

On “Drones and US Strategy: Costs and Benefits”

Ulrike Franke

*This commentary is in response to Alan W. Dowd’s “Drone Wars: Risks and Warnings”; W. Andrew Terrill’s “Drones over Yemen: Weighing Military Benefits and Political Costs”; Greg Kennedy’s “Drones: Legitimacy and Anti-Americanism”; and Jacqueline L. Hazelton’s “Drones: What Are They Good For?” All articles were published in the Winter-Spring 2013 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 42, no. 4/vol 43, no. 1).*

In the Winter-Spring 2013 issue of *Parameters*, four authors discussed the new military tool the media has dubbed “drone” and which military officials prefer to call Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV). Alan W. Dowd, W. Andrew Terrill, Greg Kennedy, and Jacqueline L. Hazelton assist the reader in gaining a better grasp of one of today’s most debated issues—the increasing use of UAVs by the US military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen.

Unfortunately, there is not as much scholarship on drones as one might think. Consequently, the articles in the forum, in particular Alan Dowd’s “Drone Wars: Risks and Warnings,” are predominantly based on newspaper editorials and other media reports. Academia has indeed been slow to respond to the unmanned (r)evolution in warfare. This can be explained in part by the scarce source material—information on military UAVs and their use is largely kept secret; reliable information on missile strikes via UAVs is difficult to find, but is becoming more available. The relative lack of scholarly work on the military and political impact of UAVs, however, illustrates a general problem academia confronts when working on current affairs: the difficulty, if not inability, of the academic peer-review process to keep abreast with fast-changing, constantly developing current affairs. Jacqueline Hazelton should, therefore, be given credit for using a considerable amount of scholarly literature in her article “Drones: What Are They Good For?”

It is understandable, therefore, if authors sometimes revert to using general media sources when academic literature is sparse. There is, however, no excuse for using notoriously unreliable media reports for information such as casualty assessments after drone strikes or for the number of UAV users worldwide. In the last few years, several organizations started to gather more accurate information on these issues in a methodologically sound fashion. Instead of using *BBC News* information on Pakistani drone strike casualties, Greg Kennedy should have referenced numbers from the New America Foundation, the *Long War Journal*, or the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (which incidentally is

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where *BBC News* gets its numbers).¹ Instead of quoting *USA Today* concerning numbers of countries with UAVs, Alan Dowd could have used the International Institute for Strategic Studies publication *The Military Balance* or governmental information such that provided by the United States Government Accountability Office.²

All four papers share one major—admittedly common—flaw: the implicit equation of drones, MALE (Medium Altitude, Long Endurance) UAVs, and armed UAVs/UCAVs. It is immensely important to make these distinctions clear: “drone” is a term being used (incorrectly) to describe all kinds of unmanned aerial vehicles. (The better term to describe modern unmanned aircraft is Unmanned Aerial Vehicle [UAV].³) Modern UAVs, or drones, range from insect-sized aircraft to airplanes the size of commercial airliners. A very small number of UAVs can be armed, mostly with air-to-ground missiles. Accordingly, the terms drone and UAV can describe both the Black Hornet—a small (4.7 inches, 16 grams) reconnaissance drone—as well as the Global Hawk, a 14 ton aircraft with a 130.9 ft wingspan. Because UAVs come in so many different forms and can be used for a large variety of tasks, an increasing number of classifications and categorizations has been introduced. Usually, a distinction is made between mini, tactical, MALE, and HALE (High Altitude, Long Endurance) UAVs. The most notorious UAVs—the General Atomics Predator and Reaper which get by far the most attention in the media—are both MALE UAVs. The term UCAV (Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle) describes armed UAVs. Armed UAVs can theoretically come in all sizes; for the moment, however, most armed UAVs are MALE UAVs. The Reaper is the most potent UCAV currently in use and can be armed with up to fourteen Hellfire missiles or a combination of missiles and laser-guided bombs.

All four authors use the term drone, but none of them believes it necessary to define what exactly is meant by it. By their writing it becomes clear, however, they are not discussing drones in general, but rather a very specific type of UAV used for a very specific purpose. Jacqueline Hazelton notes “They can kill, disable, support fighters on the ground, destroy, harry, hinder, deny access, observe, and track.” This is not exactly false—but most of these attributes pertain to only a small fraction of today’s drones, namely armed MALE UAVs. She also writes,

1 Bureau of Investigative Journalism, *Covert War on Terror—The Datasets*, January 3, 2013, <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drone-data/>; New America Foundation, *The Year of the Drone*, <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>; Bill Roggio and Alexander Mayer, “Charting the Data for US airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004-2013,” *Long War Journal*, April 17, 2013, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>.

2 *The Military Balance* lists UAVs above 20 kg for all countries. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2013* (London: Routledge, 2013). The US Government Accountability Office has published a list of all suspected UAV users in 2012. “Non-proliferation: Agencies Could Improve Information Sharing and End-Use Monitoring on Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Exports,” US Government Accountability Office, July 2012, GAO-12-536: 10.

3 The definition of a drone is “an unmanned vehicle which conducts its mission without guidance from an external source.” This means that once launched, a drone’s flight path cannot be changed. Modern unmanned aircraft are, therefore, better described by the term UAV, “a powered, aerial vehicle that does not carry a human operator, uses aerodynamic forces to provide vehicle lift, can fly autonomously or be piloted remotely, can be expendable or recoverable, and can carry a lethal or nonlethal payload. Ballistic or semiballistic vehicles, cruise missiles, and artillery projectiles are not considered unmanned aerial vehicles”. (All definitions taken from the “NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (English and French),” NATO Standardization Agency (NSA) 2008, AAP-6(2008), <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/other/nato2008.pdf>. These definitions are also used by the US Department of Defense and other governmental agencies.)

“They are claimed to do less collateral damage than either missiles or manned aerial bombing,” practically equating UAVs and missiles. Alan Dowd writes that drones are “hitting targets from Asia to Africa,” equipped with missiles fired “by a remote-control warrior sitting in the safety of a nondescript building outside Las Vegas.” He considers them “a cheap alternative to long-range, long-endurance warplanes.” None of these statements applies to the large majority of drones, which are small to medium-sized unarmed tactical surveillance UAVs. The statements are only true for MALE UCAVs.

The misuse of the term drone is not only an analytical nuisance—it has direct implications for the readers’ understanding of the issues surrounding UAV use. When Alan Dowd discusses UCAVs over nine pages and then mentions an “estimated 75 countries have drone programs underway,” there clearly is a risk readers will assume that 75 countries have or will soon have armed MALE UAVs. In reality, of these 75 countries, only three are known to have UCAVs (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel) and two (China and Iran) are suspected to have UCAVs. Most states do not have MALE UAVs. It might be the author was unaware of the distinctions. Quoting an *Economist* article which states, “Training UAS [Unmanned Aerial System] controllers . . . costs less than a tenth as much as turning out a fast-jet pilot,” Dowd replaces UAV with UCAV and writes “training UCAV controllers costs less than a tenth what it costs to train traditional combat aviators.”

Most importantly, it is crucial not to confuse the tool, i.e., armed UAVs, with the strategy—targeted killing. A drone is an aircraft that can be used (and is indeed being used) in conventional war settings or for civilian purposes. It is not synonymous with targeted killings or signature strikes, nor with surveillance or tapping, crop dusting or real estate photography (all of which drones have been used for). Using the term in a way that makes the reader confuse the tool and the task, especially if the task is highly contentious and potentially illegal, holds a risk of public opinion turning against the tool which can be, if used the right way, of considerable military value.

The military and political value of using armed UAVs for missile strikes in undeclared conflict zones is a question all four authors approach. The shared sentiment is that the undeniable tactical victories of targeted killings and signature strikes via UCAVs are lessened or even neutralized by strategic setbacks. Andrew Terrill, in his excellent study of US UCAV use in Yemen, states the use of military armed drones “appear to have made a significant difference in helping the Yemeni government cope with AQAP [al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] while reducing that organization’s ability to conduct international terrorism.” He, however, identifies the drone program as “deeply unpopular with many Yemenis.” UAVs have been criticized for violating national sovereignty, for putting psychological pressure on local populations in areas routinely monitored by UAVs, and for causing high numbers of civilian casualties. Terrill assesses there is, therefore, the “potential for serious backlash over any drone-related disaster.” Greg Kennedy draws attention to the risk of fuelling anti-American resentment and alienating allies through the inconsiderate use of UCAVs. Alan Dowd cites former US ambassador to NATO, Kurt Volker, who warns drone strikes might play into terrorists’ hands by helping them recruit new followers.

Unsurprisingly, because of this mixed picture, none of the authors unequivocally argues in favor or against the increasing use of UCAVs. Alan Dowd seems most favorable towards the new technology, but underlines “there exists no simple solution to the drone dilemma.” Andrew Terrill puts it best, indicating “drones are on probation” for the moment. Much will depend on the United States’ handling of its growing unmanned air force. It is important that academia actively participate this discussion. It is insufficient to observe the development from afar and to hide behind academic impartiality and objectivity. “Sparking further analysis of drone strikes,” as Jacqueline Hazelton aims to, is not enough. More pathbreaking scholarship on US drone use is needed. Of the four articles presented in this issue, Andrew Terrill’s detailed analysis of US drone use in Yemen and its military and political benefits and costs meets these requirements best.

These four articles provide a useful introduction and overview of central issues surrounding U(C)AV use. More analysis is to come, and, as Hazelton points out, “Many good minds are already at work, and more evidence should become available as time passes and, perhaps, as the United States makes its drone programs more transparent.” Those interested in the future of drone use in the United States and worldwide have a lot to look forward to.

On occasion, we receive commentary to articles published in the journal. We offer our authors the opportunity to review and respond to that commentary. The following reply is from Alan W. Dowd, author of “Drone Wars: Risks and Warnings.”

One Author Replies

Alan W. Dowd

Although Ms. Franke does not appear to challenge the central premise of my essay—that drone warfare opens the United States to a range of geostrategic, geopolitical, constitutional, and public policy challenges the American people and their elected representatives have not fully considered—she offers some helpful insights. Among the most important of these is the notion that we should “not confuse the tool, i.e., armed UAVs, with the strategy—targeted killing.” Regrettably, that appears to be what is happening in policymaking circles, as targeted killing with UCAVs—a tactic—has taken the place of strategy. Even so, I share her view that UCAVs can be a tool of considerable military value, but only if their use is more restrained and better defined by policymakers.

Her commentary emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between UAVs and UCAVs. This admonition is well taken. My essay made sure to note, “In the past decade, the US drone fleet has swelled from 50 planes to 7,500, though the vast majority of these drones are not UCAVs,” and made a distinction between the Army’s fleet of reconnaissance/surveillance drones and strike drones. I did use the “UCAV” acronym in discussing the disparity between manned and unmanned

training costs. It is worth noting that even some Pentagon documents use the umbrella term “UAS”—or “unmanned aerial systems”—in discussing strike and nonstrike drones. Moreover, there is a significant difference in the costs of training drone operators and traditional pilots. A recent Air Force report discussing MQ-1 Predators and MQ-9 Reapers—importantly, the report describes the MQ-1 as focusing on “interdiction and armed reconnaissance against critical, perishable targets” and the MQ-9 as “a persistent hunter-killer”—concluded that using nonaviators to operate these armed drones could save several hundred thousand dollars per pilot/controller.

Ms. Franke takes issue with my mention of 75 countries having drone programs underway. My essay did not say that all of them are UCAV programs, but some are. In fact, Russia is developing what it calls “automated strike aircraft.” Germany is procuring armed drones. After its experience in Libya and Mali, France is keenly interested in acquiring the Reaper. And then there are the known unknowns: Are Hezbollah’s drones armed? Has North Korea retooled its drones into offensive weapons? To whom will China sell its armed drones? Moreover, a drone does not have to be armed to trigger an international incident, as the United States and Iran have learned, which is one of my broader points: Drones could usher in a new age of accidental wars.

A final caveat on sourcing—the commentator writes, “There is not as much scholarship on drones as one might think; most of the articles . . . are predominantly based on newspaper editorials and other media reports,” and warns against using “notoriously unreliable media reports.” First, I am aware of no “notoriously unreliable media reports” cited in my essay. Second, owing to the nature of this new, evolving weapons system, the use of media reports as supporting material is unavoidable. Third, just as it is problematic to conflate “UAV” and “UCAV,” it is problematic to conflate “editorials” and “media reports.” Of the 49 footnotes in my essay, one comes from an editorial: a *New York Times* editorial expressly cited to convey how armed drones are being promoted by the press. Two come from authoritative essays penned by topic experts: a former US ambassador and a former National Security Council official. There are 20 news sources cited, 6 Defense Department reports, 5 books, 3 scholarly journals/reports, 2 military briefings/interviews, 2 polls, one State Department briefing, one treaty, and one statute.