

Future Challenges in Drone Geopolitics

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A Special Issue of the Journal of Strategic Security

This special issue of the Journal of Strategic Security is a timely response to something of a modern mystery. It is timely because it is difficult to read or watch television these days without coming across some reference to drone warfare or the complex questions revolving around unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). It is a bit of a mystery, however, because despite this pervasiveness of drones in the news there are relatively few scholarly efforts to rigorously and comprehensively cover the issues that flow from their use.

Our focus was to find talented writers that would be able to elucidate the trends and trials of drone geopolitics and touch on their impact to international security. Foremost in our thinking were the challenges that included the governmental and increasingly commercial use of UAVs, drone technology proliferation, the robotics revolution in military affairs, and the ethical, privacy, and civil liberty implications with widespread drone usage. Some of the questions that seemed most pertinent to us included: What are the potential long-term implications of drones in government and private industry? How is policy keeping pace with proliferation, innovation, and application? What consideration has been given to unintended consequences, especially if violent non-state actors acquire the technology? Is there a need for ethical standards or universal norms? If yes, then who should or can lead such a charge?

Our belief was that these greater empirical, ethical, and policy consequences innate to the spread of drone technology and drone acquisition were under-addressed in the scholarly and policy communities. We could not find the rigorous research and analysis we expected.. Indeed, it was actually somewhat surprising to this editorial team, given how easy it was to find discussions about drones amongst pundits and politicians, to not find as developed or organized an audience amongst serious scholars and practitioners. JSS sent out the call for papers (CFP) specifically to numerous locations – think tanks, governmental and non-governmental organizations, academic centers and institutes – all of which had a history of making drone issues an intellectual priority. While the response to the CFP was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, we also noticed difficulty in turning that enthusiasm into formal submissions reflecting a serious research effort. At the moment, therefore, our reading of the intellectual environment is that interests in drones is on the rise, but is still suffering from formal scholarly productivity. Hopefully efforts like this one at JSS will spur momentum forward. .

There is no doubt there are a number of talented individuals working diligently on the issues and concerns voiced above. But what has been largely absent in the

scholarly community has been a synthesis of such voices to allow their work to be seen in concert with each other: informing one another, complementing one another, building a true body of knowledge to which other scholars and practitioners can contribute. We believe that any reader engaging this special edition cover to cover will finally have the depth, nuance, and subtlety that seem to be quite frankly absent in the media coverage of drones and drone technology. We also believe the articles contained within are some of the leading examples of the formal scholarly work being done today and that the authors are important new voices to be heard in the years to come.

Contributions to the Special Issue

The articles assembled in this issue of *Journal of Strategic Security* examine drones domestically and globally, both for commercial and military use. Seven papers have been selected for the purpose of further developing scholarship on issues related to drones and their policy, legal, and ethical dimensions. Some common themes emerge in these works: a view that drones are effective as “raw” military instruments, but have the potential to cause political blowback in terms of negative global public perception due to civilian casualties associated with their use. A common theme appears to be the superficial compatibility of drones with just war, yet apparently disproportionate civilian deaths seem to indicate otherwise. Several authors focus on the potential for increased drone usage for commercial and government purposes in U.S. (“domestic”) airspace, noting that policy and law has a long way to catch up to the realities of increased drone usage by a wide range of actors for dynamic purposes in the future.

Matthew Crosston anchors the special issue by addressing inconsistent and, at times, contradictory ethical standards in American drone engagement policy. Specifically, he poses tough questions that don’t yet have satisfactory answers, including: if the U.S. becomes so skilled at waging war from a distance, then has a vital brake on militarism and war-waging been lost?¹ With drones, being used by both the military and intelligence community, is there a unified code of behavior, use, and standards? Who is ultimately responsible if secret missions go awry or mistakes are made? Crosston points out that the United States may rely too heavily on its continued drone dominance and not thinking about the *empirical ethical lessons* it is setting for the rest of the world when it comes to technology, war, and the rules of engagement. His article concludes with a brief examination of other nations who have drone aspirations, highlighting the contention that, “as ever more members join the drone club, the precedents established by the drone leader [the United States] are going to be relevant.”

¹ Anonymous, “Leaders: Drones and the Man – The ethics of warfare,” *The Economist*, July 30, 2011.

Michael Heatherly tackles the debate surrounding the use of drones by law enforcement over American skies and privacy concerns of private citizens. Questions about the use of drones and constitutional protections – such as warrantless search and seizure – have risen in the courts to fan the flame of debate. Heatherly notes that the citizens must be prepared for a future in which drones are increasingly utilized by law enforcement agents for criminal intelligence and operations, and play a beneficial role in keeping the borders safe and secure. The laws governing the use of drones in U.S. airspace is so far adequate, but time will tell as drone technology continues to proliferate and perhaps new use cases emerge.

Yeonmin Cho takes a closer look at drone usage in domestic airspace in the United States, focusing in particular on safety. Cho contends that safety, heretofore, has not generated the level of attention it deserves in the public debate. The regulatory framework in U.S. law has developed only recently and slowly; the FAA Modernization and Reform Act (FMRA), which opened the door for the commercial use of drones, was signed a little over two years ago, in February 2012. To fully tap into the potential of drones –and the large anticipated market for their commercial use – Cho contends that ensuring safety should be the top priority for the Federal Aviation Administration in developing and finalizing rules for civilian drone use in the national airspace.

Stephanie Hall turns the focus internationally in her article about the use of drones, particularly in Pakistan, to combat terrorism. The centerpiece of her research is the debate about the utility of relying on stand-off technology, especially airpower, to achieve military objectives without appropriate coupling with other activities, such as socio-economic aid. While noting that targeting terrorists with drones has proven effective, she contends that the blowback from drone strikes in Pakistan has increased anti-American sentiment. If drones were incorporated into a larger strategic plan encompassing foreign aid, education, infrastructure, and strategic messaging among others. Effective implementation is not without its challenges, however, as depends at least in part on the cooperation of the Pakistani government.

Alcides Eduardo dos Reis Peron continues the focus on the use of drones in Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan, primarily through the lens of international human rights. His analysis questions the legitimacy of drone usage in combat, and claims the employment of drones in Pakistan is incompatible with the idea of Just War – particularly in what concerns human rights and territorial sovereignty. Peron contends that the practice of targeted killings using drones is in discordance to the principles of international law. In short, the practice of targeted killing using drones fails to respect humanitarian principles that would guarantee legitimacy to the operations.

Ann Rogers notes that drones offer three clear benefits over manned systems: Access, persistence, and accuracy. She notes in her analysis that drones have become an increasingly attractive option for policy-makers and military commanders alike, while also concluding that drones cause significant loss of civilian life amid much controversy. Rogers focuses on the use of drones in the Gaza by Israel in Operation Protective Edge, where it was clear that the positive attributes of drone usage paradoxically led to increased use and increased civilian casualties. She concludes that drones contribute to civilian casualties not in spite of, but because of, their attributes of access-persistence-accuracy. The reason is because drones encourage planners to mount large numbers of attacks on the grounds that they are likely to be more accurate and therefore less damaging, when in fact the lesson emerging from Gaza is that in practice the opposite effect is achieved.

Finally, Michael Fowler rounds out this special issue by discussing the U.S. military decision making process for drone employment. That process takes into account four key factors: public perception, political risk, legal considerations, and military strategy. The implications of these dynamics elevate what seem on the surface tactical planning to the realm of higher-order strategy. The stakes for using drones, Fowler contends, are high because of public perceptions that drone strikes cause civilian deaths. He concludes by noting that drones, for this reason, may be at a comparative disadvantage to “traditional” manned aircraft.

It is hoped that you enjoy learning as much as reading in this special issue on the future of drones in geopolitics. The trend lines are clear and resonate throughout each article: drones will continue to advance in technology and constitute a pervasive feature of military, law enforcement, intelligence, and other governmental operations in the foreseeable future. Commercial use of drones has yet to proliferate as it likely will even more near term. Therefore, more research and scholarship is going to be necessary to ensure that policy and practice are better aligned and ultimately make a positive net contribution to international security.