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Nobody Knows if Drone Strikes in Pakistan Work, So Let's Stop

| [More](#) ^[1]

| August 17, 2011

| [Benjamin H. Friedman](#) ^[2]

Dennis Blair, the former director of national intelligence, has an [op-ed](#) ^[3] in Monday's *New York Times* criticizing US drone strikes in Pakistan.* Because I [share](#) ^[4] Blair's concern that we are conducting too many drone strikes in too many places but waffle on the strikes in Pakistan, I was hoping the op-ed would shed light on whether they are a good idea. It didn't. But it led me to harden my opposition to the strikes anyway.

Figuring out the drone attacks' value is tough, especially for the public. On the pro side, we have [evidence](#) ^[5], [some](#) ^[6] from the Bin Laden raid, that the strikes disrupt terrorist planning. The cons, beyond legal and humanitarian troubles, are taxpayer expenses and increased Pakistan anger. Opponents of drone strikes argue that the strikes produce enough terrorism and insurgency among Pakistanis to overwhelm any benefits. But there is little evidence for these claims, as Christine Fair [notes](#) ^[7]. The strikes clearly anger Pakistanis, but how that anger impacts American security is murky. The administration also plausibly claims that the civilian toll from the strikes is low—though it's almost certainly [not zero](#) ^[8] over the past year, as John Brennan, the White House counterterrorism chief, recently claimed.

I'd like to think that our government has made some rough attempt to weigh these factors. Blair's offering makes me doubt that. He makes a series of questionable assertions, some contradictory, and includes no empirics. Secrecy prevents him from offering some facts, sure, but not systematic argument or reference to facts.

The op-ed's first problem is that it is of two minds about the strikes' ability to damage al Qaeda's capabilities. Blair says that the strikes were effective in disrupting terrorism because they kept operatives on the run and unable to plan, coordinate and train for attacks. He then argues, without evidence, that the strikes no longer work because al Qaeda can replace lost leaders and still function. But wasn't that true before? Blair has switched the measure of the strikes' effectiveness from disruption to destruction. And he never asks whether al Qaeda remains a big enough [threat](#) ^[9] to justify indefinite war, even if it can still operate.

Second, Blair offers an unrealistic alternative to unilateral drone strikes. He prefers to push Pakistan to “make the comprehensive social, diplomatic and economic reforms” that transform it into a state that “asserts control over its full territory and brings government services to the regions bordering Afghanistan.” But it is our inability to produce that panacea that makes drone strikes attractive. We know how to kill people with drones but not how to make Pakistan the country we’d like it to be. Of course, he never mentions a far more workable way to reduce the need to bomb Pakistan: end war in Afghanistan.

Third, Blair says that we should replace our current drone program with one jointly run with the Pakistanis. But we already have grudging Pakistani cooperation [10] for the strikes. Why would they cooperate more fully and openly now? And how would a greater Pakistani role fix all the problems he sees with the strikes?

The op-ed did clarify a few things for me, albeit accidentally. It reminded me, for one, that covert wars are more likely to be dumb wars. When we can’t evaluate policies properly, their flaws get less notice and opposition struggles to form. Democracy, in other words, improves [11] foreign policy, and covert programs are undemocratic [12] by definition. That is a reason to insist that the military manage drone strikes and that the CIA lose its paramilitary role. Secrecy is also a reason to oppose wars, like the drone campaign, with murky benefits. Better to err on the side of peace.

We should be doubly wary of covert wars that seem cost-free. States are particularly likely [13] to launch foolish military adventures when their citizens lack skin in the game. Here we have war without a draft, a tax, or even pilots in harm’s way. Instead of “why fight?” we can ask, “why not?”

* The op-ed reprises Blair’s recent remarks in Aspen, which Malou Innocent critiqued here [14]. Also, before Air Force aviators complain about the term “drone,” I should say that I agree that it implies a lack of human control and that “unmanned aerial vehicle” is preferable. But “drone” is common enough now that I’m surrendering to it.

More by

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[5] http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/10/26/091026fa_fact_mayer

[6] <http://my.news.yahoo.com/bin-laden-cache-trove-reveals-cash-hit-al-051526031.html>

[7] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/28/drone_wars?page=0,0

[8] <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/07/18/washingtons-untrue-claims-no-civilian-deaths-in-pakistan-drone-strikes/>

[9] <http://www.amazon.com/Terrorizing-Ourselves-Counterterrorism-Policy-Failing/dp/1935308300>

[10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/wikileaks/8172922/Wikileaks-Pakistan-privately-approved-drone-strikes.html>

[11] <http://www.amazon.com/Foreign-Policy-Democratic-Politics-Kenneth/dp/0877723362>

[12] <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0721/p09s06-coop.html/%28page%29/2>

[13] <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/free-wars-are-dumb-wars-5088>

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