Policy Brief: Multilateralism and Public Support for Drone Strikes

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Policy & Problem

France and the U.S. frequently use Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or drones for counterterrorism. France submits its strikes to the United Nations (UN) for approval but the U.S. does not. Rather, U.S. officials rely on domestic legal authorizations. This is puzzling because scholars agree that multilateral approval through the UN enhances public support and legitimacy for the use of force.

What We Study

We use a survey experiment to evaluate the effects of multilateralism on public attitudes for drone strikes, namely public support and perceptions of legitimacy. We clarify the mechanisms through which the public may connect international approval with support and legitimacy. These include propositions about the legality,
merit, and morality of a strike, as well as perceptions of burden-sharing. We first asked respondents, 914 Americans and 909 French citizens, about their support and perceived legitimacy for a hypothetical strike varying UN approval (yes or no) and the country executing the operation (America or France). We then asked respondents about their perceptions of the strike's legality, merit, and morality, and how likely it is that other countries would help carry out the strike.

What We Find

Our findings show that a unilateral strike is associated with lower levels of perceived legitimacy. Importantly, our analysis shows a similar trend among French and U.S. respondents for the perceived legitimacy of a strike with or without multilateral approval. This implies consistency of public attitudes cross-nationally in France and the U.S., which coincides with existing research for drones and public attitudes.

At the same time, French respondents are also more likely to perceive a unilateral strike conducted by their own country as well as others as illegitimate. This is different for Americans, who are more likely to perceive a unilateral strike conducted by their own country as legitimate and are more apt to support it as well. Further, we find that respondents emphasize international law as the basis for support and legitimacy, suggesting a cross-national belief in multilateralism for normative rather than strictly instrumental reasons.
Why We Trust Our Results

We used a randomized control trial to protect against bias that can afflict other research methods, including selection bias and omitted variable bias. We also used a professional firm, Qualtrics, to resource our respondent pools that were blocked according to age, education, and gender. In addition to randomizing the question order to mitigate priming, our research design approximates how people make decisions in real life, which is to say for one event at a time that falls along a broader game-tree of decision points.

Why It Matters

Our study builds on the drone warfare scholarship by making two key contributions. First, whereas most scholars use U.S. respondents to proxy for global public opinion on drone strikes, we test public attitudes in a cross-national context. Second, we contribute to an emerging literature for the political psychology of drone use, which corresponds to a renewed interest in psychological approaches to international relations broadly.

Read our full study here: Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps (Research & Politics, 2022)