Drone War In Afghanistan Peaks As Human Troops Withdraw

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Forget Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and all the other secret warzones. The real center of the U.S. drone campaign is on the hottest battlefield of all: Afghanistan.

The American military has launched 333 drone strikes this year in Afghanistan. That’s not only the highest total ever, according to U.S. Air Force statistics. It’s essentially the same number of robotic attacks in Pakistan since the CIA-led campaign there began nearly eight years ago. In the last 30 days, there have been three reported strikes in Yemen. In Afghanistan, that’s just an average day’s worth of remotely piloted attacks. And the increased strikes come as the rest of the war in Afghanistan is slowing down.

The secret drone campaigns have drawn the most scrutiny because of the legal, geopolitical, and ethical questions they raise. But it’s worth remembering that the rise of the flying robots is largely occurring in the open, on an acknowledged battlefield where the targets are largely unquestioned and the attending issues aren’t nearly as fraught.

“The difference between the Afghan operation and the ones operations in Pakistan and elsewhere come down to the fundamental differences between open military campaigns and covert campaigns run by the intelligence community. It shapes everything from the level of transparency to the command and control to the rules of engagements to the process and consequences if an air strike goes wrong,” e-mails Peter W. Singer, who runs the Brookings Institution’s 21st Century Defense Initiative. (Full disclosure: I have a non-resident fellowship there.) “This is why the military side has been far less controversial, and thus why many have pushed for it to play a greater role as the strikes slowly morphed from isolated, covert events into a regularized air war.”

The military has 61 Predator and Reaper “combat air patrols,” each with three or four robotic planes. The CIA’s inventory is believed to be just a fraction of that: 30 to 35 drones total, although there is thought to be some overlap between the military and intelligence agency fleets. The Washington Post reported last month that the CIA is looking for another 10 drones as the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) become more and more central to the agency’s worldwide counterterror campaign.

In Pakistan, those drones are flown with a wink and a nod, to avoid the perception of violating national sovereignty. In Yemen, the robots go after men just because they fit a profile of what the U.S. believes a terrorist to be. In both countries, people are considered legitimate targets if they happen to be male and young and in the wrong place at the wrong time. The White House keeps a “matrix” on who merits robotic death, and Congress is essentially kept in the dark about the whole thing.

None of these statements is true about the drone war in Afghanistan, where strikes are ordered by a local commander, overseen by military lawyers, conducted with the (sometimes reluctant) blessing of the Kabul government, and used almost entirely to help troops under fire. The UAVs aren’t flown to dodge issues of sovereignty or to avoid traditional military assets. They’re used because they work better — staying in the sky longer than traditional aircraft and employing more advanced sensors to make sure the targets they hit are legit.

The U.S. military is now launching more drone strikes — an average of 33 per month — than at any moment in the 11 years of the Afghan conflict. It’s a major escalation from just last year, when the monthly average was 24.5. And it’s happening while the rest of the American war effort is winding down: There are 34,000 fewer American troops than there were in 2010; U.S. casualties are down 40 percent from 2010s toll; militant attacks are off by about a quarter; civilian deaths have declined a bit from their awful peak.

Even the overall air war is shrinking. Surveillance sorties are down, from an average of 3,183 per month last year to 2,954 in 2012. So are missions in which U.S. aircraft fire their weapons. That used to happen 450 times per month on average in 2011. This year, the monthly total has dropped to 360. In other words, drone strikes in Afghanistan now make up about 9 percent of the overall total of aerial attacks. Last year, it was a little more than 5 percent.

The UAVs are growing in importance while the rest of the military is receding.

“When Barack Obama began his first term in the White House, many in his administration pushed for keeping the number of troops in Afghanistan relatively small while boosting the number of drone strikes. At the time, Obama decided to go in a different direction. But now, as he gets set for the start of his second term, the president appears ready to embrace his internal critics, and leave Afghanistan to the robots.”