OPINION

US war, Pakistan & beyond: Killer drones, killer robots

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War is becoming faceless. Warfare in general is becoming increasingly automated. There is a race to develop weapons that can be used without human intervention. Killer drones and robots are such weapons.

In the new war weaponry, there are already robots being deployed to battlefields. Pilotless drones, guided directly from remote locations, have been used to strike targets for nearly a decade now; before them, cruise missile technology. Drones have been linked to 'war crimes', when they launch weapons that kill innocent noncombatants who, unfortunately, happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Drones have made life hell for the people of Waziristan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is now facing a military operation launched by the Pakistani government. However, drones are still pouring down with occasional intervals.

There have been 390 US drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004 when President Bush ordered the programme. These include the 339 allowed by the Obama administration, which approved the expansion of the programme to take out militants. According to reports 2,347 to 3,796 persons were killed in these attacks, including 416-957 civilians and another 168-202 children. Around 1,099-1,660 were injured in drone strikes during this period.

Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif has repeatedly demanded an end to the strikes, stating: "The use of drones is not only a continual violation of our territorial integrity but also detrimental to our resolve and efforts at eliminating terrorism from our country". The Peshawar High Court has ruled that the attacks are illegal, inhumane, violate the UN charter of human rights and constitute a war crime. However the Obama administration disagrees and continues on this path – although the rate of drone attacks in August 2014 has slowed down.

Several public surveys conducted by reputed firms have shown that the strikes are deeply unpopular in Pakistan, where they have contributed to a negative perception of the United States. This has given extremists fertile ground to recruit more as they pose as anti-imperialists.

The US uses drones primarily in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, but has also used them in military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. The network has now expanded to Syria as well. The heinous crimes committed by Isis in Iraq by killing thousands of Muslims and Christians have put pressure on the US administration to use drones in the areas controlled by the Islamic State. The brutal killing of two American journalists has provided added fuel to this demand.

Depending on the model of the drone, a drone such as a Reaper can carry thousands of pounds of payloads which result in high collateral damage. Predator drones have less collateral impact, but Hellfire missiles are lethal for the target.

International human rights law does not allow the use of Hellfire missiles because their heavy fire power exceeds the limits of fire power allowed for law-enforcement purposes, according to the American Society of International Law.

Signature strikes occur when targets are killed based on suspicion – for example, if someone appears to be engaging in 'suspicious behaviour', such as associating with a 'suspected militant' carrying a weapon. Any behaviour the US deems 'suspicious' can justify a signature strike. A 'double tap' occurs when a second drone strike follows the initial strike which results in the murder of those who may have rushed to the scene to understand what has happened, search for survivors, or assist the injured.

The myth that drones are 100 percent perfect on targets was shattered by a report. The accuracy rate for hitting the intended target is approximately 1.5-2 percent. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has estimated that 98 percent of victims of drone strikes are 'collateral damage', or in more human terms, civilians, children, or suspected militants who are either minor, low-level affiliates or whose involvement with militants has never been proven.

The United Nations has stated that the US use of drone strikes in Pakistan violates international law and is a threat to human rights not only because of the mass casualties drones strikes cause but also because the Pakistani government does not consent to them. The UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights, Ben Emmerson, released a statement expressing that the government of Pakistan "considers US drone strikes to be counter-productive, contrary to international law, and a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Manufacturing drones and missiles is highly profitable business. Several top American companies are in this business of war criminality. Top profiteers of the US' billions spent on drones include Boeing, General Atomics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, AeroVironment, Prox Dynamics AS, Denel Dynamics, SAIC, Israeli Aerospace Industries, Textron, General Dynamics, DJI.

Predator and Reaper drones are built by San Diego-based General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, (GA-ASI), a sister company to General Atomics. According to The San Diego Union-*Tribune* article 'Prowling for profit', the Predator and Reaper generally cost $4 million to $12 million each. This $4 million is sufficient to build 40 high school buildings in the Fata areas that can accommodate at least 200 students in each school.

Israel ranks second after the United States in the development and possession of drones, according to those in the industry. As the drones get bigger and more advanced, the more expensive they become. Small drones cost tens of thousands of dollars. Big drones are hugely expensive. Some costs as much as $60 million.

Elbit Systems Ltd and Israel Aerospace Industries Ltd are making deadly drones — Heron TP/Eitan and Hermes 450. Between 2009 and 2018 the US is scheduled to give Israel $30 billion in military aid. The Israeli Air Force since at least 2005 has been training many operators and maintainers.

After the hegemony of US corporations on the manufacturing of these lethal new war weapons, there is a race in several other countries to pursue the same path. Russia, which is far behind in production of war drones and robots, is now developing its own drones technology and an unmanned ground vehicle to guard its nuclear missile silos.

There is a little knowledge about the Samsung SGR-A1 machine-gun-sporting battle towers that guard South Korea's border with its northern neighbour, or even the Predator drones, loaded with Hellfire or Stinger missiles, that the CIA has been using in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.

The development of war robotics is becoming a threat too. On September 2, 2014, Angela Kane, the United Nations' high representative for universal weapons disarmament said "so-called 'killer robots' that can be programmed to fire on anyone without being directly controlled by a human is just a 'small step' away from being deployed on future battlefields, and that as such countries should move now to outlaw that".

We must be part of the campaign against all sort of weapons used for killing human beings and destroying buildings. The idea that no weapon should be used without human intervention is being cheated by drones and robots manufacturing. We must say no to arms and yes to human development.

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