The Convoluted Debate on Drones

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The same week U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta declared [3] "we're within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda"—an assessment that many believe reflects the efforts of seven years of CIA drone strikes—former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair called [4] America's "unilateral" drone war in countries like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia a mistake. "Because we're alienating the countries concerned," Blair said, "because we're treating countries just as places where we go attack groups that threaten us, we are threatening the prospects of long-term reform."

Given that our Nobel Peace Prize-winning president has drastically escalated [5] the use of these flying, robotic hitmen, there seems to be some confusion at the White House.

Speaking to attendees at the Aspen Security Forum [6], Blair said drone strikes in Pakistan should be launched only when America had the full cooperation of the government in Islamabad and "we agree with them on what drone attacks" should target. As explained elsewhere, this author accepts the efficacy of America's drone war, but with enormous reluctance [7]. That said, part of Blair's assessment seems wildly out of touch. Why would Washington wait for permission from Islamabad to hunt al Qaeda?

First, individuals either within or with ties to Pakistan's spy agency have collaborated with insurgents that frequently attack U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan. That doesn't speak well for Blair's call for joint cooperation. Second, we've known for years that elements within Pakistan have thwarted—on [8] several [9] occasions [10]—foreign-led attempts to find and take out terrorists. Even someone who is not wildly enamored with drones understands the argument for employing them unilaterally when confronted with uncooperative governments. Policymakers, however, should be weighing the ability to keep militant groups off balance against the costs of facilitating the rise of more terrorists, particularly in a country as volatile as Pakistan.

A statement even more out of step than Mr. Blair's came from Michael E. Leiter, former head of the National Counterterrorism Center. Earlier this week at the Aspen Security Forum [6], Leiter contended [11] that assessments that al Qaeda was on the verge of collapse lacked "accuracy and precision," and that al Qaeda's leadership and structure in Pakistan "is still there and could

launch some attacks." He also raised concerns about the possible long-term effects of intensive CIA paramilitary operations on conventional espionage and analysis for issues like China: "The question has to be asked: Has that in some ways diminished some of its strategic, long-term intelligence collection and analysis mission?"

Leiter's comments are troubling due to the basis for his concern about the effectiveness of counter-terrorism. To emphasize why the growing consensus that al Qaeda is "on the ropes" is premature, Leiter noted that the failed plot to blow up a vehicle in Times Square in May 2010 was carried out by an American trained by the Pakistani Taliban. This statement is misguided in what it implies. By no means can America ensure that terrorists never come from Pakistan, or anywhere else. Such an aim epitomizes our overreaction to terrorism. It gives planners in Washington not only a convenient justification to prolong the wars we're already in, but also an open-ended rationale to intervene anywhere else. Let's remember that the United States is already fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is threatening to launch a third against Iran, bombs remote villages in nuclear-armed Pakistan, and has expanded operations into Somalia, Yemen, and possibly elsewhere. This is especially concerning given the current construction of a not-so-secret U.S. air base [12] in the Middle East for more targeted strikes in Yemen.

Unfortunately, the President's choice to replace Mr. Leiter, Matthew Olsen, said at his confirmation hearing this week before the Senate Intelligence Committee that he would define the strategic defeat of al Qaeda as "ending the threat that al Qaeda and all of its affiliates pose to the United States and its interests around the world." This, too, is problematic. U.S. policy toward "ending the threat" from al Qaeda has been mainly through wars and intervention, and one of the many unintended consequences of American intervention has been the radicalization of Western-born Muslims.

Take, for instance, Somalia, where Washington has repeatedly tried and failed to bring order [13]. Over the past two years, as many as 20 Somali-American men have disappeared from the Minneapolis area. Many analysts fear these men were recruited to fight alongside al-Shabab ("the youth"), the militant wing of the Islamist Somali government the United States and Ethiopia overthrew in 2006. In describing Shirwa Ahmed, a naturalized American of the Somali diaspora believed to be the first U.S. citizen to carry out a terrorist suicide bombing, FBI director Robert Mueller said, "It appears that this individual was radicalized in his hometown in Minnesota." Somalia is a classic case of how American intervention is forever self-perpetuating.

Debates over drones should not be cut and dry. Scholars, no matter the subject, should be "intellectually honest [14]." Supporters of counterterrorism can and should feel comfortable having reservations about the tactics employed, given Washington's tendency for threat inflation. Drones may well become America's new permanent wartime footing. Sadly, we will have learned nothing from 9/11 if drones provide policymakers a more antiseptic avenue for satiating their endless appetite for intervention.

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