

Editorial

1. Drone Wars in Pakistan

The phrase ‘war on terror’ might have been quietly dropped from the United States’ military lexicon – to be replaced (according to a memo to Pentagon staff) by ‘overseas contingency operation’. But it is clear that to some degree there is continuity in practice in the tactics being pursued by the coalition in Afghanistan and Pakistan. An example is the relatively little reported campaign in western Pakistan characterised by what (in another euphemism) are commonly termed ‘drone incidents’, but which would be better called air-raids.

The term ‘drone’ has a serviceable analytical use, but the suggestion it conveys – of a very small pilot-less aircraft that is more of a scaled-up version of a model aircraft – is misleading as a description of what is happening in parts of Pakistan. For the technology of the ‘drone’, which is developing at an extraordinary rate, is as sophisticated as its effects are becoming more intensive and destructive.

The present reality of these ‘drone’ deployments is that United States forces are flying large and heavily armed aircraft over Pakistan for virtually every hour of every day, frequently accompanied by actual attacks. These air-raids have killed hundreds of people, many of them civilians, and including scores of women and children.

Three aspects of this major development in the war are worthy of note: the size and power of the weapons being used, the rapid increase in their use, and the impact in terms of civilian casualties ...

The weapon of choice for United States forces was until recently the Predator, manufactured by General Atomics. The much larger and more powerful MQ-9 Reaper is now becoming their favourite. The Reaper’s turboprop engine is nearly eight times as powerful as the Predator; it carries fifteen times the weapons load and yet travels three times more quickly.

Because these planes have no pilots and are operated remotely, often by technicians at bases in the United States, there is a huge ‘weight gain’. This, combined with the sheer size of the Reapers, means that they can easily carry a range of weapons on a par with a conventional strike aircraft.

A recent version of the Reaper has a wingspan of over twenty-five metres (about the same as a Boeing 737 passenger-jet), and can carry sufficient fuel to stay airborne for thirty-four hours. If fitted with two drop-tanks and 300 kilograms of weapons, it can fly a forty-two-hour sortie; as pilot fatigue is not an issue, shifts of operators can be used to sustain this length of time in the air.

In practice, however, bombing attacks are more likely to be undertaken by Reapers with a much shorter range, and carrying more weapons. These can include Hellfire air-to-ground missiles, Paveway laser-guided bombs, or GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs).

The Reaper is a bomber in all but name. A comment in September 2006 on the designation of this ‘unmanned aerial vehicle’ (UAV) from the then chief-of-staff of the United States Air Force (USAF), General T Michael Moseley, is indicative of official attitudes: ‘We’ve moved from using UAVs primarily in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance roles before Operation Iraqi Freedom, to a true hunter role with the Reaper’. An even better indication of its growing role is that, in 2008, the New York Air National Guard 174th fighter wing began to make the change from flying F-16 strike aircraft to ‘flying’ Reapers.

A recent customer for the Reaper is Britain’s Royal Air Force, which has deployed the aircraft in Afghanistan since autumn 2007. Its initial deployment was as an unarmed reconnaissance vehicle, but the armed variant is now in use. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) acknowledges the MQ-9’s ‘[complementary] mission’ to be ‘a persistent hunter-killer against emerging targets to achieve joint force commander objectives’. The MoD has, however, been notably reticent about publicising actual cases where the Predator has engaged in combat, or about any casualties resulting from this.

These military and technical advances, in the context of the difficulties experienced by western coalition forces in Afghanistan in the war against the Taliban, help explain why the escalation in the number of air-strikes in Pakistan (regarded as the source of much Taliban activity and weaponry) has been rapid.

US forces struck just twice in 2006, three times in 2007 and seven times in the first eight months of 2008. A surge in the last four months of 2008 saw twenty-nine air-raids, and there were fourteen between January and 8 April 2009. Pakistani sources assess the number killed over this near forty-months period at 701, including 14 al Qaeda leaders; 152 of these have lost their lives this year. These sources also claim that the great majority of people killed are civilian, though US military sources often dispute this.

The pattern here is that the Pentagon or US spokespersons closer to the action tend to discount claims of civilian casualties immediately after a raid, only for independent evidence later to appear that confirms the initial local reports. It is therefore plausible in many cases to be sceptical of the denials ...

It is also relevant that the air war in Pakistan has accelerated in a manner

largely unrecognised in the western media, though this is widely covered in the Middle East and South-West Asia. This goes a long way to explain the anti-western mood in Pakistan, and the difficulty that the current government in Islamabad has in supporting US actions ...

Paul Rogers

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University. His full text is available online (opendemocracy.net). This shortened version is reprinted with grateful acknowledgements.

* * *

2. Blowback or Frame-up in Lancashire?

British police raided a string of addresses on April 8th and 9th in Liverpool, Manchester and Clitheroe (Lancashire) alleging widespread faults in the system of visa allocations for Pakistani students, and claiming that a number of arrests had become necessary in order to uproot a potential terrorist cell. In fact, twelve arrests were made. Eleven involved Pakistani citizens. Bob Quick, the head of Specialist Operations at the Metropolitan Police, became the object of ferocious criticism in the press, because he had carried a top-secret folder under his arm when entering Downing Street. This enabled enthusiastic reporters to take photographs of the summary of the police game-plan, which, it was said, risked compromising the projected operation for the suppression of terrorism. This, therefore, had to be brought slightly forward, apparently to its detriment. The Prime Minister claimed that the police were foiling ‘a very big terrorist plot’.

We have seen some of these very big plots before, and they have done something to encourage very big agnosticism about various elements of the war on terror. We shall see how long it takes to charge any of the arrested men, or to release them with or without fulsome apologies, or even compensation for wrongful arrest.

The newspapers cannot be blamed for not knowing how seriously to take police allegations at this stage of their enquiries. It is perfectly possible that all of those detained are wholly or partly guilty, or even completely innocent. But then again, this may not be the reason for the arrests, which certainly revive the jitters among those of a nervous disposition.

We had occasion to warn in *Spokesman No. 99*, before the remarkable victory of Barack Obama in the American Presidential elections, that the

Obama team might, given the chance, authorise an ugly extension of the Afghan war into Pakistan. This was already beginning as a series of illicit raids. We were concerned about the effects of the incursion of Drones into Pakistani airspace, and the increasingly frequent strikes on alleged Pakistani terrorists. Once again, the facts of these cases are veiled in a persistent fog, which includes no small amount of misinformation.

We do not even know whether Osama bin Laden is in fact alive. It would hardly be surprising if all those bombs in all those caves had succeeded in translating him to a different plane of existence. We do know that there are large numbers of Afghans and Pakistanis with substantial grievances against the American and Allied incursions, first in Afghanistan, and now, increasingly, in Pakistan. As we said last year, this is a sinister dimension of the new situation, especially for Gordon Brown. 'For him, Pakistan is not simply a distant country with exotic customs. He has got Pakistan at home as well.' Were the arrests in Lancashire a preliminary recognition of this fact? Or were they a repetition of the dreary recital of scaremongering, false alarms to which we have become increasingly accustomed?

We have already published the most revealing statement by Barack Obama from the Woodrow Wilson Centre, on the 1st August 2007. He promised to 'turn the page'. The first of five elements he promised to confront involved 'getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan'. For emphasis, he promised to take the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Is it now to be claimed that the fight will also be taken, beyond Pakistan, to Manchester, Liverpool and Clitheroe?

There are very large numbers of armed men who have been indoctrinated in the arts of 'taking the fight' here, there and everywhere. Where will they be going next? Which other British communities will fall into their remit? How well justified will be their efforts to suppress terrorism, and how many mistakes will be made in the process? These are very worrying questions. If the war is going to Pakistan, there are bound to be citizens in Britain with Pakistani antecedents, who are likely to regard this as a matter of profound concern.

Before the police squads drill, and the intelligence communities marshal their theories, is it not sensible to ask the question, do we really want to conduct a war in Afghanistan or Pakistan? Is it really wise to alienate a substantial part of our population? Prominent Government Ministers sing from a dreary hymn sheet about the need to root out extremists among the immigrant population. Why don't they address the question of what is

seeding extremism, and what actions might foster moderation among the unfortunate people who suffer from all these wars and punitive expeditions?

Might not the cessation of terrorist bombing raids on weddings and other civil reunions be a help?

Ken Coates

Postscript: On 21 April, after this editorial was written, nine more of the 12 men arrested earlier in the month were released without charge by police, but immediately taken into the custody of the UK Borders Agency. One man, who had already been released, was similarly treated. The other two men remained in police custody for a further day, before being discharged, one into the custody of the Borders Agency, while the other, a British citizen, was reportedly ‘staying at a hotel while police restored his home to the state it was in before extensive searches’.

Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain said:

‘It is perfectly understandable that not every arrest the police make will result in charges being brought ... that is the nature of this sort of police work. What is unacceptable though is for the Government to make prejudicial remarks right at the outset. And now, now that we learn that actual evidence cannot be gathered to substantiate any terror plot, instead of releasing them with good grace and making clear a mistake has been made, the Government is seeking to deport them, citing a very vague national security threat. That is a very dishonourable way of proceeding.’

Jack Jones

As we go to press, we are sorry to receive the very sad news that Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers’ Union has died. In our next issue, we will discuss Jack’s lifelong work for peace, socialism and workers’ control.