

Canada 2030: Drone Colony?



by Azeezah Kanji

“As I helped my grandmother in the field, I could see and hear the drone hovering overhead [...] When the drone fired the first time, the whole ground shook and black smoke rose up. The air smelled poisonous. We ran, but several minutes later the drone fired again [...] Now I prefer cloudy days when the drones don’t fly. When the sky brightens and becomes blue, the drones return and so does the fear.” – *testimony* of 13-year-old Zubair Rehman to US Congress in 2013, about the American drone strike that killed his grandmother Momina Bibi in Pakistan

WHEN IT COMES to Canada’s **plans** to **acquire** its first armed drones, what we do know and what we don’t know both provide cause for alarm. So far, we know that the drones will be **equipped** to carry at least two “precision-guided” missiles each and **cost** up to \$5 billion in total; that the government expects to **award** the final contract by 2024 and for the drones to **be in full operation** by 2030. We do not know what legal restrictions will apply – even in theory – to the drones’ activities inside and outside Canada, or what protections and remedies will be available – even in theory – for the targets. How terrifying, that Canada has managed to provide even less transparency than “the European Union and even the United States [...] regarding the law and policy framework for their use of armed drones,” as law professor Craig Martin has **pointed out**. And yet, these plans are being permitted to unfold with minimal outcry and scrutiny.

Chillingly, in the series of imagined future drone use “scenarios” included in the government’s 2016 **Letter of Interest** (LOI) to potential suppliers, the many faces of

Canadian state violence are masqueraded as exercises of virtue: anti-Indigenous dispossession, anti-migrant border enforcement, international policing, domestic policing, war.

SCENARIO 1: “Arctic Sortie” (meaning: Asserting Settler Arctic Sovereignty)

Drone launched from a base in Inuvik, to monitor and ensure military rescue assistance for an environmentalist ship convoy as it crosses the Northwest Passage “to highlight the state of the world’s oceans and the impact climate change is having on our planet.”

Perversely, the ecocide unleashed by colonial extractivism on water and land is now cited to justify drone colonization of the skies.

From the **Ekati mine** to **Enbridge pipelines** - the destruction wrought by settler “resource” exploitation rationalizes increased surveillance in the name of environmental monitoring, enabling further exploitation: a vicious colonial circle. Tired of oil spills tarring the image of your tar sands? Too many **fish deaths** damning your dam? Try **greenwashing** 2.0: drone-washing, for all your “**environmental protection**” needs! Simultaneously, these drones depicted as implements of environmentalism are also deployed to ruthlessly suppress Indigenous nations’ own land and water defence – whether at **Unist’ot’en** Camp or at **Standing Rock**, where pipeline resisters were not only subjected to police **aerial surveillance** and assault, but **criminally charged** for using drones themselves to reverse the gaze. Some **writers** now critique drones’

presence in North America for bringing the domain of war into the domain of peace; as if these settler states haven't been zones of war and occupation **all along**.

SCENARIO 2: "Security Event West Coast" (read: Surveillance of "Illegal" Migrants)

Drone to covertly track and gather data on "ship carrying approximately 300 illegal migrants [...] suspected to be heading to an unknown destination on the west coast of North America."

Colonial borders, carved through Indigenous lands, facilitate the flow of state and corporate power while barring the gates to those fleeing their effects. Primary **sources** of "irregular" migration to Canada include primary sufferers of Canadian international arms dealing, de-democratization, and mining devastation: **Haiti, Yemen, Nigeria, Colombia, Sudan**. Across the ocean, in "Cyber-Fortress" Europe, drones have emerged as a **favourite mechanism** for exerting human powers of border surveillance, without incurring human obligations to rescue seafarers in distress – a way of keeping an eye on migrants from a distance as they struggle and drown. Or if they survive, to **severely criminalize** them using drone footage as "evidence." Meanwhile, the **same corporations** enriched by fuelling conflict and ecological breakdown in the Global South now make a **second killing**, from arming the borders against the displaced and dispossessed. This border violence is predicated on epistemic violence: the persistent erasure of Indigenous practices of international relations challenging state boundaries and the brutality through which they are sustained.

SCENARIO 3: "Expeditionary Maritime Sortie" (a.k.a. "Armed Reconnaissance" of Somali "Pirates")

Hellfire missile-armed drones deployed to protect oil tankers and other "large merchant vessels" in "counter piracy operation" off the Horn of Africa/Somali coast.

While borders are made impermeable to the most precarious, drone power travels across oceans and continents unchecked. Don't come to Canada, Canada's drones will come to you. From Canada to Somalia, Indigenous responses to violence are treated as the source of violence, securing the means for colonial plunder to persist. Somali "pirates" are a **product** of international depredation of Somalia's waters, exploited as an "**aqua nullius**" from which unregulated foreign fishing trawlers extract massive catches – **three times more** than impoverished Somali

fishers – while toxic industrial and nuclear waste is **freely dumped**. These waters are also a **vital shipping** corridor for the global fossil fuel industry. Drone infrastructure erected by the US in East Africa in the name of countering piracy, **originally represented** as restricted to unarmed surveillance, has since been turned towards drone-bombing Somalis in the "War on Terror" as well. In less technologically advanced decades, Canadian and American soldiers had to put their boots on the ground to torture and massacre (see: Canada's 1993 "**Somalia Affair**"). Now, the atrocities can be conveniently conducted remotely and hands-off. Like other sites of American and Canadian imperial aggression – Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan – Somalia too has been referred to by soldiers as "**Indian country**."

It's a reminder that imperialism, by gun or by drone, starts at "home," with the occupied air we breathe and the colonized land beneath our feet.

SCENARIO 4: "Domestic Overland Sortie" (in other words: Policing Anti-Capitalist Protesters)

Drone "tasked to support Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)-led security operations at a G20 Summit," against protesters and "radical elements" who seek to "exploit the presence of international media to further their anti-capitalist cause." For example, thanks to drone surveillance, activists attempting to "hang a banner concerning global warming" are "intercepted."

Key to upholding this fundamentally unjust economic, political, and legal order is the "pacification," i.e. violent subjugation, of resistance. Armed drones would supplement and augment the means of repression honed by Canadian cops at the previous **Toronto G20** and other policing opportunities such as **homeless encampments**, where protesters and encampment residents have been brutalized by police assault rifles, chemical weaponry, mounted cavalry, and "kettling" – caging – en masse. As political theorist Mark Neocleous **reminds us**, these are not aberrations but an expression of policing's original function: the offensive defence of capitalism and private property, whether in stolen Indigenous lands (eg. **the RCMP**) or stolen enslaved lives (eg. "**fugitive**" **slave patrols**).

SCENARIO 5: “Expeditionary Strike Sortie” (translation: Targeted Killing in Afghanistan)

Drone “spots a group of three Fighting Aged Males (FAMs) standing near a long wall close to the road that the [occupation coalition] convoy is traveling on [...] One of the three FAMs appears to be holding a small radio or cell phone in his hand [...] It appears on the camera that there is a shovel leaning against the wall. This is reported [and] the three FAMs are now labelled as combatants. The legal and controlling agency authorize the use of force [...] The [operator] launches a GBU49 [missile].”

This hypothetical killing casually described in a government procurement document – in which the victims are marked for extermination on no basis other than their ascribed age, gender, location, proximity to a shovel, and possession of a cell phone or radio; in which, effectively, their identities become their death warrants – would undoubtedly be labelled “terrorism” if committed by some “enemy” other. For example, by those same Afghan boys or men on the other side of the bomb.

Here are a few other (non-hypothetical) examples of drone strikes against “fighting aged males”:

“Daraz Khan [and] two others [...] had walked 10 miles up into the snowy mountains to collect scrap metal. The day promised only modest reward, not much more than 40 or 50 cents each for a camel’s load of twisted steel, but enough to make a difference for three families living on the edge of subsistence [...] The missile struck without warning from a clear sky. [...] A civilian spokesman for the Pentagon added, ‘We’re convinced that it was an appropriate target,’ although ‘we do not know yet exactly who it was’” (Afghanistan, The New York Times, 2002).

“A US air strike killed a civilian man named Mohamud Salad Mohamud, age 53, at his Masalanja farm [...] [His younger brother] described to Amnesty International what he saw at the scene of the attack. ‘When we arrived at the farm, we saw blood all over the place, especially near the irrigation canal and near the banana trees. His body was cut into pieces. I recognized his face and his left leg. I collected the pieces of his body parts and flesh and put them into a sack.’ [...] Relatives and colleagues of Mohamud said they were not contacted by any official to explain what happened or offer compensation” (Somalia, Amnesty International, 2020).

“Adel Al Manthari’s body was ravaged. His entire left

side was burned [...] The U.S. military claimed that Al Manthari and the others in the vehicle were ‘terrorists’ from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but independent inquiries said otherwise [...] While the U.S. has millions of dollars in funds earmarked for civilian victims of U.S. attacks, the military ignored pleas on Al Manthari’s behalf, leaving the 56-year-old to rely on a GoFundMe campaign earlier this year to save his life” (Yemen, The Intercept, 2022).

And then, there are all the **mass drone killings** of women and young children – misidentified as “fighting aged males,” through drone cameras the US military **boasts** can “spot a terrorist from 20,000 feet.” Of course, the “errors” are only detected after the slaughter is already complete.

With drones, the principle of unilateral application of terror – christened in the colonial air-war massacres and torture chambers of earlier centuries – is elevated to new levels of perfection. Drones permit their wielders to inflict death and surveillance, while remaining absolutely invulnerable and invisible themselves.

What can one do, in the face of faceless violence? (Perhaps invest in some of the drone surveillance-blocking “burqas” sold by an American artist for **over US\$2000** a pop. Orientalist stereotypes included.) In the US, not a **single drone** death has been prosecuted. At best, the bereaved families **may receive** a couple of thousand dollars in “condolence” payments as the price of a taken life – in contrast to the **\$1.3-million paid** by the US government when a European aid worker was accidentally struck.

Colonial states reap the profits of these experiments in mechanized domination at least twice over. Once, from the ongoing **accumulation by dispossession** they enable. And again, from selling the technological fruits to other buyers. The **candidate models** for Canada’s armed drone force, for example, are General Atomics’ MQ-9 SkyGuardian – **successor** to the infamous Predator and Reaper, pioneering agents of US terror from Afghanistan to Somalia to **Standing Rock** – and L3 Technologies’/ Israeli Aerospace Industries’ Heron – marketed as “**battle-tested**” on Palestinians trapped in the open-air prisons of their occupied lands.

And yet, bizarrely, it is those on the receiving end of colonial violence who are condemned and criminalized for waging “asymmetric” warfare. Their stone-throwing and slogan-shouting is **prohibited** as “terrorism,” their presence on their own ancestral lands is **proscribed** as “trespass” and “belligerence,” even their **starvation** and **deaths** are aspersed as aggressive “PR stunts.” Conversely, the high-tech tortures and “precision” carnage of the powerful are **heralded** (by themselves) as acts of benevolence – undertaken, **in the recent words** of one leading American taser manufacturer promoting taser-firing drones as the solution to school shootings, “because we care.”

Resisting armed drones means resisting not only the instruments of violence themselves, but also the underlying “hierarchy of being.”

The hierarchy that reduces people born on the wrong side of the colour-line or the border-line to “pirates,” “illegals,” and “terrorists” in life, and to anonymized statistics and mutilated body parts – a shattered face, a dismembered left leg – in death; mere **“lumps”** and **“ants”** to be annihilated, which is how drone operators have said their human prey appear through the machine-eye of the drone. We know that these colonial ways of carving up the world are potent and insidious, because they sometimes seep into our resistance as well: when we separate violence “over here” from violence “out there,” injury and terror against “us” versus against “them.”

For us to truly see and hear and know one another, for us to grieve and organize together, across the lines constructed to divide us – this is a powerful force of its own. Another term for it is love. A love that doesn’t narrow and “privatize” our ambit of care, but expands it; a love that manifests itself as justice (**Cornel West**), as revolution (**Assata Shakur**), as decolonization (**Leanne Betasamosake Simpson**), as “the practice of freedom” (**bell hooks**). A love that builds movements as deeply interconnected and mutually supporting as the forms of oppression and brutalization we confront: from Secwepemc territory to Standing Rock to Somalia, from Haiti to Haudenosaunee 1492 Land Back Lane, from the Arctic to Afghanistan to Anishinaabe-aki. And so, here’s another hypothetical “scenario,” an alter-scenario – a love story for a possible future, one radically different from that depicted in the Canadian government’s drone purchase LOI.

SCENARIO 6: Sky Back

Having restored right relations between humans and with other-than-human animals, air, plants, waters, and land, the “need” for drone war-police withered away. Few remember anymore how gruelling the struggle was, to shut down the drone profiteers and redirect resources towards supporting our collective survival and making reparations to those who had been harmed; a struggle that many at the time said was impossible, unthinkable, naïve. Now, looking back so many decades later, it seems impossible that things ever could have gone any other way. Certainly, aside from the widely reviled Make America Drone Again Faction (MAD AF-ers), almost everybody imagines they would have been part of the anti-drone resistance, if they even think about that period at all. Elders and history books tell the stories of that other, nightmare time: that time when economic and political systems predicated on mass immiseration and extraction enforced themselves with weapons of mass destruction, and those fleeing the ravages were punished and left to drown in poisoned seas. How backwards, how barbaric! People know in their brains that this is how the world once was, but it’s difficult to believe – a ghostly memory of death buzzing in the sky.

For future updates and organizing to resist Canada’s armed drones purchase: <https://linktr.ee/noarmeddrones>

CITATION

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