Hijacked Drones
by Jakob Steiner - 28.01.2013

My plane from Dubai was tilting towards Peshawar when I started guessing places below; which city in the FATA or perhaps Balochistan would have such a wide radius of luminescence? Looking westward, I could see lights of airplanes flying in bulk over Afghanistan…the troop drawdown? The in-flight screen made me aware of the fact that Michael Owen had just signed with Stoke City. After pondering briefly whether this contract would finally get him back on track in his career – in my memory he is still the young talent from the Magpies -I felt once again how detached the reporting on the area below me is from the realities on the ground. Most of what is said and written on the FATA is conducted from the same perspective people judge soccer, from somewhere else, with the TV and Twitter running to quickly route one's own opinions before the RT crowd has passed.

After the recent Columbia Law School report,[1] Imran Khan's attempted march to Waziristan and Malala Yusufzai's shooting in Swat gave proponents from both side had a chance to let their convictions be known. Fanatical anti-Droners found our site by searching for 'Myra MacDonald likes drones' to further bad-mouth a very balanced journalist on the issue, only because she voiced (very valid) criticism on the earlier noted report.[2] Fanatical Droners simplistically linked the attack on Yusufzai with their argument for even more drones.

There are debates going on right now, one on drones and one on talks with the Taliban, that are essential to the area's future. The fact that these talks are so detached from the place (one up in thin air, the other on the west side of the Straits of Hormuz) they are symptomatic for what goes so wrong here. To be so far away from the Know, and so in love with the grandiose speculative theories.

The debate on the use of drones in the Afghanistan - Pakistan borderlands has been hijacked by both its defenders and its condemners. Statistics, legal arguments and some dramatic personal accounts can all be used to argue for or against. Assume we could actually prove that every person killed by a drone strike was a person with a direct affiliation to the Taliban - is this where the debate would end and drones would start to shower the land

unquestioned? Or assume we would actually have surveys with a significant n that show that all people living in the area support drone strikes. This by no means should lead to the assumption that drone strikes are actually a good thing. You can do the reasoning in the other direction as well!

This bickering over numbers and significance fails completely to describe what significance the drone war actually has for the population in the targeted areas, and for the West's perception of the targeted Other - they are largely used to keep people who are far away from the Predator's impact busy. People like me. I am just acting in perfect Bhutto/Zardari-like fashion; I have a say in it all while keeping my assets safe here in Switzerland.

I am neither an expert on drones, nor on the FATA, nor on bilateral politics in conflict. I care little for singular individual victim's stories that are thrown at me in my Twitter feed to make me choose sides. I trust them just as little as some Obama speech on how 'for the most part' there were no civilian casualties. These arguments are not brought on to solve the problem, but solely to propagate one's own stubborn conviction on the issue. I am not going to argue for or against the use of some weaponry here, but just want to pull together some aspects of the drone debate that get scant attention. All I can contribute is the fact that we (our NGO) work in KP in the medical field with patients from FATA and Afghanistan, and I will highlight some interesting publications in German, because I speak it.

We run a hospital just outside FATA, and children are not growing because of malnourishment, people are dying because a lack of clean water and the ignorance from the government's as well as many people's side is a far greater threat to the people than hovering drones. Ignorance is deadly to civilians, and it is long term. Unfortunately it is not heavily discussed however and very little is done about it, although it would perhaps be a lot easier to solve. On the other hand, people who live in areas that are not subject to the drone war feel the war's impact directly. The security situation does not only imply that foreigners need to restrict their movement, it increases food prices and stops doctors from visiting the area.

I. Teach History/A History of War for Science

Two worthwhile reads on the recent history of drones and our perception of them are by John Sifton in the Nation[3] (specifically on drones) and Daniel Trombly[4] (specifically on the perception). Another article by David Bell in TNR[5] also goes along the legal arguments I will get back to when looking at the discussion from the humanitarian law perspective.

All of these look at the drone as a weapon. I want to look at it as a scientific tool. When I went to one of our University's libraries to pick up a journal for this piece, students at our Informatics Department were just testing their own drone, even if some years back we probably would have just called the thing a remote-controlled helicopter. It has become a fancy topic in different fields, and I assume it will also at some point gain importance in our Environmental Engineering & Sciences field. The fact, that this technology is being fostered by its use in a war, is a phenomenon that reminds me of one of the most important surveillance techniques in Environmental Sciences today; Radar. It was invented well before the First World War, but only further developed when its use became apparent for aircraft detection, most prominently by the Germans, who set up huge Radar stations around Berlin and later in many different places. The first drones, just for surveillance purposes were hence the so called *Homing Pigeons*[6] - the beginning of today's scientific remote sensing.

II. Law

Simply discussing the legality of drone strikes, I find it problematic if you take the legal discussion as the only base for arguing for or against drone strikes. Even if all legal reasoning would point to the fact that drone strikes are in all international legal frameworks to be considered acceptable, this does not prove at all that it is actually a good idea to carry them out. Nevertheless, there are some points that are worthwhile considering. There is of course debate in the English (US) speaking/writing world on the legal aspects of the drone war. What is interesting about the publication by the ICRC however, including mainly German authors, is the impartiality of all the contributions. Because it is the Red Cross, yes, but also because I find US writers often find it very hard to detach

themselves from axiomatic presumptions of 'national security,' that Afghans and Pakistanis all act with anti-US sentiments and the like. This focus is a handicap the authors in this journal do not grapple with.

That issue a difficult topic in itself, though. Tony Judt struggles with that in his dialogue with Timothy Snyder in the 'Age of Responsibility' Chapter of 'Thinking the Twentieth Century.' It is not just that the European Intellectuals are keeping themselves largely out of the debates circling around the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but rather that publishing them in another language than English keeps them unnoticed.

The three significant contributions are by Wolfgang Richter (a former colonel in the German army, now working at the SWP), Felix Boor (Uni Bochum) and Christian Schaller (SWP).

They argue that whether drones are used in the war in the frontier areas is not so much the issue. They acknowledge that drones may be more effective than fighter planes would, and that the action of the international forces in the FATA can be considered legal since they act on the invitation of the Pakistani government (they acknowledge that this is unclear, but I agree that it can be considered most likely the case).

But they emphasize that this observation leaves the question unresolved, whether the armed conflict there itself is legitimate the way it is lead, and that by justifying from different standpoints - self defence and an international conflict with terrorists - the Obama administration is confusing *ius in bello* and *ius ad bellum* and hence contradicting itself (Schaller).

Richter observes, that "Under certain circumstances, putative tactical advantages (that is, the effectiveness of the drones) may have negative consequences on the strategic aim of the operations." Richter also looks at the problem of identifying justifiable targets: "The appearance of armed civilians does not imply them being part of an Islamistic terror organization or the Taliban; and not all armed groups comply with the humanitarian-legal requirements to be considered eligible targets for continuous attacks. Armed civilians, who only take part in armed encounters sporadically and without a coherent organisation, are not considered protected like civilians,

during the active encounter; they may be attacked during the encounter and during the retreat. Apart from that, they need to be recognized as civilians however, and are granted their respective rights."

Boor states that the *belligerent nexus* needs to be readily given when taking out anyone with a drone, otherwise he needs to be considered a civilian.

III Ungoverned Space/Territories

The debate on the space itself where this war actually happens and how we perceive it is often only marginal. Conrad Schetter had a great article out on the terminology of this perception, *Ungoverned Territories*, a conceptual innovation of the War on Terror in the Geographica Helvetica journal.[7] He specifically looks at the invention of this terminology in the RAND report[8] and the paper by Lamb,[9] which shaped the narrative in the following years.

I translate some of his observations here to illustrate what his arguments are. He sees the term "ungoverned territories" as a "deliberate effort of a conceptual innovation" to delineate space around a very unclear concept, similar to the vague "axis of evil" of Bush and the "defence of our freedom on the Hindukush" by Struck.

The aim is to create political and analytical tools for situations, which could not be solved with the to-date available vocabulary. The effectiveness of such conceptual innovations depends on how it institutionalizes itself in the public and scientific debate and whether it becomes a framework to legitimize political actions.

Schetter wants to focus on two contexts: *(Space)-rhetoric in the area of security policies* and how specifically through *blurring and over-simplifications demands for safety are created* and how these are then used as a legitimization for political and military actions. He bases his observations on the two documents mentioned; Zellen's article "Tribalism and the future of conflict", [10] Rice's introduction of the notion that spaces in Pakistan are "ungoverned" in 2007/2008 (for example in this NPR interview), and Obama's mentioning of the area as "vast, rugged and mostly ungoverned" in 2009. Manan Ahmed in his *Where the Wild Frontiers Are* [11] dedicates a whole chapter to this issue, with Clinton and Kerry

as examples.

Early on Schetter observes:

Phenomena like warlordism, patronage and corruption tend to surface most prominently where the state is actually present. Here an institutional bricolage happens, since formal and informal rules overlap. The term 'ungoverned' suggests furthermore, that the state alone owns political legitimacy, and that non-state actors and institutions are essentially illegitimate.
[...]
Thus, in both reports, terrorists are mentioned in line with insurgencies, criminal networks and warlords. This view overlooks, that criminal networks are often closely interwoven with the state apparatus or that state actors may be closely involved in terroristic activities.
[...]
Since the term was coined based on initiatives of the US Army one has to ask, how a solution for this problem was envisioned based on what means were available.

He adds that the term "ungoverned territories" suggests that the space where the state has no power can be demarcated with a clear line and completely overlooks the possibility of transition zones/hybrid spaces and the possibility that there may be spaces that were never part of the state and where no territorial thinking as understood by the US Army may exist:

The approach of 'ungoverned territories' negates that people move in space, have networks that transcend this space and its borders, yes even make political decisions outside of spatial constraints. Transnational movements and processes of globalization are completely left out in the RAND report.

He closes rather sarcastically:

It is astonishing, that the RAND and the UGA studies specifically identify border areas where extensive smuggling and migration takes place as 'ungoverned territories'. [...] Following this reasoning, the border regions of the US and the EU should be regarded as 'ungoverned territories' par excellence.

Schetter notes how the RAND report only identifies "ungoverned territories" in the West in "Muslim ghettos in some European cities" while other publications conflictingly identify this ungovernability as both/either "rugged and remote areas" and "densely populated cities."

The concept provides no contribution to a reflective debate on the connections between territorial figuration, statehood, governance and terrorism. On top of that, the ideological use of the term is [...] highly questionable.

IV Mapping the Dangerous Space

Apart from a number of other approaches, I think understanding the space the public debate is referring to when talking of "the lawless regions of Pakistan", "the tribal belt", or "the Northwest of Pakistan" is a fundamental prerequisite to discuss the drone war and then the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In German-language media, "the North West of Pakistan" is still considered a sufficient description for lethal attacks of all kinds - it is even considered possible to equate it with the "badlands" of the country. That was of course derived from the former name of what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, North Western Frontier Province (which dates back to imperial times) and no one really ever bothered to describe precisely what this 'North West' really delineated. Note that Peshawar is 4o East of Karachi. And it became of course a bit confusing when suddenly the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan surfaced in places like Punjab, which hardly could be considered West whichever way you looked at it. Also "the North" is quite well-known in the German-speaking countries for its mountaineering history, and was always considered "safe." So when killings in Gilgit somehow make it into an AP press feed, it is immediately stated "the area used to be considered peaceful."

What to do when the 'Karachi-Islamabad-the dangerous North West - the peace loving beautiful North' map doesn't fit this country anymore?

Derek Gregory looks at how the US Army, through press briefings and Petraeus' famous PowerPoints visually (re)configured Baghdad between 2003 and 2007.[12] Apart from very insightful and interesting observations, Gregory has a very enjoyable style of writing. I think his concepts, although here applied to an urban setting involved in continuous heavy fighting with, can be understood applicable for the drone war as well (and he is currently moving into this geographical direction as well).

There are three points that sprang out I can see valid for how Pakistan is mapped as well.

IV.I Their Wars

This rhetorical effect is enhanced by the way in which those same militaries render the actions of their (non-state or para-state) enemies as indiscriminate, insensitive and illegitimate. Militias, gangs and terrorist groups are engaged in an altogether different set of "new wars" to those in Der Derian's sights. Their violence is viscerally corporeal and even diabolical. In this field of vision death stalks the battle space, saturated in blood and bodies by ethno-sectarian violence and an exorbitant cruelty directed overwhelmingly at civilians, and insurgency becomes the proving ground for a disenchantment of war, which is to say, of "their" wars.

Their wars in Baghdad are often conflicts that are reported as Shia-Sunni rivalries (and he goes into a lot more detail in other articles).[13] For Pakistan, that applies especially for reporting on Gilgit-Baltistan and Quetta, where sectarian violence has been reported widely especially in recent months. Where the Shia-Sunni divide is somehow involved (and it sure is a driver for violence), these standoffs are quickly reduced to savage conflicts with no relation whatsoever to the greater war or perhaps underlying political/land-use reasons.

IV.II Walking and Mapping

Just as the "badlands" in Pakistan are rhetorically clearly delineated in space ("North" and "South" Waziristan, the turbulent "North West", the Durand "line"; Schetter is addressing these topologies) to try to box a problem into confined space, while the actors who are ought to stay in that box are migrating in and out and are interlinked to the 'outside' world through migration and them being part of the globalized world just like, or even more so than a US Soldier,[14] Gregory points at the mapping of *ground truth* in Baghdad:

Hijacked Drones
by Jakob Steiner - 28.01.2013

The connection between top sight and ground truth was established most frequently through the metaphor of 'walking' reporters through the maps, a trope that became so commonplace that the distinction between the battle space and its representations was virtually erased. Soon after the start of Operation Together Forward, when a curfew had been imposed and checkpoints, patrols and targeted raids increased, Caldwell told reporters he would "like to walk you through the statistics of the last 30 days" and showed them a map of attacks in Baghdad district by district. "As you walk through this," he continued,"you'll see that all except two beladiyas [districts] were able to experience a slight decline". [...] He noted that "this is the only area that's been specifically cleared" coded green on the map but he predicted that "you'll see those colors expanding out through the city of Baghdad eventually". In one, magical sentence, the colors bleed from the map to the city. [...] What "it" looked like: at once the map and the city.

The "walking" trope is interesting in another if may be a bit detached from what Gregory lays out in his work. Manan Ahmed from Chapati Mystery looked at the "walking experts" issue (also in his class at FU Berlin), especially Rory Stewart and I would add Younghusband, Harrer, Newby. How does walking a place make us know more about space in the complexity of conflict? And how is that "knowledge" overrated, misinterpreted and misused?

IV.III Medical Scans of the Body Politic

The proponents of drones argue that it is possible to accurately take out identified villains from above; a surgical intervention to take out the ill. Gregory links this rhetoric to the geographical localization and containment that has been undertaken beforehand:

It is surely no accident that these military plots of deaths resemble medical scans of the body politic, where ethno-sectarian violence is visualized as a series of tumors. In his testimony to Congress in April 2008 Petraeus called ethno sectarian violence "a cancer that continues to spread if left unchecked." Here the visual and the verbal work in synch, and the maps become so many visual performances of an intrinsically biopolitical field.
[...]
Thus we are assured that intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance now provide such an accurate and detailed view of the battle space that precision-strike capacity can be directed ("surgically") against infrastructure power stations, communications systems, bridges and invited to draw a duplicitous distinction between targeting "the means of life" and targeting the lives of those who

depend on them. This mode of cartographic reason continues to yoke objectivity to what I call "object-ness": "Ground truth vanishes in the ultimate 'God-trick', whose terrible vengeance depends on making its objects visible and its subjects invisible".

While such a medical mapping may not be directly taking place in Pakistan yet, since the war involvement of foreign forces looks very different here, the coverage of the country is, through different narratives, well underway in pinning it to a map that is believed to represent the country. ✦

ENDNOTES:

1. Living Under Drones, Stanford International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic/NYU School of Law, 2012;
2. Living Under Drones – the anti-drone campaign can do damage too, Myra MacDonald, 2012
3. John Sifton, A Brief History of Drones
4. Daniel Trombly, Drone Panic – New Weapon, Old Anxieties
5. David Bell, In Defense of Drones – A Histroical Argument,
6. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-R01996,_Brieftaube_mit_Fotokamera.jpg
7. Conrad Schetter, ‚Ungoverned Territories' – eine konzeptionelle Innovation im ‚War on Terror',
8. Angel Rabasa et. al., Ungovernered Territories,
9. Robert D. Lamb, Ungoverned Areas and Threats from Safe Havens,
10. Barry Zellen, Tribalism and the Future of Conflict,
11. Manan Ahmed, Where the Wild Frontiers Are – Pakistan and the American Imagination, Just World Books, 2011
12. Derek Gregory, Seeing Red: Baghdad and the eventful city. Political Geography, 29, 266-279. 2010)
13. Derek Gregory, War and peace. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 35, 154 - 186; Derek Gregory, The biopolitics of Baghdad: counter-insurgency and the counter-city. Human Geography, 1, 8 - 23.
14. Jakob Steiner, Stories of Migration and Globalization from the Subcontinent, The Tuqay, 5 November, 2012.