## The Conundrums of Emerging Virtuous War
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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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# OPINION | The Conundrums of Emerging Virtuous War

*By Devanshi Shah*



*Image Attribute: Sgt. Tim Martin, an infantryman with  Headquarters and Headquarters Company of the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, shows evidence of the long journey after returning from  Operation Buffalo Thunder II at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Spin Boldak, Afghanistan, July 2, 2012. / 7519763810 / Flickr / Creative Commons 2.0*

After assuming office as President, Donald Trump on the third day authorized drones strikes in Yemen. Consequently, as per U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), five suspected member of al Qaeda were  **killed** in central Yemen. Recently U.S. drone strikes killed two more suspected members in Abyan and other two provinces of Southern Yemen. As per, Pentagon "**somewhere over 30 strikes**" were carried out against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in two days. With the escalation of conflict in Yemen, drone strikes are likely to **soar under Trump**. Does this imply that Trump is following the footsteps of Obama in regard to US policy on drones and their utility in military operations?

## The Global Inventory

In retrospect, the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and extensive use of drones was **enacted** by Bush administration in the wake of 9/11 especially in designated combat zones like Afghanistan in 2001,  Iraq and Syria in 2002, and subsequently in Libya. The Bush administration conducted 57 drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan,  Somalia, and Yemen; whereas Obama administration ordered 563 drone strikes in these countries by employing special operation forces. This legacy seems to be carried forward by president Trump by authorizing CIA **to conduct lethal** drone strikes autonomously. The ground rule of this legacy is the extensive use of 'virtual' military technologies in conflict zones. This is discernible from the fact that in 2001 the US Congress has mandated to make one-third of all essential U.S. military aircraft and ground combat vehicles **unmanned** by 2015. Taking into account the global inventory, around  **19 countries** have armed drones or are in the process of acquiring the technology. Suffice it to say that in the coming decade's drone technology is likely to alter the face of modern warfare.

According to International Security of America, "So far, **eight** countries have used armed drones in combat: the United States, Israel, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Iran, and Turkey. One non-state actor, Hezbollah, has also used armed drones in combat. But many other countries are arming drones and it's only a matter of time before they deploy them in combat." In 2013, the Teal Group estimated that the global market for drones will almost double in the next decade, from $6.6 billion annually to $11.4 billion a year."

## The Virtuous Era

The twenty-first century marks the advent of virtual military technologies where **militarization** of science has become indispensable for the conduct of warfare. It was during World War II the first computer controlled Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) was developed. Ever since many countries intensified their pursuit of new warfighting technologies for precision strike capabilities. This led to the development of high-technological weapons like Precision-Guided Munitions (PGM) for specific targeting to reduce collateral damage. These high-tech weapons are capable of accurate Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR).

The Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) with ISR capabilities for rapid engagement has **transformed** the narrative of modern warfare that can be defined as a revolution in virtual era. **James Der Derian** has described it as a 'virtuous war' – "a technological and representational form of discipline, deterrence, and compliance." He further explains that: "At the **heart** of virtuous war is the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance with no or minimal casualties. Using networked information and virtual technologies to bring 'there' here in near-real time and with near-verisimilitude, virtuous war exercises a comparative as well as strategic advantage for the digitally advanced."

The emergence of remote controlled weapon systems, autonomous weapon systems, automated weapon systems, and the cyber warfare has virtualised the conduct of the war in recent times. The remote controlled drones with enhanced real-time aerial surveillance possibilities allow combatants to be physically absent from the combat zones. Drones help belligerents direct their attacks precisely against military targets and thus reduce civilian casualties or any damage to civilian objects. The automated weapon systems such as sentry guns, sensor-fused munitions, and anti-vehicle landmines deployed can independently verify or detect a specific target and then fire or detonate.

In addition, the cyber warfare has potentially developed a **domain** for a man-made theater of war that is also interlinked to the natural theaters of land, air, sea, and outer space. It is a virtual space that provides worldwide interconnectivity regardless of borders – anything interfaced with the internet can be targeted from anywhere. "This **power** of virtuality lies in its ability to collapse distance, between here and there, near and far, fact and fiction." Does this mean that the new war-fighting domain is moving mankind towards an era where the virtual war will exist regardless of borders? Or should we say that the beginning of this virtual war will be an end of the much left sovereignty in all but legal **form**? What would be the impacts of these virtual military technologies on humankind? New technologies raise critical questions; some of these questions require new approaches to looking at in this virtuous era. Some of these questions can only be answered with the evolution of time and science. But one thing is for sure that the virtuous era has already begun and is here to stay.

## Overcoming Time and Distance

One of the key features of utilizing the virtual military technologies is that it reduces physical presence of combatants in the battlefield thereby causing minimal casualties. The technology requires only an operator (not necessarily a combatant) to activate, direct and fire the weapon. The armed drones have several advantages as they are unmanned and low cost. But some **studies** have proven that separating a combatant physically and mentally from the battlefield makes targeting of a potential adversary easier but result in much more harm. Frequent use of remote controlled weapon systems increases the opportunity of targeting an adversary, yet it equally damages the civilian population and civilian objects by exposing them to incidental harm. It also causes long-term psychological effects. It removes the emotion attached while evaluating the incidental loss of civilian lives, injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects.

Another issue is the limitations of the data-information-intelligence-chain – the basis of virtuous warfare. There is no assurance of acquiring exact and valuable information in spite of increased amount of sensors present on the battlefield. The lack of information obscures the understanding of battlefield leading to an inappropriate **decision**. Moreover, the data yielded through sensor inputs may not necessary lead to useful information. This limits the capacity of an operator to process a huge volume of data, indicating the incompetence of automated and remote controlled weapons, that is merely a collection of discrete and observed facts or inputs known as 'information overload'. Besides it even questions the operator's compliance with the

principles of distinction and proportionality.

## A Value Judgment

The rapid increase in acquiring new technologies and using them in contemporary military operations has opened up a new dimension involving legal, ethical and moral aspects. It raises the debate on the type of war we are fighting today. The autonomous weapon systems like a military robot designed to select and attack military targets without intervention by a human operator have not known to be weaponized yet. But once deployed, this system would bring **a paradigm shift** and a major qualitative change in the conduct of warfare. The potential capacity of the artificial intelligence of autonomous weapon systems to distinguish between a civilian and combatant evokes the question of its moral acceptability. The pertinent legal debate is that who is legal, morally or politically responsible for the war crimes committed by these autonomous weapon systems? Is it the programmer, the manufacturer, or the command that deploys these systems? And if none can be held responsible, are these systems ethically or legally acceptable? Are there any legal regimes to regulate these virtual military technologies?

With the pretext of Global War on Terror U.S. carried out counter-terror operations even in non-combat zones such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia to destroy al Qaeda and associated forces. By 2014, the bilateral security agreement between Afghanistan and U.S. concluded America's counter-terror operations in Afghanistan. Most of the perpetrators of 9/11 attackers are either captured or killed. But the 2001 AUMF still remains effective for carrying out U.S. counterterrorism operations globally "to **justify** strikes against terror groups that either did not exist at the time of the 9/11 attack or are entirely unaffiliated with al Qaeda." The credibility of 2001 AUMF can be questioned, especially its legal framework in carrying out operations by Trump administration currently.

Further, use of force by U.S. in self-defense is also quite ambiguous which raises questions regarding its conformity to the international law in terms of necessity, proportionality, humanity, and distinction. Are the thriving legal regimes sufficient for regulating virtual military operations? What redressal it can offer in case of the incompetency of these autonomous high-tech weapon systems? And, what about the dire repercussions of using this remote controlled weapon systems at the expense of civilians? Lastly, the advent of this virtual war has challenged the entire notion of territorial integrity; so the real question is how will this international system determine the concept of sovereignty at the dawn of this virtuous era?

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**Cite This Article:**

*Shah, D.* "OPINION | The Conundrums of Emerging Virtuous War" IndraStra Global Vol: 003, Issue No: 03 (2017), 0056
http://www.indrastra.com/2017/03/OPINION-Conundrums-of-Emerging-Virtuous-War-003-03-2017-0056.html | ISSN 2381-3652

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