

BOOK REVIEW

Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*, Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

Medea Benjamin, a human rights activist and founder of CODEPINK, a women-initiated organisation working against U.S. funded wars around the globe and how the money can be directed to other humanitarian as well as life-saving activities, has authored a captivating book titled *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*. Keeping her background as an anti-war activist in mind, the author provides an inside detail of drone warfare. The book is among the first that provides a comprehensive study which scrutinizes as well as investigates the production of drones, how and where they are being used, how they are piloted and used in wars as well as how their targets are chosen.

The book is divided into nine chapters. It sketches its plot around the growing danger of robotics in warfare and how, as a result, it is emerging as an ever-growing industry. She has extensively analyzed the sole purpose of the drones. She educates her readers by providing three main arguments in her book:

1. The operation of drones entails no human casualties and hence makes it easier for the U.S. to go to new wars.
2. The issue of legality of drones has never been fully answered by the U.S. even as it has been opposed by the victim countries and by the international community. It serves as a vital part of American war policy globally.
3. Drones technology possession has given the U.S. a sense of indiscriminate state power where it can subjugate itself internationally/ globally on weaker states active in war zones.

Medea describes how drone attacks go beyond the instant kill and play psychologically with the victim's family, as a result making the U.S. and its allies more vulnerable targets by the extremists/insurgents. She explains that the use of drones has made war easier for the military powers of the West. However, drones do not remain in monopoly of the West any more. China, Iran and Pakistan are also among the countries with drone technology. Drones in still a 'play station mentality' where the drones are controlled thousands of miles away from the combat zone, thereby decreasing the rate of combatant casualties.

The book also hints at the traditional contrast to the notion of 'piloting an aircraft'. She argues that the fighter pilots before the introduction of drone technology were a different breed as compared to the ones who fly the drones.

Today, the pilots who handle the drones have the privilege of operating them with a mere joystick sitting in front of series of screens thousands of miles away from their targets. Medea refers to the drone pilots as a new breed of pilots with a new breed of killing technology. The pressure that these pilots face sitting in front of the screens is mostly mental. She articulates that where soldiers on the ground engage in brutal and deadly combat, the drone operators have the luxury of watching and operating only on the screen in front of them rather than coming face-to-face with their adversary.

Another major problem vis-à-vis drone operation, she elucidates, is that the drone operator suffers from data overload since it is up to the operator to choose the target while keeping in mind its selection procedures.

She also describes the target selection which is done on two main principles/categories:

1. Personality strike.
2. Signature strike.

In ‘signature strikes’, the basic pattern of target is done through certain defining characteristics associated with terrorists activities such as people carrying guns, or groups of people sitting in a meeting, but whose identities are unknown. The idea of ‘signature strikes’ is considered vague; however, it is in active use against all males of military age found in terrorist hotspots, and therefore to be considered as targets. This approach has resulted in numerous cases of collateral damage by killing innocent civilians.

‘Personality strikes’ are also referred to as High Value Targets (HVT’s). ‘Personality strikes’ are against targeted individuals/terrorists who are on top of the U.S. hit list and are deemed a threat to American interests.

The author also makes an argument about the growing drone and robotic industry. Medea argues that it initially began as a small-scale industry only for the purpose of surveillance, and over the passage of time, has become a booming multi-million dollar business.

The book also highlights the inhumane side of drone warfare. Medea writes that there are 800,000 people living in Waziristan, and many of them live in a constant state of fear. Drone attacks have resulted in a flood of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), making many to move to cities like Karachi and Lahore resulting in cross ethnic influx.

Articulating the legal aspects of drone attacks, Medea puts forward several arguments. While talking about ‘the right to self defence’, she pronounces drone attacks as a clear disrespect for the right of self-defence. She argues that it is not clear whether these attacks are actually eliminating threats to America. Arguing about the legitimacy of targets, she informs her reader that the U.S. is not in an active armed conflict with Pakistan, which makes the legitimacy of the drones strikes all the more controversial. Another element which makes it questionable is the refusal to disclose the targets killed. The book also underlines the ‘double standard principles’ of the U.S. that ‘America is America’ and thus is more privileged as compared to other nations.

Overall, the book is an interesting read and highly informative. It is an attempt to awaken the world and its leaders to the increase in use of drone warfare, its legal aspects, and that it does more bad than good.

Mahrukh Khan, Research Fellow,
Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad
