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The Use of Drones for Counterterrorism Tactics

The use of drones is an effective and efficient means of counterterrorism that the United States military should continue to use. The debate over the use of drones has become a widely discussed issue today in the United States and other nations world-wide. This study examines how the use of drones is important for carrying out counterterrorism missions and is beneficial to the United States. The following arguments are discussed: 1) drones create less collateral damage than other war tactics, 2) the technological capabilities of drones, 3) the protection of U.S. military and national security interests, 4) the utilitarian view of eliminating few to save the lives of many, and 5) the United States’ precedents for future drones.

It is important to have an understanding of the definition of terms that are used throughout this study. First, the term “drone” refers to a military aircraft in which the pilots are not onboard, but in a control room on the ground that could be thousands of miles away from the actual aircraft. Drones are also referred to as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV). Drones can be used for a variety of purposes, such as surveillance and various forms of combat (Matthews 2013). For the purpose of this study, however, the use of drones for counterterrorism tactics is the main focus.

It is also important to have an understanding of the word “counterterrorism”. Counterterrorism is a military strategy to eliminate terrorist threats by means of killing insurgents, an organized rebellion that goes against its government or involved in terrorist activities (Khalili 2012). Another important term is “signature strike”, which is a form of drone
attack, usually with either missiles or bombs, that target unknown individuals or groups who show signs of behavior or characteristics that are associated with terrorist activities. “Personality strikes”, however, target recognizable specific individuals who are known to be associated with terrorist activities (McInerny).

The first argument for why drones should be used for counterterrorist tactics is because of their accuracy and ability to cause less collateral damage and fewer causalities of innocent civilians than alternative forms of combat. The purpose of the drone is to have a more precise means of carrying out missions, which target individuals and organizations of terrorist threat, while causing as little civilian causalities as possible (Shane 2012). Since drones were first designed, technological advancements have continuously been made to improve the precision of drone strikes in order to have a more defined target, decreasing the chances of hitting civilians. The precision of drone strikes have been compared to that of other war tactics. For instance, an F-16 that drops a five-hundred pound bomb creates more structural damage and causes a greater number of casualties than a drone strike that has a smaller, more precise blast zone (Byman 2013). Also, drones have the capability to time a strike during a moment when civilians are not present. If a civilian does enter the strike zone even after a missile has been launched, the missile can be redirected so that they do not hit innocent people (Shane 2012).

A study was done that compared the C.I.A.’s records of the ratios of combatant to civilian deaths during drone strikes in Pakistan. Four drone strike incidents were examined for this study, and the results showed that 4%, 6%, 17%, and 20% of the deaths of these four incidents were civilian deaths (Shane 2012). Although it is ideal to have no civilian deaths at all, alternative military war strategies that involve sending in troops to carry out the missions resulted in even greater percentages of civilian deaths. Avery Plaw, a political scientist at University of
Massachusetts found that in the last two decades, civilian deaths during non-drone warfare tactics ranged from 33% to 80% of the total deaths (Shane 2012). There is a specific instance in Pakistan in which warfare on the ground which caused civilians to be 46% of the total deaths. Another battle in with bombs and non-drone missiles resulted in a 41% civilian death rate (Shane 2012). Even though the highest rate of 20% of the deaths to be civilian deaths is significant, it is still much less than what the common civilian death rates are in alternative warfare tactics.

There have also been improvements upon the drones’ accuracy performance over the last few years. Percentages of civilian deaths out of the total number of deaths have been decreasing since 2008. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London has documented this decrease in civilian casualty counts, which they support with the evidence that while civilian death percentages used to be over 20%, a drone strike on July 7th, 2012, resulted in one-hundred fifty two people killed, only three of which were civilians (Shane 2012). The accuracy of drones will continue to be advanced, keeping collateral damage to a minimum, which ultimately prevents the death of innocent civilians.

The second argument for why drones should be used for counterterrorism is that drones have more capabilities for carrying out missions than alternative warfare tactics. The advanced technology that is used in these aircrafts allows the United States to accomplish missions more effectively than sending in troops. A former Air Force officer and an assistant professor of philosophy at the Naval Postgraduate School, Bradley J. Strawser, focused on the issue of whether the United States should use drones. Strawser shares, “All the evidence we have so far suggests that drones do better at both identifying the terrorist and avoiding collateral damage than anything else we have” (Shane 2012).
Drones have the capability of reaching remote areas where organizations or institutions associated with terrorism that would be extremely difficult, dangerous, and almost impossible for soldiers on the ground to reach, such as in Pakistan and other regions (Byman 2013). Such remote locations could be impossible to reach on short notice for soldiers on the ground if terrorism acts suddenly spark and there is a need for immediate U.S. military intervention. Drones, however, can quickly and easily reach these remote locations and can be ready to strike whenever the military officers decide it is necessary. During times of suspicious activities, certain drones, such as one called “Predator”, can monitor an area for months on end, waiting and looking for signs of threatening activity (Anderson 2013). This would be difficult for soldiers on the ground to monitor in such depth for so long. After long periods of monitoring time, drones that are used for warfare, such as the “Reaper”, can be ready to intervene when sending in troops in short notice is not an option.

For some strikes, such as in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen, drones are much more effective than manned warplanes. The advanced sensor data technology allows for drones to have better visuals of what is occurring in the targeted area, while pilots of manned aircrafts have access to minimal information. With the knowledge and information that can be gained from a drone compared to manned aircraft or other military tactics, it is clear that drones’ advanced technology is effective for counterterrorism tactics.

The third argument for why drones should be used for counterterrorism is that using drones, instead of sending in troops on the ground, protect United States soldiers and interests. Keeping military personnel out of harm’s way is an obvious advantage for the United States military for multiple reasons. One of these reasons is that the use of drones makes a way for the U.S. military and national security to carry out missions to eliminate terrorism without putting
soldiers in danger. Soldiers can go home to their families each night and the military does not have to lose their valuable trained soldiers who serve and protect the nation.

Another reason for why it is good to use drones instead of sending in troops is because in the case of a United States soldier gets captured, there is the possibility of them being tortured and threatened with execution if they the captured soldier is being interrogated. Torture and execution has been known among Pakistani and Yemeni militaries (Byman 2012). This is of course harmful to the captured soldier, but he or she could potentially leak national security or military information to those associated with terrorist organizations. With drones, there is no chance of being caught or finding out classified information through interrogation. Drone pilots and military authorities can be thousands of miles away from where the drone that they are controlling in areas such as Pakistan or Yemen.

Besides the value of United States’ soldiers’ lives and the protection of classified information, the cost of using drones is cheaper than sending in fleets of soldiers, along with expensive manned aircrafts, ships, submarines, and other equipment and supplies for carrying out a mission. Drones are not only less valuable than losing human lives, but drones are also of less monetary value so that the military can distribute its budget among the many needs for military purposes.

It has been calculated that one drone model, the MQ-9 Reaper, costs $12 million per drone, while the F-22, one of the Air Force’s most advanced fighter aircrafts, costs nearly ten times as much as a drone. The 8,000 drones that belong to the United States make up about one-third of all of the military aircraft, yet 90% of the Pentagon’s spending on airpower goes to manned aircraft. Because drones cost only a fraction of the price of fighter planes, keep U.S. military personnel out of danger, and protect confidential information from being leaked, there is
reason to believe that drones are efficient and important to the U.S. military and national security.

In opposition of drone use, it could be argued that that drones should not be used because it dehumanizes people by resorting to easy killing instead of other forms of resolving problems that do not lead to death. Killing has been considered an easy way out instead of attempting to reason with terrorist leaders or whoever the target individual or organization may be. There is also the benefit of authorities being able to find out information about the terrorist organization through interrogation and questioning if a leader or organization personnel is captured instead of assassinated (Khalili 2012). Someone of the terrorist organization may even have the option to surrender. Even if someone is captured, it is still considered to be better than killing someone, regardless of what he or she has done or plans to do. Those who oppose that drones should be used for terrorist strikes argue that protecting the sanctity of life by capturing and arresting is better than instant killing by drones.

In response to this argument, it should be considered that counterterrorist tactics by means of drone strikes is a way of valuing human life by protecting the lives of the innocent people who could be killed by that organization’s activities that cause harm. Considering the moral theory of utilitarianism, it would be better for few to die in order to save the lives of many more. This would mean that it is morally acceptable to eliminate the relatively few people who are the source of the killing in terrorist activities in order to prevent more potential killings of many innocent people. According to John Stuart Mill’s theory of utilitarianism, humans should act toward what will bring the greatest amount of happiness and the least amount of pain and suffering for the greatest number of people (Mill 7). Although suffering and pain of death would be inflicted on those who are targeted in signature strikes or personality strikes, it is ultimately
for the prevention of pain and suffering done to others that could potentially be victims of terrorist acts.

A second argument in opposition for the use of drones for counterterrorism is that the United States is setting a precedent for how other nations will use drones in the future when that time comes. John Brennan, President Obama’s counterterrorism advisor explains this matter of the future of drones around the globe (emphasis added by author, McNeal):

The United States is the first nation to regularly conduct strikes using remotely piloted aircraft in an armed conflict. Other nations also possess this technology, and any more nations are seeking it, and more will succeed in acquiring it. President Obama and those of us on his national security team are very mindful that as our nation uses this technology, we are establishing precedents that other nations may follow, and not all of those nations may — and not all of them will be nations that share our interests or the premium we put on protecting human life, including innocent civilians (McNeal 2012).

The United States national security and military are very aware of what the use of drone technology could mean in regards to the future use of drones among other nations. This could increase drone warfare as the primary form of offensive combat. This could be very destructive and get out of hand because drones could be abused by making many easy kills instead of only engaging in combat for a cause that soldiers are willing to risk their lives for. Some nations or organizations that develop this technology can use it for reasons other than preventing terrorism, such as using drones for whatever targets are desired or even for the use of more terrorism. The abuse of drone technology could lead to the uncivilized warfare.

Although this is a valid argument against the United States’ use of drones, it should be considered that many nations already possess the technology for drones or are seeking it,
and to relinquish the use of drones now will not stop other nations from using them. It would be disadvantageous for the U.S. to disarm itself of this technology while other nations are developing them. As other nations are developing the technology, the United States can continue to advance the drone technology and continuously improving upon them instead of relinquishing these tools.

Also, if the United States’ keeps its drone use focus on counterterrorism, then the precedent that is being set is that such technology should only be used to prevent future terrorism actions. This purpose is setting a standard for only taking down individuals or organizations that plan to do harm to innocent people, not to engage in any warfare with other countries that are having conflicts for whatever reason.

The importance of drones has been discussed regarding these issues: 1) drones create less collateral damage than other war tactics, 2) the technological capabilities of drones, 3) the protection of U.S. military and national security interests, 4) the utilitarian view of eliminating few to save the lives of many, and 5) the United State’s precedents for future drones. While considering the the debate over the use of drones for counterterrorism purposes, it is important to be aware of the effective and efficient ways in which they serve the United States’ interests.
Bibliography


