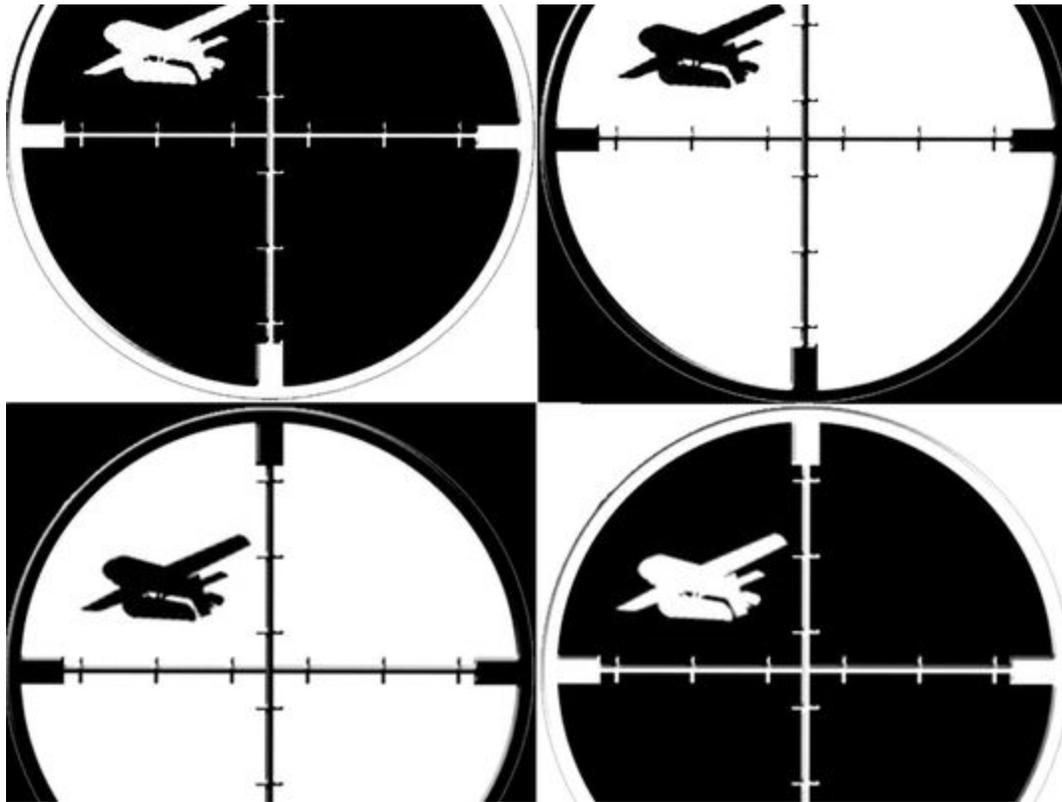


Lincoln Bloomfield: Set standards for drone use

Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr. McClatchy-Tribune 6:06 p.m. EDT July 21, 2014



Drone (Photo: Wes Bausmith/MCT)

The increasing use in recent years of unmanned aerial vehicles, known as UAVs or drones, has spurred innovation and provoked concern. UAVs, which the U.S. Air Force now calls RPAs, or remotely piloted aircraft — a reminder that humans control them — can fly in places where the risk to a pilot would be too great to justify a manned mission.

It is the use of armed UAVs to carry out what the U.S. government calls “targeted killings” on foreign soil of individuals believed to pose a serious terrorist threat to the United States that has spurred criticism, concern and debate, in the U.S. and abroad.

President Obama has tried to strike a balance between protecting the secrecy of intelligence operations and assuring Congress and the public that discrete lethal attacks via UAV-launched missiles on people inside countries such as Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan are legal, properly authorized and necessary to defend U.S. interests.

The public still has many questions, in part, because the government has remained so tight-lipped about these operations.

The Stimson Center, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C., convened a task force on drone policy in an effort to tackle and resolve divisive questions about the government's use of UAVs and related policy issues. The task force, of which I was a member, was co-chaired by retired Army Gen. John Abizaid, who previously commanded U.S. Central Command, and Georgetown Law professor Rosa Brooks, who previously served as counselor to the under secretary of defense for policy in the Obama administration.

The findings are important to consider and dispel misunderstandings about UAV technology — what is different from other military tools and what is not. Targeted killings, lawfully authorized and carefully managed though they may have been, are generating controversy at home and abroad, which should be weighed in the calculation of how best to protect the U.S. against terrorism.

Greater transparency is called for.

The administration should address legitimate public concerns by producing a comprehensive legal and policy rationale for UAV lethal strikes, particularly those outside of recognized areas of ongoing military operations. Mechanisms to introduce greater accountability, including an external review commission, would help.

In addition, the U.S. military, not the CIA, should carry out UAV strikes in all but extraordinary circumstances, since the military has well-known and established planning and review procedures and is experienced in managing and being accountable for classified lethal operations.

UAVs can do far more than military tasks, and civilian use of UAVs is already substantial and growing fast. They are increasingly used for agricultural and environmental monitoring, and the emerging capability of small UAVs to deliver cargo from one spot to another suggests a key future role in the economy, in what some predict may be a coming revolution in technology-enabled mobility and transport. Many countries have industries building drones for civilian and military uses.

While export controls on UAVs remain important to U.S. national security, controls on exports to friends and allies should not be so restrictive as to drive investment and technology leadership into potentially unrestricted foreign hands. A sensible approach for UAV exports would reflect the administration's export control reform objective seeking "higher walls around fewer items."

Drones are no longer a novelty. Unmanned systems have become an established and fast-growing segment of aviation and related sectors in the global economy.

It is time for the United States to clarify and reconfirm national policy and procedures on targeted killings with UAVs.

Not only is this needed to reassure the public of adequate legal authorization and operational oversight. Established mechanisms for transparency and oversight, and prudent export control policies permitting American industry to develop the promising potential of UAV technology for civil as well as military uses, will serve as an appropriate norm for any country using or exporting UAVs.

If respected and followed by others, America's example can reduce the prospect that foreign drones will one day threaten our own security.

Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr. is a former U.S. special envoy and assistant secretary of state. He is chairman of the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C.