Drones for Europe - Revisited

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ANDREA GILLI, SEP 4 2014

In September 2013, I published a short brief for the European Union Institute for Security Studies in which I claimed that an unmanned revolution in military technology is occurring and European countries should try to exploit its benefits.

In a blog-post last June, prof. Jocelyn Mawdsley noted that a suspicious European consensus about acquiring drones is emerging. Such consensus is mistaken and with my piece I would, somehow, epitomize it. Specifically, she claims, Europe should hesitate to embrace the drone revolution because of (1) the opposition of its citizens, (2) the related potential (and worrying) privacy issues, (3) drones' costs and, finally (4) their legal and ethical implications and their potential counter effects.

I am very glad of prof. Mawdsley's attention towards my research and I believe many of her points are interesting and deserve further scrutiny. However, I beg to disagree on a few instances.

First of all, I would like to reiterate my main idea. Drones represent a revolutionary technology that promises to deliver, in some specific circumstances, either wider military capabilities or superior efficiency – when compared to traditional platforms. In my view, drones could then help address some (not all) of the problems currently plaguing European countries' defence policies.

Let me also clarify what I am *not* saying: drones do not represent the silver bullet for the European defense and they should not be employed in every instance. In fact, my policy brief discussed the various challenges that drones trigger. In a related (and significantly longer) academic paper, with my co-author (and brother), I argue that the drone revolution poses in fact so many and intense challenges that it is unlikely to spread quickly and easily as many claim.

Let's now discuss prof. Mawdsley's arguments against adopting drones. First, according to the Pew Research Center, European citizens disapprove drone strikes. This, in her account, should be a first cautionary warning. There is at least a major problem with this argument. Drones and drone strikes are two different things: the former is a platform the latter a mission. Yet, for unknown reasons, they are often conflated into the public debate. Opposing the acquisition of drones because they can be used to conduct strikes is like opposing the use of commercial airliners because al-Qaeda threw down the Twin Towers. If EU citizens' opinion has been biased by a flawed debate, I believe, we should correct it not follow it.

A "second reason why European citizens are increasingly uneasy" about drones, according to prof. Mawdsley, is because they primarily provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions: i.e., they fly and spy and thus can somehow violate privacy. In this case, I believe that it is important to qualify the scope of the argument. The domestic employment of drones for surveillance missions clearly raises privacy issues. However, in my brief, I was primarily discussing border control and surveillance in out-of-area operations. Simply put, in order to fight piracy off the coasts of Somalia, I believe, Europe should deploy unmanned naval vehicles at a cost of few $ million rather than send a £1 bn naval destroyer. Similarly, I believe, for conducting maritime and border patrol operation, EU countries should employ one € million worth rotary-winged UAVs rather than €30+ million naval helicopters. Please also note that UAVs, when operating in non-segregated airspaces and for particular types of missions, may also entail lower training (pilots) and operating (fuel) costs.

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Third, "in strained times of budget austerity", prof. Mawdsley claims, "investing heavily in autonomous technologies" could not be seen as prudent. Two issues deserve attention in this respect. On the one hand, if the previous discussion is correct, drones may – in some specific circumstances – deliver significant savings and thus help address some of the problems currently plaguing Europe. A recurring example of success in European defense cooperation concerns the common helicopter training program led by the European Defence Agency. Each country buys expensive helicopters, pays their repair and maintenance and bears their high operating costs. However, training is pooled so to save resources. My solution is simple: scrap the helicopters, fire the pilots, close the training facilities, shut down the production plants and let's just buy drones. Am I being extreme? Yes, but I believe this is the way to go. Am I wrong? Maybe: let's discuss it.

On the other hand, I perfectly agree that European countries should not invest heavily on drones. However, this is hardly the current situation: while EU countries continue to waste or mismanage resources on redundant facilities, excessive personnel, obsolete materiel, also because of an inefficient industrial structure and acquisition policy, the resources allocated to UAVs remain extremely limited.

Fourth, prof. Mawdsley notes that while drones' benefits are uncertain, the problems they entail are pretty clear: beside legal and ethical issues, doctrinal to organizational aspects, "technologies like drones blur the lines of what might be considered an incursion into a sovereign state", thus potentially increasing instability at the global level. These are complex aspects that I cannot address here. Assessing drones' effectiveness is extremely difficult because we often lack appropriate metrics. Similarly, whether drones weaken the norm of sovereignty is an important issue but open to debate. I perfectly agree on the legal and ethical concerns. Similarly, in my brief (and in my academic paper), I discussed at length the technological and adoption challenges drones entail. However, rejecting drones across the board is not necessarily the optimal solution. More appropriate, I believe, is to invest in R&D and experimentation, so to understand their capabilities and potentials and then have an open debate about their pros and cons. If, as many claim, drones will represent the future of warfare, by deciding to quit the race early on or by waiting too much, Europe seriously runs the high risk of forcing itself into total strategic and technological irrelevance in the near future. This would be a serious mistake.

About the author:

Andrea Gilli recently obtained his PhD in Political and Social Science from the European University Institute in Florence. His dissertation investigates armaments cooperation in Europe. In the past he has been, among others, Visiting Fellow at the Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies at Columbia University in New York, at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) in Paris and at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the SAIS/Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. In 2013, he co-led the EUISS Task Force on European Military Capabilities. He recently published an article in Security Studies on the diffusion of military innovations and suicide terrorism.