



How Trump Will Run Washington's Favorite Killing Machine

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March 1, 2017

In 2016, US unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) [dropped](#) on average three bombs every 60 minutes in the global fight against radical extremists. Nothing defined President Barack Obama's doctrine more than the use of drones in projecting a minimalist—yet potent—approach of US power abroad. Seven countries with fragile governments, civil wars, and/or strong extremist groups have been the scene for this predator approach to foreign policy. Now, after Obama has institutionalized Washington's favorite killing machine, President Donald Trump has a spectacular tool of war in his hands with virtually no domestic or international accountability. Furthermore, a review of the US Department of Defense's daily reporting of strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq in the last two months shows a 6.67 percent increase of drone strikes in February 2017, the first full month of the Trump Administration. Yet, two crucial policy questions remain moving forward: who in Washington will have control over the drones, and how will the Trump Administration transform their role in serving US interests.

Drones as a National Security Tool

Since at least World War I, military inventors were contemplating the use of UAVs. However, what drove this military technology to new heights was the Vietnam War, where almost 5,000 US pilots were [killed](#), leading to the deployment of unmanned aircraft for the first time in August 1964. US adversaries took pride in capturing American-made drones. In 1964, the Chinese shot down several Ryan Firebee drones conducting surveillance over their country and displayed them to the public at the Revolution Museum in Beijing. Years later, Iran's Revolutionary Guards captured and displayed on national TV an RQ-170 drone that was operating over Afghanistan in December 2011.

Indeed, the main rationale behind unmanned aircraft has always been the concern of endangering the lives of American pilots, if they are captured or killed. That strategic thinking evolved in 2005 when the Pentagon first began to integrate the drone culture in its military narrative. In the 2005-2030 [roadmap](#) for unmanned aircraft, the Pentagon laid out the rationale for using drones: "better sustained alertness of machines over that of humans, the lower political and human cost if the mission is lost, and greater probability that the mission will be successful." The expectation was that removing humans from the use of weaponry would perfect the logistics of war. However, that was not always the case.

Suspecting al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden was among a group of men in an Arab outfit near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched on February 4, 2002 the first Predator drone targeted killing in US history. While the intended target was not among the victims (the men were villagers collecting scrap metal), this incident officially ushered

in the age of US drones as a tool of war. Meanwhile, the George W. Bush Administration continued to rely on counterinsurgency tactics in Afghanistan and Iraq to combat groups that were resisting US intervention, an effort that required significant resources and troops on the ground.

Obama, who came to power on a disengagement platform, offered a hands-off approach. The drones became a central component of US national security starting in 2009. Instead of conducting counterinsurgency on the ground, the United States took the battle to the air. Drones changed the way America conducts its wars. US Air Force data [showed](#) that unmanned aircraft in 2015 accounted for 56 percent of weapons deployed in Afghanistan, up from 5 percent in 2011.

After the rise of ISIL in the summer of 2014, the Obama strategy began to take shape with US drones supporting government forces or local troops willing and able to lead a ground fight against extremist groups. To that end, US drones were used under Obama exclusively to defeat and contain ISIL and other extremist groups, not to favor one faction over the other or to deter regional powers. However, Washington has retained the unilateral right to launch airstrikes at any time with or without the consent of the host country. Another strong argument by the Obama administration was the budget. The math is simple: an F-22 aircraft costs over \$120 million to make while the MQ9-Reaper UAV only costs \$12 million. In FY 2017, the drones budget amounted to \$4.61 billion, a 1.2 billion decrease from FY 2016, which [represents](#) less than 1 percent of the defense budget.

On May 23, 2013 Obama defended the use of drones in his most comprehensive [speech](#) on America's covert wars. He argued that the United States is "at war with an organization that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first" and described the use of drones as "a just war, a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense." Obama was questionably implying an imminent threat to American lives that justifies the use of drones abroad. However, [statistics](#) show that between 2004 and 2013, only 36 Americans were killed in terrorist attacks inside the United States. Even after 2014, ISIL became more introverted, focusing on battles in fragile countries instead of plotting attacks on US soil.

Another questionable statement in Obama's speech was that "America does not take strikes when we have the ability to capture individual terrorists; our preference is always to detain, interrogate, and prosecute." The Special Forces operation that killed the unarmed Bin Laden in May 2011 did not deliberately seek to capture him. However, the brutality and rapid expansion of ISIL altered yet again the rationale of using drones. Since the end of 2014, the United States no longer sought to capture radical extremists, and instances when it captured or had access to ISIL militants were [few or none](#).

Running the Drones Show

The drones process is now well rooted in the US bureaucracy's chain of command. Early on in the Obama Administration it was called the "kill chain," based on a [Pentagon study](#) about the decision-making process of targeted killing operations in Yemen and Somalia between 2011 and 2012. A Joint Special Operations Command's (JSOC) task force coordinated with other intelligence agencies to identify a "kill list" that went up the military echelon and through the National Security Council Principals Committee before reaching the president's desk. Over time, these layers of approval were seen as time consuming and delayed the window of opportunity to strike when the target was present in a specific time and place.

Drones were meant to target terrorists in "areas of active hostilities" of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, yet under Obama their use was expanded to targets outside these war zones—to Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, and Somalia. The types of drone strikes are also variant. While a "personality strike" pre-confirms the identity of the target, a "signature strike" suspects the target is a militant without knowing his/her exact identity. The "signature strike" has been problematic in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Yemen, where locals have long believed that these strikes led to the death of civilians more than actual militants. From 2009 to 2015, the Obama Administration ordered 473 drone strikes outside areas of active hostilities, according to [data](#) provided by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). These strikes have resulted in the death of between 2,372 and 2,581 combatants and between 64 and 116 civilians. However, three independent monitoring organizations [say](#) that between January 2009 and June 2016, 528 strikes were conducted on average with estimated casualties of 4,189 militants and 474 civilians.

Under pressure by his own Democratic Party, Obama sought in 2013 to define the post 9/11 rules of engagement for US drones by setting guidelines and parameters to justify strikes and mitigate the killing of civilians. His administration's [four rules](#) to approve a drone airstrike were: 1) "near certainty" the target is present and no civilians are in danger; 2) capturing the target is not an option; 3) host country authorities are unwilling or unable to address the threat; and 4) no other reasonable alternative is available. While these rules were not always met, the former president's biggest challenge was to enforce who had control over the lethal drones.

The Obama Administration had a two-year strenuous bureaucratic battle to shift the command and control of drones from the CIA to the Pentagon. The main reason behind this measure was to remove the shield of secrecy since the CIA cannot by law disclose public information about its covert activities. Obama was adamant about the role of the CIA and the use of drones in [remarks](#) in April 2016: "I don't want our intelligence agencies being a paramilitary organization. That's not their function. As much as possible this should be done through our Defense Department so that we can report." The CIA fiercely resisted Obama's attempt to take away the right to run a fleet of drones, forcing the White House to briefly back away and [offer](#) instead a dual command structure with the Pentagon.

However, the turning point was when former director John Brennan [removed](#) the head of the CIA's powerful Counterterrorism Center, who has long resisted giving up the armed drones. This major reorganization led the CIA to gradually adapt to its new role under Obama. Indeed, the rate of CIA-led drone strikes had significantly [decreased](#) in 2016, in particular in Pakistan and Yemen. However, the CIA continues to operate surveillance drones over Syria and Yemen without the ability to execute remote killings. As a result, the US military began to issue [statements](#) on drone strikes in Yemen as of May 2016.

What Will Trump Do?

The conventional wisdom in Washington is that the only alternative to using drones is to revert back to traditional military options. Instead of being viewed as an occupying power, US policy makers prefer for the United States to be viewed as a “predator” force. In his May 2013 [speech](#), Obama cautioned how his successors would exploit that covert war: 1) “the necessary secrecy often involved” in using drones “can end up shielding our government from public scrutiny”; and 2) the US government could view drone strikes as “a cure-all for terrorism” and hence continue on a perpetual use of drones that “will prove self-defeating.”

Trump has made clear during the presidential campaign his intention to increase US firepower against ISIL. There are indications that his administration will be more aggressive in that regard and might disregard risks involved or local sensitivities. The Yemen ground operation in January 2017 is an [example](#) of how everything can go wrong if civilian leaders do not question the military plan.

However, a data review of the Pentagon's daily reporting of strikes in the last two months against ISIL in Syria and Iraq shows no significant shift so far in the military approach. In the January 1-20, 2017 period, the Pentagon under the Obama Administration launched 324 strikes on Syria and 144 on Iraq, while in the January 21-February 10, 2017 period, the Pentagon under the Trump Administration launched 354 airstrikes in Syria and 144 airstrikes in Iraq. The 6.67 percent increase of drone strikes in February 2017 (719) compared to January 2017 (674) reflects more than anything else the gradual US focus on Syria, whether in targeting ISIL or al-Qaeda operatives.

Yet, the most controversial part of the drone program has been what the Pentagon calls “outside areas of active hostilities” (Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia). One of the options before the new administration is rolling back or disregarding Obama's [executive order](#) of July 2016 which sought to minimize the number of civilian casualties in these areas. The measures required the Pentagon to take “feasible precautions” in conducting attacks as well as investigating incidents, acknowledging US responsibility, and engaging with foreign partners. Even the Obama Administration had often violated its own 2013 rules of limiting drone strikes to instances of “imminent threats” to American security and had argued in recent years that helping foreign partners amounts to “self-defense.”

The Trump Administration will likely utilize that same argument—that using drones should adapt to the evolving nature of terrorist threats. Indeed, there are already signs that the Pentagon is interested in expanding drone strikes against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Al-Shabab in Somalia. More specifically, the Pentagon is [asking](#) for greater flexibility in launching these strikes.

However, a potential return to “signature strikes” risks creating a global backlash against the Trump Administration, which already has a trust deficit after the travel ban to the US on seven Muslim-majority countries, briefly imposed last January. It is clear that not all military aged males in strike zones are enemy combatants engaged in terrorist activities, as the US bureaucracy mindset used to be before 2013. Drones are justified because of their lower risk and higher confidence; however, their success level frequently has been questionable outside areas of active hostilities where there is no solid intelligence on the ground and where tribal areas are often mixed with radical elements. Revoking Obama’s executive order on protecting civilians in these areas will send the wrong message to US allies who are partners in this fight. Launching strikes in these areas should be based on verifiable intelligence information that the target poses “a continuing, imminent threat to Americans” and should require joint civilian/military approval while taking into consideration the time sensitivity of the operation. The first test for the Trump Administration will be in the coming weeks as Obama’s executive order requires the DNI to report the total estimated number of civilian casualties in areas outside of active hostilities zones for 2016 by no later than May 1, 2017.

Strengthening surveillance and vetting human intelligence can improve the success rate of the strikes and should be a priority. Having the CIA serve as a paramilitary force distracts the organization from focusing on intelligence gathering. The first targeted strike against Bin Laden in 2002 failed not because it missed the target or the drones were not effective but because of faulty human intelligence. While the CIA under George W. Bush became a quasi-paramilitary force, its role was restrained significantly under Obama. In light of the troubled relations between Trump and the intelligence community, and given the rising influence of Defense Secretary General James Mattis, the hold of the Pentagon on the drones will likely persist under Trump.

The first targeted drone strike by the Trump Administration, executed in Yemen in January 2017, offered insight into how far the drone process had progressed under Obama. The decision to order these strikes on AQAP was taken by the commander of the US Central Command General Joseph Votel and required neither Trump nor the White House to sign off. There are increasing indications that the White House is inclined to speed up the decision-making process behind these strikes by delegating the authority to military commanders.

It is not clear yet if the new National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster will endorse this approach, given his views that both civilian and military leaders in the Vietnam War were accomplices in the failure to manage that war. The welcomed transparency provided by the Pentagon should not be traded for lack of accountability or necessary civilian oversight. While removing the life and death

decisions from the hands of a presidency like the Trump White House might have more advantages than disadvantages, a more balanced approach might be required moving forward.

Unlike Obama, who adapted to the pressure of liberal groups and foreign governments, Trump has no constraints regarding the use of these lethal weapons, whether at home or abroad. The US Congress must continue to push for more oversight and restrictions on the drone program. The Pentagon's process of reporting a daily account of strikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq is a step in the right direction; however, the impact of these strikes should be more transparent, in particular when civilians are involved, whether they are US citizens or not. The White House should issue clear policy guidelines on the legal framework for drone strikes and indicate beyond any doubt that the CIA no longer has control of armed drones.

The added value of the Trump Administration is to think about the utility of drones after the defeat of ISIL in Iraq and Syria. As Iraqi forces close in on Mosul, the rate of US strikes has decreased—and will continue to do so—in Iraq. The same happened in Libya after the Government of National Accord liberated Sirte from ISIL last year. The Trump Administration should not shy away from ending the [Operation Inherent Resolve](#) in Iraq/Syria when the time comes and restricting the use of drones to rare instances of imminent threats. Drones should not become the dominant US national security tool available for policy makers.

More importantly, the drone culture is also expanding to allies and adversaries in the war zones where the US is operating, which increases the risks involved and the way of approaching terrorist threats. In March 2017, the US provided Afghan forces with 48 Boeing Insitu ScanEagles—unarmed modest surveillance drones to help in the fight against insurgents. The FY 2017 [National Defense Authorization Act](#) shifted resources from using drones to countering unmanned aerial systems operated by adversaries in order to sustain US superiority in the field. The Pentagon aims to produce multiple unmanned air and underwater vehicles as well as drones that can rapidly adapt to various missions. It is worth noting that even ISIL is now [using](#) coordinated drone attacks. The Iraqi government's efforts to retake Mosul have been disrupted by swarms of three to five commercial drones armed with grenades and artillery shells. The opportunities that drones bring to US wars abroad can also bring new kinds of threats.

On a final note, the new president is likely to honor the legacy of his predecessor. The Trump Administration might continue on the path of using the drones strictly for combating terrorism and opt not to intervene in domestic politics of fragile countries or seek to alter a regional balance of power. Administration officials might decide that any attempt to change the ultimate objective of these drones will not only jeopardize the war against extremists but will also damage US interests in the long run.