Precision Strike Against ‘High-Value’ Targets: Assassination and Foreign Policy

Hitting the Target: How New Capabilities Are Shaping Contemporary Intervention

Centre for International Intervention, University of Surrey
12-13 July 2012
Guiding Question:

Is ‘targeted killing’ becoming, due to progress in military robotics and in intelligence and surveillance systems, an effective way of conducting conflicts and for achieving other foreign policy objectives such as counter-proliferation or for destabilizing or overthrowing hostile regimes?
Outline

- Assassination and Foreign Policy
- Targeted Killing as a Mode of Intervention and Conflict
- Military Robotics and Targeted Killing
- The Question of Its Effectiveness
- Organizational Responses by Opponents
- Conclusion: When It Might ‘Work’
Assassination and Foreign Policy

- Assassination is an ancient practice and it has been commonly employed by states until the process of outlawing it began in the late 19th century.

- Although assassination is usually understood as the selective killing of a person of high rank by perfidious means – rank or method of killing is less important for calling an attack ‘assassination’ than the fact that a specific individual is targeted.

- Attempts to clearly delineate ‘assassination’ from ‘targeted killing’ have failed – the main difference is just that ‘assassination’ is a singular event, while ‘targeted killing’ implies a strategy or approach to warfare and political conflict centered on ‘assassination’.
Assassination and Foreign Policy

Why Assassination Got Out of Fashion:

- Self-interest of Rulers
- Considered Uncivilized
- Ineffective Against Modern States
- National and International Norms against Assassination

Why Assassination Is Again Relevant Today:

- Assassination Has Always Been a Major Aspect of Asymmetric Conflicts
- The Increased Dangers of Modern Terrorism May Justify It
- Also the Dangers of WMDs and ‘Rogue States’ May Justify It
- It Tends to Be an Aspect of Coup d'états or of ‘Regime Change’
Targeted Killing as a Mode of Intervention and Conflict

Targeted killing can be defined as the selective and premeditated killing of specific individuals, not in custody of those targeting them, by government agencies in a sustained campaign with the objective of gaining an operational or strategic advantage in an ongoing political or military conflict.

Terms to describe the new reality of warfare:

- ‘Long-Range Hot Pursuit’
- ‘Kill or Capture’ Missions
- ‘Named Killing’
- ‘Manhunting’
- ‘Find, Fix, Finish’

Targeted killing is not simply a ‘counterterrorism tool’ for the armed forces or an option for law enforcement in specific situations (hostage situations, suicide bombers), but a new emerging mode of conflict that consists of a campaign of a series of assassinations by a state against an adversary, who would be often, but not always a nonstate actor.
Targeted Killing as a Mode of Intervention and Conflict

Targeted killings usually have the following characteristics:

- The killing was authorized by a legitimate government;
- There is a judicially informed process for target selection;
- The targeted person is typically a ‘terrorist’ or other nonstate actor;
- The killing takes place outside of the territory of the authorizing government;
- There is no formal state of war between the state that authorized the killing and the state where it takes place;
- The killing is justified as ‘national self-defense’ and is meant to reduce a continuing threat to national security;
- Targeted killing is something in-between international law enforcement and international war.
Targeted Killing as a Mode of Intervention and Conflict

Targeted killing has been employed by governments against the following actors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Adversary</th>
<th>Campaign</th>
<th>Primary Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War Criminals</td>
<td>Israel: Nazis, 1950s-1960s</td>
<td>Intelligence Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proliferators of Weapons</td>
<td>Israel: German Weapons Scientists, early 1960s (Operation ‘Damocles’)</td>
<td>Intelligence Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Israel: Iranian Weapons Scientists, 2010-</td>
<td>Intelligence Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>Israel: Black September (Operation ‘Wrath of God’), 1970s-early 1990s</td>
<td>Intelligence Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US: Al Qaeda, 2001-</td>
<td>Drone Strikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guerrillas/ Insurgents</td>
<td>NATO: Taliban, 2001-</td>
<td>Special Operations Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US: Cali Cartel, 1990s</td>
<td>Intelligence Services/ Paramilitaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Rogue’ Regimes</td>
<td>US: Saddam Hussein’s Regime</td>
<td>Targeted Air Strikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NATO: Muammar Gaddafi’s Regime, 2011</td>
<td>Air Strikes/ Paramilitaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Military Robotics and Targeted Killing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Covert Intelligence Operations</th>
<th>Special Operations Forces</th>
<th>Air Strikes (Bombers or Long-Range Missiles)</th>
<th>Drones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risks to personnel</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low/ None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political risks</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial costs</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic area of operation</td>
<td>Worldwide</td>
<td>War zones or occupied territories</td>
<td>War zones</td>
<td>Worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chances of killing intended target</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deniability</td>
<td>Deniable</td>
<td>Sometimes deniable</td>
<td>Not deniable</td>
<td>Potentially deniable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drones have great advantages and they have already revolutionized the practice of targeted killing.
Military Robotics and Targeted Killing

Military robotics has made targeted killing a more viable option for governments:

- Drones offer a persistent surveillance and hunting capability;
- No lives need to be put at risk to accomplish the mission;
- The political risks are much lower since own personnel cannot be killed or captured;
- Drones, due to their precision and flexibility, often have a higher chance of killing the target than attacks with manned bombers or cruise missiles;
- The use of drones for targeted killing (in particular stealth drones and micro-drones) is potentially plausibly deniable.
Military Robotics and Targeted Killing

Up to now armed drones are not very useful in conventional wars, but prove increasingly useful in unconventional conflicts and potentially for attempts of ‘regime change’.

The trend in drone development is towards:

- Greater persistence, range, and stealth for larger systems
- Smaller and smaller systems for counterterrorism and urban warfare
- Greater autonomy and deployment in swarms

Drones will be in the future even more useful for targeted killing campaigns
So it is getting ever easier to identify, find, and kill specific individuals, but will it be worthwhile to conduct hostilities and foreign intervention in the way of focusing on the ‘neutralization’ of key individuals (so-called ‘high-value targets’)?

**Targeted Killing Objectives and the Levels of War and Conflict:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tactical Level</td>
<td>Remove an Immediate Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Level</td>
<td>Weaken the Adversary’s Operational Capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Level</td>
<td>Manipulate, Coerce, or Destroy the Adversary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Question of Effectiveness

Most empirical research on targeted killing has focused on the operational level and on the question to what extent targeted killings diminish the operational capabilities of terrorist groups/insurgents. The studies indicate the following:

- Targeted killings can affect operational capabilities;
- Targeted killings have little effect on the motivation of the adversary;
- Targeted killings are provocative (reduced chance for peace and diplomatic repercussions);
- Targeted killings can produce unpredictable results;
- Targeted killings can destabilize allies;
- Based on scarce empirical evidence, targeted killing appears to be not decisive on a strategic level.

Why is targeted killing not working on a strategic level?
Organizational Responses by Opponents

Basic Precautions That Can Be Taken By Adversarial Organizations Threatened by a Targeted Killing Campaign:

- Decentralized cell organization that minimizes communication between leaders and operatives.
- Making leadership structures intransigent (using cut-outs, front men, not announce replacements of killed leaders).
- Robust succession planning (designated successors for key roles, clear rules for succession).
- Cult of martyrs that allows the adversary to exploit the death of leaders and operatives in terms of propaganda.
Organizational Responses by Opponents

Leaderless Networks

Hydra-Like Organization

Network organizations are united not simply by hierarchical leadership structure, but by common goals and a unifying ideology – ‘taking out’ leaders will not substantially weaken the organization. ‘Taking out’ key operatives requires an excellent understanding of the inner workings of the targeted organization.
Organizational Responses by Opponents

Possible Consequences of a Collapse of an Adversarial Organization Due to Successful Leadership Attacks:

- **Complete Collapse**
  - All resistance stops
  - Organization ceases to exist
  - Victory is complete

- **Partial Collapse**
  - Organization splinters in many parts
  - Resistance continues less effectively
  - Situation becomes more complex and is less comprehensible

- **Collapse and Replacement**
  - Organization collapses but is immediately replaced by a competitor
  - The competitor gains territory and strength lost by the collapsed organization
  - A more formidable adversary emerges
Conclusion: When It Might ‘Work’

Factors That Determine the Success of a Targeted Killing Campaign:

- **Size of the targeted organization** (it is harder for small organizations to replace leaders and key members quickly enough).

- **Legitimacy of the targeted organization** (illegitimate organizations tend to be more corrupt and thus more vulnerable to leadership attacks).

- **General support base of the targeted organization** (lack of broad support means a smaller recruitment pool).

- **Power environment of the targeted organization** (no power competitor means that it is less likely that the collapsed organization will be quickly replaced).
Conclusion: When It Might ‘Work’

An approach of warfare based on targeted killing is usually a bad idea, but unfortunately it might be favored by many NATO states in many contexts because:

- It seems well-suited for today’s unconventional threats;
- It is military intervention on the cheap;
- It promises a ‘quick fix’ and requires no political commitment;
- It demonstrates political determination to an audience;
- The necessary military capabilities for targeted killing are more available.

In the foreseeable future we will see more ‘targeted killing’ based intervention, no matter whether it works militarily.
Thank You For Your Attention!

Any Questions?