

American Drones and Global Security

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That the United States of America is the undisputed global military super power is a fact that can no longer be contested, especially since the balkanization of the Soviet Union brought the Cold War to an abrupt, subsequently creating a new global order. Since then, the U.S has gone ahead to become the world's policeman and arbiter of peace.

The "Vietnam Syndrome" is a term that refers to the hangover effect of America's massive military losses during the Vietnam War. It refers to the shocking realization within U.S defense circles that its military was not constituted by bionic men after all; that like other armies, its forces were not invincible, but susceptible to the normal hazards of combat; that the American military could, like the armies of other nations, also register high casualty rates in war. Painful as these lessons were, the significant realities they conveyed to the eggheads of the military industrial complex were legion – the primary one being that wars are cruel to all the parties that engage in them.

After the embarrassing losses it suffered in its war with the Vietcong, there was a general consensus within the defense industry that the U.S could no longer afford to risk the lives of fellow Americans in future military engagements. To this end, a new stratagem, with greater emphasis on increased reliance on research, development and deployment of state of the art military technology in future military campaigns, was to be adopted to safeguard the lives of American forces. The subsequent wars the U.S fought in its post-Vietnam campaigns vindicated its adoption of a new paradigm to warfare.

The seamless successes of its campaigns in Iraq – Gulf Wars 1&11 - and Afghanistan, where it suffered minute fractions of casualties, compared to previous expeditions, were classic demonstrations of the undoubted effectiveness of its new strategic approach to combat; successes that have emphatically demonstrated the lucidness of its fighting machine to the rest of the watching world. In these engagements, the U.S did not send in ground troops initially, as was the tradition prior to the Vietnam blunder, but launched comprehensive air, land, and sea bombardments of carefully chosen military and military-related targets, using some of the most sophisticated high-tech equipment ever manufactured and deployed on the field of battle since the advent of modern combat, before committing ground troops to finish off any remaining resistance. The devastation wrecked by these weapons and the manner they decisively decided the outcome of these conflicts are testaments to the omnipotent status America's defense establishment enjoys over its contemporaries.

However, one new development that is bound to define the future of future military engagements, and which has the tendency of totally tipping the scales of modern wars in the U.S' favour, is the rise of Drones – or Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – which has given birth to a new era of combat – the age of robotic warfare. Part of the "Unmanned Combat Systems Program", Drones have completely redefined the face of warfare, giving an unfair advantage to any adversary employing it. A Drone is a pilotless plane which can be guided by remote control, or can navigate automatically based on pre-programmed software.

The U.S is the world's Drone superpower, with an estimated 7, 500 aircrafts currently in its arsenal, according to Pentagon sources. Although Israel was the first country to develop military Drone technology after the Arab-Israeli War, during which its air forces sustained heavy losses, and is a top exporter after the U.S, the U.S remains both the largest producer and most frequent user of the air craft. Drones are currently been employed by the U.S for both military and non-military purposes: by the military for gathering intelligence and military strikes – in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Libya – by police departments for surveillance, by farmers for crop yield observation, by wildlife conservationist for anti-poaching surveillance, etc.

Drones are seen as the future of modern warfare because: they are less prone to mistakes than other weapons systems, they remove the risks to soldiers and civilian non-combatants, and because technology will continue to improve such that Drones become even more precise, efficient, and infallible in the future, thus rendering less precise, efficient and fallible human forms of war obsolete. Drones are thus seen as marking “a giant step forward in humanitarian technology”, and viewed as “a weapon of choice for future national leaders in planning national security strategies.

But one of the greatest threats posed to global security is the possible proliferation of this technology in the manner the world was literally brought to a standstill during the era of the nuclear arms race when several players took a cue from the US and the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and joined the nuclear club. Already, Russia, China, Pakistan, Indian, Iran and some others are said to be test-running their own prototypes prelude to the commencement of full production. The possible explosion in the production of these devices is definitely going to make the world a much more volatile place as the casualty rates from armed combats are bound to increase exponentially.

Another worst-case scenario that is better not imagined is the possibility of terrorists groups acquiring Drone technology and deploying it in their zero-sum wars of attrition across the globe. The new face of global terrorism, which is driven by a compulsive bloodlust, makes Drones very attractive options. The operational advantages they provide can be exploited by these groups to devastating effects. Imagine these invincible and highly lethal machines in the hands of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas etal. When eventually these aircrafts become available in commercial quantity, some of the questions that will certainly pop up are: how effectively can the sale and usage of Drones be monitored? What will stop an apocalyptic group from acquiring Drones meant for civilian use and modifying them to suit their depraved purposes? These are some pertinent questions that must be answered by policymakers, manufacturers and marketers of these weapons of combat by the time they become available for use on a wider scale, outside the largely military purpose it is currently serving.

Coming closer to the home front, the U.S recently proposed to establish a Drone base in Niger Republic, a neighboring country to Nigeria, to assist in monitoring the activities of groups such as Al-Qaeda and their affiliates. The implications of the establishment of such a base for the security of the Western African sub-region will be very far reaching. For a country like Nigeria, whose security has been seriously compromised by the activities of Boko Haram, an Islamist fundamentalist group reported to have ties with Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabbab and Hezbollah, there is no guarantee that the country's airspace will not be illegally violated, as the U.S seeks to gather intelligence for the use of its military, and that it will not use this pretext to engage in other clandestine activities that might

breach the country's sovereignty, knowing the antecedents of its secret services in other theatres of conflict across the globe.

As America's role as the policeman of the globe and sole guarantor of peace continues to expand, adopting a security strategy that will reduce all possible threats to its security forces to the barest minimum, makes the use of Drones and other Unmanned systems the best option. Since assuming office, US President, Barack Obama, has sanctioned the increasing use of Drones in the country's military operations across the world. His administration has conducted more than three times as many Drone strikes per year compared to his predecessor in the Oval Office – an indication of the manner the U.S would prefer fighting its future wars.

In all, the use of Drones as choice weapons of modern warfare is bound to determine the outcome of future wars, especially as more participants prepare to join the league of countries in possession of these tactical aerial war machines. The increasing interest in this technology in defense circles across the globe, coupled with the ongoing research into the development of other unmanned – land, air, and sea – systems are bound to tilt the scale of future combats in favour of armies in possession of these robots. For the U.S, a country whose ambition of global military supremacy has never been a secret, the comparative advantage it currently enjoys in the production and deployment of this technology is an issue that should raise serious concerns in security circles across the globe.

Thus, for world peace and security to be effectively guaranteed, in the wake of the entry of these invincible flying machines into the theaters of modern combat, there is urgent need for ethical and legal guidelines in the research, production, sale and deployment of these stealth weapons of combat to be established to guide countries in possession of this technology. International organizations, continental bodies, international non-governmental organizations and national governments must push for the hashing out of effective and far reaching policies to this effect. No effort should be spared, for any effort directed towards the: peace, security and progress of the world is worth it.

God save the world!