PM: Drones and The New Robotics

by Polly Mann

The use of drones for U.S. military purposes has skyrocketed in recent years. For example, not one was used in the 2003 Baghdad action; yet today there are an estimated 7,000 "unmanned" aircraft and 12,000 ground vehicles plus the Global Positioning Satellite system, video-game-like remote controls and a host of other technologies. The unmanned multi-role Surveillance and Strike Aircraft has grown from an original 72 units to 476, an increase of more than 600% with an initial cost of $1 billion projected to cost $7 billion in 2020. (American Conservative Magazine April 1, 2010)

New soldiers learn how to operate robots that can defuse bombs or look over the top of a ridge. New sailors may well serve on a ship that operates unmanned helicopters. Or if on a submarine, they may control unmanned underwater vehicles to detect mines or to conduct surveillance of coastlines. The present communications network allows soldiers at U.S. domestic and overseas military bases to control unmanned aircraft that fire missiles or gather intelligence from both Iraq and Afghanistan. Airmen may fly drones over Central Asia while never physically leaving the continental U.S.

The size of robots can range wildly. There is ChamBot, a bloblike machine that shifts shapes to enable it to squeeze through a hole in the wall. The tiniest robot might be a miniaturized surveillance instrument that mimics a hummingbird in size and ability to hover. Projected are robotics measured in billionths of a yard that might be used to detect an enemy, as well as machines inside the human body that repair wounds, or possibly cause them. Current plans include an unmanned blimp that carries a radar the length of a football field, designed to fly at 12 miles for more than a month at a time. The 2007 MAARS robot, armed with a machine gun and grenade launcher can assume sentry and sniper duty.

Eventually robots, powered by computers, may become a billion times more capable than current varieties. Predator planes once purely remote-controlled can now take off and land on their own and track twelve targets at once. It appears that in the future mixed teams of humans and robots would work together.

There has been little negative reaction to the use of drones. The mainstream corporate media carries little information except an occasional story about a drone attack that may have accidentally hit an Afghan family. To my knowledge, no conferences or workshops have been held addressing the morality of the use and cost of the technology. American soldiers run no risk as they destroy what they assume to be combatants 11,300 miles away.

But the word “drone” has become a colloquial term in Urdu, a language spoken in both Pakistan and India. It appears in rock lyrics that accuse America of not fighting with honor.

There may be a scarcity of information in the corporate media, yet the internet is replete with descriptions and uses of drones. Missing, however, is information as to the cost of the programs. According to one article the CIA has these figures but refuses to share them. Just what portion of the 2009-2010 military budget of over $1 trillion (figure includes Veterans Benefits and interest on the military portion of the annual debt) was allocated for the purchase of robots is difficult to obtain. What is known is that more and more funding continues to be cut and even eliminated from programs that serve human needs as the Pentagon budget increases, in spite of the hype about Secretary of Defense Gates trimming some costs in some areas.

Why is it that the nation that can produce such sophisticated weapons of war cannot allocate resources for the prevention of war? How difficult is it to live in cooperation instead of competition?

Date provided by Scientific America, July 2010 and P.W. Singer, author of The Regulation of New Warfare, www.brookings.edu/opinions and Wired for War. Penguin, 2009. Budget figure from American Security Project.

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