



Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DRONE STRIKES IN COUNTERINSURGENCY AND COUNTERTERRORISM CAMPAIGNS

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The United States increasingly relies on unmanned aerial vehicles—better known as drones—to target insurgent and terrorist groups around the world. Drones have a number of advantages that could fundamentally alter how the United States engages in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Drones place no U.S. military personnel at risk. They do not require a large “footprint” of U.S. personnel overseas. They are armed with accurate missiles that have the capacity to target individuals, automobiles, and sections of structures such as rooms in a large house. Perhaps the most consequential advantage of drones is their ability to integrate intelligence collection with decisions to use force. Drones can collect intelligence directly with their own sensors. Their ability to linger for long periods of time allows this real-time intelligence to be combined with other intelligence sources. These characteristics should make drones especially effective at targeting only the individuals against whom the United States wishes to use force, while minimizing harm to noncombatants. This highly selective use of force has the potential to allow the United States to achieve its counterinsurgency objectives at lower cost and risk.

Critics, though, suggest that drone strikes have been ineffective or have actually backfired. Drone strikes are ineffective if some insurgent organizations are large and resilient enough to survive the deaths of their leaders and rank-and-file members. Even the most selective forms of violence can lead to civilian casualties. Insurgent

and terrorist organizations can exploit civilian deaths to convince supporters that the United States uses force indiscriminately, and that noncombatants face considerable risk of harm. This is perhaps the most common criticism of the U.S. drone campaign. Many observers suggest that any degradation of insurgent organizations caused by drone strikes is outweighed by the ability of such organizations to exploit even small numbers of civilian casualties with the goal of persuading people to join or support the insurgency.

A less common criticism of the drone strike campaign focuses on how such strikes influence relationships among insurgent organizations. While drone operators may be able to distinguish civilians from militants, it is more difficult to determine if a militant or group of militants are core members of one insurgent organization or another. This presents a real problem where multiple insurgent organizations are operating and the United States does not wish to target all of them. In such situations, violence is selective in the sense that it sorts militants from civilians, but is indiscriminate among militants with different organizational affiliations. This may actually promote cooperation among these groups and lead them to focus more of their energies on using violence in ways that undermine the goals of the United States.

A number of researchers have investigated the relationships between the occurrence of drone strikes and the various types of behavior

by insurgent and terrorist groups with links to Pakistan. These research efforts have not yet produced a consensus on how drones influence insurgent organizations. However, one reasonably consistent finding across the studies is that drone strikes have little influence, positive or negative, on the amount of insurgent violence that occurs in Afghanistan. This is important, because one objective of the drone strike campaign is to weaken and undermine insurgent organizations that are based in Pakistan and launch attacks against American, Afghan, and international military forces, as well as civilians in Afghanistan. The studies conducted to date would suggest that this objective of the drone campaign is not being met. A more tentative conclusion that can be drawn from the existing research is that drone strikes that result in civilian deaths appear to have little relationship with subsequent insurgent violence. This suggests that insurgent organizations have not been very effective at leveraging such deaths in their propaganda to secure more support.

Another conclusion is that drone strikes that kill militants in Pakistan are associated with increases in subsequent insurgent violence in the country. This fact could be creating a dynamic in which all insurgent organizations, even those that have few grievances against the United States and the government of Pakistan or that engage in low levels of violence, feel threatened by the drones and seek support from other insurgent organizations that do have as their goal the undermining of the U.S. position in the region.

These findings have implications for the conduct of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Drones appear to be, at most, weak substitutes for traditional counterinsurgency operations. The thrust of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine is protecting civilians from harm. While drones have the capability to punish and deter insurgent organizations, they do not alone contribute to the establishment of effective state authority in direct and meaningful ways, which likely requires large numbers of ground forces and civilians to provide services to, and gain intelligence from, the local population. A related implication concerns collaboration with host nation forces and governments. Drone strikes in

Pakistan and elsewhere were initially targeted at individual leaders of militant organizations, such as al-Qaeda, that actively targeted the United States. It appears that the types of targets of drones have been expanded to include both lower-level militants, as well as violent groups that target primarily the local authorities. Some host governments that receive counterterrorism and counterinsurgency assistance from abroad have incentives to exaggerate the threats that they and the international community face from militants. Actually eliminating the threat from such groups would undermine the rationale for foreign military and civilian funding and assistance. This could lead host governments to carefully calibrate their efforts against such groups so that they do not become strong enough to overthrow the government or take control of large areas of national territory. However, these groups would remain powerful enough to pose some plausible threat. Host governments, for example, might provide intelligence on the location and activities of militants that they prefer to target, while providing less such intelligence on militants that are of most interest to the United States. An active campaign of drone strikes might also lead the host government to take less effective action against militants with its own forces.

There is some reason to think that drone strikes might achieve their objectives in a more narrowly circumscribed counterterrorism, rather than counterinsurgency, campaign. This claim is difficult to assess, however, since the United States has not consistently employed drones in a counterterrorism campaign. Instead, as discussed above, there has been a tendency to expand the targets of drone strikes. In both Pakistan and Yemen, the expansion has been justified on the reasonable grounds that the new targets are providing assistance to groups who plan attacks that the United States wants to prevent. Also, in both cases, the groups targeted by drones operate in areas where the United States and the national government cannot or will not engage "on the ground" in large numbers. Drones are most useful in precisely such areas, since they allow the United States to project force when it and the national government have few other options.

But the absence of boots on the ground makes it more difficult to gather human intelligence on the activities of militant groups that can be used to target drone strikes. Ungoverned spaces also can allow armed groups to proliferate and form complex and short-lived alliances that are difficult for outsiders to understand, increasing the challenge of targeting only militants who oppose the United States. Drones, then, are most useful for counterterrorism in precisely those settings where the challenges of counterterrorism are the greatest, and the ability to collect intelligence is the weakest. This means that the bar for the successful use of drones to counter terrorism is set quite high, but at the same time they are, in the words of former Director of Central Intelligence Leon Panetta, “the only game in town” for countering terrorist organizations.

Armed drones are a remarkable development in weapons technology. This technology seems well-suited to effective counterinsurgency operations, which, as a large body of scholarship and U.S. Army doctrine suggest, are more effective when they employ force selectively. However, the evidence from the most sustained campaign to rely on drone strikes to deter and punish insurgent organizations in Pakistan suggests this technology has limited capacity to achieve these objectives. Insurgencies are adaptive organizations, and may change their behavior in response to drone strikes in ways that render the strikes ineffective or even counterproductive. It is also very difficult to gain accurate intelligence on insurgent movements, especially when the United States does not have personnel on the ground in

large numbers to collect and place in the appropriate context useful human intelligence, which may lead to drone strikes that do little harm to their intended targets. Despite these limitations, drone technology seems very likely to spread both within the U.S. Armed Forces, the armed forces of other countries, and even insurgent organizations. A better understanding of the limits of armed drones may allow their use to be more effectively integrated with other types of armed force and tools of foreign and security policy.

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