

Exploring the drone syndrome

Asmatullah Wazir

Abstract

This essay captures the different angles through which the drone operations are approached in Pakistan. The paper takes note of almost all the players involved in the program: the United States, operating the program; Pakistan, which is at the receiving end of the strikes; tribesmen, whose area have received almost all drone strikes; and human rights advocate. The timing of drone strikes is also criticized often, for derailing Pakistan's attempt to lure militants to negotiating table.

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Setting the ground

As American invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, many Taliban and al-Qaeda fled across the border in Pakistan, to its bordering tribal areas. The areas' some 'hospitable' people and much 'hostile' terrain provided the escaping militants the much-needed breathing space. Soon, from there, they launched attacks on international troops in Afghanistan and against Pakistani state inside the country.

Hundreds of miles away, the United States had been monitoring the tribal areas, using drone technology, ever since the war started. In 2004, the U.S. used the same technology for killing a key militant. Since then, several drone attacks have been launched; while many militants have been killed, questions are also raised over the death of innocent civilian casualties.

During the Bush administration (2002-2008), drones operations

mostly fired in FATA at the "high-valued targets", the top militants like al-Qaeda's. The incoming Obama administration (2008) introduced the concept of 'signature strikes', which targets those who are concluded to be terrorists on the basis of their ground behaviours (Patel, 2012).

As to why the U.S. shifted the drone's usage from monitoring to striking, several explanations can be offered. It was then, in 2004, when American intelligence started pointing towards heightened militant activity inside Pakistani tribal areas. Simultaneously, the Afghan government raised their complaint bar against Pakistan for supporting Taliban. Reports about militants getting training in the area also trickled in national and international media (Abbas, 2014).

Yet strikingly, the first attack was wrongly claimed by Pakistani armed forces (Hudson, Owens, & Flannes, 2011). The attack was meant to pressurize President Musharraf into

taking decisive action against Taliban as well to counter the growing threat of militants from FATA.

The Taliban, on the ground, responded brutally. They went on a rampage, killing those tribesmen who, the Taliban thought, had spied for the Americans by pinpointing the location of Taliban fighters (Rashid, 2012). A tribesman with any sort of electronic chip was often killed.

American perspective

Drone attacks in FATA, and elsewhere, remain an integral part of the U.S.'s counter-terrorism policy. They provide a ready-made solution of targeting enemies without risking personnel in the inhospitable of tribal areas.¹

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told AFP in February 2013 that drones are an "important part" of America's "operations against Al-Qaeda, not just in Pakistan, but also in Yemen, in Somalia and I think it ought to continue to be a tool we ought to use where necessary" (*Express Tribune*, 2013).

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Many in the U.S. administration deem drone strikes as legal and ethical. By allowing drone strikes, they argue, the U.S. president is doing his constitutional role of protecting the American nation from any imminent threat.

Drone attacks alone can't eliminate terrorism. Physical elimination of enemy is not the decisive step in combating terrorism, which requires discrediting the ideas of the militants. Extending proper rule of law such as thorough investigation and prosecution is more likely to be more damaging to what terrorists stand for (Abbas, 2014).

The drone strikes that target hard-core terrorists can be effective, provided they are supported by

¹ Author's interview with Dr Qibla Ayaz, ex-vice chancellor of the University of Peshawar. June 3rd 2013.

parallel public relations exercise to challenge the ideas projected by those terrorists

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Pakistani perspective

Pakistan opposes American drone strikes in its territory, deeming them as violation of its sovereignty.

There is ample evidence suggesting tacit approval by Pakistani authorities of the drone attacks. It was even reported that Pakistan has provided two of its airbases to the USA for drone operations (ICG, 2013). Some officials may, too, appear confused on whether or not to support the drone attacks against key militants. Yet, no formal bilateral agreement, allowing Americans drones in FATA, has surfaced (LUD, 2012).

At the same time, Pakistan has also demanded transfer of drone technology to Pakistan, so that, it is

argued, its own forces can strike out militants, without evoking strong resistance from the people (*Dawn*, 2010).

The human rights perspective

Several human rights groups have expressed legal concerns over drone attacks. The UN's special rapporteur on human rights, Ben Emmerson, has said that drone strikes on Pakistani soil are a violation of the country's sovereignty and as such illegal (*The News*, 2013). Similarly, according to another special rapporteur, on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, drones are a major challenge to the system of International law (Abbas, 2014).

Rights bodies have called upon the United States administration to ensure that the drone strikes are transparent, accountable, and legal. Questioning the secrecy surrounding the whole program, watchdogs have demanded from the U.S. Department of Justice "the memorandum", that outlines on what legal grounds drones carry out target killing and "signature strike", the behaviour hinted to be that of a terrorist.

The U.S. has been asked to ensure that proper procedures, in compliance with international law,

are followed for selecting a target, especially in case of signature strikes, and to investigate into civilian deaths and injuries (ICG, 2013).

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Contradictory claims

According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, from 2004 to 2013, the casualties from drone strikes fell in the range of 2520 to 3621, of which 416 to 948 people were civilians. Similarly, a recent report published by Amnesty International, an international human rights organization, revealed that most of the drone victims were non-combatants. AI even reckoned that some of the drone strikes in Pakistan constitute as war crime. Meanwhile, Pakistan's defence ministry too released its estimates of casualties from drones: since 2008, 38% of the

deaths were those of civilians; the rest were militants.

A local journalist questioned the credibility of different surveys on drone attacks in North Waziristan where the situation is "quite fluid". "In the absence of government writ there," he argued, "the possibility of conducting credible survey is simply possible", further adding that "even if one does take place, the results will be influenced by the fog of fear factor". He believed that "most of surveys are either bogus or conducted under the patronage of one or the other actor of this conflict, which means tilted and biased output."²

"I consider drones as a main hurdle in the way of any peaceful settlement as dialogue process has always been sabotaged under well planned agenda." a tribal elder.

Another local argued on similar lines, "Usually the sites of drone attacks are immediately cordoned off by the

² Author's interview with Umer Daraz, a local journalist in North Waziristan. March 2013.

militants, and access is denied to everyone.”³

Spoilers

Pakistan has also voiced its concerns on the timing of some of the drone strikes, which, Pakistan argues, spoiled the country’s efforts in resolving differences with the militants.

Two recent cases in point are Waliur-Rehman and Hakimullah Mehsud, two top leaders of anti-Pakistan Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who were eliminated at the time, when Pakistani state was reaching out to them to hammer out a peace deal. According to Ziaur Rehman, who has extensively reported the conflict in FATA, “Ample time and hectic efforts are needed to establish any contact with such leaders. These include initiation of trust-building measure to create conducive environment, for kick-starting any dialogue process. But, with the elimination of such leaders/commanders, all efforts go in van, and the process would have to start from the scratch again.”⁴

Malik Khan Marjan Wazir, a *malik* (tribal elder) from the troubled North Waziristan and patron of Tribal Grand Alliance, also echoes those concerns. “I consider drones as a main hurdle in the way of any peaceful settlement as dialogue process has always been sabotaged under well planned agenda,” he said.⁵

The very first drone strike, in June 2004, targeted Nek Muhammad Wazir, the leader of the inchoate Taliban, who had, only two months earlier, signed a cease-fire agreement with Pakistan. For a while, Pakistan claimed the attack. Resultantly, the agreement soon fell apart (Ahmed, 2013).

Some argue that even peace building efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan hits a toll from drones. Raza Shah, a peace building expert, whose institution Sustainable Peace and Development Organization runs dialogue between civil societies of Pakistan and Afghanistan, agrees, “drones are indeed playing the role of active spoiler in this whole equation between ANSA and the government of Pakistan.”

³S. Dawar’s interview with a local tribesman W. K. Wazir. March 11th 2013.

⁴Author’s interview with Ziaur Rehman. February 12th 2015.

⁵Interview with the author. January 27th 2015.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any control over it. And having no control means no public ownership,” he says.⁶

Another local argued on similar lines, “Usually the sites of drone attacks are immediately cordoned off by the militants, and access is denied to everyone.”

What do people say?

Public opinion in the FATA seems divided on the issue of drone attacks. According to a local from Miramshah, headquarter of North Waziristan, “there is sizable portion of population especially in North Waziristan who approves of drones and call them as *Ababeel*,⁷ out of their support for the strike. Yet there is a section of society within tribal belt, who believes otherwise. They believe that the harm inflicted by drones to the local population, be it psychological, social or economic it is met with reduce support for the

Pakistan Army and increase support of the Taliban be that Afghan or Pakistani version of Taliban”.

The tribal factor

Some argue that the tribal of FATA who have the element of revenge in their bloods always reacted to the drone attacks for which the Pakistani government took responsibility. As a reaction, the tribesmen took revenge on anything they thought represented the government.

Impact

Residents, hunted by continuous risk of death, have developed serious levels of stress. Notable families often face frustration. A journalist said about this dilemma:

“Being the elders, they can’t refuse stay to TTP members on account of Pashtun Wali, the Pashtun code of conduct; at the same time, they are wary of the fact that if, God forbid, they are targeted by a drone strike, they will have to face the

⁶Interview with the author. November 2nd 2013.

⁷ According to the Quran (105:1-5), God sent *Ababeel* (swarms of flying creatures) who pelted the owners of the Elephant with stones and baked clay and made them like green crops devoured (by

cattle). The exegesis writers say the reference of the owners of the Elephant is to army of Abrahah Ashram, the Abyssinian viceroy, who led a big expedition against Makkah to destroy the Ka'bah around 570 A.C.

consequences from both the government for providing shelter to the commanders and from the TTP who may suspect them for spying. We are caught between the devil and the deep sea”.⁸

The mobility of tribesmen has also been restricted due to drones. Now, they prefer to avoid gatherings such as weddings, funerals and the jirgas, the tribal way of conflict resolution

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Conclusion

The value of drones for intelligence and surveillance purposes is undisputed. In war zones, drones can support ground operations in significant, often decisive, ways.

However, what remains debatable is their seemingly-unilateral use as a counterterrorism instrument in theaters not declared as war zones. Resultantly, people of the tribal area seem stuck between the war of technology and ideology. On the one side are drones from the sky; on the other side are militants on the ground. However, people do support the strikes for killing militants.

But, by not taking on board completely the sovereign state where these drone strikes are targeted, and lacking transparency over the nature of attacks, question marks will be raised every now and then.

⁸ S. Dawar’s interview with W. K. Wazir.

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