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The New Strategist

The *New Strategist*, the journal of the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre,¹ aims to acquaint readers with excellent and innovative interdisciplinary articles in strategic studies that address the pressing concerns of leaders in the fields of defence and security. The journal does not present UK Ministry of Defence policy, opinions or beliefs; every article independently stands or falls on its intellectual merit.

The *New Strategist* is interested in strategic thinking and thinking about strategy, but it is not limited only to debates about theory and decision-making. Instead, it spans a wide field of view. In addition, it aims to combine cutting-edge theoretical advances in defence and security theory with recent findings in empirical and practitioner-focused research. The *New Strategist* encourages innovative analyses across disciplinary boundaries that challenge conventional approaches and promotes critical and creative thinking in matters that impact upon defence and security.

The *New Strategist* welcomes submissions from academics and policymakers across the arts, humanities, and social sciences and including such disciplines as international relations, political science, military history, strategic studies, political sociology, political economy, anthropology, organisational and management studies, and all fields related to defence.

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On the Ethics of Drone Strikes, Optimism and Obscuring Language: A Conversation with an Anonymous Academic

CHRISTIANA SPENS

CS: Is there an ethical dilemma regarding the use of drone strikes, and is that dilemma specific to drones, rather than air strikes, for instance?

AA: I think there are ethical dilemmas specific to drones because of the ways that drones are deployed. So they're deployed by people who are entirely remote from the target. And therefore, the kind of decision processes that human beings are normally capable of when they are in a relationship with their environment and capable of picking up all kinds of cues, both consciously and subconsciously. That sort of relationship with the environment — those sorts of feeds to intelligent decision-making — are absent. Therefore I think there are specific issues.

CS: Is it fair that there should be so little risk for the drone operators? Does it matter that one side risks so much less than the other?

AA: I think this is part of a larger question, whether it is now possible for a just war to be fought justly. Now this is a big philosophical question, and I'm not an expert on it, but it seems to me that increasingly, there are things that suggest that the answer to that is no. Part of that is that the attacker in this case has much less at stake than the potential victim. So I think there are another series of issues there that merit exploration.

CS: More generally then, if killing is made 'easier' through such technology, then how does this affect the people instructed to kill, and the action of killing?

AA: I would be very interested to know the answer to that. I was chatting to somebody within the last week who says there's been some interesting work on that recently, and some science of psychological issues and mental health issues as a result. Which I think one would expect, but previous work on PTSD and trauma and killing suggests that the greater distance — physical and psychological — from the target — in a sense the easier it is to manage the personal and psychological consequences. So that would be a very interesting thing to explore.

CS: From a philosophical rather than psychological point of view, do you think, if the killing is at a distance (physically and psychologically), does that make it any different, morally? Does it make a difference?

AA: To the targets it doesn't make any difference. They're going to be killed. There's an ethical dimension over the accuracy of these weapons. And it seems to me that there's quite a lot of mythology surrounding — and loose use of language surrounding — modern high tech weaponry. There are these clichés about surgical strikes, that these would only 'take out' or whatever is the current euphemism — enemy targets — and this, quite clearly, is not the case. And yet the discourse surrounding this — in particular from the military and from politicians — is, I would suggest, really quite misleading. And I think greater care needs to be taken in ensuring that people who are not only within the system, so to speak, that is resulting in deaths via the use of these weapons — but also the public and politicians are much more careful in their use of language.

CS: If the people involved, then, are misled into thinking that, perhaps by the language used, that these strikes are ethical because they're more specific than they really are — whose responsibility is it, then? Is their moral responsibility less because they're being misled?

AA: Well, I would be interested to know more sufficient detail to know how the kill chain works, to be able to answer that question. But I don't know how it works. An analogy of the decisions that led to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima Nagasaki — in which, it has been suggested, in a very good book by Jonathan Glove, that *nobody* really felt responsible, from the president downwards. And that is possible, I suppose, with the spread of responsibility and the very large numbers of people who are involved in that decision-making. And the way that they will rationalise and justify and imagine what it is that they are doing. I don't know whether that's a good analogy or not, but I find it quite a helpful one.

CS: So perhaps no one has any direct responsibility for actually killing someone, if they can rationalise their part in it by saying 'I was told to do this' and so on... That comes about through a diffusion of responsibility, but ultimately people still die.

AA: People still die. Just to go back to my atomic bomb analogy — President Truman, according to his journals, appeared to have convinced himself that those two bombs were attacking military targets. And that is quite an interesting definition of military target — if you're actually going to wipe out large amounts of two cities. So I think a lot of the things that are going on here, as you say, diffuse the sense of moral and ethical responsibility. And actually, the responsibility of making decisions.

CS: And going back to the first question, is that specific to drone strikes? Or is this the latest manifestation of the tendency of responsibility to be diffused? Is it also an inevitable consequence of technological advancement?

AA: I think that there is a difference to the experience of a pilot in the air, and the operatives, often contractors, who are on another continent. I think it is a difference

in experience. And it goes back to my original point about environmental clues and feedback informing decisions. That said, the literature on bombers and fighter pilots, certainly in the Second World War (I'm not so familiar with the more recent literature), suggests that for them, killing at a distance was considerably easier than for people who were kind of hand to hand.

CS: Are there historical precedents to the use of drone strikes in Afghanistan (especially), and, if so, what do these precedents tell us about current strategy and its possible strengths and pitfalls?

AA: Obviously a drone is different to previous sorts of aerial bombardment, but Afghanistan, as I recall, was the first area in Central Asia, where after the First World War, the UK bombarded from the air, in the so-called, very brief, Third Afghan War. I think what we can learn, going way back into the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1839–41, is that British military activity in Afghanistan has resulted in the reputation of the British being extraordinarily casual about civilian casualties. Memory in societies with oral traditions is long — memories get confused — but are still strong — and stories about the excesses of the army of retribution, after the disastrous retreat of the First World War, were still current around 1970 when the American anthropologist Louis Dupree visited the site of the British retreat and collected such stories. And what the Brits did with the Indian seapoys to exact revenge in Afghanistan in 1842, was a terrible atrocity, and these things are remembered, albeit in a mixed up way — and of course the Afghan written accounts of what the Brits did in the first two Afghan wars are very different to the accounts that I'm familiar with, you're familiar with — what was written by the Brits. So what's the relevance of that to drone strikes? That the drone strikes provide further evidence of this casual approach to civilian casualties in conflict on the part of the Brits. And I would have thought, in spite, no doubt, of their best efforts otherwise, the US military would have gained a similar reputation. So I think that's an important theme.

CS: And in terms of propaganda, obviously those against the Americans can use these memories and this construction, whether true or false, that this is a long injustice that has been going on for many years, and one that should be rebelled against... So it feeds into a current propaganda war also.

AA: It does. It does not surprise me. I expect history will judge the drone campaigns, and the intensity of them in that area, including in Pakistan, as having been a cause of exacerbating the security problem in that region and internationally. To some extent — I mean I can hear the US military, if they were here, or the UK military, if they were hearing me say this, would say, but you (plural) are beneficiaries of this because we have killed so many leading members of Al Qaida. Well I have my doubts about this... One might need to define success in a broader way than the number of enemies killed.

CS: So a longer view of success?

AA: Absolutely, a longer view. And a broader definition. One needs to think what it is like for the people living in the FATA area, having drones above them all the

time. Well, a lot of the time. The effects of that must be extraordinarily disturbing. I imagine that it's unlikely for people who are affected by drones, either directly or indirectly, to think that what the US is doing is justified and righteous.

CS: What do you think would be a better alternative to using drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan (and whether or not that depends on the region)? Would air strikes be better, or would more careful assassinations of certain people be better, and does that vary, region to region?

AA: There must be a difference between drone strikes within Afghanistan and drone strikes on sovereign Pakistan territory, which must create huge difficulties for the Pakistani authorities, and for the way that Pakistan is trying to secure itself. As to methods of assassination, I'm not sure I'm in the position to judge.

CS: I suppose I mean that, in effect, drone strikes can seem more like a messy type of assassination, if the aim is for 'surgical strikes'. But assassination isn't seen as a great idea for various legal reasons. Pragmatically, though, would assassinations actually be more ethical than drone strikes, when [drone strikes] involve so much collateral damage?

AA: Well I wouldn't want to be in a position of attempting to justify assassination. And I think what we're talking about here rather depends on how one frames the activities of the Allies: what is the mission in Afghanistan, what right is there for the US to be killing people in Pakistan? So I'm not sure in this context what 'assassination' would mean.

CS: I suppose I just mean is that when talk of drone strikes is about 'surgical strikes' and the 'taking out of certain key targets', firstly that isn't really any different to assassination, and secondly, other types of assassination might actually be more ethical, since there could be less collateral damage.

AA: Well are not drone strikes a method of assassination?

CS: If the intention is simply to take out certain people, I don't see how they are very different, really. And it would be more ethical to just take out one person, than take out various others as well.

AA: Well I'm not sufficiently expert in knowing about whether it is possible to take out fewer people using different methods of assassination. . . I think that clearer thinking about what drone strikes do [however], and what the language used actually means, would help focus minds. 'Targeted killings', 'collateral damage', 'taking people out' . . .

CS: I suppose that's the problem — a lack of transparency when it comes to describing the effects of drone strikes.

AA: The debate *is* obscured by the use of language, it's also obscured by the extraordinary over-optimism of what the military tend to claim that they're able to do. A book I'd strongly recommend [on this subject] is *Overconfidence in War* by Professor Dominic Johnson. . . He explores the adaptive utility of optimism, in con-

flict. So an example is the extraordinary optimism there would appear to be about — and enthusiasm for — allied air strikes on Iraq and Syria, as if there somehow will be a panacea, and this tends to be a characteristic of discourse at the opening of hostilities. Exaggeration — well meaning — by wonderful people — about what can be achieved.