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Security Drones:
Is the Singapore Public Ready?

By Muhammad Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman

Synopsis

The Singapore Home Team is leveraging technology, such as drones for operational efficacy, in support of the SG Secure movement. A powerful tool, the use of drones for homeland security must be accompanied by clear guidelines and with public trust.

Commentary

IN RESPONSE to a Parliamentary Query on 27 January 2016, Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs Desmond Lee said that the Home Team is leveraging new technologies to cope with increasing demands amid manpower constraints; including exploring the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or drones to support the management of public order and major incidents. Drones are currently being tested by homeland security forces overseas for surveillance of public space. However, is our Singapore public ready for the Big Brother in the Sky?

The benefits of surveillance drones to the homeland security are manifold; including increased police presence to deter terrorism and crime, and enhanced data collection for situational assessment to support incident management. In extreme and perilous public order situations, drones could possibly be armed with non-lethal weapons such as tear gas to aid ground officers in dispersing rioters. Drones could undoubtedly be a high-utility asset in the Home Team's arsenal to safeguard safety and security in a densely-populated and highly urbanised operating environment.

Drones – High Tech Guardian or Creepy Big Brother?

Notwithstanding its potential, drones like any new technology could conjure both curiosity and fear. A September 2012 article "One-third of public fear police drone

use" by The Washington Times reported that a third of the people polled were concerned that the use of police drones could lead to loss of privacy. In an era of vocal and demanding citizenry, the government faces an increasingly herculean task of communicating its policies to the public. Likewise, the Home Team through community engagement (e.g. the Community Safety & Security Programme) endeavours to build and sustain trust and confidence of the public.

Given the heightened terrorist threat, the Home Team seeks to deepen partnership with the public by launching the SG Secure movement to better engage the community and strengthen its vigilance and resilience. In sync with this overarching movement, any testing and implementation of new technology (e.g. drones) in the public domain must be accompanied by careful public messaging that would inspire confidence instead of fear and distrust.

A homeland security drone programme must be seen by the public as a contemporary symbol of the Home Team's reliability and unwavering resolve to public security - not misconceived as a mass surveillance tool for an authoritarian state. Misconceptions could negate positive sentiments towards the Home Team, and run counter to relationship-building efforts under the ambit of SG Secure.

Can Drones Co-exist with Community Partnership?

One may ask how a drone programme might be profoundly different from other surveillance technology rolled out earlier by the Home Team such as PolCam 2.0. For starters, drones are capable of discreet and mobile surveillance unlike fixed CCTV cameras (i.e. fear of being followed). Drones could provide greater scope of coverage in terms of geographic area (i.e. fear of mass surveillance), and vertical space for high-rise buildings (i.e. fear of invasion of private space – note how LRT windows switch to opaque when the trains pass by HDB residential units). As an unmanned vehicle, there would be a hidden human operator actively controlling the drone by remote, and this might raise concerns over possible abuse or misuse.

Public sentiments towards the use of drones specifically by security agencies might be muddied by its battlefield reputation as faceless killing machines; popularised by Hollywood movies such as "Eye in the Sky". A drone as a faceless extension of a police officer, yet interacting obliquely with the populace from a distance by virtue of its aerial presence in public space, might propagate an impersonal and cold connection between homeland security agencies and the community. This could inadvertently be counter-productive to ongoing community engagement efforts (e.g. new "Community Engagement Officer" vocation), where public trust and cooperation are critical success factors for SG Secure.

The Home Team in its commendable efforts to ensure effective operations amid increasing demands and resource constraints, need to be circumspect that the technology it adopts could have the side-effect of making its agencies appear less human or socially detached.

Introducing Drones to the Public – Measures for Holistic Approach

The current global discourse examines the socio-political, ethical and legal issues

from the use of drones and its perceived lack of humanity. A May 2012 article "Send in the Homeland Police Drones, Says Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell" by Forbes posited that the legitimacy of policing hinges on the moral authority of our shared humanity. The International Association of Chiefs of Police had in August 2012 published a set of Recommended Guidelines for the Use of Unmanned Aircraft. These underscore the importance of taking concurrent steps to safeguard the collaborative relationship between the public and the law, as security agencies seek to leverage technology.

Singapore's homeland security community should, as strategic anticipation, have its own discourse and explore approaches – including policy and strategic communications - to these issues. Policy should clearly articulate the operational considerations (e.g. type of incidents & events) that would necessitate the use of drones, operating procedures and training to ensure safe and responsible piloting, and public notification on the deployment of drones. Policy on the use of drones, and the data amassed, must stand up to legal and moral scrutiny.

Security agencies should work with the media (mainstream & social) and grassroots to involve the public early in communicating the benefits, trade-offs and safeguards in the use of drones; concurrently addressing the public's concerns and incorporating their feedback to the drone policy. In essence, the public must be effectively informed and convinced that drones would be used in good faith and responsibly by the state for the benefit of public security.

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