Drone Warfare Should be Scaled Back Until Moral and Legal Abuses Can be Addressed

James Wyss Jan 9th 2013

Drones have become synonymous with the War on Terror. Their unique ability to locate, pursue, and neutralize targets at great distances makes them ideal for a conflict that extends past traditional battlefield boundaries. Waging war through remote control has been a boon to commanders eager to keep casualties low and results maximized, but their moral problems still plague the concept of engaging enemies with what are basically flying robots.

The U.S. military has been using drones for the better part of the last 20 years. Originally developed as reconnaissance platforms, successful strikes against important militant and insurgent targets have proven their worth in combat roles. Increasingly successful drone operations allowed the Obama administration to continue fighting the War on Terror while still making good on promises to reduce and withdraw troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Policy makers and military leaders were also able to expand operations into areas where enemy fighters received support, such as Pakistan and Yemen, as well as unrelated but important battlefields such as Somalia.

Logistically speaking, this has not been a problem. Drones do operate in very gray moral and legal areas. Human rights organizations oppose using drones, questioning their abilities as "surgically precise killing machines." Citing the "Living Under Drones" study from Stanford and New York University, Sheldon Richman (former senior editor at the Cato Institute) argues that instead of undermining militant causes by killing off leaders, drone warfare actually inflames it and breeds anti-U.S. sentiment by creating an environment of terror in which anyone might suddenly be killed by bombs from the sky.

Other organizations decry the deaths of innocent civilians. Family members of Anwar al-Aulaqi, the infamous Al-Qaeda recruite who was killed in a drone strike, are suing the U.S. government, claiming that he, and those with him at the time of his death, were wrongfully killed since there was no declaration of war against Yemen. Their claims are not without merit since Anwar was a U.S. citizen and therefore entitled to due process under the U.S. Constitution, regardless of whatever activities the federal government believe he was involved in.

The famous (or infamous) ACLU has taken up the cause as well, fighting a legal battle over provisions which would allow the federal government to continue similar operations

and maintain a "kill list," or a group of targets defense officials believe constitute a threat to the U.S.

Particularly troubling is how drone warfare runs contrary to the Constitution. The current framework allows the Executive Branch to easily usurp war powers from Congress by determining targets and initiating attacks in the name of national security. Using drones to eliminate threats to the U.S. also ignores the judicial branch's responsibility for determining guilt and mandating sentence, especially if the targets are U.S. citizens. They also allow the government to continue an undeclared war against an undefined enemy in order to reach intangible objectives.

While drones may save the lives of friendly troops, they also enable moral and legal abuses on an increasingly large scale. They do not represent carte blanche to kill whomever the president or other policy makes and defense officials deem threats in a conflict which grows more nebulous as it drags on. Commanders, leaders, and elected officials should seriously consider the implications of drone warfare and scale back operations until the problems can be addressed in a satisfactory manner.