Drones of War
American Strategies across the Durand Line

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Between mid June and mid July alone, there were at least six drone attacks by the US on militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), killing more than 175 people. One such strike alone on 23 June 2009, hit a funeral, killing nearly 100 people.

Some crucial questions need to be addressed. Contrary to the popular expectations, why should the Obama administration continue the drone attacks, against its own ally? And, why should Pakistan make meek objections, but submit eventually? Will these attacks continue, and expand into the settled districts of NWFP and even Balochistan, as some American reports have indicated?

I
DRONE ATTACKS: AMERICAN & PAKISTANI STRATEGIES

Despite the opposition from Pakistan. the US considers the drone attacks as highly effective, in military terms. Ever since they started in 2004, as a part of their strategy to neutralize the Taliban in FATA, there have been at least 40 plus attacks, killing nearly 500 people. Reasons behind the US relying on the drone attacks are easy to understand. First, there is a trust deficit between the US and Pakistan, when it comes to actions against the al Qaeda and Taliban.

The US forces in Afghanistan do not trust that the Pakistani security forces are serious about taking military actions against the Taliban and al Qaeda in the FATA. Though Pakistan's security forces have taken serious military actions against the Taliban in Swat, there have been no such serious military initiatives in any of the seven tribal agencies of the FATA. Pakistan has been more interested in cutting deals with various Taliban groups, for political and strategic reasons. Second, the US also considers that any sharing of information with Pakistan's security forces leading to the latter taking actions against Taliban/al Qaeda elements have been not so successful. The US fears that the information gets leaked to the targets, leading to their escape.

Third, since any cross-Durand hot pursuit is likely to

invite more trouble for US-Pak relationship and result in further alienation of the US, drone attacks solve an important problem. There is no need for the US to physically be there in the FATA, thus not only avoiding human casualties, but also avoiding a political quagmire inside Pakistan. Finally, though political leadership in Pakistan has been accusing the US of violation of sovereignty, there seems to be an understanding between the security forces across the Durand line, on the drone attacks.

There seems to be a clear but covert understanding between Pakistan and the US. For political reasons, Pakistan will not be able pursue an effective military operations against the Taliban in FATA. The Pashtun factor in Pakistan's military and the Pashtun nationalism across the Durand line, is likely to play a major role, in Islamabad not pursuing an active military strategy vis-à-vis the Taliban in FATA. Had it not been for the public opinion mobilized against Fazlullah and his goons following the flogging incident and the destruction of girls schools by the Taliban, it is unlikely that Islamabad would have pursued a sincere military operations in Swat.

II
DRONE ATTACKS SINCE 2004: A SURVEY

While the Pakistani government and the anti-US elements condemn the drone attacks as a violation of sovereignty, killing innocent tribal people, the American forces have been claiming, that these attacks have been successful in eliminating key Taliban and al Qaeda targets. Truth lies somewhere in between.

Who are the targets?

Undoubtedly, there have been key Taliban and al Qaeda operatives, who were successfully neutralized in these attacks; the following brief biography of each target suggests, the drone attacks have been successful in eliminating some top operatives from both organizations.

Nek Muhammad, a tribesman from South

Waziristan, was killed in the first drone attack in 2004 near Wana. As a tribal militant, Muhammad fought in Afghanistan with the Taliban, going on to later join with the Pakistani constituency of the organization where he rose as a Taliban and Pashtun Islamist commander. When Musharraf's government attempted to launch a series of attacks on Waziristan militants, Nek retaliated with a series of brutal suicide bombings and guerilla attacks on Pakistani troops. In addition, Nek was known to harbor both Taliban militants as well as al Qaeda operatives.

Abu Hamza Rabia was an Egyptian born al Qaeda operative. He was killed in 2005 in North Waziristan. Rabia was one of al Qaeda's operation chiefs, in charge of the external planning of terrorist attacks. He was considered third in command within al Qaeda, behind Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawhiri.

Abu Layth al-Libi was a Libyan born al Qaeda operative. He was killed in 2008 in Khushali Torkiel, North Waziristan. Within al Qaeda he was involved in terrorist operations planning, officially listed as an operational commander and guerilla warfare expert. He was reported to be tied to a 2007 bombing in Bagram, Afghanistan that was meant to kill visiting former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Aby Sulayman Jazairi was an Algerian born al Qaeda operative. He was killed in 2008 in Damadola, a village in Pakistan's Bajaur tribal area. Jazairi was a senior al Qaeda trainer and operations commander, as well as an explosives expert. He was assigned to plan attacks on the west.

Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar was an Egyptian born al Qaeda operative. He was killed in drone attacks in 2006 in the Pakistani village of Damadola. Umar was a WMD-researcher, weapons expert and trainer. His expertise led him to become a project leader for the development of chemical and biological weapons with al Qaeda. Umar was ranked as a "high importance" target by globalsecurity.org.

Rashid Rauf is a British operative of the al Qaeda. It is speculated that Rauf was killed in a 2008 drone attack, however his death was never confirmed. Rauf was in change of external operations for attacks in Europe. Most notably, he was connected to the 2006 plot to blow up several commercial aircraft leaving from British airports.

Khalid Habib was an Egyptian born al Qaeda

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operative. He was killed in 2008 in Baijur, Pakistan. Habib was one of al-Qaeda's chief operations planners working along the Af-Pak border.

Sheikh Ahmed Salim is a Kenyan with links to al Qaeda. It is speculated that he was killed in a 2009 drone attack. Most notably, Salim is charged with providing the trucks used in the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam.

Where have the Drone Attacks Taken Place?

A statistical survey of the American drone attacks in the FATA brings about certain interesting facts. Though the FATA is consisting of Seven Agencies, the drone attacks have been taking place primarily in two Agencies – North and South Waziristan. Of the approximately 48 known drone attacks since 2004, nearly 50 percent of them have taken place in South Waziristan and 30 percent have taken place in North Waziristan. The remaining 20 percent of the attacks have been scattered throughout the Agencies of Bajaur, Mohammand, Kurram and Orakzai. Bajaur and Mohamand Agencies have been the primary targets outside North and South Waziristan.

While the precise locations of drone attacks are difficult identify, reports suggest that specific houses are the most common target, with at least 14 documented instances of such attacks occurring in both North and South Waziristan as well as Bajaur, Kurram and Orakzai, ranging from 2004 to present. Attacks on vehicles and compounds were the next most common, with five well documented cases of each taking place.

Both types of targets attacked were primarily concentrated in South Waziristan, however, vehicle attacks started only in 2008, while attacks on compounds had been executed since 2005. Of the four documented attacks on training bases, three were in South Waziristan and one was in North Waziristan. In addition, starting in 2004 at least three attacks have been launched on cave hideouts in South Waziristan, and in North Waziristan two attacks have been launched on madrasas, the first in 2004 and the secoond in 2009. Finally, in 2009 one attack was reported to have taken place during a funeral in South Waziristan, ironically for the victims of a previous drone attack.

Second, there is a clear linkage between the TTP led by Baitullah Mehsud and the drone attacks. The fact that Waziristan (North and South) is attacked more, which is considered to be Baitullah's stronghold, means that the primary target of the drone attacks is the TTP network.

Third, except for a couple of attacks in Bannu district, there have been no drone attacks in the settled districts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), especially in Swat. Though there were reports in the media that the US is likely to expand the drone attacks into Balochistan, it has not happened so far. In total there have been approximately 48 drone attacks since 2004.

III
DRONE ATTACKS: CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Some interesting questions need to be answered at this juncture, before proceeding further. How did citizens of the UK, Egypt, Libya and Morocco and other countries of the Middle East ended up in the FATA? How did they enter? How did they stay here for a long time, without detection? Pakistan would like to conveniently ignore the sovereignty question here. If drones are attacks on Pakistan's sovereignty, how does one define the illegal presence of these foreigners in Pakistan's territory? Who are those people, who reach the target site much before the security forces, immediately after the drone attack and remove the bodies from the scene?

In terms of targets, most of those who were neutralized in these drone attacks are primarily from al Qaeda. Except for Nek Mohammad in 2004, there has been no major Taliban leader – either from Afghanistan or from Pakistan has been killed. Are the Taliban leaders able to hide better than the al Qaeda leadership? Or, are these attacks aimed only at the al Qaeda leadership and not the Taliban?

Despite the collateral damages in the drone attacks, one should also understand the increasing precision in which the missiles fired from these drones find their targets. There were instances in which the missiles hit the exact room or portion of the building the target was staying. As mentioned above, some of the attacks have taken place on a moving target.

Clearly, there is a high degree of intelligence – human and technical, without which the target cannot be identified so precisely. More than the intelligence, what is also equally important is the technical superiority that the US possess now, in terms of guiding a missile to the target, sitting far away from the target and not being physically present anywhere nearby. Drone attacks, perhaps will be the greatest learning experience for the US forces in this War against Terrorism, irrespective of whether they neutralize Osama bin Laden or not.

No doubt, Pakistan wants to understand this technology. Zardari has made repeated statements that the US should share this technology with Pakistan and the drone attacks in fact should be carried out by Pakistan's military forces. What would Pakistan do, if it manages to get this technology? Would it use against the Taliban? Would it use against India? Would it use it against the Baloch rebels? One should remember, how Akbar Bugti, a former Governor of Balochistan was hounded and bull dozed to death by the security forces.

What also needs to be understood is, despite the precisions, some local tribal people have also been killed in these attacks. While the pro-Taliban elements in the region define those local people who were killed as "innocent", the US consider that these people are local supporters of the

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Taliban and al Qaeda, in whose houses the targets were staying and meeting. For the US, strictly speaking, the dead local people are supporters/sympathizes and not all innocent, as is being claimed.

Furthermore, when one compares the importance of the operatives neutralized by the drones with the number of tribal people correspondingly killed, a section who supports such attacks could even argue that a certain amount of such collateral damage is justified if it means bringing down key players within the Taliban and al Qaeda network. For example, if one has to consider the importance of Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar, one could argue that in exchange for his termination numerous other deaths would be justified, for the number of bystanders killed in conjunction with his death would likely be fewer than the number of innocent killed in future planned attacks were he allowed to live.

The fact that the drone attacks have taken place in only a few areas also will disprove the claim that the drone attacks are in fact increasing the anti-American feelings and resulting in the local Taliban gaining support. If they are indeed so, how does one explain the violence in Swat and other Agencies of FATA, where there were never a drone attack?

That being said, one cannot ignore the anti-American sentiment that exists in Pakistan, and it would not be wise to discount these feelings when analyzing the government's stance on the drone attacks. It would be dangerous for the government to appear too "pro-US" as that would likely fuel even greater retaliation and dissent amongst the Taliban militants, many of whom are known to launch suicide attacks and the like at the government when they are displeased. It is therefore in the best interests of the Pakistani government to appear against the actions of American forces in the region, regardless of how they actually feel.

IV
CONCLUSIONS: THE DRONES AHEAD

What is likely to be the strategies pursued by US and Pakistan vis-à-vis the drones? Will the US stop the drone attacks? Will the public opinion in Pakistan push Islamabad to take a decisive step against the US drones?

A survey carried out in the FATA in early 2009 by the Aryana Institute of Regional Research in fact has claimed that, over two thirds of the local people in the FATA consider Taliban and al Qaeda as the primary enemy and want the US to carry out those drone attacks, as Pakistan Army is unable or unwilling to reduce the Taliban influence. So much for Pakistan's opposition to the drone attacks!

The public opinion is likely to remain hostile to the US, as it has been over the last many decades. Each drone attack is likely to invite more editorials, opinion articles and TV debates, parroting the same old sentiments. However, it is unlikely to be decisive, to pressurize the government to pursue any extreme measure. On the other hand, the government in Islamabad and the provincial capitals are likely to make threats and rhetoric statements for public consumption. They will remain, at best, rhetoric.

Second, the US is likely to continue the drone attacks. In fact, one could see a pattern in the number of drone attacks being increased considerably since 2008. Of the total attacks, over 80 percent of them have occurred since 2008. In terms of number, there have been more attacks in the first seven months of 2009 than in the past five years combined. By the end of 2009, one could see maximum number of drone attacks in this year, when compared to the previous five years combined.

Third, besides the lack of credible opposition from Pakistan, the US also finds it a military tool, to disturb the TTP and Taliban network. What the media and public opinion in Pakistan consider as collateral damage, is something the US is willing to risk and consider as a tolerable cost.

Fourth, despite threats to expand the drone attacks into Balochistan, the US is unlikely to do so. As seen earlier, most of the attacks have been concentrated on the FATA and never expanded to the settled districts of the NWFP. Though there have been reports of the Quetta Shura of the Taliban and the network hiding within the pashtun population in Northern Afghanistan bordering FATA and NWFP, the US is unlikely to expand the focus of drones. With an insurgency led by some Balochi tribes already troubling Pakistan, it is not in the interests of Islamabad to allow the drone attacks to meddle the situation in Balochistan further.

Fifth, Pakistan is likely to make symbolic protests for political reasons, but is unlikely to make any serious measures to prevent the US from using the drones to target Taliban and al Qaeda targets in FATA. If Islamabad is willing to play along, why should Washington be worried and stop this? Especially, when they consider it as a military success against the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Finally, the US is likely to continue the drone attacks, for this is the first time such a strategy has been perceived as a huge military success.

Perhaps, this strategy may become an ultimate weapon to fight militancy, especially in terms of targeting the leaders, who are hiding in a difficult terrain. The use of satellite technology, by the militant leaders for communication, has now made them vulnerable. Who knows, one day, a lucky drone may find its ultimate target!.

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