

“The Morality” of Drone Warfare

By [Global Research](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Global Research, August 19, 2012

[Drone Wars UK](#) 19 August 2012

There have been a number of articles published recently on the morality of drone wars, many of them suggesting that those of us with grave concerns about the growing use of drones have either got it wrong, are confused, or are just plain misguided.

Writing in The Observer, Peter Beaumont posed the question [‘Are drones any more immoral than other weapons of war?’](#) After suggesting that “much of what has been written on both sides of the debate on the surrounding moral and legal issues has been ill-informed and confused” he then goes on to give a rather unhelpful summary of the international law arguments surrounding the use of force against non-state actors based on the recent paper [‘The Strategic Context of Lethal Drones’](#) published by the American Security Project.

With regard to morality he suggests that

“[the] compelling question to be asked over the future of drone warfare... is the one posed by Foust and Boyle [of the American Security Project] who demanded whether, as a military tool, drone warfare is actually effective; whether its use is justified when set against the political fallout that the drone campaign has produced and whether drones have actually reduced the threat posed by militants.”

The question, in other words is, do the ends justify the means? Hardly the most moral position. However, at least Peter Beaumont engaged with the argument.

Last month Flight Global writer Craig Hoyle [dismissed any concerns that campaigners may have](#) about the growing use of drones. While, shuddering to use the phrase ‘drone wars’, he says campaigners are all simply “missing the point” (but omits to say how exactly). Apparently he thinks that those with moral and ethical qualms about drones simply have nothing better to do now that we have outlawed cluster bombs and anti-personnel mines (did we have a point on those Craig?)

Describing himself as an [ex-CIA official, Phillip Mudd writing in Newsweek](#) acknowledges there are ethical issues arising from the use of drones but argues that in relation to war zones they are “misdirected”. In war zones, he writes, drones are just another “delivery tool” to apply lethal force, like a rifle or a piece of artillery. The point he clearly misses though is that unlike the rifleman or tank driver, the drone operator is sitting safely thousands of miles away, and it is this very distance – both physical and psychological – that is a key ethical issue.

Mudd goes on to argue that drones give the option for lethal force to be used beyond war

zones – and not just for killing terrorist suspects either:

“In an age of non-state threats that are as deadly as al Qaeda, and more pervasive—drug trafficking organizations, human trafficking networks, and pirates off Somalia, to name a few—armed drones give policymakers, and operators, the option of intervening in areas that are not warzones.”

Mudd argues that the ethical dilemma that drones present is should we accept insecurity or accept targeted killing:

“Do you want to kill, to reduce an emerging threat before it reaches our shores? Or do you want to limit authorized killings to warzones? If it’s security you insist on, we now have the most surgical killing machine the world has ever seen. Is that the future you want? And if not, are you prepared to accept the consequences?”

To formulate the ethical choice on this issue as either accepting (and thereby legitimizing) drone targeted killings on the one hand or accepting a future of continuing insecurity on the other is simplistic nonsense. There are of course other (and we would argue) much better ways to pursue security, peace and justice.

A more thoughtful piece was Joseph Singh’s [Betting Against a Drone Arms Race](#). Singh, a researcher at the US think tank Center for a New American Security, rejects the arguments made by many, including recently by [Noel Sharkey](#) and [Michael Ignatieff](#), that US drone use outside wars zones could encourage other nations to use forces in a similar way. Instead, Singh argues, drones are fundamentally no different from piloted aircraft in respect of applying lethal force:

“Any state otherwise deterred from using force abroad will not significantly increase its power projection on account of acquiring drones.”

While he cites the [downing of a Turkish jet by Syria](#) in June as proof that nations will not tolerate breeches of national sovereignty, he doesn’t really grapple with the fact that the US use of drones outside war zones is a precedent that others may well follow.

US academic and philosopher [Bradley Strawser, interviewed in the Guardian](#) about his views on drones earlier this month was quoted as saying “It’s all upside. There’s no downside. Both ethically and normatively, there’s a tremendous value.” Strawser, who is assistant professor of philosophy at Monterey Naval Postgraduate School, later said the Guardian “misrepresented” his views and was given space to argue his case in his own words, to which we will come in a moment.

In his interview he names and then dismisses three objections to drone warfare. Firstly, while he says he shares “the gut feeling that there’s something odd” about the “lopsided asymmetry” of drone killing he says that it’s like police officers having bullet-proof vests in a shoot out with bank robbers. Er, no, it’s not....

The second objection that he names and then rejects is “the suggestion that risk-free remote killing degrades traditional conceptions of valour”. Whilst I have very occasionally

heard this argument, the objection to risk free remote killing that most people make is not because it undermines concepts of valour but that it makes it easier to undertake attacks both within theatres of conflict and in the wider sense. To be fair to Strawser he does come to this in his final argument, but ends up by not dealing with the argument, instead saying: "There could be an upside. There are cases when we should go to war and we don't, especially in humanitarian case like Rwanda.

In the space he was given [to clarify his position](#), Strawser heavily nuances his position. He argues that drones "can be a morally preferable weapon of war if they are capable of being more discriminate than other weapons that are less precise and expose their operators to greater risk." Note that "can be" and "if" in there... Like Joseph Singh (above) Strawser also makes the obvious point that drones can be moral but "only if the mission is just".

We started this review of recent writing on drones with Peter Beaumont's Observer article. He began his reflection by recalling how three years previously he had come across the victims of an Israel drone strike whilst in Gaza. We can't finish this round-up without mentioning [Dr Rajaie Batniji fantastic article in The Lancet](#), reflecting about his recent visit to see family in Gaza, drones and the search for dignity. Read it and weep.

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