

Unmanned Aerial Systems as the Next Military Technological Breakthrough: An Assessment on Drone Operations in Counterinsurgency Efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan

MPhil Baris Kirdemir (Turkey)

Pakistan National Defense University

bariskirdemir@gmail.com

Unmanned aerial systems already started to alter contemporary militaries' force structures. In this regard, the US has increased its reliance on drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan gradually. Moreover, various studies in the military literature have started to focus on potential future effects of unmanned platforms and advanced payload they carry on conduct of warfare and military deployments around the world. There are various subjects of debate among strategic circles on how much to alter force structures to eliminate the presence of the pilot in the cockpit. For example, one of the debates in the US consists of various views on whether unmanned strategic bomber aircraft would be a wise option for future contingencies.

Moreover, the invention of and reliance on unmanned platforms may alter geo-strategic considerations as well. Operation of drones require infrastructure such as airfields around the world. Countries such as the US and the UK may consider utilization of drones when planning resource allocations. Besides, future aircraft carriers may carry significant numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles on board. As far as the current trends are concerned, political and financial limitations may encourage the polities to rely on unmanned aerial systems while conducting limited military campaigns.

Invention and use of unmanned aerial systems is a part of evolution of airpower. Since the first uses of airpower in the context of conduct of warfare, how to utilize it for desired strategic effects and to increase overall strategic performance remains as a valid question, correlating with the enduring nature and dynamic characteristics of war. Consequently, how to use airpower in counterinsurgency and other forms of irregular warfare has remained as a significant question for strategic and scholarly debate.

Since war and strategy are holistic in their nature, consisting of distinctive elements and dimensions, the strategic effects of using unmanned aerial systems would depend on how holistic the counterinsurgency operations have been conducted. Moreover, counterinsurgency is a

population-centric type of war. Therefore, drone strikes are more effective in theatres in which the military as well as non-military aspects of counterinsurgency are applied in a holistic way.

Similarly, there are two distinct ways to relate drone strikes with overall strategic objectives. If the drone operations are conducted in isolation and do not supplement or get supplemented by other dimensions of warfare, it is the strategy of compensation for lacking elements in the counterinsurgency campaign. Conversely, should the drone operations be conducted as a component of holistic campaigns, then they become force multipliers, especially in the context of precision strike and intelligence related capabilities.

Since most of the literature on strategic effects of drone strikes as a component of recent campaigns in Afghanistan, Pakistan, as well as Yemen focus on whether use of armed unmanned aerial systems in these theatres is productive or counterproductive, the first finding of this study that should be mentioned at this point is that the real problem is not whether drones are used in such counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaigns, but it is about how the assets as tactical means are used in relevance with other dimensions of strategy and war. Counterinsurgency wars are population-centric, that is, counterinsurgent forces must focus on disconnecting insurgent movements from the population, and increasing the legitimacy of the local government among the public.

As mentioned earlier, strategy and war are holistic in their nature, though they include distinctive dimensions that contribute to the overall preparation for war, war proper, and outcomes. Moreover, both military and non-military characteristics of counterinsurgency wars cause the very presence of population-centric requirements that cannot be addressed solely with the use of airpower. This study, therefore, claims that drone strikes are more productive in the context of desired strategic objectives when they are conducted in integrated ways with other dimensions and domains of warfare. On the other hand, even the most tactically successful use of unmanned aerial systems cannot serve the strategic objectives of counterinsurgency campaigns that are political in nature.

In fact, the drone strikes in Pakistan are irrelevant to the counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan, in the context of declared official objectives of the drone campaign. Moreover, strategic effects of drone strikes that target Pakistani Taliban are also mixed, and they are nowhere near serving to the defeat of insurgency in Pakistan. In sum, the “only game in town” approach does not create the desired outcomes. Targeted killings, signature strikes and overall counterterrorism approaches in isolation, that is, lacking important aspects of irregular warfare would not factually improve the strategic performance. Finally, a dynamic public diplomacy and transparency should accompany the conduct of targeted killing operations.

Close air support and ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, targeting, acquisition, reconnaissance) are the most effective mission types for unmanned aerial vehicles in the context of the recent counterinsurgency campaigns. First of all, a major reason for this is the mentioned “only game in town” approach. The lack of complementary missions causes ineffectiveness of targeted killings with drones. Experienced and well-structured non-state armed groups are able to compensate the loss of their operators and leadership.

When used in a networked way with ground forces as well as non-military aspects such as political, economic and information efforts, the use of drones creates a “force multiplier” effect thanks to their distinctive specifications such as endurance, lack of the pilot in the cockpit, and advanced payload.

Finally, the use of drones would affect all the domains of conduct of warfare. First, drones are a part of the evolution of airpower. Future air forces will acquire and use more and more unmanned assets. They may enable more productive ways of use of airpower for strategic effectiveness. Secondly, the use of drones support ground forces effectively, especially in close air support and ISTAR missions, multiplying the capabilities of situational awareness. Third, drones will contribute to future naval warfare. For example, the ways aircraft carriers are utilized and their roles may be altered thanks to the drone technology, and drones may enable naval assets to eliminate modern challenges such as anti-access and area-denial capabilities of opposing forces. Fourth, the space domain is crucial to use of sophisticated modern drones. Satellite technology enables remoteness, command and control and ISTAR capabilities of unmanned aerial systems. Finally, drones are related with cyber domain to a considerable extent.