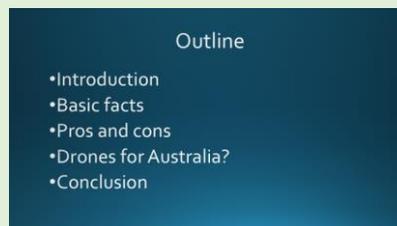




Droning on?

Arguments for and against drone warfare

Lecture by David Stephens to ANU UN Society, 1 May 2013



1. Introduction

First, let's look at some statistics

Kill counts – the numbers of people killed by drones

The *theme* here is murkiness and confusion; the numbers are disputed; so is the status of the people killed

Some estimates from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) are on the slide

Drone strikes in Pakistan 2004-13

Total US (CIA) strikes: 366
 Obama strikes (since 2009): 314
 Total reported killed: 2,537-3,581
 Civilians reported killed: 411-884
 Children reported killed: 168-197
 Total reported injured: 1,174-1,465

Source: Bureau of Investigative Journalism (London), "Covert war on terror – the datasets", <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drone-data/>, accessed 14 April 2013

Note how the numbers on the slide don't add up: there is dispute on the raw numbers and whether the people killed were civilians or militants

For example, allegedly the US method of counting is to assume that all adult males killed are "militants": between 1900 and 2500 on those statistics

The BIJ, on the other hand, reckons less than two per cent of those killed in Pakistan are "high profile" militants – that's only about 50 people

The other thing to notice, fairly obviously, is the massive increase in drone strikes under the Obama Administration; we'll come back to why that might be

Who specifically is responsible? Who owns the drones?

Murkiness and confusion again

The received view is that the drones targeting Pakistan are "owned" by the CIA; though it is alleged that some or all (perhaps 50 per cent) have been operated by the private security firm (Blackwater) on behalf of another even more shadowy US military agency called Joint Special Operations Command or JSOC

Suggestion recently that “ownership” of the former CIA/JSOC/Blackwater drones may be going to the Defence Department; that may introduce stricter controls over their use compared with now where anything that Pres does against terror is legal (“lawful extra-judicial killing”); Obama 2013 state of the union address gave some hints (refer you to an excellent article by Daniel Klaidman in *The Daily Beast* in March on that subject: Bibliography)

Honestly we don’t know the real story; difficult enough to get US officials to admit they run drones at all, let alone which agency or contractor is responsible. *Secondly*, what happens when a drone hits its target? Here’s a description from the *Chicago Monitor*, published by the Council on American Islamic Relations:

Faheem Qureishi sat in his uncle’s home in the *hujra*, a gathering space for men and male guests...

Without warning, the men heard a distinct hissing sound, and all instinctively bowed their heads down. A drone missile hit the center of the *hujra*, blowing off the ceiling and the roof, shattering all the windows, and damaging neighbors’ homes.

Faheem ...was the only survivor of the strike. “[I] could not think,” said Faheem, “I felt my brain stopped working and my heart was on fire... my entire body was burning like crazy.”

... After a few moments of panic-stricken confusion [Faheem] walked out of the rubble of the *hujra*... Neighbors found him... and rushed him to a government hospital...

Faheem suffered from a fractured skull, burns and shrapnel wounds all over the left side of his face and body. His left eye has been replaced with an artificial one, and he has lost hearing in his left ear; he also has limited mobility. Faheem was only fourteen when he was attacked by the drone in January 2009.

The *theme* there is obviously horror and distress; death from the sky

But that theme is not universal...

Thirdly, another interesting snapshot: how do the operators of military drones feel about them?

There's an Australian example here



Couple of comments on that

One, the Australians in Waziristan were operating rented, *unarmed*, surveillance drones – not clear whether *armed* drones, or even ones that we *owned*, would have been even more of a buzz for the Wing Commander

Two, there are clearly some attractions in this work for military people and potential military people; it is alleged that the US Air Force is recruiting more people to operate drones than they are recruiting to fly old-fashioned aeroplanes (Side point there is that unmanned drones need a lot of men and women in the backrooms to run them; but also these high tech options are attractive to some)

Another *theme* then is excitement, the pleasure a professional soldier takes in using “something technically sweet” (Robert Oppenheimer)

Final pen picture: a hint about how it affects us in Australia. In February this year, the Defence Minister, Stephen Smith, said this:

I am not opposed to the notion of giving consideration down the track to *armed*, unmanned, aerial vehicles.

A final *theme* to introduce things – “what’s next?” anticipation

2. Basic facts

There are big drones and little ones: Global Hawk, a surveillance drone, weighs 14 metric tonnes; at the other end of the scale, British army has a surveillance drone, 16 grams, 10 cm by 2.5 cm, with a camera and a transmitter

Some drones on the slide

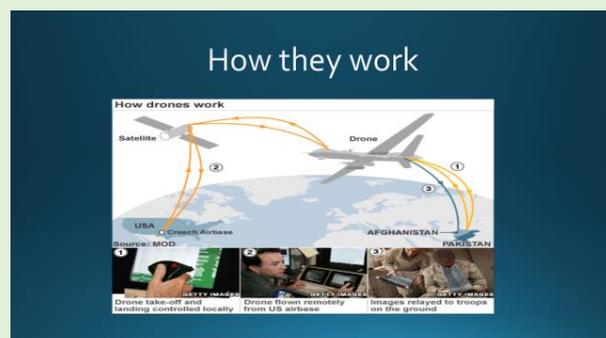


Military and non-military drones; want to talk mainly about military

Among the military, as we said, there are armed and unarmed: Predator and Reaper are the two best known armed ones; armaments are missiles such as Hellfire or laser guided bombs

Drones have cameras and sensors and they can stay in the sky for around 17 hours, perhaps days; *in the future*, months, perhaps years, fuelled by other drones

Global Hawk is big but is unarmed, for surveillance; we are looking at something like Global Hawk for surveillance to our north-west, to watch for asylum seeker boats



How do they work? The slide gives a pretty good idea, though note this one *leaves out* the missile

Who has drones and where are they based, where are they fired from?

There are 64 alleged bases in the US but the key locations are the ones that initiate strikes by Predator and Reaper drones

There are apparently 12 of these, located in about 10 states e.g. Creech base in Nevada, near Las Vegas, as on the slide

There is also increasing activity in Africa and the Middle East in terms of bases where the drones live, so to speak; much closer to the target

For example, recent map in the Washington Post has alleged bases in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Pakistan and, now, Niger

United States uses *military* drones extensively in Pakistan; also in Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya

Other countries have military drones but don't (yet) use them as much; as far as we know, apart from the US, only the UK and Israel have used *armed* drones

UK is said to have made more than 350 *drone strikes* in Afghanistan (query figure)

Israel is said to have *killed* more than 800 people in Gaza with drones (Palestinian source: query)

Secondly, a word about terminology: people tend to use the word "drones" as short-hand; some military prefer to say "unmanned aerial vehicles" or UAVs or "remotely piloted aerial systems" or RPAS or simply "robots"

Main thing to remember is different sizes, different purposes

The other thing to remember is they are here already and there will be more and more of them

The General Accounting Office in the US says that at the end of 2011 there were 76 countries which possessed drones – 76 countries – that, however, includes civilian as well as military and unarmed as well as armed: though note it is not difficult to reconfigure unarmed to armed

Military numbers (armed, large drones) estimate: no-one really knows; figures range widely; somewhere more than 800 world-wide belonging to the US, UK, Israel, France, Germany, Italy, India, Turkey, deployed

More than 80 per cent of these belong to the US

On the other hand, a figure of 7000 *in the US alone* (unarmed, armed, all sizes but the great bulk of them would be small surveillance drones)

There are clearly difficulties about counting due to secrecy

So what are the arguments pro and con?



3. Pros and cons

Note that here talking only about *military drones*

Look at pros and cons under three headings: moral, political/economic and military

Those headings and that order are important

I mentioned a moment ago the Wing Commander making the comparison with crack cocaine; that came from an ABC report by Mark Corcoran last year about an industry conference at the Gold Coast on drones and related matters

Corcoran said “this gathering of aviation industry insiders was fascinated by the technology but displayed *no interest* in discussing the political or ethical considerations of this rapidly expanding form of warfare”

We’ll be a bit more comprehensive this evening

Essentially, I am throwing out ideas for you to consider

Moral, first, then; *moral arguments pro, for* the use of military drones, particularly armed ones

First, the biggest moral issue (for some observers, at least) is protecting soldiers; governments are always going to get into fights for policy reasons; drones will keep more soldiers out of “harm’s way”; the weapons are fired from a distance, without there being “boots on the ground”; less soldiers are in danger

Secondly, drones, armed ones, discriminate, unlike bombers, gas and infantry; essentially, with armed drones, operators sitting at screens follow little splodges of heat on the screen, representing targets, then, at a certain point, when the target is on its (his) own, say, give the order to fire

Put another way, drones are said to limit “collateral damage” – essentially, the killing of innocents – to facilitate the targeting of specific enemies (colloquially, “the bad guys”)

Note that the first of those arguments – protecting boots on the ground – is really only a moral argument from the point of view of the nation that is operating the drones

An American moral philosopher, Bradley Strawser, says the US is morally obliged to use drones because “[y]ou’re not risking the pilot. The pilot is safe... [D]rones can be a morally preferable weapon of war if they are capable of being more discriminate than other weapons that are less precise and expose their operators to greater risk.”

OK, now some *moral arguments con, against* the use of military drones

First, drones are said to facilitate summary executions (of alleged terrorists) secretly, without trial and sometimes without justification; that's a moral argument that should be of interest to all of us; *also a legal argument*; certainly has been of interest to a succession of United Nations rapporteurs in this field ("targeted extra-judicial killing")

Secondly, involvement in war should require "skin in the game", that is, on the ground; in other words, if you want to fight a war, you should be committed enough to put people into danger and bear the consequences

Paradoxical perhaps to present that as a moral argument *against* the use of drones – if you are *really* serious about waging war, you have to *show* you are serious by putting soldiers where they are likely to be killed; I'll leave that for you to consider

You will note also that there is a political element to some of these arguments, as well as a moral one; which is good: politics and morality *should* overlap

Here's some other *political arguments in favour* of using military drones

First one: drones reduce the potential for casualties of soldiers on the ground: this is really the earlier *moral* argument restated but here it is less about protecting *soldiers* and more about reducing the political costs *for governments* in having soldiers coming back in body bags; using drones can reduce the body count and reduce those political costs

Second political argument for: it is argued that drones are more appropriate weapons for modern warfare, which is increasingly against terror cells rather than states; this assumes accuracy

Thirdly: drones allow the targeting of terrorists hiding behind the national sovereignty of our nominal allies e.g. Pakistan; when I say "our" here I am talking US/Australia; Pakistan obviously sees it differently and I'll return to that

Fourthly: we are told that drones can facilitate involvement in conflicts where there is a good *moral* case for intervention but adverse *politics* attaching to the use of expeditionary forces e.g. Rwanda, Bosnia, maybe Syria, Iran?; drones are said to facilitate efficient intervention in messy situations

Note that some of those are *past* conflicts; wistful retrospectivity; "maybe if we had had drones in such and such a past war, we could have sorted it out quicker"; even seen it suggested that the British might have achieved a different outcome in Ireland if drones had been used against IRA leaders; or possibly against Iain Paisley

Next political argument for: on the economic side here, drone warfare is said to be *cheaper* than expeditionary force warfare; this has been a strong argument for President Obama, put keenly by John Brennan, who was Obama's drone-master and is now his spy-master (head of the CIA)

So President Obama goes for drones largely because they are cheaper in lives – American lives – and cheaper in dollars

You may think this is a fairly narrowly based argument, even a self-centred argument, but Obama would argue that his first duty is to protect Americans; probably little argument from Americans on that point; would apply in any country

Let's go on to some *political arguments against*

First, because drones reduce the numbers of politically risky *military* casualties, they create the potential to prolong existing wars, enter current wars that have previously been off limits, and enter new wars; *again* that paradox that having to put soldiers "in harm's way" has been to some extent a discipline on governments; the argument here is that this *former* discipline will be reduced if the drone option is available

Secondly, then a *similar* argument from the *economic* point of view: because drone warfare seems to be *cheaper* than conventional warfare, drones create the potential to prolong existing wars, enter current wars, and enter new wars; from this point of view, having to *spend money* on expeditionary forces has been a discipline on governments making rash or stupid military commitments; the suggestion is that if you make wars cheaper you'll have more of them and they will last longer

You will have noticed that both of these arguments have just appeared a moment ago as political arguments *for, in favour of*, using drones

Whether you see them as arguments *for* or arguments *against* depends really on where you sit

If you are President Obama or John Brennan, trying to make the best of an unwinnable war which you would much rather be out of, you will see them as arguments *for* because they reduce your costs, human and financial

For lots of other people, they are probably good arguments *against* using drones

Thirdly, another argument *against*, which is to do with *nuclear weapons*: the argument here is that the possibility of nuclear weapons being used in war is *increased* if they can be associated with "surgical strikes"; you can see the attraction if you are a harassed strategist in Washington or wherever: mount a nuke on a drone and *efficiently* take out a whole city full of terrorists

Fourthly, using drones will, it is said, increase popular resentment in the war theatre: “death from the sky”; feeling among the targeted population that disproportionate force has been used; the use of disproportionate force, probably with collateral damage (innocent victims) increases the likelihood of local resentment

That leads in turn to attacks on ground forces or to terrorist retaliation against the country using the weapon; even, I’ve heard it suggested, attacks on suburban homes or army base homes in the US, occupied by drone operators; operators at the Creech base live in Las Vegas, for example

Drones may be very effective recruiters for terror: one Taliban leader is alleged to have recruited 150 volunteers after a drone strike when he had typically picked up only 10 or 15 in three months

Fifthly, drones may involve infringements of national sovereignty, even of nominal allies e.g. Pakistan; this was a political argument *in favour*, of course, but is also a political argument *against*; again it all depends whether you see it from the US angle or the Pakistan angle; clearly there are problems in the US-Pakistan relationship because of the use of drones against targets in Pakistan

What do people in target countries really think? What about the rest of the world? Here’s a slide

Public opinion on drones

- 74 per cent of Pakistanis in 2012 believed the United States is an enemy of Pakistan; compared with 60 per cent in 2008; this proportion has risen *roughly* in line with drone strikes (or in line with publicity of the issue)
- Among 19 countries surveyed in 2012, only in the US did more than 50 per cent approve of drone strikes; disapproval rates among other countries ranged from 90 per cent in Greece to 21 per cent in India (where 32 per cent supported and 50 per cent didn't know)

Source: SGG Jamal, “US drone policy in Pakistan: an analysis of the effectiveness of the drone program” (University of Minnesota, 2012): http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/143325/1/Jamal_U.S.%20Drone%20Policy%20in%20Pakistan.pdf, accessed 14 April 2013

15

NB peak in US strikes was in 2010 (118)

US opinion: *disapprove* 28 per cent, *approve* 62 per cent

Other notable figures against from that 2012 poll: Britain 47 per cent

disapprove, Germany 59, France 63, Russia 68, Japan 75, Turkey 81 ... China 55

The most striking evidence from the target areas in Pakistan comes from the report last year by two American universities, called “Living under drones”; Google it

Living under drones reports (quick summary);

- constant hovering of drones overhead terrorises people and disrupts community life;
- people live in constant fear of being killed, compounded by their inability to protect their families from strikes
- children are afraid to go to school (schools have been hit in the past) and people avoid social gatherings, including funerals for victims of drone strikes
- fear of “double taps” keeps people, even emergency services, away from victims of drone strikes
- stream of refugees to larger cities

That’s Living under drones

We come to *military arguments for* and again a couple of these have come up already; I'll go through them quickly

Which is appropriate – military arguments should be subservient to ethical and political ones

First, drones reduce the potential for casualties of soldiers on the ground; seen that argument before

Secondly, and this is interesting: it is claimed by supporters of drone warfare that the distance, the *disconnect* between the target and the operator means that there has to be a greater range of checks and oversights on the use of drones and that this actually means increased accountability and allowing operational decisions to be made further up the chain

So it's the President, at one of the Tuesday meetings in the White House, on advice from a whole hierarchy of people, signing off on a strike to take out an alleged Taliban leader

Finally as a military argument for, putting the emphasis on drones will mean redirecting military budgets to areas that are more relevant to modern warfare

Don't buy a fighter plane or a battleship which you probably won't use and which may not even work properly; invest in efficient, effective drones instead

And now, a few *military arguments against*

First, it is argued we will still need ground troops in many situations; they, the ground troops, will be subject to local resentment against drones

Secondly, the accuracy of drones is overstated; so stick with the ground troops

Thirdly, a new one, there is potential for proliferation of drones to “rogue states” and terrorists: remember that some of these vehicles are quite compact, easily stolen; like tactical nuclear weapons

Fourth, on the defence purchasing argument: every line of a military budget has its supporters; it is very hard to shift spending; there will be *more* spending, not substitution; so, the argument runs, don't expect shifting the focus to drones will save you money; the fly boys will still want their manned fighters, drones or no drones



Drones for Australia?

4. Drones for Australia?

Now obviously, all of these arguments we've just tracked through apply to Australia as much as they apply to any other country

There are a couple of *threshold issues* with particular Australian relevance, though

One: if Australia gets into drones as part of its current defence alliance with the United States it is likely to mean we will become tied more closely to the alliance at a time when recent ventures under that alliance (Iraq, Afghanistan) have not been raging successes

You could argue that, at a time when it might be worth having a critical look at the alliance and its benefits to Australia, we could be increasingly moving instead towards a new style of warfare – drone warfare – which probably only makes sense as a strategy *under the alliance* – our few drones working with lots of US drones, much as our small contributions of soldiers have done in the past

If you think ANZUS is OK, of course, then it won't be a problem for you that the alliance is moving into a new phase built around drones; if you *do* have concerns about the US alliance, you should have concerns about the drone future, also

Two, another threshold issue: could we, *should we* be a drone base, either a location for the people behind the screens, or a location for storing drones ready to launch?

US marines are on their way to a base in Darwin; might Darwin be a potential *drone base* as well, with the drones presumably pointed towards China and North Korea?

Once again, if you think the US alliance is OK, then none of this is a problem; Australia could just develop a drone capacity as a new way of paying the insurance premium on the American alliance

Big question though is who in Australia is pushing to get drones?

Here's a quote from a Senate Estimates hearing 28 May 2012, twelve months ago

General Hurley, the Chief of the Defence Force, said, “new UAV use in the future would obviously be part of the force structure review process and the white paper process... I would not discount the fact that we might have armed UAVs...”.

That was 12 months ago; it is a bit difficult to know from outside where the force structure review is up to now; or the white paper – or white papers

White paper on Friday!

Even without those documents, it's clear that Minister Smith has picked up the vibe; earlier quoted him at the Avalon air show; here's the fuller version:

I am not opposed to the notion of giving consideration down the track to armed, unmanned, aerial vehicles. ... [T]his is not something that will completely dominate the future, but it is an option.... I'm not opposed to the notion of unmanned aerial vehicles carrying weapons, we don't have them at the moment, there are no proposals at the moment, but this is a conversation which in due course, both defence and Australia *needs to have*.

But there are always complications with a project like this

For example, there will be differences of view *between* the services; some in the air force reckon the sorts of wars we have fought recently give too much prominence to the army, reducing the air force to “bus drivers”, getting the army to the front line

Air force people would also use arguments about efficient kills and reduced body counts (on “our” side) as reasons to get drones

The army, on the other hand, are used to being top dog, the leading player, in our expeditionary forces and would like that to continue (more funding, more prestige, etc.)

There might be splits also – as I hinted earlier – within air force between the “fly boys”, the ones who prefer to be behind the joystick of a real plane, and the screen jockeys, perhaps call the latter group the “crack cocaine” guys

And there will be ruthless competition between the potential suppliers, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, BAE Systems, General Atomics; these are some of the world’s biggest companies and they are strongly represented here in Australia

And remember this is an industry which has a huge reputation for bribery and corruption of government buyers – not, of course, that I am saying that would happen here

What we do have in Australia, though, is a study by the Williams Foundation, which is a think tank headed by a former Chief of the Air Force; a study into the future of drones in the Australian Defence Force

This Williams Foundation work was motivated by a desire from some people within Defence (and outside it) to push things along in the context of the force structure review and the white paper

Defence put some money into the work; strong interest from drone manufacturers; Williams Foundation still developing its views; report due out in October

The Foundation is “an *independent* research organisation [which] conducts its operations *independently* and has no political or industry ties”

Which is good because the Foundation is funded by Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, BAE Systems, General Atomics Aeronautical (manufacturers of Predator and Reaper), Raytheon and other defence firms

In a paper he gave in February this year to a drones conference, the chairman of the Williams Foundation said this about the key *policy issues* facing the Williams Foundation study and ultimately the government:

"Policy issues": Williams Foundation

1. Will the Australian Government set a policy framework about the effective and efficient acquisition and use of drones...?
2. ... [W]hat organisation or organisations would provide for the effective and efficient acquisition and utilization of the full range of systems?
3. Should the ADF acquire weapons capable (strike) systems or reconnaissance and surveillance systems only in the first instance?
4. ... [H]ow soon and how much will Defence leadership be prepared to shift zero-sum funding and resources from manned to unmanned systems?"

Air Marshal McCormack concluded:

The future for Australia?

“[T]he Foundation has no doubt about the enormous potential and opportunities for the cost-effective use of drones in a wide range of roles and tasks at the tactical, operational and strategic level.”

Air Marshal Errol McCormack AO (Retired), Chairman, Williams Foundation, 25 February 2013: <http://www.williamsfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/Drone%20wars-FEB13.pdf>; also source for previous slide, accessed 4 April 2013)

Conclusion

5. Conclusion

Apologise in advance if this final bit sounds like preaching but will do it anyway

This is *too important* an issue to leave to the experts or to the people who have a vested interest – in this case, the brass, the retired brass, the politicians and the defence manufacturers

A reason to get involved?

“The greatest threat to world peace is not from nuclear weapons and their possible proliferation. It is from drones and their certain proliferation.”

Simon Jenkins, “Drones are fool’s gold: they prolong wars we can’t win”, *The Guardian*, 10 January 2013:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/10/drones-fools-gold-prolong-wars>, accessed 14 April 2013

That remark on the slide sounds like a good reason to get clued up about drones

Plenty of information out there: get hold of it; speak up; harass people, demand to know more; pester the Senators to ask questions in this year’s estimates hearings, talk about it in seminars like this

It’s your world; it doesn’t belong to the generals, the air marshals and the defence industry

As a first step, keep an eye on progress with the Williams Foundation work, demand the sunlight treatment for it; an “open” seminar in July (try and get to

it); “invitation only” seminar later (make a noise and ask for an invitation);
report in October (get hold of it)

If we are to have drones, let’s do it with our eyes open, with proper discussion

And let’s do it paying particular attention not just to the policy and military
questions but the moral and ethical questions as well

Or to put it another way, let’s think about what’s good for people like 14 year
old Fareem, the sole survivor of that drone strike in 2009, as well as what’s
good for the crack cocaine Wing Commander

Thank you

Questions?