

Researcher illustrates impact of drone usage in areas of conflict

February 9 2016, by Jill Disanto

The use of drones has had significant consequences for how governments conduct counter-terrorism operations. But technological limitations mean they are less likely to effect wars between countries, according to a new paper co-authored by Michael C. Horowitz, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania.

In "The Consequences of Drone Proliferation: Separating Fact from Fiction," Horowitz, who is associate director of Penn's Perry World House, argues that [drones](#) have the potential to enhance security in disputed border regions because they easily allow states to monitor what's happening.

The article's co-authors, which include Sarah E. Kreps from Cornell University's department of government and Matthew Fuhrmann from Texas A & M University's department of political science, examine the effects of drones in counterterrorism, interstate conflict, crisis onset and deterrence, coercive diplomacy, domestic control and repression. They underscore ways in which the analysis challenges emerging views on drone proliferation, and they identify national security implications for the United States.

The article explains how there are two polarizing schools of thought regarding drones. Pessimists draw attention to all of the ways drones are undesirable, while others believe that unmanned aerial vehicles are harmless because of their operational limitations, which include a low flying speed and vulnerability to air defense systems. The authors

maintain that both of these views are incomplete and that there are many other factors to consider.

"Those who argue that drones are transformative overlook important operational limits of the technology," Horowitz said. "The more dismissive view, by contrast, fails to fully appreciate how removing pilots from aircraft changes the decision-making calculus of using drones versus manned alternatives."

With a comprehensive assessment of the consequences of current-generation drone proliferation, including how both perspectives are misguided, Horowitz, Kreps and Fuhrmann say what's missing from the current debate is a realistic understanding of what today's drones can and cannot do.

"Accurately capturing the capabilities of current generation drones is critical to understanding how drones may or may not change military affairs or world politics more generally," Horowitz said.

The article explores the history of unmanned aerial vehicles dating back to the mid-1800s and ongoing trends. For example, during the Xinjiang protests in 2014, China sent out surveillance drones to monitor the situation. But, as the use of armed drones continue to spread, it will mean dictators can do more than just surveillance. With armed drones, there is a possibility for repression.

"Drone proliferation carries potential significant consequences for counterterrorism operations and domestic control in authoritarian regimes," Horowitz wrote. "Drones lower the costs of using force by eliminating the risk that pilots will be killed, making some states, especially democracies, more likely to carry out targeted attacks against suspected militants."

The co-authors conclude that, if used to monitor disputed territories and borders, drones have the potential to reduce uncertainty about an adversary's behavior, which could promote peace if the enemy's intentions are benign.

"Drones are neither a game changer across every dimension of international security, nor simply a redundant military technology with little significance for international security. The consequences could change dramatically as technical advancements occur over time."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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