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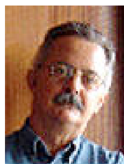

265
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# DRONES: The Name and The Thing

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Word of the day: "drones", spoken of more and more, and not without a degree of confusion. First, these vehicles must be assessed from a general perspective, before coming to the field in which they are most widely used, the military. Second, drones and their military deployment should be analysed from an instrumental perspective, that is to say, as instruments of defence policy. What is a drone? We are told that it is an "unmanned aerial vehicle", but that is not true. There is no one "on board" the drone, but there is a person who mans it, albeit from a distance. Though the drone may be controlled by a computer programme, that programme has been configured by someone and so on. This first point is important. No matter how much technology we employ, in the end, *the human element* remains key to decisions regarding its use. Someone (physical persons, not only legal institutions or "technology parks") has, whether they like it or not, the responsibility for the actions of the drone. Among other considerations, this opens up a whole field of legal consequences of great significance.

A drone is not exclusively a weapon of war. It is a device that flies, with no one on board to control it, following the instructions and parameters of someone managing it from the ground. There are drones that are not for military use, and perform civilian tasks, such as monitoring traffic or agricultural crops, providing support to televisual sports broadcasts, and, recently, they are becoming just one more gadget: a company that sells books, DVDS and other items over the internet appears to be considering delivering its products by drone. It remains to be seen whether this happens or not, but it promises to bring about aerial traffic jams and new security problems. Even in their non-military use, a whole range of possible applications require legal precision. On the one hand, are questions of how certain fundamental rights may be affected, such as those to privacy and intimacy as well as those surrounding image rights. Beyond that is the question of how their use should be managed in relation to the fight against organised crime and the trafficking of drugs and people, such as the mafias responsible for the migratory flows that have such dramatic consequences in Malta, Lampedusa and elsewhere.

In the specific case of drones for military use, there are two variations, which may be summarised thus: drones as express weapons of attack, and drones that carry

out complementary military tasks. The latter—aerial vehicles for surveillance, image capturing, and “area control”—is easier to address. But it is necessary to focus our attention on the use of drones as weapons of war in their strictest sense: as planes for bombing, hunting, ground attack, and for the deployment of missiles or diverse artillery. That is to say, as weapons that kill.

Some sources say drones were used as direct attack weapons as early as 2001, in the war in Afghanistan. Today it is estimated that around 40 states either have drones or have decided to acquire them in the short term (and have the technical and budgetary resources to do so). The use of drones in war may turn out to be one of the changes that characterises the new century and new millennium, but really it will be doing what we always have (making war) with new or relatively new means, always with the end of increasing the efficiency of ‘our’ actions, and hampering those of the enemy.

While the United States’ use of drones went hand in hand with the two George W. Bush presidencies—above all in Afghanistan and on its eastern border—their use has increased substantially during the Obama administration; in number of flights, number of civilian casualties and in the breadth of their use to include other sites, such as Pakistan, Yemen, and even Somalia. So that, between 2004 and 2013, in Pakistan alone, drones killed 3460 people, of whom, according to Pakistani sources, at least 35% could only be categorised as “innocent civilians”.

In theory the use of drones should mean avoiding having to put troops on the ground, and finding and pursuing the enemy with (again theoretically) more efficient results. In the end the equation is simple: reduce casualties on our side (to, if possible, zero) and maximise those of the enemy. But it would be unfair to say that the United States is the only country using this strategy. Long before their integration into US military strategy, Israeli security and armed forces had already developed multiple uses for drones.

There is another argument from military logic that complements this. It is the idea that the more technology is used, the “cleaner” the war. This “clean war” theory is not only convenient for the military, it also helps keep recruitment levels high. Countries that want to be a “world power” need large armed forces, but, without compulsory military service, recruitment can be a serious problem. This “clean war” rationale is intended to make war more socially acceptable, to give members of the armed forces the sensation of greater security and to avoid the “combat fatigue” that every long-lasting war results in (think, for example, of Vietnam).

A significant example of the link between drones, defence policy and foreign policy is President Obama’s May 2014 speech to the West Point military academy. In this important speech, Barack Obama attempted to stabilise the position of the United States in the world. The strange thing about it was the venue he chose: West Point, the prestigious United States Military Academy, in a garden full of cadets, commanders, officials and those occupying the highest military positions in the country. It hugely contrasted with his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (why would the Nobel Committee award the Peace Prize to an incumbent head of state, who was newly in office and had had yet to make a definite move in foreign policy terms?). Back in 2009, Obama gave a more warlike speech, in which he justified the use of military force to a surprising degree.

The President of the United States moves in a delicate, contradictory setting. He is in the middle of his last term in office and must carefully measure what he does and does not do, because it will determine what he leaves to the world, his legacy. Always lurking are the shadows of the two wars inherited from his predecessor

but left to him to finish, at least to the extent of withdrawing US ground troops. In military terms, those wars were not lost, but neither were they won, above all from a political perspective. While Afghanistan may be considered to have ended in a kind of stalemate, conflict in Iraq seems to be at the United States' door once again, this time in a context in which Washington neither can nor wants to "re-enlist". This time it is an inter-community civil war being fought between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq and also in Syria.

Obama's problem is how to explain to his country that it will not be easy to continue being the "leader of the world" while at the same time shrinking back from the greatest challenges of the moment: Russia, China, the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, energy, human rights. In this regard, reducing his defence policy to an instrument of foreign policy and changing the "all war" discourse for one in which the United States is a feared and respected world leader investing militarily in the use of drones and special operations, may turn out to be a strategic error, and a false certainty in domestic policy. Drones and special operations troops are not the cement that will give cohesion to the United States' foreign (or defence) policy. It is much more like a policy of communication and public relations.

In general, the United States goes to war alone, and it will continue to do so (at least in terms of strategic and operational decisions), be it in Iraq, Afghanistan, or, as now, in the drones + special operations version, which Obama would like to combine with ambitious "coalitions of allies" that provide, if not greater military power, at least greater international legitimacy, with or without the United Nations, as is the case at present with Islamic State and its derivations. If we reread Obama's speech at West Point with care, we see that, above all, there is continuity in the last twenty-five years of US foreign policy. With or without drones.

As a conclusion, drones are not, in the end, all that new (even though some authors present them as a genuine "revolution in military affairs"), but they seem like they are new. And they will continue to appear to be so because that suits the politicians, the military leaders and, above all, the powerful corporate private industry that lives off all this, and which, in a more rustic version, General Eisenhower himself denounced in the 1950s.