



Comment

Time to Call-Off the Drones

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As millions of people celebrated the [International Day of Peace](#) on 21 September, the US military (or possibly the Central Intelligence Agency)¹ marked the occasion with [two further](#) drone strikes in South Waziristan (Pakistan), killing a handful of alleged militants. These were the 70th and 71st such reported strikes this year. Four more were [reported](#) in North Waziristan in the last three days, making September the heaviest single month of drone strikes since 2004. A conservative [estimate by US think-tank, New America Foundation](#), suggests that US drone attacks in Pakistan have killed one civilian for every two combatants, but no official figures are available.



Reaper UAV Taxis at Kandahar Airfield – photo credit: defence images, UK MoD/ flickr

Two recent conferences in Europe highlight the growing concerns among civil society about the military use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), known as drones. NATO Watch shares these concerns and is calling for a global moratorium on the deployment of armed drones and for urgent international discussions to develop an arms control regime to regulate the use, development and transfer of these weapon systems.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR), a UK-based Christian NGO, [hosted a conference](#) in London on 18 September, which discussed the use of armed drones and the wider dangers of a robotic arms race. Speakers included Noel Sharkey, professor of robotics and artificial intelligence at Sheffield University, and Professor Dave Webb of Leeds Metropolitan University. Both speakers explored the recent proliferation of armed robots including their expanding use for

targeted killings (assassinations). They also discussed concerns over the movement towards autonomous armed robots that might eventually select and kill their targets without human intervention, raising associated ethical and legal issues. (Professor Webb's presentation is attached to this Comment).

A similar three-day workshop organised by the [International Committee for Robot Arms Control](#) (ICRAC) took place in Berlin on 20-22 September. The London and Berlin meetings involved a broad range of policy experts and academics, Red Cross representatives, peace activists, military advisers and human rights lawyers. In March this year, Philip Alston, then the UN's special rapporteur for extrajudicial executions, said in a [report](#) that the US, "*the most prolific user of targeted killings*" in the world, should halt the CIA's campaign of drone strikes in northwest Pakistan. He warned that the practice amounted to "*a licence to kill without accountability*".

While only the US military and CIA deploy drones in Pakistan, both the British and US governments use them in Afghanistan to launch Hellfire missiles and Paveway bombs against Taliban targets. (For information and comment on UK's use of drones see [this website](#)). All the drones are operated from Creech Air Force base near Las Vegas, eight thousand miles away from the frontline. However, a judicial review of US drone attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan may now be forthcoming as a [judge agreed earlier this month](#) not to treat the past arrest of 14 peace activists at the Creech Base as a simple trespassing case. The judge



Creech Air Force Base – photo credit: CODEPINK women for peace/flickr

said he would take three to four months to study the issues and testimonies involved before making a decision.

At the London conference, FoR launched their new report, [Convenient Killing: Armed drones and the playstation mentality](#), which urges the UK government to publish information about the use of drones and the casualties involved. The report warns that, *“while politicians and defence officials issue assurances that armed drones will always have a ‘man-in-the-loop’ to give the go-ahead before an attack, the military industry seem to be researching and exploring the development of drones that have the capacity to launch weapons autonomously”*.

Drone use has increased significantly in recent years. The British reaper drone had been fired 97 times in Afghanistan by July 2010. The US budget allocation for drones increased from \$1.7bn in 2006 to \$4.2bn in 2010. FoR's report concludes that, *“Drones are the latest in a long line of ‘super’ new weapons developed and used in the mistaken belief that they will provide a clean and tidy solution to human conflict. Time and again history has proved that this is a myth”*.

And where is NATO in all of this? When asked a question about drone attacks in Pakistan at his monthly [press briefing on 15 September](#), Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen simply replied, *“I have no comments whatsoever on the alleged drone strikes”* – which is somewhat surprising, since the Secretary General is not normally reticent in providing an opinion. NATO doctrine on drones is being developed at the [Joint Air Power Competence Centre \(JAPCC\)](#) at Kalkar in Germany – a ‘Centre of Excellence’ established in 2005 and supported by 17 NATO nations. A January 2010 JAPCC report, [Strategic Concept of Employment for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in NATO](#), sets out current thinking in some detail.

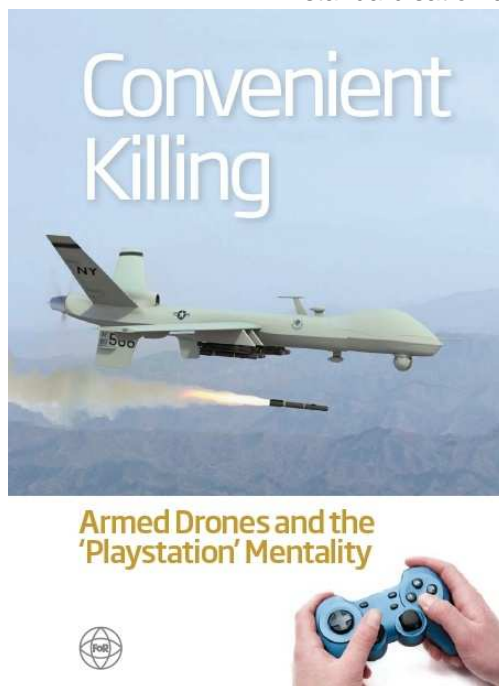
The JAPCC report offers operational guidance for “optimum UAS employment across a range of

military operations”, such as counter-terrorism, expeditionary and counter-piracy missions, and includes discussion on doctrine, organisation, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, airspace management, standardisation and interoperability. Consideration

is also given to limitations that most frequently affect the drones, such as reliance on data links and adverse atmospheric conditions (wind, turbulence, icing conditions etc). However, there is no guidance or discussion about how such systems could impact on the ways in which wars are fought, the legality of their use or what the likely effect will be on civilian populations.

This is a huge oversight and the NATO Secretary General should be leading the call for a comprehensive review of the military and security roles of UAVs within the Alliance. The UN's special rapporteur for extrajudicial executions has recommended that states publicly identify the rules of international law they consider to provide a basis for any targeted killings. NATO in consultation with Member States should do likewise. The Alliance should also examine the feasibility of developing an international ‘code of conduct’ or agreement to regulate and limit the use of drones.

Revisions to the Missile Technology Control Regime and UN Arms Register offer two potential regulatory approaches, although a new regime governing robotic behaviour, including a ban on fully autonomous systems, would probably be necessary. And mechanisms for ensuring greater civilian oversight might include, for example, the tagging of video footage for subsequent independent review. In sum, there is no shortage of potentially effective regulatory options, just the political will to explore and implement them. This needs to change.



¹ As a rule neither the US military or CIA confirm drone attacks but they are the only two forces in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region that deploy pilotless drones inside Pakistan