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Killing by Remote Control: Western Countries Relying on Technology in the Military

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ALEX HARRIS, MAR 7 2016

'Killing by Remote Control'. What Does the Use of Drones Tell Us About the Increasing Reliance of Western Countries on Technological Solutions to Military Problems?

The problem with the drone is it's like your lawn mower. You've got to mow the lawn all the time. The minute you stop mowing, the grass is going to grow back.[1]

Upon President Obama's inauguration into office in 2008, he pledged to end the 'war on terror', the public 'call to arms' that President Bush first issued following the events of 9/11. Instead of concluding the war, Obama placed it further within the private sphere, where combat was now fought 'in the shadows', through special operations and a substantial increase in the use of robotic and surveillance technology. This substantial increase can be demonstrated through empirical data collected by the New America Foundation. Within Pakistan, the height of Bush's drone strike action reached 36 in 2008. By 2009, Obama had authorised 52 strikes in 2009, reaching an apex of 122 strikes in 2010, with 72 in 2011. From 2004-2015, of 401 total strikes, Obama has been responsible for authorising 353 strikes (88%) over Bush's 48 strikes (12%). While I am doubtful that this represents the 'real' total of strikes that have been conducted (with the NAF stating that the data came from 'credible news reports'), the empirical data is useful in demonstrating an increasing reliance on technological solutions[2]. It is my contention that the growing reliance on these technological advances highlight the Western requirement for precision, accountability and a reduction in collateral damage. While I will reference some of the criticisms concerning the ethics and morality of this 'technological solution', I will primarily be focusing on the tactical and strategic advantages that these weapon systems offer the West, in waging 'humane' and 'hybrid warfare'.

Firstly, I wish to discuss the role of technology within war. Is it fair to suggest that warfare now solely employs technological solutions to military problems? Has the use of drones changed the nature of warfare that is now fought by the Western countries? A warring state relying on technological solutions to gain strategic advantages in combat is an idea almost as old as war itself. Indeed, it is on the battlefields that these technologies are first "invented, exploited and then properly scrutinized by thinkers seeking to rightfully limit their use to *morally justifiable* purposes"[3]. From the creation of the long-bow to the repeating machine-gun, technological solutions have always played a vital role in warfare. As aptly described by Van Creveld, "every single element is either governed by or at least linked to it"[4]. When Van Creveld refers to a 'single element', he is not just referring to the act of battle itself but its elements in its entirety, such as communication, strategy and command. It's convincing and I wish to speak of technology in the same way, recognizing its presence within all aspects of warfare. However, despite recognizing the omnipresence of technology within the elements of war, it cannot be its sole reliant. The use of technology in war, as concluded by Van Creveld, "often means there is a price to be paid in terms of deliberating *diminishing* efficiency"[5] – a line of argument I will later conclude as a warning against this 'increasing reliance', as a warning that true victory cannot yet be individually gained by 'eyes in the sky'. Now, to turn to drones or UAV's (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), they are also by no means a recent invention. Their first reported battle-test was said to have occurred in 1849 when Austria sent unmanned balloon, loaded with explosives, to attack Venice. A pilotless aerial torpedo was tested during World War 1 and UAVs were actively used by the US during the Vietnam War. The War of Attrition, from 1967-1970, was the first recorded battlefield appearance of UAVs equipped with camera

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equipment, for the function of surveillance, a role of the drone that is certainly established within the popular consciousness today.

Now that I have discussed the use of technology and, more specifically, the history of UAVs on the battlefield, I wish to briefly summarize the ethical arguments that are raised, in part due to the efficient lethality of these weapon systems, namely the 'threshold' argument. This argues that the effectiveness of their drones – both in cost and in deployment – lowers the threshold that normally limits violence within morally acceptable boundaries. If it is perceived as a safer and more politically safe option than deploying troops, critics are concerned that drones will serve to exacerbate violence, where the 'fog of war' is dispersed and the ease at which an insurgent can be surveilled and then neutralized, concerns critics of its legal and moral implications. However, this ease is praised as precise and efficient, indeed referenced in President Obama's State of the Union Address, expressing his view in regards to Osama Bin Laden, where "if you have twenty minutes, you do it swiftly and surely"[6]. It is also suggested that these 'strikes from the sky' are serving to radicalize generation after generation in the Middle East, where 'dishonourable' killings from a faceless enemy, albeit one with superior technology associated with the 'West', is acting as a recruitment tool. However, under Just War theory, drones are deemed morally permissible. While it is accepted that they are capable of great damage, it is deemed permissible due to the improvements that they offer at the other end of the spectrum, in prevention and deterrence. Indeed, in 21st century hybrid warfare, where the enemies are no longer identified through uniforms or emblems, can technology such as drones be justified under this identification framework, under the support they can offer ground-troops and the targeting of the disguised guilty hiding among and behind the general population? Such questions of the morality and ethics of drone warfare are perhaps more suitable of a different paper but it is important to make reference to the prevailing narrative nonetheless.

In helping to explain the increasing reliance upon drones in Western warfare, I first wish to reference the economic and technological advantage that drones bring to the battlefield. Following Hallgarth's argument, the West possesses a large quantity of resources with a clear technological superiority. However, what the West lacks is 'available recruits', where the redundancy of conscription and, perhaps, public opinion, leaves troop numbers lacking. However, this is a minor disadvantage, far surpassed by its very superiority in technology. This might be indicative of the West's continued drive to improve and develop its technological capabilities within war. In relation to the economics of drones, for the resourceful West, the numbers are advantageous. Recent figures place the cost of a Reaper Drone at around \$10.5 million dollars. In comparison, one F-22 Fighter Jet is priced at around \$150 million dollars and that involves a human element on top of the cost. Looking at this statistic alone, it is not surprising that the drone has become an increasingly relied on weapon of war. Despite this relatively low cost, one where America is leading the 'Drones Arms Race', it has come under criticism. For Singer, wars are only morally permissible if public and legal channels have offered their approval, believing that "by making war costless, it takes the public out of the loop by giving it no reason to care about the decision to start a war"[7]. While I would suggest this statement is a little dramatic, it raises an interesting question; what are the implications if the West begins only relying on cheaper alternatives to conduct its warfare, if indeed, this is a key factor for the increased reliance on drones? If drones intervene on humanitarian grounds and save lives, Singer would still disregard such positive reports as 'crude calculations', where the West was 'powerful' enough to save those innocent civilians but "only at a time and place of its choosing and, more importantly, if the costs were low enough"[8]. It is clear that the cost-efficiency of these drones helps to explain the increasing Western reliance. While I disagree that this is the only element contributing to its use, citing their precision next as a factor, Singer's argument is interesting. While war will clearly never be 'costless', it is an important warning from Singer, highlighting his concerns if this reliance upon drone strikes continued.

Another clear advantage of the utilisation of drones lies in their precision, a mode of warfare that appeals to 'humane' western values, where human error is reduced and the risk of collateral is to be avoided. David Whetham described a scenario where a drone strike could be effectively utilised. An insurgent leader, moving from safe-house to safe-house in hostile territory, would be extremely difficult to apprehend. If the state could surgically 'remove' that person, with no allied human lives at risk and legal authorisation granted, this would be a case of a targeted killing. Troops on the ground would avoid that risk and the legality of the authorised strike would be undisputed. In our modern 'information age', political accountability is of importance. For every badly directed missile hitting a school or a hospital, there will be mobile recording devices on the ground sending such images around the world over social media platforms. The western world fights 'humane' wars, governed by rules and regulations. Western states believe

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that drones offer the best (current) technological advancement to fight these wars. They allow for precise targeting and they have to be approved through various legal-politico channels before being granted approval. A common criticism argues that civilian casualties are still present, dismissed by Christine Fair who characterised these strikes as “the product of meticulous planning among lawyers and intelligence officers”[9], usually “accomplished with minimal civilian deaths”[10]. An article released in 2010 reported that drones had now upgraded their weaponry from 100 pound Hellfire Missiles to 35 pound Scorpion Missiles, possessing smaller blast radiuses and thus more effective at reducing collateral damage[11]. There will always be civilian casualties within war – it’s a fact of war – but it seems convincing that a real advantage of this technology is in its reduction of collateral damage. In addition, the restrictions required for authorisation instil a degree of accountability and its precise form of attack suits the fourth-generation mode of warfare that the West fights. Consequently, the increased reliance upon drones by the West seems to represent the form of warfare that the West now wishes to fight – precise, accountable and a reduction in the loss of both innocent and allied lives.

To conclude, I wish to assert that, despite a growing reliance upon the presence of drones in the asymmetrical wars that are being fought by the Western powers, it would be dangerous to continue to solely rely on technological advances. To gain a lasting political settlement, territory needs to be held and controlled, with a ‘friendly’ government instilled and maintained. This cannot be achieved by technological advancements alone, an advantage that the West holds over those it seeks to restrict, but must be achieved by ‘boots on the ground’. States have always relied on technology to gain superiority on the battlefield and this move towards UAVs is no different. The West’s increasing reliance highlights the new precise, efficient and accountable form of warfare that it now seeks to wage, to distinguish itself from the lawless ‘other’ it holds in its sights. However, to truly gain total victory, a heavy *human* influence is still required on the ground.

Endnotes

[1] Bruce Riedel, Counter-Terrorism Advisor to President Obama, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/plan-for-hunting-terrorists-signals-us-intends-to-keep-adding-names-to-kill-lists/2012/10/23/4789b2ae-18b3-11e2-a55c-39408f6e6a4b_story.html

[2] International Security, <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan-analysis.html>.

[3] Strawser Jay Bradley, McMahan Jeff, *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), p32.

[4] Van Creveld, M, *Technology and War: From 2000BC to the Present*, (1991), p311.

[5] *Technology and War*, (1991), p319.

[6] State of the Union Address, January 28th 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8484451.stm>.

[7] P. W. Singer, *Wired for War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), p323.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Fair, C. Christine, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/28/drone-wars-2/>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Warrick, Joby, and Peter Finn, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/25/AR2010042503114.html?nav=emailpage>.

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