Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

Discussion Paper on Drones

In November 2012 QPLC issued a Watching Brief (NO.20) on Drones. This paper has been prepared by Robert Howell (Peace & Earthcare Worker) as a follow-up discussion paper.

This supplement to the "Drones" Watching Brief summarises and comments on a presentation by Christian Enemark, Crawford School, ANU, titled *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War* [i]. This is the same title of a book that he has written.

Enemark stated the argument that in some countries there is strong technological and military momentum towards the use of such systems, partly because the physical and mental frailties of human users of force are increasingly seen as posing operational risks and impediments. A robot could be programmed to do a better job by reducing human error. Hence armed drones are good in that sense.

In consideration of the ethics of war, Enemark argues that once the decision has been made to go to war, the relevant principles are those of discrimination and proportionality. Arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success. The anticipated benefits of waging a war must be proportionate to its expected evils or harms.

A further consideration discussed by Enemark deals with moral responsibility: who is to be held morally responsible? Enemark argues that there are three options:

a) the robot's programmer;
b) the drone's commander; and
c) the robot itself.

During the presentation reference was made to the science fiction author Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics:

1) a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2) a robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3) a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law [ii].

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia Inc.
Incorporated in the ACT

PO Box 6063
O'CONNOR, ACT 2602
Email qplc@quakers.org.au
Web www.quakers.org.au
ABN 16 036 715 933

Evaluation by R.H.

The evidence does not confirm the argument that robots can minimise or eliminate human error. A study conducted by a US military adviser has found that drone strikes in Afghanistan during mid-2010 to mid-2011 caused 10 times more civilian casualties than strikes by manned fighter aircraft [iii]. There will need to be some significant improvements before the situation is reached where robots are less discriminatory.

I found the claim that the robot could be morally responsible to be logically contradictory. Moral culpability is a human affair. Even though some animals suffer pain, we do not hold them morally responsible. Drones do not suffer pain. I cannot see how they can operate autonomously. If they are to operate in a war theatre they must be able to select who are enemies, and they must be programmed to take into account the principles of discrimination and proportionality. The programmes must ultimately be based on human judgments. Hence c) should be deleted. I would also argue that other options should be included, including senior military personnel responsible for the use of systems and the application of rules of engagement.

Although Enemark quoted Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, he did not discuss the implications that armed drones are in conflict with the First Law. I find the question of whether to use armed drones tends to jump too quickly over the more fundamental question of why have a war in the first place. A fundamental critique of the Cold War is that it was not effective. In a review, Westad states that although Washington and Moscow opposed colonialism, the methods they used were very similar to the European colonialists [iv]. In country after country, Kurgistan, Guatemala, Vietnam, Angola, Ethiopia, peasants were taken off their land and out of their villages, and given the choice of submission or starvation. The only success that the USA had in interventions since 1945 were two half states, (South Korea and Taiwan) out of the thirty other countries they had directly or indirectly been involved. The Soviet Union's success rate was no better. Westad states that if there is one big lesson of the Cold War it is that unilateral military intervention does not work to anyone's advantage while open borders, cultural interaction, and fair economic exchange benefit all. Developed countries still have to learn this lesson.

In consideration of this more fundamental question, I think the use of armed drones is rarely justified. How can this use of force be effective in reducing the terrorist threat in a country in the medium to longer term? Unless more emphasis is placed on a preventive approach, the justification for using the money on technology to wage war, and armed drones in particular, is very thin. The money is better spent elsewhere on prevention, mediation in conflict, and effective post-conflict reconstruction.

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[i] Routledge. 2013. http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415540520/

[ii] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Laws_of_Robotics

[iii] Spencer Ackerman. US drone strikes more deadly to Afghan civilians than manned aircraft – adviser. Guardian 2 July. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/02/us-drone-strikes-afghan-civilians

[iv] Westad, O. A., The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times, 2006 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

R. Howell October 2013


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