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OVERVIEW

United States intelligence officials call unmanned aerial vehicles, often referred to as drones, their most effective weapon against [Al Qaeda](#). The remotely piloted planes are used to transmit live video from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to American forces, and to carry out air strikes. More C.I.A. drone attacks have been conducted under President Obama than under President George W. Bush.

One of Washington's worst-kept secrets, the drone program is quietly hailed by counterterrorism officials as a resounding success, eliminating key terrorists and throwing their operations into disarray. But despite close cooperation from Pakistani intelligence, the program has generated public anger in Pakistan, and some counterinsurgency experts wonder whether it does more harm than good.

Yet the strikes have [cast a pall of fear over North Waziristan](#), an area that was once a free zone for Al Qaeda and the [Taliban](#), forcing militants to abandon satellite phones and large gatherings in favor of communicating by courier and moving stealthily in small groups, according to a mid-ranking militant and supporters of the government.

The administration has argued that the drone strikes against [Al Qaeda](#) and its allies are lawful as part of the military action authorized by Congress after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, as well as under the general principle of self-defense. By those rules, such targeted killing is not assassination, which is banned by executive order.

But the disclosure in 2010 by news organizations that Anwar al-Awlaki had been added to the C.I.A. kill list shifted the terms of the legal debate in several ways. He is located far from hostilities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the perpetrators of 9/11 are believed to be hiding, and he is an American citizen. The notion that the government can, in effect, execute one of its own citizens outside a combat zone, with no judicial process and based on secret intelligence, makes some legal authorities deeply uneasy.

In September, drone attacks in Pakistan drastically increased as part of the C.I.A.'s covert war in the region. The agency has launched at least 20 attacks, the most ever during a single month, and more than twice the number in a typical month.

The expanded air campaign comes as top officials are racing to stem the rise of American casualties before the Obama administration's comprehensive review of its Afghanistan strategy set for December.

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THE RISE OF THE DRONE

Predator spy planes were first used in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. The Air Force's fleet has grown quickly in recent years. But despite their popularity, the drones have many shortcomings that have resulted from the rush to deploy them. Air Force officials acknowledge that more than a third of their Predators have crashed. Complaints about civilian casualties have also stirred concern among human rights advocates.

The political consensus in support of the drone program, its antiseptic, high-tech appeal and its secrecy have obscured just how radical it is; for the first time in history, a civilian intelligence agency is using robots to carry out a military mission, selecting people for killing in a country where the United States is not officially at war.

In December 2009, the Obama administration authorized an expansion of the C.I.A.'s drone program in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas, to parallel the president's decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan. [Further escalation of strikes appeared to follow a suicide bomb attack that killed several C.I.A. agents](#) in Afghanistan.

Assessments of the drone campaign have relied largely on sketchy reports in the Pakistani press, and some have estimated several hundred civilian casualties. The New America Foundation, a policy group in Washington, studied press reports and estimated that since 2006 at least 500 militants and 250 civilians had been killed in the drone strikes. A separate count, by

The Long War Journal, found 885 militants' deaths and 94 civilians'.

In May 2010, in an unusually ferocious American attack on militants in [Pakistan](#), about 18 missiles fired from pilotless aircraft killed at least 14 fighters and wounded four others in the tribal area of North Waziristan.

The [drone attack](#) was the third following the failed [car bombing](#) in Times Square on May 1, and raised the number of drone attacks against militants in the tribal areas in 2010 to more than 30, almost all of them in North Waziristan.

DEATH BY REMOTE CONTROL

In a June 2010 [report](#) to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Philip Alston, the United Nations special representative on extrajudicial executions, said that the growing use of armed [drones](#) by the United States was undermining global constraints on the use of military force, and warned that the American example would lead to a chaotic world as the new weapons technology inevitably spread.

Mr. Alston called on the United States to exercise greater restraint in its use of drones in places like Pakistan and Yemen, outside the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq, and proposed a summit meeting of "key military powers" to clarify legal limits on such killings.

Warning that the technology is making targeted killings much easier and more frequent, the report raised concerns that drone operators, based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, risk developing a 'PlayStation' mentality toward killing.

Only a week before, the military had released a [report](#) faulting military drone operators for "inaccurate and unprofessional" analysis from a remote location, leading to an airstrike that killed 23 Afghan civilians, including women and children.

The report also said that a targeted killing outside of an armed conflict "is almost never likely to be legal." In particular, it rejected "pre-emptive self-defense" as a justification for killing terrorism suspects far from combat zones.

BOMBINGS INCREASE

In September, the C.I.A. drastically increased its bombing campaign in the mountains of Pakistan, American officials said. The strikes have been part of an effort by military and intelligence operatives to cripple the [Taliban](#) in a stronghold being used to plan attacks against American troops in Afghanistan.

The strikes have also reflected mounting frustration both in Afghanistan and the United States that Pakistan's government has not been aggressive enough in dislodging militants from their bases in the country's western mountains. In particular, the officials said, the Americans believe the Pakistanis are unlikely to launch military operations inside North Waziristan, a haven for Taliban and Qaeda operatives.

The 20 C.I.A. drone attacks in September 2010 represented the most intense bombardment by the spy agency since January, when the C.I.A. carried out 11 strikes after a suicide bomber [killed seven agency operatives](#) at a remote base in eastern Afghanistan. According to one Pakistani intelligence official, the recent drone attacks did not kill any senior Taliban or Qaeda leaders. Many senior operatives had already fled North Waziristan to escape the drone campaign, he said.

Over all the spy agency has carried out 74 drone attacks in 2010, according to the Web site [The Long War Journal](#), which tracks the strikes. A vast majority of the attacks — which usually involve several drones firing multiple missiles or bombs — have taken place in North Waziristan, aimed against several groups, including Al Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani network, militants responsible for a spate of deadly attacks against American troops.

But the C.I.A.'s campaign has also raised concerns that the drone strikes are fueling anger in the Muslim world. The man who attempted to detonate a truck filled with explosives in Times Square told a judge that the C.I.A. drone campaign was one of the factors that led him to attack

the United States.