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Death From Above, Outrage Down Below

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IN recent days, the Pentagon has made two major changes in its strategy to defeat the Taliban, Al Qaeda and their affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan. First came the announcement that Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal would take over as the top United States commander in Afghanistan. Next, Pentagon officials said that the United States was giving Pakistan more information on its drone attacks on terrorist targets, while news reports indicated that Pakistani officers would have significant future control over drone routes, targets and decisions to fire weapons (though the military has denied that).

While we agree with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that “fresh eyes were needed” to review our military strategy in the region, we feel that expanding or even just continuing the drone war is a mistake. In fact, it would be in our best interests, and those of the Pakistani people, to declare a moratorium on drone strikes into Pakistan.

After the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, and following much internal debate, President George W. Bush authorized a broad expansion of drone strikes against a wide array of targets within Pakistan: Qaeda operatives, Pakistan-based members of the Afghan Taliban insurgency and — in some cases — other militants bent on destabilizing Pakistan.

The use of drones in military operations has steadily grown — we know from public documents that from last September to this March alone, C.I.A. operatives launched more than three dozen strikes.

The appeal of drone attacks for policy makers is clear. For one thing, their effects are measurable. Military commanders and intelligence officials point out that drone attacks have disrupted terrorist networks in Pakistan, killing key leaders and hampering operations. Drone attacks create a sense of insecurity among militants and constrain their interactions with suspected informers. And, because they kill remotely, drone strikes avoid American casualties.

But on balance, the costs outweigh these benefits for three reasons.

First, the drone war has created a siege mentality among Pakistani civilians. This is similar to

what happened in Somalia in 2005 and 2006, when similar strikes were employed against the forces of the Union of Islamic Courts. While the strikes did kill individual militants who were the targets, public anger over the American show of force solidified the power of extremists. The Islamists' popularity rose and the group became more extreme, leading eventually to a messy Ethiopian military intervention, the rise of a new regional insurgency and an increase in offshore piracy.

While violent extremists may be unpopular, for a frightened population they seem less ominous than a faceless enemy that wages war from afar and often kills more civilians than militants.

Press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders. But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2 percent — hardly “precision.” American officials vehemently dispute these figures, and it is likely that more militants and fewer civilians have been killed than is reported by the press in Pakistan. Nevertheless, every one of these dead noncombatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased.

Second, public outrage at the strikes is hardly limited to the region in which they take place — areas of northwestern Pakistan where ethnic Pashtuns predominate. Rather, the strikes are now exciting visceral opposition across a broad spectrum of Pakistani opinion in Punjab and Sindh, the nation's two most populous provinces. Covered extensively by the news media, drone attacks are popularly believed to have caused even more civilian casualties than is actually the case. The persistence of these attacks on Pakistani territory offends people's deepest sensibilities, alienates them from their government, and contributes to Pakistan's instability.

Third, the use of drones displays every characteristic of a tactic — or, more accurately, a piece of technology — substituting for a strategy. These attacks are now being carried out without a concerted information campaign directed at the Pakistani public or a real effort to understand the tribal dynamics of the local population, efforts that might make such attacks more effective.

To be sure, simply ending the drone strikes is no more a strategy than continuing them. Stabilizing Pakistan will require a focus on securing areas, principally in Punjab and Sindh, that are still under government control, while building up police and civil authorities and refocusing aid on economic development, security and governance. Suspending drone strikes won't fix Pakistan's problems — but continuing them makes these problems much harder to address.

Governments typically make several mistakes when attempting to separate violent

extremists from populations in which they hide. First, they often overestimate the degree to
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extremists from populations in which they hide. First, they often overestimate the degree to which a population harboring an armed actor can influence that actor's behavior. People don't tolerate extremists in their midst because they like them, but rather because the extremists intimidate them. Breaking the power of extremists means removing their power to intimidate — something that strikes cannot do.

Imagine, for example, that burglars move into a neighborhood. If the police were to start blowing up people's houses from the air, would this convince homeowners to rise up against the burglars? Wouldn't it be more likely to turn the whole population against the police? And if their neighbors wanted to turn the burglars in, how would they do that, exactly? Yet this is the same basic logic underlying the drone war.

The drone strategy is similar to French aerial bombardment in rural Algeria in the 1950s, and to the "air control" methods employed by the British in what are now the Pakistani tribal areas in the 1920s. The historical resonance of the British effort encourages people in the tribal areas to see the drone attacks as a continuation of colonial-era policies.

The drone campaign is in fact part of a larger strategic error — our insistence on personalizing this conflict with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Devoting time and resources toward killing or capturing "high-value" targets — not to mention the bounties placed on their heads — distracts us from larger problems, while turning figures like Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Pakistani Taliban umbrella group, into Robin Hoods. Our experience in Iraq suggests that the capture or killing of high-value targets — Saddam Hussein or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi — has only a slight and fleeting effect on levels of violence. Killing Mr. Zarqawi bought only 18 days of quiet before Al Qaeda returned to operations under new leadership.

This is not to suggest that killing terrorists is a bad thing — on the contrary. But it's not the only thing that matters, and over-emphasizing it wastes resources. The operation that killed Mr. Zarqawi, for example, was not a one-day event. Thousands of hours of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance were devoted to the elimination of one man, when units on the ground could have used this time to protect the people from the insurgency that was tearing Iraq apart.

Having Osama bin Laden in one's sights is one thing. Devoting precious resources to his capture or death, rather than focusing on protecting the Afghan and Pakistani populations, is another. The goal should be to isolate extremists from the communities in which they live. The best way to do this is to adopt policies that build local partnerships. Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies must be defeated by indigenous forces — not from the United States, and not even from Punjab, but from the parts of Pakistan in which they now hide. Drone strikes make this harder, not easier.

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