

'Ethico-Political' Implications of Drones in 21st-Century Conflicts

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This paper explores three ethical implications of drones: the dehumanization of the drone target, the implications of drones regarding the pre-existing ethical frameworks on war (Jus Ad Bellum) and the new forms of control and sovereign control over death and life made possible by drones.



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INTRODUCTION

Drone technology is increasingly becoming more capable of autonomous violence and destruction. With drones heralding a new age of warfare and a change like military technology, it is crucial to evaluate drones' ethical and political implications. This is because drones are capable of integrating advanced algorithmic and computer systems, thus allowing a level of mathematical precision to military operations that have never been seen before. Proponents of drones would say that this allows for a reduction in unintended casualties. However, analysis of real-world drone operations has shown that this is not the case. Drones also allow for more advanced and penetrative surveillance and control over people. Given these numerous ethico-political concerns - it is important to explore the place drones have in our world today.

This paper explores three ethical implications of drones: the dehumanization of the drone target, the implications of drones regarding the preexisting ethical frameworks on war (*Jus Ad Bellum*) and the new forms of control and sovereign control over death and life made possible by drones.

Dehumanization of the Target

Due to the physical separation between drone operators and the actual battlefield, often spanning thousands of miles, and their reliance on screens to identify potential targets, they become significantly detached from the immediate realities of the situation. Consequently, their decision-making is affected, as evidenced by multiple reports indicating an elevated likelihood of conducting strikes without adequate information. This unfortunate consequence unintentionally harms innocent civilians, a phenomenon commonly called the 'Playstation Mentality.' Due to the distance from the battlefield, using the drone becomes more and more like playing an action game on a Playstation with a similar disregard for the loss of life.¹ Previously, soldiers in combat operations were aware of the gravity of taking a human life by virtue of their proximity to the enemy. With the emergence of drone warfare, this may no longer be the case as potential targets become dehumanized and represented as mere pixels on a screen. The U.S. military and intelligence authorities actively promote this dehumanization - they call a successful kill 'bugsplat'.² Human beings targeted by drones are now insects to be smashed against a hard surface - not individuals with certain

¹ Philip Alston and Hina Shamsi, "A killer above the law?", *The Guardian*, February 08, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/feb/08/afghanistan-drones-defence-killing>

² Jennifer Robinson, "'Bugsplat': The ugly U.S. drone war in Pakistan." *Al Jazeera*, November 29, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/11/29/bugsplat-the-ugly-us-drone-war-in-pakistan> (Accessed on July 05, 2023)

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inalienable human rights. This dehumanization of the target is, therefore, intrinsic to drone warfare. Noel Sharkey, a computer scientist and anti-drone intellectual, is also of this opinion - that drones remove the blood, gore and agony of actual battlefield killing, thus deciding to kill by drone strike an easy one to make - with regards to ethical considerations.³ All desirable ethical responses that make killing a considered well-evaluated decision on the ground are suspended in a drone strike. Moreover, the risk to one's personnel also necessitates a careful decision-making process about deadly force - this is absent in drone warfare.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote that the foundation of ethics is the face-to-face encounter with the human other.⁴ Drone warfare - by being unable to see its target as human - suspends the possibility of ethics and makes killing a frivolous activity bereft of ethical import. To prove this requires a straightforward thought experiment. What produces a more robust ethical response in the soldier - seeing an innocent child through his own eyes in an on-field situation or seeing pixels on the screen from a thousand miles away?

For example, as recently as in 2021, just before the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, it conducted a drone strike in Kabul that struck a car containing ten civilians, including three children - killing all of them.⁵ This was clearly due to a lack of adequate evaluation of faulty evidence. Given that there are countless cases like these littered throughout the bloody history of the U.S. drone war in Afghanistan and Pakistan - it is clear that drones allow for a detachment of the operators and decision-makers from the human dimension of the operation thus causing unsatisfactory treatment of evidence as well as a callous disregard for collateral damage.

Supporters of drones may point out that the situation can be averted through proper personnel training. However, the continuation of civilian casualties and collateral damage suggests no such training has occurred. Moreover, there is no intention to place such measures to prevent collateral damage. Drones lend themselves to secrecy - only their victims and operators know their use. Drones are also used by covert organizations like the CIA, which always operate in a grey ethical

³ Noel Sharkey, "Saying 'No!' to Lethal Autonomous, " *Journal of Military Ethics*, Vol. 9 (4), 2010 pp. 369–383. Also See, Noel Sharkey, "Drone race will ultimately lead to a sanitized factory of slaughter." *The Guardian*. August 03, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/03/drone-race-factory-slaughter> (Accessed on July 02, 2023).

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pennsylvania, 2013.

⁵ Azmat Khan, "Military Investigation Reveals How the U.S. Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul," *The New York Times*, January 06, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html> (Accessed on July 04, 2023)

area as well as without civilian oversight. Drones are, therefore, the perfect weapon for covert operations that are ethically and legally questionable.

Drones and War Ethics

The Ethics of warfare are primarily divided into two categories. The first category - *Jus Ad Bellum* - consists of moral prescriptions regarding when war itself is morally justifiable. In other words, these principles determine the circumstances that justify war. The second category - *Jus In Bello* - concerns moral conduct during a war.

While discussing the ethics of drones under *Jus In Bello* seems obvious - since drones are used during a war - there are also several compelling points against drone usage under *Jus Ad Bellum*. Firstly, the availability of drones reduces the reluctance of a country to engage in war as it precludes the risk of their soldiers dying. As philosopher Peter Singer points out, "People are more likely to support using force as long as they view it as costless".⁶ Secondly, the availability of UAVs also leads to the emergence of 'secret wars'. Due to the inherently secretive nature of UAVs, wars can now be started without any judicial oversight. Due to this, unethical wars are much more likely to occur. One of the central principles of *Jus Ad Bellum* is that wars should be fought with the goal of peaceful reconciliation. However, drone warfare is antithetical to a peaceful settlement of war as they create more animosity and bitterness amongst the population against whom the drones are being used. For example, the use of UAVs in Pakistan has directly contributed to Anti-American sentiments, leading to more radicalization and tensions within Pakistan.⁷

Biopolitics of Drones

Biopolitics is a term coined by the philosopher and political theorist Michel Foucault. It refers to the power of the modern state to monitor and control the lives and activities of its subjects to an extent never seen before. Foucault wrote that biopolitics involved control over the behaviour of the subject population - "individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and,

⁶ Peter. W. Singer, *Wired for war. The robotics revolution and conflict in the 21st century*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2009.

⁷ Jane Mayer, "The Predator Drone War." *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/26/the-predator-war> (Accessed on July 02, 2023)

if need be, punished".⁸ The U.S. drone program in Afghanistan did not see Afghans as human beings or individuals but as bodies to be surveilled and their daily behaviour evaluated within a predetermined matrix of acceptable and 'suspicious behaviour'. In other words, the vast majority of drone attacks rely not on identifying specific individuals as targets (an identified Al Qaeda leader, for example) but on monitoring the behaviour of the general Afghan population. Drones are inherently biopolitical machines. They can monitor a given population for days on end without being detected. This biopolitical dimension of drones will only become more relevant as they are integrated with the latest advancements in information technology and big data.

An example is the drone strike in Kabul that killed ten civilians, including seven children in Kabul on August 29, 2021, just before the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan.⁹ There was no confirmation that the car the civilians were travelling in contained terrorists - the strike was solely based on suspicious behaviour. The U.S. military personnel watched through drones as the car was "gingerly loaded with a box carried by five adult males". The car reportedly followed an "erratic route".¹⁰ Therefore, the drone strike was initiated based on a biopolitical matrix of acceptable behaviour that renders Afghans into dehumanized bodies that either conform to or deviate from set standards of conduct. Therefore, drone warfare victims are not proven guilty of any concrete crime. Their guilt is instead determined by their existence itself - their race, their nationality and their daily behaviour. They are not judged for who they are or their concrete actions but "for their behaviour within a logic dependent on the ability to distinguish between the normal and the symptomatic".¹¹

However, Foucault's analysis of biopower and biopolitics cannot contend with the full extent of death and destruction that drones have caused. Foucault imagined biopolitics as an instrument of governance to keep populations docile. While this was undoubtedly part of the objective of the U.S. war on terror in Afghanistan - there was also a drive to kill, to exterminate populations deemed dangerous. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics adequately understands this exercising of

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, Penguin and Allen Lane, London, 2004.

⁹ "Afghanistan: US admits Kabul drone strike killed civilians", *BBC News*, September 18, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58604655>

¹⁰ Azmat Khan, "Military Investigation Reveals How the U.S. Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul," *The New York Times*, January 06, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html> (Accessed on July 04, 2023)

¹¹ Cristiano Mendes, and Junqueira Karina, "Drones, Warfare and the Deconstruction of the Enemy." *Contexto Internacional*, Vol. 42 (2), 2020 pp. 237–256, <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-8529.2019420200002>.

deadly force within the context of Foucauldian biopower. Mbembe sees necropolitics as the "synthesis of massacre and bureaucracy".¹² Necropolitics, therefore, is the exercise of sovereign power - the power of the sovereign to decide over life and death - with the methods of biopolitics. Necropolitics, therefore, involves the creation of a distinction between groups of people worthy of life and populations deserving of death by employing the techniques of biopolitics - surveillance, auditing, cataloguing and so on.

Necropolitics is also inextricably tied to colonialism and racism. The distinction that necropolitical drone warfare creates between "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" is determined by the racist and neocolonial gaze of the U.S. military personnel. An important part of drone target identification is the presence of Afghani "military-aged males" (MAMs) - individuals in this category are immediately marked out for death and are seen as automatically guilty. A Stanford University and New York University study found that "the U.S. government counts all adult males killed by strikes as militants."¹³ Judith Butler writes that these military-aged males are "a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human".¹⁴ This reflects the old racist colonial logic of the colonial sovereign marking out the colonized for extermination. Jamie Allinson writes, "The drone is not merely a new technology in the everyday sense of a mechanical and electrical assemblage: it is a technology of racial distinction".¹⁵ These concerns over the use of drones are critical as drones are capable of operating outside conventional judicial channels and the paradigm of human rights.

CONCLUSIONS

As the preceding discussion highlights, drones are definitely a potentially revolutionary military technology with numerous ethical and political concerns. Countries with drone capabilities need to consider ethical implications and act in a responsible and ethical manner. Proponents of drones argue that with proper monitoring and management, drones can be more ethical than any current warfare. However, drones do not exist in a political vacuum and a vastly unequal world with covert

¹² Achille Mbembe, "Necro-politics", *Public Culture*, Vol. 15 (1), 2003, pp. 11–40.

¹³ International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, And Trauma To Civilians From Us Drone Practices In Pakistan", September 2012. <https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Stanford-NYU-LIVING-UNDER-DRONES.pdf>

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, London, 2004.

¹⁵ Jamie C. Allinson, "The Necropolitics of Drones." *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 9, 2015, pp. 113-127.

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agencies pursuing operations without oversight and powerful nations waging war without regard for national sovereignty; drones are a dangerous weapon that lends themselves to unethical usage.

To ensure the ethical use of drones in modern conflict, countries should:

1. **Transparent about the use of drones:** Countries should be open about their use, including the legal and ethical justifications for their use, the targets of the strikes, and the results of the strikes.
2. **Follow established legal and ethical frameworks:** Countries should follow established legal and ethical frameworks for using force, such as the Jus Ad Bellum and the principles of proportionality, necessity, and discrimination.
3. **Minimize the risk of civilian casualties:** Countries should take steps to minimize the risk of civilian casualties, including through accurate intelligence gathering, careful target selection, and precision-guided munitions.
4. **Ensure accountability:** Countries should ensure that those responsible for drone strikes are held accountable for their actions, including through independent investigations and judicial oversight.
5. **Engage in dialogue:** Countries should engage in open and honest dialogue with other countries and civil society organizations to promote a greater understanding of the ethical implications of drone use and to work towards developing common standards and principles for their use.

To conclude, it is always up to countries with drone capabilities to ensure that the use of drones in modern conflict is consistent with ethical principles and respect for human rights. By doing so, they can help minimize the harm caused by drone strikes and promote a more stable and peaceful world.

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*The views expressed in this article are solely that of the
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