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The Search for Antiseptic War
The Prospects and Perils of Drones for the United States, the Sahel and Beyond

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The U.S. Government has made clear that stabilization missions requiring deployment of large numbers of personnel—military and civilian—are not on the agenda for the foreseeable future. Not only budget constraints but also sobering experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a strategic shift.

As the U.S. draws down its presence in Afghanistan, it's fair to say that the lives lost and billions spent to stabilize the country and provide a foundation for Afghan development have not produced progress commensurate with the effort. In early 2012, the Pentagon released its strategic defense guidance, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," which underscored a new reliance on Special Forces, technology, and intelligence to protect and promote U.S. national security interests. Drones have become a centerpiece in the new approach; the ramifications of which are already visible in hotspots around the globe. In Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia, the U.S. deploys drones in increasing numbers to gather intelligence and to kill high value insurgent and terrorist targets. In Africa, drones outfitted only to gather intelligence at this time are front and center in U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. The underlying goal of these new efforts is to monitor extremist groups and to help shape an inhospitable environment for them in Mali, Nigeria and Niger.

Technological changes have altered the conduct of war over the centuries. Early discoveries were intended to inflict maximum damage on the opponent while sparing one's own troops and treasury. The use of atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II marked the apex of this approach. More recently, however, the search for greater precision has accompanied public aversion to gratuitous destruction and massive loss of life. Instead of a "scorched earth" policy, efforts shifted to "surgical" strikes. Drones are just the latest in a long line of technological advances upon which the U.S. has come to increasingly rely in crisis situations.

What is the drone's appeal? Several advantages for the U.S. come to mind. First, drones are unmanned; therefore, whether gathering intelligence or targeting an adversary, U.S. personnel are not in harm's way. An official directing the drone may be thousands of miles from the conflict zone. Second, drones increase the range of intelligence gathering; one can travel to areas where U.S. personnel cannot or will not. Third, weaponized drones are directly linked to monitoring and, as such, their targeting is arguably more precise. Equally important, actual strikes restrict damage; thereby significantly reducing non-combatant casualties – a vast improvement over more traditional weapons. This is the claim at least, although the numbers of innocent civilian killed in drone strikes is unknown because U.S. or allied personnel are usually not in the area to check. Finally, unmanned drones are relatively inexpensive—they not only spare American lives; they also are considerably cheaper than other comparable weapons systems.[1] They sound ideal so why have drones become a matter of debate? Two major concerns deserve closer scrutiny: mission effectiveness and moral hazard.

Given Germany's skepticism of the military and widespread pacifist sentiment following World War II, sensitivity to issues of moral hazard are high. The use of drones in the United States and implications of weapons that can be fired from thousands of miles away have struck a nerve.

First, mission effectiveness depends upon the mission goal. In fragile states plagued by insurgency, experience has demonstrated that a primary emphasis on killing insurgents merely multiplies their ranks. Military officers recognized early on in Iraq and Afghanistan that the U.S. could not kill its way to a solution in either country. As a result, counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine was rediscovered and attempted in both. COIN doctrine posits the importance of protecting the local population and helping to build effective and legitimate host country government institutions. Insurgencies and conflict are rooted in problems of politics and governance. Only improved governance, justice and opportunities will dry up the extremist recruitment pool. As such, sophisticated local knowledge, nuance, differentiation and finesse are required to address crisis situations effectively – qualities that drones or other technologies do not possess. In terms of mission goal, then, drones may be part of an approach, but not a primary one.

Even at the technical level, confidence in drones may be misplaced. After all, they are only as accurate as the individuals who direct them. Technical intelligence gathering capabilities have exploded in recent years while human intelligence capacity has declined. Investing in regional and country experts who understand the situation and actors in the field has dangerously lagged. Such experts are essential to sift massive amounts of information and to provide a qualitative analysis of the situation on the ground. Drone technology lures decision-makers with the promise of an inexpensive, antiseptic means to counter extremists or insurgents. But the confidence in technology is misplaced. The results are short-term, incomplete and may be counter-productive. Thorough discussion of effectiveness in its broader context has been largely missing.[2]

A second major concern is that of moral hazard. U.S. Administration and Congressional discussions of drones to date have revolved around three legal issues: 1) expansion of the joint Congressional resolution, "Authorization for Use of Military Force" (AUMF); 2) authority to determine kill targets; and 3) U.S. terrorists killed overseas in drone strikes. The AUMF, passed just days after the September 11th attacks, provided the legal basis for the U.S. counterterrorism campaign against Al-Qaeda wherever it operated. Federal court decisions expanded the authority to justify attacks on groups associated with Al Qaeda. The issue now is whether AUMF language needs to be expanded further to justify the inclusion of groups in Libya, Mali, Nigeria and elsewhere that have no direct link to Al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks or if completely new authorization must be obtained.[3]

The second debate focuses on President Obama's authority to approve a kill list. Opponents argue that an independent judicial body should have that authority; not the president. The third concerns the legality of killing a terrorist who is a U.S. citizen either at home or abroad without due process. An old-fashioned filibuster by Senator Rand Paul on March 6-7, 2013 sought assurance from the Administration that a U.S. citizen on U.S. soil would not be subject to a drone strike. That Senator Paul got so much positive attention for his effort reflects an awakened awareness of the potential risks of drones to U.S. citizens. These are important issues that merit careful examination.

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However, none of them reflects any concern about the people in other countries targeted by drones – some of whom may be falsely identified as terrorists or insurgents.[4] Moreover, the most publicized discussions to date fail to wrestle with the underlying moral hazard of killing from a distance; of never experiencing the human and material suffering wrought.[5] This is not a new phenomenon – fighter pilots, for example, fly far above and never see the faces of those killed. But they are in the theatre of combat and therefore, vulnerable to being shot down. A drone controller is a giant step removed from combat. He or she goes home after a "normal" work day. The entire exercise is more akin to playing a violent video game than it is to real life: easy, antiseptic, and no risk for Americans. The victim, his family, friends and their suffering remain abstract.

The fundamental disagreement over moral hazard between Henri Dunant and Florence Nightingale over a century ago is worthy of reconsideration. Durant, horrified by the carnage at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, founded the Red Cross to provide humanitarian relief to combat survivors. Nightingale, also a humanitarian, adamantly rejected the premise of the Red Cross. She argued that to make war less costly in human and material terms would make it more probable.[6] Obviously, the Red Cross approach prevailed and the intent to reduce suffering is not questioned. But the weapons and carnage of war have changed. In today's context, drones exempt only one side from the horror of combat. The moral hazard that this presents should become an integral part of the U.S. discussion. A small step in that direction was incited by the proposed "Distinguished Warfare Medal" for drone pilots and cyber-warriors. The ensuing ire that a medal would be awarded to someone who is never at physical risk put this proposition on hold for the time being.[7]

If the U.S. is skirting the moral hazard issue, alternately in Germany, it is front and center. German political and religious leaders, as well as interested segments of the citizenry, are engaged in a vigorous debate about armed drones before the government acquires them. Given Germany's skepticism of the military and widespread pacifist sentiment following World War II, sensitivity to issues of moral hazard are high. The use of drones in the United States and implications of weapons that can be fired from thousands of miles away have struck a nerve. Opposition party leaders echo the concerns of Nightingale when they note that such weapons lower the threshold for using military force because the risks to one's own people are essentially nil. The German Defense Minister has tried to defuse the issue with the proviso that if the government buys combat drones, the operators will deploy to the theater and serve alongside those in combat.[8]

A serious discussion in the United States on the ability and limits of drones to contribute to mission goals, as well as the attendant moral hazard, would be encouraging, particularly as drones occupy an ever more prominent place in U.S. crisis response. The U.S. government is currently positioning itself for counter-terrorism missions in Africa, with drones in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Djibouti. The establishment of a drone base in Niger is the latest addition designed to closely monitor developments in Mali and Nigeria. For the time being, U.S. drones in Africa can only be used for surveillance for reasons noted in the discussion of the AUMF. However, concern about Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) links with disaffected groups like the Tuaregs in Mali and Boko Haram in Nigeria have prompted the Obama Administration to explore legal authorization to use armed drones against such individuals or groups should the need arise. A shift to armed drones would introduce a major change in conflict dynamics, the implications of which require careful consideration by Washington and its African partners.

The argument is not that drones should never be used; rather, they can best be used judiciously to supplement a coherent assistance strategy focused on grievances and governance. The contribution drones might make to the mission goal and accompanying moral hazard should be paramount in the discussion. Otherwise, drones will be added to a long list of technological developments that have outstripped decision makers' wisdom to use them responsibly.

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ENDNOTES

1 For a more detailed discussion see Michael J. Boyle, "The costs and consequences of drone warfare" International Affairs 89:1(2013)1-29, pp. 3-5.

2 John Kaag, "Drones, Ethics and the Armchair Soldier" The New York Time Opinionator, March 17, 2013; Jane Harmon, "Remote-Control Warfare Requires Rules" The New York Times, 18 March raise the broader issues.

3 Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, "Officials debate stretching 9/11 law" The Washington Post, March 7 2013, p. A-1,11.

4 That hazard of indiscriminate killing and false profiling is discussed by Boyle, Op cit. pp. 8-9. The UN is investigating civilian deaths from U.S. drone strikes. Lev Grossman, "Drone Home," Time, February 11, 2013

5 Some analysts have provided careful examinations of drones—including efficacy and moral hazard. See Boyle, op cit.; Micah Zenko, "Reforming U.S. Drone Strike Policies" Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 65, January 2013

6 Philip Gourevitch, "Alms Dealers" The New Yorker, October 11, 2010. 102-109, pp.105-06.

7 Peter Singer argues that with warfare moving steadily in the direction of technology and distance from the battlefield, the medal is appropriate. "Honoring remote-control heroes" The Washington Post, Outlook, February 17, 2013, B3. Karen DeYoung, Medal for drone pilots, cyberwarriers is on hold" The Washington Post, March 13, 2013, A 15.

8 Michael Birnbaum, "A preemptive debate over drones," The Washington Post, February 12, 2013. P. A6. Marcel Dickow and Hilmar Linnenkamp, "Combat Drones—Killing Drones" Stiftung Willenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comments 4 February 2013

The Africa Program and The Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity (Leadership Project)

The Africa Program and Leadership Project are predicated on the belief that Africa and Africa-related issues are important to the United States and provide important experiences and models for the rest of the world. Both programs have several areas of focus that try to respond to the needs of policymakers and the public for greater knowledge about and understanding of African developments and to understand fragile states emerging from conflict and their challenges. These include a series of "working groups" and country consultations on specific countries or issues, in closed forums that bring together key policy players and opinion leaders to look at policy options. Also, the Africa Program and Leadership Project sponsor regular public policy forums, bringing together Africans, and conflict and peace building experts and scholars, policymakers from all levels, and civil society practitioners to address issues relating to U.S./African interests and to managing conflict in emerging democracies.

The Africa Program maintains a focus on current conflict zones, such as Sudan, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the Niger Delta of Nigeria, and on overarching policy issues such as trade, development, drug trafficking and regional economic integration. In the Leadership Project, we seek to stimulate analysis and discussion of ways to achieve more effective and holistic strategies for peace building and strengthening state capacity. In all of these activities, we work in concert, and often co-sponsor events, with other NGOs, international, community and U.S. government agencies.

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