

You never saw them flying: advanced generations of drones

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Photo: USAF

Reading about drones recently, the Alan Parsons Project 1982 song ‘Eye in the sky’ came to mind. At one point I had a recording of it, and I never forgot the tune and the atmosphere. There was something about that song that I liked, and didn’t like at the same time. This to me resembles how I feel about drones: highly technical devices that I like and dislike for what they are. Just as with the song, my ambiguous feeling will probably not go away. Let me mention three bits of recent news to illustrate this.

An American manufacturer of drones, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., has announced that it will work with Fokker Technologies to create a so-called Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance Unmanned Aircraft System for the Dutch Ministry of Defence. Last June a [spokesman](#) told reporters that the manufacturer’s partnership with Fokker “represents a steadfast commitment by both parties to support the Dutch Armed Forces with a proven, cost-effective, and responsive solution to the Netherlands’ requirements for persistent situational awareness”. The Dutch authorities have a use for drones on missions carried out by the military and in certain domestic surveillance.

The Guardian Weekly reported on June 7, 2013 that there are concerns over extrajudicial killings by flying robots. While fully autonomous drones are not yet on offer, technology has moved closer to a fully autonomous state with a US Navy drone that can fly and land itself. This development caused a special rapporteur to the United Nations to caution that drones were initially intended only for surveillance and that offensive purposes were prohibited. Yet, the rapporteur continued, once strategists realised their advantages as a means of carrying out targeted killings all objections were swept out of the way.

This month, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) started a [crowdfunding](#) campaign to pay for two “eco-drones”, which will help point wildlife rangers to spot poachers of rhinos, tigers and elephants. The wildlife conservationists view the drones as “a means to an end” to speed up efforts to save the endangered animals, as park rangers

are often powerless against well-equipped [cartels](#). Journalists have asked whether the flying robots will be armed, but they will be furnished only with cameras.

Where do these three examples leave us? With advanced generations of drones, guarding the guardians is essential – but how useful drones are. Drones can replace helicopter surveillance and add to satellite imaging – but privacy risks coming second every time. In a recent [blog](#), Bart Schermer notes that drones usually go unnoticed and are able to observe areas normally considered private. A nightmare for those who see the constitutional state hollowed out by advancing technology.

In my view, it is not a technology that anyone should be worried about. It is us, when we are in a position to decide. How do we choose when to use drones, what specifications do we give them, how do we deal with generated data? Applied with prudence, advanced technology is of service to us all. But there it is again, that strange song in the back of my mind: “I am the eye in the sky – Looking at you, I can read your mind – I am the maker of rules – Dealing with fools, I can cheat you blind”.