



Discussion on combat drones in Germany: reflecting a strategic dilemma

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Since 2013, a debate has been raging in Germany about armed drones. For the author, however, it is not the drones as such that have given rise to this ethical debate. The substance of the public discourse reflects a paradoxical reality: Germans find it difficult to see the commitment of their armed forces to their main vocation: coercion. This is the result of a demilitarized and ambivalent strategic culture, stuck in the "trap of multilateralism".[1]

1] See Kaim Markus: "Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr in der Multilateralismusfalle", in: Mair Stefan, "Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr", SWP, Berlin, September 2007, p. 43 ff.

Ua discussion dominated by critics

Multilateralism is one of the basic principles of German security policy. Germany's new role in NATO and the EU since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the expansion of the spectrum of missions of both alliances have led to an increase in the Bundeswehr's external commitments. Participation in the ISAF mission saw the first large-scale combat by German ground forces after the Second World War. The lessons learned by the Bundeswehr from this stabilization mission in Afghanistan led to the decision to acquire armed UAVs or at least UAVs that could be armed in the future. The coincidence of the publication of this decision with the announcement of the renunciation of the "EURO-HAWK" programme led to a public discourse based on a false debate. All the more so as the term "combat" is still sufficient to cause unrest in Germany.

According to a representative poll, in mid-2013 about 50% of Germans were in favor and only 24% against equipping the Bundeswehr with combat drones [1]. The proponents of acquisition, who based their arguments primarily on the role of armed drones for the protection of soldiers, apparently failed to convince the population that this was a critical

need for the armed forces. On the contrary, it was the opponents who took the lead with their ethical arguments. While some arguments, such as the prospect of subsequently developing fully autonomous weapon systems, are well justified in principle and taken into account by the Bundeswehr, others are debatable. This debate replaces the discussion on the role of the Bundeswehr in asymmetrical conflicts and on the role Germany intends to play in the future within military alliances. The criticism of targeted eliminations is exemplary for understanding a strategic dilemma that is obscured by the debate on armed drones.

Confusion between the trilogy "ends - ways - means".

The German discussion revolves essentially around the use of armed UAVs by US forces. Their strategy of targeted eliminations [2], outside of armed conflicts, polarises the vision of what the operational use of UAVs could be and has contributed to the demonisation of UAVs in public opinion. Critics are certainly not wrong to question a targeted elimination policy that is questionable both legally and ethically. American interpretations of international law to justify their "war on terror" are controversial among legal scholars, and the prevailing view is that this practice violates international law. Nevertheless, it should not be ignored that targeted eliminations in an armed conflict may be compatible with international law, provided that the principles of humanitarian law are respected.

According to Clausewitz, it is the political end as the initial motive that "will provide the measure of the goal to be achieved by military action, as much as the effort required" [3]. 3] Targeted elimination is the path to achieving a political goal. This path is not dependent on a specific means. The use of armed UAVs is only one possibility among others to eliminate a target. If drones are condemned, other remote platforms or weapons, which are already used by the Bundeswehr, must also be condemned. Artillery systems and cruise missiles are just a few examples. It must therefore be noted that there is confusion between the object and its use: between the means, the way and the political end[4]. If critics oppose the use of armed drones, it is because they reject military force as a political end. They believe that the use of armed UAVs should reduce the risks for the forces involved, and fear that their acquisition would then facilitate the political decision in Germany to engage the Bundeswehr in other conflicts, especially in asymmetric conflicts.

A peaceful and post-heroic strategic culture

The discussion on armed UAVs thus replaces a broader debate on the use of the Bundeswehr in particular and the use of military force in general. It is directly linked to the German strategic culture, which experienced a break in 1945. A break caused by the trauma and consequences of the Second World War. A pacification imposed by the demilitarisation policy of the Allies who occupied Germany. If we consider war as "an act of violence designed to force the adversary to carry out our will" ...[5] the Germans of today strive to accept military violence as "a real political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a realisation of them by other means" [6].

As a result of the shock following the collapse of Germany and the subsequent sense of guilt, the Germans developed the posture of a civil power[7] in which the use of military

force is not totally excluded, but very restricted. The latest polls have confirmed the reluctance to use the armed forces, despite the professionalization of the Bundeswehr. The defense of NATO territories is still considered to be the nation's main mission. On the other hand, the approval of an external operation depends on the character of each mission.

Like all Western civil societies, the Germans agree under certain conditions to engage in armed conflicts in order to ensure their security. However, the same civil societies often remain sceptical or even negative about the use of military force. This ideological stance is the result of the visible absence of direct consequences of current conflicts on the daily lives of Germans, from which stems the perception of a diffuse and not very tangible threat that does not justify such violence. Moreover, because of their post-heroic attitude,^[8] they reject sacrifices and condemn losses instead of glorifying the soldiers who died for their homeland. Finally, their normative attitude and sense of law make the acceptance of violence difficult because in their field of civil experience violence is generally prohibited as a means of conflict resolution.

Although the use of military force is not entirely taboo in Germany, it is still suspect. In an operation, the higher the level of violence and danger, the more reluctance increases. Consequently, Germans prefer humanitarian, support or peacekeeping missions in their immediate vicinity. This is a way of saying that they wish to commit their armed forces to missions that are not necessarily part of their core business: combat^[9].

^{9]} Clausewitz highlighted in his astonishing trinity that the nature of war oscillates between three poles, three tendencies, one of which represents its original element, the blind natural force, made up of raw violence, hatred and animosity. This tendency is rather related to the people and is part of their strategic culture. The government must therefore consider the ideological orientation of the society in its political reasoning.

The dilemma of an ambivalent strategic culture

The Germans, who have cultivated a kind of pacifism^[10] since 1945, have at the same time focused their defence on the principle of multilateralism, which translates into integration into collective security systems. Multilateralism was intended to serve as a means of regaining the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the course of time. Moreover, the creation of the Bundeswehr during the Cold War was intended solely to defend the country and its allies against aggression from the Warsaw Pact. Since reunification, the spectrum of engagement of the military alliances has gradually broadened without the Germans having accepted all the resulting consequences. Germany's weight in international relations has also increased with the return of its full sovereignty. As a result, the Allies increasingly demanded that the other side of the Rhine assume its responsibilities, particularly in the military field. Consequently, German policy must meet the Allies' expectations and obligations while at the same time incorporating the opinion of its people, who are reticent about foreign intervention policy. This dilemma affects the operational effectiveness of the Bundeswehr.

In order to demonstrate its solidarity, Germany has already intervened several times in external operations. However, "commitments have always been extremely limited by the political level in order to maintain a reassuring image of peacekeepers" [11] and to prevent involvement in coercive missions. This illusion was finally shattered by the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan when an astonished German people discovered, starting in 2008, that ground forces had been engaged in an asymmetric war. The conclusion drawn by German society seems to be: Never again will there be such an engagement.

Critics argue that armed drones are only suitable for asymmetric conflicts. Therefore, they no longer consider the acquisition of these platforms reasonable if politics respects public opinion on engagement in Afghanistan. However, there is nothing to prevent Germany from experiencing new strategic surprises in the future that might force the Bundeswehr to participate in its military alliances. The crisis in Ukraine and the emergence of the Islamic state illustrate this. But how do we cut the Gordian knot? We can neither choose the unilateralism that risks isolating us, nor refuse every high-intensity mission without losing our influence and credibility among our Allies. What we need is the political will to change strategic thinking and to overcome a pacifism that neglects the realities of the post-Cold War era. Our Allies, for their part, have a historic responsibility to reassure the Germans in this approach.

6) Cf. Biehl Heiko and Wanner Meike: "... military violence is not only a political instrument, but also a means to achieve political relations..." "Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland" ZMSBw, Forschungsbericht, September 2014, Potsdam, p. 23 ff.

2) Targeted killings : based on the identity of a target (personality strike) or based on the behaviour of a target (signature strikes).

3) Carl von Clausewitz: "...From the war", Full translation by Denise Naville, Les éditions de minuit, 1955, p. 59.

4) Cf. Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer: "To believe that the drone makes it possible to wage a "war with zero deaths" is dangerous", in: ADA(Armées d'aujourd'hui), N°393, oct-nov, 2014, p. 48

5) Carl von Clausewitz, idem, p. 51.

6) Carl von Clausewitz, idem, p. 67.

7) cf. Kriste and Maull: "Zivilmacht und Rollentheorie", in: "[7] cf. Zeitschrift für internationale Beziehungen" Nomos Verlag, Heft 2, December 1996, pp. 283-312.

8) Definition: societies that are structured by work and the prospect of prosperity, not by courage and sacrifice, Münkler Herfried: "The role of images in the terrorist threat and new wars", in: Guerre et opinion publique, Revue Inflexions, N°14, 2010, p. 44.

9) Cf. Carl von Clausewitz, idem: "... the idea of combat is the basis of all use of armed forces...", p. 77.

10) Encyclopedia Larousse: a current of thought that advocates the search for international peace through negotiation, disarmament and non-violence.

11) Major General de Langlois: "Does the Franco-German couple have a future in matters of defence and security", in...: Les Cahiers du CESAT, N° 36, June 2014, p. 27.

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