THE STRATEGIC EFFICACY OF DRONES FOR US GRAND STRATEGY

Francis N. Okpaleke[1]
Al Chukwuma Okoli[2]

Introduction

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, led to the proliferation and increased deployment of drone as a counterterrorism strategy of the US for leadership decapitation and targeted killings of terrorists and their abettors globally. Analysts and scholars (Strawser 2013, Boyle 2015b) have made strong arguments for the continuation of this strategy based on a number of reasons including: the lower cost of warfare using drones, its precision from afar, its accuracy compared to manned aircrafts, its disruptive effects on terrorist organizations and saving the lives of US soldiers. However, despite the reliance on drone strikes so far, little is known about its effectiveness as an instrument of statecraft for achieving US grand strategy. This is because data on the target of drone strikes, location and number of strikes, the exact casualty figure of terrorist killed and attacks foiled, and the number of unintended civilian deaths[3] following drone strikes are classified by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Hazelton 2017). Thus, making empirical assessment of the actual effect of drone strikes speculative due to limited credible evidence from the US government[4].

Controversial aspects of drone use since 9/11 have also called

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1 Department of Politics and Public Policy, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

2 Department of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. Email: okochu007@yahoo.com

3 Most data on drone strikes have been published by sources other than the CIA and the JCOS. These sources which include the American Investigative Journal, Bureau of Investigative Journalism often rely on the information transcribed from locals in the aftermath of drone strikes. While they provide the closest data for assessing US drone warfare they may not reflect accurate figures and targets following drone strikes.

4 President Trump administration has loosened the constraints associated with Obama era rules for drone strikes.

into question the political and strategic (tactical and military) benefits of lethal drone strikes for the US government. So far, the morality of drone strikes, unintended death of non-combatants, generation of anti-American sentiments, alienation of the US from the Islamic world, dent in US global image and the consideration that drone strikes facilitate militant recruitment have questioned the political utility of drones. Within the policy and public opinion circles of the US, strong dissenting opposition to the continued use of drones as a hard power tactic for targeted killings have called into question the politics of drone warfare and how this potentially shapes and affect Congressional support, government legitimacy and winning the hearts and minds of the American people for the 'Global War on Terror'. In this regard, continued use of drone strikes raises second order effects domestically and nationally for the US government which ultimately affect its national security objectives (Hazelton 2013). In addition, while drones have been used as tool to facilitate alliance and support states such as Yemen and Pakistan so far, it is not apparent whether drone strikes can be expected to achieve the same political effects for the US in other countries. Apart from violating the territorial sovereignty of countries where it has been used, the question of constitutionality regarding the use of drone strikes against American citizens living abroad and the amount of executive power drones confers the President over issues of national security has also come to the forefront of the debate regarding the political ends it achieves (Taggart et al. 2017). From a strategic viewpoint, lethal drone strikes potentially increases the possibility that its proliferation by near peer competitors of the US such as Russia and China including non-state actors threatens US military hegemony in the post 9/11 security environment by engendering a security dilemma—as a result of drones engendering an arms race among revanchist and resurgent powers akin to the Cold War.

Grand strategy reflects how a state thinks about assuring its own security or how the military instrument should be employed to achieve state goals (Art 2013, Posen 2014). And the underlying elements of US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War has been that the 'US must remain the world's dominant military power, build alliances, deploy forces around the world, manage global institutions, and be ready to intervene anywhere to ensure stability and promote liberal democracy' (Miller 2010). Successive US administration have used competing versions of US grand strategy since 9/11 with drone strikes featuring prominently among the quiver of offensive tactic for achieving military goals. However, the extent and how precisely drones are used for the furtherance of the US national security objectives outside the theatres of war and within the contours of US grand strategic visions remains

debatable. One side of the debate questions if drones are crucial military assets that create operational opportunities for the US, which although far from being politically cost free, are less contentious than manned aircrafts for both the targeting and the targeted countries (Fortmann and von Hlatky 2009, Mayer 2015). The other side of the debate, questions if drones, are simply 'new' technological toolkit in US military arsenal that serve as tools for coercive diplomacy – threat or the use of force by a state to achieve certain goals – in asymmetric warfare outside contested air spaces (Hennigan 2011, Morris 2018). Or if drones serve as discriminate instrument available to decision makers for furthering a range of strategic objectives (Knopf 2010).

Hence, it is not clear what precise role drones accomplish for the US in terms of its grand strategy. Current debates by academics and policy makers assume that tactics create strategy, and that reliance on drone for specific attacks creates beneficial or adverse political effects for US security and interests (Art 2013, Hazelton 2013). The point is, in analysing current drone use by the US, it is not obvious whether they are used as instrument of force or as an element of US defensive or offensive strategy in targeted states. Or whether drones encourage imperial overreach by asserting US unilateralism and hegemony in terrorist and rogue states in the post 9/11 security environment. Likewise, it is not clear if they mainly serve as tactic for facilitating alliance with weak states or deterrence against terrorism at large. While it could be argued that drones facilitates US counterterrorism strategy and increase its power projection and military hegemony, the overarching argument of this paper is that contemporary use of drones post 9/11 undermines US strategic objectives evident by the rise of anti-Americanism in Muslim world, proliferation of drones by US near peer competitors, civilian death toll and weakening support for the US in targeted countries (Hazelton 2017b). This underscores the need for deeper assessment into the rationale and reliance on drone strikes and what it achieves for the US outside its use in targeted states. To this end, the utility of drones are analysed within the existing typologies of US grand strategy since 9/11 in order to deductively determine, the political and strategic roles they accomplish for the US. Doing so places drone strikes within proper perspective as a national security tool for statecraft rather than a broad counterterrorism solution.

To gain better insight on the role of drones for US grand strategy, drone strikes are assessed from the politicised functions of the use of force: compellence, deterrence, defending and staggering (Hazelton 2017b). Compellence supports the use of force as a strategy to prevent enemy targets from taking action. It requires demonstrating to the adversary the capability of inflicting terrible pain if it does not change its action. Compellence questions

the ethical and legal context of drone strikes by the US and precludes the possibility that drone authorizations by policymakers are for inflicting pain on suspected terrorists or intentionally causing civilian deaths (Miller 2008). Drones as a compellence tactic, serves as a preventive strategy to forewarn the enemy, however, in causing pain, death or threat to the enemy it may not successfully alter targeted behaviour (Hazelton 2013). Deterring, on the other hand, is the use of military power to stop the adversary from acting by threat of retaliation (Boyle 2013). As a deterrence tactic, drones can be used directly, indirectly or by denial. As a direct deterrent, drone strikes prevent future attacks by denying terrorists safe havens and the capacity to perpetrate future attacks on US interests. As an indirect tactic, drones are used to pressure facilitators and abettors of terrorism than the terrorists themselves (Miller 2010). Deterrence-by-denial sees drone as tactics to deter terrorist organizational cohesion and to degrade terrorist capabilities.

As a defensive tactic, drone strikes are considered as tools for the prevention of future attacks on US homeland and for targeted killings of leaders and affiliates of terrorist groups. Swaggering is the direct use and projection of brute force to intimidate or coerce adversaries (Zegart 2018). Drones as a swaggering tactic implies its use against terrorist and its abettors is principally to show US power and to further warn its adversaries of its offensive capacities. These possibilities on the use of force underscores the need to assess drones from a theorized political context. Analysing drone strikes this way, allows an assessment of drone use in declared battlefields and non-declared battlefields where drones have been used so far. Likewise, this includes theatres in which the US has national or international permission to strike, theatres in which it does not, and so on.

This chapter is structured into six parts. The first part provides the background and key themes. The second part unpacks the post 9/11 and the rise of lethal weaponization of drones in US counterterrorism operations in targeted states. The third part unbundles US grand strategy before and after 9/11. The fourth part examines the role of drones in Bush unilateral offensive strategy. In the fifth part, the quandaries of drone warfare for US grand strategy under Bush is explored. The last part is an analysis of political and strategic implications of drones.

Post 9/11 and the Rise of Drones

Like piloted armed aircraft, drones—a collective term for unmanned aerial vehicles, remotely piloted vehicles and unmanned military systems—

provide intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance as well as strike capacity. They are remotely controlled by pilots on the ground or autonomously based on a pre-programmed mission and achieve a variety of military effects as other air platforms. They can kill, disable, support fighters on the ground, destroy, harry, hinder, deny access, observe, and track (Hazelton 2013). Like pilots providing close air support, firing missiles, or dropping bombs, drone operators are expected to respect the laws of war, striking based on clear information, including assessment of potential human costs. Drones however appear detach brutality from humanity by creating a 'new species of war' by dehumanizing death (Heyns 2013) by quantifying civilian lives in the hands of drone operators and contributing to what Heather describes as the 'gamification of death' (Heather 2013).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s, the US emerged as the unipolar or hegemonic power with overall dominance in power resources, especially in the military sphere, including a unique global power-projection capability (Miller 2010). The period which marked a transition of US grand strategy from containment to defensive realism was characterised by the absence of any major power willing and able to threaten the US, in the international system. The resulting decline in the level of external threat thus, allowed the US the luxury of advancing a defensive rather than an offensive liberal strategy. Under the defensive liberal doctrine, the US placed strong emphasis on multilateralism and a willingness to undertake limited humanitarian interventions (Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2013). The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, however, changed the US defensive outlook of the international environment as a result of new and emerging threats which challenged its unipolarity and security. This culminated to a second shift in US grand strategy to a more offensive liberal strategy premised on forcible democratic promotion in terrorists and rogue states and a willingness to assert US unilateralism, as reflected in the Bush Doctrine and carried out in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The resulting shift also altered US counterterrorism strategy with the inclusion of lethal drone strikes in the quiver of US stand-off weaponry.

US Grand Strategy Before and After 9/11

Prior to the events of 9/11, the initial grand strategy of the US can be described as one anchored on democratic globalism—which established that the political and security interests of the US can be best achieved by the promotion of liberal political institutions and application of US military and political power in democratic interventions globally (Jervis 2003, Miller

2010). Many including Art and Cronin (2003) and Hurst (2005) have argued that the grand strategy of Bush around this period was devoid of elements of offensive liberalism or more precisely, of plans to assert US unilateralism and unique global power projection capability—which it achieved as the emergent hegemonic power following the collapse of the Soviet Union—in rogue states or those providing safe havens for terrorists. This was expressed by Bush's ambivalence to effect regime change in Iraq or order offensive military action against the Baathist government. Likewise, the initial foreign policy orientation of Bush, or what has been described by analysts— as the 'First Bush Doctrine'— focused on strengthening US military power and balancing great power competition. This was evident in Bush's objection to the deployment of US military in humanitarian interventions as stated during his 1999 presidential campaign (Leffler 2011). In effect, the initial grand strategy of Bush era can be summarized as one focused on changing the Clinton era defensive liberal strategy of humanitarian intervention to a humbler defensive realist approach focused on multilateralism, limited humanitarian interventions with little inclination to offensive liberal tendencies[5]. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks however caused a paradigm shift in US grand strategy from one that focused on democratic globalism to a muscular hardline grand strategy that expressed the fungibility of America's power. The 9/11 attacks altered the perception of the 9/11 security environment and spurred the concerns that terrorist groups may be emboldened to carry out more reprisal attacks on US homeland (Okpaleke and Burton 2020). This formed the basis of Bush era, pre-emptive and preventive warfare and led to the shift in the priorities of second Bush doctrine.

The muscular post 9/11 counterterrorism tradition was carried on into the Obama administration. Though Obama's grand strategy differed slightly from Bush in terms of its tenets, as it exalts restraints and multilateralism and the use of Washington's soft power in dealing with issues in global affairs, it maintained the intensification of drone strikes in targeted states and championed the deployment of US military in the Asia-Pacific to challenge China's military posturing and its territorial claims in the South China Sea and facilitated increased deployment of troops to Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Syria. In sum, Lofflman conceptualized Obama's grand strategy as a 'hybrid discourse' that emphasized:

that the US remained the world's dominant power tasked with exercising

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5 Though there were clear ominous signs, including the attacks against the *USS Cole* and previous attack on the World Trade Center, the Bush administration treated the imminent threat of al-Qaeda as benign.

global leadership but subvert the unilateralism of Bush and the neoconservative vision of primacy with a more conciliatory approach of multilateral cooperation and consultation (Lofflman 2017 , 17).

Like Obama, Donald Trump's grand strategy have also maintained the post 9/11 tradition of drone warfare and a muscular counterterrorism strategy. Trump's grand strategy can be summed as a composite of 'principled realism' with national isolationist undertones that embraces a zero-sum worldview premised on a materialist conception of power, and international order and a recrudescence of populist sovereignty. Hal Brands (2017), view it as one espousing ''nativist, protectionist, and nationalist-isolationist vision for the US under the populist slogan 'American First', that challenges the post-Cold War Washington's consensus on liberal hegemony.' The expansion of drone strikes outside traditional battlefields of the US under Trump underscored the continuity in the pattern of change in US post 9/11 grand strategy. Next, we examine the use of drones in the Bush grand strategy.

The Utility of Drones in Bush Unilateral Offensive Strategy

Following 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration embarked on a programme of extraordinary rendition—the transfer of an individual with the involvement of the United States or its agents, to a foreign state in circumstance that make it likely than not that the individual will be subjected to torture, cruel, or inhuman degrading treatment—of unnamed alleged terrorist in secret detention centers across the globe (Sadat 2006). Under this programme, which Bush admitted publicly to on September 6, 2006, suspects are blindfolded, shackled, sedated, illegally detained, tortured by any means necessary and in some cases killed in faraway Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison (Sadat 2004). Due to public backlash and Congressional debate on the sickening nature of the controversial policy, the US government based on a Memorandum dated December 30, 2004 suspended the programme. The retraction of this policy attention and focus of the Bush administration shifted to the use of drones for targeting killing operations of these suspected terrorists and in the prevention of attacks to US soil. It is therefore critical to underscore how lethal drone strikes served US military strategic objectives.

Drones served a number of purposes for the Bush unilateral offensive strategy. These roles include but not limited to leadership decapitation, targeted killing, and democracy promotion in rogue states. In the aftermath of 9/11, leadership targeting of terrorist organizations has become a key feature of counterterrorism policies. The 2003 National Strategy for Combating

Terrorism (NSCT) claims that leaders are essential to terrorist activity and that their removal is likely to result in organizational collapse.

Thus, the main focus of drones for Bush was for the elimination of leaders affiliated with global al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It is based on the idea that one the leadership is killed, the organizational structure of terrorism would be dismantled (Reymond 2012). Drones due to their precision and lethal weapon capabilities were thus suitable for this based on their remote features which enables them to identify these targets and consequently eliminate them once intelligence matches the 'kill order'. This explains why immediately following the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, President announced that the US had dealt a 'severe blow' to al-Qaeda (Bush cited in Flibbert 2006). The event demonstrated that the success of the drone program during its infancy, as defined by the ability to kill other high-value targets like Harethi and Nek Mohammad, gave the Bush administration the impression that if limited drone strikes were successful, more strikes would be even better.

Another use of drones in the Bush era was for targeted killings of al-Qaeda and the Taliban leadership networks in Afghanistan and in the remote tribal regions of Pakistan. This was subsequently expanded to Somalia and Yemen (Walsh 2018). In Bush two terms, 53 drone strikes were authorized in targeted states particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan with most of these strikes (48) occurring in the last year of his administration. The domestic legal underpinning for U.S. counterterrorism operations and the targeted killing of members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda and its affiliates across the globe is the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which the US Congress passed just days after 9/11. The statute empowers the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force" in pursuit of those responsible for the terrorist attacks (Flibbert 2006). Though the use of targeted killings in peacetime is an outlawed practice in the US since 1976, under the Bush era, the White House maintained that the US under Article 51 of the UN charter, allows the targeted killing of persons such as high-level al-Qaeda leaders who are planning attacks, both in and out of declared theaters of war (Ronald, Shaw and Ahkter 2012). Used this way, drones were used in the Bush era as a prerogative to unilaterally pursue targets in states without prior consent if that country is unwilling or unable to deal effectively with the threat. Gallarotti, (2010) describes the intricate processes involved in the US targeted killing using drones: (i) deciding if the target is a significant threat to U.S. interests, (ii) being cognizant of state sovereignty issues, (iii) having high confidence in the target's identity and (iv) that innocent civilians will not be harmed, and, finally, (v) engaging in an additional review process if the individual is a U.S. citizen. However, this practice have been criticized over the issue of

collateral civilian deaths and blowback effects (Bergen and Tiedemann 2011, Qadir 2014).

Drones under Bush also served as the liberal weapon of choice to minimize civilian casualties and heed the laws of armed conflict while at the same time trying to gain domestic soft power from the Congress and the US public. This is because of their unique capability of satisfying the rule of 'risk-transfer war', respecting the laws of armed conflict and limiting expenditure at the same time (Boyle 2013). The point here is drones served as the weapon of choice in the Bush era for the shift of US strategy from defensive realism to offensive liberalism. As Sauer and Schornig (2012), notes on this, 'lethal drone strikes seem like a perfect fit for democratic warfare through their appeal to the utilitarian and normative characteristics of democracies'. However, there is limited basis to stretch the argument for the use of drones for democratic promotion in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq as the use of offensive strategies engendered countervailing democratic reactions. In other words, drones appear to worsen rather promote democracy in terrorist and rogue states.

## The Implications of Drone Warfare for US Grand Strategy: Bush Era

Drone strikes under Bush despite its successes in achieving leadership decapitation, targeted killings, reducing troop deployment and casualty figures, appeared to weaken rather than strengthen the US (Okpaleke and Burton 2020). Firstly, beyond Iraq, the militaristic crusade of the US under Bush to enforce the pillars of its doctrine appear to be self-defeating and disempowering for the US as the offensive militaristic tactics deployed using drone strikes to root out terrorists in their hiding cells within, outside the Middle East increased the cause of anti-Western militancy, and appeared to alienate the government of the target nations as evident in Pakistan and Yemen (Gallarotti 2010, Bergen and Rowland 2013). To this, Jervis (2005) contends that the use of US powers in the war against terrorism has actually increased American vulnerability by energizing terrorism and galvanizing support for anti-Western movements within the countries drones strikes occurred. Betts (2002), adds, 'drone strikes appeared to inflame existing enemies the US had prior 9/11 and targeted killing using drones in the second phase of Bush drone authorization in pursuant to the AUMF, created a web of fear and greater enemies in invaded territories.

A recent study by Shah (2018) on the impact of drones in what he described a 'perpetrated territories', outlined negative feedback in Muslim

countries on the perception of US image as a military threat following drone strikes during the Bush era. This is analogous to a Pew Research study conducted in 2003 to ascertain the perception of the US. The research showed that in seven out of eight Muslim nations, hostile coalitions against the US increased in areas in which they were minimal. Studies including (Jervis 2005, Reymond 2012) carried out within this period in Muslim countries showed that US hostility served as a catalyst for perpetrating acts of coercion instead of eliminating them. To this end, the excessive reliance of hard power (and drones) in dealing with terrorism under the Bush era appeared to have been most counterproductive in improving US image as a democratic crusader.

Evidence from research on terrorist radicalization and recruitment between 2004 and 2008 showed that a dramatic spike in deaths by suicide bombings in Afghanistan and Pakistan—which were the two main, center for the Bush era drone strikes (Leffler 2011, Bergen and Rowland 2013). Though it is impossible to prove direct causality from data alone due to the secrecy on data on drone use— available data provide close estimate on the total civilian deaths. For example as Figure 1 shows, there are evident discrepancies in the reported figures published between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism on the casualty figures.

Figure 1: Comparison of CIA and Bureau of Investigation Journalism report of 330 Bush drone strikes in 2007-2008 in Pakistan
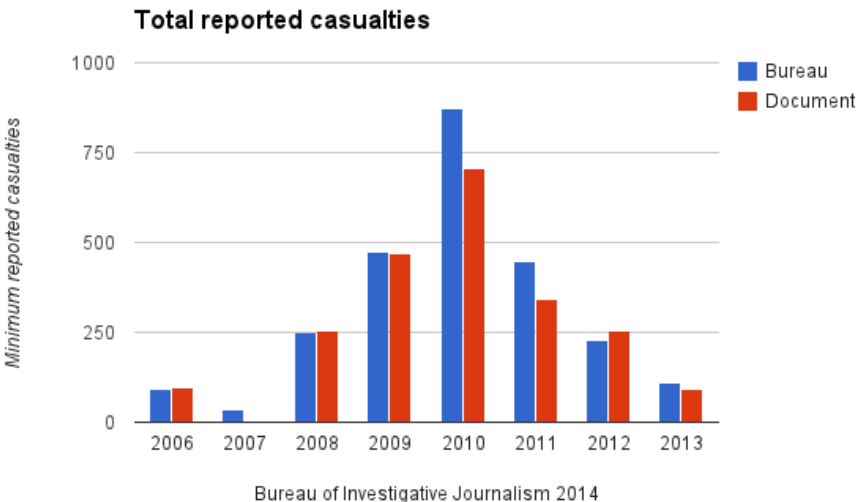
Source: Bureau of Investigation Journalism (2014)

Hence, it is probable that drone strikes provide motivation for retaliation, and that there is a substantive relationship between the increasing number of drone strikes and the increasing number of retaliation attacks (Gallarotti 2010). As data published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2014 shows for every high-profile, purposeful attack by the US, many more low-profile attacks take place. This position was underscored in the report published by the CIA (2004, 104), report on high value targets. It states:

> The potential negative effect of HLT operations include increasing the level of insurgent support, strengthening an armed group's bonds with the population, radicalizing an insurgent group's remaining leaders, creating a vacuum into which more radical groups can enter, and escalating or de-escalating a conflict in ways that favor the insurgents.

These types of attacks can be explained by what military strategist David Killcullen and Andrew Exumcalls the 'accidental-guerrilla' syndrome – in which occupying forces mistake local and regional resistance movements fighting for their interest as part of a larger organization (Killcullen and Exum 2009). Simply put, a local rejection of external forces. Thus for the Bush administration the use drone warfare as the only policy tool in the FATA region in Pakistan for preventing terrorist safe havens without any local political engagement, arguably ended up creating accidental guerrillas which undermined US democracy promotion and counterterrorism strategy in the region. These 'new combatants' contributed to the growth of terrorist cells which further led to hindered US counterinsurgency operations. On this, Shah (2014, 65) writes, "the new combatants unable to retaliate against the US within FATA, crossed over the border into Afghanistan, where U.S. troops, NATO forces and Afghan security forces are concentrated and present easily identifiable targets or while joining the ranks of groups like the Pakistani Taliban, whose attacks within Pakistan destabilize the U.S.-Pakistani alliance".

More so, while the notion of attack from the skies, without direct agency or accountability appeared to be in fact was in theory an attractive vehicle for U.S. counterterrorism during the Bush era, it however came at a high price for US grand strategy by complicating U.S. strategic mission in Afghanistan, as well as the fragile relationship with Pakistan (Qadir 2014). This is because drones posed a threat to national sovereignty of these countries due to an undeclared war, the consequence according to Gallarotti (2010, 20) resulted in "enormous pressure for governing structures in these countries while at the same time worsening social volatility in the target area with unpredictable outcomes". The ensuing collateral damage compounded by extra judicial

killing, material damage and traumatic effects following drone strikes fuels instability and escalates violent retaliation against convenient targets. This further creates a legitimacy crisis in targeted states manifest in anti-drone opposition protests as seen in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere. This has been conceptualized as 'blowback effect' to explain how drones causes domestic and national discontent due to asymmetric vulnerability of individuals in targeted states from these strikes and the indefensibility of government to shield its citizenry from its impact.

Arguably, Bush militant confrontational strategy of using drones to deliver the US from the threats of terrorism and WMD appeared to have made the threats even greater because of the negative feedback generated by drone strikes in targeted states (Okpaleke and Burton 2020). With respect to the administration's three major goals, one of the most devastating weakening effects of this hard power posture of the Bush Doctrine, was the diminishing capacity for the U.S. to achieve these goals, as a result of the negative feedback that undermined the domestic soft power aspect of the Bush foreign policy (Miller 2006). This is because prior to 9/11, extant counterinsurgency policies of the US have focused on the use of force to prevent the rise of new insurgents and civilian deaths, however, under Bush this was side-lined for a new policy of targeted killings using drones. These lethal drone attacks have failed to effectively decapitate the leadership of anti-U.S. terrorist groups based on evidence from Pakistan and Yemen (BIJ 2013) rather it resulted in the killing hundreds of other people subsequently alleged to be militants; many were civilians. (Ronald, Shaw and Akhtar 2014). The rapidly growing population of survivors and witnesses of these brutal attacks therefore have the social incentives to join the ranks of groups that access and attack U.S. targets in Afghanistan across the porous border which in itself resulted in the smouldering dissatisfaction of the policy due to militant counterattacks it causes in cities where it is used (Boyle 2016). Hence, due to counterinsurgency policy across the border in Afghanistan – which relies on "hearts and minds" and troops living on the ground side by side with civilians the damage to the high-cost campaign is even more palpable.

Political and Strategic Implications of Drone strikes for US Grand Strategy

Existing drone use by the US however raises a number of critical considerations for US grand strategy with underlying political and strategic implications. The first consideration, comes from domestic discontent within the US and anti-American sentiments generated internationally in

countries were drones have been used so far. Within the US, Congressional and public support for continued drone use has been inflamed by limited information and transparency on the surgical strikes in targeted states (Strawser 2012). Considering the importance of domestic support for the exercise of military power overseas, the expansion of drone policy by successive US administration may share the same fate as the Bush era policy of extraordinary rendition and wireless wiretapping—the unipolarity, public disapproval and illegality of which, led to the policy's demise despite its initial modest success as a preventive and defensive tactic against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Internationally, growing public objections and frustration from host states—Pakistan and Yemen—and other US counterterrorism partners for the continuation of drone policy against their citizens, and the opposition to cite bases in territories of non-host counterterrorism partners of the US imposes additional restrictions on US drone policy particularly in the Middle-East, this calls into question the political utility of drones as tools for statecraft outside the US.

The second risk consideration is that of drone proliferation. So far, current drone use engenders what Micah Zenko terms the "America's third war" (Zenko 2013). This war, defined by remote warfare and precise targeting of enemy combatants have been the defining feature of US military offensive in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya and most recently in Syria (Chamayou 2015). However, the US near monopoly for the use of lethal drone strikes since 2002 may erode as more countries recognize and develop drones as a valuable military asset. In recent times, modern military powers such as Germany and Israel have announced plans to acquire combat drones, while several other countries have growing armed drone capabilities, most notably the Chinese, Iranians, and Russians (Zen 2015, Boyle 2016). Of these three countries, China poses the most significant threat in terms of its lethal drone capability. This however potentially threatens US military and allied operations capabilities when developed by near peer competitors (Kirton 2015). According to Kilcullen and Exum, 'the threat to US technological advantage derives not from adversaries' numerical superiority but from the increasing application of technologies which were hitherto exclusive to US technological superiority' (Kilcullen and Exum 2009). Thus, while continued use of drones and its allied technologies raises the prospects for US to re-assert its technological superiority in the post 9/11 security environment, it potentially engender effects that undermine its technology might and military reach. As David Kilcullen puts it:

> We (the US) have slain a large dragon, but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes, in dealing with these snakes as

evident from US technological deployment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, it (the US) has demonstrated how it fights modern wars, and as such, giving potential near-peer competitors a blueprint for how to counter the core capabilities that underpin US military superiority (Kilcullen 2010, 40).

Hence, the world to which the US is responding to with further drone proliferation is one where the US may not have a choice to pull back from dealing with potential threats in its aftermath, but where potential competitors may increasingly develop the means to counter key US military area of advantage and hamper its strategic objectives. Already, the proliferation of drones so far is only one step short of an impending drones arms race, already foreshadowed in recent developments of both anti-drones defence systems and stealth drones (which have been used by the US for almost a decade, but are now also in the arsenals of resurgent and revanchist powers such as Russia and China. With countries as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Israel also investing in their own military drones programmes, proliferation risks via the international arms market, also increases the risk that rogue states and non-state actors may capitalize on these technology in planning retaliation and attacks on the US.

The third risk is civilian death following drone strikes and its impact on the notion of the civilian in targeted territories. This consideration is based on the argument that drones currently possess the ability to hit their intended targets with minimal collateral damage relying on its precision system (Sauer and Schoring 2012). This it achieves in three ways: first, drone strikes are based on the confirmation that the intended target is engaged in the behaviour that put them on the target list, thereby reducing the likelihood of strikes based on faulty intelligence. Second, drones establish a "pattern of life" for the intended target, which allows operators to predict when the target will be sufficiently isolated to allow a strike that is unlikely to harm civilians (Hollis 2016). Thirdly, drones are controlled remotely, so the decision to employ a weapon can be reviewed in real time by lawyers, intelligence analysts, and senior commanders without any concern (in most cases) that a hesitation to act may cost lives (Hazelton 2010). However, available data on the aftermath of drone strikes on casualty figures published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Air Wars and New America Foundation, show that from 2002-2020 about 1850-2840 combatants have died from drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Though the CIA provide lower estimates of deaths, published figures do not often consider the accurate number of unintended kills following drone strikes. Besides, there are no empirical basis to accurately determine the precise number of unintended targets killed as these information are often classified.

Since 2017 under President Donald Trump, there appears to be a continuation of drone strikes as a counterterrorism policy for the US and the expansion of drone strikes outside al-Qaeda and the Taliban, specifically against the Islamic States in Syria (ISIS). Available data so far from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA 2017) document that in the first half of 2017, air strike campaigns (including drones) have led to a 43 percent in civilian casualty. Apart from the legal, moral and ethical implications of civilian deaths—which is not the focus of this thesis, drone strikes generate countervailing outcomes within the domestic politics of these countries which not only inhibit US international liberalist agenda but also fuel support for anti-West hard-line politics in the Islamic world. In Pakistan for example, under the Obama administration, the expansion of drone strikes and the rising civilian deaths caused political tensions to mount against the Pakistani government which had an alliance with the US to allow drone strikes to decimate terrorist safe havens in the FATA region and remote places in Pakistan (Shah 2014).

The fourth consideration is blowback effects—that is drone strikes inflame national sentiment against the US and facilitate militant recruitment and retaliation (Hudson, Owens and Flannes 2012). This implies that the continuation of drone strikes potentially backfires on the US by sowing seeds of discontent and rather than decimate terrorist organizations, would serve as a catalyst for more upheavals, loss of US support, and engender what Gallarotti, (2010) termed as the 'disempowerment' of US foreign policy in the Middle-East. Thus, beyond the short time objectives that drone strikes achieves for the US, a critical consideration lies in the long-term implication of its continued use if successive US administration continues its weapon system as a tool for statecraft.

Thus, as drones continues to proliferate and its use for counterterrorism operations embraced by successive US administration, the unanswered questions regarding the political and strategic utility of drones potentially increases vulnerabilities and uncertainties in the long term for the US. With the weaponization of artificial intelligence (AI), drone use potentially engenders a security dilemma at the international sphere with impact on military balance, great power competition, which the US may be unable to dispel.

Final Remarks

This paper reviewed US drone warfare by exploring it within the context of US grand strategy, with focus on the Bush era. The argument that

drones served as tool for the facilitating US offensive-unilateral strategies were premised on the lethal use of drone strikes for leadership decapitation, targeted killings and 'limited' democracy promotion. However, this paper examined the adverse effect of drones for Bush doctrine, to wit grand strategy. It demonstrated that drones not only produced a limited foreign policy based on projection and coercion, it engendered effects that were antithetical for the US by generating anti-Americanism, international backlash for civilian deaths following drone strikes, and conferring the US with 'imperial' powers as drone operations potentially disregarded territorial sovereignty in these countries and in the event where there was a formal state cooperation (as with Pakistan and Yemen), the strikes were enshrouded in secrecy and targets classified. It also determined that the initial success of drone killings in disrupting strategic organizations has bred its own downfall as the further down the militant hierarchy drone strikes aim and hit, the fewer the high-value targets and the less critical the disruption to the organization.

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the role of drones in furthering or undermining US grand strategy. This is against the backdrop of the thinking that contemporary use of drones in the context of post 9/11 era undermine the successive US administration's strategic objectives as evidenced by the rise of anti-Americanism in Muslim world, proliferation of drones by US near peer competitors, civilian death toll and weakening support for the US in targeted countries. This implies that while drones has played a historical and significant role for the US in power projection and asserting its unilateralism and military hegemony when dealing with rogue states and terrorist groups post 9/11, the political and strategic utility of drone strikes for US grand strategy is not apparent. Thus, this paper posits that though armed drones has played a quintessential role as a key instrument of statecraft for facilitating US offensive strategy in targeted states, the aftermath of drone strikes and its controversial aspects engender inimical outcomes that serve to undermine US strategic objectives. Based on qualitative analysis of secondary data, the paper questions the wisdom and benefits of using and shifting greater reliance towards armed drones, as a pathway for furthering US grand strategy.