

**Pugwash Conference-2016**  
**Drones and Its Impact on Warfare**

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This paper will focus on the debate surrounding the employment of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAVs) or ‘drones’ in modern warfare as an effort to reduce boots on ground, and will discuss the extent to which this policy has ‘dehumanized’ war by using America as the primary case study. Generally speaking, drones have been in use since World War II with countries such as Israel using their drones as a means of surveillance and gathering video imagery in the early 1980s over southern Lebanon (Strickland, 2013). Yet what changed the face of drone technology was the creation of Gnat, or as currently known the Predator. It was developed in San Diego, by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., with its first UAS vehicle – the Gnat 750, being able to not only cruise at altitude above 30,500 feet but equally able to remain in an operating altitude for 48 hours (Merlin, 2009, p.1). Undoubtedly, this was a major feat for all militaries especially the Americans, as it marked the beginning of what some may argue as an effective surveillance tool requiring neither fuel nor a pilot (Bowden, 2013). Nonetheless, as time progressed, drones were not solely restrained to surveillance but equally an attack mechanism as seen with the arming of UAVs. Despite the benefits it provides in terms of reducing ground troop commitment, it also signals a detachment from war; a distance between targets and Langley executives, which as Grossman states allowed a ‘desensitization to killing’ as every aspect of the killing is ‘rehearsed, visualized, and conditioned’ (DeShaw Rae, 2014). However, regardless of these ethical and moral implications, it is apparent that at present, drones have become a preferred method especially under the Obama administration (Babbin, 2013), thus demonstrating a greater reliance on targeted killing. It is in this context that the paper will thus examine armed drones and the challenges it brings to the nature of contemporary warfare.

One of the key catalysts in the advancement of the arming of drones was Osama bin Laden. Even prior to the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden had been on the CIA radar for years given his connections to the suicide bombings of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (Woods, 2015). The attacks underlined the urgent necessity to find Osama bin Laden, a task which proved difficult given the low visibility in the Afghan mountain range. The first few flights in 2000, made by the Predator were solely for surveillance and were arguably successful in finding the target. Yet what became evident was the slow process between spotting the target and subsequent shooting, thus leading the CIA to focus on as Woods states, turning the Predator from a ‘spying platform’ to an ‘assassination tool’ (Woods, 2015). Propelled even

further by the 9/11 attacks, armed Predators soon began to play a vital role in U.S. warfare especially with regard to countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, as Washington Post reports, it is estimated that since 2004, around 375 drone strikes have been carried in Pakistan alone of which 354 strikes have occurred during President Obama's presidency (New America Foundation). Therefore, it goes without saying that the Obama administration has expanded significantly its drone program, not only in terms of quantity but equally, an extensive apparatus used for drone attacks, namely the building of secret facilities such as two operational hubs in the East Coast (Miller, 2011). To an extent, one could infer that Obama's shift to targeted killing is a result of technological advancements and better on-the-ground intelligence (McCriskin, 2013). Conversely, it could be argued that it reflects public sentiment to reduce American casualties and thus avoid repetition of Afghanistan- a view reinforced in the survey conducted by Pew Research Center where it is outlined that approximately 52% of American support drones (Pew Research Center, 2014). As conservative pundit, George Will states, America should 'do only what can be done from offshore, using intelligence, drones... and small potent Special Forces units...' (Brose, 2009). Ironically, although the statement was regarding Afghanistan, Will's ideas appear to resonate closely with Obama's current policy in Syria. Nonetheless, regardless of the principal motive that led to the increase of the U.S. drone strikes, it cannot be denied that the employment of 'drone war' and the secrecy surrounding these strikes, especially those led by the CIA, have raised questions in the international community about both its legal and ethical aspects.

In terms of the dehumanization of war with the introduction of drones, it is apparent that this has occurred to a large extent. Despite arguments that the use of armed drones in modern warfare is an acceptable response to the 'unconventional violence' terrorism presents (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2014), one could highlight how drones are used by the U.S. not only as a tool in war but also as a means of patrolling borders as seen with drone presence near the U.S.-Mexican border (Nicas, 2015). Nonetheless, in relation to examining the role of drones in wars, it is undeniable that the distance between the 'killer and the killed' has a considerable impact in separating the 'regular violence of military... from human emotion' (Sifton, 2012). Essentially, drones are machines and therefore, lack that element of human empathy thus resonating with current propositions of a 'drone court' which would enable human supervision or more simply a judicial check (Rao, 2015). Furthermore, regardless of their ability to carry out precise attacks, it should be highlighted that one of the main criticisms of the program is civilian deaths. According to the British-based, Bureau of Investigative

Journalism, it is reported that civilian deaths in Pakistan since 2004 alone, amount to a number between 423-965. What causes further tension in the international community is how the drone-strikes in Pakistan are led by the CIA whom despite Obama's efforts to transfer some responsibility to the Department of Defense, still control the majority of drone attacks (Cortright, Fairhurst and Wall, 2015, p.219). The CIA is not a military agency and therefore does not have a system which ensures they adhere to legal and ethical standards.

In conclusion, it could be said that with the lack of a clear apparatus monitoring drone warfare, the question of accountability becomes difficult to answer. Even worse is how as a result of secrecy shrouding the subject of drones in America, people are often presented with a more detached version of war, a version which is likened perhaps to a video game (DeShaw Rae, 2014). Nonetheless, it is important to note that military drone operators suffer as much as combatants do from PTSD. Thus, drones not only have had a changing impact on the nature of warfare, namely the objectification of targets, but equally on the participants themselves. The long hour shifts sitting behind a computer screen, and yet still being able to experience 'combat violence on live video feed' (Dao, 2013) in a similar way to combatants, will have a significant toll on both their health and ability to perform their duties as soldiers. In this respect, the argument that the US is reducing US casualties appears invalid and rather contradictory. Overall, although drones present some benefits, it is clear that the system still needs to be reformed, more precisely, there needs to be more transparency and an independent entity to ensure international rules are being adhered to in this new form of warfare.

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