The security impact of drones: challenges and opportunities for the UK

Posted on Thursday 19th September 2013

When President George W. Bush handed over the reins of US foreign policy to Barack Obama, he reportedly made two requests. First, that the incoming US president maintains the covert cyber attacks against Iran, and secondly, that he continues the counter-terrorist drone campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not only did Obama follow through on this request, but during his time in office US drone strikes have more than doubled. Such actions have generated heated debates in the United States and beyond over whether drone attacks against alleged terrorists in these countries have contributed to US and wider international security. Despite such misgivings, the use of drones, or as Air Forces prefer to call them, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) is on the increase. The United Kingdom is using armed drones as part of its campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, a policy which has attracted publicity centred on the civilian casualties that such actions cause.

What is less frequently remarked upon is the role armed UAVs have played in protecting UK and allied military personnel on the ground by bringing to bear precision weapons that can decisively alter the odds of battle. What these contrasting roles of targeted killing and force protection underline is the ethical ambiguity associated with armed drone warfare. How should we balance the conflicting moral choices involved in conducting these counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations? While reflecting on this question, it is worth pondering how far the availability of armed drones would have changed decision-making in Washington and London in earlier international crises. For example, would they have made a difference when it came to saving Rwandans during the genocide in 1994? The fundamental barrier to armed intervention to halt the genocide in April 1994 was the risk to the lives of US and UK military personnel, but the use of armed drones to attack the Hutu militias perpetrating the killing would have removed this risk.

Asking such questions gives rise, however, to a further ethically troubling question which is: if armed drones make warfare riskless for those conducting it, does this lower the inhibitions to using force? The questions multiply at this point. UAVs might change the military possibilities on the ground when the intervening states have aerial superiority (as over Afghanistan and Pakistan today), but what happens when the other side starts firing back with its own drones? It is an open question whether the major Western states leading in UAV technology will find their security decreasing as potential adversaries use it against them. And then there is the risk that terrorist groups will use drones against civilian targets, potentially including the use of deadly toxins.

These are some of the questions that the Birmingham Policy Commission on the Security Impact of Drones: Challenge and Opportunities for the UK will address. The Commission, the sixth in a series of public policy engagements by the University of Birmingham, will be formally launched at fringe meetings of the Labour and Conservative Party conferences. Chaired by Sir David Omand, the Commission brings together distinguished public servants from the military, defence industry, and NGO community as well as leading academics from the **Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security** at the University of Birmingham. It will focus on the challenges and opportunities that drone technology – both commercial and military – poses for current and successive UK governments. Beyond the controversies surrounding the use of armed drones in the Global War on Terror, the Commission will consider the wider impact of the new technology on security and the implications this has for UK public policy in a national, regional, and international context. What, for example, should UK policy be in relation to the development of autonomous drones? Currently, UAVs are programmed to take off and land in an autonomous way, but the application of force remains a fully human decision. The next generation of UAVs could be pre-programmed to attack targets on the ground against a set of pre-determined criteria. Concerned at the ethical implications of removing humans from the firing chain, non-governmental organisations like Human Rights Watch are campaigning for a ban on the development of these systems. But is such a ban in the UK's security interest? One critical issue would be how far such a ban could be verified globally?

In exploring these issues, the Commission recognises that one of its important roles is to cut through the over-simplifications and misconceptions that shape much of the current debate.

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