Drones: What Are They Good For?

Jacqueline L. Hazelton

The drone debate continues hot and heavy. Critical issues range from the morality of targeting choices and concerns about unintended casualties and anti-Americanism to matters of legal and bureaucratic oversight.[1] These are pressing questions; the United States' use of drones as a weapon of war is on the rise, and other countries are interested in acquiring them.[2]

Less often raised are first-order questions, or examinations of first principles. These questions consider the fundamental nature of a concept or a tool.[3] This article poses basic questions about the use of drone strikes as tools of the state. My goal is to spark further analysis of drone strikes as an instrument in the US foreign policy tool kit. I ask how drones compare to other weapons and what they may be able to achieve tactically and strategically, militarily and politically. These are also questions worth considering in the context of how other states' acquisition of armed drones could affect the United States. In addition, I identify major unanswered empirical questions about the outcome of drone strikes. There is still a lack of empirical evidence about the effects of drone strikes, partly due to the secrecy of US drone programs and partly due to their relative novelty. But even without that research, it is possible to consider the utility of drones in attempts to increase US security.

Some of these questions may seem to have obvious answers, but for those who suggest there is broad agreement in the public debate on first-order questions and first principles regarding drone strikes, I offer the contrasting positions of *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick and retired Air Force General Charles Dunlap. Remnick states, "We are in the same position now, with drones, that we were with nuclear weapons in 1945. For the moment, we are the only ones with this technology that is going to change the morality, psychology, and strategic thinking of warfare for years to come." Dunlap says, "It's not particularly new to use long-range strike. David defeated Goliath with a long-range strike

1 Sara Kreps and John Kaag, "The Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Contemporary Conflict: A Legal and Ethical Analysis," *Polity* 44, no. 2 (April 2012): 260-285; Benjamin H. Friedman, "Nobody Knows if Drone Strikes in Pakistan Work," *The National Interest,* August 17, 2012, http://nationalinterest.org; Sarah Waheed, "Drones, U.S. Propaganda and Imperial Hubris," *Middle East Research and Information Project,* January 25, 2013, http://www.merip.org; Room for Debate, "Do Drone Attacks Do More Harm Than Good?," *The New York Times* online, September 25, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com; C. Christine Fair et al., "You Say the Pakistanis All Hate the Drone War? Prove It," *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com; Jack Goldsmith, "Drone Stories, the Secrecy System, and Public Accountability," *Lawfare*, May 31, 2012, http://www.lawfareblog.com; Christopher Swift, "The Drone Blowback Fallacy," *Foreign Affairs* online, July 1, 2012, http://christopher-swift.com.

2 Greg Miller, "Under Obama, an Emerging Global Apparatus for Drone Killing," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2011; Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Pursues Sale of Armed Drones," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2011.

3 Oxford Dictionaries defines first principles as "the fundamental concepts or assumptions on which a theory, system, or method is based." (Oxford University Press, April 2010).

Jacqueline L. Hazelton specializes in international security, focusing on compellence, asymmetric conflict, military intervention, US foreign and military policy, counterinsurgency, terrorism, and the uses of military power. She is a visiting professor in the University of Rochester Department of Political Science and was previously a research fellow at the Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School.

with a missile weapon. At Agincourt, the English bowmen destroyed the flower of the French knighthood with long-range strikes . . . and we have had long-range strike bombers for some time. This really is not new conceptually."[4]

This article considers the goal of US drone programs to be greater security for the United States and its friends and allies. Caveat: There are analysts thinking about a future of stand-off, plugged-in warfare. I make a more modest effort to consider what drone strikes may achieve in fundamental political terms as a forceful tool of the state. I also bracket issues of morality, legality, budgeting, and bureaucratic oversight. Answering practical questions requires understanding what states *can* do and *want* to do with drones, politically and militarily. Investigation into the morality of drone strikes is contingent on what states expect drone strikes to achieve and how those drones are deployed. Striking only targets in the act of mounting an attack on the US homeland, for example, presents different moral questions than so-called "signature strikes" against unidentified individuals judged to be behaving suspiciously.[5]

The first core question is whether drones are a unique weapon and whether they provide distinct advantages or disadvantages over other weapons. I categorize drones as a form of air power based on the following logic and evidence, which I detail expecting disagreement will advance the analysis. Like piloted armed aircraft, armed drones provide information as well as strike capacity. They can achieve a variety of military effects, as other air platforms can. They can kill, disable, support fighters on the ground, destroy, harry, hinder, deny access, observe, and track. Like pilots providing close air support, firing missiles, or dropping bombs, drone operators are expected to respect the laws of war, striking based on clear information, including assessment of potential human costs.

Drones provide several advantages over manned armed flights and sea-based launches. They are claimed to do less collateral damage than either missiles or manned aerial bombing; they can hover overhead for relatively long periods of time to gather information for a strike (up to 14 hours); they can strike quickly, and the missile can be diverted from its original target in an intentional miss.[6] They are also less expensive than manned platforms. Unlike other delivery systems, however, they require a permissive environment, which is likely to limit their utility in some theaters.

Drones, like other air and sea platforms, are a form of power projection. They give the United States the ability to mount tactical assaults without necessarily putting US personnel directly in harm's way, potentially evoking domestic opposition. They also allow the United States to avoid putting its forces in foreign territory, potentially eliciting a nationalistic response. Drones are similar to Special Forces in their direct

4 David Carr, "Debating Drones, In the Open," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2014; "Does U.S. Drone Use Set a New Precedent for War?" *PBS NewsHour*, October 10, 2011.

5 Scott Shane, "Elections Spur a Move to Codify U.S. Drone Policy," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2012.

6 Micah Zenko, "Reforming U.S. Drone Strike Policies," *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 65*, January 2013; Retired Lt. Gen. David Deptula, "Drones Best Weapons We've Got for Accuracy, Control, Oversight; Critics Don't Get It," *defense.AOL.com*, February 14, 2013, http://defense.aol.com/2013/02/15/retired-gen-deputula-drones-best-weapons-weve-got-for-accurac.

targeting ability, but they can reach remote locations and, again, do not place US troops directly in peril. Nevertheless, drone strikes do require cooperation by individuals and states on the ground. The United States needs, for example, basing rights, agreements to host launch and recovery personnel and search-and-rescue teams, and overflight permissions.[7]

A significant concern raised in the public debate is that drones make killing too easy. This is a critical issue that connects to questions about US grand strategy and whether drones encourage imperial overreach.[8] But because the United States uses a variety of tools to conduct targeted killings—from the Special Forces raid on Osama bin Laden's Pakistani compound to the missile strike on Dora Farms, where Saddam Hussein and his sons were believed to be sheltering early in the Iraq War—I suggest there is more to gain analytically by first focusing on understanding the tactic, that is, what targeted killing may and may not achieve as a foreign policy tool, then addressing concerns specific to the platform.[9]

The second core question pertains to the strategic utility of drone strikes for a state. What political goals can drone strikes achieve? In considering this question, I use a theoretical prism that identifies the fundamental political goals of the state's use of force to defend, deter, compel, and, sometimes, swagger.[10]

It is possible to consider targeted killings, specifically those conducted by drones, as an element in a defensive strategy. This strategy would be intended to ward off attack and reduce possible damage by killing leaders and facilitators plotting violence against the United States, and disrupting their operations. It is also possible to argue targeted killings deter future attacks by denying armed groups the capability to conduct those attacks, and punishing those planning violence against the United States and its interests. The deterrence-by-denial argument requires consideration not only of targeted killings but also drone strikes to directly degrade targeted groups' capabilities in other ways (e.g., cause equipment and supply shortages, operational and strategic paralysis, and disruption of operations). Drone strikes in this analysis might also deter cooperation with a group based on fear or doubt about the group's likely success.[11]

It is harder to argue that targeted killings might exercise a compelling effect by threatening greater pain if the targeted organization does

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7 Ibid., 7.

8 Derek Gregory has argued, for example, that the United States is using drone strikes much as the British used air power in consolidating their control over the empire in the late 19th century and the 20th century to World War II, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:7-8 (2011), 188-215.

9 More broadly, Micah Zenko, *Between Threats and War: U.S. Discrete Military Operations in the Post-Cold War World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), considers drone strikes as a type of discrete military operation, "a single or serial physical use of kinetic military force to achieve a defined military and political goal by inflicting casualties or causing destruction, without seeking to conquer an opposing army or capture or control territory," 2.

10 Robert J. Art, "To What Ends Military Power?" *International Security* 4 (Spring 1980): 4-35.

11 Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 55-86. John Brennan told the Senate Intelligence Committee in hearings on his nomination to head the CIA that the United States uses drone strikes to deter terrorist attacks, not to punish those who commit them. Kimberley Dozier, "CIA Chief Nominee: Drones Only a Deterrent," *The Associated Press, MSN.com*, February 7, 2013, http://news.msn.com/politics/cia-chief-nominee-drones-only-a-deterrent.

not change its behavior.[12] Successful compellence requires displaying to the adversary the will and capability to cause terrible pain if the adversary does not change its behavior. The ethical and legal context of drone use by the United States make it unlikely at first glance that policymakers would choose to use drone strikes to cause pain to an adversary by deliberately targeting innocents. In terms of causing pain to the adversary directly, the death or threat of death to a plotter is an organization's cost of doing business, not a taste of suffering to come if it does not change its behavior.[13]

There are several other possible strategic effects of drone strikes. Swaggering, here displaying US military power and its seemingly effortless global reach, arguably demonstrates resolve, a quality that has been underlined as an element of US counterterrorism policy.[14] Drone strikes can also be seen as the straightforward use of brute force to destroy those who would threaten the United States or its allies.[15] In addition, they are an alliance tool supporting other states, such as Yemen and Pakistan.

It is an open question whether all drone strikes can be expected to have the same political effects at all times and in all places. If a drone strike was politically ineffective in Yemen in 2002, there is reason to investigate whether it will be politically effective in Yemen, Pakistan, or Somalia today, or in Mali, Syria, or the Philippines tomorrow.[16] This possibility suggests the importance of considering drone strikes in their political context. This context may include, for example, theaters where the United States is at war, theaters in which it is not, theaters in which the United States has national or international permission to strike, theaters in which it does not, and so on. A matrix of types of targets and expected effects would be useful. There may also be interactions among these factors that shape the political effects of drone strikes.

The questions and theoretical answers posited here require empirical investigation. Many good minds are already at work, and more evidence should become available as time passes and, perhaps, as the United States makes its drone programs more transparent. Critical questions include whether drone strikes or targeted killings prevent or drive attacks on the US homeland; whether they reduce or increase attacks on US forces and interests elsewhere; whether they buttress client states, provoke

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12 Vikash Yadav suggests the U.S. military has used drones to compel a change of behavior by the Pakistani military rather than to change the behavior of targeted groups directly, "North Waziristan: Drones and Compellence," *Duck of Minerva*, April 30, 2011, http://www.whiteoliphaunt.com/duckofminerva/2011/04/north-waziristan-drones-and-compellence.html.

13 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Matthew Kroenig and Barry Pavel, "How to Deter Terrorism," The Washington Quarterly 35:2 (Spring 2012): 21-36, discuss terrorism and deterrence more broadly; Job C. Henning, "Embracing the Drone," The New York Times, February 20, 2012, urges US adoption of a more transparent doctrine of deterrence by drone.

14 Audrey Kurth Cronin, "U.S. Grand Strategy and Counterterrorism," *Orbis* (Spring 2012): 1-23, notes the George W. Bush administration's concern with resolve after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

15 Justin Elliot, "Have U.S. Drones Become a 'Counterinsurgency Air Force' For Our Allies?" *ProPublica*, November 27, 2012. http://www.propublica.org/article/have-u.s.-drones-become-a-counterinsurgency-air-force-for-our-allies; Jackie Northam, "Pakistan Says U.S. Drone Strikes Violate Its Sovereignty," *NPR*, February 7, 2013, notes that the Pakistani government is widely considered to support US drone strikes in private while using them as a tool to whip up anti-American sentiment publically, http://www.npr.org/2013/02/07/171413259/pakistan-says-u-s-drone-strikes-violate-its-sovereignty.

16 Zenko, *Between Threats and War*, 88-89.

upheaval, or hasten a client's fall; and whether drone strikes increase radicalization and also anti-Americanism, or other forms of terrorism.

These questions are not unique to drones. They bear directly on the need for a counterterrorism strategy that begins by identifying critical US interests and threats, then systematically sorts through a realistic consideration of ends, ways, and means. This analysis requires answering first-order questions and identifying first principles while fostering rigorous research into the actual effects of drone strikes on US and international security.