

Drones, Gender and Classical Realists

Written by John de Bhal

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JOHN DE BHAL, APR 17 2015

'I know Americans think drones are the answer, but I wish they could understand how I and other children in my community see drones' – Rehman, drone victim (NPR 2013).

Recently, an American scholar has defended his nation's use of drones. Daniel Byman (2013: 32) has argued that drones have significant strategic value because they devastate terrorist sanctuaries in states like Yemen, and Pakistan. It is also recognised that drones have killed civilians, but according to Byman (2013: 35) this is of little significance in the larger scheme of things as drones' capacity to kill terrorists gives them huge strategic utility. But does the killing capacity of drones make them strategically viable as Byman (2013) suggests? This essay takes two theoretical approaches in order to answer this question. The approaches examined are classical realism – which most closely resembles Byman's position – and feminism. Both theoretical frameworks are highly complex and will inevitably be simplified for clarity and concision. In line with the feminist perspective, my main argument is that drones cannot be considered strategically viable in terms of their killing capacity because they have the ability to perpetuate the spread of terrorism as opposed to eliminating it.

My argument proceeds in five main sections. In the first, I will outline what drones are in order to provide the reader with a rudimentary background on how they are used as well some controversies surrounding their use. Secondly, I demonstrate how classical realism has shaped Byman's argument in order to lay the foundations for my main analysis in the following sections. The third section questions drones' strategic value, arguing that they exacerbate the problem they are trying to solve by using a feminist perspective to critique classical realism's parameters. In the fourth section, I examine the limitations of the theoretical positions used in this essay. Finally, I conclude my argument and outline the implications of my case.

What are drones?

Drones are also known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). As the name suggests, drones do not have a human pilot on board of the aircraft but their pilots remain on the ground and the aircraft is operated remotely (Miller 2014). The United States has used militarised drones to conduct counterterrorism operations overseas (Byman 2013). The US' use of drones has been controversial. Byman (2013: 32) has acknowledged a number of controversies surrounding drones including their violations of sovereignty overseas, their legal use by the United States, and the drones' ability to kill significant numbers of civilians. Nevertheless, some consider drones to have enormous strategic value (Byman 2013).

As a precursor, I am aware that debates surrounding the use of drones are highly complex. However, my focus – asking if drones offer any significant strategic capacity – is extremely justified. Byman (2013) has justified drones because of their capacity to kill 'terrorists'. Byman ignores how drones can exacerbate terrorism. As a result, it is optimistic and wrong to conclude that drones 'work' for this reason.

Classical Realism, Byman and Drones.

This section outlines how classical realism has shaped the argument espoused by Byman (2013) in order to lay the foundations for the following sections of this paper. It focuses on the main tenets of classical realism reflected in

Drones, Gender and Classical Realists

Written by John de Bhal

Byman's argument in order to analyse the finer nuances of his argument later in this paper. I admit from the outset that classical realism is not the only theoretical position espoused by Byman and this is taken into account.

Classical realism and its custodians consider states to be the main actors in world politics. The 'classic' classical realist texts such as 'Politics Among Nations' (Morgenthau 1948) and 'The Twenty Years' Crisis' (Carr 1939) aim to explain the behaviour of states. Additionally, Byman (2013) also does this as he aims to explain and justify the behaviour of US drone strikes. Although the War on Terror is fought between state and non-state actors, Byman (2013) is trying to justify and explain the actions of a state. Even though classical realists see states as the main actors in world politics, they see all politics as a struggle for power (Lebow 2013: 61).

Furthermore, classical realism's ethics do not extend beyond the state's commitment to its own interests. As Morgenthau has outlined 'universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states' (1948: 11). In line with this statement, Byman (2013: 33, 34, 41) rejects the Geneva Conventions in terms of torture and the killing of civilians, principles of state sovereignty in addition to international law and justifies this defiance in terms of the US national interest. Moreover, classical realism is further reflected in the justification of drones as drones allow the United States to pursue its national interest overseas at little financial or human cost (Carr 1939: 20; Byman 2013: 43).

Another core tenet of classical realism is its emphasis on the internal cohesiveness of states. Classical realists see little difference between domestic and international politics because they see all politics as a struggle for power (Lebow 2013: 61). Acting outside the communal bonds and norms of the internal populations can lead to fractures within (Lebow 2013: 62). The death of American soldiers and the lack of public support as a result are often cited as the main reasons why the US lost the Vietnam War (Lynch and Sperlich 1979: 22). Byman (2013: 39) recognises the importance of US public opinion and frames his argument accordingly. Furthermore, Byman (2013: 33) is aware that drones could lure the US into conflicts it could otherwise avoid, which reflects hubris. Classical realists see great powers as their own worst enemy because of the possibility of hubris (Lebow 2013: 61).

While Byman (2013) presents an argument in largely classical realist terms, there are also a number of other theoretical positions in his text. For example, states like Yemen and Pakistan have cooperated with US counterterrorism efforts (Byman 2013: 38), reflecting a neoliberal regime surrounding counterterrorism (Sterling-Folker 2013: 115). Additionally, Byman (2013: 41) espouses a structural realist position on the repercussions of other states acquiring drone technology because of the uncertainty surrounding the future intentions of other states (Mearsheimer 2013: 79). Other theoretical positions exist in Byman's text, but I do not want to take emphasis away or detract from my argument or the focus of this essay.

Byman (2013) justifies the use of drones in terms of their strategic utility. This is reflective of the how classical realists justify policy. As Morgenthau has outlined, 'the political realist asks: "How does this policy affect the power of the nation?"' (1948: 13). Byman (2013) attempts to justify how the policy of drones affects the power of the US and by justifying their use in strategic terms, further shows how classical realism has shaped his argument. The following section will further elaborate and critically analyse the strategic value of drones from a feminist perspective.

Drone's Strategic Value: A Feminist Perspective.

To briefly summarise the previous section, classical realists see war as a continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz 1832: 87). This reflects Byman's stance on the War on Terror, while the drones are the 'other means' of continuing the US foreign policy. Moreover, drones are seen as effective means because 'by killing key leaders and denying terrorists sanctuaries in Pakistan, Yemen, and, to a lesser degree, Somalia, drones have devastated al Qaeda and associated anti-American militant groups' (Byman 2013: 32). Again this reflects classical realist thought on the strategic capabilities of drones as realists are adamant that military power is an essential part of international politics and is one of the most effective types of power a state can use to coerce its enemy (Carr 1939: 110; Morgenthau 1948: 136). A feminist perspective reveals the issues with Byman's conviction, demonstrating that drones have the potential to exacerbate terrorism as opposed to fighting it.

Drones, Gender and Classical Realists

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In contrast to classical realism, feminism sees gender as its point of analysis in international relations (Tickner and Sjoberg 2013: 205). It sees the strategic value of drones defined in terms of killing to be a masculine assertion, whereas Byman and classical realists may understand this to be objective (Tickner 2001: 44; Tickner and Sjoberg 2013: 207). In short, feminism critiques classical realism's masculine foundations.

Feminism understands war not as extension of politics but as something that directly involves individuals, with the aim of physically hurting human bodies (Butler 2010: 30; Sylvester 2012: 484). Moreover, 'feminists focus on how world politics can contribute to the insecurity of individuals, particularly marginalised and disempowered populations' (Tickner 2001: 3). It provides a challenge, and another perspective to the traditional hegemonic, masculine descriptions and representations of the world that theories like classical realism present (Tickner 1988: 429). This is the foundation of my analysis in this section: feminism's ability to discern the human experience of war and how the insecurity of drone victims can also prove to further insecure the US. I do this because within Byman's analysis, ordinary individuals affected by drones are excluded. Moreover, it means that the effects of drones on the lives of individuals can be discerned and analysed.

From this perspective, Byman's analysis is misguided and also misrepresentative. Byman (2013: 35-36) acknowledges that drones' 'selling point' lay in their ability to kill terrorists. It is also recognised that civilians have also been killed, but Byman concludes that this is irrelevant in the larger scheme of things (Byman 2013: 35-38). In contrast, feminism sees war as a phenomenon that aims to kill with little rationality as this is the end to which drones are justified (Butler 2010: 26). There is little justification of drones in the larger picture. Byman (2013) fails to outline how drones could assist in ending the War on Terror. Instead drones are justified by their killing capacity (Byman 2012: 33-35).

By making human experiences the focal point of its analysis, it can be revealed that drones are not necessarily fighting terrorism, but perpetuating it. Traditional international relations theory has always underestimated the agency of people, and their statist abstractions of world politics are constraining in this respect because they give little agency to individual beings (Butler 2010: 48; Sylvester 2012: 490). Byman's analysis underestimates and overlooks how drone strikes could be exacerbating terrorism as opposed to combating it.

By ignoring individuals and the way in which drone strikes impact individuals lives, classical realism is incapable of discerning how this is inhibiting the effectiveness of drones. By destroying homes, and in some cases weddings (Human Rights Watch 2014), drone strikes further alienate individuals in countries where drone strikes are used. Moreover, this would assist the propaganda that terrorist groups aim to instil in populations, thus exacerbating the dislike of the US in these states as well as increasing the number of terrorist operatives (Cronin 2013: 48).

One author has documented stories of people in Pakistan whose lives have been affected by drones. One story in particular reveals how a US drone strike killed a village elder, his son, his two nephews and also a guest. This led the brother of the elder, who was completely impartial to the US and to terrorist groups to join a terrorist group and begin to fight against the United States (Shah 2012: 58).

Another narrative concerning the human experience of drones that classical realism fundamentally is not capable of recognising is the story of a suicide bomber. This suicide bomber decided to sacrifice himself because of the constant bombardment of drone strikes from the United States. The Jordanian doctor had little affiliation with terrorist groups beforehand but in a video recorded beforehand said 'this [suicide] attack will be the first of the revenge operations against the Americans and their drone teams outside the Pakistani borders' (Chuchmach, Schiffrin and Martinez 2010).

Classical realism and Byman (2013) see drones as a powerful tool of foreign policy, but the stories above completely contradict this blind, masculine conviction. Feminism's sensitivity to the experiences of real people in war reveals that drones do little except for kill people. As the accounts above demonstrate, drones have a significant capacity to perpetuate terrorism as opposed to fighting it. Although I have provided two, albeit it brief examples, there is an increasing amount of strategic studies' scholarship that is recognising the effects that drones are inflicting in regards to perpetuating terrorism as opposed to fighting it (see Cronin 2013; Habbas 2013; Hoffman 2010; Sprusansky

Drones, Gender and Classical Realists

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2013). This demonstrates that feminist understandings of the human experiences of war and classical realism are not incommensurable. Furthermore, it illustrates that feminism has the potential to guide policy makers by steering them away from the conviction that 'drones work' when it comes to fighting terrorism.

In this section, I have argued that classical realism significantly overestimates the strategic value of drones. This is largely because of its statist conception of the world, which does not enable it to discern the affects that drone strikes have on individuals. Feminism has revealed, via its understanding of how drone strikes could affect the lives of individuals in drone-occupied countries, that drones are exacerbating the problem of terrorism as opposed to solving it. Consequentially, drones 'strategic value' is defined in terms of its capacity to kill and not to end the War on Terror.

Parameters of Feminism and Classical Realism.

Classical realism's parameters have been made clear – its inability to discern the human experience of war means that the US drone policy is perpetuating the problem it is trying to solve.

The most obvious critique of the feminist position in this paper is its lack of concrete policy alternatives to drones. This is not the point, and a feminist insight to the effects that drones have on impartial individuals in drone-occupied states has the potential to assist US policy makers. It could force them to reconsider whether or not drones are a viable policy option if the War on Terror is to end. Furthermore, a feminist insight should also restrain those who claim that 'drones work' because this conviction can lead to the perpetuation of a blind faith.

Conclusion.

My main argument has been that drones offer little strategic value because they have the capacity to perpetuate the problem they are trying to solve. This essay has proceeded in four sections. Firstly, the reader was provided with a basic understanding of drones. Secondly, I outlined the classical realist stance espoused by Byman, which claims that 'drones work' because of their strategic value in order to critique this position in the following section. Thirdly, I demonstrated that an insensitivity to the human experience of war means that classical realism is unable to discern the effect that drones can have on ordinary individuals, and concluded this section by illustrating that drone strikes perpetuate terrorism as opposed to combating it. Fourth, I examined the critiques and parameters of the theoretical positions examined in this essay to show that feminism is capable of assisting US policy makers. The significance of my case is that drones are not as strategically viable as some like Byman (2013) have depicted them to be. I have attempted to dispel this blind conviction in order to assist both US policy makers and hopefully those whose lives are, and have been affected by drones. The implications of my case are along the same lines. Mainly, the recognition that drones destroy lives and have the potential to exacerbate terrorism. Traditional international relations theory has a tendency to exclude ordinary people with beating hearts from its stories.

As Christine Sylvester has put it, 'in the shadows of IR, people dwell' (2012: 484). Drone warfare demonstrates that ignoring these people in the shadows can prove to be costly.

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Drones, Gender and Classical Realists

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