

## Shape and Consequences of Military Missions

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# How Many Wars Is the US Fighting Today?

**Abstract:** The US has withdrawn from Iraq and is planning to do likewise from Afghanistan in 2014. This article argues that the US has been fighting at least 5 wars, most of which are unannounced and undeclared, and are fought with air power and robotics technology.

**Keywords:** drones, US wars, robotic warfare

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Most people in the US and around the world, when asked the question in mid to late 2011, “How many wars is the US fighting today?” would answer “one” or “two”: Iraq and Afghanistan. The first has now ended and the second is in the process of winding down. The US still has some 70,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan, with withdrawal scheduled by end-2014. And, while the US has officially withdrawn its forces from Iraq, it maintains thousands of private contractors and State Department personnel in the country and, in addition, has expanded its troop presence just across the border in Kuwait.

In addition to these two large-scale conflicts the US is also fighting a number of *unannounced* and *undeclared* “wars”. These unannounced wars are fought mainly with air power and increasingly with drones rather than ground troops. If we define war to include conflicts where the US is launching extensive military incursions, including drone attacks, but that are not officially “declared,” then the US is directly involved in at least *three* wars – in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia – in addition to Iraq and Afghanistan. These

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unannounced wars follow in the tradition of many previous covert US military incursions, such as in Chile, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The difference is that advanced military technology now enables the US to fight such wars in a different way, which is far less transparent, and to sustain operations over several years.

In this paper, we first briefly outline the global scale of US military involvement today, outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, we examine how the emergence of robotic warfare is enabling the US to become involved in more conflicts worldwide. Third, we look at some of the implications of this relatively new technology, and its effect on US power. Finally, we offer some preliminary conclusions.

## 1 The US global military reach

Since 2001, the US defense budget has increased by more than a trillion dollars, not including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today US military operations are involved in scores of countries across all the five continents. The US military is the world's largest landlord, with significant military facilities in nations around the world, and with a significant presence in Bahrain, Djibouti, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to long-established bases in Germany, Japan, South Korea, Italy, and the UK.<sup>1</sup> Some of these are vast, such as the Al Udeid Air Force Base in Qatar, the forward headquarters of the United States Central Command, which has recently been expanded to accommodate up to 10,000 troops and 120 aircraft.<sup>2</sup> The US Central Command (CENTCOM) is active in 20 countries across the Middle Eastern region, and is actively ramping-up military training, counterterrorism programs, logistical support, and funding to the military in various nations. At this point, the US has some kind of military presence in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, U.A.E., Uzbekistan, and Yemen.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, The

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2010 Baseline.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. National Security Agency, Military Construction Budget, Fiscal Year 2011 Estimates, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2011/budget\\_justification/pdfs/07\\_Military\\_Construction/10-NSA.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2011/budget_justification/pdfs/07_Military_Construction/10-NSA.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Area of Responsibility Countries, United States Central Command, Department of Defense, <http://www.centcom.mil/area-of-responsibility-countries>

US Africa Command (AFRICOM) supports military-to-military relationships with 54 African nations.<sup>4</sup> Many of these activities are indirectly related to US wars – for example, the US military is “helping” the Kyrgyz military – probably because we use Kyrgyzstan as a supply route to Afghanistan. Its new president, Almazbek Atambayev said recently that he was planning to close an important American military base there when its lease runs out in 2014. Meanwhile, we are also “helping” the military in Turkmenistan, just in case the Kyrgyzstan base is closed.

The size of the budget for all these operations is difficult to piece together because Congress appropriates funds to line items for each force, rather than to individual activities. In some cases, however, we can estimate the amounts being spent. For example, the US spends around \$4 billion per year in direct military aid to Pakistan (in addition to another \$4 billion or so on “civilian” assistance). It also spends billions on Pakistan’s military as reimbursement for expenses spent by Pakistan in providing assistance to US military operations. While some in Congress have threatened to withhold aid to Pakistan in the aftermath of its reaction to the bin Laden raid, there is no serious questioning of the value of the tens of billions that are being devoted each year to military-to-military activities all over the world.

During the past decade, the US has intensified its presence throughout the so-called “arc-of-instability”. The two main areas of growth during this period have been in “Special Operations” forces and in the use of “unmanned aerial vehicles” (UAVs) such as Predator drones. Special Operations forces have grown in size and budget, and are now deployed in some 75 countries, up from 60 at the end of the Bush administration. According to the *Washington Post*, teams are now operating in Yemen and Somalia and throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, in addition to the longstanding involvement in countries such as Colombia and the Philippines (DeYoung and Jaffe 2010). These forces are also used in regular combat missions in Afghanistan as well as in special assignments such as the assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan conducted by Navy SEALs. The diplomatic cables leaked by Wikileaks described a number of other US operations, including covert activities in Algeria in 2006–07, and in Somalia, (where the US was implicated in promoting the invasion by Ethiopia), as well as in Saudi Arabia.

Many of these “mini-war” operations are integral parts of what President George W. Bush called the “Global War on Terror,” or “GWOT.” This terminology

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<sup>4</sup> Fact Sheet: United States Africa Command, May 12, 2012, <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=1644>

has largely been replaced by the phrase “Overseas Contingency Operations,” but the spirit of “GWOT” – the idea that the US is waging a global war against terrorism wherever it may lurk – lives on.

## 1.1 The rise of robotic warfare

Many of the undeclared wars are being fought primarily with air power, rather than ground troops. In particular, the US has rapidly escalated its use of robotic warfare including UAVs. Drones have been deployed repeatedly against suspected terrorists in various countries without any formal declaration of war and without Congressional approval. They appear to be a weapon of choice for the Obama administration.

The CIA, rather than the regular armed forces, conducts much of this covert robotic warfare. This follows in a long tradition of US covert operations that stretches back to the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, the Contras in Nicaragua, and the support for the Mujahedin in Afghanistan fighting against the Soviet occupation. In the current cases, there is no formal declaration of war, and thus no requirement for explicit Congressional authorization or budgetary oversight. Nonetheless, these operations can be on a significant scale, such as in Pakistan, and they often involve collateral killings of innocent civilians.

Robotics has had the effect of changing the playing field. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, it had only about 60 unmanned aircraft in its arsenal. Today, the US has more than 7,000 UAVs, as well as thousands of ground robots, which are used to detect and to defuse roadside bombs. Some of these drones are used only for surveillance, but many models can carry missiles or bombs. The Predator C Avenger, for example, can cruise at 53,000 feet for up to 20 hours, tracking targets on the ground, and carries up to 3,000 pounds of munitions. Since May 2005, the MQ-1 Predator has been fitted with Hellfire missiles. The Predator series alone has flown more than 80,000 missions, including combat operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Somalia (Jennings 2010).

It is important to distinguish between the “regular” drone program that is operated by the military in the established war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq and the unofficial CIA-led program that targets suspected enemies around the world, including countries where US troops are not stationed. As Jane Mayer argued in *The New Yorker* last year,<sup>5</sup> the Pentagon’s drone attacks are

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5 The Predator War: What are the risks of the C.I.A.’s covert drone program? [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/10/26/091026fa\\_fact\\_mayer#ixzz2LrK6Kpbj](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/10/26/091026fa_fact_mayer#ixzz2LrK6Kpbj)

targeting enemies of US troops, and they can be considered an extension of conventional warfare. However, the invention of precise, remotely controlled robotic aircraft has enabled the US to expand dramatically the number of covert, unofficial attacks it carries out without providing information to the public about where it operates, how it selects targets, or how many people it has killed, including innocent civilian bystanders.

The use of drones to attack al-Qaeda and Taliban bases in Pakistan has accelerated rapidly in recent years. According to the New America Foundation, there were nine US drone strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2007, and 33 in 2008, the final year of the Bush administration. After Barack Obama became President, that figure jumped to 53 in 2009 and 118 in 2010. According to Peter Singer of Brookings, this is double the number that we used with manned bombers in the opening round of the Kosovo War. “By the old standards” he points out, “this would be viewed as a war” (Singer 2010). Many others, including those in Pakistan and other nations under such attack would also view them as a war.

The CIA is also scaling up its drone program in Yemen, where the US military has been conducting strikes against al-Qaeda affiliates for years. While serving as Commander of CENTCOM, former General David Petraeus approved a plan to expand US security involvement in the country, stating that “... our efforts in Yemen should be seen not just as part of our overall counter-terrorist campaign, but also as part of what might be termed ‘Preventive Counterinsurgency Operations’ – to help Yemen deal with challenges that could become much more significant if not dealt with early on”.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear to what extent the CENTCOM military program is being coordinated with the CIA drone program.

Several studies have now estimated that the costs of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will total between \$3 and \$5 trillion dollars.<sup>7</sup> Much of the costs of covert operations, however, are hidden within parts of the defense budget that are closed, or funded separately by the CIA. Additionally, some of the State Departments aid budget to the governments of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and others is actually military or paramilitary assistance to those countries in support of their counterterrorism efforts.

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<sup>6</sup> General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army, Commander, U.S. Central Command, The Senate Armed Services Committee on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategic Review and the Posture of U.S. Central Command, March 16, 2010, <http://www.centcom.mil/pakistan/>

<sup>7</sup> See studies by Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes which estimated the cost at \$3 trillion (Bilmes and Stiglitz 2008); the Brown University “Costs of War” study in 2011, which estimated the cost at \$3.7 trillion (<http://news.brown.edu/pressreleases/2011/06/warcosts>); and Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress (2008), which estimated the cost at \$3.5 trillion (<http://www.cfr.org/iran/war-any-price-total-economic-costs-war-beyond-federal-budget/p14794>).

## 2 Implications of drone warfare

America is able to fight wars in multiple locations because, unlike a decade ago, it now has the technical ability to do so. UAVs are a new kind of weapon system controlled by operators based thousands of miles from the war theatre. *Wired* magazine described most drone missions as “flown by Air Force pilots stationed at Creech, a tiny outpost in the barren Nevada desert, 20 miles north of a state prison and adjacent to a one-story casino. In a nondescript building, down a largely unmarked hallway, is a series of rooms, each with a rack of servers and a ground control station. There, a drone pilot and a sensor operator sit in their flight suits in front of a series of screens. In the pilot’s hand is the joystick, guiding the drone as it soars above Afghanistan, Iraq ... ”

The attractions of this technology to the military are clear. Drone strikes enable the US to target militants wherever they may be located, matching the fact that al-Qaeda and its affiliates are widely dispersed. It is much cheaper than conventional warfare, and it avoids putting American troops at direct risk on the ground.

However, there are some serious question marks over the proliferation of this “remote-control” form of warfare.

1. What is the legal basis for such extra-judicial killings? The issue was highlighted by a drone attack in September 2011 that killed Anwar al-Alwaki, an American-born Muslim cleric who allegedly instigated and inspired several attacks on US interests. What is the legal authority for the US government to kill an American citizen without due process?
2. Who makes the decisions about who is to be targeted and where? How are the military – and the CIA – to be held accountable? For now, people control the drones. But looking ahead, some experts wonder how this type of warfare will change once robotics develops to the next level. Some compare current robotics development with where computers were around 1980. In the future, if unmanned weapons become fully automated and controlled by robotic sensors, who will make the decisions about launching attacks? Peter Singer points out that the Geneva conventions “were written in a year in which people listened to 45 rpm records and the average home cost \$7,400”. Is it too much to ask them to regulate all the nuances of a twenty-first century technology like a Reaper system? He argues that while the technology is moving at an exponential pace, our institutions are struggling to keep up (Singer 2010).
3. Is robotic warfare effective? In “Washington’s Phantom War,” Peter Bergen, a counterterrorism expert at the New American Foundation, and Katherine Tiedemann, a George Washington University researcher, question the

long-term effectiveness of sending armed drones to launch missiles at clay huts in Pakistan. The authors point out that on average, only “one out of every seven” US drone attacks in Pakistan kills a militant leader. The majority of the people killed in such strikes are low-level fighters or a small number of civilians. In total, the authors argue, less than 2% of those killed by US drone strikes in Pakistan have been described in reliable press accounts as leaders of al Qaeda or allied groups.

4. Are the drone strikes counterproductive? In January 2006, the US launched a high-profile raid in Pakistan, targeting al-Qaeda’s deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The drone strike missed him, but killed at least 18 civilians, unleashing widespread protests across the country. This type of incident has led some, including Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, a former aide to Gen. David Petraeus and one of the world’s most respected counterterrorism strategists, that such strikes are counterproductive in that they stoke anti-American feelings and create recruits for militant terrorist groups. Former General Stanley McCrystal has argued that drone strikes always create “scar tissue” when they are used – because regardless of whether civilians are *actually* killed, the local population believes this is the case.
5. Are the drone systems secure? In the summer of 2009, US forces discovered extensive drone footage on the laptops of Iraqi insurgents, which they had apparently been able to capture and hack into by purchasing a \$26 piece of software (Shachtman 2011). In September 2011, there was another known computer virus infecting systems at Creech. How long will it be before drones fall into terrorist hands or sophisticated hackers manage to subvert their missions in dangerous new ways? More generally, are we forcing our enemies to develop such weapons of their own? A world of drone wars between countries, including next-generation miniature “nano” drones that cannot be easily detected, might be extremely negative for US security in the long run.
6. What is the morality of operating such systems? A recent article by Retired Marine Corps Colonel G.I. Wilson (2011) notes that the great distances over which drones operate creates an emotional, mental, and physical divide between “us” and the enemies we kill. He argues that drones “... provide a useful high-cost and high-tech justification for us to dissociate our actions from our values.”

### 3 The future of UAVs and some hard questions

The US drone program escalated rapidly between 2004 and 2010, with no public debate. There are no international rules of conduct on when it is fair and just to deploy them. Under the UN Charter, to which the US is a signatory, member

states may defend themselves from an armed attack (Article 51) but Article 2(4) prohibits them from choosing war as a means of settling disputes.

As Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz have written,<sup>8</sup> the US has largely succeeded in its attempts to destabilize al-Qaeda and eliminate its leaders, but at an enormous cost to the national budget, and our decisions about how to finance these wars have added trillions to the national debt, and profoundly damaged the US economy.

It is time we stepped back and asked ourselves some hard questions about the progressive militarization of our foreign policy. The most fundamental question is whether any reasonable benefit–cost analysis would make these wars – declared and undeclared – justifiable? Even if we ignore the physical and psychological damage done to people on both sides, the costs calculated by Winslow Wheeler, Bilmes, Stiglitz and others are enormous.

Is the considerable time, money, and effort involved in all these military operations across the world making us more secure? Is it securing our oil supply? Is it building better relationships with our long-term strategic allies, such as Saudi Arabia? The answers to these questions are at best unclear. Certainly, it is not winning the US any friends in the Arab street, leaving us vulnerable to populist political shifts such as the “Arab Spring”. Recent attitude surveys invariably show most Muslims in the Middle East distrust the US and that situation has not improved since Obama became President.

The rapid acceleration in technology enables us to sustain long-distance conflicts, but also requires more public debate. In particular, there needs to be greater transparency about who decides precisely when and how we get into these conflicts? What are their justifications? What mechanisms do we need so the national security apparatus can be checked with public disclosure and Congressional oversight? The questions we have raised in this paper are not easy ones to answer but they need to be addressed. As a nation, we will be better off, both in our democratic values and in our national security, if we address them openly rather than being blinded by advances in technology that will become more and more difficult to undo.

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