

# WHICH CAME FIRST, UNILATERAL STRIKES OR SIGNATURE STRIKES?

I realized something as I was writing [this post](#) on Mark Mazzetti's latest installment from his book. Signature strikes – those strikes targeted at patterns rather than identified terrorists – purportedly preceded our unilateral use of drone strikes in Pakistan.

At least that's what appears to be the case, [comparing this article](#), which dates General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani's approval of signature strikes to a January 9, 2008 meeting with DNI Mike McConnell and Michael Hayden.

The change, described by senior American and Pakistani officials who would not speak for attribution because of the classified nature of the program, allows American military commanders greater leeway to choose from what one official who took part in the debate called “a Chinese menu” of strike options.

Instead of having to confirm the identity of a suspected militant leader before attacking, this shift allowed American operators to strike convoys of vehicles that bear the characteristics of Qaeda or Taliban leaders on the run, for instance, so long as the risk of civilian casualties is judged to be low.

[snip]

The new agreements with Pakistan came after a trip to the country on Jan. 9 by Mike McConnell, the director of national intelligence, and Gen. Michael V. Hayden, the C.I.A. director. The American officials met with Mr. Musharraf as well as with the new army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and offered a range of increased covert

operations aimed at thwarting intensifying efforts by Al Qaeda and the Taliban to destabilize the Pakistani government. [my emphasis]

With [Mazzetti's latest](#), which dates unilateral strikes to a July 2008 meeting with Kayani (note, Mazzetti doesn't say whether Hayden and Stephen Kappes, or someone else, "informed" Kayani).

While the spy agencies had had a fraught relationship since the beginning of the Afghan war, the first major breach came in July 2008, when C.I.A. officers in Islamabad paid a visit to Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the Pakistani Army chief, to tell him that President Bush had signed off on a set of secret orders authorizing a new strategy in the drone wars. No longer would the C.I.A. give Pakistan advance warning before launching missiles from Predator or Reaper drones in the tribal areas. From that point on, the C.I.A. officers told Kayani, the C.I.A.'s killing campaign in Pakistan would be a unilateral war.

The decision had been made in Washington after months of wrenching debate about the growth of militancy in Pakistan's tribal areas; a highly classified C.I.A. internal memo, dated May 1, 2007, concluded that Al Qaeda was at its most dangerous since 2001 because of the base of operations that militants had established in the tribal areas. That assessment became the cornerstone of a yearlong discussion about the Pakistan problem. Some experts in the State Department warned that expanding the C.I.A. war in Pakistan would further stoke anti-American anger on the streets and could push the country into chaos. But officials inside the C.I.A.'s Counterterrorism Center argued for escalating the drone campaign without

the I.S.I.'s blessing. Since the first C.I.A. drone strike in Pakistan in 2004, only a small number of militants on the C.I.A.'s list of "high-value targets" had been killed by drone strikes, and other potential strikes were scuttled at the last minute because of delays in getting Pakistani approval, or because the targets seemed to have been tipped off and had fled.

So, in July 2008, when the C.I.A.'s director, Michael Hayden, and his deputy, Stephen Kappes, came to the White House to present the agency's plan to wage a unilateral war in the mountains of Pakistan, it wasn't a hard sell to a frustrated president. [my emphasis]

Now, Mazzetti dates the urgency to use unilateral strikes to a May 1, 2007 report that said al Qaeda was reconstituting in the tribal lands. The report was likely an early draft of or precursor to the [July 17, 2007 NIE](#) on "The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland."

Let's take a step back and contextualize that.

As I noted in the earlier post, the idea to escalate the drone program reportedly came from counterterrorism center chief "Roger" months and years before the escalation was approved. As Greg Miller [laid out](#), as the campaign against al Qaeda was foundering in 2006, the previous CTC head, Robert Grenier was ousted by Jose Rodriguez.

By 2006, the campaign against al-Qaeda was foundering. Military and intelligence resources had been diverted to Iraq. The CIA's black sites had been exposed, and allegations of torture would force the agency to shut down its detention and interrogation programs. Meanwhile, the Pakistani government was arranging truces with tribal leaders

that were allowing al-Qaeda to regroup.

Inside agency headquarters, a bitter battle between then-CTC chief Robert Grenier and the head of the clandestine service, Jose Rodriguez, was playing out. Rodriguez regarded Grenier as too focused on interagency politics, while Grenier felt forced to deal with issues such as the fate of the interrogation program and the CIA prisoners at the black sites. Resources in Pakistan were relatively scarce: At times, the agency had only three working Predator drones.

In February that year, Grenier was forced out. Rodriguez “wanted somebody who would be more ‘hands on the throttle,’ ” said a former CIA official familiar with the decision. Roger was given the job and, over time, the resources, to give the throttle a crank.

Note how similar, though different in key ways, this narrative is from [Mazzetti's](#), which said that CIA adopted drones because they couldn't detain terrorists without torturing them (see also [Micah Zenko on that](#)). Here, Roger had to replace Grenier (albeit two years after the first drone strikes) because Grenier was so distracted dealing with the aftermath of the torture scandal and working with other agencies.

Months later in 2006, partly to deliver an election season terror scare, Rodriguez [would travel](#) to Pakistan and have them detain Rashid Rauf, the Pakistani liaison with Britain's liquids plotters, forcing the Brits to roll up his network in the UK before they had fully developed their evidence.

SUSKIND: In late July of 2006, the British are moving forward on a mission they've been—an investigation they've been at for a year at that point, where they've got a group of “plotters,” so-called, in the London area that they've

been tracking...Bush gets this briefing at the end of July of 2006, and he's very agitated. When Blair comes at the end of the month, they talk about it and he says, "Look, I want this thing, this trap snapped shut immediately." Blair's like, "Well, look, be patient here. What we do in Britain"—Blair describes, and this is something well known to Bush—"is we try to be more patient so they move a bit forward. These guys are not going to breathe without us knowing it. We've got them all mapped out so that we can get actual hard evidence, and then prosecute them in public courts of law and get real prosecutions and long prison terms"...

Well, Bush doesn't get the answer he wants, which is "snap the trap shut." And the reason he wants that is because he's getting all sorts of pressure from Republicans in Congress that his ratings are down. These are the worst ratings for a sitting president at this point in his second term, and they're just wild-eyed about the coming midterm elections. Well, Bush expresses his dissatisfaction to Cheney as to the Blair meeting, and Cheney moves forward.

NPR: So you got the British saying, "Let's carefully build our case. Let's get more intelligence." Bush wants an arrest and a political win. What does he do?

SUSKIND: Absolutely. What happens is that then, oh, a few days later, the CIA operations chief—which is really a senior guy. He's up there in the one, two, three spots at CIA, guy named Jose Rodriguez ends up slipping quietly into Islamabad, Pakistan, and he meets secretly with the ISI, which is the Pakistani intelligence service. And suddenly a guy in Pakistan named Rashid

Rauf, who's kind of the contact of the British plotters in Pakistan, gets arrested. This, of course, as anyone could expect, triggers a reaction in London, a lot of scurrying. And the Brits have to run through the night wild-eyed and basically round up 25 or 30 people. It's quite a frenzy. The British are livid about this. They talk to the Americans. The Americans kind of shrug, "Who knows? You know, ISI picked up Rashid Rauf."

Even as the Bush Administration [was undercutting](#) our ability to fully investigate Rauf's network, Roger was beginning to push newly confirmed CIA Director Michael Hayden to change the way we used drones.

When Michael V. Hayden became CIA director in May 2006, Roger began laying the groundwork for an escalation of the drone campaign. Over a period of months, the CTC chief used regular meetings with the director to make the case that intermittent strikes were allowing al-Qaeda to recover and would never destroy the threat.

"He was relentless," said a participant in the meetings. Roger argued that the CIA needed to mount an air campaign against al-Qaeda "at a pace they could not absorb" and warned that "after the next attack, there would be no explaining our inaction."

Under Hayden, the agency abandoned the practice of notifying the Pakistanis before launching strikes, and the trajectory began to change: from three strikes in 2006 to 35 in 2008.

A second proposal from the CTC chief, a year or so later, had even greater impact.

"He came in with a big idea on a cold,

rainy Friday afternoon,” said a former high-ranking CIA official involved in drone operations. “It was a new flavor of activity, and had to do with taking senior terrorists off the battlefield.”

The former official declined to describe the activity. But others said the CTC chief proposed launching what came to be known as “signature strikes,” meaning attacks on militants based solely on their patterns of behavior.

Previously, the agency had needed confirmation of the presence of an approved al-Qaeda target before it could shoot. With permission from the White House, it would begin hitting militant gatherings even when it wasn’t clear that a specific operative was in the drone’s crosshairs.

This seems to contradict Mazzetti’s timeline, suggesting we stopped informing the Pakistanis before we first used signature strikes. It also seems to date signature strikes to sometime around May 2007, right when the report on the FATA threat came out. That may be right, or it’s possible three steps happened – no information, then signature strikes, then ostensible unilateral operation.

But consider these details. First, by early 2007, Dick Cheney [was pretty much running](#) Pakistan policy out of his office, in significant part to protect Pervez Musharraf.

Retired American officials say that, for the first time in U.S. history, nobody with serious Pakistan experience is working in the South Asia bureau of the State Department, on State’s policy planning staff, on the National Security Council staff or even in Vice President Cheney’s office. Anne W. Patterson, the new U.S. ambassador to Islamabad, is an expert on Latin American “drugs and

thugs"; Richard A. Boucher, the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, is a former department spokesman who served three tours in Hong Kong and China but never was posted in South Asia. "They know nothing of Pakistan," a former senior U.S. diplomat said.

Current and past U.S. officials tell me that Pakistan policy is essentially being run from Cheney's office. The vice president, they say, is close to Musharraf and refuses to brook any U.S. criticism of him. This all fits; in recent months, I'm told, Pakistani opposition politicians visiting Washington have been ushered in to meet Cheney's aides, rather than taken to the State Department.

No one in Foggy Bottom seems willing to question Cheney's decisions. Boucher, for one, has largely limited his remarks on the crisis to expressions of support for Musharraf. Current and retired U.S. diplomats tell me that throughout the previous year, Boucher refused to let the State Department even consider alternative policies if Musharraf were threatened with being ousted, even though 2007 is an election year in Pakistan. Last winter, Boucher reportedly limited the scope of a U.S. government seminar on Pakistan for fear that it might send a signal that U.S. support for Musharraf was declining. Likewise, I'm told, he has refused to meet with leading opposition figures such as former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, whom Musharraf has exiled.

Meanwhile, over the course of 2007, Pakistan would see a contentious clash between Musharraf and Pakistan's courts, followed by the assassination of Benazhir Bhutto. The day she



was assassinated, Bhutto [was due to provide information](#) claiming the ISI was using US aid money to steal parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2008.

The day she was assassinated last Thursday, Benazir Bhutto had planned to reveal new evidence alleging the involvement of Pakistan's intelligence agencies in rigging the country's upcoming elections, an aide said Monday.

Bhutto had been due to meet U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., to hand over a report charging that the military Inter-Services Intelligence agency was planning to fix the polls in the favor of President Pervez Musharraf.

[snip]

[PPP's election monitoring head Safraz Khan] Lashari said the report claimed that U.S. aid money was being used to fix the elections. Ballots stamped in favor of the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, which supports Musharraf, were to be produced by the intelligence agencies in about 100 parliamentary constituencies.

"They diverted money from aid activities. We had evidence of where they were spending the money," Lashari said.

Whether or not those claims were true, Musharraf lost the parliamentary elections and, under the threat of impeachment during the summer of 2008, he resigned.

Which brings us full circle. The apparent reason signature strikes were first made known came from worry in the Bush Administration and counterterrorism circles that Musharraf's losses in early 2008 (which would ultimately bring about his resignation) [would mean](#) the US would not be permitted to use signature strikes.

American officials reached a quiet understanding with Pakistan's leader last month to intensify secret strikes against suspected terrorists by pilotless aircraft launched in Pakistan, senior officials in both governments say. But the prospect of changes in Pakistan's government has the Bush administration worried that the new operations could be curtailed.

[snip]

But Bush administration officials and American counterterrorism experts are expressing concern that these arrangements could come under review or be scaled back by the winners of Pakistan's parliamentary elections. The two winning parties have said they want to enter talks with Pashtun tribal leaders who opposed the military government of Mr. Musharraf and who at times have supported the Taliban and given refuge to foreign Qaeda fighters.  
[my emphasis]

Meanwhile, at a time it was pretty obvious Musharraf would not remain President, according to Mazzetti, the US "informed" Kayani that the US would be operating unilaterally going forward.

That is, the unilateral break appears to have had everything to do with the transition in power from Musharraf to Asif Ali Zardari, and nothing to do with a real break between the Pakistani military and the US.

Perhaps this is just a story meant to give cover to Zardari. Perhaps this is an indication that the US and Pakistani's military, on the verge of losing the President who assumed power through military coup, agreed to just pretend the entire program was unilateral going forward, so as to continue as is. Or perhaps the ISI and military really did get read out of the program (though I

don't buy that, partly for reasons described below).

There's one more thing I find fascinating about this chronology. As Mazzetti [already laid out](#), we started using drones in Pakistan with a "side payment" strike against Nek Muhammed in 2004; before we were even killing our own identified enemies, we were killing Pakistan's enemies.

Then, in 2009, as Cheney's micromanagement gave way to John Brennan's. First, three days into Obama's first term, the President [was presented](#) with dead civilians and the concept of signature strikes.

Now, on the morning of Jan. 23, CIA director Michael Hayden informed the president of a drone missile strike scheduled to take place in the tribal areas of Pakistan, near the Afghan border.

[snip]

Tribesmen a world away, in the tiny village of Karez Kot, later heard a low, dull buzzing sound from the sky. At about 8:30 in the evening local time, a Hellfire missile from a remotely operated drone slammed into a compound "of interest," in CIA parlance, obliterating a roomful of people.

It turned out they were the wrong people. As the CIA's pilotless aircraft lingered high above Karez Kot, relaying live images of the fallout to its operators, it soon became clear that something had gone terribly awry. Instead of hitting the CIA's intended target, a Taliban hideout, the missile had struck the compound of a prominent tribal elder and members of a pro-government peace committee. The strike killed the elder and four members of his family, including two of his children.

[snip]

Sometimes called “crowd killing,” signature strikes are deeply unpopular in Pakistan. Obama struggled to understand the concept. Steve Kappes, the CIA’s deputy director, offered a blunt explanation. “Mr. President, we can see that there are a lot of military-age males down there, men associated with terrorist activity, but we don’t always know who they are.”

Then, several months later, a typically weak WMD claim [gave the CIA the excuse](#) to do what Pakistan had long asked them to do – target Baitullah Mehsud.

In May [2009] one such phrase, plucked from routine phone intercepts, sent a translator bolting from his chair at the National Security Agency’s listening station at Fort Meade, Maryland. The words were highlighted in a report that was rushed to a supervisor’s office, then to the executive floor of CIA headquarters, and finally to the desk of Leon Panetta, now in his third month as CIA director.

*Nuclear devices.*

Panetta read the report and read it again. In a wiretap in the tribal province known as South Waziristan, two Taliban commanders had been overheard talking about Baitullah Mehsud, the short, thuggish Pashtun who had recently assumed command of Pakistan’s largest alliance of Taliban groups. It was an animated discussion about an acquisition of great importance, one that would ensure Mehsud’s defeat of Pakistan’s central government and elevate his standing among the world’s jihadists. One of the men used the Pashto term *itami*, meaning “atomic” or

“nuclear.” Mehsud had *itami* devices, he said.

As Jane Mayer [counted up](#), the campaign to kill Mehsud took up to 16 strikes and up to 321 people were killed.

Still, the recent campaign to kill Baitullah Mehsud offers a sobering case study of the hazards of robotic warfare. It appears to have taken sixteen missile strikes, and fourteen months, before the C.I.A. succeeded in killing him. During this hunt, between two hundred and seven and three hundred and twenty-one additional people were killed, depending on which news accounts you rely upon.

Among the strikes Mayer lays out, five occurred before the May 2009 dirty bomb alert, suggesting that story served to either respond to Obama’s heightened strictures or just to offer an explanation for the campaign against Mehsud, which ultimately [led to the death of 7 CIA officers and contractors in Khost](#).

On June 14, 2008, a C.I.A. drone strike on Mehsud’s home town, Makeen, killed an unidentified person. On January 2, 2009, four more unidentified people were killed. On February 14th, more than thirty people were killed, twenty-five of whom were apparently members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, though none were identified as major leaders. On April 1st, a drone attack on Mehsud’s deputy, Hakimullah Mehsud, killed ten to twelve of his followers instead. On April 29th, missiles fired from drones killed between six and ten more people, one of whom was believed to be an Al Qaeda leader.

Update: McClatchy has [this report](#), showing that the US is targeting non-AQ figures. That includes precisely the people targeted in

pursuit of Mehsud.

Forty-three of 95 drone strikes reviewed for that period hit groups other than al Qaida, including the Haqqani network, several Pakistani Taliban factions and the unidentified individuals described only as “foreign fighters” and “other militants.”

And remember! This entire campaign against Mehsud, including the five attacks before the dirty bomb scare, purportedly happened at a time when the US was working unilaterally, meaning there'd be virtually no explanation for the five earlier attacks.

Something doesn't add up.

Whatever the excuse, Mazzetti's latest piece admits that these drones strikes led extremists who might otherwise have focused on India to instead focus on us.

But the map of Islamic militancy inside Pakistan had been redrawn in recent years, and factions that once had little contact with one another had cemented new alliances in response to the C.I.A.'s drone campaign in the western mountains. Groups that had focused most of their energies dreaming up bloody attacks against India were now aligning themselves closer to Al Qaeda and other organizations with a thirst for global jihad.

We're now at war with a number of additional extremist groups in Pakistan, because of our drone strikes.

It seems the question – which came first, unilateral strikes or signature strikes – may have as much to do with the implied failure that claims of unilateralism might elicit as they do with the real relations here.