

Since the 19th March the United States have carried out five unmanned airstrikes. The targets were:

March 21st: Unmanned Predators and Reapers struck a compound in the village of Inzar, North Waziristan. The targeted compound belonged to a relative of a militant commander. Initial reports indicated that four terrorists were killed. However none of these were reported to be senior al Qaida or Taliban leaders. The Taliban responded to the attacks by killing four "U.S. spies." A note found attached to the bodies stated that: "Spies are spies, and they will come to the same fate as these men. Do not spy for America."

March 23rd: Unmanned aircraft targeted a vehicle inside a compound run by the Haqqani Network in Machis, North Waziristan. Whilst six terrorists were reported killed in the strike, none were believed to be senior al Qaida or Taliban leaders.

March 27th: An unmanned strike attacked a compound in the village of Hurmaz, North Waziristan. Four terrorists were reported killed in the strike, but none were considered senior or al Qaida operatives. The village is administered by Hafiz Gul Bahadar, the most senior Taliban commander in the region. However, Badahar was also rumoured to have been killed in an attack in the Datta Khel region on March 10th.

March 30th: At least three missiles were fired during an unmanned strike on a Taliban safe house in Tapi, North Waziristan. Tapi is a known haven for the Haqqani Network. Six terrorists were reported killed in the strikes, but no senior al Qaida or Taliban operatives were identified amongst the casualties.

April 12th: Two missiles were fired on a compound run by a known local Taliban leader in the village of Boya, North Waziristan. According to reports five Taliban fighters were killed and two were wounded. As with the other attacks no senior al Qaida or Taliban leaders were reported to have been killed.

So far this year, the U.S. has carried out 26 airstrikes in Pakistan. According to the Long War Journal, these strikes have resulted in the deaths of 188 al Qaida or Taliban fighters. North Waziristan continues to be the sole location for airstrikes, with the Haqqani Network the principal target.

The gap of thirteen days between the two most recent strikes was by no means uneventful. ♦ On the 5th April the Pakistani Taliban mounted an assault on the U.S. Consulate in Peshawar. The attacks represented the first major strikes by the Taliban outside the tribal areas since mid-March. Pakistani security guards prevented the Taliban from entering the compound. Four members of the assault team and two security guards were killed during the battle. Upon accepting responsibility the Taliban also claimed that the attacks were in response to the unmanned airstrikes.

On the 9th April the Pakistani Air Force (PAF) took the air campaign away from North Waziristan. Fighter aircraft bombed a private prison ran by the outlawed Lashkar-e-Islam (LI) in Teerah Valley, Khyber Agency. According to the Daily Times the prison was used by the LI to hold people abducted for ransom. Ten kidnapped people and two LI operatives were killed in the attack.

On the 10th April the PAF also targeted a jirga in the Teerah Valley. The jirga was organised by a local tribe and was attended by members of the LI. PAF jets hit the site of the jirga twice, killing 45 civilians and extremists in the process.

However on the 13th April reports emerged that at least 71 civilians were killed in this airstrike. Sources also claimed the PAF strike was misdirected. Instead of attacking a jirga the strike hit a house belonging to a tribal elder from the Kukikhel clan. ♦ The Kukikhel are regarded as loyal to the State, and reportedly have three sons serving in the Pakistani military.

The Khyber region has become a hub of extremist activity since October 2009. After the Pakistani military launched an operation in South Waziristan both the Taliban and al Qaida relocated to Khyber. Both the LI and the Taliban are known to operate training camps and bases within the region. These are used to launch attacks in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet this is not to suggest that the LI and the Taliban have formed an alliance.

Despite exerting a Taliban-like grip over his territory the leader of the LI, Mangal Bagh, claims not to support the Taliban. Khyber is also of strategic importance to NATO. The Khyber Pass is the major NATO supply route into Pakistan. It is estimated that 70% of NATO's supplies transit through the Khyber Pass. Accordingly the Taliban have been active in Khyber, attacking both Pakistani security forces and NATO supply columns. The most recent attack came on March 31st, when 80 to 100 militants attacked a Frontier Corps camp near Bara town. According to Dawn, dozens of militants and six soldiers were killed in the attack. The PAF's use of fighter aircraft further demonstrates the United States' determination to maintain its dominant and still exclusive position in the region's unmanned strike activities. On the 22nd January, the United States outlined plans to provide Pakistan with RQ-7 Shadow unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Yet as Viewpoints has previously pointed out the Shadow is used solely for intelligence gathering rather than combat purposes. The Obama administration has also recently responded to criticisms that equate unmanned airstrikes with illegal assassinations or unlawful extrajudicial killings. In a March 25th speech to the American Society for International Law, State Department Legal Advisor Harold Koh cited domestic and international law as justification for the unmanned programme. As the United States is engaged in armed conflict with al Qaida and the Taliban, individuals are considered as members of a belligerent armed organisation and, therefore, lawful targets under international law. Accordingly, a state that is involved in armed conflict or legitimate self-defence is not required to provide targets with due legal process before the state opts to use lethal force. Koh further emphasised that unmanned airstrikes must be undertaken with caution. In this respect, the President personally signs-off the airstrike and relevant lawmakers are briefed on the programme. Given Pakistan's reputation for oscillating between civilian and military rule and institutional confrontation it is unlikely that Islamabad can offer the same legal guarantees. Consequently unmanned airstrikes will continue to be undertaken by the United States alone.