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DRONES: THEIRS AND OURS

by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

A drone – of the kind discussed here – is a programmed killing machine. By definition it is self-propelled, semi-autonomous, and capable of negotiating difficult local environments. Remote handlers guide it towards an assigned target. A drone does not need to know why it must kill, only who and how. They have drenched Pakistan in blood, both of fighters and non-combatants.

America's Drones

These are unmanned aircraft – MQ-1B Predators and MQ-9 Reapers – operated remotely from Nevada. In 2004, a Predator-fired Hellfire missile took its first casualties in FATA. Since that time, constantly circling the skies over Waziristan, Orakzai, and Bajaur, high-resolution drone cameras have kept watch on vehicle and people movements over day and night. They are augmented by a network of ground-based spies and informers who identify Taliban and Al-Qaida targets. When discovered, they are usually tortured before being killed.

The 100th drone strike for 2010 was recorded on November 15. In typical terse style, a newspaper reported that “a handful of militants, including Arabs, were killed”. Maybe they were indeed militants. But, then again, they could have been ordinary people.

Who do drones actually kill? Sometimes we are sure, as when Al-Qaeda celebrates the martyrdom of its commanders. About two dozen senior followers of bin Laden have been taken out by drones in recent years. But in general, ascertaining casualties of either militants or non-combatants is extremely difficult. Independent journalists cannot venture into this dangerous war-zone. Even if one succeeded, he would be limited to a tiny observational area. The Pakistan Army, or the CIA, have relatively better information but they too can only guess the damage and fatalities. Their local spies often have their own axes to grind and tribal scores to settle.

In short, damage assessment by drones is a free-for-all; you can believe what you want. Well, almost! Hit repeatedly by missile strikes, militants have migrated from South Waziristan to North Waziristan and Kurram, where they are being daily targeted. Drones have prevented large formations of Taliban fighters from acting in concert. This sort of evidence suggests they are militarily significant – at least in a limited way.

CIA director, Leon Panetta, goes much further. He claims that his spy agency's unmanned aircraft are “very effective” in taking out suspected militants in Pakistan. He,

like many in the Obama administration, believes that short of a US ground invasion, drones are America's best bet for destroying Al-Qaida's leadership.

Pakistan's Drones

Pakistan has many more drones than America. These are mullah-trained and mass-produced in madrassas and militant training camps. Their handlers are in Waziristan, not in Nevada. Like their aerial counterparts, they do not ask why they must kill. However, their targets lie among their own people, not in some distant country. Collateral damage does not matter.

The human drone is infinitely better manufactured than its aerial counterpart. The motor, feedback, and control systems have been engineered to high precision by natural evolution over a million years. This drone never misses its target, which could be a mosque, Muslim shrine, hospital, funeral, or market. But military and intelligence headquarters have been targeted with deadly precision as well.

The walking (or driving) drone's trail is far bloodier than that of the MQ-1B or MQ-9; body parts lie scattered across Pakistan. Detection is almost impossible. The destructive power has steadily increased. The earlier version had a simple bomb strapped on the back but the newer one carries plastic explosives packed into vests both on the front and back of the chest. For additional killing power, the explosives are surrounded with ball bearings and nails. This killing machine is far cheaper than anything General Dynamics can make. Part payment is made by monthly installments to the family, and the rest is in hooor-credits, encashable in *janat-al-firdous*.

What must be the last thoughts of the bomber as he sits in the eight row of mosque worshippers, moments before he reduces dozens of his fellow Muslims to bloodied corpses? Can he think beyond instrumental terms? As a murder weapon, the human drone has no room for moral judgment, doubt, remorse, or conscience.

Protesting Aerial Drones

American peace activists, who are men and women of exceptionally good conscience, are outraged. Cindy Sheehan and her colleagues have found a new cause and a new place to be – the drone headquarters at Creech air force base in Nevada is now attracting placard carrying protesters. The CIA headquarters in Langley is also becoming a popular place to visit.

Pakistan too has seen some visible agitation. Given strong anti-drone sentiment, one might have thought that gatherings would attract tens or hundreds of thousands. But, in fact, only a few dozen or few hundred people have turned up at protests, mostly organized by religious right-wing parties. This is because the culture of street protests has essentially disappeared – except on blasphemy and religious sectarian matters. Nevertheless, the small street turnouts do not mask the fact that Pakistan's population is perhaps the most anti-American in the world. In fact, surveys show that it exceeds Iran and Cuba in this respect. Drones are one important reason, although there are many other reasons as well.

Silence on the Human Drone

Vocal as they are about being bombed from the sky, most Pakistanis – including many on the Left – suddenly lose their voice when it comes to the human (Muslim) drone. There appear to be three key reasons.

First, the bomber – even if he kills pious Muslims or those in the act of prayer – sacrifices his life for Islam. Therefore, lest they be regarded as irreligious, people mute their criticism. The bomber receives an Islamic burial together with his victims. But paradoxically, even when a militant group takes credit, many still prefer to believe that the bomber was a Hindu, Jew, or one purchased by Blackwater. For a long time, a myth that the bomber was not circumcised was in circulation.

Second, Pakistan television channels have created a distinctive public psyche. The country feels sharp pain when attacked from outside but feels little or no pain when attacked far more ferociously from inside. On an average day, militants butcher about a dozen ordinary people, policemen, and soldiers. And yet, when 3 soldiers were killed by NATO troops in October 2010, the country erupted in a paroxysm of rage that could not be pacified even after repeated apologies.

Third – and this particularly applies to muddle-headed “anti-imperialists” – suicide bombers get a lower level of condemnation because they are supposedly fighting the American Goliath in some unspecified way. I recall a left-wing rally in Islamabad last year that was called to protest the public flogging of a Swati girl, Chand Bibi. This rapidly turned into an anti-drone rally. Typically the chants at such rallies are: down with religious extremism, down with the Pakistan Army, down with American imperialism, down with the drones.....

While this position of “downing” everyone and everything is laudably pure and pious, it scarcely addresses the question: who shall protect Pakistan’s population from religious militants, stop the daily dynamiting of girl’s schools and colleges, prevent human bombers from exploding themselves in mosques and markets, and end the slaughter of Shiites? The notion that protection can come from “mobilizing the working class” is laughable. It is irresponsible to think that somehow the fierce onslaught of an army of fascistic holy warriors can be stopped by two dozen earnest people holding colorful placards at the Islamabad Press Club.

Aerial Drones: the Downside

The use of unmanned aircraft to kill in another country halfway across the globe raises important ethical and legal issues.

First, and most seriously, they have doubtlessly killed non-combatants, including women and children. Smaller warheads and precise guidance have reduced collateral damage, but killing innocents is never excusable even if fewer are killed than had artillery or aircraft been used. The fear in the local population is palpable. A pharmacist in Peshawar told me

last year that the sale of sleep medicines like Valium has skyrocketed in FATA. One of the ever-circling drones may turn nasty at any moment.

Second, aerial drones violate Pakistan's sovereignty. However, this is a lesser objection than the first. Pakistan had deliberately chosen not to exercise force against FATA's militants until recently. Indeed, since 2002, Pakistan's military had turned a blind eye as the Taliban created their Islamic emirate in Waziristan which collected taxes and tolls, and steadily increased its stock of weapons and equipment.

Some Pakistanis Actually Want Drones

Not all Pakistanis are angry at aerial drone strikes. According to Farhat Taj, a Pushto speaking female researcher at the University of Oslo who makes frequent trips to FATA, most tribals actually welcome the drone attacks. She says these victims of Taliban brutality do so out of helplessness and desperation. They would prefer their enemies to be killed by the Pakistan Army, but it is also acceptable if they are killed by infidel America. Bucking accepted wisdom, she claims, "In Waziristan people get really upset when there are no drone attacks. Their apprehension is that the US and Pakistani government might enter in an agreement to halt the attacks."

It is difficult to know whether this, or similar statements, should be fully believed. But there is at least a grain of truth here. Many FATA students in my university have seen the barbarity of Taliban militants from close quarters. They want the beasts killed – and they don't care how and by whom. For example, a physics PhD student from Mohmand told me that he has not been back to his village for 3 years and still lives in constant fear of being kidnapped by militants. His crime? To have protested the public decapitation by the Taliban of 14 members of a neighbour's family outside the village mosque. Even after the mosque's mullah justified the head chopping as something that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) routinely did to his enemies, the sickened student objected – and then promptly fled.

Not surprisingly, Kurram's Shiite community of about half a million people is also said to be largely supportive of drone strikes. They have suffered an estimated 2,000 deaths at the hands of Taliban militants since 2007. Photographs of severed heads and limbs have been posted on the internet by the Taliban, who think that Shiites deserve nothing less.

A scientific survey of attitudes in FATA in today's dangerous circumstances is impossible. Nevertheless, the impression one gets in talking to individuals is that tribal people with education generally favour drone strikes. This includes those who have lost relatives. But uneducated people, who form the overwhelming majority, hate them.

Conclusion

Pakistan has three choices.

The first is surrender. We can stop fighting, accept militant demands, or perhaps join up with them to fight hegemonic America. One is keenly aware of its long history of

wrongful military interventions overseas, grabbing of natural resources, and installation of pliable governments.

But the Taliban want something immensely more dreadful. They stone women to death, force girl-children into burqa, cut off limbs, kill doctors for administering polio shots, threaten beard-shaving barbers with death, blow up girls schools, and kill musicians. In a society policed by Taliban vice-and-virtue squads, art, drama, and cultural expressions would disappear. The only education would be that of madrassas.

Seeking to avoid difficult choices, some influential leftists living outside Pakistan have tried to wish the problem away. They deceive themselves – and others – into believing that the Taliban are merely some kind of ethnic Pakhtun movement. But the emergence of the Punjabi Taliban, and a score of fanatical organizations with Taliban-like ideology, has proved this to be nonsense. These movements represent a cancerous malignancy within Muslim societies that is spreading across borders, boundaries, and ethnic divides.

Other leftists have fantasized that religious militants represent some kind of indigenous, albeit primitive, movement for wealth redistribution. But social justice is not on their agenda. Where does one hear Taliban leaders speak about land reforms, or doing away with feudalism and tribalism? They do not demand worldly things like roads, hospitals and infrastructure. Instead, they dream of transforming today's lame democracy into a fascist religious state where they will be the law.

The second option is to stop fighting and start negotiating.

This cannot work because Pakistani militants are not united under a central leadership. Some groups are largely criminal while others have various ideologies that are extreme but mutually incompatible. Even when one group is clearly dominant, they cannot be persuaded just by reason and argument – or even by surrendering.

The failure in Swat proves this point. The Pakistani government and army had cravenly accepted the writ of the Taliban and signed on to *nizam-e-adil*. In a matter of days the peace agreement was violated, and the Taliban moved on to the adjoining area of Buner. Their spokesman, Muslim Khan, announced that they would take over all Pakistan and that they recognized no authority other than the Qu'ran and Allah. It took Pakistani society a long time to recognize that surrender in Swat would not bring peace. This delay was immensely costly in human lives.

The third way – and the only sensible way – is to fight determinedly against the militants while keeping open doors to negotiation. Simultaneously, it is crucial to work on land redistribution, create a justice system that actually works, control corruption, tax the rich, and improve governance.

Fighting militants is practically possible only through some mix of local militias (*lashkars*), the police and Frontier Constabulary, the Pakistan Army, and American drones and weaponry. Each of these can be rightly criticized: the *lashkars* often have

criminals within them and are known to avenge old tribal scores; the police and FC are notorious for corruption and brutality; the Army is hung up on its hatred for India so it supports certain “good” militants while killing “bad” ones; and the Americans have often cynically manipulated religious fanaticism to their advantage. But without some combination of these unsavory forces, there will be carnage of ordinary Pakistanis.

In this grim situation there is no guarantee of victory, even eventually. To prevent defeat every effective weapon – economic, social, political, and military – must be pressed into service. The use of aerial drones, terrible though it is, is a necessary evil. Those who say that it is illegal and immoral to kill from the sky are probably right, but they have yet to give us an alternative.

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