

Since the 12th April the United States has carried out seven unmanned airstrikes. The targets were:

April 14th: Unmanned predators or reapers fired two Hellfire missiles at a car in the village of Ambor Shagha, Miramshah, North Waziristan. According to Pakistani intelligence sources four militants were killed in the strike and an additional three were wounded. No senior al Qaeda or Taliban figures have been reported killed in the strike.

April 16th: Unmanned U.S. aircraft fired seven missiles at a Taliban compound and two vehicles in the town of Tolkhel, Miramshah, North Waziristan. The first strike hit the targets, whereas the second appears to have hit as the Taliban attempted to recover the dead and the wounded. In total, six militants were killed in this strike.

April 24th: A flight of Predators or Reapers hit a Taliban compound in the town of Marsi Khel, North Waziristan. Whilst seven militants were reported killed in this attack none were senior al Qaeda or Taliban figures.

April 26th: An unknown number of unmanned aircraft hit a compound owned by the Taliban commander Haleem Khan near Miramshah, North Waziristan. Most of the eight fighters killed in the attack are believed to be from South Waziristan. Haleem Khan nor any other senior militants were reported killed in the attack.

May 3rd: Unmanned U.S. aircraft fired three missiles at a moving vehicle and killed four militants in the town of Marsi Khel, North Waziristan. None were reported to be senior al Qaeda or Taliban officials.

May 9th: Ten militants were killed after unmanned aircraft fired two missiles at a compound in the town of Inzar Kala, Datta Khel. According to Pakistani intelligence the property became suspicious as it was being used by foreigners. However it was not immediately if any high-value targets were amongst the casualties.

May 11th: The U.S. launched a barrage of missiles at a Taliban compound and vehicle in two separate strikes in the Datta Khel region. In the first strike unmanned vehicles fired 18 missiles at a 'training camp' ran by North Waziristan Taliban leader Hafiz Gul Bahadar. Fourteen militants were reported killed in this strike. In the strike two missiles were fired at a moving vehicle. Whilst no senior militant figures have been reported killed, the intensity of the attack suggests these were high-value targets.

According to the Long War Journal the United States has so far carried out 35 airstrikes this year. As this is 18 shy of the 2009 total it is likely that airstrikes in 2010 will exceed the previous year. North Waziristan remains the focal point for unmanned airstrikes, with over half occurring within territory associated with Hafiz Gul Bahadar.

Over the past year twenty top Taliban or al Qaeda operatives have been reported killed by unmanned airstrikes. However intelligence figures continue to confirm that Hakeemullah Mehsud, the leader of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, is still alive. Yet despite surviving a U.S. airstrike in January the Pentagon now believes that Hakeemullah is no longer in command of his forces.

Last month's Drone Wars highlighted the U.S. State Department's legal justification for unmanned strikes. Since then a prominent law professor has outlined to a Congressional panel how pilots of unmanned aircraft could theoretically be prosecuted for 'war crimes'. As unmanned airstrikes can be conducted from afar the pilots could – in theory – be subject to prosecution in countries where attacks occur. This is because drone pilots are not combatants in the strictest legal sense. Accordingly, parties that participate in hostilities without the combatant's privilege do not violate laws of war. However they gain no immunity from domestic laws. As a result drone pilots may be liable for prosecution for injuries, death or damage of property caused by their airstrikes.

It needs to be pointed out that the Congressional panel also heard criticisms of this legal perspective from other prominent academics. However the opinion appears to have added a new dynamic to debates regarding the legality of unmanned airstrikes. As such attacks are likely to continue it is a perspective that will likely receive increased attention.