

# Remote and “Cost Effective” Killing Machines: Fighting Drone Wars without Incurring US-NATO Casualties

"A relatively cheap way of killing people, important at a time of spending cuts"

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Ground the Drones (UK)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD, US NATO  
War Agenda](#)

*Chris Nineham, vice-Chair of Stop the War, writes that the great advantage of drones for western governments is they can be used without domestic casualties and therefore, they hope, without the risk of popular opposition or protest.*


RAF Waddington will soon be the control centre for British drone warfare. It may already be, we can't be sure.

The fact we don't know testifies to the secrecy that surrounds the operation of these remote control killing machines. Drones embody the sinister shift that has been taken in the West's wars post Iraq.

They blur the distinction between war and state execution, with no chance for public scrutiny.

Britain has been using drones in Afghanistan for some years. But by developing its drone capability, the British government is now stepping up its global ability to conduct arbitrary assassinations.

Official US language shows drones are normalizing such behaviour. There has been next to no public discussion about their use in Britain, but in the US drones are actually justified as precision weapons of international assassination. Their supporters say they are capable of surgically removing terrorist targets, so 'cleansing' weakened states of extremist leaders.

 In a half hearted attempt to provide a legal framework, the Obama administration has claimed that drones are justified because they are used only against "specific senior operational leaders of al Qaida and associated forces" involved in the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks who are plotting "imminent" violent attacks on Americans. The US is still at war against Al-Qaeda, the argument goes, so such lethal incursions into foreign territory are legal.

"It has to be a threat that is serious and not speculative," President Barack Obama said in a Sept. 6, 2012, interview with CNN. "It has to be a situation in which we can't capture the individual before they move forward on some sort of operational plot against the United States."

But the evidence is unchallengeable: this is nonsense. Recent reports suggest that just 1.5%

of the estimated 3,100 that have been killed by US drones in Pakistan were identified by US officials as 'high-profile targets'. The US categorises victims as children, civilians, "high-profile," and "other." "The 'other' grey zone comprises males of fighting age.

The Obama administration assumes that these are legitimate targets even though there is no information as to their affiliation. But the Washington Post reported in February that most attacks now are "signature strikes," in which targets are selected based on suspicious patterns of activity and the identities of those who could be killed is not known. In 2012, the New York Times paraphrased a view they said was shared by several officials that "people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top Qaeda operative, are probably up to no good."

Their crime in other words was to have been young, male and in the area.

But it's not just that fantasies are being peddled about drones' technical ability to single out their targets. Their strategic role is being obscured too. In reality drones are not used simply as surgical weapon to pre-empt a possible attack. Partly their adoption has been driven by the unpopularity and the manifest failure of the conventional wars that have been fought under the rubric of the war on terror over the last twelve years.

The great advantage of drones from the point of view of western governments is that, at least while the West has the technological edge over competitors, they can be used without domestic casualties and therefore, they hope, without the risk of popular opposition or protest.

Another advantage of drones is that they are a relatively cheap way of killing people, important at a time of spending cuts. They are a way of continuing foreign wars while slimming budgets.

Drones are no more part of a rational policy of self-defence than the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. And nor do they mark a drawdown in US military ambitions. They are in fact being used as a surrogate for conventional military operations. White House senior counterterrorism adviser John Brennan defended drone strikes in April 2012 by comparing them to "deploying large armies abroad" and "large, intrusive military deployments."

The fact the US has used drones in Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan and very likely in Mali as well as Iraq and Afghanistan, testifies to the fact that drones are integrated into the US's wider war strategy. They are being used to destabilise enemy governments and shore up allies.

The conditions that led to the war on terror are still in place. The US faces growing economic challenges while it retains enormous military predominance. The chaos and volatility created by the failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of Chinese power in influence in the Pacific, in Africa and elsewhere make the global situation is, if anything, even more tense than at the beginning of the last decade.

The US military is explicit that the war goes on. In January, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, told Ted Koppel that even after 2014, "Our war in Afghanistan will be complete, but no one has ever suggested that that will end the war." Secretary Panetta is just as clear: "We are in a war. We're in a war on terrorism and we've been in that war since 9/11."

In a process that the experts call 'monopoly erosion', drone use is spreading fast, confirming that they are becoming the new face of modern warfare. A 2012 survey showed that 11 countries had functioning drone systems, including France, Germany, Israel, Turkey, India and China. Other countries are rushing to catch up. We already face a frightening situation in which great powers are confronting each other with these 'easy to use' 'low cost' killing systems.

A US study based on extensive research in Pakistan gives some inkling of the impact of this remote control imperialism:

Drones hover twenty-four hours a day over communities in northwest Pakistan, striking homes, vehicles and public spaces without warning. Their presence terrorizes men, women and children giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities. Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment, and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves.

One man interviewed by the researchers described the reaction to the sound of the drones as "a wave of terror" coming over the community. "Children, grown-up people, women, they are terrified. . . . They scream in terror." Another "God knows whether they'll strike us again or not. But they're always surveying us, they're always over us, and you never know when they're going to strike and attack".

The opposition to our government's foreign wars must continue – we mustn't let them keep fighting behind our backs.

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#### 16 April Public Meeting in Parliament: Drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Public meeting jointly called by Afghanistan Withdrawal Group of MPs and the All Party Drones Group

Tuesday 16th April: 18.30 to 20.00  
Wilson Room, Portcullis House  
(next to Westminster tube station)

#### Speakers:

Chris Cole, Drone Campaign Network UK  
Rafeef Ziadah, War on Want

#### Co-Chairs:

Paul Flynn MP  
Baroness Stern

*Afghanistan Withdrawal Group of MPs* was launched to press for British withdrawal and consider constructive ways in which the conflict might be ended. The group is co-chaired by MPs Paul Flynn and Caroline Lucas. Supporters are drawn from across the political parties.

*All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones* was set up to examine the use of drones by governments for domestic and international, military and civilian purposes. It is chaired by Tom Watson MP. Baroness Stern, a cross bench peer and human rights and criminal justice

campaigner, is group vice chair.

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