

# Drones provoke worries of 'Playstation' mentality

The USA has embraced the use of unmanned aircraft known as 'drones' in its fight against terrorism, and other countries are following suit. Is this the beginning of 'robot wars?'



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Somewhere in an air force base in Nevada, just miles from the glitz and glamour of Las Vegas, a pilot sits at the controls of a computer. On his screen is an aerial view of a desert landscape, dotted with human figures. The camera zooms in on one of them and the pilot receives a command. He presses a button. Over 7,000 miles away in a village in eastern Pakistan, a Hellfire missile rips through the sky and explodes, killing several men.

The men are the victims of an unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV – commonly called a drone. These small remote controlled planes mounted with sophisticated cameras are an increasingly important part of the US arsenal. Since 2001 America has launched drone strikes in at least six countries – three of them allies or neutrals. Almost 3,000 people are estimated to have been killed.

It is not only the USA. Nobody knows for sure which countries have drones,

WAR FROM AFAR: A TIMELINE OF MILITARY TECHNOLOGY

 <b>4TH CENTURY BC</b> <b>CROSSBOWS</b> DEVELOPED IN CHINA	 <b>1400</b> <b>CANNONS</b> WIDELY IN USE	 <b>1700</b> <b>FLINTLOCK MUSKETS</b> THE MAIN WEAPON IN EUROPE
 <b>1915</b> <b>ZEPPELINS</b> BOMB SUFFOLK IN FIRST AERIAL BOMBING ATTACK	 <b>1944</b> <b>UNMANNED ROCKETS</b> LAUNCHED BY GERMANS	 <b>2001</b> <b>UNMANNED DRONES</b> STRIKE TARGETS IN AFGHANISTAN

but it is thought that there are several – including Iran. And this may be only the beginning. Reports this week suggested that America is examining the possibility of nuclear drones, which could stay airborne for months. In current models, fuel usually lasts less than a day.

It is easy to see the attraction of these futuristic weapons. Without risking the lives of military personnel, UAVs allow governments to pinpoint strikes against faraway targets. Reports from eastern Pakistan suggest Taliban leaders now live in fear, avoiding mass meetings and open spaces.

But there are also concerns about technology that allows mass killing from an office desk. One top UN official warned of a 'Playstation mentality' that robs war of emotional risk or exertion, making it seem like a mere simulation.

The fear that technology is removing the psychological barriers to killing is not new. Medieval writers, for instance,

railed against longbows and crossbows for allowing soldiers to mechanically kill skilled fighters from afar. But with the development of aerial bombing in the 20th Century, these worries have intensified.

#### WAR GAMES

'It is well that war is so terrible,' American general Robert E. Lee once said, 'otherwise we would grow too fond of it.' This, say critics, is exactly what makes drones so horrifying: by removing the terror of war, they make it a clinical exercise at best – and at worst, a game.

Paranoid fantasies about callous carpet bombings are absurd, say supporters. After all, it is still humans who ultimately make the decisions, a long time has passed since top commanders fought in the front line. In fact, they say, drones might even be more humane than humans: most atrocities are fueled by battlefield emotions like fear, adrenaline and blood-lust, not unfeeling calculation.

#### Q & A

##### Q Do I have anything to fear from drones?

A Unless you live in a war zone or rogue state, you're thankfully unlikely to see an armed drone hovering overhead anytime soon. But military drones are only one kind of UAV. They are also increasingly used for a variety of other purposes, including surveillance. That opens up a whole new

can of worms: with video cameras looking down on us from the skies, many have fears about privacy.

##### Q The future sounds sinister...

A: Perhaps, but supporters say that this sort of technology will make us safer. Drones won't all be spies: they can be used for search and rescue operations, for instance, or scientific research. And similar technology is used in ground-based robots

which can do any number of things – cleaning streets, protecting children, even giving legal advice.

#### SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**'If you support a war, you ought to be prepared to risk your life in it.'**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Eastern Pakistan** – East Pakistan was once a separate state from West Pakistan, and the central government still has only a limited amount of control over the region. It is desertous, largely quite poor and shares a long border with troubled Afghanistan. Recently it has become famous as a haven for extremist Islamic

terrorists – hence America's use of drones in the region.

**Nuclear drones** – Drones powered by nuclear energy, that is, rather than drones carrying nuclear weapons. Still, some fear that nuclear drones could be captured by terrorists or rogue states and used to create a 'dirty bomb' – an explosion that produces deadly radiation.

**Robert E. Lee** – Robert Edward Lee is generally thought of as one of the great geniuses of military history. He commanded Southern Confederate troops in America's bloody civil war of 1861-65, winning countless victories against the numerically and technologically superior forces of the North. He was uncomfortable about the idea of slavery, but still fought for the right of Southerners to own slaves. Lee is a controversial figure in America to this day.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Are governments right to embrace the use of armed drones in war?
2. Is war more or less problematic when fighters don't need to confront one another face to face?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Think of a peaceful use for a remote controlled robot. Design a drone that fits the demands of the job, and explain the features you have given it.
2. Research a military invention from history and write a paragraph about how it changed how people fought wars.

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 **NOTES**

