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The US must reassess its drone policy

By Malou Innocent

Commentary by

An American missile killed Pakistan's most wanted militant, Baitullah Mehsud, on August 5. The death of the radical Taliban commander was a success for Pakistan and the United States. However, the method used may well produce dangerous unintended consequences in how it might undermine one of the United States' primary interests. Chaos in Afghanistan could spill over and destabilize neighboring Pakistan. That's why the efficacy of missile strikes must be reassessed.

The targeting of tribal safe havens by CIA-operated drone strikes strengthens the very jihadist forces that America seeks to defeat, by alienating hearts and minds in a fragile, nuclear-armed, Muslim-majority Pakistani state.

During a recent visit to the frontier region, I spoke with several South Waziri tribesmen about the impact of US missile strikes. They recounted how militants exploit the popular resentment felt from the accidental killing of innocents from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and defined themselves as a force against the injustice of a hostile foreign occupation.

Missile strikes alienate thousands of clans, sub-clans and extended families within a tribal society that places high social value on honor and revenge. To the Pashtun tribes straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, personal and collective vendettas have been known to last for generations, and are invoked irrespective of time and cost involved. Successive waves of Persian, Greek, Arab, Turk, Mughal, British and Soviet invaders have never successfully subdued this thin slice of rugged terrain.

On August 12, the US special envoy for the region, Richard Holbrooke, told an audience at the Center for American Progress that the porous border and its surrounding areas served as a fertile recruiting ground for Al-Qaeda. One US military official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, called drone operations "a recruiting windfall for the Pakistani Taliban."

Military strikes appear to be the only viable recourse against the tribal region's shadowy insurgents, with US officials pointing to the successful killing of high-value Al-Qaeda militants like Abu Laith al-Libi in January 2008 and chemical weapons expert Abu Khabab al-Masri in July 2008. However, even if tomorrow Osama bin Laden were killed by a UAV, the jihadist insurgency would not melt away. The ability to keep militant groups off balance must be weighed against the cost of facilitating the rise of more insurgents.

Citizens living outside the ungoverned tribal areas also detest drones. "Anti-US sentiment has already been increasing in Pakistan ... especially in regard to cross-border and reported drone strikes, which Pakistanis perceive to cause unacceptable civilian casualties," conceded US Central Command chief General David Petraeus in a declassified statement written on May 27, 2009.

Drone strikes also contribute to the widening trust deficit between Pakistanis and the US. A recent poll conducted by Gallup Pakistan for Al-Jazeera found that 59 percent believed the US was the greatest threat to Pakistan. Most Pakistanis oppose extremism; they simply disagree with American tactics.

America's interests lie in ensuring the virus of anti-American radicalism does not infect the rest of the region. Yet Washington's attempts to stabilize Afghanistan help destabilize Pakistan, because its actions serve as a recruiting tool for Pakistani Taliban militants. Just as one would not kill a fly with a sledgehammer, using overwhelming firepower to kill a single insurgent creates collateral damage that can recruit 50 more. Military force against insurgents must be applied precisely and discriminately. On the ground, Pakistani security forces lack training, equipment, and communication gear to carry out a low-intensity counterinsurgency. But drones provide a poor substitute if the goal

is to engage rather than alienate the other side.

A better strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan is for the United States to focus on limiting cross-border movement by supporting local Pakistani security forces with a small number of US Special Forces personnel. To improve fighting capabilities and enhance cooperation, Washington and Islamabad must increase the number of military-to-military training programs to help hone Pakistan's counterterrorism capabilities and serve as a confidence-building measure to lessen the Pakistan Army's tilt toward radicalism.

Ending drone strikes is no panacea for Pakistan's array of problems. But continuing those strikes will certainly deepen the multiple challenges the country faces. Most Pakistanis do not passively accept American actions, and officials in Islamabad cannot afford to be perceived as putting Washington's interests above those of their own people. Long-term success in both Afghanistan and Pakistan depends on the people's repudiation of extremism. Continued US actions add more fuel to violent religious radicalism; it is time to reassess both US tactics and objectives in the region.

Malou Innocent is a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington DC and recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Pakistan. She wrote this commentary for ***THE DAILY STAR***.

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