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High-tech robo-weapons and the new rules of war

By David Ignatius

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A new arsenal of drones and satellite-guided weapons is changing the nature of warfare. America and its NATO allies possess these high-tech weapons, but smaller countries want them, too. Here's an inside glimpse of how the process of technology transfer works:

A year ago, Saudi Arabia was fighting a nasty border war against the Houthi rebels across its frontier with Yemen. The Saudis began bombing Houthi targets inside Yemen on November 5, 2009, but the airstrikes were inaccurate, and there were reports of civilian casualties.

The Saudis appealed to America for imagery from US surveillance satellites in space, so they could target more precisely. General David Petraeus, who was Centcom commander at the time, is said to have backed the Saudi request, but it was opposed by the State Department and others. They warned that intervening in this border conflict, even if only by providing targeting information, could violate the laws of war.

So the Saudis turned elsewhere for help – to France, which has its own reconnaissance satellites. The French, who were worried that imprecise Saudi bombing was creating too many civilian casualties in Yemen, agreed to help. The necessary details were arranged within days.

When President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Riyadh on November 17, he was ready to open the new intelligence liaison channel. A Saudi official recalls that by the first night of Sarkozy's visit, detailed pictures of the Yemeni battle space began to move electronically to the Saudis.

With this precise satellite intelligence, the Saudis were able to monitor the Houthis' hideouts, equipment dumps and training sites. Saudi warplanes then attacked with devastating effectiveness. Within a few weeks, the Houthis were requesting a truce, and by February 2010 this chapter of the border war was over.

For the Saudis, this was an important military success. "The French were extremely helpful" and their assistance "was a key reason we were able to force the Houthis to capitulate," says a Saudi official.

But the Saudi incident raises larger questions about the transfer of technologies that have demonstrated their deadly effectiveness during the past decade in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas. These weapons are seductively attractive; they offer the promise of destroying an enemy from a safe distance of 10,000 or 20,000 feet in the air.