



The Role of Media in Shaping Narrative about the Impact of Drone Strikes on Insurgency in Pakistan

Abdul Basit Khan,¹ Abdul Nafey,² & Hidayat Ullah³

Abstract:

This study focuses on the impact of drone strikes on insurgency in Pakistan and the role of media in positive and negative narrative building in the context of drone strikes. It describes how the public perspective about drone strikes is different in the US and Pakistan, and what is the role of media in shaping it. The data was collected through secondary sources such as books, research articles, and online news sources. The data is analyzed through a qualitative method of research under which a thematic approach is used. The objective of this study is to show the actual impact of drone strikes on insurgency in Pakistan. The data shows that the drone strikes reduced the militant attacks, but at the expense of further deteriorating the situation in some cases, and areas. The second objective is to explore the role of media in shaping narrative. The masses in Pakistan deem these attacks as violations of the rules of International Law. While the masses in the United States mostly support drone strikes. Mainly, public opinion is based on the narrative introduced by the media networks they are watching.

Keywords: Pakistan, drone strikes, insurgency, narrative building, media, FATA, escalation, de-escalation.

INTRODUCTION

There were several factors of militants living in border regions in Afghanistan closed to the Pakistani border after the dismantling of the Soviet Union. When American authorities launched Operation Enduring Freedom post 9/11, the militants escaped into Pakistani territory via Tora Bora which was later heavily bombed by American bombers. The militants were there in the border areas of Afghanistan linked to Pakistan because of the Cold War American doctrine which they used those against defeating the Soviet Union with the help of Pakistan and China. However, when America launched its war on terror post nine eleven 9/11 and attacked Afghanistan in October of 2001, these armed militants turned against the Americans and Pakistani authorities. They perceived America as occupation forces attacking their soil like the Soviets did. In the Cold War, Americans were their helpers and Pakistani authorities were in-ground allies against the Soviet

¹ MS Scholar, Department of International Relations, Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta, Balochistan. Email: abdulbasit4691@gmail.com

² Lab-Engineer, BUIITEMS, Quetta. Email: abdulnafeykhan@gmail.com

³ Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, BUIITEMS, Quetta. Email: hidayat.ullah@buitms.edu.pk

occupation. In that instance, however, helpers (Americans) turned to the enemy, and the allies (Pakistanis) reciprocated by becoming allies of the enemy (Ahmad, 2013). Through that period, many members of those militant organizations became popular in the Pakistani erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region, now merged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (PK) province of Pakistan. Among them, the most prominent one was Nek Mohammad.

Nek Mohammad belonged to the Wazir tribe of Pashtuns from the tribal area of Pakistan. He was a Militant who was anti-Pakistan Military and had waged a war against it in the tribal region of ex-FATA in Pakistan. Nek Mohammad in his true sense was against the policies of Pakistan to be part of the American alliance in the war on terror after 9/11. One of his war tactics was to fight with foreign fighters. Consequently, he mostly welcomed foreign fighters like Arabs and Uzbeks in the tribal region of Pakistan when they were on the run to save from the US cluster bombing in Afghanistan post 9/11 war on terror (Mazzetti, 2013). He was the most prominent attacking force against Pakistan. He was consistently attacking Pakistani military outposts in the tribal region bordering Afghanistan. Pakistani army in response took action, but no conclusive result was generated from those operations. In April 2004, Pakistan's military restored peace with Nek Mohammad and his group. However, it was not prominent. After a few months, Nek Mohammad waged war against the military again. In that response, Pakistan secured a secret deal with the American authorities. General Pervaiz Musharraf was quoted to be saying that things often fell from the skies in Pakistan. This resulted in the very first drone strike in Pakistan on June 17 which killed Nek Mohammad and started the new and deadliest wave of insurgency which continued for over a decade. Pakistani authorities were reluctant to accept that it was a US drone strike and stated that it was their guided rocket attack (Mazzetti, 2013).

This study aims to explore: the causes of the increase or decrease in the insurgency in the western border areas of Pakistan linked with Afghanistan by the use of force via the use of drone strikes; To analyze the perspective of authorities about drone strikes in both the United States (US) and Pakistan; to evaluate the role of media/news sources in shaping narratives regarding drone strikes, and; to assess the effects of drone strikes on SDGs defined by the United Nations in drone-affected areas?

This study mainly focuses on the key argument of how media shapes the narrative of public regarding an event or events. The researcher focuses here on the drone strikes in ex-FATA region of Pakistan and how the masses of Pakistan and the US responded to it. Moreover, the study further looks into the actual impacts of drone strikes in Pakistan. This study is divided into four main parts. First of which, includes the background, methodological frame work, and literature review related to the topic. The second part describes the role of media in shaping narrative in both Pakistan and the US. The third part focuses on the actual impacts of drones in the form of factors of escalations and de-escalations. The fourth and final part of this study entails the analysis of the data, the violations of the prohibition of the use of force by the UN charter in the form of drone strikes, and the conclusion of the study with findings and recommendations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is mainly qualitative in which descriptive and analytical techniques have been used. The data was collected mainly through secondary sources such as books, research papers, reports,

articles, governmental surveys, etc. The criterion for data selection was based on the wide range of studies of following topics: war on terror, drone warfare, different strategies for war, narrative building by media, and general perception of the public. A source of data collection was news articles published online. One of the ways to process data from news articles was to check all possible dimensions and scenarios of news reported. Moreover, they checked the reports of the same news in Pakistan and the US. The predominant approach of analysis throughout this study is content analysis within a qualitative data collection approach. The research design is a mixture of explanatory and descriptive study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The death of Naik Mohammad by unmanned drone was the start of a pro-long insurgency in the border region of Pakistan linked to Afghanistan especially the ex-FATA region. After the death of Naik Mohammad, Baithullah Mehsud emerged as the leader of those militants in South Waziristan. Later in the autumn of 2007, Baithullah Mehsud announced that several local Taliban groups had been united under his leadership to form the Tehrek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Khan, 2011). The TTP was formally established in 2007 as an umbrella organization that brought together some 40 Islamist militant leaders, and their groups, from across the FATA and other parts of KP under the command of a Baitullah Mehsud of South Waziristan (Abbas 2014, 152). Mehsud was killed in a US drone strike in August 2009 (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016).

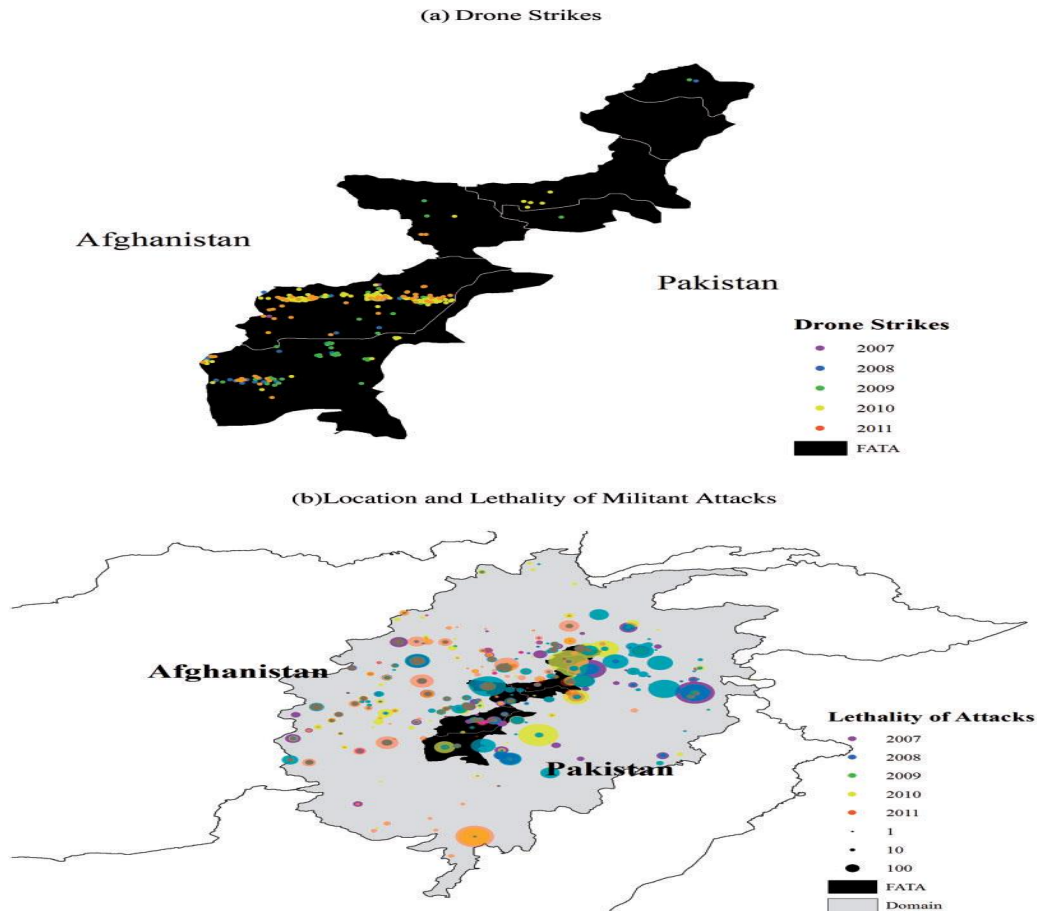
Under President George W. Bush, the US launched a total of 47 drone strikes. After Obama assumed office in 2009, the CIA launched 52 in that year alone. CIA drone strikes peaked in 2010 at 122 and then decreased to 73 in 2011, 48 in 2012, and 27 in 2013. The number of drone strikes continuously declined in the upcoming years after 2013. However, the actual impact of drone strikes is still unknown, and not clearly defined. Authorities in the US claimed it as one of the best weapons for eliminating high-value targets while reducing collateral damage. Asked about criticism of the missile attacks by counterinsurgency experts, Panetta said he did not want to discuss specifics, "but I can assure you that in terms of that particular area, it is very precise and is very limited in terms of collateral damage" ("U.S. Airstrikes in Pakistan," 2009). "Very frankly, it's the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al Qaeda leadership," Panetta told the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles.

Pakistani Authorities on the other hand called upon them as violations of International Law and state sovereignty. *"Continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government. It is creating a credibility gap,"* Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari told General Petraeus, according to a statement issued by the President's office (Williams, 2013). Thus, this is a considerable factor to keep in mind while researching the outcomes of drone strikes in Pakistan. However, most of the sources are skeptical about the actual position of the Pakistani government on drone strikes which might be in favor of them under the table.

Moreover, the failure on the part of the government to provide immediate relief assistance to the affected people in the war zones of FATA and PATA has, in turn, created antipathy between the people and the government. The sense of political deprivation and lack of participation in decision-making has further widened the gulf between the government and the people. This prevailing

situation in FATA goes in favor of the militants who exploit inherent structural weaknesses in the tribal political and administrative system to create divisions in the tribal society where some have started perceiving the Taliban as their saviors (Khan, 2011).

Figure 1 Drone strikes in comparison with the lethality of Terrorist Attacks



Source: (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016)

ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING NARRATIVE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are a couple of theoretical lenses which can be applied to this research study. One of which is the lens of Realism and how the world works in war zones. Moreover, the significance and impact of any miss-calculated move that targets civilians in any form or shape could eventually end up being one of the biggest disasters for authorities who want to formulate peace in conflicted regions. Furthermore, fundamental human rights and their violation and how this scenario affects overall view of terror are important to consider. In addition, how ideas and perspectives shape conflict zones. Like, defining the behavior of insurgents and people affected by this overall scenario could be studied from the lens of constructivism as well.

Apart from this, Media Framing theory shall also be applied to this study as it shows how the media is involved in framing the perspective of people to shape their overall understanding of a specific

scenario. 'Framing theory' is the study of how rhetorical devices can be used to convince people of the value of any given position. Frames select certain aspects of a perceived reality to make them more noticeable, often simplifying the message to mobilize people and garner support (and importantly, demobilize antagonists) (Amis, 2022). framing is mostly built upon the emotional response to a situation or scenario and is changeable over time. When a new frame comes in the place of old frame, this framing changes, and narrative holding it too. The transition can be positive as well as negative in the context of shaping the overall mindset of people. For example, the effects of drone strikes whether positive or negative are shaped by the framing of media coverage. Drone strikes are considered the most brutal weapon of war by the Pakistani public. Moreover, it was considered a violation of international law and UN charter in Pakistan. As it was reported: "These attacks which have suddenly increased since December 16, 2014, are decidedly illegal, immoral and they undermine the country's sovereignty...if we endorse these attacks because they kill our enemies, we would only be according to a legal status in international law...to the US or any other country the right to undermine our sovereignty ("Droning the truth," 2015)."

Framed reporting like this shaped the general narrative of the Pakistani public against drones as they violate international Law and the sovereignty of Pakistan. However, on the other hand, there are opinions and perspectives which actually support the drone strikes as they have been the most crucial element of war for the elimination of high-value terrorist targets. "The drone strikes by the US were the only thorn in their side [Taliban] because they have been precise and on the mark in taking out their high-value Taliban and Al-Qaeda targets" ("A halt in US," 2014). Yet again the framing of the same events made a shift in the narrative building of population in Pakistan.

The media coverage of this is also evident in shaping the narrative. The media outlets in Pakistan have portrayed drone strikes as a violation of integral sovereignty of Pakistan. While the media in the US has argued in favor of drone strikes. This research will look into both kinds of coverage below.

IMPACT OF MEDIA COVERAGE REGARDING THE DRONE STRIKES VALIDITY

The following section evaluates the impact of media coverage regarding the US drone strikes to target militants on Pakistan areas near to Afghan border. First, the impact of media coverage in Pakistan is discussed followed by the impact of the media coverage in the US.

Pakistan

One of the major reasons why drone strikes have become such a salient issue among so much of the Pakistani general public is that there is a large amount of media coverage of the drone issue. The killing of major Al Qaeda, Pakistani, or Afghan Taliban figures gets regular coverage in the Pakistani print media (such as the newspapers *Dawn* in English and *Jang* in Urdu), as well as television and radio. But the collateral damage from drone strikes also gets major play in the Pakistani media outlets. Scenes of destroyed vehicles, houses, and the bodies of people killed in the strikes are frequent sights on Pakistani television. These visual images (or stories in the newspapers) are often accompanied by interviews with villagers professing the innocence of those who were killed and claiming a high toll among women and children. TV channels, such as Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) and GEO TV, frequently show footage of the effects of drone strikes and subsequent outrage. This media coverage has made drone strikes a very highly charged issue among many Pakistanis (Kaltenthaler et. al, 2012). On the ground in Pakistan, accounts suggest that

civilians believe the conventional wisdom that drones are indeed uniquely adept at killing civilians and missing their actual terrorist targets (Williams, 2011). Such perceptions are fed by Pakistani journalists, 67% of whom consider drone strikes in and of themselves to be “terrorist acts” on par with suicide bombings (Yusuf, 2011). In January 2010, another Pakistani daily described an increased death toll for the year 2009 and claimed, “Of the 44 Predator strikes carried out by U.S. drones in the tribal areas of Pakistan over the past 12 months, only five were able to hit their actual targets, killing five key al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, but at the cost of over 700 innocent civilians...for each al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by the American drones, 140 civilian Pakistanis also had to die” (Over 700 were killed," 2010).

Media coverage is the key indicator of the narrative building of the masses. They are exposed to mostly local media. So, they believe mostly what they see. Moreover, they are unable to go and find out the truth in areas where drone strikes are happening. Pakistani media coverage related to drone strikes is mostly negative which is why the perspective of the Pakistani public regarding drone strikes isn't positive. Instead, they consider drone strikes as a violation of their integrity and an attack on their brothers by occupying forces.

The US

The national survey by the Pew Research Center (2015), conducted among 2,002 adults, finds that 58% approve of the U.S. conducting missile strikes from drones to target extremists in such countries as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. About a third (35%) disapprove of U.S. drone attacks. This view mostly comes from the media reports and influences through different kinds of media reporting. The US citizens mostly are unaware of the in-ground situations. They form their point of view of an international event through reporting via newspapers, articles, news reports, and social media. The main perspective of this argument is again the narrative built by media coverage which the average US citizen is exposed to which shows how drone strikes are effective and lethal weapons of war for the US without actually sending in ground troops. For them, it feels like a win-win scenario.

Actual Impact of Drone Strikes on Terrorist Attacks

Below are the several factors in both the increase and decrease in militant attacks. Moreover, how is the perspective built by news coverage in Pakistan and the USA.

A few of the factors of escalation are mentioned below:

Factors of Escalation

Radicalization and Recruitment: One of the unexpected effects of drone attacks has been the recruitment and radicalization of people who support militancy. These attacks' collateral damage, which frequently causes civilian deaths, has inflamed anti-American sentiment and given extremist groups a powerful weapon for recruiting new members. Drone attacks have unintentionally increased the size of insurgent groups, allowing them to keep up their operational strength.

Change in Plans: Insurgent organizations have had to adapt and change their plans as a result of drones. By using strategies like disguising themselves as members of the community, blending in with civilian attire, and deploying increasingly decentralized command systems, these groups have grown more tenacious and elusive. As a result, drone strikes unintentionally aided in the

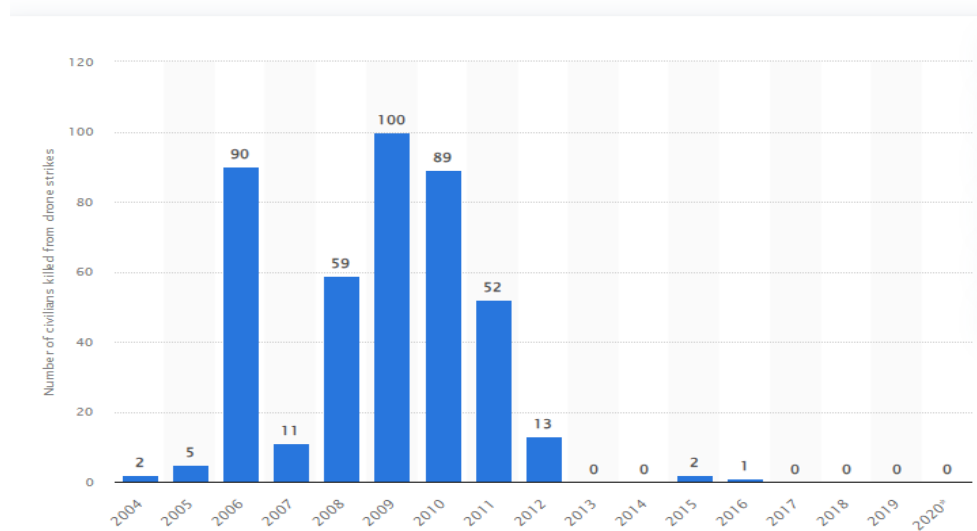
development of insurgent strategies, making the success of counterinsurgency operations more difficult.

Territorial Expansion: Drone strikes have prompted insurgent organizations to broaden their territorial control even if they may be used to take out certain high-value targets. It is now difficult for the Pakistani government to successfully combat the insurgency since terrorist presence in the tribal areas of Pakistan, which were previously the core of militant activity, has spread to urban areas and other locations.

Trust Erosion: The US' continuing use of drones has caused Pakistan and its allies to lose faith in one another. Diplomatic relations became strained, and collaboration in counterterrorism measures were hampered by the apparent infringement of sovereignty. Insurgent organizations have been able to take advantage of the rift as a result of this mistrust, further complicating counterinsurgency efforts.

Civilian casualties: One of the important factors of escalation is the civilian casualties by drone strikes and their drawback on peace and security of the domestic region.

Figure 2 Civilian casualties by drone strikes in Pakistan in different years



Source: (*Civilians Killed from U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan 2020*, n.d.)

It was reported that Washington was “conducting drone strikes in communities that feel abandoned and extremely vulnerable. Whatever tactical gains may be achieved by drone strikes in such an environment, there are serious doubts as to whether they are part of a viable strategy for addressing the threats of militancy and terrorism or bringing lasting security and peace to the region or the people of FATA” (Open Society Foundation, 2014). However, there aren’t only drone factors that escalated insurgency in Pakistan.

In fact, the drone strikes de-escalated the situation as well, and a few of the de-escalation factors are mentioned below:

Factors of De-Escalations

There are a couple of factors of de-escalation by drone strikes as well. Which includes the elimination of high-value targets, lesser human casualties, and collateral damage, and swift and economically beneficial for the government. A few of these points are mentioned below:

Elimination of high-value targets:

The US authorities continued drone strikes despite being criticized for a very long time as a violation of the sovereignty of another country. This was because of their effectiveness in the war zone as the weapon which eliminates high-value targets which would rather be extremely difficult to eliminate without the large number of human casualties on both sides. Drone strikes have resulted in the deaths of many top terrorist leaders. In late 2012, the US administration claimed to have eliminated at least two-thirds of the top 30 al-Qaida leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan during the first three years of President Obama's first term in office. The estimates compiled by the New America Foundation suggest that by August 2014, drone strikes in Pakistan accounted for the killing of 64 militant leaders. The list includes 38 high-level al-Qaida functionaries and several al-Qaida-affiliated and Taliban group leaders ("Two-thirds of top," 2012).

Lesser Human casualty: In conventional military operations, there is a high risk of human causality for both the military personnel, and also the unarmed civilians when going against the high-value targets of terrorist organizations. However, via drone strikes the elimination of high-profile terrorist leaders could be done without any major human loss. The drone strikes on both Naik Mohammad and Baithullah Mehsud are the prime example of lesser human casualties when compared to the Pakistani Military operation in the ex-fata regions of Pakistan.

Swift Action: Another factor of de-escalation by drone strikes is their swift action on intelligence as compared to the conventional army. The conventional army is mobilized by ground and ground sources of transports are used for their mobilization. While the drone aircraft are quick in mobilization and attack. This makes them more convenient for attacks on specific high-value targets which could escape if military action is taken.

Financially suitable: Another factor that makes drones really able for the government and specifically in the case of drone strikes in Pakistan is their cost effectiveness. This in comparison to the army mobilization or the conventional jet fighters is more cost effective without any human suffering.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

The Effects on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Drone attacks not only affected the overall situation of ex-FATA region of Pakistan but also affected the sustainable development goals of the United Nations. The effected goals are as follows:

Life on Land (Goal 15): Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (Goal 16): Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Partnerships for the Goals (Goal 17): Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

It is important to mention that SDGs like goal 16, the foundational in providing the way forward by the United Nations for peace and security in the region. As it propagates peace, Justice, and strong Institutions. Sustainable development doesn't come to effect without peace, stability, human rights, and effective governance, based on the rule of law. Yet our world is increasingly divided. Some regions enjoy peace, security, and prosperity, while others fall into seemingly endless cycles of conflict and violence. This is not inevitable and must be addressed ("Goal 16," n.d.). this is the goal which is the primary effect of drone strikes on Pakistan soil. Moreover, a couple of other SDGs are also affected like Good Health and well-being and Quality education. After the drone strikes, the main and easy target for terrorists would be the school for both boys and girls. Thus, making it hard for the people of the area to educate themselves. The example of the Taliban attack on a girl's school targeted a child named Malala for her activism and voice for education and more specifically girls' education on October 9, 2012. Armed violence and insecurity have a destructive impact on a country's development, affecting economic growth, and often resulting in grievances that last for generations. Sexual violence, crime, exploitation, and torture are also prevalent where there is conflict, or no rule of law, and countries must take measures to protect those who are most at risk ("Goal 16," n.d.).

The Violation of International Law

This section evaluates whether drone strikes are a violation of the territorial integrity of a country or not. Moreover, drone strikes are an element of the use of force in international law, or they can be given exceptions.

The UN Charter

The prohibition of the use of force in the UN Charter is as follows

Article 2(4) of the UN charter stipulates that "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." However, there is also an exception to this article on the prohibition on the use of force as self-defense which can be of many types ranging from revenge to pre-emptive strike to protect against insured attack.

This exception is contained in article 51 of the UN charter that says: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." There is this argument that affecters of drone strikes exceed from militants to the civilian populace. In that case, there is a probability of the authorization of IHL.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

The conduct of armed conflicts is governed by a set of legal guidelines and principles known as international humanitarian law (IHL), commonly referred to as the law of armed conflict or the law of war. Its main goals are to safeguard those who are not currently participating in hostilities and to reduce the use of violent means of conflict. By creating guidelines for the compassionate treatment

of persons impacted by armed situations, IHL strives to create a balance between military needs and humanity.

The implementation of IHL

Armed conflicts, which fall into one of the following two categories, are subject to IHL:

1. International Armed Conflicts: These are wars or other conflicts involving foreign intervention that involve two or more states.
2. Non-International Armed Conflicts: These are conflicts that take place between armed non-state groups or between such groups themselves on the soil of a single state.

There are a lot of predominant points of view on whether the drone attacks have increased the number of insurgents and the views of insurgency or not. Whether they were the most lethal weapon against the insurgents or tools of innocent mass killings. On the one hand, the argument is that drone strikes have eliminated the most important militant leaders for both the US and Pakistan. This is to know that Pakistan has not officially announced any secret deal with the US to eliminate high-value targets via drone strikes. However, "In a rather rare move, the Pakistan military for the first time gave the official version of US drone attacks in the tribal region and said that most of those killed were hardcore Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists and a fairly large number of them were of foreign origin. General Officer Commanding 7-Division Maj-Gen Ghayur Mehmood said in a briefing here: "Myths and rumors about US predator strike and the casualty figures are many, but it's a reality that many of those being killed in these strikes are hardcore elements, a sizeable number of them foreigners. Yes, there are a few civilian casualties in such precision strikes, but a majority of those eliminated are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements" (Williams, 2011).

The US Senator Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, summed up American frustrations with the Pakistanis when he said, "For them to look the other way, or to give us the green light privately, and then to attack us publicly leaves us, it seems to me, at a very severe disadvantage and loss with the Pakistani people" (Williams, 2013).

The Military's 7-Division's official paper on the attacks till Monday stated:

Between 2007 and 2011 about 164 predator strikes had been carried out and over 964 terrorists had been killed. Of those killed, 793 were locals and 171 foreigners, including Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, Filipinos, and Moroccans. In 2007, one missile strike left one militant dead while the year 2010 was the deadliest when the attacks had left more than 423 terrorists dead. In 2008, 23 drone strikes killed 152 militants, 12 of whom were foreigners or affiliated with Al Qaeda. In 2009, around 20 predator strikes were carried out, killing 179 militants, including 20 foreigners, and in the following year 423 militants, including 133 foreigners, were killed in 103 strikes. In attacks till March 7 this year, 39 militants, including five foreigners, were killed (Williams, 2011).

On the other hand, drone strikes have been faced with a dire amount of criticism from the masses and are considered to be the violation of their fundamental right and IHL. Under the different principles of IHL comes the principle of proportionality. Which is ensuring the civilian lives and property in any armed conflict. However, it was seen to be violated on many instances by drone strikes in the ex-FATA region of Pakistan. For example, at least 40 people have died in a US drone strike in the Pakistani region of North Waziristan, local officials say. Most of the victims were believed to be civilians attending a tribal meeting near the regional capital, Miranshah ("US Drone Strike," 2011).

Limitations of the Study

This research is purely based on secondary data which is derived from research articles, Newspapers reports, and books on the topics. As this topic is extremely sensitive and the researcher wasn't able to conduct surveys and questionnaires from people related to the study because of security concerns, most of the information used in this study is used from available secondary sources of data.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the effect of drone operations on the expansion of the insurgency in Pakistan is a complicated matter with significant ramifications. The findings in this research suggest that drone attacks have unintentionally helped the insurgency escalate by encouraging recruitment, radicalization, strategic adaptation, territorial expansion, and the deterioration of international relations, even though they have temporarily disrupted insurgent networks and killed key militant figures.

To effectively address this issue, policymakers must take into account how drone strikes will affect the dynamics of the insurgency in Pakistan over time and look into alternate approaches that strike a balance between security concerns and the need to avoid unintentionally supporting the very groups they are trying to suppress.

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