

Drones: A Projection of Force Abroad

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Abstract

After the events that took place on September 11th, 2001, the United States military drastically increased their use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). This type of projection of force abroad has not come without scrutiny. Both the legality and effectiveness of use have come under question. This study sets out to understand whether the use of drones by the United States is an effective way to fight terrorism abroad. In order to measure success, the study looks at the legality of strikes with regards to how the United States frames their use of drones. The study also looks at the foreign policy goals of the United States usage of drones, specifically through the lenses of liberal-interventionism, in order to determine whether the usage of drones is effective in combating terrorism abroad. The study will focus on drone usage against al Qaeda and the Taliban, primarily in the countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Subsequently, the United States drone usage is a useful instrument because of the way it eliminates key targets and facilities of US enemies abroad.

About the author

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Introduction

Between 2009 and 2013, the United States drone program under the Obama Administration eliminated over 3,000 al Qaeda fighters and other members of terrorist organizations (Bynam, 2013). Although the use of drones in military actions has utilized since World War II, states have opted to use unmanned aircraft because of substantial technological developments (Gusterson, 2016). Since the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan following September 11, 2001, the United States has turned to the use of UAVs to promote their interests abroad. The ability to project force around the world without physical human presence has become one of the US' preferred tactic in fighting terrorism. This essay will analyze the question of whether drone usage is a successful tool in fighting terrorism in the Middle East, by measuring the legality of strikes, the overall strategy and goal of these strikes, and finally by analyzing the actions through the foreign policy goals of the United States. This essay finds that the United States drone usage is a useful instrument because of the way it eliminates key targets of terrorist abroad and disrupts terrorist organizations in the Middle East.

Background

Foremost, it is necessary to look at the context of events in the international world in order to understand the increase of drone usage by the United States. After the events of 9/11, the United States government declared the goal of fighting terrorism abroad a priority. The terrorists identified in the attacks on the US were said to be members of a group known as al Qaeda. This terrorist group and its subgroups would become the primary target of US military action overseas. This group is primarily settled in the countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan (Johnston

& Sarbahi, 2015). A particular area of importance in this study is the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which is largely a rural area where many offshoots of al Qaeda are reported to be (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2015). The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are mountainous, poorly mapped, and not readily accessible to ground troops. To effectively exert force in this region, the US turned to the use of drones. To understand if the use of force was effective in the fight against terrorism, it is important to classify militants and combatants accordingly.

Defining Terms and Legality

In order to understand whether the use of drones has been a beneficial tool in fighting terrorism, it is important to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants in conflict. For drone strikes to fit in the legality of war, they must be administered during the presence of an armed conflict (Vogel, 2013). Post 9/11 the United States and the US media posed the conflict against al Qaeda as a “war on terror” in general. This description guided audiences and the public to see this conflict as an ambiguous fight against all terrorists abroad (Vogel, 2013). By 2009, the administration would abandon the phrase “war on terror” instead changing the conflict to a “war with al Qaeda and its associated forces,” (United States Department of Justice, 2009).

This change of description would also include members of the Taliban, who were thought to be harboring al Qaeda members and would later be targets of drone strikes (Vogel, 2013). As stated by Vogel, this war against al Qaeda and its associates has been “declared” numerous times by United States government through defense spending bills and presidential speeches. The war was first formally declared in 2001 by the passing of the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (Vogel, 2013). With the United States clearly stating they are in an armed conflict with a particular enemy, although it is considered a non-state actor, it opens the

door to the potential use of drones in this conflict. Without the justification of being in an armed conflict, the United States would not be able to legally justify their usage (Vogel, 2013).

With that in mind, during these armed conflicts, there are often unforeseen casualties. These casualties are categorized into two main groups: combatants and noncombatants. Under International Human Rights law, during a conflict there are certain privileges given to “lawful combatants”, this distinction is given to participants in the conflict who belong to the state that is fighting. For example, during the First World War, lawful combatants would be soldiers on either side of the fight. In regards to the US’ conflict with al Qaeda, the US government did not categorize enemy fighters to be “lawful” but instead as “unlawful combatants,” which do not receive the same privileges as the latter (Vogel, 2013).

According to R.J. Vogel, this classification was used by the US government because of the “irregular force” al Qaeda had become. This “irregular force” is described to be committed by a non-state transnational organization whose “members’ actions do not allow for protections entailed to lawful combatants.” This distinction would be used by the United States in order to frame the legality of their drone strikes against “al Qaeda and its associated forces.” (Vogel, 2013). This proposed war would account for a substantial amount of casualties, and the US needs to ensure their use of force against non-state actors like al Qaeda is legally justified.

Continuing, the United States would state that its declaration of the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Terrorists overrides provision set out in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter that limits the use of force against non-state actors. The US suggests it holds jurisdiction to defend itself in three situations (1) after armed events, (2) where pre-emptive defense is necessary to address a “continuing threat,” (3) and in times where a threat is present

(Nasser, 2015). With the combination of clearly defining the enemy and rights of those in the combat, the United States sets up a legal framework that could be argued to be within the bounds of international law. However, Nasser points out that many of the justifications used by the United States to legitimize their use of drones are rooted in ambiguities and the complexity of overlapping international laws (Nasser, 2015). This legal justification is critical to understand if drone strikes have been a useful tool in the fight against terrorism.

In order to stay within the boundaries of war, the US government needed to frame where the battle or conflict was taking place. As stated above, the majority of the empirical data comes from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas region, but the US was able to frame a much larger geographical area of conflict. Since al Qaeda is connected across many different countries, the US declared its fight on al Qaeda and terrorism as a whole to have no geographical boundaries. This can be seen from the drone strikes in countries like Yemen and Iraq (Byman, 2013). The US has tried to broaden its scope of force abroad by broadly defining both combatants and the area of conflict; this ensures that the US government stays within the bounds of a legal war.

Legality of use is one way that suggests the use of drones is beneficial. Although, there is legality in targeting al Qaeda, the civilian casualties because of drone usage is a fundamental criticism of the use. Data collected by Long War Journal from 2006 to 2016, showed that drone strikes in Pakistan accounted for an estimated 158 civilian deaths. In comparison, during that same period, the ratio of confirmed deaths of “al Qaeda and associates” to civilian deaths was 17:1 (Roggio, 2016). In the conflict with al Qaeda, the United States is never legally justified in any of its killings of civilians.

Drone Strike Targeting

The effectiveness of drone strikes in the Middle East is critical in the understanding of the US' goals. The US government turned to drone usage because of the difficulty of directly eliminating terrorist cells in the difficult terrain of the Middle East. Since al Qaeda and its members know the region, they can stay hidden and concealed from most detection. By using drone surveillance, the government can locate specific groups and targets. Target killings were sanctioned by the US in the years following 9/11. The first reported target killing occurred on November 2, 2002, when a head leader of al Qaeda was eliminated during a strike in Yemen (Cheema & Chaudhry, 2015). This would be the start to many future drone strikes, which would eliminate terrorist targets abroad without putting soldiers in harm's way. The US government has continued to use targeted strikes to remove senior officials similar to those in Yemen. Drone strikes are also targeted on at strongholds and potential training grounds of terrorist groups. The government's use of drones has disrupted the training of al Qaeda members by discouraging them to gather in large groups or out in the open (Bynam, 2013).

The fear of a drone strike has made members go so far as to not use electronic communication systems (Byman, 2013). Even without the physical use of the drones, the US can exert military presence and power in a region far from US territory. With the both ability to eliminate key al Qaeda members and disrupt the everyday workings of the organization shows the usefulness of the US drone strikes in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East and South Asia. In contrast, the Obama administration has changed from targeting al Qaeda members to most recently using "signature attacks" on the Taliban. These "signature attacks" are when US drones target suspected groups of Taliban ground soldiers. Reports show over 40% of drone strikes during the Obama administration have been aimed at the Taliban (Bergen & Rothenberg,

2015). This shift in targets demonstrates the versatility of the US use of drones to target many facets of terrorism in the Middle East. In looking at the data behind drone strikes, its usage in fighting terrorism in the Middle East can be seen as beneficial.

Success by the Numbers

Data acquired throughout the 2000s shows an increase of drone usage over time from the Bush to the Obama administration. According to data collected in April of 2011, there have been 233 drone strikes, resulting in that caused roughly 1,400 to 2,000 casualties. The study showed that 95% of those victims were military combatants (Bergen & Tiedemann, 2011). Low rates of civilian deaths have been attributed to the increase in both cooperation between foreign governments and technology. Drone strike data shows that the US is effectively using drones to take out specific targets and is doing so accurately. Bergen and Tiedemann also state that since 2011, drone strikes have taken out 33 “insurgent leaders”. Research done by The Long War Journal estimated that from 2004 to 2016 over 50 either Taliban or al Qaeda leaders were killed by drone strikes (Roggio, 2016). With that in mind, there is also data to show that drone strikes have killed a considerable amount of civilians.

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there have been 204 children killed by drone strikes (Pugliese, 226). With a ratio of around seventeen confirmed militant kills to every one civilian, the argument of proportionality of use comes into the discussion. Scholars, such as Tony Nasser would argue that there are international laws that prohibit the murder of civilians no matter the type of armed conflict or actors involved. Although a counter-argument for the use of drones is that many would suggest these civilian fatalities would come whether the use of force was drones or alternative methods of combat. According to the Bureau of

Investigative Journalism, the civilian death rate in Yemen was three times higher when using non-drone military force such as “ground troops or non-drone missile strikes” compared to drone strikes during a fixed period of time (Saletan, 2016). Ultimately, the majority of measures taken from the data on drone strikes in the Middle East, suggest that drone strikes are useful in the fight against terrorism.

A Tool to Achieve US Foreign Policy Goals

With that in mind, the use of drone strikes is a tool used to promote the foreign policy goals of the United States. For the last two decades, the United States has promoted foreign policy goals that align with liberal interventionist ideology (Parmar, 2009). This political theory favors the role of interventionism in humanitarian conflicts as well the promotion of democracy through interventions abroad. Inderjeet Parmar describes the recent interventions in Iraq and the Middle East to be focused on military action to promote democracies. Parmar, suggest the US intervention in the Middle is based on protecting the domestic security of the United States (2009).

The protection of US security is clearly seen by the US use of drones in its fight against terrorism. The United States is able to continually promote its democratic interest abroad through its use of drone strikes. In addition drone usage continues to promote the recent foreign policy shift of neo-conservatism, which highlights the necessity for the United States to use its power to enhance the global stage (Parmar, 2009). In order to affect the international arena, the US has turned to fighting terrorism in the Middle East. The US government is achieving this foreign policy goal through the effective use of drone strikes in the Middle East.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations have seen it as prudent to continue to combat terrorist groups abroad through the use of drone strikes. The use of drones gives the US continuous projection of force against threats to their national interest. The US drone usage allows the government to continuously promote its national interest in the Middle East. The promotion of US foreign policy goals through the use of drones can be seen through the recent example of the US conflict with Islamic State.

Islamic State Conflict

In the case of the US intervention against the Islamic State in the Middle East, the United States aimed their attacks in order to “eliminate the threat the posed to the international community” (Department of Defense, 2015). As of December 3, 2015, the Department of Defense reported 14 strikes carried out by unmanned vehicles against the Islamic State and its resources in Syria. Many of these strikes were targeted at Islamic State buildings and oil well heads ("Strikes Hit ISIL in Syria, Iraq"). These strategic attacks are one primary goal of the US in their fight against terrorism. As stated above, the elimination of crucial resources and targets disrupts the organization of terrorist groups. These strikes are also an example of how the US intervenes in conflicts around the world without the risk of endangering US military. This recent example highlights the US ideology of defending its interest abroad.

Conclusion

Ultimately, drone usage has been shown to be a useful tool in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. Since the US government is engaged in armed conflict with terrorist groups, they have legal grounds in using this type of force. This projection of force eliminates key targets and leaders of different terrorist groups in the Middle East. With the absence of ground troops,

the United States is still able to intervene in conflicts abroad without the risk of US military casualties. In looking at drone strike data, the US drone usage has been a useful tool in accurately eliminating targets without substantial civilian deaths. The United States has continued to increase its use of drone strikes from the Bush to Obama administration and could be argued to be their preferred tool in fighting terrorism in the Middle East. Currently, the United States has been able to dismiss international concerns of its drone use by the way it has shaped the legality of their strikes. Policymakers must continue to accurately define combatants and externalities of the war to justify the use of drones. The United States has recently followed a doctrine focused on liberal interventionism in order to promote domestic security, and the use of drones has been shown to be one of the best tools for doing so, especially in its fight against terrorism in the Middle East.

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