

Ignoring Ethical Questions About Military Drones

There are times when our technology advances faster than our ability to contemplate the ethical use or misuse of the latest gadget.

When we fail to seriously consider the ethical ramifications of employing new hardware, especially when it is military hardware, we run the risk of setting a precedent that may very well create a less stable world as other nations acquire similar technology.

I am specifically thinking of the United States' worst kept "classified" secret: the usage of remotely piloted drones to kill suspected terrorists - or at least those whom the United States has labeled as terrorists.

Such strikes routinely rain fire from the skies over places like Pakistan and Yemen.

While White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan [has defended](#) drone strikes as "legal, ethical and wise," this particular ethicist is not yet convinced that employing these strikes are indeed ethical or wise, although they are legal.

Yes, they are efficient and cost-effective, allowing the United States to continue its far-flung global wars, but since when do we equate the ethical with efficiency or cost-effectiveness?

While theoretically targeting "terrorists" is the goal, the fact remains that the distinction between a terrorist whose intent is to do bodily harm and a sympathizer who visited a training camp is an important nuance.

Just as important is the targeting of American citizens (i.e., Anwar Al-Awlaki) who are labeled terrorists without the constitutional right to due process.

An American citizen is being sentenced to death without any charges being

levied, trials being conducted or judicial process being followed.

In effect, the White House has become the accuser, judge and executor - an affront to the U.S. Constitution for those of us who take our basic freedoms, rights and liberties seriously.

According to the New America Foundation (an independent Washington think tank that closely tracks the drone program and relies on local media and reports from observers in Pakistan), since Obama took office, some 250 strikes have occurred in Pakistan killing about 2,345 individuals.

With so many deaths, one can expect some "collateral damage" - a technical term meaning killing innocent civilians.

Although Brennan states that such deaths are "exceedingly rare," it is estimated that more than 471 civilians have been killed since the program began in 2004, of which 309 occurred during Obama's watch. This might explain the deterioration of U.S.-Pakistan relationships.

As problematic as all this may be, here is my real concern. At this point in time, the United States has air superiority. In other words, we control the skies and are the sole possessors of the technology that makes this possible.

Hence we can employ the usage of drones and then ethically justify said usage - à la Brennan.

But what happens when other countries start developing similar technology? For example, on Dec. 4, 2011, around 140 miles inside Iran from its border with Afghanistan, a drone supposedly off course (or simply doing undercover surveillance) fell into Iranian hands.

An April 22, 2012, [BBCstory](#) has Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh boasting about infiltrating the drone. He claims the Iranians have broken its encryption codes and reverse-engineered the aircraft to make their own copy.

True, it is questionable that the Iranians will soon be flying their own drones. But what if they share the drone's schematics with the Chinese?

Will the Chinese eventually develop their own drones? And even if the U.S. drone was not salvageable, it's only a matter of time before others like China have drones.

So what happens when China has drones and decides to also target their terrorists - terrorists like the Dalai Lama? After all, the Chinese foreign ministry has accused the [DalaiLama](#) of "[terrorismindisguise](#)" for supporting Tibetans who have set themselves on fire in [protest](#) against Beijing's rule.

Is our unilateral killing of those we call terrorists anywhere in the world without some type of global consensus creating a precedent for other nations to also kill whomever they label as terrorists anywhere in the world without some type of global consensus?

Technological advances are wonderful, but heaven help us as the arrogance of "exceptionalism" continues to lead us to commit acts around the globe that we only find repulsive and offensive when others do what we have already done.

[MiguelA. DeLaTorre](#) is professor of social ethics at Iliff School of Theology.