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The Political Effects of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles on Conflict and Cooperation Within and Between States

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This report summarises a day-long conference held as part of ‘The Political Effects of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles on Conflict and Cooperation Within and Between States’, a research project undertaken by the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security (ICCS) at the University of Birmingham. This project has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under Research Councils UK’s ‘Science and Security Call’. The project was aimed at responding to the subsection of this call that invited research on ‘Improving our ability to use S&T developments to increase co-operation and collaboration as a means of preventing future conflict’.

The conference brought together experts from academia, policy, and industry to discuss the interim findings of the project with the ICCS research team. Its aim was to engage with these stakeholders in order to develop and refine the conclusions of the research and highlight key areas for further examination. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, whilst this summary is a full record of the proceedings, neither the names nor the affiliations of any of the speakers or participants have been recorded in regard to any points made or information disclosed.

Executive Summary

The narratives that surround the use of drones continue to be the source of much contestation at the local, regional, and international level. It is critical to understand the political contexts that drones are deployed within to properly understand their impact on contemporary conflicts and conflict resolution.

Whilst drones have provided a useful method of protecting Western interests in the conflicts examined, principally by reducing the risk of terrorist attacks on Western soil being launched from these countries, the employment of this technology has often come at the expense of a wider strategic approach to resolve these conflicts.

There is considerable need for further empirical study of the long-term effect of drones on traditional local methods of conflict resolution. Such research must draw from a range of sources and not be principally premised on only Western research data.

* For purposes of accessibility, this report will use the term ‘drones’.
Introduction

With regard to the Pakistan case study, it was questioned how far US drone policy was the principal stumbling block to a negotiated peace agreement with the Islamist militant group, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in north-western Pakistan. It was contended that drone strikes contributed to the erosion of traditional methods of conflict resolution in north-western Pakistan through the unintentional killing of tribal elders and pro-peace elements of the TTP. It was also argued that the killing of senior TTP figures has accelerated factionalization of the group, severely hampering its ability to negotiate, as a single unified actor, a peace agreement with the Pakistani government.

Moving on to the next case study, it was argued that drone strikes in Afghanistan have attracted less public attention than those in Pakistan and Yemen because they have been used to support conventional military operations. It was stressed that drone strikes account for only a small proportion of the overall number of conflict related deaths in Afghanistan, and as such, it is important not to overstate their impact on the broader course of the conflict. Whilst drone strikes have been reasonably effective in killing senior Taliban figures, the dominant honour culture of Afghani society has meant that these losses have been quickly replaced. Therefore, it was argued that a drone-facilitated leadership decapitation strategy was of limited value in degrading enemy organisational and command structures. However, this policy has allowed the Afghani government to project force outside of the administrative centre where the majority of its forces are based. Whilst drone strikes have so far been unable to change the course of the conflict, they have provided a means of maintaining the status quo.

Yemen has provided a unique case study because of the complex security situation in the country following the destabilising effects of the Arab Spring, two separatist insurgencies, and the presence of external players, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State militants. For the most part, US drone strikes have focused on, and have had a temporary effect in, a counterterrorism role against AQAP, severely constraining the operational capabilities of the group. These strikes have curtailed AQAP’s ability to plan and carry out attacks on international targets, but have incentivised the group to refocus attacks on local targets, exacerbating domestic and regional insecurity. As such, drone strikes appear to be an effective method in advancing US interests in Yemen, but have proven largely insufficient in providing a strategy for the wider objective of stabilising the country.

Some comparative findings from the three case studies were presented. Afghanistan and Yemen, in particular, indicate that the availability and deployment of drones, for both reconnaissance and strike purposes, has led to something of a ‘strategic withdrawal’ by the US government and military. It was argued that this consists of both a self-restricting footprint of military forces on the ground and limited ambitions to project force and influence in the conflicts it is engaged in. This perception of drone strikes as a relatively effective, low cost, and domestically acceptable means of advancing US interests in Afghanistan and Yemen has led to a decreased need to think about a broader strategy for ending these conflicts. As a conclusion, it was maintained that the conflicts in all of the examined case studies may fall beyond traditional conflict resolution, regardless of whether or not drones are deployed, in part as a result of their complexity within their respective global and regional settings. As such, the use of drones is expected to continue in all three cases with the likely consequence of the perpetuation of these conflicts. However, the ‘low cost’ conflict management capability that drones provide may present the necessary breathing space for decision-makers to reinvest in greater strategic thinking to realise the long-term aims of negotiated solutions to these conflicts.
Discussion

Discussion opened with a participant challenging the idea that drone strikes are a cost-effective alternative to conventional air sorties given the associated expenses of maintaining and upgrading these technologically complex systems. The response to this was that ‘low cost’ in this context also refers to the relatively small political costs of using these systems as a means of projecting force, as well as their comparative financial benefit with regard to other forms of intervention. There is relatively little domestic political opposition within the United States to the use of drone strikes overseas, as opposed to more visible military alternatives, such as the deployment of ground troops, which carry considerable political baggage in light of recent costly engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Debate then moved on to the extent to which the negative public association of drones is a result of the weapons platform itself rather than the collateral damage that can result from their use in strike operations. It was argued that the effect on the ground is the same regardless of whether a strike is undertaken by a manned or unmanned aircraft, but the information campaign undertaken by opponents of drones has focused on emotive arguments relating to the ease at which drone technology permits lethal strikes in distant, disconnected theatres. A commentator suggested that a comparison with long-running conventional air campaigns, such as the enforcement of ‘no-fly zones’ in the run up to the 2003 Iraq War, may help identify the unique characteristics of drone strikes for air support purposes. It was also proposed that there are in fact downsides to the use of drones for strike operations, as opposed to other aircraft. It was argued that it is wrong to believe that unmanned and manned air platforms have the same strike capability, as drones have a significantly smaller strike capability, only being able to carry lighter, albeit more precise, ordnance.

It was also noted that it is important to differentiate between the use of drones for close air support and for more contentious ‘targeted killing’ operations to understand the narratives and public reactions that surround their use. This is demonstrated by the discernibly different media association of drones in Yemen and Pakistan, where strikes are employed for targeted killing, as opposed to Afghanistan, where strikes are perceived as a facet of conventional military operations, even though in many cases they are also used for targeted killing. The findings of the Birmingham Policy Commission were referenced, which emphasised the distinctiveness of the British approach from the US usage of these systems, most notably the UK’s reluctance to expand armed drone operations beyond traditional battlefields governed by the laws of war.

It was further stated that the majority of drones are not weaponised and most drone operations are not strike operations, but for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). The unique capabilities of this tool, such as loitering and extensive data-gathering, demonstrate that drones have a much wider application than just as a strike platform. It was added that there also appears to be considerable humanitarian applications for drone technology, far removed from the dominant narrative that such systems are only valuable for force protection in conflict situations. Drones have been used by aid groups to assess damage and prioritise relief efforts in otherwise inaccessible areas following the Nepal earthquake, and to track refugees in the hope of better understanding transnational migrant flows. United Nations peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo have also employed the technology to protect civilians by monitoring rebel movements and detecting armed incursions. It was claimed that drones could have helped prevent or put an end to mass killings or genocide, such as those seen in Rwanda and Srebrenica.
The first empirical panel examined the use of armed drones by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan to target Taliban members and leadership.

Whilst drones in this theatre have been employed principally in an ISR role, it was argued that the literature on drone use in Afghanistan has focused almost exclusively on the civilian deaths and collateral damage caused by drone strikes. This led to the ‘blowback’ narrative - whereby the use of drone strikes acts as a means of recruitment for terrorist organisations and increases the number of terrorist attacks – being challenged. Large-scale surveys of the Afghani public suggest that if there is blowback, it arises from military uses of force other than drones.

It was further argued that, from a conflict resolution perspective, it was important to understand a deep sense of grievance as a particularly significant motivating force in the Afghani case, given the country’s honour culture and perception of Western oppression. It was argued that the use of drone strikes in this context has not deterred the Taliban from continuing to fight against ISAF forces and the Afghani government. This led to the proposition that any form of conflict resolution needs to focus on the Afghan rather than the blowback narrative. The use of drone strikes on their own does little to affect any aspect of the conflict, and the drone narrative is subsumed by Afghans into other narratives, principally honour, grievance, and oppression.

The second part of the panel explored in further depth the perception of drones by the Taliban. Whilst drone strikes are not extensively referred to in Taliban propaganda, they have understandably featured in the group’s internal communications and impacted on its operating procedures. Measures implemented by the Taliban to try and mitigate the effectiveness of drone strikes now include keeping electronic or telephone communications to a minimum, subcontracting visible tasks, such as the laying of Improvised Explosive Devises (IEDs), to paid civilians, and relocating senior leaders to remote areas. It was noted that the Taliban ‘spy narrative’, that drone strikes only occur with the help of informants on the ground, has also led to attempts by the group to control the population. This has resulted in recriminations, including executions, of those accused of being spies. The Taliban has also employed local civilians as human shields in efforts to deter drone strikes targeting its commanders.

It was argued that drones have had some impact on how the government and insurgents use space in Afghanistan, impacting on the dynamics of the conflict. Governance in Afghanistan is typified by dualist systems whereby the state’s power is restricted to areas immediately surrounding administrative centres, with a limited ability to determine what goes on beyond this point. As a consequence, it was argued that insurgent power prevails beyond these areas in addition to some periodic and symbolic militant incursions into administrative centres. As such, the Taliban has tried to achieve autonomy from the population by dominating them in this relatively uncontested space. Drones, however, allow state actors to project force outside of these administrative sectors, often at a much smaller cost to the local population than the use of other conventional military forces. Being able to disrupt Taliban dominance through drone strikes may enable citizens to continue to support the government and engage in traditional practices of conflict resolution without the risk of violent recrimination. Drones, therefore, facilitate a continuation of the status quo in terms of the governance of Afghanistan. However, whether this will eventually result in a peaceful settlement is debatable.

The final part of the panel discussed the wider conclusions that could be drawn from the Afghan case. It was argued that Afghanistan is an illustration of the ‘Obama doctrine’, which has been characterised by a significant reliance on the capabilities that drones provide. This strategy, it was contended, reflects a realistic recognition of US capabilities and its reduced objectives, and the avoidance of causing further harm by seeking to contain rather than resolve conflicts. To this end, this doctrine has been enacted through two principal means. The first is the use of drones in a counterterrorism role in Afghanistan to prevent terrorism from breaking out from the region and threatening the US homeland. Second, drones have been symbolically presented as a precise, clinical, and surgical weapon that the American public should embrace as a more acceptable alternative to putting boots on the ground in Afghanistan. This smaller footprint contributes to a reduced vulnerability for US forces. Without US forces on the ground, there is less need for terrorists to deploy IEDs that not only kill soldiers, but also cause Afghan casualties. With less potential for antagonism, it was argued that there is increased potential for conflict resolution and more open debate on the issues fuelling violence. It was further argued that drones do play a particular strategic purpose in this context, albeit with the caveat that this function may only be possible in Afghanistan because of the permissive political environment and uncontested airspace.
Discussion
It was suggested that the presentations had not completely answered the question as to the degree to which drones impact on the potential for ending intrastate conflict which had been identified as a key research question in the opening panel. Referring to an earlier point that drone strikes have accounted for a very small proportion of the total number of strikes and casualties in Afghanistan, it was argued that it would be surprising if the use of these weapons platforms had had a large impact on the course of the conflict. This also raised a question as to whether drone strikes could prolong the conflict in Afghanistan. In response, it was suggested that the question could be reduced to whether the use of drones is helping to avert a civil war and reduce the prospects of an open-ended insurgency in Afghanistan. Whilst there are risks of conflation with the impact of other systems in this context, it appears that drones make it difficult for insurgents to control local populations and territory. It was reiterated in this context that these weapons systems increase the ability of the government to project itself beyond administrative centres where conventional forces are concentrated. The combined effect is to provide Afghani citizens with a degree of autonomy from violent insurgents, allowing for the continuation of many political processes that otherwise would cease. As such, these factors go some way to averting civil war and preventing a protracted insurgency in the country. It was argued that, although a difficult process, there is a need to identify the unique functions of drones in the Afghan context to fully address the overarching research question driving this project. In the absence of doing this, drone strikes remain a subset of other types of strike operation, including those launched by manned aircraft, which would therefore pose a larger question regarding the contribution of these operations to the conflict’s resolution.

A question was raised as to whether there is a dominant anti-drone narrative for Afghanistan. Western audiences are generally unaware of the use of armed drones on a conventional battlefield, and the public narrative here is unexplored and uncontested. In Afghanistan, it is particularly difficult for one side to dominate or control the narrative because of the multiple, concurrent, and often conflicting rumours within the general public that surround both ISAF forces and the Taliban. As such, the Taliban has devoted relatively little attention to contesting the public consciousness here. Such is the pervasiveness of these rumours that in many cases the killing of senior Taliban figures by drone strike helps discredit widely held notions that suggest the US government is colluding with and supplying Taliban forces.
Yemen

The panel considered the history of the US drone campaign in Yemen, together with the complexity of the current regional and local conflict, which create an ongoing challenge to sustainable stability.

The US drone campaign in Yemen dates back to the first agreement between US President George W. Bush and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, permitting US strikes in 2002 in an effort to manage an increasingly complicated conflict.

However, it is under the Obama administration that the drone programme has become much more visible, with a sharp increase in strikes since 2011. In 2012, it is believed that ‘signature strikes’, where targeting is based on ‘pattern of life’ data rather than specific intelligence regarding an individual combatant, were first used. Examples were given where this policy has caused significant collateral damage, including the deaths of civilians and anti-AQAP activists. Approximately twenty per cent of the casualties of drone strikes in Yemen are estimated to be civilians, a figure much higher than those in the Afghan and Pakistani case studies examined. By 2014, eleven provinces and approximately fifty per cent of the Yemeni population have been under the direct or indirect threat of drone strikes. Drone strikes have, as a result, become an important political issue domestically. The Yemeni National Dialogue, a political negotiation that brought together all of the various factions involved in Yemen’s Arab Spring, was interrupted by a protest where the bodies of individuals killed in drone strikes were placed outside the conference venue with an accompanying demand for an apology from the Yemeni government. It was argued that the protest implies that the transition to democracy cannot occur in Yemen without the issue of drone strikes being addressed.

The second part of the panel examined the complex local and regional context of the conflict in Yemen. The country is the base of AQAP and its local subsidiary Ansar al-Shari’a, in addition to a nascent presence of Islamic State. In parallel, there have been two insurgencies that preceded the drone campaign, a southern separatist campaign and successive Houthi rebellions in the north. All of this occurred in a context where state institutions are extremely fragile and weak, which has exacerbated, but also been exacerbated by, an economic and humanitarian crisis.

US drone strikes have primarily targeted AQAP in the south of the country where the group has formed opportunistic alliances with southern separatists and tribesmen. These strikes have resulted in the deaths of more than fifty of AQAP’s leaders and commanders. Ansar al-Shari’a has only been targeted by US strikes for a brief period in 2012. It was argued that it therefore appears that the US government has given precedence to protecting the US homeland from terrorist attacks over resolving the conflict, given the US classification of AQAP as the al Qaeda affiliate most capable of carrying out attacks in the West. The perspective from Washington is that the drone campaign has been effective in containing the threat posed by AQAP. In addition, the US counterterrorism campaign against AQAP has enabled the Yemeni government to defeat and retake territory from the group temporarily. This campaign, however, has failed to make any contribution to the sustainable stabilisation of the security situation in Yemen, which in many regards is worse now than in 2011–13. It was argued that it therefore appears that in the Yemeni context, drones have proven effective at a tactical level, but are unable to compensate for the lack of a comprehensive US strategy to stabilise and secure the country.
Discourse

It was questioned whether many of the issues highlighted in the presentations, in particular the collateral damage caused by drone strikes, are in fact the consequence of all forms of air campaign rather than being an issue related to the use of drones specifically. A more pertinent question is whether the use of drones leads to a tendency to engage in military adventurism because of the perceived low risk now associated with doing so. In response, it was suggested that while the weapons platform is relatively unimportant for those targeted or inadvertently affected on the ground, the pervasive capabilities of drones provide an option for such strikes to be launched almost immediately at any time. The campaign in Yemen is also defined by the use of drones, not just for the visible role in carrying out strikes against militants, but also for other important ISR roles. It was suggested that the debate does not just revolve around drones, or even the use of airpower, but instead is part of a wider discussion about the availability of new military tools and technologies that allow the US government to keep threats to the homeland at bay without the need to address the underlying causes of these conflicts. However, drones may be used to achieve a window of opportunity where this strategic thinking can take place.

Discussion turned to the question of how far drone strikes have had a ‘blowback’ effect in Yemen in terms of AQAP recruitment and motivation for attacks. The research team responded that their preliminary findings provide little evidence to support the claim that strikes have had a significant effect. In reaching this conclusion, the project team pointed out that they had systematically examined AQAP’s English language propaganda and publications, as well as BBC monitoring and SITE intelligence, to record how often an attack has been justified with reference to drone strikes. Even lagged by three months, the data suggests that less than 3.5 per cent of AQAP attacks were justified as a response to US drone strikes. However, the methodology underlying this conclusion was challenged on the grounds that the finding did not take into account non-Western sources, and in discussion, it was suggested that the project would benefit from studying Arabic sources (AQAP issues press releases in Arabic for each of their attacks) which are not principally aimed at Western audiences, in contrast to the English language publications by these groups. Two examples cited here were AQAP’s targeting of a military parade in Sana’a, which was directly justified as a response to US drone strikes, as was another AQAP attack, also in Sana’a, where militants thought they were targeting a joint Yemeni and US command and control centre for drone operations. As such, it was suggested that coverage of both Western and Arabic sources might lead to a higher attribution figure than the currently verified 3.5 per cent. There was agreement that the research would be strengthened if Arabic sources could be incorporated into the future development of the project. It was also suggested that the three-month time period upon which the figures for blowback had been generated was too short, given the fact that other studies indicate that reprisal attacks can occur over longer time-frames. Recruitment patterns will also take much longer to emerge, as evidenced by those seen in Afghanistan and, most notably, the rise of Islamic State as a long-term consequence of the 2003 Iraq War. In response, it was suggested that isolating for the causal impact of drones is difficult because AQAP and militant recruitment may be motivated primarily by deep-seated anti-Americanism, of which drones strikes only constitute one facet.

The question was raised as to how the research project has determined the classification of combatants for the purpose of statistical analysis. AQAP has at various points engaged in alliances of convenience with southern tribal fighters and counter-government forces, making it hard to distinguish genuine AQAP members. It was suggested that in branding all of those killed in drone strikes that are not civilians as members of AQAP, the research risked inflating the perception of the threat from AQAP. The vast majority of militants fighting in Yemen do not fully support AQAP’s ideology and have no interest in attacking the ‘far enemy’ of the US or the West. In response, it was pointed out that there is no clear uncontested definition of ‘enemy combatant’ shared by the various organisations that monitor drone strikes in Yemen, meaning that consistent research data is difficult to acquire. To address this challenge, the research has focused on investigating the motivations behind the targets that are selected which may prove a more reliable method of assessing the impact of US drone strikes in Yemen. It was also argued that whilst innocent civilians have been killed in these strikes, a high proportion have resulted in the deaths of their intended targets.
The dominant public and media narrative in Pakistan holds that US drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of north-western Pakistan have been the principal barrier to the peaceful resolution of the TTP-led insurgency in the region.

According to this narrative, the targeted killing of senior TTP figures has diminished the group’s will and capacity to engage in negotiations with the Pakistani state and military. The panel’s opening presentation dismissed this notion as simplistic and a misleading reading of the complex political context within which US drone strikes have been located. It was argued that there has been clandestine collusion between the Pakistani and US governments over the strikes and this has presented various parties with a vested interest in continuing the conflict, including the TTP, with the opportunity to use drone strikes to distract attention from alternative explanations for the failure of peace efforts. It was argued that the TTP has used the anti-drone narrative to disguise its opposition to the peace process, given its fundamental ideological rejection of the Pakistani state. Key evidence cited here is the fact that there was no let-up in terrorist attacks or significant progress on peace negotiations during the five-month suspension of US drone strikes between December 2013 and June 2014. Furthermore, the cessation of the drone campaign has never been a central demand of the TTP during negotiations with the Pakistani government and military. It was also argued that US drone strikes should not be blamed for the factionalization of the TTP which has undermined efforts at conflict resolution by preventing the group from negotiating as a coherent actor. US decapitation strikes have exacerbated struggles over the leadership of the group, but the infighting within the TTP is principally the result of internal ethnic and tribal divisions which date back decades.

In addition, surveys and interviews with tribesmen in the FATA revealed that their resentment primarily rests against the Pakistani state’s apathy towards resolving the conflict, rather than US drone strikes. However, drone strikes have helped erode traditional regional methods of conflict resolution, as practiced through assemblies or committees of tribal elders known as Jirga. This is particularly unwelcome given the region’s historic rejection of outside influence and foreign intervention. In addition, drone strikes have directly – and indirectly through TTP reprisals against members of the local population accused of providing intelligence for strikes – killed tribal elders, further undermining the capacity of local communities to facilitate conflict resolution.

Discussion
The question was raised as to whether, with or without the presence of the drone campaign, a peace agreement can be achieved between the Pakistani military and militants. In response, it was suggested that the outcome of such a situation without drone strikes is difficult to predict. Interviews by the project team with senior officials make it clear that the military rejects the notion that the TTP genuinely wants peace and this has influenced their approach to negotiations. In addition, the military has been particularly poor at recognising the importance of local culture in every facet of life in the FATA, including conflict resolution. The example was given of a visit by Pakistani army generals to the home of prominent militant, Nek Mohammad Wazir, during the negotiation of the Shakai Peace Agreement in April 2004. Whilst the gesture was intended to indicate trustworthiness on the part of the military negotiators, visiting an opponent’s home is regarded in the local culture as an admission of fault.

Discussion turned to the proportion of drone strikes that have targeted al-Qaeda in comparison to the proportion that have targeted the TTP and other Taliban groups. Specific statistics are hard to obtain here, but research indicates that drone strikes have targeted al-Qaeda more frequently than the TTP. The US government has principally targeted militants who have been using the FATA as a base to launch cross-border attacks against US forces in Afghanistan. Whilst the local population initially welcomed these individuals given their success in ousting Soviet forces from Afghanistan in the 1980s, their presence has become unwelcome principally because of their strict enforcement of Wahhabi religious doctrine, which has infringed on local cultural practices. Anger is not only directed at these militants for their attempts to impose this system on the local population, but also towards the Pakistani government which has done little to stop this process.

The question of how far the Pakistan military under the Musharraf government had colluded with the US Central Intelligence Agency was raised. It was responded that Musharraf had insisted that all US drone operations were undertaken with Pakistani governmental approval and the US government was never allowed to undertake an unrestricted armed drone campaign, as evidenced by considerably lower number of strikes that took place between 2004 and 2008 in comparison to the period that followed. Evidence that there had been a secret agreement between the US and Pakistani governments is provided by the fact that the Pakistani government quickly claimed that it was its warplanes that undertook the strike that killed the prominent militant figure, Nek Muhammad Wazir.
It was argued that stripping away the emotion attached to drone technology is crucial for further research. In particular, there is need for a greater disaggregation between the platform and purpose, or in other terms, drone technology and the uses to which this technology is put. It was argued that it is difficult to separate the use of this technology from the ‘strategic withdrawal’ in which US government and military appears to be currently engaged. It is certainly the case that the availability of drones has facilitated a reduced US appetite for other forms of intervention. However, whilst drone strikes have played their part, this appears to be a wider global political trend with the US government now principally calibrating its foreign policy in terms of its own homeland security. The real danger is that by doing so, it is undermining and degrading local capacity, thereby exacerbating indigenous domestic instability and perpetuating local conflicts.

Whilst aircraft can be used for the same purpose, drone technology has given considerably greater salience to the issue of employing ‘targeted killing’ as a weapon of war. There is considerable need to address how this practice affects conflict resolution, especially given that drones now facilitate targeted killings as a readily available, low cost alternative when negotiated solutions prove difficult or problematic. One of the main casualties of this increased use of drone strikes appears to be traditional local systems of conflict resolution. External actors, who have little or no appreciation of their contextual importance, often bypass these mechanisms. Whilst such practice may provide short-term security solutions, marginalising local actors will likely make it harder to achieve peace in the long term.

The US government’s use of drones within the territory of other states without their consent also provides a significant challenge to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. The US legal justification that it can use drones to intervene on grounds of self-defence when a state is ‘unable or unwilling’ to deal with what it deems a threat is particularly contentious. The issue will prove especially controversial if other states, particularly those not from the West, try to invoke such justification in the future for their own use of armed drone strikes.

Drone technology enables the pace of war to be slowed down. The unique loitering and ISR capabilities of drones allow decisions to be calibrated and modified over time, which equates to a different quality of decision-making. In addition, US drones have, so far, only been deployed in situations where the US military enjoys near total air superiority. The current breed of armed drones, that rely on their ability to fly at high altitudes to avoid being shot down, are likely to be ineffective when employed in contested airspace. In addition, as the research in this project shows, those targeted by drone strikes have demonstrated an impressive ability to mitigate their effectiveness. The air campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria should have provided the perfect arena for drones, given the risk to captured aircrews. However, drone strikes, together with other forms of air strikes, have, in this context yet to prove significant in turning the tide of the conflict, with Islamic State militants developing and employing effective practices to mitigate the threat from the air. The panel also raised the wider issue of the long term consequence of drone technology for military conflicts. It was noted that the proliferation of drone technology also gives rise to cheaper access to the air that will challenge existing air defences in a variety of contexts. As new states and new actors acquire this capability, there may well be a new age of vulnerability, not only for Western military forces, but also for national security more generally.