

Are Drones the Answer? The EU and Contemporary Security Challenges

Written by Jocelyn Mawdsley

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JOCELYN MAWDSLEY, JUN 16 2014

It is fairly rare that there is a broad consensus in Brussels on security issues these days. The well-publicised difficulties with the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) have made the differences between member states clear. It is noticeable therefore when one thing seems to unite them, namely that drones (and other autonomous vehicles) offer a cost-effective (comparatively) answer to European security needs including border surveillance (the Eurosur project), intelligence gathering for military planning, and acting as a force multiplier to reduce the numbers of combat troops on the grounds. Their proponents, like Gilli, from the EU Institute for Security Studies, claim they have 'dramatically reshaped intelligence and warfare over the past two decades...combat drones will reshape - if not completely revolutionise - air warfare'. Industrial interest is strong. This interest is not just from defence firms, although struggling aerospace firms see autonomous systems as an important new market segment. Sixteen member states already own drones for either military or non-military purposes, while their manufacture is spread across 21 member states. The EU interest is emphatically dual-use: drones are seen as being an important enabler in the delivery of internal security policy goals like border control and counter-terrorism as well as a military tool. In fact, the EU's homeland security policies seem increasingly driven by a technology-centric frame. Indeed the European Commission has funded many security research projects in this field and cooperates closely with the European Defence Agency. But are drones really the miracle solution that they are portrayed as?

The first obvious problem is that EU citizens and some of their elected representatives seem highly sceptical. The 2012 and 2013 polls for Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project found that the majority in every European country surveyed disapproved of drone strikes (carried out by the United States). In February 2014 the European Parliament voted with a large majority to condemn American use of drones for targeted assassinations. Moreover, the ongoing fallout from the Snowden Affair suggests that European citizens are also uneasy about surveillance and privacy issues. This is particularly marked in countries that have experienced authoritarian government with extensive surveillance of citizens. Trenchant critics of EU drone policies from Statewatch and the Transnational Institute point out that the European Commission not only has identified public concerns about drones as a major problem in their use in internal security, but is also actively developing strategies to counteract such opposition. It is not clear though that in straitened times of budget austerity that investing heavily in autonomous technologies will be seen as prudent, particularly when their usage may not be viewed as politically legitimate.

There is also the question of whether drones (and other autonomous vehicles) are the best way to tackle certain security challenges. It is unquestionable that there is a major humanitarian problem in the Mediterranean as migrants and refugees attempt to reach Europe in flimsy boats. The UNHCR has described it as a colossal humanitarian catastrophe. But should the Eurosur border surveillance project really be the priority of the European Commission? There seems to be little money to support states like Italy and Greece, who were at the epicentre of the Eurozone crisis and made to make substantial public spending cuts. Yet, these are the places at the front line when it comes to the rescue and reception of those trying to cross the Mediterranean.

Similarly on the military side, just because a technology is capable of doing certain things, does not necessarily make it strategically wise to do so. Military innovation often has unintended consequences, and these technologies are unlikely to be an exception. An interesting recent discussion paper by the UN Institute for Disarmament Research

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argues that 'increasing autonomy in weapon systems raises a complicated set of issues, where technological promise, legal regimes, strategic doctrine, moral codes and cultural beliefs about technology are intertwined.' The authors urge that the consequences of increasingly autonomous weapons systems are fully considered. One issue might be of particular concern to the EU, namely state sovereignty. The worsening security situation in Ukraine has reminded us of how much European peace and stability rests on respect for the border agreements reached by neighbouring countries. Technologies like drones blur the lines of what might be considered an incursion into a sovereign state, which in turn might trigger an Article 5 response from NATO. Isn't this something worth considering?

In summary, while the immediate attractions of drones are fairly obvious in the military setting and there are clearly some benefits to their internal security use, the EU needs to be careful that policy is not driven by technological possibilities, but rather that the consequences of this type of technology use, both intended and unintended, are considered. It will be interesting to see how the newly elected European Parliament exercises its powers of scrutiny in this area.

About the author:

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