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For Now, Drones Are the Best Option



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It is impossible to say whether drone warfare has done more harm than good in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where I have the greatest familiarity and where most drone strikes have apparently occurred.

The Central Intelligence Agency and Pakistan's intelligence agency and military have revealed little about actual targets and outcomes, so we cannot assess whether the people they were trying to kill were "drone worthy."

Most journalism relies on dubious Pakistani reports that exaggerate innocent civilian casualties and discount terrorist fatalities. There are few efforts to independently verify "first-hand accounts," which are always assumed to be true.

In the tribal areas of Pakistan, drones are less dangerous than ground operations.

Finally, no forensic experts have been employed to verify claims about injuries to discern if they comport with ballistics and weapon effects associated with drone-delivered munitions. Given that trauma, injury and death can be attributed to terrorist attacks and Pakistani conventional military operations, this form of verification is critical.

But we can conclude for several reasons that drones are the best alternative, once the United States (with the collusion of Pakistan agencies in many cases) decides that a person is to be killed.

The tribal areas are governed by the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation rather than Pakistan's constitution. Because of this, there are no police forces in the area, but rather militias, paramilitary and military forces. Americans could not therefore detain suspects without ground operations.

Alternatives are more deadly and devastating: Pakistani military operations, which are not precise and have displaced up to 4 million people, devastate infrastructure and displace whole communities.

And while Pakistan helps the United States in some operations it undermines the United States in others. For this reason, the United States cannot simply outsource such an assignment to Pakistan because there have been too many cases where the Pakistanis have alerted the targets in advance.

Drones may not be desirable but they are the best option at least in the tribal areas.