

DESCENDING DRONES?

Targeted assassinations of terrorism suspects overseas have become a routine matter under US President Barack Obama. Usually, these are carried out using armed drones. However, the usefulness and frequency of such missions is bound to decline: First of all, domestic oversight is increasing, reducing the US government's freedom of action; secondly, there are growing concerns that the negative international perception of these missions serves as a terrorist recruitment tool. Finally, the terrorist threat is increasingly shifting towards home-grown attacks that cannot be prevented through the use of drones.



Reduced usefulness in the fight against terrorism: an armed "Reaper"- drone being prepared for a mission, Iraq, 16 October 2008. Photo: US Air Force / Erik Gudmundson

Drones – unmanned, remote-controlled aircraft – have become the hallmark of President Barack Obama's counterterrorism policy. In the fight against international terrorism, narrowly defined by Obama as being focussed on al-Qaida and its allies, the US has come to depend to an unprecedented degree on the targeted assassination of suspects. These are usually carried out using armed drones. Even though his greatest security-policy success – the assassination of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 – was largely due to the deployment of Special Operations Forces, Obama was able to observe the operation live in the White House, watching a video stream relayed by a drone above Abbotabad. Though drones are not only used

as weapons platforms, but also for surveillance, as in this case, the debate over their use is mainly focused on the key role they play in killing terrorism suspects. It is also notable that the intense public criticism of US drone deployments is primarily a non-American phenomenon: Within the US, public opinion is merely opposed to the extrajudicial execution of US citizens.

Any assessment of the US drone missions is subject to certain constraints. The programme is classified. No official figures are available for the number of missions or the – intended or accidental – victims, nor is there any official information as to the exact targeting processes. Independent estimates based on media reports or un-

named government sources diverge considerably. Therefore, this analysis will not be based on such controversial statistics, but will instead examine the underlying logic of the missions.

To this end, the analysis begins by analysing the role of drones in the US campaign against terrorism since 11 September 2001. Subsequently, it will discuss why the usefulness of drones in this campaign is declining: First of all, the US government's domestic leeway is narrowing, mainly due to criticism of the use of drones against US citizens. This is likely to lead to increased Congressional oversight. Secondly, drone strikes are now increasingly regarded as counterproductive due to the negative perceptions generated among the international community. Thirdly, because of the evolution of the terrorist threat, drones are almost completely ineffectual in preventing the types of attacks that are currently seen as most likely.

Military use of drones

The US military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) use many types of drones for a variety of purposes. These include observation, monitoring, and reconnaissance. Depending on the exact type, drones rely either on their capability for extended loitering above an observation target, or their small size and high mobility. Such surveillance is mostly based on optical sensors. Cameras directly relay their recorded image to screens viewed by the pilots and observers. Other drones inter-

“Personality strikes” and “signature strikes”

International criticism has been directed in particular against the so-called “signature strikes”. In these cases, the precise names and functions of targeted persons are unknown. Those responsible for the strikes merely assume that the target is a member of a hostile group based on a review of circumstantial evidence such as movement profiles, intercepted communications, and known associates. The underlying assumption is that urbanised al-Qaida members will only be sheltered by active supporters when traveling in rural Pakistan, so as to avoid being betrayed by informants. According to reports, the US therefore regards all adult males in immediate proximity to the jihadists as legitimate military targets. This assumption in particular is frequently criticised by the international community.

“Personality strikes”, on the other hand, are based on personal information about individuals identified by name. If attempting their capture would pose an unacceptable risk to friendly forces, drones may be deployed against them. In these missions, according to members of the US government, considerable efforts are made to prevent the deaths of innocent bystanders. According to these sources, many attacks have been aborted because of the presence of women or children near the target. However, as outlined above, such restraint is not exercised in the case of able-bodied males of military age; nor are such victims listed as “civilian casualties” in US statistics.

cept telecommunications signals in order to facilitate the location of wanted individuals or the monitoring of conversations. The US acquired its first substantial experience with surveillance drones in deployments over the Balkans during the second half of the 1990s.

According to reports, the US Air Force conducted its first successful test of an armed drone in February 2001. Since then, the military and intelligence services have developed drones equipped mainly with guided missiles. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, this programme was accelerated: As early as 7 October 2001, an armed “Predator” took off on its first mission over Afghanistan.

The “Predator” and its much more powerful successor model, the “Reaper”, represent a series of drones that for all their advantages also have significant shortcomings: They are slow, unwieldy, and easy to detect on radar. This is not an issue in the current theatres of operations. However, in airspace defended by relatively modern air defense systems, they would simply be unable to operate. To remedy this shortcoming, a new generation of drones is already in operation: Allegedly, the US is deploying the RQ-170 aircraft, which employs radar-evading technologies, in Iranian and Pakistani airspace.

Immediately after the 11 September 2001 attacks, armed drones were used in support of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The administration of George W. Bush chose a global approach to combating a global threat: Al-Qaida, the terrorist organisation led by Osama bin Laden, was to be hit wherever it maintained support structures. Since then, it appears that the main goal of drone missions has been the

prevention of catastrophic terrorist attacks on the scale of the 2001 attacks. In this respect, the drone strikes adhere to two tenets: On the one hand, they are used against jihadists in regions of limited statehood in order to deprive them of operational depth. On the other hand – and this was particularly true for the initial phase – they are primarily aimed at high-ranking operational al-Qaida leaders, based on the assumption that their deaths would severely disrupt the planning of a major terrorist attack. In the process, the US is utilizing the ability of the unmanned aircraft to loiter for long periods of time over areas that are either politically sensitive or where the operational environment for US ground troops is extremely dangerous. In addition to target surveillance, therefore, the main advantage for the US government of using drones is the avoidance of own losses.

In November 2002, the US carried out its first armed drone strike outside of Afghanistan when it attacked a target in Yemen. Since 2004, US drones have been striking targets in Pakistan, which is currently the main geographical focus of the drone missions. Up until the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, some of these missions were launched from bases within Pakistan. Since 2006, there have been strikes against targets in the Philippines, and the first drone mission in Somalia most likely took place in June 2011. Also in 2011, armed drones took part in the air war against the forces of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Ghaddafi – though this was not labelled as part of the “war on terror”. It is possible that further missions are being carried out in other countries.

According to US President Obama, outside of Afghanistan, the US is only targeting al-Qaida and associated groups. However,

the term “associated groups” is a hazy one – according to reports, there have also been killings of members of Pakistani groups that are not directly opposed to the US, but to the Pakistani government. Also, there have also been reports of operations that killed only innocent bystanders or even individuals who were explicitly acting as mediators. These problems will continue to persist.

The exact number of drone missions is unknown. The difficulty of ascertaining statistics in this area is not only due to secrecy on the part of the US government and the governments of many targeted countries, but is compounded by the fact that in Yemen and Somalia in particular, not all targeted killings by the US have been carried out by drones. Before 2011, the majority of such assassinations in these countries are reported to have been carried out by Special Operations Forces, cruise missiles, and manned aircraft. Nevertheless, most sources assume that the number of drone strikes under President Obama has increased six-fold over George W. Bush’s eight-year administration: Drones have decimated the core operational leadership structure of al-Qaida and forced its most important planners to concentrate on their own survival instead of planning complex attacks. According to reports, however, drone strikes have subsequently mainly targeted second-tier, less important members of al-Qaida and other groups. In this context, particularly outside of Pakistan, the US relies on information from local allies, whose reliability must in most cases be questioned. This increases the risk of unintended killings. In these mission reports, a distinction is usually made between “personality strikes” and “signature strikes” (cf. info box). For both types of missions, however, the fundamental truth remains that like every other weapons system, drones are only as precise as the information underpinning their deployment.

Diminishing domestic leeway

The first reason why the number of drone strikes is likely to decline in the future is that the US government’s leeway within the domestic US political system is diminishing. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks, the White House has enjoyed an unprecedented degree of latitude in counterterrorism, unfettered by parliamentary and societal control. After 12 years of relative quiet on the “home front”, this scope is gradually shrinking.

For a US president, and especially for Barack Obama, the domestic legitimacy of the drone missions is decisive. In this respect, however, US public opinion is divided. According to a Gallup survey in March 2013, 65 per cent of US respondents support the targeted assassination of foreign terrorism suspects overseas. However, only 41 per cent support the killing of US citizens overseas. Outside of security policy circles, therefore, domestic criticism of US policy is not primarily voiced against missions against foreign terrorism suspects, but against the relatively special case of the targeted assassination of US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki in September 2011 in Yemen. However, this question touches upon matters of state policy regarding democratic oversight, and is thus increasingly affecting the acceptance of drones in general.

In the US Congress, there has been increasing pressure on Obama to make his drone strike policy more transparent. His speech at the National Defense University of 23 May 2013, in combination with the Presidential Policy Guidance issued the previous day, is an outcome of this limited leeway. In this largely classified policy directive, Obama reportedly ordered that the Department of Defense take on increased responsibility for armed drone missions for the foreseeable future, at the expense of the CIA. So far, drone strikes have been carried out separately by the military and the intelligence service, depending on the theatre of operations. Since 11 September 2001, the areas of responsibility of these two organisations have converged: The military has considerably expanded its intelligence capabilities; at the same time, the CIA has engaged in large-scale targeted capture and assassinations of suspects and no longer limits its operations to the gathering and analysis of intelligence. One of the reasons for reinstating a clear separation between the military and intelligence services is to facilitate better Congressional oversight. However, the question of bureaucratic responsibility should not be overstated: As long as the US adheres to its policy of targeted killing – as Obama has unequivocally announced he will – the intelligence services and the military will continue to cooperate closely. The question of which organization ultimately conducts a strike is a secondary one.

According to reports, the general aim of the directive is to noticeably reduce the number of missions outside of Afghanistan and to achieve a marked increase in

Due process? Killing US citizens with US drones

On 22 May 2013, the US government declassified information about US citizens killed in drone strikes. According to this information, so far, four US citizens have been killed; however, the only targeted assassination among these was that of Anwar al-Awlaki. As the son of Yemeni immigrants, he was able to communicate to a large audience, including in the US, through his strong oratory skills. On 30 September 2011, al-Awlaki was killed by three coordinated CIA drones in Yemen.

The Obama administration decided at an early stage to seek out al-Awlaki and, if necessary, to kill him. The US Department of Justice subsequently issued a document laying out the conditions under which a US citizen suspected of being a “senior operational leader” of al-Qaida or an associated group can be killed overseas and outside of an active combat zone. According to this legal opinion, 1) an “informed, high-level official of the US government” must have determined that the person in question constituted an immediate threat; 2) the possibility of capture must be regarded as unfeasible; and 3) the operation must be carried out in accordance with the “applicable law of war principles”.

The US government’s arguments rely mainly on the assumption that the US is engaged in a war with al-Qaida and groups associated with it. The Constitutional guarantee of due process and a fair trial, a fundamental right of the citizen against the state, has a longstanding tradition in the US. This explains the rejection of targeted killings of fellow Americans among a majority of US citizens (52 per cent, according to a Gallup survey).

transparency. Even if the drone missions continue, therefore, the overall domestic leeway of the US government appears to be diminishing.

US drone missions as a recruitment tool

A second reason for the declining importance of drones is the growing concern that reports about high numbers of innocent victims killed and the perception of drones as symbols of US omnipotence generate more new terrorists than are killed by the attacks themselves. Despite the internal logic of “signature strikes” and the relative precision of “personality strikes”, there can be no doubt that drone strikes have killed numerous innocent victims. Especially in tribal societies such as those of western Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, family ties have the potential to significantly enhance the already existing resentment. Even if this does not imply an immediate increase of the threat to the US, the drone strikes constitute a strong source of outrage and a catalyst of recruitment among radicalised jihadists already living in the US. The first documented example was the “Times Square Bomber” Faisal Shahzad, who compared his attempted attack in 2010 with the use of armed drones. He seems to represent a trend: Security experts believe that drone strikes have replaced the prison in Guantanamo Bay as the main recruitment instrument for young jihadists.

This development is of importance for an overall assessment of the strategic value of drones. The growing concern among US security circles is reflected in the sombre warning concerning the potential side-

effects effects of drone strikes issued by retired US general Stanley McChrystal, who was himself responsible for the military drone missions between 2003 and 2008. In January 2013, McChrystal noted that international condemnation of drone missions was far more widespread than generally perceived in the US. Therefore, he argued, their further use within the current strategy would have to be reconsidered.

Evolution of the terrorist threat

A third reason is the increasing ineffectiveness of drones in the face of an evolving terrorist threat. Despite the apparently significant impact of drone strikes on the core of al-Qaida, recent developments indicate that the terrorist network is learning to adapt to the threat of drones. French soldiers have found among the effects of a local jihadist leader in Mali a set of instructions on how to evade drone surveillance most effectively. Security experts assume that al-Qaida issued these instructions in order to enable their regional offshoots, based in areas of operations where the US is not yet carrying out drone missions, to protect themselves against such attacks.

For al-Qaida, it makes sense to strengthen regional franchises in this way, since the organisation appears to be nearly leaderless at the operational level. However, the death of bin Laden was only symbolic in this respect: As President Obama rightly pointed out, there has been no major successful attack by al-Qaida in the US since 2001. Globally, the remaining members of its leadership must be content with playing a secondary role in the worldwide jihad. They have effectively ceded their claim to ideological and, notably, opera-

tional leadership to their regional branches, thus allowing these to raise their own profile with attacks on US interests in their immediate environment.

The current threat in the US, but also in other Western countries therefore emanates not so much from terrorists travelling to the US to carry out an attack. The greater threat in the US is from “home-grown” terrorists who have been raised in the country. The attack on the Boston Marathon and the murder of a British soldier in London in May 2013 illustrate the new threat towards “neighbourhood targets”: Though smaller in their dimensions, such attacks can pose serious threats to societal harmony within the affected communities. Drones are of little use here. Paradoxically, it may therefore be the case that the success of drones in decimating al-Qaida will ultimately make it more difficult to gather information about the current terrorist threat.

The killing of terrorism suspects, mainly through the use of drones, has doubtless been an important instrument in the campaign against the core of al-Qaida in recent years. The three interdependent developments outlined above – the decreasing domestic latitude, the counterproductive negative perception of drones strikes that may serve as a recruitment instrument, and the evolution of the terrorist threat towards local threats – will likely cause a decline in the number of such US drone missions. Nevertheless, the US will continue its targeted assassinations of terrorism suspects, and drones will undoubtedly play a key role in the process.

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