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National Security and the Efficacy of Drone Warfare

Abstract: This chapter examines arguments on a series of national security issues including the role of drones in conventional armed conflict. First, it questions efficiency, finding that material and human costs are significantly lowered, though unmanned aircraft still require a great deal of technical support, remote pilots still face traumas and stresses, and many agree that a country pays a diplomatic price for the wanton use of drones in counter-insurgency operations and could undermine credibility with its own or foreign publics. This chapter also evaluates claims of accuracy and precision, comparing drones positively with other types of warfare, but uncertain of whether high value targets are really emphasized over low level militants and cognizant of serious civilian casualties despite lower degrees of collateral damage.

Keywords: collateral damage; cost of drone warfare; drones and sovereignty; drone accuracy and precision

Mark Bowden wrote how since David slew Goliath with the new technology of the slingshot, advancement and innovation have been determining factors in military affairs. In the 21st century, Goliath just invented the new slingshot; the United States’ development of armed unmanned aerial vehicles and associated cyber innovations has fortified its standing as the world’s unrivaled superpower. Since they can collect intelligence and serve as strike platforms while avoiding placing military personnel at risk, drones are more “flexible and effective technologies of violence.” Some observers suggest that owing to their accuracy, drones can employ their “persistent stare” and “unblinking eye” to put “warheads on foreheads” and actually reduce the likelihood of civilian casualties in warfare. Drones can detect troop deployments, naval exercises, the movement of weapons systems, and terrorist training camps. They possess the advantage of enormous intelligence collection and data analysis capabilities as warfare turns to disrupting command and control, computer centers, and communication networks. Drone strikes prevent threats to the United States by eliminating terrorists so they cannot engage in future operations, deter potential terrorists by their ability to kill at great distances, and punish those who have attacked the United States or U.S. interests. In fact, the U.S. Air Force is seeking the ability to find, fix, assess, track, target, and engage anything of military significance anywhere in the world. Certainly the primary hypothesis of many national security planners is that drones are effective; indeed they are the “only game in town” in the words of then U.S. Director of the CIA Leon Panetta. President Barack Obama’s speech on drone strikes summed up the current U.S. outlook:

To begin with, our actions are effective...Simply put, these strikes have saved lives...Remember that the terrorists we are after target civilians, and the death toll from their acts of terrorism against Muslims dwarfs any estimate of civilian casualties from drone strikes. Conventional airpower or missiles are far less precise than drones, and are likely to cause more civilian casualties and more local outrage. And invasions of these territories lead us to be viewed as occupying armies, unleash a torrent of unintended consequences, are difficult to contain, result in large numbers of civilian casualties and ultimately empower those who thrive on violent conflict...So it is false to assert that putting boots on the ground is less likely to result in civilian deaths or less likely to create enemies in the Muslim world. The results would be more U.S. deaths, more Black Hawks down, more confrontations with local populations, and an inevitable mission creep in support of such raids that could easily escalate into new wars.