

By Alex Shone, UK Defence Forum Research Associate in Residence

The total number of drone attacks for 2011 has now reached 19 according to the Long War Journal resulting in a total of 83 insurgent and terrorist casualties. The journal now reports at least 21 civilian casualties as a result of attacks.

March has been a month of steady drone activity. Notable events were the controversial attack on the 17th March which is thought to have killed a large number of suspected militants, though perhaps also to have killed civilians.

It is also worthy of note the reaction by militant groups in the region to the drone strikes, particularly the strike of the 17th. Action taken by the militants against those they deem as 'spies', the human intelligence assets helping to target drone strikes, appears to have intensified.

#### **28th March:**

The Taliban have created a group assigned to hunt down tribesmen suspected of providing information to the CIA that enables the Predator campaign to target terrorist leaders in Pakistani tribal areas.

The group, known as the Lashkar-e-Khorasan, or Army of the Khorasan, was established in North Waziristan last year by both the Haqqani Network and Taliban forces under the command of Hafiz Gul Bahadar. The creation of the group was confirmed by Pakistani intelligence officials, tribesmen, and members of the Taliban.

#### **22nd March:**

A "dual hatted Taliban and al Qaeda commander" who leads forces on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border has threatened to avenge a recent controversial Predator strike in the Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan.

Qari Zia Rahman, who commands both al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, threatened to retaliate against US forces in Afghanistan for the March 17 Predator strike in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan. The strike, which was denounced by top Pakistani military and political leaders, killed more than 30 people, including 10 Taliban fighters and a senior lieutenant loyal to North Waziristan Taliban leader Hafiz Gul Bahadar.

#### **21st March:**

The Taliban executed four more so-called 'US spies' who were accused of providing information that led to last week's controversial Predator airstrike in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan.

The Taliban also accused the men of aiding the US in the March 17 Predator strike that killed

more than 30 people, including 10 Taliban fighters and a senior lieutenant loyal to North Waziristan Taliban leader Hafiz Gul Bahadar.

### **17th March:**

US Predators carried out another attack in the al Qaeda haven of Datta Khel in Pakistan's Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan, the second in the area in two days.

Reports as to the precise number of casualties differ as do those surrounding the target of the strike. It is believed that a large number of militant fighters were among the dead, as were civilians and even perhaps members of the security forces.

This strike was strongly and openly condemned by Pakistan's top military commander, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

### **16th March:**

The US launched an attack against terrorist targets in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas, in the known al Qaeda haven of Datta Khel in North Waziristan. The drones fired a pair of missiles at a moving vehicle in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan, killing five suspected militants. The exact target of the strike is unknown, and no senior al Qaeda or Taliban leaders have been reported killed in the attack. No civilians have been reported killed.

It has been speculated that a shift in US drone tactics has been effected, so as to minimize civilian casualties, by hitting vehicles believed to be carrying terrorist leaders and operatives.

The Datta Khel area is administered by Hafiz Gul Bahadar, the Taliban commander for North Waziristan. Bahadar provides shelter to top al Qaeda leaders as well as terrorists from numerous Pakistani and Central Asian terror groups.

Datta Khel is a known hub of Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al Qaeda activity. While Bahadar administers the region, the Haqqani Network, al Qaeda, and allied Central Asian jihadi groups are also based in the area. The Lashkar al Zil, al Qaeda's Shadow Army, is known to have a command center in Datta Khel.

### **14th March:**

Unmanned US strike aircraft attacked yet again in Pakistan's Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan. The strike is the fourth in four days.

The drones fired a pair of missiles at a moving vehicle in the village of Tapi in the Miramshah area of North Waziristan, killing six. The exact target of the strike is unknown, and no senior al Qaeda or Taliban leaders have been reported killed in the attack.

The village of Tapi is a known haven for al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network. US Predators have struck in Tapi four other times since December 2008.

**13th March:**

Unmanned US strike aircraft conducted their second attack today, this time in Pakistan's Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan. The drones fired a barrage of six missiles at a compound run by a Taliban commander and a vehicle in the village of Spagla in the Miramshah area of North Waziristan, killing six suspected militants and wounding five more.

Spagla is a known hub of Taliban and al Qaeda activity. US Predators have struck targets in the village three other times since December 2009. The last strike in the village took place on Feb. 21, 2011, when nine suspected militants were killed in an attack on a compound.

The village of Spagla is located in the sphere of influence of the Haqqani Network, a powerful Taliban group that is a favorite of Pakistan's military and intelligence services and is closely allied to al Qaeda. The Haqqani Network shelters and supports al Qaeda, and launches attacks against Coalition and Afghan forces across the border.

In another attack made on this day, unmanned US strike aircraft fired at a vehicle in an area of South Waziristan controlled by the Taliban, but failed to hit the target, according to reports from the region. This failed strike is the first recorded instance of Predators missing their target.

The drone launched a pair of missiles at a vehicle in the Azam Warsak area of South Waziristan, but the missiles missed their target.

The target of the strike is unknown. Al Qaeda operatives and members of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan are known to shelter in the area.

**13th March:**

US Predators killed five suspected militants in an area of North Waziristan known to shelter al Qaeda and allied terror groups seeking to attack the West.

The drones fired two missiles at a vehicle in the town of Khaisor, which is near the town of Mir Ali. Three terrorists were reported killed in the first volley. The Predators then circled back and fired four more missiles at the vehicle as the Taliban attempted to recover the bodies. Two more were reported killed.

No senior al Qaeda, Taliban, or other terrorist leaders have been reported killed in today's strike. But the nature of the strike, including the follow-up attack using four missiles, indicates that a wanted leader or a dangerous operative was the target of the attack.

**9th March:**

A senior Pakistani Army officer said that the covert US air campaign inside Pakistan's tribal

areas is killing dangerous al Qaeda and Taliban fighters and that civilian casualties are low.

Major General Ghayur Mehmood, the commander of Pakistan's 7 Division, whose area of operations includes the Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan, said that "hardcore elements" of the Taliban and "foreigners" make up the bulk of those killed in the US airstrikes. Mehmood's North Waziristan territory has been the epicenter of the airstrike campaign in recent years. Since the beginning of 2010, 90 percent of the strikes (113 of the 130 strikes) have hit targets in North Waziristan.

"Myths and rumours about US predator strikes and the casualty figures are many, but it's a reality that many of those being killed in these strikes are hardcore elements, a sizeable number of them foreigners," Mehmood told Pakistani reporters in a briefing in Miramshah in North Waziristan.

Mehmood also said that "few" civilians have been killed in the strikes.

### **8th March:**

Unmanned US Predators struck inside Pakistan's tribal areas for the first time in 11 days. Today's strike killed five "militants" in the tribal agency of South Waziristan. The drones fired two missiles at a compound in the village of Landidog about 12 miles west of Wana, the main town in South Waziristan.

It was reported that five suspected militants were killed, but no specifics were offered as to whether those killed were Taliban, al Qaeda, or members of other allied terror groups. No senior terror commanders have been reported killed. Also, no civilians were reported killed in the strike.

The area is controlled by Mullah Nazir, the leader of the Taliban in the Waziri tribal areas in South Waziristan. Pakistan's military and intelligence services consider Nazir and his followers "good Taliban" as they do not openly seek the overthrow of the Pakistani state.