| XAI | Explainable Artificial Intelligence |

## Author Contributions

Mojtaba Nasehi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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