

US expands global drone warfare

By Thomas Gaist
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In what the *Washington Post* describes as the “next phase of drone warfare,” the Obama administration is set to “extend the Pentagon’s robust surveillance networks far beyond traditional, declared combat zones.” According to the *Post*, Washington is set to deploy the drone fleet to new areas across the globe, where it will be used to monitor drug runners, pirates and “other targets that worry US officials.”

A Defense Department spokeswoman said the military is “committed to increasing” drone activities throughout Asia and the Pacific. The *Post* also cites Colombia as a war theater that will likely see increased use of American drones, although US drones have already been engaged in operations against “narco-terrorists” in collaboration with the Colombian military.

“Surveillance drones could really help us out and really take the heat and wear and tear off of some of our manned aviation assets,” Marine Gen. John F. Kelly, head of the US Southern Command, said in March.

While Obama has claimed that “the tide of war is receding,” actually the US government is intensifying military operations worldwide. During the past decade, the Pentagon has assembled a fleet of hundreds of high-altitude, “unmanned aerial vehicles” (UAVs), which now carry out missions on a daily basis in service of the strategic aims of US imperialism. The “Predator” drone series alone has carried out at least 80,000 sorties in conflict areas including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Somalia.

In their 2013 article, “How Many Wars Is the US Fighting Today?” Linda Bilmes of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Michael Intriligator of the University of California, Los Angeles argue that the US is engaged in at least five “unannounced and undeclared” wars fought to a large extent with robotic weapons systems.

As the paper points out, these conflicts are part of a long “tradition of many previous covert US military incursions,” including those in Chile, Cuba, Nicaragua and many other countries. Advanced military

technologies have facilitated a massive extension of such covert military incursions, the authors argue, writing that “the emergence of robotic warfare is enabling the US to become involved in more conflicts worldwide.”

The paper states: “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.”

Additionally, the US has “some kind of military presence” in Colombia, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, UAE and Yemen.

Bilmes and Intriligator assert that “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.”

Statistics from the New America Foundation show that drone strikes have escalated at an exponential rate. Pakistan was hit by only nine drone strikes from 2004 to 2007, increasing to 118 by 2010.

Many smaller US military operations in Africa and the Middle East are increasingly utilizing drones. Former US Africa Command (AFRICOM) commander General Carter Ham stated in February that his forces required a 15-fold increase in surveillance and reconnaissance capacities for the continent. US Air Force drones have already been flying sorties across North Africa, and the US already operates drone bases in Djibouti, Ethiopia and the Seychelles.

As part of “Operation Nomad Shadow,” a secret US military surveillance program, the US military is currently launching drones from the Incirlik air base in Turkey to

provide surveillance for the Turkish military in its campaign against the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The drones fly into northern Iraq to gather data, which is then transmitted to a “fusion cell” in Ankara for analysis.

The drone operations are arousing popular hostility in Turkey. Protests erupted in 2012 in response to an airstrike by Turkish pilots, directed by a US drone, which killed 34 civilians. The US drone incorrectly identified the convoying civilians as PKK guerrillas. A study released on Thursday by the Pew Research Center found that 82 percent of Turks oppose the Obama’s administration’s global drone war.

Simultaneous with its operations abroad, the Obama administration is ramping up drone flights in the US. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), for instance, has purchased Puma drones used by the Navy, which are slated for deployment off the coast of Los Angeles.

ONMS is currently preparing to expand drone flights in other states, including Hawaii, Florida, and Washington. A new \$100 million drone hangar is currently planned for Fort Riley, Kansas, along with a new hangar and airfield at Fort Hood, Texas.

The drone war is taking a heavy toll of civilian lives. Last year, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) published information about deliberate targeting of rescuers, mourners, funeral processions, and those who return to the scene of drone strikes after the initial explosions, a tactic known as the “double tap.” So-called signature drone strikes are frequently launched based on analysis of “patterns of behavior,” with individuals engaging in supposedly suspicious gatherings and movements selected for targeting.

According to the BIJ, US drone strikes have been responsible for at least 3,500 deaths, including American citizens, who have been personally selected for assassination by President Obama. The BIJ maintains that at least 555 of the dead are confirmed civilians, in opposition to Senator Dianne Feinstein’s claim that civilian casualties have been in the “single digits.”

Pakistani government estimates featured in a recently leaked internal document, “Details of Attacks by NATO Forces/Predators in FATA,” show that at least 147 of 746 people killed by US drones between 2006 and 2009 were civilians, and 94 of them children. A report issued by Stanford and NYU law schools last year found that 50 civilians are killed for every confirmed “insurgent” who is eliminated by the strikes.

The Obama administration, as the *Post* observed, has “imposed a broad cone of silence on its drone programs worldwide,” operating on the basis of secrecy and issuing secret laws and fiats to institutionalize worldwide targeted assassination.

In May, Obama gave a speech in staunch defense of his use of drone strikes, and announced the codification of his administration’s drone policies in a new “Presidential Policy Guidance” document. Obama said, “For the same human progress that gives us the technology to strike half a world away also demands the discipline to constrain that power—or risk abusing it. That’s why, over the last four years, my administration has worked vigorously to establish a framework that governs our use of force against terrorists—insisting upon clear guidelines, oversight and accountability that is now codified in Presidential Policy Guidance that I signed yesterday.”

The Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) document is one of more than 20 secret Presidential Policy Directives (PPD) promulgated by the Obama administration and withheld from public view. According to www.allgov.com, a PPD is a “statement by the President directed to the Executive Branch” which “becomes part of the particular legal framework that grows up around any statute or program.”

The PPG institutionalizes and provides a false veneer of legality to the worldwide campaign of targeted killings. What Obama presents as a constraint on power is, in reality, a measure that strips every person on the planet of their right not to be killed arbitrarily on the say-so of US state officials.

The global drone war is a primary instrument of US foreign policy. It is waged, under the fraudulent mantle of the “Global War on Terrorism,” not to defend the US against terrorists, but as part of an expansive militarist agenda aimed at shoring up American imperialism’s eroding position of strategic dominance.

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