

The Political Effects of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles on Conflict and Cooperation within and between States

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The use of armed and unarmed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs/drones) by the United States and the United Kingdom has dramatically increased over the past decade. Aggregate data compiled from a range of open-access sources suggests that over 1,300 strikes have been carried out to date against enemy targets, killing almost 3,000 insurgents and nearly 500 civilians.¹ From the vantage point of the intervening states, these statistics are defended as markers of military success against enemy forces. However, from the perspective of the targets of these strikes - far from the use of drones reducing the risks of insurgency and terrorism - each strike justifies substantially increasing the level of violence against US/UK forces. These clashing assessments of the political effects of drone strikes can only be understood in a context of cultural misunderstandings; for the intervening side, drones represent the latest manifestation of what Martin Shaw (2005) has called 'risk-transfer militarism' (the progressive reduction of risk to Western intervening forces). For the populations affected by drone strikes, they represent the unacceptable combination of Western arrogance, technological hubris, invulnerability, and exclusivist beliefs and values. Consequently, different values, belief systems, narratives, and historical contexts lead to radically different interpretations of whether US/UK drone strikes are increasing or decreasing the security of both the intervening and affected actors. Yet, the evidence on which these claims and counter-claims are being made is highly contested,² and there is very little systematic comparative analysis of the data.

The point of departure for this project, and responding to that part of the ESRC/AHRC-dstl Science and Security call which focuses on 'Improving our ability to use S&T developments to increase co-operation and collaboration as a means of preventing future conflict', this research will investigate in a comparative context how conflicting perceptions of the use of drones shapes the propensities for conflict and cooperation both within the territory of the penetrated state and between the intervening state and the state in which the drones are operating.

Current research concerned with the use of drones, to a large extent, focuses on questions of the morality, legality, and legitimacy of the use of drone strikes (e.g. Ratner, 2007; Quintana, 2008; Sanderod, 2009; Breaux et al, 2011; Brunsetter & Braun, 2011; Columbia Law, 2011; Boyle and Foust, 2012; Carvin, 2012; Kaag & Kreps, 2012a & 2012b; Kennedy & Rennger, 2012). Empirically, these and other studies primarily focus on Israeli operations, and there is far less detailed work on the effectiveness of US drone strikes (David, 2003; Byman, 2006). The overwhelming majority of US drone strikes have been carried out in Afghanistan (67%), followed by Pakistan (26%), Yemen (3%), and Somalia (1%). As this data suggests, the use of drones has evolved into a core component of a US-driven global counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategy.³ Underlying the increased use of drones is an assumption among the United States, the United Kingdom, and key allies that this advance in Science and Technology renders the large deployment of ground forces redundant (Herold, 2010; Shane, 2012). Specifically, their increasing reliance on drones (for both reconnaissance and combat) to target opponents, their supporters, and supply networks over large geographical areas at low economic cost and very low risk to the lives of combatant forces is considered a highly effective strategy for counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. Moreover, this policy is defended as the only prudent means of protecting overseas interests and making the 'homeland' more secure. The need for more systematic engagement with the implications of drone technology is also borne out by the fact that this technology is rapidly proliferating beyond the United States. Whilst Quintana (2008:9) identified 22 countries developing drones, the Drone Wars UK site recognises 31 countries making efforts in this area.⁴ Among those countries engaged in developing drones, the United Kingdom has already made a significant investment financially. According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the United Kingdom has spent £2bn in total,

¹ We have compiled data from the Long War Journal (<http://www.longwarjournal.org>), the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (<http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com>), and Drone Wars UK (<http://dronewarsuk.wordpress.com>). As we focus on the use of drones by the US and UK, we leave out consideration of Israeli drone strikes.

² See for example also Kilcullen (2009), Matulich (2012).

³ See also Betz (2008), Pardesi (2009).

⁴ Moreover, as is the case with Hezbollah, non-state actors, too, are swiftly beginning to exploit this new technology as a form of insurgent warfare (Joshi, 2010).

with £500m going on armed drones (Ministry of Defence, 2012). Consequently, there is an important need for research as to whether this UK investment is increasing or decreasing the security of UK citizens as well as those people and groups affected by drone strikes. An answer to this question can only be given on the basis of sound evidence, so that any UK policy on drones can contribute to the goals of both national and international security.

This research project will contribute to building the evidentiary base for informed policy making on the use of US/UK drones in overseas theatres of operation. As such, it will significantly contribute to two emerging strands in the research on drones. The first of these strands is research that has begun to look at strikes in specific geographic areas (Bergen & Tiedemann, 2010; Aslam, 2011, 2012; Swift, 2012) and which has begun to explore the psychological effect of the strikes on the residents of Waziristan (Pakistan). This is a crucial spring-board for our research but what requires further investigation is how the use of drones has been impacting on the perceptions of affected groups in terms of the possibilities for achieving a negotiated settlement of conflicts (NYU-Stanford 2012). The other strand of research concerns the even more limited analysis of the effect of US/UK drone strikes on relations between the intervening state and the state within which the drones are operating. To date, such analysis has been largely restricted to anecdotal observation, rather than being studied in its own right (e.g. Hudson, Owens & Flannes, 2011: 123; Swift, 2012).

Research Design

To understand how conflicting perceptions of S & T are shaped by cultural context, and to explore how far the use of drones has generated new spaces of cultural misunderstanding leading to increased conflict, the project adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework rooted in the study of cognition, emotions, and the construction of historical narratives. Increasing focus in political psychology and International Relations has been paid to the narratives produced within and between societies and how these narratives open up new ways of understanding questions of (in)security, cooperation, and conflict in global politics (Monroe, 2002; Bell, 2006; Fattah & Fierke, 2009; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Head 2012; Head & Wheeler 2012). Recognizing the importance of narratives – the idea that “human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin, 1986, as cited in Hammack and Pilecki, 2012, p. 76) - brings to the forefront, as political psychologists have long argued, the complex interrelationships between beliefs, emotions, culture, identity, and decision-making for understanding political action (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012: 76). Conflicts in national and international arenas are frequently represented through competing narratives. The ways in which narratives are constructed and deployed holds the potential to reinforce, exacerbate or, alternatively peacefully transform conflicts. Thus, in thinking about how we might understand conflict and potentially transform it, it is crucial to appreciate the role that both narratives and emotions play. By utilizing this framework, the project team will investigate whether the use of drones has established and/or further strengthened narratives which transmit conflicts and grievances across generations and geographies. Or alternatively, has it opened up new spaces for negotiations to mitigate and end conflicts? Thus, the project team will seek to address the following primary research question:

- *Does the use of drones by a state⁵ on the territory of another actor increase or decrease the propensities for conflict and cooperation both within and between these actors?*

As evidenced by existing data, drones as a means of contemporary warfare are primarily deployed in situations of insurgency and civil war that are considered as international security threats, specifically as threats to US and allied interests, because international terrorist networks have become embedded in the countries concerned: al-Qaeda and its local (Taliban) supporters in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, and al-Shabab in Somalia. Consequently, this primary research question gives rise to two further sub questions:

- *What impact does the use of drones have on the possibilities for containing and/or ending intrastate conflict?*
- *What impact does the use of drones within a state’s borders have on the relationship between this state and the intervening state?*

⁵ We use ‘state’ here as shorthand to include coalitions of states.

The underlying, testable proposition of this primary research question and the two sub-questions therefore is that the use of drones has an impact on interstate and intrastate conflict (and the potential thereof) and as a consequence on national and international security.

We can hypothesise different scenarios for the effects of drone warfare. The use of armed drones can contribute to the ending of intrastate conflict either by facilitating a government's defeat of insurgent groups and/or encouraging the sides to achieve a negotiated settlement. If either of these outcomes leads to sustainable stability within the country concerned, we would expect a net increase in national and international security; that is, we would be able to observe reduced conflict/increased cooperation at the intrastate level. Conversely, if defeating an insurgency is not possible and/or if a conflict settlement proves unobtainable or unsustainable, the net effect on national and international security would be negative. In terms of interstate conflict, the use of drones is partly predicated upon cooperation between the two actors concerned. Where such cooperation is sustained, the net effects on national and international security are likely to be positive, where it does not exist or evaporates, the opposite is to be expected. This is, of course, a simplistic model and the relationships described above are in reality unlikely to be either linear or one-directional. We are mindful of the fact that there is also a relationship between the effects of drone warfare on interstate and intrastate conflicts: for example, interstate cooperation is likely to make drone warfare in intrastate conflicts more effective (through enhanced intelligence cooperation, coordinated public diplomacy efforts), while more effective drone warfare will contribute to enhanced interstate cooperation (by way of stabilising embattled governments, delivering security benefits to societies, increasing interdependence between domestic and external governmental actors).

At the same time, drone warfare is not the only factor that shapes the dynamics of interstate and intrastate conflict and cooperation. While our model above assumes impact (i.e., the use of drone warfare has consequences for intrastate and interstate conflict), it does not postulate that it (alone) causes any of the specific outcome possibilities briefly described in the preceding paragraph. Thus, rather than testing for simple mono-causal propositions, our approach will favour a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships that result in specific national and international security outcomes. Using such an approach will also enable us to achieve a more specific understanding of the role that drone warfare plays in achieving these outcomes and of the conditions under which drone warfare can be expected to have a positive (or negative) impact on interstate and intrastate conflict and cooperation and how these 'produce' certain net effects for national and international security.

Case study selection

The United States is currently using drones primarily in a campaign against the Taliban, al-Qaeda and associated groups in Afghanistan - (where the United Kingdom is also operating drones), - Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, and it is these cases that we will focus on, as, according to open-access data available, they cover over 95% of all recorded armed drone strikes over the past decade (excluding those conducted by Israel). While we thus achieve a near-complete universe of cases, there is sufficient similarity and variation between the cases to allow meaningful systematic cross-case comparisons. This can be briefly, but by no means comprehensively, demonstrated with the following illustrative examples.⁶

Variation in the disposition of the governments of the target states to drone warfare, and their capacity to act on it, will allow us to investigate the effects of drone warfare on interstate conflict and cooperation, and vice versa (i.e., how different levels of interstate conflict and cooperation affect the effectiveness of drone warfare). In Afghanistan and Pakistan, where over 90% of armed drone strikes have occurred, US action is pushing an already fragile and volatile relationship with Pakistan to breaking point. Despite claims of secretly supporting the campaign, the Pakistani government has publically condemned the US use of drones as a breach of sovereignty and it has become a major source of friction between domestic contenders for the Pakistani leadership and the United States (NYU-Stanford, 2012; Guerin, 2012). The recent NYU-Stanford study on drone strikes in Pakistan highlighted the way that these attacks are radicalising public opinion and this has the potential to encourage greater political instability (NYU & Stanford, 2012; Masood, 2012). By contrast, Yemen is undergoing a period of transition triggered by the Arab Spring in the country and has long battled with two insurgencies. Here, the government of President Hadi remains

⁶ Other avenues of investigation in the project will include cross-regional networks and the role of transnational organised crime (see Wolff, 2011).

supportive of US drone strikes⁷ against Ansar Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law), an alliance comprising al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), local militants and foreign jihadists (ICG, 2011). Exploiting Southern secessionist grievances and central government weakness has thus enabled one of the currently most active al-Qaeda 'branches' to expand and consolidate its basis in the country (The Voice of America, 2012). In Somalia, recent changes notwithstanding, no effective government has existed for the past two decades, thus creating a radically different context compared to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen for examining the impact of drone warfare on the dynamics of conflict and cooperation.

By examining the different case-specific positions of the US/UK and their allies vis-à-vis insurgent and terrorist networks, the project will explore the effects of drone warfare on both intrastate and interstate cooperation and conflict and how the interrelationship between them affects international security gains (or losses). It will also give us an opportunity to examine the extent to which the use of armed drones for counter-terrorist purposes is governed by a different set of principles and effects compared to its use in a (simultaneous) counter-insurgency campaign. While across all four cases close links exist between insurgent and terrorist networks on the ground, the position of the United States and United Kingdom is different. In Afghanistan ISAF is directly engaged in a counter-insurgency campaign alongside a counter-terrorist campaign, whereas in Yemen, Pakistan, and, to the extent that a government can be said to exist, in Somalia, it is local governments fighting an insurgency while the United States pursues a counter-terrorist campaign.

Research Methods

The project will rely primarily on qualitative research methods. This is appropriate given the small number of only four cases that we propose to study as this will allow us an in-depth investigation of each individual case and systematic cross-case comparison, while the small number of cases does not lend itself to a quantitative approach. Data gathering will rely on three sources. First, the review of existing literature on each of our cases and open-access data concerning drone deployment and use; second, interviews and focus groups with policy-makers, officials (civilian and military), NGOs, and politicians in the United States and United Kingdom, and in those countries where FCO travel advisory guidelines permit travel, and alternatively, the utilisation of local networks of researchers, activists, and personnel of international governmental and non-governmental organisations; and third, focus groups that comprise representatives of the Diaspora in the United Kingdom (the University of Birmingham has excellent local links with Diaspora groups from all four case-study countries who are resident in the West Midlands). We will use semi-structured interviews to gather information on the rationale and objectives behind the use of drones, the assessment of its effectiveness, and the evolution of a drone 'strategy' in different theatres of operation and as part (or not) of both counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency campaigns. The project consultant is an expert on Pakistan, speaks local languages, and is equipped through his knowledge of Pakistani society and culture to conduct interviews (together with members of the project team) with leaders and local journalists from the tribal areas, many of whom are moving to settled areas in Pakistan as a direct result of the drones strikes (Berger & Tiedemann, 2011).

An advantage of qualitative interviewing, understood as an interpretive process, is its capacity to enable self-reflexivity among interview subjects. This increases the likelihood that they may reveal the emotions and motivations which shape individual and collective meanings and the cultural constructs that they give rise to (Silverman, 2004). We will use focus groups to discuss more general propositions and hypotheses that we formulate in the course of our project, bringing together experts to discuss specific topics (e.g., the effectiveness of drone use in support of the Hadi government in Yemen), as well as mixed groups to discuss broader issues more comprehensively (e.g. the extent to which the use of drones is driven by US domestic concerns, technological 'temptation', or campaign effectiveness).

In an effort to mitigate the risks of fieldwork in countries where the FCO advises against travel, we will make use of local networks of researchers, activists, and personnel of international governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as review relevant local media coverage. Existing contacts of the PI and CIs, for example, the Chatham House Yemen Forum, Oxfam, the World Food Programme, the International Crisis Group, and the UN Department of Political Affairs will allow us to gather relevant data 'remotely' without compromising the integrity

⁷ This is also borne out in initial research by Christopher Swift who suggests that the blowback against US drone strikes being seen in Pakistan is not being experienced in Yemen (Swift, 2012).

the past for his work on Yemen with Chatham House and on South Sudan (e.g. Wolff, 2012). As part of this risk-mitigation strategy, we will also use interviews and focus groups with officials from our four case-study countries based in Washington, New York, London, and Brussels to investigate attitudes towards, and effects of, drone warfare in the countries concerned. Additionally, we will be engaging with Diaspora groups in the UK to gain insights into the extent to which their concerns are influencing UK policy development and implementation on drone warfare and the extent to which they influence public debate in their countries of origin.

We will conduct interviews and focus groups at the second stage of research, following an extensive engagement with the existing literature on each of our cases. This will, on the one hand, allow us to be fully briefed prior to interviews on the complexities of each individual case, while on the other hand giving us an opportunity to refine questions such that we will gather truly relevant and ultimately comparable data. In the third phase of the research, based on in-depth case study research in phases one and two, we will systematically compare information across all four cases in order to understand at a more general level what the impact of drone warfare is on levels of interstate and intrastate conflict and cooperation and how these effects translate into net gains (or losses) in terms of national and international security. In this third step, we will again make use of focus groups. These phase-three focus groups will bring together US, UK, as well as NATO and EU policy practitioner experts involved in the shaping of drone policy to ensure that our findings are relevant for ongoing policy debates. In this sense, the second and third stages will facilitate co-production of social science research between a team of academics and policy-makers from user organisations. This, in turn, will also enhance impact opportunities.

Advisory Group

An Advisory Group will be set up which will comprise (in addition to the PI, the two CIs, and Dr Wali Aslam, the project consultant) a mix of academic experts and users/stakeholders. Agreement to join the group has been obtained from: Caroline Kennedy (University of Hull, currently working on an Office of Naval Research (US) funded project researching IEDs and (C)IED including the use of drones and with field-work experience in Afghanistan); Paul Schulte (former MOD, Non-Resident Senior Associate, Carnegie Europe and Carnegie Nuclear Policy, and Visiting Senior Research Fellow Centre for Science and Security Studies, Kings College, London); Professor Keith Hayward (Head of Research at the Royal Aeronautical Society); John Finney (a member of the Executive Committee of British Pugwash and a member of the Council of International Pugwash); Sir Michael Aaronson (co-director of the International Centre for Intervention at the University of Surrey). Sir Kim Darroch (Chair of the Permanent Secretaries Group of the UK National Security Council) will be invited to join as will a representative from dstl. The Advisory Group will be involved at all stages of the development of the research, will be invited to comment on drafts of outputs, and will meet three times during the project in Birmingham. It will provide a key source of advice and contacts, and will participate in a final workshop when the project's findings will be disseminated to users and stakeholders.

Outputs

This research project will produce briefing papers on each of the case studies; two articles (target: International Studies Quarterly; Journal of Conflict Resolution) co-authored by the PI and CIs, exploring respectively the lessons across the four cases and the impact that the use of drones has on the possibilities for transforming violent conflicts. In addition, the PI and CI's will also write a shorter article targeted at practitioner communities exploring the implications of the research for future UK policy on drones (target The RUSI Journal).

Dissemination

Our dissemination strategy for the above outputs is aimed at both academic and non-academic users: (1) it involves relevant stakeholders and users through the participation of the Advisory Group at all stages of the research; (2) it uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups as well as (confidential and public) briefings to share findings with key users/stakeholders; (3) briefing papers and other electronic outputs will be posted on the project webpage which will host a blog providing an opportunity for global discussion and networking on the project, as well as vidcasts of the key findings of the research team; (4) a one-day workshop at the University of Birmingham will be held at the beginning of the project bringing together key academic and non-academic users/stakeholders (including members of the Advisory Group) and will be followed the next day by a separately funded workshop organised jointly by John Finney of British and International Pugwash, Prof. Noel Sharkey (University of Sheffield and a co-founder of the International

Committee for Robot Arms Control (ICRAC) and the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security at the University of Birmingham. This will bring together an internationally renowned cross-disciplinary grouping to discuss how to develop – potentially in collaboration with the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge (COMEST) – an international regulatory regime for drone technology; (5) interim findings will be presented at seminars in UK academic institutions and relevant conferences (BISA 2014, ISA 2014); (6) a separately funded concluding workshop at the University of Birmingham bringing together academic and non-academic users and stakeholders to discuss the principal findings of the project and the implications of these for the UK's security and defence requirements.

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