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As Drone Tech Improves, Blowback From Drone-targeted Nations Worsens

Just after 11:00 a.m. on Tuesday, May 14, a prototype drone (the X-47B, shown) launched from the deck of the *U.S.S. George H.W. Bush* sailing about 100 miles off the coast of Virginia.

The lift-off of the drone from the aircraft carrier was historic, as it was the first time an unmanned aerial vehicle was able to pull off that difficult feat. While impressive, it would have been more so had the Navy been able to land it back on the flight deck, the way manned aircraft do.

A *Wired* story reports that X-47B program manager Captain Jamie Engdahl said "that the X-47B will actually conduct its first carrier landing at sea around July or August. Engdahl and other Navy officials say they still have to perform more tests before the X-47B is capable of landing on a carrier."

Although the drone — known by the amusing call sign "Salty Dog 502″ — cannot yet perform that maneuver, it is remarkable in many ways.

Perhaps most amazing of the technologies built into this weapon is the fact that it is not only unmanned, but unpiloted. This newest Northrop Grumman invention completes its mission using a pre-programmed algorithm and GPS data.

"The Navy's model is different from the Air Force's," said Rear Admiral Ted Branch, the commander of Naval Air Forces Atlantic, as quoted in *Wired*. "We don't have someone actively flying this machine with a stick and a throttle. We fly it with a mouse and a keyboard."

Military commanders were proud of the achievement (*Wired* reports that Navy officers "openly likened the X-47B's launch off the *Bush* to the first-ever launch of a plane off the *U.S.S. Birmingham* in 1910") and accordingly invited members of the media to witness the demonstration.

Such publicity is rare when it comes to the activities of drones, however.

The Obama administration is notoriously tight-lipped about the myriad uses to which it puts these devices in the "War on Terror" once they've been tested and tuned with a lot less media attention.

In Pakistan, the president's drone war is deplored for its secrecy and its lethal legacy.

This sentiment is shared by Pakistan's prime minister-elect, Nawaz Sharif. In his first comments since his party's widespread victory in elections held late last week, Sharif insisted that he did not want to sever ties with the United States over the drone strikes that have killed so many of his countrymen, but he did call out President Obama for violating the sovereignty of Pakistan by ordering the deadly drone missions without the approval of Islamabad.

The *Washington Post* suggests that Sharif's stance might evince a forthcoming rescinding of Pakistan's "grudging compliance" in the prosecution of the death by drone program that is such a favorite weapon

in the Obama arsenal.

"I think we have good relations with the United States of America. We certainly have to listen to each other," said Sharif. "If there are any concerns on any side, I think we should address those concerns."

"Drones indeed are challenging our sovereignty," said Sharif. "I think this is a very serious issue, and our concern must be understood properly."

Sharif is not the alone in his disdain for the drones.

In an interview with *The New American*, a senior official in Pakistan's mission to the United Nations said that "everyone in the government" of Pakistan believes the drone missions are assaults not only on the citizens of Pakistan, but on its sovereignty, as well.

Despite such reported unanimity of animosity, there are a couple of obstacles standing between Sharif and the ridding of Pakistani skies of the ubiquitous buzz of U.S. drones.

First, as reported by the *Washington Post*, Pakistan stands in the very busy queue of countries cashing checks from the U.S. Treasury. In 2012, for example, Pakistan received nearly $3 billion in American humanitarian and military aid. That's lots of reasons for Sharif not to rock the boat.

Another potential roadblock is the power exerted by the armed forces in Pakistan. In the past, the army — described by the *Washington Post* as one of "the strongest institutions in the country" — has welcomed the presence of the U.S. military, including the drones.

That support has declined, however, as the number of reported innocents killed by drone-fired missiles has increased.

According to data provided by LongWarJournal, since 2004 the United States has conducted 338 airstrikes inside the borders of Pakistan, ostensibly as part of the mission to "target and kill al Qaeda and Taliban commanders based in Pakistan's lawless northwest."

Since 2006, drone strikes have resulted in the death of over 2,600 Pakistanis, not all of whom qualified as "militants" who are purportedly the target of the drones' deadly payload.

From "double-tap" strikes (that kill not only the target, but also anyone trying to retrieve the body) to the "signature strikes" (that target groups displaying "militant behavior" rather than individual suspects believed to be planning attacks on the United States), this indiscriminate assassination of those not charged with any crime or suspected of any ill-will is creating more enemies than it is eliminating.

A recent *New York Times* story written by Declan Walsh chronicles the case of blowback in Pakistan and how "militant enforcers," motivated by the CIA's covert identification of drone targets, have taken to tracking and torturing those suspected of aiding the American operatives in carrying out their murderous missions.

For several years now, militant enforcers have scoured the tribal belt in search of informers who help the CIA find and kill the spy agency's jihadist quarry. The militants' technique — often more witch hunt than investigation — follows a well-established pattern. Accused tribesmen are abducted from homes and workplaces at gunpoint and tortured. A sham religious court hears their case, usually declaring them guilty. Then they are forced to speak into a video camera.

The taped confessions, which are later distributed on CD, vary in style and content. But their endings are the same: execution by hanging, beheading, or firing squad.

Such sham proceedings are a mockery of legitimate justice and are themselves as reprehensible and unconscionable as the indiscriminate delivery of Hellfire missiles by U.S. drones. Remarkably, however, the suspected CIA co-conspirators are at least afforded some due process, albeit with a pre-determined and deadly outcome. The same cannot be said of those marked for assassination by the U.S. government. As Kevin Gosztola writes, "Now, there is one point worth making: as horrifying as the torture and killings of alleged informers in Pakistan might be, those targeted by these militant groups are afforded more justice than targets of US drone attacks."

Facts reveal that the prosecution of the drone war in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and North Africa is ironically increasing al-Qaeda's success in the region. Al-Qaeda couldn't cook up a more effective recruitment program than the U.S. drone war that is allegedly aimed at eliminating the "terrorist" organization.

For President Obama and those pulling the triggers on the joysticks guiding the missiles toward their human targets, "suspected militant" means (presumably) "all military-age males in a strike zone." For those of us concerned with the Constitution, due process, and the rule of law, "suspected militant" means nothing other than a person not charged with any crime, not afforded even the most perfunctory due process protections, but summarily executed upon order of the president anyway. In this way, we are no better than those we kill in the name of safety.

If Arab media reports are to believed, as the president's drone war expands into new theaters, so does the reach of al-Qaeda recruiters whose message is falling on the sympathetic ears of those whose loved ones are being obliterated by the United States without reason or remorse.

"With every American drone attack resulting in civilian deaths, anti-American sentiments increase against Washington as well as against the government which endorses these attacks," said Khaled Alabd, a Yemeni reporter and activist as quoted by *Arab News*.

The swell of anti-American feelings in countries beset by drone strikes is a concern to some Washington lawmakers.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that last week, Representative Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), offered a bill requiring the U.S. military to notify Congress "about every drone strike outside Afghanistan as well as about operations to kill or capture terrorists away from declared war zones."

Perhaps Thornberry isn't familiar with the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and its designation of the entire globe — including the United States of America — as a "war zone."

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