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General Assembly 1

Main Topic: The question of Promoting Democracy

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Introduction

The Reaper UCAV

Drones (unmanned aeroplanes operated by remote control[1]) were initially used for spying purposes. They permitted territories to be overflown, and photographs taken, without risk of a pilot being killed or captured.

More recently they have been fitted with missiles and bombs, and have been used to target opponents out of reach of conventional land- or sea-based weapons.

The absence of the weight of a pilot, armour to protect the pilot, oxygen etc., coupled with advances in technology, mean drones can remain at high altitude for much more than 24 hours at a time (just the remote operator needs to be replaced during the flight). They can intercept radio and mobile 'phone communications and gather information through video, radar and thermal-imaging.

Drones can relay real-time footage to operations rooms and hand-held devices of soldiers on the ground. With object- and face-recognition software, they can identify suspicious patterns of movement for people and vehicles, and be used to respond to perceived threats and targets.

Through the use of satellite communications, hunter-killer drones can be controlled from outside of the country being targeted.

The use of drones has become particularly associated with the United States, who has used them to target Islamic fighters in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia, although many countries (including Britain, Israel, Russia and China) have drones.

However, missiles and bombs are blunt instruments, they do not discriminate. Those within a certain radius of where they strike are killed or wounded irrespective of whether they are the targets.

Countries using hunter-killer drones typically ascribe surgical precision to their targeting. The reality is different. Also, pilot errors, malfunctions of the drones, missiles or bombs, faulty intelligence and misinterpretation of data have resulted in civilian casualties.

[1] In the military they are typically referred to as **UAVs** (unmanned aerial vehicles), **UCAVs** (unmanned combat aerial vehicles) or **RPAS** (remotely piloted aerial systems).

The X-47B UCAV

In January 2018 Russia reported that it had tracked down and killed the group of militants responsible for a recent coordinated attack of 13 armed drones against one of its bases in Syria; 7 were shot down and 6 were taken control of using electronic warfare. Russia said it analysed the construction of the drones and explosives of the captured crafts, concluding that the militants in Syria must have had help from a technologically advanced country.

Experts have commented that swarm-like attacks using weaponised drones is a growing threat and likely to only get worse. They also said the possibility exists of terrorists using these drones in urban areas against civilians.

Definition of key terms

Collateral damage: Military terminology for incidental killing or wounding of non-combatants or damage to the property of non-combatants during an attack on a military target.

Non-combatants: A civilian not taking part in active hostilities.

Personality strike: A drone strike targeting a specific individual.

RPAS: Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, an acronym used to refer to hunter-killer drones.

Signature strike: A drone strike where the identity of the individual is not known, but their pattern of behaviour indicates they are likely to be involved in terrorist activity.

Targeted killing: The intentional, premediated and deliberate use of lethal force against a specific individual who is not in the physical custody of the perpetrator.

UAVs: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, an acronym used to refer to hunter-killer drones.

UCAVs: Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles, an acronym used to refer to hunter-killer drones.

Key issue

The key issue is whether the arguments in favour of hunter-killer drone attacks outweigh the arguments against those attacks or vice versa. The following are some pros and cons put forward in respect of the recent use of hunter-killer drones by the US, together with some comments on these in green italics.

Arguments put forward in favour of US hunter-killer drone attacks

- Drones have been used to kill upwards of 3,500 militants, including dozens of high-level commanders implicated in organising plots against the US, trainers, bomb makers and operatives.
- According to a US hostage held for several months by the Taliban in Pakistan, drones represented a terrifying presence for militants.
- It is claimed that drones kill fewer civilians as a percentage of total fatalities than other military weapons such as cruise missiles or aircraft bombing.
  This is difficult to substantiate. Judicious counting and propaganda from both sides make available statistics on civilian casualties unreliable.
- They allow countries to attack without risking the lives of their own combatants and avoiding the costs of "boots-on-the-ground" missions.
- Drone strikes permit more focussed attacks against specific terrorist threats than "boots-on-the-ground" missions.
  The ongoing war in Afghanistan illustrates the risks of invading a country in order to eliminate a terrorist organisation.
- Approval of drone strikes are subject to a strict review process and congressional oversight.
  Nevertheless, such processes cannot completely eliminate errors or ensure civilians are not killed or wounded.
- Drone strikes help countries fight the terrorist threats to their own domestic peace and stability.
  However, if an incumbent government is considered to be formed of terrorists, this same argument supports war.
- US drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia are legal under international law because these countries have officially consented to such strikes within their countries as each is unable to control terrorist groups within its own borders. Other legal arguments have been put forward in support of US drone strikes in other countries, and the legality of strikes under US law.
- The US cannot risk falling behind the rest of the world in the development of drone technology.
  This echoes the mutually-assured-destruction (MAD) doctrine put forward to support the nuclear arms race of the Cold War.

Arguments put forward against US hunter-killer drone attacks

- Drone strikes create more terrorists than they kill. Civilian deaths and wounding from such attacks may have a radicalising effect on the societies that the US drones are trying to eliminate extremists from.
- Due to errors or flawed intelligence, some strikes target civilians.
  A similar argument led to the abolishment of hanging for capital crimes in the UK in the 1960s.
- Drone strikes divorce the US people from the true horrors of war.
- To bring a conflict to a close, the warring parties must be reconciled. The lower cost of continuing a conflict though the use of drones may delay the point when reconciliation begins, and ultimately increase the total number of casualties.
- The ease with which such attacks can be effected may increase the number of conflicts in the world.
- Drones kill large numbers of civilians, and the terrorists that are killed are mostly low-value targets that do not represent significant threats to the US.
  This is difficult to substantiate. Judicious counting and propaganda from both sides make unreliable the available statistics on civilian casualties, and the threat level from terrorists that are killed.
- Permission for drone strikes lacks sufficient control and oversight.
- Legal arguments have been put forward that US drone strikes are against international law.

Timeline of key events

In 1849 Austria dropped pilotless hot-air balloon bombs on Venice. The attack caused very little damage but Venice surrendered 2 days later.

Remote controlled planes were developed during World War I.

During the interwar years the British developed a remote controlled target for anti-aircraft gunners to use for target practice.

During World War 2 the Nazis developed Vergelbungswaffe[2] 1 (V1, nicknamed the doodlebug in Britain). This was a pilotless flying bomb; targeted initially at London and later at Antwerp and Liege in Belgium; it flew until the fuel ran out. At peak, more than 100 were fired a day. If you heard the engine stop you were in serious danger. A V2 was also developed and fired.

Radio-controlled spy planes were developed in the 1950s.

During the Cold War, remote controlled planes were expensive, unreliable and the pilots needed to be within radio distance. The planes were overshadowed by satellite spy networks and supersonic manned spy planes.

In the 1970s aircraft with glider-like thin wings that could remain in flight for more than 24 hours were developed. This permitted them to be used to monitor developments over extended periods.

In the 1990s transmitters were used to send live footage to ground-based commanders.

Live footage was subsequently transmitted by satellite across the world, and the drones were armed.

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[2] Vengeance Weapon in English. It was intended as retaliation for the Allied bombings of German cities.

There were 57 drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen during the 8 year US presidency of George W. Bush which ended in January 2009.

There were 563 drone strikes in those countries during the 8 year US presidency of Barack Obama which ended in January 2017.

Quite a few have been fired so far during US presidency of Donald Trump.

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