



WATCHING BRIEF

DRONES

Drones and Their Use

An unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) – known as a drone – is an aircraft without a human pilot. Its flight is controlled by computers in the vehicle or by remote control. Drones are usually used for military purposes, although there are now more civil uses (eg fire-fighting, surveillance, policing, traffic, border patrol).

The main focus of concern at present is the military use of drones. In an article in *The Guardian* on 26 September 2012, Clive Stafford Smith, the director of Reprieve (a group advocating against capital punishment) drew attention to the following details about drones in the context of the war in Afghanistan:

- The US has more than 10,000 armed drones in its arsenal.
- In Waziristan (northwest Pakistan) as many as six predator drones circle over one location at any given time, watching movements below from high-resolution cameras.
- These drones emit an eerie sound like a buzzing wasp.
- Everyone can see the drones 1500 metres above them, and nobody knows when the missile will come.

He goes on to say that the psychological impact of the constant presence of the drones is significant, as they are a reminder of the threat of imminent death and injury.

The website *Drone Wars UK* has published information on the use of drones by the United Kingdom. It has estimated that the number of drones in the UK defence forces is 335, and that the rate of use has increased from 27 in 2008 to 105 in 2012. In a report 'Convenient Killing' issued in September 2010 by the *Fellowship of Reconciliation* in UK, Mary Dobbing (A Quaker worker with FoR) reported that drones had been used by the US in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and Pakistan, by the United Kingdom in Afghanistan, and by Israel in Gaza.



The Impact of Drones

Ramesh Thakur (an ANU professor who specializes in disarmament) said in *The Canberra Times* on 13 October 2012 that the recent march led by Pakistani political leader Imran Khan against the presence of the drones highlighted the heavy death toll that has resulted in Pakistan – estimated at between 2000 and 3000 people. He said the justification for the use of drones is that they reduce the risk to US soldiers, kill fewer innocent civilians, and kill terrorists. But data from the New Service Foundation shows that since 2004 only 49 'high-value' militant leaders have been killed in drone strikes. He says further that:

"There are legal, moral and strategic problems with the use of drones to kill the enemy. An exhaustive new study by the law schools of Stanford and New York universities concludes that their use has traumatised and terrorised an entire population. It has undermined respect for the rule of law and international legal protection. It sets dangerous precedents for facilitating the recourse to lethal force around the world even as lethal drone technologies are being developed by several countries and export control barriers are softening. More than 50 countries now have drones".

One view of what is happening is expressed by Peter W Singer (Director, 21st Century Defense Initiative at Brookings) in an article 'Attack of the Military Drones' in *Brookings* 27 June 2009:

"The use of unmanned systems may therefore provide the most graphic illustration of the war of ideas that underpins much of the conflict currently underway. The very value of robots in war is their ability to diminish human loss for the side using them: they are the ultimate means of avoiding sacrifice. But the side that turns to robots is fighting against those who see death as something to be celebrated, and not merely for themselves, but also for those around them..... So, with the growing use of remote technologies and terrorism, the warriors of the two sides meet less and less in battle whether in actual combat or the battle of ideologies".

Joseph Gerson, (Director of the American Friends Service Committee's Peace and Economic Security Program) said in a speech about Afghanistan on 13 October 2012 that:

"Greater than the logistical obstacles to winning the war is the fact that you cannot build on a corrupt foundation. Even as the great majority of Afghan people oppose the Taliban's return, the Karzai government, dependent on brutal and repressive war lords, opium barons, bribery and embezzlement cannot win Afghan hearts and minds. This explains why the Obama Administration is turning away from counter insurgency warfare, which necessitates nation-building, to counter terrorism with its increased reliance on drones and Special Forces".

Melanie Fox of the Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington (FCNL) USA has drawn attention (31 July 2012) to the increasing use of drones in the US itself:

- There are 9 drones currently monitoring the US borders with Mexico and Canada.



- Drones are an expensive border and enforcement tactic.
- Drones only lead to a small fraction of arrests made on US borders.
- Drones are less effective at capturing people and drugs than their counterpart planes staffed by an actual pilot.

FCNL has joined with other peace groups in US to protest about the extensive use of drones, especially in military operations.

Australia and Drones

In Australia, drones are part of the military planning by the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Mark Corcoran in an *ABC News* report on 4 September 2012 said:

"The ADF is quietly resurrecting plans to buy seven huge intelligence and surveillance drones that could cost up to \$3b. The unmanned aerial vehicles will be used for maritime surveillance and intercepting asylum seeker boats".

He recalled that the Howard Government committed in 2004 to acquire 12 large drones of the Global Hawk variety. But the Labor government cancelled that in 2009. It has been resurrected as part of the 2012 Defence Capability Plan.

In an interview for *ABC Radio* on 4 September 2012, Andrew Davies from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute said that the Defence Department had confirmed that Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles did use Edinburgh Airbase in South Australia "for replenishment purposes" between 2001 and 2006. He said it was not clear what role they were playing at that time, but it could have been to plug gaps in military satellite surveillance. He confirmed that it seemed to be part of the largely covert operations undertaken by Australia in supporting US military strategies in our region and beyond.

On the wider issue of drones, the ABC Radio's *Background Briefing* on 26 September 2012 covered the issues around the increasing use of drones for surveillance, and the privacy concerns that were emerging. In the program, James Woodford (ABC) says:

"Stealthy, unmanned aircraft have been the preserve of the military and governments. But that has changed dramatically in recent years. These mass-market drones are now readily available from games stores, where they are marketed as toys".

Ethical Issues

There seem to be some significant issues that warrant concern and attention:

- The psychological impact of the constant presence of drones in conflict areas.



- The extent to which the safety of soldiers is outweighed by the danger to innocent civilians and the targeting of alleged terrorists.
- The secrecy surrounding Australia's involvement in US strategic use of drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- The fact that technological development may have outrun the international community's capacity to regulate the use of drones.

Dr Robert Sparrow, a philosopher at Monash University, has made the following points in an article 'Call to Boycott Military Robots' on *Science Alert* website on 22 August 2012:

- Military robots make war more likely by lowering the threshold of conflict.
- The ethics of working on military robotics cannot be divorced from the ethics of the ends to which they are used.
- If robots are killing people overseas in unjust wars, this raises serious questions about the ethics of building robots for the military.
- Engineers should consider boycotting such work for the military and seek work on projects that confront social and environmental challenges.

In the report previously mentioned 'Convenient Killing' (2010), Mary Dobbing spoke of a core concern being the 'playstation' mentality whereby the geographical and psychological distance between the drone operator and the target lowers the threshold for launching an attack.

Rules of Engagement

The Australian Defence Force (ADF), like its counterparts around the world, has rules of engagement that include such points as:

- Australian forces will not attack civilians or other persons protected by the Geneva Conventions, such as those who are incapacitated by sickness or wounding and are unable to defend themselves, or who have surrendered.
- Australian forces will not attack civilians provided they are not being used for a military purpose.
- Australian forces will not use or assist or encourage others to use anti-personnel mines or cluster munitions.

There are calls for greater international scrutiny of the use of drones. In 2009 the then UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, Philip Alston, in a report to the UN General Assembly, expressed concern that the use of predator drones might violate international law. On 25 June 2012, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, speaking at an open Security Council debate, drew attention to the killing of civilians in Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia as a result of the use of military drones in counter-terrorism operations.



Fatima Measham wrote in *Eureka Street* on 8 February 2012 that “the world community must move quickly to highlight the legal implications and moral turpitude of negligently killing innocent people by remote”. In August 2011 Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, voiced deep concern at the number of civilians killed in air attacks, including by unmanned drones. On 27 March 2012 it was announced that the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations is exploring the potential use of new technology such as “drones”.

Louise Arbour, CEO of the International Crisis Group, reported on 18 May 2012 on NATO plans to develop and expand the use of drones “to confront the security threats of the future and make better use of tighter budgets”. She said that the rules for using strike drones should be clarified and the tests that determine who is a target should be explicit. She sees the tendency towards greater use of drones as stretching legal boundaries and likely to be counter-productive in alienating many people:

“Many modern armies claim to be increasingly attentive to their legal obligations. But at the same time, they seem ever more reluctant to account for their actions publicly and transparently. This may be an unintended consequence of their perceived expanded exposure to prosecutions, whether before the International Criminal Court or elsewhere”.

Amnesty International (1 February 2012) has also called for the USA to clarify the basis for its use of drones in Pakistan. It points out that drone attacks have doubled in Pakistan under the Obama administration, with severe consequences for civilians in those areas targeted. Amnesty claims that there is poor monitoring of exactly what impact the drones are having on civilians.

Quakers

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) is currently not focussing on the issue of drones, but is aware of our concern. In Britain, Quaker Peace and Social Witness reports that it has supported the Fellowship of Reconciliation in research into drones. In the US, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) are maintaining close attention to the issue of drones.

The Quaker Council on European Affairs, in its October newsletter *Around Europe*, has an article about drones and says: “The distinction between civilian and military research and development is a difficult line to draw, and this is very clear in the development of aerial drones. The technology that is being produced to allow civilian drones access to European airspace will inevitably provide benefits to military drone capabilities”



The Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee (QPLC) urges Friends to keep informed about what is happening, and to raise their concerns with our elected representatives, especially about Australia's plans and actions and how they can be reconciled with the ADF official rules of engagement. QPLC will consider what national action might be taken including approaching the ABC radio and television services to seek greater coverage of Drones in their current affairs broadcasting.

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Canberra
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