Perceptions and Politics in a World of Drones

Wali Aslam
PhD in International Studies, University of Leeds, UK. Senior Lecturer in International Security, Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies. University of Bath, United Kingdom.

Abstract
With an increasing number of states employing Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), or drones, there is a need to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of this technology. Western politicians often praise drones for both their accuracy and precision. They may indeed be both of these, but their use also has significant, far-reaching consequences for the societies where they are deployed.
This paper makes the case for adopting a more comprehensive approach that will keep in mind the politics surrounding the use of drones and in particular how they are perceived by the communities at the receiving-end. There is a need to look beyond the narratives of precision, accuracy and lack of risk. We also need to be vigilant to ask our politicians why they decide to use the drones in a given situation. Finally, we should also be cognisant of the broader – at times negative – consequences of their use for the host communities, for the rule of law and for democracy at home.

Resumo
Perceções e Política num Mundo de Drones

Com um número crescente de Estados a recorrem ao emprego de veículos aéreos não-tripulados, ou drones, existe a necessidade de efetuar-se uma avaliação abrangente sobre a eficácia desta tecnologia. Os políticos ocidentais elogiam frequentemente os drones pela sua exatidão e precisão. Na verdade, podem ser ambas, mas o seu uso também tem consequências significativas e de grande impacto para as sociedades dos países onde são empregues.
Este artigo justifica a adoção de uma abordagem mais abrangente que tenha em mente a dimensão política envolvente ao recurso a drones e, em particular, como eles são percecionados pelas comunidades dos países onde são empregues. Há a necessidade de olhar para além das narrativas de exatidão, precisão e ausência de risco. Também é necessário estar vigilante, de forma a questionar os políticos sobre o porquê da utilização de drones em determinadas situações. Por fim, deve-se estar consciente das consequências mais amplas - por vezes negativas – junto das comunidades dos países onde são empregues, a bem da defesa do Estado de Direito e da democracia no país que deles se socorre.

The usage of drones across the world has increased manifold in the last decade. Another such recent military technology that has garnered so much international public attention in such a short period of time is hard to come by. It is routine for countries to experiment and deploy new technologies to tackle various conflicts but the use of drones has gripped our collective imagination in a unique way. Given how quickly several states have started using the technology, the long-term impact of the use of drones (also called Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or UAVs) will take a while to materialise.

Like any other technology, no study of the use of drones can be conducted in a completely objective way. It is no wonder that several analyses concerning the efficacy of the drones ask us to adopt a broader view – a view that is beyond the question of just looking at whether drones are killing 'good' or 'bad' guys. In other words, it is not possible to just say that this technology is effective if it is killing terrorists and it is ineffective if it is harming innocent civilians. There are a number of other factors that we need to keep in mind when we study the impact of these machines in settings of war and counterterrorism.

This piece will highlight some of the broader challenges the drone technology throws at us. It argues that in order to be better prepared to deal with the consequences of using drones, a state contemplating this relatively novel method of warfare is advised to adopt a new approach - one that is not restricted just to assessing drones' efficacy through the numbers of terrorists or civilians killed.

The drone technology is truly marvellous in that it provides its operators an ability to fly these machines from thousands of miles away without putting the lives of the operators in harm's way[1]. Some drones have the ability to hover over a country's airspace for up to eighteen hours in one go and provide live feedback to the operator about the developments in the territory they are overseeing. The ability to collect immensely large amounts of data and to target individuals with little cost to those using it is seen as one of the biggest successes of the drone programme.

Although we hear a lot about the utility of these machines, we do not get to know much about how they are perceived by the citizens of the countries they are overseeing. One question can be: does the public in the targeted state see the drones in the same way as they are seen in the West? The answer is likely to be in the negative. A cursory glance at any mainstream Pakistani newspaper will reveal that drones are often seen as a new face of imperialism by many members of the Pakistani public (Dawn, 2013). For such individuals, drones symbolise American imperialism (aided by technology), which is reminiscent of British imperialism.

Interestingly, these perceptions are reflected in the surveys conducted on the use of

1 It is common knowledge that the United States flies its drones working in Iraq and Afghanistan from Creech Air Force Base in Clark County, Nevada, USA.

drones in Pakistan. Drones target a narrow area of Pakistan called the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Almost all the strikes that have targeted Pakistani territory between 2004 till today have focused on FATA and only a handful have taken place outside it. Surveys conducted in the rest of Pakistan have generally tended to show opposition to the use of American drones in Pakistan (Iqbal, 2014). That is despite the fact that American drones have killed many high-ranking terrorists wanted by the Pakistani state, such as Baitaullah Mehsud. Furthermore, the human toll has also been decreasing (New America Foundation, 2017b). Similar to the case of any other weapons, it is critical to remember that the perception of drones by those at the receiving end matters a great deal. However, the issue of the continuity of Western domination (through direct or remote means) is a topic that does not feature much in Western policy evaluation of the use of drones.

This author does not argue that the West should stop using the technology as an instrument of counter terrorism – far from it! The purpose here is to assert that understanding the local viewpoints would better prepare us to understand the resistance to several Western methods of conflict resolution and counter terrorism. By learning about those views, we would be able to devise more effective strategies that will better anticipate on-the-ground consequences of the technology. If the overall objective is to win the confidence of the people in a foreign state, then the battle is being fought not only on the battlefield but also in people's minds, as always.

The studies of the efficacy of the use of drone technology tend to neglect one further critical aspect of their use: how drones help disperse terrorists from one contained space to a wider territory that spans across borders and boundaries. American drone strikes in FATA started in 2004. The tribal areas have a distinct political status in Pakistan and the country's standard laws do not apply there. These areas had become the new homes of various Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants after the American invasion of Afghanistan in December 2001 (Aslam, 2013a). Soon afterwards, it became clear to Americans that due to the remoteness of the tribal areas, they had little chance to track down these individuals in the absence of active Pakistani cooperation. Hence drone strikes seemed to provide a perfect answer for the problem. As a result, around 392 strikes have been conducted in the tribal areas of Pakistan so far with only 6 strikes targeting areas outside FATA (New America Foundation, 2017b).

Given this situation, suspected terrorists have been leaving FATA to relocate to other parts of the country (Ali, 2010; Aslam, 2014). A number of them have moved to Karachi, Lahore and those parts of FATA that have not been heavily targeted by drones. The move, however, has not changed the basic agenda of these individuals, which is to wage a jihad against those they consider infidels. The dispersal of suspected terrorists across Pakistan in order to escape drones has come with serious consequences for their new host populations. In FATA, they used their tribal

hideouts to target American forces in Afghanistan, but after their relocation, they have been targeting Pakistani civilians to continue their mission. These civilians and members of the country's security forces are legitimate targets for these individuals as the state is an official ally of the United States. Though their target has changed, their mission remains the same. Proponents of drones have been highlighting their success in decreasing the number of attacks on Western forces in Afghanistan. However, the approximately 50,000 Pakistani civilian victims of terrorism rarely get mentioned in such assessments, and some of these may likely have been the target of terrorists who have moved from FATA to escape drones.

After their relocation, these individuals do not confine themselves to religious violence. They also actively participate in kidnapping for ransom, drugs and arms smuggling, and land grabbing in cities like Karachi (Ali, 2010). Much of the revenue generated through their participation in such activities goes back to fund militant activities in the country's northwest. This under-studied consequence of the use of drones will have significant implications for the regional security in South Asia long after the Western forces depart from the region.

While studying under-examined aspects of the drone warfare, we also have an obligation to scrutinise on-the-ground politicisation of the use of drones in host territories. It is generally observed that the use of this technology helps in the radicalising agendas of various politicians and noted personalities of the political right in spreading a message that is conducive to their cause (Aslam, 2015). Countries like Pakistan have seen an overall shift to the right among the public's attitudes, with an increasing number of its citizens displaying religious symbols and attending rallies organised by conservative politicians and clerics. Several politicians have referred to the use of drones by the US in Pakistani territory as being the cause of most of the problems facing the country. For example, the cricketer-turned-politician, Imran Khan, has used these attacks as examples of American hubris, blaming the US for massive collateral damage and death of innocent civilians. Khan believes that the use of American UAVs has not been very effective, as the situation in Afghanistan is far worse than it was when the strikes were initially employed in 2004.

Imran Khan has a clear appeal amongst the country's youth and his rhetoric has played a key role in turning some of the youth against the West, leading them to believe that there is an international conspiracy to weaken Pakistan and drones are just one part of that plan (Guardian, 2012). Khan has successfully portrayed himself as the spokesperson of the political right in Pakistan. This radicalising impact of drones has been detrimental to conducting a fair and impartial assessment of America's role in helping build Pakistan's democratic institutions and supporting the people of the country through its numerous development projects. This is yet another examples of how the public's perceptions trump the material realities. The material realities are not utilised for the purpose of objective evaluations.

There is also a need to understand the effect of the drones in weakening the institutions of the states they might be operating in. Several US administrations have made a case for empowering the institutions of the states where terrorism might be a major challenge. These states include countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan and Iraq. It is often contended that terrorism flourishes in failed or failing states because these states do not have the right capacity to deal with the challenge at hand. We are told that only a stable democratic setup will solve the internal problems in these countries, including sectarian and religious terrorism. That explains several Western efforts that concern supporting rule of law initiatives in states like the ones mentioned above. A key objective of the endeavour is to enable countries to have the capacity to apprehend, charge, try and detain those considered to be breaking the law.

Where the US has stressed the need to bolster the state's capacities in many failed or failing states, it has also engaged in extra-judicial killings in these countries through its drones. There are very few platforms for those who might want to appeal such strikes. Importantly, such forums are often outside the targeted country's own judicial system.

Pakistani military officials often collude with the US in facilitating the targeting of suspected terrorists in FATA. Traditionally, Pakistan's army has been the main decider of the state's foreign policy. Pakistan's foreign allies have also chosen to work directly with the army, bypassing the civilian leadership even when democracy existed in Pakistan. That explains why Pakistan's democratic institutions suffer from a lack of legitimacy as their control over the country's destiny has been limited since the country's creation in 1947.

When it came into the White House, the Obama administration officials admitted that Washington was mistaken in supporting various military rulers in the country and from then on it would work to strengthen the democratic institutions there. There had been an acute realization that Pakistan's many ills may be attributed to the lack of a stable democratic system, and that not only the country but many other nations across the world have had to suffer for that reason. However, that support was not more than lip service during the two terms of US President Barack Obama. Though there has been much focus in American policy statements towards strengthening the democratic setup, Obama's usage of drones flew in the face of that approach (Aslam, 2011).

Officially, the government of Pakistan opposes the use of drones on its territory. The country's National Assembly and one of its High Courts have asked Washington to halt the attacks as they violate Pakistani sovereignty. However, this has had limited effect on American policy. This situation contributes to undermining the legitimacy of the Pakistani Parliament and the country's democratic setup, which is already struggling to emerge from the shadow of dictatorship. This neglect of the country's

democratic institutions has much symbolic relevance and significance. Such obvious bypassing of their own democratic and legal institutions may help the citizens of a targeted country legitimise circumventing the rule of law. In other words, the policy has served to undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system that the US wanted to support (Aslam, 2010).

Those championing the use of drones often focus on their ability to be precise and accurate. There is no doubt that by making the drones hover over their targets for hours, drone operators tend to ensure that they only attack the right person and the collateral damage is minimum or none. This faith in the technology's ability to deliver on its objectives is crucial for the contemporary drone programmes initiated by states. An intricate intelligence network is behind every drone strike. There are several ways to collect intelligence on one's targets. Some targets are selected on the basis of complex algorithms that may be related to the target's mobile phone signals. For example, one's chances of being attacked are higher if their mobile phones reveal they have an enhanced presence inside the home of a known terrorist. There are also sources of human intelligence that the targeting state employs to collect information on who is to be struck. That is often the case with Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Significantly, these informants are also part of the same societies as the targets. There are no publically available mechanisms to ascertain that these informants provide the correct information on their targets. Given that we cannot confirm whether the person killed was a combatant or a civilian, we cannot be certain of the exact accuracy of drone wars (Aslam, 2012).

Drones are useful for Western governments because they provide low-cost solutions to various complex problems that might otherwise have required a presence on the ground. They are a convenient tool in the time of austerity when the deployment of boots-on-the-ground is too expensive and not feasible. That also magnifies the need to be critical of the official discourses of accuracy and precision. An accurate weapon does not give *carte blanche* to our statesmen and women to use it in almost any possible setting. A more careful scrutiny and selection of all available tools are necessary in order to answer different challenges.

This writing has earlier studied the impact of the use of drones on domestic rule of law in certain states. However, it is also important to remember that certain facets of the usage of drones can also run contrary to the international law. The employment of drones is not prohibited under international law *per se*. However, there are aspects of their usage that, according to some, directly contravene the Geneva Conventions surrounding armed conflict. For example, one such use is in the form of double-tap attacks. Such attacks refer to strikes that closely follow on from another strike. They are normally undertaken to target those who might sympathise with the terrorists and who may come to rescue their friends after the first strike. That is a way to maximise the impact and to attack most number of enemies at one time and space.

Though there are cases where other terrorists come to help their allies after the first strike, these strikes also attract rescuers. Rescuers and humanitarian workers motivated by the objective to help those in need get together to recover bodies and take the injured to hospital. Quit clearly, not all of those who reach a location after a drone strike are terrorists. They include ambulance-drivers, other rescue workers and sometimes regular civilians. The Geneva Conventions specifically prohibit the killings of rescuers who are solely motivated by a humanitarian urge to help those in distress (Greenwald, 2012). American double-tap strikes have often been criticised quite vociferously and their number has now gone down in recent years.

Given the visibility of drone strikes, those undertaking them go out of their way to give an impression that they are following necessary rules and the force is being used in a proportionate manner. In order to avoid being criticised for killing innocent civilians, the Obama administration expanded the definition of who would be considered a combatant compared to who would be characterised as a civilian. Its members decided to define any 'military-aged-male' as a combatant and thus a legitimate target (Becker and Shane, 2012). This age range covered men as young as 16 and as old as 60. This redefinition was considered helpful in avoiding legal ramifications for killing innocent civilians. That reveals that successive governments employing drones take into account the legal impact of their actions. That also means that we have to be vigilant as to how certain terms like 'combatants' and 'civilians' are defined by Western leaders.

The United Kingdom's use of drones in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre particularly reveals that states are keen to use their drones under the framework of international law. The United States has launched the most number of lethal drone strikes so far in the region. The UK forces have joined their American counterparts in Afghanistan in using drones. However, the latter quite often made a point of distancing itself from the former by asserting that it uses these weapons within a clear legal framework. That framework has been guided by domestic British law as well as international law. The British forces' adherence to law was also applauded in a report by the UK Parliament's Defence Select Committee (Parliament, 2014). Importantly, the UK has not conducted any known strike in Pakistan due to the lack of a clear legal basis for the action. This remains true despite the fact that the British have launched hundreds of strikes as part of action against insurgents in Afghanistan (Roggio, 2017). The British government always maintained that it only employs its drones when there is a clear threat to British interests, especially to its armed forces operating in conflict zones. According to that logic, Pakistan would have been a target given that the country's tribal areas have provided haven for those who tried to perpetrate terrorist attacks in the UK (Alderson, 2008). In the absence of a clear legal mandate, however, the UK tended to rely on the US to attack

individuals threatening its interest. This British policy could be described as a responsible approach (Aslam, 2013b).

The 21 August 2015 British drone strike in Syria, killing two of its own citizens, however, has major implications for the UK's standing as a responsible great power in international society. The strike was a departure from that longstanding UK position of abiding by the rule of law. It has generated much interest and controversy since the day it was announced. It appeared that after much reluctance, the UK government started to follow in American footsteps to act as the judge, jury and executioner in matters of national security, citing 'imminent' threat (BBC News, 2015). Where the action may provide some legitimacy to the US stance of using armed drones in preemptive self-defence, it also poses a series of pertinent questions that require urgent answers before another such strike is undertaken.

One of the questions relates to the killing of British citizens as part of 'collateral damage'. Apparently, the British missile was aimed at Riyad Khan, 21, from South Wales, who was considered to be involved in planning an attack on VE Day commemorations in Central London in the summer of 2015. That strike also killed Ruhul Amin, a 26-year-old British citizen from Aberdeenshire, as well as another IS fighter. Unlike Khan, these individuals were not considered to be posing an imminent threat to UK interests and were killed because they happened to be traveling in the same car with Khan in the Raqaa area of northern Syria when the strike took place. If one were to accept the logic that Khan posed an imminent threat of the nature that he had to be targeted whenever the opportunity arose, a key question would ask whether the new British approach means that the UK government is willing to accept the loss of British lives as collateral damage. If yes, then how many British lives would be too many for the government to stop a strike from going ahead, leading the government to decide that the cost-benefit calculus was not in its favour? The US has in the past often called off strikes against terrorists that were on its watch lists if individuals not wanted by it were present in the area. The question is especially pertinent for the UK government given that the individual in question was a British citizen.

The former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, asserted that the strike had a clear legal basis under international law according to the advice given by the country's Attorney General. The apparent reference was to Article 51 of the UN Charter which upholds the right of states to respond when an armed attack occurs on their soil. However, the recent strike was not undertaken after an attack against the United Kingdom. It can be more aptly categorised as an example of preemptive self-defence. Policymakers in Washington have often referred to the US National Security Strategy of 2002 that made the US case for acting preemptively instead of waiting for an attack to occur (The White House, 2002). British officials, on the other hand, have refrained in the past from using that language so openly. David Cam-

eron's statement was a major departure from that approach as he championed that idea of preemption quite explicitly.

The issue of preemptive self-defence itself is not very contested, and nations around the world broadly concur that in the case of an imminent threat, governments are justified in acting to defend themselves. The question, however, is related to where the British government would draw the line. In other words, when would a threat move from the classification of 'likely' to 'imminent'? Furthermore, who will decide how to define an 'imminent' threat? British policymakers might have all good intentions but, as Henry Kissinger said, having good intentions does not always mean that one's actions would also be right. That is why liberal democracies have a system of checks and balances that allow for oversight and review of different branches of government. Critics of the August 2015 strike called for evidence of the threat to be presented to either the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee or an independent reviewer. Reviews such as these are critical in determining whether the government's decision to act preemptively was justified.

The British drone strike of August also opened the possibility of such strikes happening in the future. The strike also made it clear that the British government has decided to target its enemies directly instead of going to the US to take action against those who might be threatening British interests (as happened in the case of Rashid Rauf, killed in Pakistan in 2008 by American drones). There might be any number of reasons why the UK chose this approach despite protestations at home and abroad. One of these could be the desire among British policymakers to reassert the UK's position as a major great power in international society at a time when Russia, China and the US are returning to an era of great-power competition. Such preemptive actions do send clear signals to those plotting against the UK to refrain from doing so, but the policy shift has complex implications for Britain's status as a great power. In a rush to tackle imminent threats to its interests and to be (re)counted as a major player in global politics, the United Kingdom statesmen would be well advised to not endanger the country's standing as a more responsible great power that abides by international law, both in letter and in spirit.

The acquisition and use of drones is increasingly becoming an international status symbol. It is estimated that around eighty countries in the world have a drone programme or are exploring the possibility of establishing one (New America Foundation, 2017a). That means that we are going to see an increased likelihood of states arming them to intervene in conflicts. Given this scenario, we are going to face a world in which breaches of sovereignty are going to get more frequent in the coming years. Western countries have to be prepared to see other great powers, such as China, India and Russia, employ them inside their states or within the region. We need to be better prepared to avoid drone-led breaches of sovereignty escalate into major international conflicts.

There is also the challenge of non-state actors using these machines during conflicts. It has been reported that Hezbollah has been using quad copter-style drones to drop explosives in Syria to kill Syrian rebels (Axe, 2016). These are significant developments because it is clear that the technology is not just for the use of well-established militaries, they can also be used by non-state actors engaged in low-intensity conflicts. The United States military is already investing significant sums to destroy drones that might be coming to attack American forces. That means that the race does not just concern who develops a more sophisticated drone programme but also relates to who has a better defence against them. Future technologies created for such purpose would focus on mid-air destruction of such platforms.

This piece has highlighted various under-studied aspects of the use of drone technology. Though the author has brought up some of the significant negative repercussions of their use, the intention has not been to advocate a renunciation of drones. Furthermore, the author does not want to convey the message that nothing good comes out of the use of UAVs and the technology has only negative points. This is the technology of the future. As mentioned earlier, more and more states are investing heavily in their drone programmes. This piece has made the case to use these weapons with much more caution and circumspection. It warns us to not let our confidence in our technological expertise close over eyes to on-the-ground consequences of the use of drones.

The author has also shown that the perception of these weapons by different individuals matters a great deal. For example, we have examined on-the-ground consequences of American drone strikes in Pakistan and how the issue of perceptions can be critical. The debates on the efficacy and appropriateness of drone strikes rarely take into consideration these aspects of drone usage. We do not know much about how the masses in the countries at the receiving-end of drones make a link between these machines and the continuity of Western imperialism. There is also a need to understand how the technology may be weakening the rule of law. Furthermore, drones provide cannon fodder to the conservative politicians and statesmen in the target states to sell their ideology. Their job is made easier by a silent response adopted by the US with reference to their drone programme. There are hardly any justifications that are put forward to counter the indigenous narratives. The vacuum is filled by those who have their own agendas.

We have also looked at the implications of the drone usage for international law. Though not specifically contrary to international law, certain aspects of their usage are said to be breaking Geneva Conventions. We also highlighted how state and non-state actors in the world are employing drones for reasons ranging for surveillance, reconnaissance and even to attack their enemies.

The shortcomings of the policy of using drones have to be addressed if the West would like to conduct a fair and impartial assessment of the efficacy and appro-

priateness of the employment of this tool to counter the global terrorist threat. Furthermore, there is a need to view the use of drones as a short-term tactic with limited value in the long-run. They cannot serve as a replacement for the comprehensive strategy which would be required to deal with the type of challenges different countries are trying to tackle through the use of drones.

Drones are the technology of the future and there needs to be much more awareness about them among the statespersons as well as among the members of the public (Aslam and Rauxloh, 2015). Militaries would like to use any technology that will make their jobs easier. It is only by having a socially and politically aware masses that we can hold our militaries in check and our politicians accountable in every situation in which they make a case to employ drones to counter an emerging threat.

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