U.S. Drone Tactics and Global Precedents in the Fight Against Terror

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In February 2016, explosions rocked the Sambisa Forest of northeast Nigeria as missiles fired from a drone struck a large gathering of vehicles thought to be an ammunition dump for the terrorist group called Boko Haram. Such incidents have become common around the world since 9/11, as the United States has deployed its fleet of unmanned drones to target various terrorist groups in inaccessible and volatile regions. The drone, for many, has become a symbol of America's fight against terrorism. The 2016 Nigeria strike, however, was unique in that the missiles were fired not from a U.S. drone but, for the first time, from a Nigerian drone. In fact, weaponized drones have quietly been proliferating around the world over the past two decades, especially with the ready availability of cheaper drones from China.

Membership in the increasingly less exclusive international club of countries who employ weaponized drones now includes the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Israel, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, and South Africa. And this list will continue to grow; last year the United States approved the sale of drones to Italy, and Saudi Arabia has reportedly begun purchasing Chinese drones as well.

Many supporters of military drone programs focus on the technology itself, pointing to the precision of weapons that can conduct combat without putting pilots in harm's way. Some have even argued that there is a moral obligation for governments to use drones to achieve combat objectives agreed to be "just." The drone in of itself, however, is simply a tool to be used or misused like any other military technology. More worrisome than the spread of this technology is the tactical precedent the United States has established – an approach already copied by other countries using armed drones to target terrorist groups.

U.S. Drone Warfare Tactics

Since the first U.S. drone strikes were conducted shortly after 9/11, American drone use has broadly followed one of two tactics:

- **Targeted strikes** are directed against known terrorists when their location can be determined. This type of strike is used when it is determined that the individual is beyond the reach of any law enforcement or government agency but poses a "continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons," according to the Presidential Policy Guidance for drone strikes released in August 2016.

- **Signature strikes**, on the other hand, only target behavior rather than specific locations. Within a designated area, such as Waziristan in northwestern Pakistan and Abyan Province in southern Yemen, all "military-aged" males are designated as "combatants," and any suspicious behavior in these areas – such as large meetings or vehicle convoys – will be targeted for drone strikes without knowing *who* is specifically involved or the actual purpose of the observed action. Often times, signature strikes use a "double-tap" technique, in which one strike is quickly followed by a second, targeting anyone that comes to the aid of those caught in the first explosion. This tactic became particularly prevalent after 2008 when drone strikes increased under President Obama.

Short-Term Successes versus Long-Term Negative Effects

Some scholars and policymakers have defended the effectiveness of drone use. They point to the positive impact that drones have on counterterrorism efforts in the various states where they are used, producing some statistical evidence to show that, when part of a broader and continuous counterterrorism strategy, drones can disrupt the activities of terrorist groups in the short run. Most basically, analysts argue that drones are simply the cheapest and safest option available when targeting terrorists in these remote and inaccessible

areas.

However, many scholars point to the negative impact that drones have on counterterrorism efforts over time. In the short run, drones may work to hinder the activities and capabilities of terrorist groups. But in the long run it is less clear whether drones have any measurable impact in stopping terrorist activity. When dealing with highly decentralized terrorist organizations, such as the various Pakistani Taliban groups, drone attacks targeting of leadership and members have done little to reduce terrorist efforts, as anger over such strikes boosts subsequent terrorist recruitment efforts. Following many drone attacks, especially those that take innocent lives, terrorist groups cite vengeance for U.S. drone strikes as their primary motivation for renewed terror attacks.

Signature strikes are especially likely to kill innocents, alienate entire populations, and spur vengeful responses. When signature drone strikes are launched against all suspicious gatherings in an area, the government launching these strikes does not know precisely who is on the receiving end. Authorities may be unfamiliar with the culture and traditions of the societies under scrutiny, and are rarely able to verify exactly who was killed in follow-up analyses. In one such signature strike, Warren Weinstein, a U.S. aid worker kidnapped in Pakistan, was accidentally killed in 2015, along with Italian aid worker Giovanni Lo Porto. Many reports from targeted regions within Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia recount innocent people killed by signature drone strikes. Aid workers and people from these communities speak of a lingering fear about who could be next. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas region of Pakistan, for example, residents are afraid to gather for weddings, funerals, or even to sleep together, out of fear that drone strikes could be triggered.

Fighting Terrorism the Right Way

In short, certain U.S. precedents for the deployment of drone strikes involve crucial downsides and may not be effective in stemming the tide of terrorism, because they have resulted in the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent civilians. To ensure greater oversight, U.S. authorities should fully transfer drone program control from the Central Intelligence Agency to the military. In addition, U.S. leaders should understand that this technology will continue to proliferate and work with other countries to establish and observe international standards and limitations. And the United States should take the lead in creating mechanisms for the families of innocent victims of drone strikes to claim legal reparations. These important measures could soften the spread of problematic drone tactics around the world.