

Contextualizing the Drones Debate

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Over the past several years, the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or drones, in lethal counterterrorism operations has expanded at an unprecedented rate, generating a discourse primarily centered on the legality and morality of existing programs. This debate has often strayed from the facts, become politicized, and overlooked the strategic considerations of the use of drone technology.

The American Security Project has compiled this fact sheet to provide basic information about drone programs, technology, and strategic considerations. All of the references and data presented here are expanded upon in our accompanying paper, “The Strategic Context of Lethal Drones.”

Programs and Technology:

- The US currently operates two separate drone programs. The first, an overt program, is directed by the Pentagon and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in declared combat theaters of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. A second, covert program is commanded by the CIA and operates in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.
- Though no explicit legal justification has been provided by Administration officials, these programs operate within the constraints of Article 51 of the UN Charter.¹ A state may act unilaterally against another state if one of either of the following conditions apply:
 - The targeted state permits the use of force by the targeting state within its territory; or
 - A group within the targeted state, or the targeted state itself, has committed an act of aggression against the targeting state.²
- A variety of UAVs and UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) are employed in operations. However, three UAVs in particular are believed to be most widely used in counterterrorism operations and have garnered significant attention: the MQ-1B Predator, the MQ-1C Gray Eagle, and the MQ-9 Reaper.

Acquisition and Operating Costs:

Critics of US drone programs argue that due to research and development costs as well as the manpower required for operations and maintenance, drones cost more than their conventional fighter jet counterparts. According to cost data from unclassified Department of Defense Selected Acquisition Reports (SARs),³ most drones have a slight cost advantage over conventional aircraft.

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Strategic Considerations:

- In evaluating the use of drones as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy, there are several considerations:
 - Location. To date, the US is only known to have operated drones in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. The nature of the environment in which they are used determines the role drones play in strategic operations. In “normal” combat zones like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, U.S. officials discuss drone operations openly. U.S. officials do not often discuss drone operations in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia.
 - Mission. Policymakers like drones because they are considered an efficient, effective way to gather intelligence and target suspected terrorists. Their advantages include:
 - Can be sent into hostile territory with no risk to the lives of pilot
 - Can loiter for hours without the constraints of shift schedules or human endurance
 - Can be rapidly reassigned to a different target
 - Can target and strike with precision
 - Have superior sensor technology that enables the collection of more intelligence than can be analyzed on the ground⁴
 - Measurement. Despite their ongoing use in both combat and non-combat environments, there has been no meaningful measurement of the actual efficacy of lethal drone strikes to date. Among the most pertinent questions, are:
 - Is the manner in which drones are used securing American interests?
 - Are drones contributing to the permanent degradation of local insurgencies and militant networks?
 - Do the security effects of drone programs justify the political and social consequences?
 - Are drones part of a broader counterterrorism strategy, or have they simply become the strategy entirely?

Understanding the efficacy of drone programs as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy can only be achieved through the development of metrics and prudent measurement. In this manner, the US can ensure that its use of drones in counterterrorism operations are well-advised and do not overreach, or fall short, of strategic objectives.

(Endnotes)

1. Charter of the United Nations, “Article 51,” <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter7.shtml>.
2. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston: Study on targeted killings,” 28 May 2010, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.24.Add6.pdf>.
3. Department of Defense, “Selected Acquisition Reports,” 2010-2011, <http://www.acq.osd.mil/ara/am/sar/>.
4. Spencer Ackerman, “Air Force Chief: It’ll Be ‘Years’ Before We Catch Up on drone Data,” Wired’s Danger Room blog, 5 April 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/04/air-force-drone-data/>.