

Drones: targeted killing is only part of the problem

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The US use of drones for targeted killing has rightly received a lots of media attention over the past week. Since the beginning of 2012 the [US has stepped up its drone assassination programme in Yemen](#), while continuing to [launch drone strikes in Pakistan](#) despite repeated [pleas from the Pakistan authorities to stop](#). Kill lists and extrajudicial killing of suspects, once seen as completely unacceptable to the global community (and to the vast majority, still does) now seems to have become almost a matter of routine for [the US and its President](#).

[Journalists](#) as well as [commentators](#) – and now [churches](#) – have rightly been investigating and criticising this particular use of drones, and in both the [US](#) and the [UK](#) legal challenges are underway to stop further attacks and to reveal more detail about the process.

But it's important to remember that targeted killing is not the only problem with unmanned drones.

Earlier this week I took part in an [online discussion about the use of drones hosted by the Canadian think tank CIC](#). Author and drone expert Peter Singer and Oxford Professor of Ethics and Law, Jennifer Walsh, argued that there was no particular problem with drones *per se*. They argued (as most mainstream commentators do) that it's not the development and use of remote armed technology that is the problem, but rather the fact that they are it is being used outside 'official' armed conflicts to undertake targeted killing. Just to be very clear, the use of drones to undertake assassinations far away from any battlefield is a very serious problem which must be investigated and challenged.

But it's not just the fact that drones have enabled the expansion of targeted killing. The problem with drones goes deeper than that.

To put it simply, armed unmanned technology and the concept of 'remote war' alters the balance of options available to our political and military leaders *in favour* of a military response. Armed drones are making the political cost of military intervention much lower than it had previously been.

Before the advent of armed drones (and particularly since the Vietnam war) public antipathy towards risking troops lives in foreign wars has meant the balance of the options available to our leaders weighed more on the side of political rather than military intervention (with notable exceptions of course). Now however, the scales have shifted in the opposite direction and drones enable our political leaders to intervene militarily overseas by launching remote attacks at great distances with no risk to their own forces. Although some argue that it has been possible to launch attacks at great distances for many years by using cruise missiles for example, it is the ability of the drone to sit and loiter over towns

and compounds for many hours and days rather than the 'one-off shot' of a cruise missile that makes a crucial difference.

While it is still very early in the drone wars era, the fact that the US used unmanned drones to launch attacks in six different countries during 2011 – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya – shows how much easier it now is to undertake military interventions.

On top of this, is the concern that drones may also make it much easier to launch attacks within particular theatres of war.

[According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism \(TBIJ\) there have been around 330 US drone strikes in Pakistan and around 40 drone strikes in Yemen.](#) Though the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are the first 'official' wars in which armed drones have been used in a sustained and comprehensive way, there is as yet no public analysis of the impact of unmanned drones in these conflicts. Given that the US has ten times the number of Britain's five armed Reaper drones in Afghanistan – and Britain's drones have launched over 250 drone strikes – it is quite possible that there have been over 2,000 drone strikes in Afghanistan (although this is simply a guess).

Due to the secrecy surrounding the use of armed drones it is difficult at this stage to say for definite that the 'risk free' nature of drone is actually increasing the frequency of attacks. However an official US military report into an attack in February 2010 which resulted in the deaths of a number of Afghan civilians found that the [drone pilots in Creech "had a propensity/bias for kinetic operations"](#).

We know that drones are loitering over particular areas, towns and compounds for hours and days at a time looking for "targets of opportunity" and this is of serious concern. Louise Arbour, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and currently chief of the International Crisis Group said about the growing use of unmanned drones recently ["The most serious concern is the secrecy which surrounds these operations, added to the fact that they are mostly deployed in isolated, inaccessible areas, which makes it virtually impossible to determine whether they are used in compliance with the laws of war."](#)

While it is right and important that there is growing condemnation of the use of drones for targeted killing, we need also to be challenging the growing use of unmanned weapons technology itself. No doubt some will respond with the cliché that 'guns don't kill people, people kill people'. And like most clichés there is a rather grim element of truth to that. And others will say also that drones are not intrinsically bad like cluster bombs or anti-personnel landmines as they can be used in other ways than for killing. Nevertheless armed drones by their nature and the way they are designed to be used, simply makes the world a more dangerous place.

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