

Just Comment – Games we play - war by remote control

What happens when science fictions becomes battlefield reality? Peter Singer¹ gives an account of the latest military robots, the present state of mechanised warfare; war by remote control; where technology is taking us in wars of the future; how robots have become integral to the modern military; and the revolution in the military and the changing nature of conflict in the 21st century.² We may be wired for war but are we wired for weighing the consequences?

There are philosophical and ethical questions when a soldier thousands of kilometres away can, as if playing a video game, sit in a control room before a computer and obliterate an Afghan or Pakistani village or Taliban hideout by remote control then sign off, go home for dinner with his family and play with his/her children. It is war by remote control. It is also 'execution without trial'. The use of drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV's) will not make the world safe and will lead us to lose trace of the morals of armed conflict?³

I am deeply disturbed by the long-distance murder of poor and defenceless people that passes for legitimate 'war' in our time. It is incredibly cowardly, and I marvel that more people don't jump up and down in the streets, pointing this out. How much courage does it take to point and shoot a missile at a town you've never seen, filled with children whose voices you've never heard. **Alice Walker**

Reality

The increased use of robotics by the military is alarming. Australia's Defence White Paper, provides for a continuing rise in military spending at 3% above the inflation rate. Few argue to reduce defence spending. There are ethical implications of Australia's continuing alignment with a military machine that relies increasingly on remote-control killing devices to attack Pakistani villages and elsewhere.⁴ Ethical questions arise from the changed relationship between the human and the robot and the implications of this mechanised death. There are about 5,000 unmanned drones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfit pilots due to age or for medical reasons can now continue their flying careers in these unmanned bombers.⁵

Ethics

We can sympathise with Pakistani complaints when drones are operated by military personnel thousands of kilometres away. This risks war becoming even more dehumanised but it is humans who do the dying. The ethical problem with drone technology essentially concerns this distance.⁶

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 'Predator' drone strikes will increase. They are considered 'very effective' and precise in targeting so-called insurgents. The story is very different as wedding parties, funeral parties and schools are inadvertently targeted. Civilian casualties and the violation of territorial sovereignty cause much tension and resentment. Independent reports suggest that only 10 out of the 70 cross-border strikes in Pakistan actually hit their targets. Since August 2008 unmanned aircraft have killed close to

600 people in north-western Pakistan.⁷ Drone aircraft have dropped as much ordinance on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the previous 12 months as rained down on Kosovo ten years earlier, but with little political fallout.⁸ Today, the US is busy escalating its own military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, notably with the multi-billion dollar upgrade of its naval and air bases on the island of Guam.⁹

Can we allow ourselves to be neutral about the loss of human life during pilotless missile strikes?

Possible Consequences

- lack of proximity results in complacency about avoiding or minimising harm to civilians while pursuing legitimate targets.
- the ease of sending drones instead of soldiers into battle leads political leaders and citizens to lose sight of the whole gravity of war.¹⁰
- wars will be easier to start.
- wars entering our living rooms with videos of robotic battles downloaded look more like entertainment.¹¹
- stolen weapons can be reused by the enemy.¹²
- use of such weapons reduce the need for negotiation and make war easier rather than negotiation or diplomacy.
- handing military tasks over to robots will lower the perceived cost of conflict and make war and threaten more civilians.¹³
- unmanned military craft are more attractive than killed and wounded soldier.¹⁴
- use of robots is an admission of cowardice and an unwillingness to fight with honour.¹⁵
- drone strikes against suspected terrorists could be in breach of international laws against summary executions.¹⁶

What's the problem?

Though profitable for weapons contractors, drones make the work of antiwar activists far more difficult.¹⁷ Though use of robots/drones have led to a reduction of US casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq compared to Vietnam, the downsides are profound: the rising percentage of civilian casualties.

'In World War I, less than 10 percent of casualties were non-combatants; in World War II, the percentage of civilian casualties was roughly 50 percent, and today over 90 percent of those killed in wars are civilians. In Iraq, one detailed study estimated that more than 600,000 Iraqis had been violently killed by June 2006. By allowing soldiers to kill from greater distances, which makes it easier to pull the trigger, robots may take this trend a step further.'¹⁸

As fewer soldiers come home in body bags, less attention is paid to foreign policy and future wars. Wars are easier to begin – and with fewer people.¹⁹ If a country like the United States can be aggressive without suffering casualties (normally an important deterrent to war), it may negotiate less, attack more often and kill in greater numbers.²⁰

Public Perception

Public perception is an important aspect to whether remote warfare will affect the actual willingness to fight. Remote military techniques put a comfortable distance between the viewer and what is viewed. Internet and mobile phone technology means that more people can watch actual and simulated combat for entertainment. It allows people to participate vicariously, and with enthusiasm, in the fighting at the front lines, knowing that they will not be hurt. As there is no risk to personal safety, civilians can use institutionalised violence as entertainment, desensitising them even further from the destruction that is taking place.²¹ This could lead the public to take its country's wars even more lightly.²²

Conclusion

Australia can address the root causes of instability in its own neighbourhood, by stepping up genuine cooperation on human rights and more equitable arrangements for sharing the benefits of globalised trade. Cooperation depends on trust, and trust is necessary for dialogue: shaking hands requires putting down your shield. We need to scale down preparations for war or fighting, not scaled up.²³

Remote warfare *will* save lives - but only for countries that can afford the technology. More countries will develop remote capabilities, leading to greater destruction on every side – but the poor continue to suffer.²⁴

As we devise new ways of waging more intimidating and complex wars, use of remote weaponry has made endless destruction possible whilst we keep distance from what is being done on the ground. The tragedy is that the effort and creativity that goes into war could be better used for education, healthcare and developing international relations. Robotic warfare begs the question as to when will we focus less on pursuing conflict and more on making peace.²⁵ The 'luxury' of waging war via remote control can encourage political cowardice and military adventurism. Albert Camus said it is easy to turn a blind eye to bloodshed when it involves someone else's blood.²⁶ Whatever happens, our humanity is under threat.

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