IPRI Journal XVI, No.1 (Winter 2016): 1-21

Critical Reflections on the *Reality* of Drone Warfare: Thinking with Jean Baudrillard

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Abstract

In order to enter symmetrical relations of force in a war, the two opposing sides need to have some balance in technology (and overall power). When such balance is not there in a war, e.g. like the Gulf War in the early 1990s, it transforms into, what Jean Baudrillard calls, a non-war. In other words, he questions the occurrence or reality of a non-war. Along the lines of Baudrillard's critique of the Gulf War, we register critique of the ongoing drone war on the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland. We argue that the technological imbalance is even worse in this drone war. Accordingly, there is higher level of asymmetry in the relations of force, which has transfigured the nature/reality of this war. We apply and test a set of Baudrillard's concepts to explain this transfigured nature of the drone war.

Key words: Warfare, Drones, Non-war, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Jean Baudrillard.

Introduction

In February 1991, when the Gulf War broke out, one of the leading French critics and political philosophers, Jean Baudrillard, wrote a critical essay, 'The Gulf War: Is It Taking Place?' in the French daily *Liberation*. This essay was his second in a series of three that he would publish on the Gulf War.[1] In these essays, he questions the reality or the 'taking place' of the Gulf War. The first essay was published before the war broke out, which was ironically titled 'The Gulf War Will Not Take Place.' In this essay, he argued that the war in its conventional sense would not take place. Then, along the same line of argument, he wrote a third essay that was published in the aftermath of the war. In this, he further

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

substantiated his earlier arguments. It was also ironically titled 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.'

Baudrillard's interrogation of the occurrence or the 'taking place' of the Gulf War, which otherwise involved massive aerial bombardment and mass casualties, might sound counterfactual, counterintuitive, and provocative. However, from critical International Relations (IR) perspective, his style of critical writing is quite illuminating. His purpose is not to ignore the facts of war. But, instead, to introduce a critical way of thinking about modern, rather post-modern wars, especially the ones in which there is immense imbalance of power between adversaries. He critiques and even mocks such post-modern, imbalanced and asymmetric wars.[2] He questions whether any two opposing forces are able to engage each other in, what he calls, 'the form of relations of force.'[3] He suggests that in the wake of the Gulf War, the dilemma faced by post-modern wars, especially involving hi-tech and low-tech adversaries, is this inability to enter and engage in symmetrical relations of force. Comparing the state-of-the-art technology of the American Army against the low-tech Iraqi Army, Baudrillard argues that just as the latter are incapable of putting up resistance, the former are 'paralysed by [their] own strength and incapable of assuming it in the form of relations of force.'[4] For instance, the aerial bombardment and especially the infamous turkey shoot—the indiscriminate shooting of Iraqi troops and civilians fleeing along the road to Basra—was not a war but a 'non-war.'[5]

A decade after the Gulf War, the United States declared another similar (non-)war, the War on Terror. This war reminds us of Baudrillard's theses explained in his three essays. Even though the War on Terror is different from the Gulf War in various ways—for instance in organisation, strategy, and technology, as well as the topology of the mountainous battleground and the nature of declaration and conclusion of the two wars—there are still many parallels that can be drawn between the two, especially from the vantage point of technology deployment and *the form of relations of force*.

In order to draw these parallels, let us first reassert Baudrillard's question in the new setting of the War on Terror. Our question will be: Is it

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[2] See Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Rod Thornton, *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Roger W. Barnett, *Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to U.S. Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 2003); Steven Metz and Douglas V. Johnson, *Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Concepts* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2001).

[3] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 24.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 49.

possible for the United States and the Al Qaeda-Taliban alliance to engage in a symmetrical form of relations of force? It is difficult to answer the question in a clear Yes or No. Strictly speaking, Baudrillard himself did not provide a Yes or No answer in relation to the Gulf War. Perhaps, he deliberately avoided doing so in order to provide space for productive suspicion and critique. In case of the War on Terror, which deployed yet more sophisticated robotic technology, the difficulty to answer in a Yes or No style becomes more pronounced. With the robotic drones, the semi-virtual interface of the earlier Gulf War has transformed the War on Terror into a full-fledged virtual war. The robotic war has begun to materialise what critical war studies call 'seamless manipulation' in which 'the seams between reality and virtuality [are] deliberately blurred,'[6] and the sedentary pilots of drones engaged in an actual battlefield through virtual interface.

Brief History of Drone Technology and its Deployment in Warfare

Technically called an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the history of the drone can be stretched as far back as the American Civil War. The opposing forces in the Civil War had invented explosive-laden hot air balloons. They wished to fly the balloons into enemy territories. Even though the ventures did not bring any success to either side, but it did introduce a new war tactic.

Almost a century after the invention of explosive-filled hot balloons, the Ryan Aeronautical Company in 1951 introduced the first jet propelled drone. It was named Firebee. The Firebees, though technologically wanting, were extensively deployed in the 1960s over China and Vietnam, especially for reconnaissance purposes. However, it was not until the Gulf War that we see strategic deployment of the modern, well-equipped drone. In this war, the RQ Pioneer drone was deployed against the Iraqi forces for surveillance, reconnaissance, and damage assessment.

The Gulf War increased the desire and demand for upgrading drone technology. It led to the making of RQ series of drones in the early 1990s. The RQ drone was further developed by 2001, and it was given a new name, MQ-1 Predator, which reflected its multi-mission capability. RQ and MQ drones have flown a large number of surveillance missions over Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan since 1995. The latest and the most advanced version of MQ series is the MQ-9 Reaper, which proved its initial operating capability in October 2007. The MQ-1 and MQ-9 drones have

[6] Paul Patton, "Introduction," in Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.

taken up the vanguard position in the aerial combat against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland.

According to U.S Air Force unclassified information about MQ series of drones, MQ-1 Predator is a medium-altitude long endurance unmanned aircraft system.[7] MQ-9 is a medium-to-high altitude long enduring aircraft system. Their functions include reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition. They are, primarily, employed to locate and strike 'critical', 'perishable' and 'emerging' targets. MQ-1 and MQ-9 are described as 'system[s], not just aircraft[s].' A system typically consists of several air vehicles, a ground control station (GCS), a satellite and operations and maintenance staff. The crew of a UAV consists of a pilot and a sensor operator, and a mission intelligence coordinator. The pilot and the sensor operator fly the aircraft from a remotely located Ground Control System in coordination with the mission intelligence coordinator. These aircrafts are equipped with a coloured nose camera for flight control purposes. Moreover, MQ-1 Predator has one daylight camera and one infrared camera, and some other sensors as the mission may require. On the other hand, MQ-9 has two daylight video cameras, one low-light television camera, and one infrared camera. It also incorporates a laser rangefinder/designator, which provides the capability to precisely designate targets for laser-guided munitions. The combination of electro-optical, infrared, laser designator and laser illuminator into a single sensor package system in the aircraft is called a Multi-spectral Targeting System. The aircraft relays ground imaging, strip maps, spotlight images and ground moving target indication (GMTI). The MQ-1 Predator can deploy two laser-guided AGM-114 Hellfire anti-tank missiles, while MQ-9 Reaper can deploy several of them, and has the capacity to carry and fire GBU-12 Paveway II laser guided bombs and sidewinder missiles.

The first recorded drone strike inside Pakistan was carried out on June 18, 2004, targeting a local Taliban commander in South Waziristan. Since then, there have been over 420 drone strikes as of December 2015 in various parts of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland. The total number of people killed (including civilians) is between 2500 and 4000.[8] The frequency of drone attacks increased in the year 2008, and reached its peak

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[7] U.S Air Force, "MQ-9 Reaper: Fact Sheet Display," United States Department of the Air Force, http://www.af.mil/AboutUs/FactSheets/Display/tabid/224/Article/104470/mq-9-reaper.aspx (accessed December 1, 2015).

[8] Jack Serle and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "US Drone War, November 2015: American Troops in Afghanistan and Somalia Supported by New Strikes," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, December 1, 2015, https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2015/12/01/us-drone-war-november-2015-american-troops-in-afghanistan-and-somalia-supported-by-new-strikes/ (accessed December 1, 2015).

during the year 2009. After 2009, there was steady decrease in the strikes rate.[9] These strikes have killed dozens of Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. But, they have also killed a large number of unarmed civilians, including women and children.

Reality of Drone Warfare: Thinking with Jean Baudrillard

A Virtual War

By raising Baudrillard's question in the beginning of the essay—'Is it taking place?'—we do not assume that the American drone war, in terms of ground strikes and killings in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland is not taking place. Rather, like Baudrillard we also question whether it is *really* taking place. This might sound like an obvious contradiction or paralogism, but that is how the nature of this secret war is—a paralogistic war. It is a war that has violated and muddled the valid arguments of reasoning when it comes to its 'taking place.' When we look at the open source statistics, this war certainly appears to be taking place. There are reports of hundreds of Hellfire missiles fired. These missiles have killed dozens of militants, but also hundreds of civilians as mentioned above. The local people have also taken to the streets in thousands protesting against these attacks. Drone fleets have flown thousands of hours of reconnaissance, surveillance, and active targeting missions over a decade. The United States Congress has taken up the question of drone warfare, though reluctantly, in a number of Senate committee hearings.

Yet despite all these facts, the information data often loses itself in a nebulous mix of contradicting reports. For instance, when a drone attack is carried out, reports from different sources—that of American agencies, Pakistan's intelligence agencies, Taliban spokesmen, and the general public—often contradict each other. At times, these contradictions develop into rumours and conspiracy theories. Similarly, there is not much clarity of information about the whereabouts of the enemy, their purpose, and war tactics and strategy. There is also little clarity of information about the ground bases of the drone fleet and/or their long-term strategy. Moreover, it is not known when this war started, and when it might end. This is not even clear to the U.S or Pakistan military authorities either.

Similarly, one of Baudrillard's primary theses regarding the taking place of the Gulf War does not seek to subvert the reality of violence, destruction, and fear in the Gulf region. He does not concern himself with the question of the subversion of reality, rather with its transfiguration. For

[9] Serle and Fielding-Smith, "US Drone War."

instance, Patton in his introduction to Baudrillard's essays concurs that the latter concerned himself 'less [with] a representation of reality than its transfiguration and that it should pursue a "fatal strategy" of pushing things to extremes.'[10] In so doing, Baudrillard takes *a fatal strategy* by moving beyond the realm of representation of reality to a realm that transfigures it, i.e., the realm of the virtual. Characterised by extensive deployment of modern, yet fledgling, information technology, the realm of the virtual reduces the taking-place of the Gulf War to a jumble of information, speculation, and promotion. This transfiguration not only sapped the traditional meaning of warfare from the Gulf War, but also adversely affected the human dimensions of violence, destruction and fear. In the Gulf War, human targets *evaporated* on computer screens as digitalised symbols and graphics. The Gulf War that the world saw through the American media, primarily CNN, took place more in the virtual environs of cyber space than on the actual desert battleground of Iraq. 'As a result,' as Patton puts it, 'what we saw was for the most part a "clean" war, with lots of pictures of weaponry, including the amazing footage from the nose-cameras of "smart bombs" and relatively few images of human casualties, none from the Allied forces.'[11]

The difference in warfare technology between the U.S. and Iraq in the Gulf War was so high that Baudrillard feared that the war 'will not take place' and even when it was taking place he doubted that it was taking place. The Gulf War, he contended, was torn between two contradictory tendencies which took place spontaneously i.e., 'escalation' and 'non-occurrence', 'intensification and deterrence.'[12] While Paul Virilio believed that acquiring of modern technology would increase the chances of escalation in an apocalyptic war in present times, Baudrillard argued that it would also lead to self-deterrence in which a highly sophisticated military would be incapable of engaging its enemy in an actual war. He writes:

> We [Virilio and himself] concluded that this decidedly strange war went in both directions at once. The war's programmed escalation is relentless and its non-occurrence no less inevitable: the war proceeds at once towards the two extremes of intensification and deterrence…It is a sign that the space of the event has become a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean.[13]

[10] Patton, "Introduction," 6.
[11] Ibid., 3.
[12] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 49.
[13] Ibid., 49–50.

Accordingly, the transfiguration of the realm of the real entails two changes in the event of war: first, the bifurcation of the Euclidean space of war; and second, the transformation of that space into a 'hyperspace with multiple refractivity.' The bifurcation of Euclidean space leads to the creation of two different and separate spaces of the actual and the virtual. However, Baudrillard bifurcates not for the sake of separating, but for superimposing them to create a hyperspace. The virtual remains superimposed on the actual exactly like the cyber war field of a computer screen superimposes the actual war field. The advantage of creating such a hyperspace is that the contradictory phenomenon of the event of war becomes possible and plausible, i.e. we can then say that the war can take place without taking place. The American audience, the military and the masses in general, which were positioned in the virtual space of the Gulf War, thanks to the information technology and media coverage, saw only a 'clean war' and not the bloody war taking place (the not-taking-place of war aspect). On the other hand, the Iraqi audience placed in the actual space of war saw only a bloody war and not the clean war taking place (the taking-place of war aspect).

Thinking along the lines of Baudrillard and Virilio, we argue that the American drone warfare in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland has proceeded in two diametrically opposite directions. On the one hand, it has seen relentless programmed escalation primarily due to the deployment of state-of-the-art technology, infliction of one-sided damage, destruction, and casualties on the enemy as well as on the civilian population as its collateral damage or because of its myopic blindness to distinguish between the two. On the other hand, it has seen self-deterrence—the incapacity to engage the enemy in symmetrical relations of force in order to launch an actual war. In effect, the modern drone technology has made it almost impossible to materialise a war between the United States on one side and the Taliban and Al-Qaeda on the other.

Since the Gulf War, the transfiguration of the event of war in the context of the War on Terror has further intensified. In fact, the War on Terror has actual or virtual spaces/interfaces of war, but they are no longer permanent. These war interfaces are temporary and mobile depending on the collection and manipulation of intelligence information and speculation about insurgency and militancy. While the actual and virtual war interfaces remain superimposed on each other, their bifurcation becomes visible when militancy, for instance, is detected in the virtual space, but (not taking place) in the actual one (and hence the casualties) and vice versa.[14]

[14] Syed Sami Raza, "The North West Frontier of Pakistan: Preoccupation with 'Unveiling' the Battlefield and the Continuing Violent Cartographies," in *The New Violent*

The multiple reflectivity of the hyperspace of war also makes a distinction between martyrdom and killing; the martyr and the killed visible and understandable. In fact, the realm of the virtual (the one that American drone sedentary pilots see on their computer screens) reduces people to what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*—mere lives that are killed without impunity.[15] On the other hand, in the realm of the actual, these people are sacrificed and their sacrifice is believed to carry the sublime metaphysical meaning of martyrdom.

Distant War

The conventional war, which we also term as actual war, is typically a forceful 'duel.' According to the acclaimed theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, 'War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale.'[16] In order for a duel to take place, it is necessary for the forces to be positioned in close proximity, ideally being face-to-face with each other. The nature of war taking place on the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands is different from a conventional ground war. As a major tactic, the U.S forces have deployed drones. This tactic gives them an edge on the territorially based Taliban forces. Even though the drone technology is still far from being highly sophisticated, it enables the U.S forces to target their enemy not only from a high altitude, but also from latitudinal difference (i.e., from Nevada). This technological difference led Lt. Gen. (retd.) Talal Masood (with a long experience of cold and hot wars in the region) to call the drone warfare, a 'distant war.'[17] P.W. Singer interprets distant war as America's 'great willingness to use force, but only if it can do it from afar with high technology, limiting as much as possible its human exposure on the ground.'[18]

This distant war has successfully resulted in frustrating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, out of this frustration, they then boast their own bravery and exploits. For instance, Mahmood Shah, a retired brigadier who was once a top Pakistani official in the tribal areas, talks about what militants think of this war with America: 'The militants say that if Americans want to come and fight, they should fight them face-to-face.' In other words, they challenge the American forces to descend from cyber

Cartography: Geo-Analysis after the Aesthetic Turn, ed. Samson Opondo and Michael J. Shapiro (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 192.

[15] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[16] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Feather Trail Press, 1832), 18.

[17] P. W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2009), 310.

[18] Ibid.

space to actual rugged battlefields of the borderland to fight a one-on-one war.

Interestingly the phrase distant war clearly resonates with Baudrillard's theses—'The Gulf War Will Not Take Place,' 'Is it Taking Place?', an' "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.' The problem with a distant war is that its taking-place is often suspected, as Lt. General Talat puts it: 'This type of warfare seldom involves distinct front lines. Fighting has taken place in a confusing mix of friend and adversary.'[19] Similarly, a U.S army officer has said:

> People sitting in air conditioned command cells in distant countries, betting the farm on UAV…will never get it right. You have to 'walk the field' to fight the war….It cannot be done long-distance or over croissants and lattes in teak-lined rooms. It is done in the dirt, over *chai*, conversation, and mutual understanding.[20]

However, the possibility of a face-to-face war is difficult from another point of view as well. In the drone warfare, as well as in other asymmetric technological warfare, neither soldiers nor their adversaries have faces. The war is more a struggle of dissimulation, distortion, and disfiguration of faces. American soldiers, for instance, are increasingly becoming more like cyborg-soldiers with an overwhelming amount of armour. Moreover, those who operate drones remain hidden behind the virtual interface. On the other hand, the Taliban Al-Qaeda fighters disappear behind their tribal interface, i.e. covering faces or with tribal dress codes blending into civilian population. While American soldiers wear body armour like masks and goggles, the Taliban wear scarves or the left behind/captured armour of American soldiers. Many Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters who have a head-price are not identified by photographs, but by hand drawn sketches. Interestingly, drones that hover in the skies of Waziristan deploy low resolution cameras which cannot focus on persons to identify faces. One U.S General, for instance, confessed: 'Insurgents don't show up in satellite imagery very well.'[21] Moreover, drone warfare cannot be a face-to-face war or a duel simply because the Euclidean space has also been divided on vertical and horizontal planes in such a way that one army is positioned on a horizontal plane, while the other on a vertical one. Accordingly, war maneuvering for offensive and defensive purposes is only a matter of hit-and-run or hit-and-fly.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 215.
[21] Ibid.

Asexual War

Baudrillard developed a distinct genre of sexual tropes, metaphors, and similes to explain the not-taking-place of the Gulf War. Just as a literary repertoire of poems, ballads, memoirs, eulogies, and elegies arise with an actual (that is also traditional) war, so a perverse genre of mockery, comedy, and sexual tropes arise with a 'non-war.' For instance, at one point he compares the Gulf War with digitalized asexual war:

> This war [the Gulf War] is an asexual surgical war, a matter of war-processing in which the enemy only appears as a computerized target, just as sexual partners only appear as code-names on the screen of Minitel Rose.[22]

Elsewhere he equates the Gulf War with 'a celibate machine.'[23]

Typically, the sexuality of a war is related to the tropes of manliness, bravery, fearlessness, and psychological strength. The Gulf War, and the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq brought to light the extensive use of these metaphors and tropes within the American forces. Especially, with the question of moral choice to go to a war, and the rising number of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patients, derogatory metaphors like 'sissies' have become common in the American Army. On the other hand, the extensive use of drones has left an impression among their adversaries of weakness and cowardice. As one security analyst puts it, 'How you conduct war is important. It gives you dignity or not.'[24] However, American army strategists remain inattentive to those concerns. The present strategy is to spend money and resources more than the blood of their soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel Bob Bateman, for instance, remarked:

> First and foremost, it is due to an inclination extant since the Second World War that the United States will always spend money instead of lives if at all possible. Exacerbating that is a trend towards preferences for increasingly complex systems.[25]

Apart from preferences for modern complex technology, the U.S. military's preferences for 'attitude and aptitude' in the selection of new soldiers have also seen remarkable change. Passion, strength, and masculinity are not as much the qualities of a new soldier than his/her aptitude for technology, skills in understanding simulations and playing video games, intelligence and efficiency in gathering, sifting and reading

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[22] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 62.
[23] Ibid., 36.
[24] Singer, *Wired for War*, 311.
[25] Ibid., 207.

electronic information. Colonel Chris Chambliss of U.S. Air Force at Creech Air Force Base in an interview to CNN talked about the new vision of the modern soldier: 'If you look at the younger people right now, they are multitasked…they can do a lot of different things with a lot of different information…that's certainly the skills we need.' CNN, then interviews a newly selected Air Force cadet Greg Groves to reflect on his selection. To a question Grove says, 'I feel like maybe because I am younger I can pick up on things faster…like I pick up on computer games and when I do play video games occasionally with my friends I can pick on it fairly quickly.[26]

With the new repertoire of skills and with distance afforded by the drone, an American soldier can surely avoid getting directly involved on a ground battlefield. Such a war, however, becomes 'a war enclosed in a glass coffin, like Snow White,' as Baudrillard puts it, 'purged of any carnal contamination or warrior's passion.'[27] Drone technology is meant to 'project power without projecting vulnerability' as Gen. David Deptula describes.[28] And the desire ultimately is to overcome the fear of death in war.

Inhuman and Blank War

The absence of sacrifices in the Gulf War on the part of American forces impelled Baudrillard to question its human element. Thus, he writes,

> Strangely, a war without victims [victims only on Iraqi side and not on American side] does not seem like a real war but rather the prefiguration of an experimental, blank war, or a war even more inhuman because it is without human losses. No heroes on the other side either, where death was most often that of sacrificed extras.[29]

Just as Clausewitz believed that war is necessarily 'an act of violence,'[30] so extending the argument further Baudrillard believes that for a war to take place some blood should spill on both sides. Otherwise, the violence would not be the violence of war, but that which takes place in persecution. And the war that is reduced to mere persecution becomes a

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[26] Nic Robertson, "How Robot Drones Revolutionized the Face of Warfare," *CNN*, July 27, 2009, http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/07/23/wus.warfare.remote.uav/ (accessed April 28, 2016).

[27] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 43.

[28] David Deptula, "Retired Lt. Gen. Deptula: Drones Best Weapons We've Got For Accuracy, Control, Oversight; Critics Don't Get It," *Breaking Defense*, February 15, 2013, http://breakingdefense.com/2013/02/retired-gen-deputula-drones-best-weapons-weve-got-for-accurac/ (accessed April 15, 2016).

[29] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 73.

[30] Clausewitz, *On War*, 18.

blank war because it is devoid (blank) of form of relations of force. In other words, it begs the question, which for instance Giorgio Agamben asked in the wake of violence in the concentration camps: Are relations of power still possible today?[31] The blank war is said to be without victims, not only because there are no dead on the side of the perpetrator, but also because the victims on the persecuted side are reduced to 'extras.' On such occasions, the blank war becomes a pure killing machine devoid of any form of relations of ethics and humanity, which are composite of the so-called civilised wars.

The blankness and inhumanity of and in war has reached a new level in the War on Terror. The drone war has become like an everyday routine job done on a desk and screen. It has led to conflation of the banal act of 'going to work' and the frightful act of 'going to war.'

In 2007, a popular Pakistani satirical song *'Chacha Wardi Lahnda Kyo Nahen?'* (Uncle, Lose the Uniform Why Don't You?) became the punch line against General Pervaiz Musharraf and American drone war in street protests in Pakistan. The song even became a popular ringtone for cell phones. One of the fragments of the lyrics translates as follows: 'America's heartless terrorism, Killing people like insects, But honour does not fear power.' The song not only reversed the roles in the perpetration of terror in the War on Terror, but its imagery also indirectly compared American forces with invincible robots and the people on the borderland with insects. The human element in the drone war has been replaced by the interventions of heartless robots and speechless human-insects. The War on Terror has seen new form of relations of force between the robots and insects, pure metal and pure meat by displacing—i.e. distancing and virtualising—the human element from the war. Singer writes,

> The introduction of unmanned systems to the battlefield does not change simply how we fight, but for the first time changes who fights at the most fundamental level. It transforms the very agent of war, rather than just its capabilities.[32]

The advent of autonomous unmanned systems would mark the final stage of the three-stage development of the soldier body from ancient to modern times: first stage of the flesh-and-blood body; second stage of the flesh-and-blood body aided with prosthetics; and third stage of the metal-and-electric body or the prosthetics themselves and the disappearance of the flesh-and-blood body. John Pike placing this development in the warfare technology in a historical context said: 'First, you had human beings

[31] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
[32] Singer, *Wired for War*, 194.

without machines. Then, you had human beings with machines. And, finally you have machines without human beings.'[33] A security analyst Christopher Coker fears that 'today we stand on the cusp of post-human history' perhaps because we are losing the '5,000-year old monopoly over the fighting of war.'[34]

Symptomatic War: Information, Speculation and Promotion

Clausewitz believed that the fog—the difficulty of getting clear information—and friction—the probability that a strategy does not go according to plan—are characteristic of almost every war. Baudrillard, on the other hand, combines the fog and friction characteristics of war into one element that he calls uncertainty. Both scholars, however, project that the nature of war transfigures with the fog, friction, and uncertainty. Baudrillard writes,

> Their war-processors, their radars, their lasers and their screens render the passage to war as futile and impossible as the use of a word-processor renders futile and impossible the passage to the act of writing, because it removes from it in advance any dramatic uncertainty.[35]

The war processors, radars, computer graphics and simulations all produce technological simulacra that seeks to overcome the difficulties posed by the principle of uncertainty. The Gulf War, for instance, took measures to overcome uncertainty, but could not do much. It saw a number of bungled missions. Nevertheless, the Gulf War produced more desire for technology among the military and American defense circles with the hope to gain increased control over their own forces as well as over those of the enemy's and ultimately over the event of war. They seemed keen towards launching an information warfare, or as one of its main proponents Vice Admiral Arthur Cebrowski called it a 'network-centric warfare.'[36]

The main assumptions of a network-centric warfare are to gain total information awareness and near-perfect intelligence. This would bring immense information advantage so that a networked army will not only remain aware of its own positions on the battlefield, but also that of its enemy's. It will be aware of the enemy's strength and weaknesses, strategies and tactics more than the enemy itself. Despite many breakthroughs in information technology, the development of aerial and land robots, and the ability to generate vast amounts of information at one

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 34.
[36] Singer, *Wired for War*, 180.

time about the enemy and the battlefield, the problem of uncertainty stays on the ground. P.W. Singer in his detailed analysis of robotic technology, for instance, concludes: 'The fog of war ain't going anywhere. Even with robots, we are learning that war will remain as unpredictable as it is enduring.[37]

While the desire to overcome the fog and friction of war through technology seems far from having been realised, the massive amount of information input—the digital, optical, and sonar—has been producing its own peculiar challenges. One such challenge relates to the identification and isolation of the enemy. In effect, the enemy has come to find new safe havens not only in the actual battlefields of Afghanistan, but also in the barrage of virtual information. Baudrillard, for instance, had noted this problem in the Gulf War as he wrote: 'All kinds of electronic interference creates a sort of barricade behind which he becomes invisible. He also becomes "stealthy" and his capacity for resistance becomes indeterminable.'[38] This is clearly symptomatic that the enemy lives more in the virtual interface than in the actual one. He is transfigured into electronic symbols and digital codes and in order to identify and isolate him complete decoding software/s are required. In this sense, this modern technological warfare is proving to be more about software than hardware, virtual than actual.

Instead of decreasing the fog of war, the drone war has dramatically increased it. Despite the superior intelligence and information input, it remains unclear in the aftermath of a drone attack whether or not the target has been taken. For instance, in 2009, Bill Roggio in an article on the *Long War Journal* blog wrote,

> Previously, Al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al Zawahiri, Abd al Hadi al Iraqi, Abu Obaidullah Al Masri, Adam Gadahn, Ibn Amin, and Rashid Rauf have all been reported killed in various strikes, but these men later resurfaced. Similarly, Sa'ad bin Laden was recently reported killed, but he is now thought to be alive. And Abu Khabab al Masri was reported dead several times before he actually was killed in a July 2008 strike.[39]

In July 2009, a CIA drone targeted Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud. For the next few months, it became a contentious issue between the Taliban and the Pakistani government whether or not Baitullah was dead. On the other hand, the American intelligence not sure about the result

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[37] Ibid., 195.

[38] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 43.

[39] Bill Roggio, "The Fog of the Predator War: Baitullah Is Alive, Say Pakistani Taliban," *Long War Journal* (2009), http://www.defenddemocracy.org/project/the-long-war-journal/ (accessed October 12, 2015).

preferred to remain silent. Interestingly, for months the Pakistani government kept on challenging the Taliban to release any video as evidence to bear out their claim that Baitullah was alive, while the Taliban kept on asking the government to produce their evidence of his death.

The fog of drone war not only surrounds the killing of militants, but also that of civilians. The figures relating to civilian casualties remain controversial. For instance, some sources in Pakistan highlight that the drone strikes have 'killed some 700 civilians [as of April 2009]. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2 per cent.'[40] In other words, 98 per cent of those killed in drone attacks were civilians. Amir Mir, a leading Pakistani journalist reveals in a local Pakistani daily, *The News International*, in April 2009 that during the same period, American drone attacks had killed '687 innocent Pakistani civilians.'[41] On the other hand, Bergen and Tiedemann of New America Foundation wrote that since 2006, 83 U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan had killed 760 to 1,050 people. Out of which 505 to 696 were militants and 252 to 316 were civilians.[42]

One of the reasons why the fog of war surrounds the War on Terror is the extensive and intensive involvement of intelligence agencies of different states involved. The agencies do not share how they operate their missions, how they select targets, how they take them out, and how many have been taken out in the War on Terror. There is no concrete information as to when this drone war started, how it started and when it might come to an end. Perhaps the intelligence agencies themselves have no answers to these questions, and therefore, we are left with speculations of government spokespersons and independent media. In this way, the event of war is reduced to speculation and becomes symptomatic. According to Baudrillard:

> So war, when it has been turned into information, ceases to be a realistic war and becomes a virtual war, in some way symptomatic. And just as everything psychical becomes the object of interminable speculation, so everything which is turned into information becomes the object of endless speculation.[43]

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[40] David Kilcullen and Andrew Mcdonald Exum, "Death From Above, Outrage Down Below," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2009, Opinion section, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html (accessed May 20, 2015).

[41] Amir Mir, "US Drones Have Killed 14 Terrorists, 687 Civilians," *The News International*, April 10, 2009.

[42] Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "Revenge of the Drones: An Analysis of Drone Strikes in Pakistan," New America Foundation, October 19, 2009, http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/revenge_of_the_drones (accessed December 12, 2015).

[43] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 41.

Despite the fog of war being linked to information about the figures of dead militants and civilians, the drone is believed to have the capability to collect massive amounts of information. The drone has stirred excitement in the American defence circles even though its value or usefulness in enabling the pilot and sensor operators at ground control stations to fight the actual war through the virtual interface remains ambiguous at best. One information technology enthusiast in the American defence believes that, 'It is not just video resolution, it is not just signals, it is not just access to analysts, what has really evolved is the fact we can integrate a variety of information and analyse it in real time.' Another offers that, 'This is Buzz Lightyear technology. This is unprecedented amount of information in warfare.'[44] Even if one agrees that the American defence laboratories have hit upon the 'Buzz Lightyear technology,' the major challenge for the American Army will be its incorporation in offensive and/or defensive strategies by developing a military doctrine. However, at this point, especially in the context of the War on Terror, the American Army does not have a well-defined military organisational or deployment doctrine to incorporate the drone in a standard war plan. According to robotics pioneer, Robert Finkelstein, 'We don't have the strategy or the doctrine…we are just now thinking how to use UAVs, when we should be thinking about how to use them in groups. What are the collectives of air and ground systems that might be most optimal?'[45]

Moreover, the Buzz Ligthyear technology is not as revolutionary as its enthusiasts believe. Several crashes of drones have been reported. Apart from that the Multi-spectral Targeting technology is not fully reliable. It makes use of low resolution cameras whose images are sketchy and blurry at best. The *TIME* reported, 'Thermal cameras are notoriously imperfect. Even under ideal conditions, images can be blurry. In one of several stills from drone video seen by *TIME*, it's hard to tell if a group of men is kneeling in prayer or the men are militants in battle formation.'[46] In order to overcome the problems arising from low-resolution images, pilots and sensor operators are trained to rely on the technique of *the patterns of life analyses*. Accordingly, the pilot and the sensor operator analyse the real time social patterns of everyday life in a given war field. They analyse

[44] Julian E. Barnes, "Military Refines a 'Constant Stare against Our Enemy': The Rapidly Increasing Surveillance Power of Unmanned Aircraft Gives U.S. Officials an Option Beside Troops," *Latimes.com*, November 2, 2009, latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-drone-eyes2-2009nov02,0,3816238.story (accessed December 1, 2015).

[45] Singer, *Wired for War*, 211.

[46] Bobby Ghosh and Mark Thompson, "The CIA's Silent War in Pakistan," *TIME*, June 1, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1900248,00.html (accessed December 1, 2015).

patterns of movement, interaction, and the overall rhythm for differentiating militants from civilians. However, it remains to be seen how far the integration of techniques borrowed from sociology with those of information technology and aeronautics would work for sedentary pilots and sensor operators.

Even if one agrees to the integration-of-technology argument of these otherwise different fields of knowledge, still a practical question needs to be addressed: how much knowledge and understanding does a young UAV pilot have of a culture that is halfway around the world and that has remained isolated given its geographical location and mountainous terrain? Moreover, as the numbers of drone pilots are increasing every year, much of the training is taking place in simulated environments rather than on an actual war ground. How would they be able to differentiate, for instance, between civilians and militants in a land where carrying arms in everyday life is customary? Any attempt to answer these questions would remind us of Baudrillard's remark, See them become confused in explanations, outdo themselves in justifications and lose themselves in technical details (war drifts slowly into technological mannerism) or in the deontology of a pure electronic war without hitches.[47]

The cultural and topological understanding of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland becomes even more complicated with the deployment of technology. 'Technological mannerism' and the 'deontology' of the drone warfare are not symbolic but symptomatic—symptomatic of a war wriggling out of (human) control. However, the advancement of robotic technology and equipping the military goes on with relentless enthusiasm in the U.S. In 2006, U.S. Air Force could fly six drones at a time. The number increased to thirty eight by 2009, and fifty by 2011. Moreover, the new drone is far more sophisticated and heavily equipped. A report highlights that, 'With the wide-area surveillance technologies, the number of video feeds collected at one time is due to expand exponentially -- from 38 today to nearly 3,000 by 2013.' Moreover, it says, '[A] drone which now stares down at a single house or vehicle could [soon] keep constant watch on nearly everything that moves within an area of 1.5 square miles. The year after that, the capability will double to 3 square miles.'[48] The surveillance capability of drones depends on the computational technology, which is believed to be advancing at high pace. For instance, an unclassified report titled *Drone systems roadmap 2007-2032* projects the Cray Red Storm computer system's processing speed to memory relationship at 10^7, while that of the human brain's is projected at

[47] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 34.
[48] Julian E. Barnes, "Military Refines a 'Constant Stare against Our Enemy."

10.[8] These improvements in computational technology are expected to dramatically improve drone capabilities. For instance the report projects:

> In the context of unmanned system capabilities, this ever-increasing computational performance can bring improvements in integrating and interpreting data from sensors and in interacting with human operators. While speech *recognition* is advancing rapidly, speech *understanding* in natural conditions will not be achieved in the coming decade. Its appearance will hinge on a subset of natural language evolving into an accepted computer interface language. Visual recognition in natural conditions, as in automatic target recognition, will likewise be at least a decade away. The more "thinking" that can be completed onboard in real time, the less bandwidth to pipe the data off board for human processing will be required; in other words, future battlefields may have less spectrum congestion than the battlefields of today. Rules of engagement will have to evolve to "trust" the validity of a future unmanned system's text report rather than its video.[49]

Apart from fears of being challenged by its own autonomous computers, robots, and unmanned systems, the U.S. Army is faced with the challenge of growing complexity of technology which is already adversely affecting its capability to fight the War on Terror. Almost a decade into this war, the U.S. has started realising that winning the War on Terror is not only becoming difficult, but also losing its strategic significance. For instance, Bruce Hoffman, a professor at Georgetown (widely regarded as the dean of terrorism studies), writes that, 'We are deluding ourselves if we think in and of itself the drone programme is going to be the answer.'[50] On the other hand, CIA keeps itself deluded with what it calls the strategic gains. Michael Hayden, for example believes, 'We force them to spend more time and resources on self-preservation, and that distracts them, at least partially and at least for a time, from laying the groundwork for the next attack.'[51]

Despite certain strategic gains, it seems difficult to say whether this war is decisively winnable or can be wound down. In such a scenario, the growing complexity of technology more than anything else is likely to be a decisive factor. It reminds one of Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction story, *Superiority*. The fiction is instructive of how an Army with an advanced,

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[49] The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), "Unmanned Systems Roadmap, 2007-2032," December 10, 2007, www.fas.org/irp/program/collect/usroadmap2007.pdf, 62.

[50] Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "The Drone War," *New Republic*, June 3, 2009, https://newrepublic.com/article/61767/the-drone-war (accessed December 1, 2015).

[51] Ibid.

but complex technology loses the war to its enemy which had relatively poorer technology, but used it with skill and efficiency. Taking place in a distant future, the fiction drives home the recollections and reflections of a captured military officer who believes that his side lost because of its superior technology or/and because of the enemy's inferior one. He recollects, 'We were defeated by one thing only—by the inferior science of our enemies…I repeat, by the inferior science of our enemies.' Clarke's military officer insinuates that 'his side was seduced by the possibilities of new technology. It created a new doctrine for how it wanted war to be, rather than how it turned out.'[52] They desired to overcome the principle of uncertainty, to *lifting the fog of war* and its friction, but in so doing they had inadvertently built more of the fog and friction. Clarke's fictional vision did not leave the U.S. military commanders and armchair strategists untouched. Impressed of Clarke's vision, a U.S. Air Force general, Charles J. Dunlap, wrote similar imaginary stories on 'How We Lost the High-Tech War,' basing them on the reflections and thoughts of a captured U.S. soldier.

Domestication War

Underlying the fictional accounts of Clarke and Dunlap is a sense of what Baudrillard calls 'serious depression, a neurosis of powerlessness' which is caused not by lack of power of the U.S. forces but conversely 'its enormity.'[53] At the same time, it is akin to pervasive disbelief in the technology itself, partly because there is no limit to it. The technology has rent asunder the Euclidean space necessary for establishing proportion between ends and means in a war. While the U.S. faces 'disproportion of means' to its ends in the War on Terror, the Taliban Al-Qaeda alliance faces a 'disproportion of ends' to their means. Because both the sides have lost their sense of proportion of power needed for their respective ends and means, the War on Terror has become a 'non-war.' Interestingly, just as the Taliban Al-Qaeda alliance does not realise and believe in their powerlessness in relation to their ends, so the U.S. does not realise and believe in its too powerfulness in relations to its strategy. This paradoxical situation can be put in Baudrillard's words:

> If the West believed in its own power, it would not give a moment's thought to this threat. The most amusing aspect, however, is that the other does not believe in his powerlessness either, and he who does not believe in his

[52] Singer, *Wired for War*, 212.
[53] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 80.

> powerlessness is stronger than he who does not believe in his power, be it a thousand times greater.[54]

Aside from this paradoxical situation, there is something more serious taking place within the broader logic of disproportion and neurosis of power. In the increasingly expanding war, intensively in technology and extensively on territories, the U.S. has lost its enemy or/and chosen the refractory forces that the enemy represented. Baudrillard configured this situation a decade ago when he wrote:

> [T]here is no longer any enemy, there is only a refractory element which must be neutralised and consensualised. This is what the Americans seek to do, these missionary people bearing electro-shocks which will shepherd everybody towards democracy. It is, therefore, pointless to question the political aims of this war.[55]

Moreover, he said, 'Our wars, thus, have less to do with the confrontation of warriors than with the domestication of the refractory forces on the planet…'[56] The U.S. seems to have lost track of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and confused them with the new refractory forces in general.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the drone technology has revolutionized the battlefield. There is substantial investment going on in further enhancing this technology given the speculations about how it will yield decisive advantage against the enemy, by bending, what Baudrillard calls, 'the form of relations of force' in favour of the technologically advanced army on the battlefield. However, the technology is also feared to eventually replace the human element from warfare (whether in decision-making or bodily engagement on the battleground). It will intensify virtual interface against actual interface (the ground battlefield), thus, leading to a drastic impact on the symmetry of modes of engagement.

While drone technology will soon usher modern warfare into post-modern warfare, it is a travesty that the first test of this technology is taking place against an adversary that still uses pre-modern warfare equipment and skills. The drone warfare 'taking-place' on the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland, and elsewhere in the Middle East, is indicative of this travesty or what Baudrillard calls the 'non-war' aspect of modern technological warfare. On the one hand, there is great disparity in the aims, strategies, and

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 84.
[56] Ibid., 86.

technology between the two sides—the U.S. Army and the Taliban—and on the other, there is media deployment of the ethical discourse for justifying the use of drone technology. However, despite having a scientific edge over the Taliban (and Al-Qaeda), this technology is far from yielding promised victory. It has, rather, transformed the battleground in such a way (by creating asymmetrical relations of force) that the War on Terror has become an unending war encumbered with the burden of collateral damage.■