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Drones are fool's gold: they prolong wars we can't win

New appointments in the White House hail an era of hands-free warfare. Yet these weapons induce not defeat, but retaliation

Simon Jenkins
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The greatest threat to world peace is not from nuclear weapons and their possible proliferation. It is from drones and their certain proliferation. Nuclear bombs are useless weapons, playthings for the powerful or those aspiring to power. Drones are now sweeping the global arms market. There are some 10,000 said to be in service, of which a thousand are armed and mostly American. Some reports say they have killed more non-combatant civilians than died in 9/11.

I have not read one independent study of the current drone wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the horn of Africa that suggests these weapons serve any strategic purpose. Their "success" is expressed solely in body count, the number of so-called "al-Qaida-linked commanders" killed. If body count were victory, the Germans would have won Stalingrad and the Americans Vietnam.

Neither the legality nor the ethics of drone attacks bear examination. Last year's exhaustive report by lawyers from Stanford and New York universities concluded that they were in many cases illegal, killed civilians, and were militarily counter-productive. Among the deaths were an estimated 176 children. Such slaughter would have an infantry unit court-martialled. Air forces enjoy such prestige that civilian deaths are excused as a price worth paying for not jeopardising pilots' lives.

This week President Obama appointed two drone "enthusiasts" as his new defence secretary, Chuck Hagel, and his new CIA chief, John Brennan. Drone war is now the flavour of the month

and the military-industrial complex is licking its lips. If Obama, himself a lawyer, had any reservations about the legality of these weapons, he has clearly overcome them.

Quite apart from ethics and law, I find it impossible to see what contribution these weapons make to winning wars. The killing of officers merely sees others replace them, eager for revenge. The original Predator was intended for surveillance but was adapted for bombing specifically to kill Osama bin Laden. When he was finally found, the drone was considered too inaccurate a device to risk, and old-fashioned boots-with-guns had to be sent instead.

As for the inevitable killing of civilians, however few or many, this is not just "collateral damage" but critical to victory or defeat. It does not occupy or hold territory and it devastates hearts and minds. Aerial bombardment has long been a questionable weapon of war. It induces not defeat but retaliation.

On Monday a BBC documentary on the siege of Malta devastatingly charted the German bombing assault, the most intensive of the second world war. Though it took a heavy toll on the island's infrastructure it did not stop its resistance. Belief in bombers and the failure to invade Malta cost Germany the Africa campaign. A weapon of airborne terror that fails to cow an enemy and merely invites defiance is not effective at all. Three-quarters of Pakistanis are now declared enemies of the US.

Yet each week Obama apparently sits down and goes through a "kill list" of Muslims he intends to eliminate, with no judicial process and no more identification than the word of a dodgy spy on the ground. At least Britain's drones in Helmand, we are told, are used only in close air support for ground troops.

Since the drone war began in earnest in 2008, there has been no decline in Taliban or al-Qaida performance attributable to it. Any let-up in recruitment is merely awaiting Nato's departure. The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, has called the attacks "in no way justifiable". The Pakistan government, at whose territory they are increasingly directed, has withdrawn all permission.

The young Yemeni writer Ibrahim Mothana protested in the New York Times of the carnage drones are wreaking on the politics of his country, erasing "years of progress and trust-building with tribes". Yemenis now face al-Qaida recruiters waving pictures of drone-butchered women and children in their faces. Notional membership of al-Qaida in Yemen is reported to have grown by three times since 2009. Jimmy Carter declares that "America's violation of international human rights abets our enemies and alienates our friends".

The drone wars seem pointless yet unstoppable. Their appeal to western leaders lies partly in their sheer novelty, partly in the hope they may make defeat less awful. They are like the USS New Jersey's shelling of Lebanon's Chouf mountains in 1984, a blood-thirsty display to cover withdrawal. The drone is not an aid to victory, but it eases the defeat its use has made more likely.

The Taliban in Waziristan are no threat to London or to Washington. Al-Qaida can do no more to undermine the state than set off the occasional bomb, best prevented by domestic intelligence.

Today's "wars of choice" reflect a more sinister aspect of democracy. Elected leaders seem to crave them, defying all warnings of the difficulty of ending them. Mesmerised by Margaret Thatcher's gain from the Falklands, they all want a good war.

In this the drone is fool's gold. Driven by high-pressure arms salesmanship, Obama (and David Cameron) are briefed that they are the no-hands war of the future, safe, easy, clean, "precision targeted". No one on our side need get hurt. Someone else can do the dirty work on the ground.

The tenuous legality of this form of combat requires the aggressor to have "declared war" on another state. But al-Qaida is no state. As a result these attacks on foreign soil are not just wars of choice, they are wars of self-invention. How soon will it be before the US finds itself "at war" with Iran and Syria, and sends over the drones? When it does, and the killing starts, it can hardly complain when the victims retaliate with suicide bombers.

Nor will it just be suicide bombers. Drones are cheap and will easily proliferate. Eleven states deploy them already. The US is selling them to Japan to help against China. China is building 11 bases for its Anjian drones along its coast. The Pentagon is now training more drone operators than pilots. What happens when every nation with an air force does likewise, and every combustible border is buzzing with them?

I did not fear nuclear proliferation because I believe such bombs are mere prestige acquisitions, so horrible not even lunatics would use them. Drones are different. When they were called guided missiles, they were in some degree governed by international law and protocol, as was the practice of global assassination.

Obama rejects all that. He and the US are teaching the world that a pilotless aircraft is a self-justifying, self-exonerating, legal and effective weapon of war. However counter-productive a drone may be strategically, it cuts a glamorous dash on the home front. It is hard to imagine a greater danger to world peace.