

DRONES: COUNTERTERRORISM BUT NOT STRATEGY

As one of the few civilian Americans who has been present in a zone where the US operated its drone campaign, David Rohde has a fairly unique perspective from which to comment on the tactic. And while in this long piece on drones, he recognizes their value, he also warns against their risks.

In 2008, I saw this firsthand. Two Afghan colleagues and I were kidnapped by the Taliban and held captive in the tribal areas of Pakistan for seven months. From the ground, drones are terrifying weapons that can be heard circling overhead for hours at a time. They are a potent, unnerving symbol of unchecked American power. At the same time, they were clearly effective, killing foreign bomb-makers and preventing Taliban fighters from gathering in large groups. The experience left me convinced that drone strikes should be carried out – but very selectively.

Ultimately, he notes that in both Pakistan and Yemen, the drones are contributing to increased instability.

For me, the bottom line is that both governments' approaches are failing. Pakistan's economy is dismal. Its military continues to shelter Taliban fighters it sees as proxies to thwart Indian encroachment in Afghanistan. And the percentage of Pakistanis supporting the use of the Pakistani Army to fight extremists in the tribal areas – the key to eradicating militancy – dropped from a 53 percent majority in 2009 to 37

percent last year. Pakistan is more unstable today than it was when Obama took office.

[snip]

Instead of decimating the organization, the Obama strikes have increased the ranks of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from 300 fighters in 2009 to more than 1,000 today, according to Gregory Johnsen, a leading Yemen expert at Princeton University. In January, the group briefly seized control of Radda, a town only 100 miles from the capital, Sanaa. "I don't believe that the U.S. has a Yemen policy," Johnsen told me. "What the U.S. has is a counterterrorism strategy that it applies to Yemen."

The deaths of bin Laden and many of his lieutenants are a step forward, but Pakistan and Yemen are increasingly unstable. Pakistan is a nuclear-armed country of 180 million with resilient militant networks; Yemen, an impoverished, failing state that is fast becoming a new al Qaeda stronghold. "They think they've won because of this approach," the former administration official said, referring to the administration's drone-heavy strategy. "A lot of us think there is going to be a lot bigger problems in the future."

[snip]

Retired military officials warn that drones and commando raids are no substitute for the difficult process of helping local leaders marginalize militants. Missile strikes that kill members of al Qaeda and its affiliates in Pakistan and Yemen do not strengthen economies, curb corruption, or improve government services.

The entire article seems to be an expression of

Rohde's hard-earned experience and the doubts of former defense officials who may or may not be Admiral Mike Mullen and Robert Gates (plus retired general David Barno, on the record).

I find that particularly interesting given the series of leaks—apparently from CIA's Counterterrorism Center and some in Congress—complaining that David Petraeus has made drone targeting rules too restrictive. Rohde's sources are saying the opposite—that even the more restrictive rules Petraeus put into place are too lax (though the Petraeus complaint seems to focus on Pakistan and Rohde includes Yemen in his scope).

But there's also this remarkable comment from Ben Rhodes:

“The light U.S. footprint had benefits beyond less U.S. lives and resources,” Rhodes told me. “We believe the Libyan revolution is viewed as more legitimate. The U.S. is more welcome. And there is less potential for an insurgency because there aren't foreign forces present.”

It is neither clear that the various factions that joined to take out Qaddafi will get along long term, even assuming Libya succeeds in hunting down the Qaddafi dead-enders. It is even less clear that Libyans will support the US friendly policies. But there are no Americans there to target so, Success!

But it seems that the Obama Doctrine measures success solely in terms of the insurgents-becoming-terrorists we create, and not the insurgents targeting our allies. Which is why, I guess, the Administration doesn't see Rohde's point, that ultimately until we stabilize these countries, they will still present a danger.