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## Is the US Drone War Effective?

MICHAEL J. BOYLE

Among the most distinctive features of US President Barack Obama’s counterterrorism strategy has been his reliance on unmanned aerial vehicles—more commonly known as drones—to target terrorist operatives around the globe. The use of drones has rapidly expanded beyond the battlefields where US troops have openly engaged in conflict, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, to a range of undeclared combat zones, including Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. According to an official estimate, the US military launched in 1,160 drone strikes in Afghanistan alone between 2009 and 2012.

In many respects, it is not surprising that the Obama administration would resort to drone strikes as a way of keeping pressure on Al Qaeda and the Taliban as the US military prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan. What is more unusual is the extent to which the administration has employed drones to target militants in countries where the United States is not formally at war. According to an estimate by the New America Foundation (which has conducted one of the most comprehensive studies), the Obama administration launched 321 drone strikes in Pakistan and 83 in Yemen between 2009 and 2013. There have also been scattered strikes in countries such as Libya, Somalia, and Mali. Under Obama’s leadership, the American drone war has grown far beyond its original limits under President George W. Bush, and now stretches across wide swaths of South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

The use of drones has proven widely controversial for a number of moral and legal reasons. Some

critics argue that drones are increasingly becoming a substitute for real military combat—a cheap and seductive way to fight dirty little wars without raising taxes or imposing sacrifices on the American people. Others object that drone warfare does not conform to traditional notions of heroic warfare, in which combatants face an equal risk of death. Still others have argued that the illusion of a bloodless war produced by drones raises a moral hazard that could lead the United States to more frequently engage in wars abroad on the assumption that it can do so without cost.

The legal criticisms mainly question the right of the United States to engage in drone strikes in countries against which it has made no formal declaration of war, as well as the extent to which the original Authorization for Use of Military Force passed by Congress after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has been stretched beyond its original intent to cover drone strikes against groups unrelated to, or only loosely affiliated with, Al Qaeda. A number of civil libertarians have also expressed concern about the dangers of a president wielding the power to kill people abroad (even US citizens, in some cases) without a judicial finding of guilt or appropriate Congressional scrutiny. These legal and moral issues have deepened the sense of unease in Washington over the use of drones and raised additional questions about the wisdom of deploying them so frequently in South Asia.

### DEFINING EFFECTIVENESS

For many, however, the most immediate question is whether or not drones are effective in targeting terrorist operatives and producing tangible security gains for the United States. On this point, the administration has been emphatic that drones are indeed highly effective and have become, in

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the words of former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, the “only game in town” when it comes to destroying Al Qaeda. The security gains from drones, according to the administration, are indisputable. Panetta asserted in 2011 that drones have so radically improved American counterterrorism efforts that their use has put the United States within reach of “strategically defeating Al Qaeda.” If drones have been so effective in bringing Al Qaeda to its knees, some advocates argue that the case for using them is self-evident and that many of the legal and moral objections therefore become secondary.

Yet the questions surrounding the effectiveness of drones are more complicated than the Obama administration’s account suggests. At the most basic level, what it means for a drone strike to be effective is rarely defined. Are drone strikes considered effective if they yield only tactical gains, such as the elimination of “bad guys” from the battlefield? What are the possible long-term strategic costs of drones? How should they be measured against these tactical victories? The Obama administration’s public arguments about the effectiveness of drones have tended to conflate tactical and strategic gains, implying without evidence that they are the same.

The administration’s drone policy has not directly addressed some key measurement issues. How, for example, would the United States know if it had achieved a tangible security gain from a drone strike? How can it measure the effect of drone strikes on the organizational capacities of the militant groups it targets? As a number of critics have noted, the effectiveness of drones is highly dependent on the extent to which they do not indirectly generate or recruit more militants than they eliminate. If the United States is merely trading existing militants for new ones in the future, as critics allege, the argument that drones are effective due to their immediate impact on Al Qaeda needs to be reexamined.

More generally, this debate over effectiveness also needs to consider both on-the-ground blowback and the political consequences of drone strikes. The administration has argued that blowback will be minimal because its drone attacks are highly precise and cause relatively few civilian casualties. Yet this argument confuses effectiveness with precision. Even if drones are precise, their strategic utility can be undermined if they provoke a call for revenge from the social, tribal, and family networks of their victims. Similarly, the

political costs of drones must be weighed against their utility in killing militant leaders. Particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, drones have stirred up new levels of hostility against the United States and endangered the stability and cooperation of the local governments, with potential long-term consequences for the stability of the South Asian region.

## TACTIC OR STRATEGY?

According to the Obama administration, drone strikes have been highly effective in terms of decapitating the top Al Qaeda leadership and placing the organization under intense pressure. There is some evidence to suggest that this claim is true. Papers discovered in Osama bin Laden’s house in Abbottabad after his death showed that he encouraged his colleagues to flee Pakistan’s northwestern region of Waziristan in order to avoid drones. He also recommended a range of operational security measures, such as traveling by road infrequently, carefully monitoring movements so as not to attract attention, and moving on overcast days to evade the gaze of drones.

By one estimate, more than 50 senior Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders have been killed by drone strikes. Bin Laden himself recognized that drones have hollowed out the top leadership of Al Qaeda and left the leadership ranks populated with younger, less experienced operatives. In the eyes of the Obama administration, drones have degraded the capacity of the organization and made it harder for its leaders to plan for the future. As Obama remarked in his speech at the National Defense University in May 2013, “Today, the core of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan is on the path to defeat. Their remaining operatives spend more time thinking about their own safety than plotting against us. They did not direct the attacks in Benghazi or Boston. They’ve not carried out a successful attack on our homeland since 9/11.”

While the administration is correct that drones have degraded Al Qaeda’s ability to operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan by removing its top operational leadership, it is not clear that this fact alone proves the effectiveness of drone strikes. The administration’s standard of effectiveness is a tactical one, generally concentrating on whether drones eliminate “bad guys.” Yet the strategic question regarding drones—that is, do they cause sufficient harm to Al Qaeda to produce durable security gains for the United States—extends beyond a tally of leaders removed from the battlefield.

Even if Al Qaeda is under organizational pressure due to drones, this may have unintended consequences. As Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations has pointed out, drones tend to force operatives to leave one theater for another, diffusing rather than destroying the threat. For example, pressure on Al Qaeda in the “AfPak” theater has forced its operatives to move to Yemen, Somalia, and parts of the Levant—especially Syria. For a number of reasons, including the pressure placed on it by drones, Al Qaeda has become less a hierarchical terrorist organization than a franchise brand that local groups can adopt for their own purposes and exploit for funding, training, and other resources. Instead of pushing Al Qaeda to the edge of strategic collapse, drones may have accelerated its fragmentation into a series of local affiliates, most of which are weaker than Al Qaeda’s central organization was at its height before 9/11.

Here the effectiveness argument is murkier than it initially appears: Drones have degraded the central organization of Al Qaeda, but they have also turned one enemy into a series of loosely connected smaller foes. It is not yet clear whether this fragmentation will render Al Qaeda strategically weaker than it was beforehand, or whether in fact this dynamic will give Al Qaeda a second life as a franchise outside its original theater in South Asia.

Moreover, the United States has not limited its drone strikes to the Al Qaeda leadership alone. The Obama administration has expanded the number of targeted groups to a range of Islamist networks affiliated, often in different ways, with Al Qaeda. The New America Foundation found that the majority of drone strikes targeted not Al Qaeda, but rather the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and various smaller Islamist groups, some of which are allied as factions under the umbrella of the Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan (TTP). In some cases, the identity of a drone strike’s target remains unknown; in others, the United States is occasionally unsure which militant group a known target belongs to. Some of the Islamist factions targeted by drone strikes are so small that US officials have found it difficult to distinguish between them in the general atmosphere of militancy brewing in Pakistan.

The same scattering dynamic is also present with the use of drones against these local groups

in Pakistan. In this case, many factions of the TTP have fled from the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and relocated to cities like Karachi, where they are increasingly targeting Pakistani civilians with terrorist attacks. While their capacities have been degraded in the FATA, the effect of drones on their organization as a whole is less clear.

## WEAK LINKS

The Obama administration has expanded its targeting to local groups in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere under the argument that they are linked or affiliated with Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Yet the problem here concerns the slippery concept of linkage: In this complex environment, many local groups will be in some way “linked” to Al Qaeda or the Taliban, yet those connections can mean anything from direct combat support to parallel independent operations against US forces (as with the Haqqani network in Afghanistan), or a range of lesser, even incidental, relationships. Much of the reporting on drone strikes merely accepts the

word of US or local officials that a militant was “linked” to Al Qaeda, without questioning the precise nature of that connection.

One potential danger of this catchall approach is that the United States may wind

up creating more enemies by targeting groups only indirectly affiliated with Al Qaeda. Some evidence of this dynamic already exists: The Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad was allegedly trained and deployed by a faction of the TTP to attack New York City in 2010 in revenge for US drone strikes. This event is particularly significant because the TTP’s principle enemy is the Pakistani government; it only tried to attack the United States after its leadership was targeted by an American drone strike. It is possible that smaller Islamist groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Taiba, could take similar action in response to the pressure that they have experienced under drone strikes.

While the Obama administration tends to speak about drones as a tool against Al Qaeda alone, the reality is that drone strikes are targeting organizations with varying links to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, as well as other Islamist groups whose main quarrel is with the governments of their own countries. Given the blowback risk, analyzing the effectiveness of these drone strikes

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is more complex than the administration's argument implies. The United States has racked up a series of tactical victories by removing high-ranking Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives from the battlefield, but it still remains unclear whether Al Qaeda is close to collapse or simply more dispersed and amorphous. Most of these strikes amount to tactical hits against Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and a growing array of other Islamist networks. Yet the larger strategic question is whether those drone strikes will push all of these groups toward defeat and contribute to long-term stability in the AfPak theater. There is no evidence at present that the Taliban, for example, is close to defeat in Afghanistan or Pakistan. While drone strikes have certainly weakened Al Qaeda's leadership, local hostility to the strikes has also given the organization a powerful propaganda tool. Drones have now replaced Guantanamo Bay as the preferred recruiting theme for militants.

The danger of the Obama administration's approach revolves around the conceptual questions of what "linkage" means and what that implies for US policy. The administration has remained vague on what it means to say that a group is "linked" to Al Qaeda and therefore a justified target for a drone strike. Due to the slipperiness of this concept, and the temptation to use drones preventively, the United States may be overemploying them and creating a series of smaller, less capable local enemies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. If so, the drone campaign is facilitating a process by which the United States replaces a single transnational terrorist network with an array of locally embedded new foes. The debate over the strategic effectiveness of drones must weigh the creation of these local enemies against the elimination of "bad guys" in the short term.

## COUNTING CASUALTIES

In part, the question of the strategic utility of drones ties into a controversial debate over the number of civilian casualties caused by drone strikes. Much of the existing debate conflates precision with effectiveness, implying that if drones are precise, they must be effective. Yet even the evidence for the precision of drones is less clear than the Obama administration's public arguments suggest. The exact number of people killed by drone

strikes is unknown. In Afghanistan, the casualty tolls are difficult to ascertain, since drone strikes occur most often amidst combat operations. Distinguishing who was killed from a drone strike, as opposed to other means, is often impossible.

Estimates of casualties from the covert drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen are more readily available. The New America Foundation estimates that between 2,080 and 3,428 people have been killed by drones in Pakistan (2004–13) and another 717 to 927 in Yemen (2002–13). But casualties from drone strikes are notoriously difficult to measure and verify. Most of the strikes are conducted in distant—sometimes ungoverned—territories of Pakistan and Yemen, where few have the ability to interview survivors or even count the dead. Moreover, it is well known that the Taliban and other local Islamist groups inflate casualty counts for propaganda purposes.

Many newspaper accounts of drone strikes toss around words like "militants" and "civilians" casually, often without evidence. The underlying difficulties of reporting strikes in these countries has been compounded by the US decision to adopt a classification scheme that counts any male between the ages of 18 and 70 killed in a drone strike as a "militant" unless posthumous evidence is presented to clear his name. For this reason, almost all of the data on casualties from drone strikes needs to be treated with a healthy degree of skepticism.

Advocates of drones compare their relative precision favorably with other methods of warfare, and note that drones cause fewer civilian casualties than air strikes or ground assaults. The Obama administration has adopted a similar line of argument, stating that its stringent guidelines for selecting targets ensure that relatively few, if any, civilians are killed in drone strikes. In 2011, Obama's then-chief counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, claimed that there had been no civilian casualties from US drone strikes for nearly a year due to their precision. Obama publicly argued in 2012 that the drone program is "a targeted, focused effort at people who are on the list of active terrorists." The administration has emphasized that strikes have a "surgical" character and are conducted with a "laser-like focus." In his May 2013 speech at the National Defense University, the president acknowledged the real-

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ity of civilian casualties from drone strikes but insisted that “before any strike is taken, there must be near certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured—the highest standard we can set.”

Is this correct? Estimates provided by the New America Foundation suggest that the percentage of civilian deaths varies, depending on whether the high or low casualty number from a given range is used. In Pakistan, for example, the data suggest that between 12.4 percent and 8.9 percent of the casualties were civilians. In Yemen, the estimate runs between 10.9 and 9.0 percent. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), an independent London-based organization, has produced alternative estimates that put the figures of civilians killed by drone strikes somewhat higher. In Pakistan, for example, the highest range of the TBIJ estimate suggests that 26 percent of those killed by drone strikes were civilians. Similarly, the TBIJ data suggest that as much as 13 percent of the victims of drone strikes in Yemen were civilians.

By either estimate, the hyperbolic arguments of some critics—that drones are a wholly indiscriminate weapon of war, killing more civilians than terrorists—can be rejected. Moreover, both data sets suggest that the precision of drones is increasing over time, and the rates of civilian casualties from drone strikes has dropped significantly under the Obama administration.

## RISKING REVENGE

Yet the fact that drones are not as indiscriminate as other weapons of war should not be confused with the argument that they are so precise as to avoid consequences from their use. To confuse precision with effectiveness, as much of the debate over drones does, is to sidestep some pressing questions about who is killed and what blowback their deaths may bring.

While drone strikes do not indiscriminately harm civilians, they are increasingly targeting non-Al Qaeda groups, such as the Taliban and other local Islamist networks operating in countries like Pakistan and Yemen. These local groups are dominated by recruits who are often not full-time fighters, but rather fight in their own villages or regions on a part-time basis. Unlike Al Qaeda operatives, many of whom are from Arab countries and have few local connections, local Taliban or other Islamist fighters have families and dense webs of social networks in the regions in which they are targeted. The risk that the families and friends of such fighters killed in drone strikes will

be motivated to seek revenge is likely to be higher than it is with Al Qaeda targets.

Akbar Ahmed of American University has argued that drone strikes in the Pashtun regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan may activate latent codes of revenge that obligate tribesmen to fight the Americans, either directly or by joining militant networks opposed by them, in response to the death of their relatives. As one Pakistani man who lost relatives in a drone strike remarked to researchers from Stanford and New York universities: “We won’t forget our blood, for two hundred, two thousand, five thousand years—we will take our revenge for these drone attacks.”

This risk of blowback is even greater because the Obama administration has expanded the targeting of drones to lower-ranking operatives of these organizations. An estimate by the New America Foundation suggests that only 2 percent of the casualties from drone strikes are “high-value targets” or key commanders of Islamist groups.

Lower-ranking fighters are particularly likely to be enmeshed in a variety of family, religious, and cultural networks in their local communities. This makes them more likely to have family and friends who will seek to avenge their deaths by joining militant organizations than the foreigners who typically fill the ranks of Al Qaeda. Expanding the drone war to local Islamist networks and targeting lower-ranked operatives of these organizations magnifies the risks of revenge-fueled blowback against the United States or its local allies.

The implicit assumption that drones are effective because they are precise permeates much of the debate over these weapons. Yet there are reasons to believe that a relatively precise weapon—perhaps even one that could be called “humane” compared with many other alternatives—may produce local blowback that undermines its effectiveness in the long run. The decision to target non-Al Qaeda groups and lower-ranked operatives from these organizations has doubtlessly produced an unknown number of new militants, while taking others off the battlefield.

At present, it is impossible to know the net effects of drones. The causality between drone strikes and militant recruiting is particularly complex: Strikes might be increasing in areas of high militancy because the threat is increasing, or these organizations might be growing in strength because the tempo of drone strikes has provoked outrage among the local population. But there is no reason to assume that even a relatively precise

weapon like drones could be used without risking blowback in the long run.

## PAKISTANI BACKLASH

A thorough analysis of the effectiveness of drones should also consider the larger political ramifications. If drones end up creating high levels of political opposition to the United States, or to a local government whose cooperation is crucial to Washington, this effect may offset the tactical gains achieved by removing enemies from the battlefield.

A growing number of critics from inside the Obama administration have come forward to voice this concern. In 2011, former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair wrote that drone attacks did decimate the leadership of Al Qaeda, but they also “increased hatred of America” and harmed “our ability to work with Pakistan [in] eliminating Taliban sanctuaries, encouraging Indian-Pakistani dialogue, and making Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal more secure.” Similarly, General James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 2013 said regarding the drone policy in Pakistan, “We’re seeing that blowback. If you’re trying to kill your way to a solution, no matter how precise you are, you’re going to upset people even if they’re not targeted.”

Public backlash over drones can make it harder for local governments to say “yes” to the United States, thus raising the costs of strategic cooperation. In Pakistan, for example, drone strikes have become a flashpoint of debate and placed the government under intense pressure to appear as if it is not standing idly by while the United States strikes its territory. Of course, the reality has always been more complex: The Pakistani government has traditionally consented to at least some of the strikes, and privately applauded when they took out its own enemies.

Throughout 2010–12, political pressure began to build in Pakistan as the drone strikes increased in tempo. In 2012, Pakistan’s parliament denounced the strikes and demanded that they be halted, while some nationalist politicians began to talk about shooting down American drones in the country’s airspace. In many respects, this was a cynical double game: Pakistani military officials secretly approved drone strikes and allowed some to launch from their air bases while the political

class grandstanded against the United States for domestic consumption.

By early 2013, this situation had become untenable due to mounting public anger. After he came to power in June 2013 elections, Pakistan’s new prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, declared that “the policy of protesting against drone strikes for public consumption, while working behind the scenes to make them happen,” would not continue. Throughout the past year, Sharif has consistently called on Washington to reduce the number of drone strikes in order to mollify public opinion. In February 2014, it was revealed that the United States had agreed to curtail drone strikes while the Pakistani government sought a peace agreement with the TTP.

Although the controversy has died down recently, the salience of the issue in Pakistani public life illustrates some of the strategic costs associated with the drone campaign. As some critics have noted, only a minority of Pakistani civilians is even aware that the US drone program exists, due to illiteracy and low access to radio and television.

Yet those who are informed about it are fiercely opposed to unilateral drone strikes on Pakistani territory. According to a 2012 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 97 percent of informed Pakistani respon-

dents viewed the drone program as “bad” or “very bad.” Another Pew poll in 2012 revealed that 74 percent of Pakistanis considered the United States an enemy, up from 59 percent in 2010.

This anti-American atmosphere has placed the Pakistani government under intense domestic pressure from nationalist forces to stand up to Washington. Among the most prominent of these critics is Imran Khan, a former cricket star turned politician, who publicly named the CIA’s Islamabad station chief in November 2013 in order to embarrass the United States and capitalize on the widespread discontent about the drone campaign. Even though drones have successfully taken out insurgents fighting Pakistan’s government, and weakened or scattered elements of the TTP, this has come at the cost of deep political polarization and increasing hostility toward America.

## AFGHAN GRANDSTANDING

In Afghanistan, a different set of political consequences has arisen. President Hamid Karzai

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has used civilian casualties from drone strikes to manufacture new crises with the United States and strengthen his bargaining position.

During contentious negotiations over a bilateral security agreement, Karzai has capitalized on accidental deaths from drone strikes to grandstand and burnish his credentials with parts of the population hostile to the American mission. While Karzai's position on drones is cynical and opportunistic (he has said relatively little about civilian casualties caused by the Taliban) it has nevertheless deepened the crisis over the unfinished agreement and led Obama to threaten to withdraw all US troops.

Moreover, there is some limited evidence that drones might serve as a recruiting tool for the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban leadership recently criticized the use of drone strikes, calling them an attempt to mask America's defeat in the country, and commenting that "the affected local populations, traumatized by such attacks, begin to view the Americans as a discriminate and immoral force that is willing to sacrifice the lives of the locals in order to attack a small number of their enemies."

Politically, the casualties associated with drone strikes in Afghanistan, while minimal in comparison with Pakistan, have nevertheless played into the hands of both Karzai and the Taliban, and undermined long-term US priorities in the country.

## LONG-TERM DANGERS

Most of the Obama administration's arguments for the effectiveness of drones have been short-term and tactical, concentrating on how drone strikes remove key enemies from the battlefield, and why they may be the best of a selection of bad options in difficult terrain. Yet, with some exceptions, members of the administration have avoided discussing the possible long-term costs of the drone program.

The debate is a difficult one, in large part because many of the details of the drone program remain shrouded in secrecy, and many of its costs will not be known for years to come. But even today there is considerable evidence to suggest that

drone strikes, no matter how precise, have negative consequences sufficient to offset the administration's strongest arguments in their favor.

The dangers—that drone strikes may inadvertently produce new, locally embedded enemies, or that their use will generate political crises that damage relationships with key American partners—all suggest that the Washington may pay a price for overreliance on drones as opposed to other counterterrorism tools. In South Asia, this overreliance has exacerbated anti-American sentiment and produced a backlash effect that may undermine the legitimacy of the governments of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

This does not mean that the United States should never use drones for fear of their potential long-term repercussions. But it does suggest that Washington is best advised to exercise considerable caution, and selectivity in choosing targets, when authorizing drone strikes in the future. It also means that the Obama administration should be more circumspect in claiming that tactical victories from drones can be achieved today without the risk of potentially painful costs tomorrow. ■

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