

# Research on UAV Counter-Terrorism and the US Counter-Terrorism Strategy

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**Abstract:** Drones, which once made great contributions to the US anti-terrorism war, and the anti-terrorism policy represented by Obama are now widely criticized. Not only are victims in Pakistan and Yemen condemning them, but there have also been widespread doubts in the United States in recent years, and Senator Paul's speech against drones has aroused widespread discussion and doubts in the United States. This doubt arises not only because drones have killed a large number of innocent people while fighting against terrorism, nor because drones have indirectly provided a breeding ground for terrorist organizations, but also because of the deep dissatisfaction with Obama's anti-terrorism policy in the United States.

**Keywords:** Drones, Counter-terrorism, Strategy.

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## 1. Problem Statement

Since the 9/11 incident, drones have been an important weapon in the US anti-terrorism battlefield, and as the anti-terrorism situation becomes increasingly complex, they are increasingly relied upon by the US government. Since the anti-terrorism war, they have successively killed important terrorists such as Mohammed Atef, Kashmiri, one of the candidates for succession to Bin Laden, and Awlaki, the leader of the Al-Qaeda branch in the Arabian Peninsula, and played an important role in the operation to kill Bin Laden. It can be said that they have made great achievements in the anti-terrorism battlefield. Moreover, under the stimulation of the anti-terrorism war, drone technology has become more advanced, and production has continued to expand, making it a trump card for the US military to fight terrorism.

However, behind the series of brilliant achievements of drones, voices of doubt have never ceased. Not only have countries such as Pakistan and Yemen that have been attacked by drones repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with the United States, but voices of doubt and opposition within the United States have also been growing. For example, in March this year, Senator Paul delivered a lengthy speech opposing President Obama's drone policy. The speech lasted 13 hours, attempting to delay the Senate's vote on Obama's appointment of Brennan as CIA director, who was the main designer of the drone targeted elimination tactics. Paul's speech received a strong response and immediately sparked a heated debate among the American media and the public about drones, and even the entire US anti-terrorism policy represented by them.

Why is the former "anti-terrorist hero" now also questioned in the United States? What is the effectiveness of drone strikes, and how much influence will it have on the United States' future anti-terrorist policy? This article hopes to make a preliminary exploration of these issues.

## 2. Basic Situation of the U.S. Government's Use of Drones to Counter Terrorism

Both the Bush administration and the Obama administration invested heavily in drones in the war on terrorism to reduce the use of battlefield troops and strengthen

anti-terrorism efforts. On October 17, 2001, the United States dispatched an RQ-1 "Predator" drone to launch an AGM-114 "Hellfire" air-to-ground anti-tank missile at the Afghan Taliban. This was the first time that a drone carried weapons for actual combat. [1] Immediately afterwards, November 13, 2001, the United States used a drone to kill Bin Laden's deputy, 57-year-old Mohammed Atif. In January 2003, the United States and Britain launched the Iraq War. In the early stages of the war, only a small number of drones were used for target reconnaissance, but after overthrowing Saddam's regime, the United States began to use drones for counter-terrorism. By 2005, there were more than 700 drones deployed in Iraq.[2]

During the Bush administration, drone technology made a huge leap forward. Not only could it carry air-to-air missiles and thus have the ability to conduct self-defense air combat, but it could also better connect with the ground command system. However, in terms of the number of uses, the Bush administration was dwarfed by the Obama administration. During the Bush administration, the United States carried out less than 50 drone strikes, while the Obama administration's use of drones increased dramatically, with more than 370 attacks to date. [3] Drones have become one of the most relied-upon tactical means for the Obama administration to carry out targeted strikes.

US President has a greater influence on the use of drones, and the scope of use is also wider. Currently, US drones are jointly managed by the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). First, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) prepares a list of attack targets, and then a team of intelligence analysts and military officials reviews the list every three months. After approval, it will be reviewed again by the National Security Council in the shortest possible time, and then immediately sent to CIA Director Brennan for confirmation, and finally approved by President Obama. In addition, if additional personnel are to be added to this list, President Obama himself needs to make the final decision. [4] This gives the US President tremendous power in the use of drones.

The areas where the US drones are currently attacking are mainly the Taliban in Pakistan, the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, and the Somali Youth Party in Somalia. According to the Washington Post database, there have been

347 drone attacks in Pakistan, 53 in Yemen, and 2 in Somalia since 2002. Among these attacks, the attacks in Pakistan were approved by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, but drone attacks in other areas outside Pakistan required the approval of Obama himself. [5] Currently, the CIA is still secretly using the secret drone base in southern Saudi Arabia to launch attacks on the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is mainly active in Yemen, but Saudi Arabia does not allow the United States to hand over this base to the US Department of Defense for open operation. [6]

### 3. Advantages of Drones in Counter-terrorism

Obama approved a drone strike on Pakistan just three days after taking office, killing the targeted terrorists and causing several civilian casualties. [7] The frequency of drone use has continued to soar during Obama's administration, and has become the US government's favorite weapon in the war on terror. This situation is inseparable from the advantages of drones themselves.

First, the use of drones is relatively inexpensive, and economically it is an ideal choice for the United States. After 9/11, the U.S. government sent a large number of ground troops to Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan and other places in the name of the war on terror, which not only resulted in the deaths of nearly 7,000 American soldiers, but [8] also consumed a lot of economic resources. Ten years later, the annual budget of the U.S. Department of Defense has nearly doubled, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone cost about \$1.2 trillion. However, the ongoing financial crisis and the ensuing economic recession have made it difficult for the U.S. government to maintain such a high level of spending for a long time. In addition, the Obama administration is currently preparing to revitalize the U.S. economy by investing in domestic infrastructure and education, and American citizens are also paying more attention to employment and medical care. Against this backdrop, the U.S. anti-terrorism spending has begun to decline since 9/11, and current defense spending has fallen to the level of 2007. [9]

In the current economic downturn in the United States, the development of drones has naturally become the first choice of the US military. For example, the price of a "Predator" drone is about 3.5 million US dollars, [10] while the cost of each F-35 fighter is as high as 156 million US dollars. [11] In addition, the use of drones can avoid casualties among US troops, which is a rare advantage for the United States, which attaches great importance to human life. Therefore, the scale of drone production began to expand rapidly during Obama's tenure, and its users were no longer limited to the Central Intelligence Agency, but also expanded to various branches of the US military and the Department of Homeland Security. In 2010, the US Department of Defense invested more than 5.4 billion US dollars in the development, procurement and operation of drones, which was 2.5 billion US dollars more than the United States spent on drones in the entire 1990s [12]. When the United States began the war on terror in October 2001, the US Army had only 54 drones, but by 2012, there were more than 4,000 drones, and the number of drones in the entire US military exceeded 6,000. In 2012, the US military paid for 1,395 drones, far more than the 459 in 2011.

Secondly, the battlefield advantages of drones are more obvious. Drones are characterized by precise strikes and flexible use, and are suitable for areas with high mountains,

deep valleys and complex terrain, such as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. As for the two most common drones, Predator and Reaper, they are equipped with color and black-and-white cameras, radars, infrared imaging devices, and image intensifiers, which enable drones to transmit clear videos to remote ground operators even at night. These operators can use the laser of the drone to aim at people or buildings on the ground, and then command the drone to carry out precise strikes. In addition, the RQ-1 Predator drone is also equipped with the latest global satellite positioning system, which can help the drone transmit its longitude and latitude to the ground operator. [13] All of these make drone strikes have surgical precision vision and aiming technology. The terrain of the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan is complex, with both high mountains and deep valleys, as well as vast deserts. In addition, the tribal forces are intertwined. The Pakistani government has no jurisdiction over this border tribal area and cannot stop the activities of terrorists in the area. It is a forbidden area that even the US anti-terrorist forces find difficult to cross. It is precisely by using these high-tech means that drones have successively killed several senior terrorist leaders on the Afghan-Pakistani border. In addition, the "invisibility" of drones means that drones fly at a very high altitude and are designed to be concealed, so they are difficult to be discovered by the enemy. Drones and their ground combat personnel have formed a complete "killing chain" that is invisible and bloodless.

Third, the use of drones in warfare has also received less attention from the media and the public. Compared with sending large-scale troops to fight on the ground, drone strikes are smaller in scale, with no human contact and limited targets, so the media paid less attention to them before, and the Obama administration was under less pressure and constraints when using drones. Therefore, the Obama administration did not admit to the secret drone operations in Pakistan until 2012, and the US officials have always downplayed the number of drone strikes and civilian casualties. [14]

### 4. Reasons Why Drones Are Opposed

The use of drones by the United States has caused a large number of civilian casualties in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other places, directly arousing anti-American sentiment among the people of these countries. Although the US official claims that drone strikes have "surgical precision" and that they kill only radical elements, according to incomplete statistics from the New America Foundation, drone air strikes have killed 2,283 people since 2004, of which 32% are civilians. [15] And although drones have killed many terrorists in the operation, about 15 civilians are killed for every terrorist killed. [16] Pakistani journalist Noor Behram visited North Waziristan in northwestern Pakistan, the hardest-hit area by drone attacks, and took a large number of photos, which showed that most of the victims were not so-called militants, but unarmed civilians, most of whom were women and children. [17]

Currently, such reporting requires taking great risks. Freelance journalist Hayat Ullah Khan was kidnapped and killed after reporting on a 2005 drone strike in Waziristan for a Pakistani newspaper. Other reporters have been attacked and threatened. Even [18] more outrageous, according to those who have survived drone strikes, the United States often uses a mode of attack called double tap, which is to launch

multiple strikes on the target in a short period of time. [19] This not only makes it difficult to carry out humanitarian relief, but also prevents people from collecting evidence of drone killings of ordinary people. Faheem Qureshi, the only survivor of the first drone strike after Obama took office, claimed that after a drone strike, no one dared to go to the scene to collect bodies for half an hour because they were worried that another attack would come unexpectedly. Behram claimed that after an attack, some people went to help, but just 5 to 10 minutes later, the drones would attack those who were helping.

The U.S. drone strikes mainly target tribes in the border areas of Islamic countries, which will further cause tensions between the central and peripheral areas in these regions, thereby objectively creating soil conducive to the growth of terrorism. The areas of drone strikes are mainly located in the Pashtun region in northwestern Pakistan, the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, and poor failed states such as Yemen and Somalia. These countries have historically had tensions between the central and peripheral areas. Drone strikes not only further damage the already broken social structure in the border areas, but also, due to the support or acquiescence of the central governments of these countries for the use of drones, it is easy to cause further dissatisfaction of ethnic minority tribes in border areas with the central government. [20] Therefore, although the use of drones can kill a few terrorist leaders, it will cause structural conflicts and continued tensions between the central and peripheral areas of these countries, thus providing a breeding ground for the spread of local terrorism.

At present, an unstable terrorist arc has emerged from Somalia and the Gulf of Aden through the Sahel and Sahara regions to the Atlantic coast and Mauritania. Anti-American terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel region of North Africa, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Boko Haram in northern Nigeria are growing stronger in the Middle East and Africa, and have become a threat to the security and stability of the world. This has also become an important reason why drones are criticized.

of drones also raises legal issues. As a US citizen born in the United States, the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki by a US drone has raised widespread domestic doubts about the constitutionality of the decision-making process for drone strikes. As early as early 2010, the US government authorized a lethal strike against Anwar al-Awlaki [21]. After a long period of careful deployment and intelligence gathering, on September 30, 2011, the US government successfully killed Anwar al-Awlaki by launching a "Hellfire" missile from a drone in the Khashef region of Yemen. [22] After the attack, Obama claimed in his speech that Anwar al-Awlaki was the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), who had carried out numerous terrorist attacks around the world through indirect preaching and direct participation, but the president did not mention Anwar al-Awlaki's US citizenship. For the president, the death of Anwar al-Awlaki meant another milestone in the United States' fight against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates after the killing of Bin Laden. (Obama 2011) But for the American public, it meant that the US government arbitrarily ended the life of an American without a trial through judicial procedures.

Days after Awlaki was assassinated, facing questions from American citizens about the fairness of the decision-making process for the drone strike, the U.S. government said the

decision to kill Awlaki was made by a small, secret group of White House officials and supported by a secret legal opinion from the Office of the President's Legal Counsel (OLC). [23] According to a White House memo, the U.S. government believes that killing an American citizen is legal if three conditions are met: he is a senior member of al-Qaeda, his threat is imminent, or he cannot be arrested.

Awlaki's death caused a strong reaction in the United States, and the Obama administration's claim that it made secret decisions under the guise of national security obviously failed to convince the American people. On March 6, 2013, Senator Rand Paul delivered a 12-hour long speech to protest Obama's policy of using drones to attack terrorists, and to delay and obstruct the appointment of Brennan as CIA director, who was the main designer of the Obama administration's drone targeted killing tactics. Paul claimed that the number of people who died in drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia has reached 4,700, including 176 children and an American citizen, Awlaki. He also believed that since the Obama administration can legalize the killing of a citizen without legal trial as long as it believes that a citizen is anti-American, American citizens have every reason to worry that drone attacks may occur in the United States. Paul's speech sparked a heated debate in the Senate, the core issue of which was whether the US president had the power to use drones to kill an American who did not participate in an attack on the US mainland? If anti-Americanism is the only criterion, then in the 1960s, university campuses were filled with government dissidents; should they also be considered enemies of the state?

Although the legality of using drones for targeted assassinations has never ceased to be questioned, the US government has been increasing, not reducing, the number of targeted assassinations using drones since Obama was elected president. [24] This has not only led to a gradual increase in the attention of the American public and media to drones in recent years, but has also exacerbated the division of the Republican Party in the Senate. Opponents generally believe that there is a lack of clear standards for how to determine the targets of drone attacks, and this standard, which is a matter of life and death, cannot be determined solely by the president and a so-called secret team. This has caused Americans to worry about the future use of drones in the United States, because once a drone war breaks out, there will be no place to hide, so publicly demanding restrictions on the president's right to use drones to attack terrorist suspects in the United States has become a widespread demand of the current American public.

The reason behind the U.S. policy of using drones to fight terrorism is actually to oppose the unprecedented and rapid expansion of the U.S. government's executive power under the guise of the war on terrorism. This is reflected in the fact that the U.S. government has invested a lot of resources to support the development of a large number of new weapons technologies, including drones, because this huge and expanding national institution needs various advanced military and paramilitary technologies to fight the enemies they identify. The drone industry has brought significant benefits to drone manufacturers such as General Atomics Aeronautical Systems and Lockheed Martin. The International Association for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems has stated that the current restrictions on the use of drones in the United States have hindered the development of the industry and affected the creation of jobs. The association

predicts that if the restrictions on the use of drones in the United States can be reduced in the next 15 years, the industry will be able to create more than 23,000 jobs and the salary will reach 1.6 billion U.S. dollars. [25]

On the other hand, it is manifested in the rapid expansion of administrative agencies, which have occupied too many social resources in the United States. This expanded administrative agency is called Top Secret America by Priest and Arkin. According to their research, this "Top Secret America" is composed of 1,271 government agencies and 1,931 private companies. There are more than 854,000 workers in this huge bureaucracy. These companies have 10,000 offices in the United States, and these agencies occupy a total of more than 17 million square feet of real estate.

People work in counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence. Their activities include domestic wiretapping, international mail surveillance, and various other forms of intelligence gathering under the guise of national security. Moreover, this agency also transmits this new discourse of military violence to the world while trying to justify it. [26]

## 5. Conclusion

The substantial development of drones as a tactical means is actually due to the profound adjustment of the US anti-terrorism strategy. Since the September 11th incident, the US grand strategy has undergone a transformation from liberal internationalism to limited liability. The former emphasized the US advantage and had the ambition to reshape the world, reaching its climax in the Iraq War. However, with the decline of US domestic resources and capabilities on the one hand, and the resurgence of the US limited liability ideology on the other hand, although the US won the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it could no longer invest huge resources in reconstruction. Under [27] this strategic adjustment, drones came into being as a practical tactical means.

Although Obama's policy of using drones for targeted killings has successfully killed dozens of senior leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, other terrorist leaders have successfully fled to the Middle East and Africa and continue to carry out small-scale attacks. To a certain extent, it has effectively killed dozens of leaders of al-Qaeda and its branches, and to a certain extent destroyed al-Qaeda's operational capabilities, especially its ability to organize large-scale attacks similar to the "9/11" incident. However, the radical ideology of these organizations has not changed. On the one hand, they demand the establishment of extreme Islamic law in the local area, and on the other hand, they oppose the United States, the West and its local agents. Although they no longer have the ability to launch large-scale attacks against the US mainland for some time, they can still carry out small-scale attacks in marginal areas. For example, the attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi in 2012.

On the one hand, the Obama administration's drone policy and the anti-terrorism strategy it represents have led to a sharp expansion of the US government's executive power, which has threatened the tradition of American liberalism and made the American people feel that their lives and freedoms are threatened, thus exacerbating the division of American society. On the other hand, this sharp expansion, under the guise of "national security", has occupied too many social resources, which has also caused serious dissatisfaction among the American people. As an effective anti-terrorism measure, the US government's drone anti-terrorism policy needs to be continuously adjusted and improved.

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