

Since the 17th February the United States have carried out eight airstrikes. The targets were:

February 17th - A Predator attack that targeting a Taliban compound in the village of Tapi near Miramshah, the main town in North Waziristan. The strike killed Sheikh Mansoor, a key al Qaida military leader based in North Waziristan. Pakistani news sources reported that the airstrike left a number of other important militants dead

February 18th ♦ An unmanned US Predator fired two missiles at a compound and a vehicle in Danda Darpa Khel just outside of Miramshah, North Waziristan. Four Haqqani Network fighters were initially reported killed, including Mohammed Haqqani, one of twelve sons of Jalaluddin Haqqani.

February 24th ♦ An unmanned US strike aircraft fired three missiles at a Haqqani Network compound and vehicle in the village of Dargi Mandi just outside, Miramshah, North Waziristan. Five Haqqani Network fighters and three foreign fighters, a term used to describe al Qaeda members, were reported killed and several more were wounded. On March 2nd the Taliban released a statement confirming that Qari Mohammad Zafar, a leader of the al Qaeda and Taliban-linked Fedayeen-i-Islam, was killed in this attack.

March 8th ♦ Two unmanned US strike aircraft fired missiles at two compounds in a bazaar in Miramshah, North Waziristan. Five terrorists were reported dead in a strike that targeted the Haqqani Network.

March 10th ♦ Five unmanned US strike aircraft fired a volley of four missiles at a Taliban compound in the village of Mizar Madakhel near the Afghan border, North Waziristan. The compound was owned by Hafiz Gul Bahadar, the Taliban commander for North Waziristan. The Pakistani military signed a peace agreement with Bahadar even though he continued to shelter al Qaeda leaders and fighters. Fifteen Taliban fighters were initially reported killed in the strike. On March 11th, US intelligence officials confirmed to the Long War Journal that Bahadar was the target of the strike. Bahadar was further rumoured to have been killed in the strike, however US officials have been unable to confirm that this is the case.

In a martyrdom statement released on March 12th Sadam Hussein al Hussami was killed in this airstrike. Hussami was a key al Qaeda operative involved in the network's external operations. He was also directly linked to the suicide attack at Combat Outpost Chapman on December 30th, 2009.

March 16th ♦ An unmanned US strike aircraft fired four missiles at two Taliban compounds in the village of Datta Khel, North Waziristan. Datta Khel is a known hub for al Qaida and Taliban leaders. However no senior Taliban or al Qaida figures were reported killed in this strike.

March 17th ♦ The US launched two unmanned airstrikes in North Waziristan. In the first strike, five missiles were fired at two vehicles transporting militants in the village of Hamzoni. Five militants were reported killed in this attack. The US also fired two missiles at a compound in Datta Khel. Three terrorists were reported killed in this attack. No senior Taliban or al Qaida figures have been identified among the victims.

The United States has now carried out twenty-two strikes in 2010. Of the 121 airstrikes carried out since 2004, over 50% have targeted positions in North Waziristan. The Haqqani Network has now been subjected to 31 airstrikes, compared with 22 strikes on targets associated with Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan. ♦Baitullah ♦ the then overall leader of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) ♦ was killed in an airstrike on August 5th 2009. Upon his brother's death Hakeemullah Mehsud assumed leadership of the TTP. Since January 14th 2010 Pakistani officials have reported on three separate occasions that Hakeemullah has been killed in three separate airstrikes. However a former officer of the Pakistani military intelligence service indicated on March 15th that two of his 'associates' were with Hakeemullah on the March 9th.

One interesting feature of the Long War Journal's recent reports is distinctions made between the use of Predator or the 'newer, more

deadly Reaper' unmanned aircraft. This distinction merits closer inspection. The Reaper is a medium altitude long endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). According to reports, the Reaper has overcome most of the difficulties encountered with previous UAVs that commonly must compromise between conflicting demands for payload, speed, altitude, speed and persistence. With an operational ceiling of 50,000ft, and higher cruising speed, Reaper can cover a larger area, under all weather conditions carrying payloads of more than 1.5 tons. Whilst the Predator is also capable of an identical operational ceiling, its payload capacity is 450 pounds.

The Reaper also carries more advanced sensors at a weight that is twice the capability of the Predator. It can carry external stores of 1,500lbs on each of its two inboard weapons stations, 500-600 lb. on the two middle stations and 150-200 lbs. on the outboard stations. The Reaper can also carry up to 14 Hellfire missiles, compared with two on the Predator. The Reaper can stay airborne for up to 14 hours fully loaded. Yet by comparison the Predator can remain airborne for 24 hours.

On this most basic of evidence it is difficult to establish which UAV is proving the most effective in strikes against the Taliban and al Qaida. Whilst the Reaper clearly wins in terms of lethality, the Predator's durability still makes it a formidable aircraft. Whilst both have proved effective in the killing of senior militant figures, high-value targets still remain elusive. As a result, unmanned airstrikes will remain a feature of the war on terror.