



Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Nguyen Ba Nguyen

Title: **Targeted Killing: How and When Intelligence Agencies Eliminate Their Targets, and the Impact of Emerging Technologies**

Programme/year: 2018

Author of Evaluation (supervisor): Mark Galeotti

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	10	8
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	30	17
	Methodology, analysis, argument	40	28
<i>Total</i>		80	53
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	10	10
	Style	5	5
	Formal requirements	5	3
<i>Total</i>		20	18
TOTAL		100	71



Evaluation

Assassination (or targeted killing, or state-sanctioned murder, whatever euphemism one chooses to use) is a time-honoured tactic of statecraft. This thesis explores reasons for its possible resurgence in the modern world, reflecting changing geopolitical and military realities, as well as the possible impacts of certain emerging technologies, especially through the prism of three countries (USA, Israel, Russia) which have proven especially willing and able to carry out such operations.

Major criteria:

The fundamental research question is whether technological and geopolitical trends are making assassination more “attractive” as a tool of statecraft, building from an historical assessment of when and how states resort to such methods and then considering how far the lessons provide pointers towards future developments. The hypothesis is that conventional warfighting is increasingly taking second place to more bespoke forms of conflict, including targeted killing.

Being based on a predictive argument, the thesis cannot – and in fairness, does not – pretend to be able to reach any definitive conclusions so much as present some likely potentialities. In particular, as the technologies for arm’s-length targeted killing become more widespread and effective, and as the sole superpower, the USA, has adopted a doctrine of targeted killing, it explores the degree to which this is becoming normalised and ultimately legitimised.

This is an important and very relevant topic, and one that has been inadequately explored in the scholarly literature (on which point, more below). This is clearly not based on a strong theoretical but rather empirical framework, exploring historical and techno-doctrinal trends with a nod to expected utility theory, largely through past operations and future capabilities. The use of three case studies to illuminate the wider issues, and the choice of these three, seems clear and appropriate.



At times, the author undoubtedly gets mired in detail and narrative, which contributes to the length (also noted below). Behind the thick description, though, is a discernible line of argument. While light on methodological elaboration, and open to debate on some definitions, it is coherent, and makes an interesting and plausible case for its take on assassination as an instrument of greater utility – or at least *perceived* greater utility – and usability in the future.

Minor criteria:

This is a field that is strikingly badly served in the scholarly literature, and the author has not only drawn comprehensively on what little there is, but also supplemented this with a wide-ranging survey of news articles and other open-source analyses. These are also used in the main critically and sensibly, without falling prey to the biases which are especially evident in discussion of this topic. The footnoting is sometimes erratic, but generally appropriate and certainly accurate. (Although the bibliography not being in alphabetical order of author is annoying.)

The style of writing is clear, sometimes lyrical (and admittedly at others convolution), but entirely appropriate to an academic thesis. Unfortunately, there is also too much of it. This is a massive document, and could have done with being more streamlined, especially in some of the thick descriptions and historical sidebars (even though these do help demonstrate the wider explanatory utility of the three core case studies).

Overall evaluation:

This is a work which at times demonstrates more enthusiasm and imagination than dry scholarly rigour, but manages in the main to walk that fine path between the two. Furthermore, as a piece of predictive analysis in a field badly-served by existing literature, imagination and enthusiasm are necessary adjuncts to the analytic capacities and mastery of the subject matter the author undoubtedly demonstrates.



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I recommend the thesis for defence and imagine the author will be asked to discuss why he adopted the approach/methodology he did, and the challenges in addressing such a leading-edge topic.

Suggested grade: C

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Markus J. ...', written over two horizontal lines.