Drones Risk Putting US on 'Slippery Slope' to Perpetual War

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As the *New York Times* reports, the Stimson Center today released a report warning that "the Obama administration's embrace of targeted killings using armed drones risks putting the United States on a 'slippery slope' into perpetual war." The *Washington Post*, the *Guardian* and Vox all lead their articles on the report with that warning.

The slippery slope point probably isn't new to most readers. But it's worth focusing on here, both because the argument is often misstated or misunderstood, and because, in this case, I helped make it. The report's task force, co-chaired by retired General John Abizaid, former head of U.S. Central Command and Rosa Brooks of Georgetown Law, included working groups. I was on one that considered, among other things, what danger drones create for U.S. foreign policy. The report largely reflects those we identified: the erosion of sovereignty, blowback from those in targeted countries, drone strikes' tendency to undermine democratic oversight, and the slippery slope problem.

The report puts those concerns in context. It points out that: drones can serve wise or dumb policies; that most drones are for surveillance or other non-strike uses; and that it is drone strikes that occur off declared battlefields that have generated the most controversy. The report notes that past military innovations, like cruise missiles, raised similar concerns by making waging war easier.

The report rejects several common complaints about drones. It denies that they create a reckless, "playstation mentality" among pilots. It explains that drones are not more prone than other weapons cause civilian casualties.

Having delimited the circumstances where drones raise concerns, the report goes into considerable causal detail, at least compared to most reports of this kind, about what the trouble is. The blowback, oversight, and sovereignty problems are relatively easy to understand, in theory. The tricky part is measuring the harm.

The slippery slope point is easier to confuse. What the report says is essentially that drones encourage us to get into avoidable fights without winning them. And that failure invites escalation:

The seemingly low-risk and low-cost missions enabled by UAV technologies may encourage the United States to fly such missions more often, pursuing targets with UAVs that would be deemed not worth pursuing if manned aircraft or special operations forces had to be put at risk. For similar reasons, however, adversarial states may be quicker to use force against American UAVs than against US manned aircraft or military personnel...increasing the risk of tit-for-tat escalation. UAVs also create an escalation risk insofar as they may lower the bar to enter a conflict, without increasing the likelihood of a satisfactory outcome. For example, the terrorists that US UAVs tend to be used to hunt are often mostly motivated by localized conflicts occurring in states with fractured political orders. The use of UAVs to track and kill such individuals does not repair the political rifts that give rise to terrorist violence. If US targeted killing campaigns fail to eradicate all threats of extremism, this may create a perceived policy failure. This, in turn, may create domestic political pressures to continue or escalate the use of lethal force, leading US UAV hunter-killer missions to continue indefinitely.

The standard rejoinder is that drones are not causing wars; they are preventing more costly wars involving traditional U.S. airpower, raids, or ground force. The report says no, in many case the alternative is doing nothing.

If lethal UAVs were not an option, we doubt that the United States would have engaged in nearly as many targeted strikes against suspected terrorists in places such as Pakistan and Yemen. In such contexts, airstrikes using manned aircraft would generally be viewed as creating an unacceptably high risk of civilian casualties. Raids involving US forces on the ground — including special operations forces— would create a similar risk of unintended civilian casualties, and would also create a risk of significant US casualties. Finally, the relative invisibility of UAVs enables relative deniability, often a convenience to host nations that are unwilling to appear to have welcomed a US military presence inside their territory. The existence of weaponized UAVs did not "cause" the United States to engage in targeted killings of terror suspects outside of traditional territorially bounded battlefields, but it seems reasonable to conclude that their existence enabled a significantly expanded US campaign of targeted cross-border strikes against suspected terrorists.

So drones encourage us to think we can repair problems we cannot, feeding our tendency to see U.S. military power as the answer to distant political conflicts. That tendency is an obstacle to peace. It also should cause us to ask whether military options are always worth having. As Bernard Brodie notes, the U.S. Constitution says otherwise. The Stimson report deserves credit for focusing us on that point amid all the clamor about drones.

Note that the report also deals with less controversial issues: FAA drone regulation and U.S. export controls. I should add that I don't endorse all of the report's analysis or recommendations. Two recommendations particularly trouble me. Forming another bipartisan commission to review drone policy seems like a waste of time born of a tendency to confuse report writing with policy-making. And an interagency or centralized approach to developing drone technology is liable to disrupt the

development of diverse technologies and programmatic competition that encourages innovative uses of drones.

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