



## **Drones & suicide attacks**

**By  
Rafia Zakaria**

According to the New York Times, from August 2008 to August 2009 there have been approximately 60 drone strikes inside Pakistani territory. The number of drone strikes roughly equalled the nearly 65 suicide bombings in Pakistan in this period. These 60 drone strikes show a 12-fold increase in the number since 2007 which saw only five drone attacks.

On the other hand, the number of suicide bombings in Pakistan remained unchanged despite the escalation in drone attacks: there were 60 in August 2007 and 65 in August 2009.

There is much to interpret in these statistics particularly in light of the fact that drones are once again being touted as a magic cure that would deliver the United States from failure in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The American argument in favour of them proceeds thus: Pakistan will not allow US and Nato troops in its territory and hence drones are a convenient means of attacking “high-value targets” without tangibly impinging on Pakistani sovereignty.

The delivery of targets such as the recent death of Baitullah Mehsud are offered by American military strategists as proof of the ubiquitous value of remote-controlled drones as a means of evading questions of territorial sovereignty while also accomplishing military objectives. Politically, the drones are also an easier sell for American politicians to their constituencies: there is no imminent threat of a cavalcade of dead soldiers arriving in flag-draped coffins. At the same time, the ability to strike out Al Qaeda targets continues to be the campaign narrative of the Obama administration that resolutely touted the group’s elimination as the “right war”.

But all this is old news familiar to Pakistani ears. What the comparative statistic of drones vs suicide attacks also illustrates is that despite the 12-fold increase in drone attacks in the tribal regions by the United States, there has been no decrease in retaliatory suicide attacks by Taliban and their affiliated militants. It is this fact that should stick in the throat of many an American military commander who would like to insist that the drones’ successful elimination of the leadership cadres of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban is reaping dividends in improving the security of the region.

In other words, the fact that the number of suicide attacks in Pakistan has not budged an inch since the increase in drone attacks points to the truth that despite the supposed elimination of leadership, the capacity of the Taliban to organise and execute suicide attacks has not been diminished. It has been observed that the number of Pakistanis that support collaboration with the United States in the war on terror has predictably fallen as the number of drone attacks have increased. In 2005, when there was only a single drone attack in Pakistan, nearly half the country supported working with the US. Now scores of drone attacks and hundreds of civilian casualties later the number has dwindled to little more than 30 per cent.

The contrast is thus damning. Somewhere in the United States, a drone operator sits in a booth with a joystick and commandeers a pilot-less aircraft armed with deadly bombs. He stares at a computer monitor and enters in coordinates provided by elaborate GIS systems and, much like in a video game, aims, shoots and fires at targets he sees on a satellite map. The pilot, based on video and satellite data, chooses to bomb or not bomb. The decision to kill is made infinitely easier by the remoteness of the act and the geographic removal of the pilot from those he will kill. Sometimes the target is killed and sometimes the intelligence is faulty and a sleeping family or a wedding party bears the brunt of the miscalculation.

At all times, however, the Taliban capitalise on the ensuing mayhem and gain new recruits and re-energise old ones. Terror thus spreads not simply in the village where the drone attack has taken place but far and wide in the bazaars of Peshawar and the streets of Lahore and the offices of Islamabad where these recruits avenge their anger against the drone attacks.

According to a report published by the Brookings Institution in July, the ratio of civilians to militants killed by drone attacks is 10:1. If the tragedy of 10 civilians dying for every Al Qaeda or Taliban operative killed is not in itself enough to force a reconsideration of the utility of drones then the fact that the capacity of the Taliban or Al Qaeda to carry out suicide attacks is unaffected by the elimination of these leaders must surely be.

Remote warfare is thus remote only in its inability to impress upon its operators the tremendous cost of taking human lives. In its ability to induce human suffering and effect hatred against an invisible enemy that kills at the press of a button and the prompting of a computer screen it is proximate real and immediate. If these costs are evaluated for what they are and not interspersed with political spin that paints the delivery of every Al Qaeda or

Taliban target as an incontrovertible win for the US then the mystery of the Pakistani people's ire towards the United States will be quite easily solved.

If US military commanders and political leaders continue to believe that sacrificing 10 civilians for the possibility of eliminating a handful of Al Qaeda or Taliban leaders is a fair bargain then little hope remains for the partnership. While both Al Qaeda and the Taliban are existential threats to the Pakistani state and to the collective security of both nations the expectation that the casualties and political cost of fighting them should only be borne by Pakistan is destined for failure.

As the debate over the Kerry-Lugar bill amply demonstrates, the relationship between the United States and Pakistan is at a crossroads. The revulsion most Pakistanis feel at being handed out pennies in exchange for absorbing the human and political cost of drone attacks points to an alienation that goes beyond questions of sovereignty and towards deeper issues of how many thousands of Pakistani lives must be lost to appease the American quest for security.

The writer is an attorney and director at Amnesty International, USA.  
rafia.zakaria@gmail.com

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