Security by remote control: can it work?

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Security by remote control is usually understood to mean the use of armed drones, but this talk takes a wider perspective.

Background

In 1993 CIA chief R. James Woolsey characterised the situation after the Cold War as "having slain the dragon, we are now in a jungle inhabited by poisonous snakes". There was a marked scaling back in the US military at this time, though it was selective, focusing particularly on nuclear weapons and submarines, while the Marines Corps did not shrink. The strategic aim was to "tame the jungle rather than slay the dragon", by projecting power using the Navy, Cruise missiles, and long range strike aircraft and emphasising the use of special forces.

When George W Bush came to power in 2001, Donald Rumsfeld in the Department of Defense initially espoused the doctrine of "war light". Following the attacks of 9/11 and the extension of the "War on Terror" to "see down the Axis of Evil" (Iran, Iraq and North Korea), the invasions of Afghanistan and then of Iraq were based on this principle. The US sought to depend heavily on aerial bombing and special forces (and in Afghanistan, on the Northern Alliance as local allies). In Iraq, only 60,000 ground troops were deployed, as compared with 600,000 after its invasion of Kuwait.

By May 2003 this approach appeared to be working – Al-Qaida was dispersed, the Taliban removed from power, and Saddam Hussein was deposed. Iran was seen as less of a threat because it was encircled by the presence of US military power. The deployment of armed drones by the US and Israel reinforced the idea that "war light" worked. However, the credibility of this approach was undermined by the failure to provide security for Afghans, and by the increasingly violent and complex insurgency in Iraq, and there was a return to large numbers of boots on the ground, with troop "surges".

When Barack Obama came to power, he characterised Iraq as a "bad war" from which the US withdrew completely by 2011, and Afghanistan as a "good war", despite the initial increase in US troop numbers. However this "war heavy" approach also essentially failed, along with the idea of reshaping the Middle East that had prevailed during the Bush administration.

Remote control

Consequently, there has been a move away from the idea of sending large military forces overseas, and towards dependence on relatively new technologies and new enhanced methods.

1) Armed drones, which began to be developed during the Cold War, are now used extensively, particularly the Reaper, which has the advantage of long "loiter" time and high accuracy, While the Reaper carrying Hellfire missiles is the main armed drone being used by the US, there are many other types. The US is thought to have carried out 1,600-2,000 strikes in Afghanistan with Reaper drones so far. The UK has also carried out some 350 strikes in Afghanistan, with its five-strong Reaper squadron, which

has been operational for the last four years. The actual flights are out of Kandahar airbase in Afghanistan but the drones have been operated, each by two or three RAF personnel, in real time out of Creech airbase in Nevada. A new enhanced squadron of drones will operate out of RAF Waddington, south of Lincoln.

As of last year, the MoD provided no information on casualties resulting from these strikes. During the Libya campaign against Col Gadhafi, MoD press information on their mailing list recorded 'hits' on targets but no information on casualties.

2) **Special forces** have expanded dramatically. In the UK it is very difficult to obtain numbers of special forces but a new special forces support group has been established to provide logistical support for SAS and SBS (Special Boat Service) operations. In the US, the army, air force, navy and marines all have their own special forces, which come together under the Special Forces Command, semi-unified at a worldwide level. Forces under this command numbered around 45,000 four years ago, are currently over 60,000 and by 2015 are expected to reach 75,000. Their operations are never covered in the media except in unusual circumstances – for example, the fact that US special forces have been operating in Mali since the French moved in January 2013 only became known when members of the force were killed in a car crash.

3) Also below the radar is the rapid expansion of **private military companies** (separate from private security companies such as G4S). These are more combat-oriented and tend to be drawn from ex-special forces personnel – from former French Foreign Legionnaires, South Africans, Ukrainians, Australians, as well as British and Americans.

The use of armed drones, along with the increasing numbers of special forces and private military companies, remains little known in terms of public opinion. This development represents a combination of technology, new methods and "needs must". And these trends are not new, nor confined to "the West" – for example, Russian special forces were used in Crimea ten days ago, though the Russian government denied any military involvement.

It's not just the US and Israel that are making and exploiting armed drones – others developing armed drones at scale are China, Russia, India, and probably Turkey, and certainly Iran is interested. What we are seeing is the early development of a particular technology which can so easily proliferate without any discussion of arms control.

If drones, special forces, etc. can be used for targeted assassinations in sovereign countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia and possibly Mali, this raises all kinds of issues. The Pentagon view seems to be that if they identify a named person whom the US considers a threat, it is ethical and legal to take action against them – i.e. to assassinate them using drones. This argument might equally be applied by Russia in Ukraine or Georgia, by China in Myanmar, by Turkey in the north eastern (Kurdish area) of Iraq and possibly by Iran in Israel. In other words, it is not easy to argue that action which is acceptable if carried out by the US is not acceptable from other countries. So we are at the start of something new. There are also arguments in the MoD about the status of pilots who are operating the armed drones. When they go off base to return home, are they active military combatants who have just gone off duty? If so, are they 'legitimate targets'? These are significant questions which no one is really answering.

The whole idea of moving into an era of warfare by remote control is superficially attractive and quite seductive, and may in the short term appear to work. For example, from a US viewpoint, it was argued that their drone attacks in Iraq removed the middle level of the al-Qaida movement based there. However the result is that the movement has changed beyond recognition. It was never a narrow hierarchical movement, but it is now more like an idea that takes different forms in different contexts, and it is arguably more influential than ever. It is highly active in Iraq and in Syria and holds territory

there, as well as in Yemen, southern Caucasus, Nigeria and Somalia. This is despite the fact that we are now three or four years into the era of the armed drones, which were supposed to have crippled the movement.

To summarise with a few final points:
- Armed drones are causing a lot of controversy.
- They are a very important issue, but they are only one part of a wider picture.
- There are all kinds of legal issues about drones and the use of special forces.
- We are moving into an era of weapon proliferation, with consequences that are difficult to predict.

Overall, we need to be far more attentive to these issues. One disappointing recent development was that in July 2013 the Select Committee on Defence announced that it would do a study on armed drones (which it called Remotely piloted aerial systems). The committee initially invited written evidence, but about eight weeks ago it announced that, very unusually, it had decided not to call oral evidence, thus depriving independent analysts of the opportunity to put their case in public. Few people are drawing all these issues together, and it is desperately important that the debate should not go by default.