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The Impact of External Support on Insurgency

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Abstract

Insurgency is an organized struggle to overthrow an existing government. External support has played an important role in the success and failure of insurgencies. Insurgencies externally supported both militarily and financially lasted long and succeeded. In contrast, many insurgencies failed, lacking external support. The existing literature has discussed how external support contributes to the success and failure of insurgencies. This study, however, discusses the external support to counterinsurgents, not insurgents and its impact on insurgency in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The article explains that after Pakistan became an ally of the US in the war against terror, it allowed the CIA to undertake targeted operations against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. After their distrust increased, the US started its drone campaign to target the militants. The drone campaign helped the militants to exploit the innocent killed by drones and attracted more support and recruited more youth against the government.

Key Words: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, Drones, External Support, Escalation

Introduction

Insurgency, according to David [Galula \(1964, p. 2\)](#) is a prolonged struggle conducted systematically to gain some specific objectives while overthrowing the existing government. In popular debate and academic discourse, the term insurgency is used exclusively for subversion and irregular warfare, and similarly, counterinsurgency is used for such measures taken by the government and its foreign supporters to defeat it ([Zaalberg, 2012](#)). Insurgency and counterinsurgency are not new forms of warfare; however, the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, gave new life to both insurgency and counterinsurgency. In Afghanistan, the US and NATO forces faced a Taliban insurgency that successfully overthrew President Ashraf Ghani's government on August 15,

2021. Similarly, Pakistan being an ally of the US in the war against terror, also witnessed insurgency in its tribal region. Historically, insurgencies have been supported by external governments which contributed to their success. This study, however, explores how external support to counterinsurgents (not insurgents) contributes to the success or failure of insurgencies.

The existing literature has discussed the role of external support to insurgents, the inefficiencies of the allies, and the role of repressive state policies in the escalation of insurgencies. For instance, [Melshen \(2007, p. 685\)](#) argues that external support to insurgents plays a key role in the success and failure of insurgencies. Insurgencies in the Philippines, Malaya, and Kenya failed because they

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did not receive outside support. As opposed to the above-stated examples, insurgencies in Rhodesia and Afghanistan, as well as the Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam, received external support and were successful ([Melshen, 2007, p. 685](#)). His study provides a good account of external support to insurgencies but has not discussed the role of external support to counterinsurgents. [Byman \(2006\)](#) stresses that the role of a country's allies is an important factor in the success and failure of some insurgencies. He notes that the allies of the US, who fought Al-Qaeda-linked insurgencies, suffered from four categories of structural problems: repressive regimes, imbalance in civil-military relations, economic instability and discriminatory societies. He further observes that the allies also have distinct interests which influence their fight against insurgents, and therefore the US should spend more of its resources to improve their domestic security instead of helping allies to deal with insurgencies.

Likewise, [Goswami's \(2013, p. 29\)](#) study specifically discusses the escalation process in insurgencies. She suggests that several factors, including insurgents' political motivation, supply of arms, state response, and internal and external support, play a significant role in the success of insurgencies. According to her, the state's use of massive force to deal with insurgencies in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in India was a key factor in the insurgency escalation (2013, p. 35). [Kubo \(2007, p. 183\)](#) maintains that there is a strong relationship between the repressive measures taken by a state and the escalation of insurgency and that state repressive policy is an important intervening factor that contributes to the success or failure of a rebellion. Furthermore, he stresses that states with weak democracy and low GDP per capita often tend to use repressive measures (2007, pp. 184-185). [Bose \(2003, p. 116\)](#) cites an example from India and maintains that the repressive policy of the Indian government has radicalized public opinion and has convinced thousands of Kashmiris to start the armed struggle against the state. [Hibbs \(1973, p. 116\)](#), advancing the same argument, demonstrates that state repression often leads to mass violence and exacerbates the situation.

The above factors are immensely important, and they influence the success and failure of an insurgency; however, they have overlooked how the external support to counterinsurgents contributes to insurgencies. As stated above, this study suggests a different explanation for the escalation of insurgency in the tribal areas. In addition to the above factors, I demonstrate in this article that the intervention/support to counterinsurgent forces also determines the escalation of an insurgency provided that it reinforces the insurgents' narrative. I argue that the US intervention and its extensive and indiscriminate employment of drone strikes in Pakistan strengthened the narrative of the insurgents and escalated the insurgency. I will analyze the problem in light of David Kilcullen's global counterinsurgency theory.

Historical Background

Pakistan and the US have a chequered history of bilateral relations. Their relations were at their lowest ebb before the 9/11 incident. However, after the initiation of the war on terror in 2001, their relations resumed, and Pakistan became a frontline state, receiving a total of \$33 billion in aid ([Iqbal, 2018](#)). However, Islamabad claimed that the losses were greater than the amount received in US aid. According to the Pakistan government, 44 percent of the above amount was received on account of Islamabad's support to US operations in Afghanistan ([Rana, 2017](#)). It is significant to highlight here that most of the US aid was provided to the military regimes in Pakistan.

Instead of establishing a long-term strategic relationship with Pakistan, Washington preferred to have better relations with Pakistan's dictators – Field Marshal Ayub Khan in the 1950s, General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, and General Pervez Musharraf after 9/11 ([Schaffer, 2002](#)). The support of military dictator Musharraf in Pakistan was particularly hard to fathom, as ostensibly, the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq to restore democracy ([Fair et al., 2010](#)). The general perception in Pakistan is that the US used Pakistan, but when her interests were fulfilled, the relationship deteriorated. The US government, on the other hand, believed, especially after 9/11, that Pakistan played a double game by taking action

against some groups while covertly protecting others. The fundamental difference between the two countries at the strategic level was that the US wanted a uniform policy and action against all Taliban groups, whereas Pakistan wanted to dismantle the groups undermining its internal security ([Basit, 2013](#)).

It was partly this distrust, and policy differences, that led the US government to conduct drone strikes inside Pakistan's tribal areas to target the high-profile militants. After the Pakistan government began to sign peace accords with the militants, questions were raised regarding the seriousness of the army fighting militancy. Secondly, after FATA became a sanctuary for international terrorists and a major flashpoint, it also made the US increase drone strikes. However, the historical differences between the two countries and the collateral damage of the drone strikes contributed to the militancy and helped the insurgents to obtain the support of the people.

The Legality of Drone Strikes

An [ICG report \(2013a\)](#) claims that Pakistan's military dictator General Pervez Musharraf and the subsequent government of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani had entered into tacit agreement with the US regarding drone strikes. Gilani, for the first time in 2010, acknowledged that the Musharraf government permitted the US government to use the drones for 'surveillance and reconnaissance' in Pakistan ([The Tribune, 2010](#)). Musharraf, in an interview with CNN in 2013, acknowledged that the government has signed off on strikes only on few instances and when there was no chance of collateral damage ([quoted in Robertson and Botelho, 2013](#)).

Mary Ellen O'Connell, a Professor of Law at the University of Notre, questions the use of a drone on legal grounds and argues (1) that the drones are battlefield weapons and can be used only in a combat zone. It is unlawful to use it outside the combat zone. The US legally justifies the use of drones in Iraq and Afghanistan, pointing to internal violence inviting the assistance of another state. However, the US cannot point to any such invitation in Pakistan and in many cases, drone strikes took place when there was no armed

conflict. Even the express consent by the Pakistani government cannot justify its use because states cannot give consent to a right they do not have ([O'Connell, 2010a](#)). She further observes (2) that the principle of necessity and proportionality must be respected by the US when employing drones. Proportionality disallows an attack that causes loss or injury to civilian life, damage to civilian property or a combination thereof is excessive in relation to the expected direct military advantage ([O'Connell, 2010b, p. 5](#)). Keeping this principle in mind, the drone attacks exceeded the loss over advantage and fuelled anti-Americanism and helped the militants to attract more recruits to take revenge.

O'Connell further argues that (3) drones operating in Pakistan are violating the humanitarian law identified by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The drone attacks in Pakistan are conducted by CIA operators and civilian contractors who are hardly trained in the laws of armed conflict. She concludes that the negative impact and the unlawful nature of the drone strikes raise a serious question on the US promotion of the rule of law in the world and it is difficult to justify the use of a drone by the CIA, let alone civil contractors ([O'Connell, 2010b, p. 6](#)).

The failure of the US government to publish information regarding drones and to allow independent scrutiny undermines the assertion that the strikes were conducted in accordance with international law ([ICG, 2013a](#)). Article 2 (4) of the UN charter holds back a state from applying force against the territorial integrity or sovereignty of any other member state. However, there are two exceptions to this rule. The Security Council has been given authority to act if there is any threat to peace and during an act of aggression (O'Connell, 2010b). Secondly, article 51 of Chapter VII also provides that a state may act in response to self-defense in case of an armed attack against it, until the Security Council acts. Murphy maintains that drone strikes in Pakistan can be justified under the following circumstance: (1) the Pakistani government has authorised it; (2) authorization by the UN Security Council; (3) in response to non-state actors attacks operating from Pakistan; or (4) in response to possible attack from Pakistan itself ([Murphy, 2009](#)). It is significant to note here that the

International Court of Justice (ICJ) does not authorise any state to intervene and take action against non-state groups in another sovereign state (Peron, 2014, p. 88). O'Connell argues that the targeted killing of people through drone strikes is unlawful, indiscriminate, and violates Pakistan's sovereignty (O'Connell, 2010b, p. 89). The Pakistan government denied any agreement with the US which allowed drone strikes in the country. The Peshawar High Court in Pakistan in 2013 declared that the drone strikes were illegal and that they violated the country's national sovereignty and, therefore, must be declared war crimes as they kill innocent people.

Amnesty International in its report titled 'Will I be next' maintained that the innocent killings in the tribal areas of Pakistan may be considered as war crimes and extrajudicial killings. The report revealed how 68-year-old Mamana Bibi was blown into pieces in October 2012 when she was gathering vegetables in the field, and how 18 male labours were killed in a series of drone strikes when they were assembled for an evening meal after a hard day's work (Amnesty International, 2013). Aslam observes that the US position on drone policy cannot be described as responsible when analysed through the principles of legality and legitimacy. The above writers have largely engaged in legal and human rights debate ignoring the impact of drones on the insurgency in Pakistan, a gap this study addresses.

The US Perspective on Drone Attacks

Former chief counterterrorism advisors for both President Bush and Obama endorsed the use of drone strikes and declared them ethical, wise and necessary as they were able to kill high-profile leaders of Al-Qaeda in a remote, inaccessible region (Boyle, 2013). Juan Zarate, President Bush's counterterrorism advisor, stated that the use of drones has made Al-Qaeda on the defensive because many of its high-profile leaders have been killed in the drone strikes (Mayor, 2009). On May 1, 2012, John Brennan, Obama's chief counterterrorism advisor (2009-2013) maintained that since the US is engaged in a conflict with Al-Qaeda and its associates post 9/11, the use of lethal forces against these organizations is legally justifiable

in a country which is unable to take actions against them (quoted in Zakaria, 2015). He further asserted that due to the existing threat to the US, the use of drone strikes which avoid unnecessary civil casualties are ethical (Zakaria, 2015).

In a meeting with Pakistani officials in 2008, US Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus told them that we are helping Pakistan through our drone strikes which kill the bad guys with minimal collateral damage (Khan, 2008b). Former CIA Director Michael Hayden (2006-2009), advocating the excessive use of drone strikes in the tribal region of Pakistan, argued that due to drone strikes, the tribal areas has remained unsafe for international and local militant organizations (CNN, 2009). Former Director CIA Leon Panetta (2009-2011), while supporting the use of drones, argued that they were effective in terms of their precision and collateral damage and the only choice which disrupt Al-Qaeda leadership (CNN, 2009).

Speaking for the first time regarding the controversial use of drones, President Obama in 2012 rejected the perception that the US is just sending drones to kill people; rather, it is well-coordinated, and target only those active terrorists who are planning to attack and harm the Americans (De Young, 2012). Justifying US strikes in other countries, the then US Secretary of Homeland Security argued that international law should allow and accommodate a country's needs to deter any possible threat abroad by taking pre-emptive actions (Dawn 2008d).

Writers such as Plaw, Fricker, and Williams also conclude that the US has no other alternative than drone strikes, which are more humane and reasonable, to pre-empt any terrorist strike emanating from tribal areas of Pakistan (Plaw, Fricker, and Williams, 2011). Ullman and Wade (1996) suggest that the best way to fight asymmetric threats is to undertake destructive operations to incapacitate the enemy. This could be achieved by through efficient use of information technology in order to ensure the accuracy of the target. Fair argues that the drone strikes have been well-planned, intelligence-based operations conducted with minimum civilian deaths (Fair, 2010). It is interesting to note that the US government does not provide any information on how civilians and

'combatants' are distinguished in drone strikes ([Peron, 2014](#)). The most important yet overlooked aspect of the drones is how far the attacks have made the people accept militancy as an existential threat. The evidence suggests that drone strikes and their collateral damage have made it difficult for the government in Pakistan to obtain the support of the people and strengthened the militants' narrative that Pakistan is fighting the US war on terror and killing its own people.

Global Counterinsurgency Theory

Global Counterinsurgency Theory, propounded by David [Kilcullen \(2005\)](#), suggests that global jihad is an insurgency that aims to change the existing world order through the use of violence and subversion. The local Taliban had established links with international organisations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The US government used drone strikes to kill Al-Qaeda, and Taliban operatives in the tribal areas, creating a backlash that was exploited by the militant organisations. To deprive international terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda of local support, [Kilcullen \(2005\)](#) argues that the traditional counterinsurgency model of the 1960s had to be revised to create what he calls 'counterinsurgency redux'. Therefore, in 2005 he proposed the idea of 'disaggregation' to counter the global insurgency.

A strategy of disaggregation according to [Kilcullen \(2005, p. 610\)](#) should cut the links between global, regional and local actors. This would deny the exploitation of local actors by the global and regional actors. Similarly, the strategy focuses on isolating Islamists from the local population while winning their hearts and minds. Kilcullen's disaggregation strategy primarily focuses on delinking global and regional actors from local operatives. The most important aspect of the theory, which is relevant to addressing insurgency in the tribal areas, is how to alienate the local population from militants. However, instead of applying the disaggregation strategy to alienate the local insurgents from the international terrorist groups, the US used its drone strikes, which contributed to the escalation of insurgency in the tribal areas.

[Kilcullen \(2009a\)](#) argues that the war on terrorism can best be understood as being against a transnational globalised insurgency instead of the traditional terrorism problem. In this globalised insurgency, Al-Qaeda is using the globalization tools to accumulate the diverse factors and actors operating in separated time and space ([Kilcullen, 2009a, p. 29](#)). To support his argument, he quotes Osama bin Laden, who outlined the Al-Qaeda strategic approach, stating that Al-Qaeda should send only its two *Mujahideen* to raise its flag, which would attract the US forces there and would cause America human, political and economic losses.

[Kilcullen \(2009a\)](#) also mentions that seeing the immediate failure of mass uprisings in the Muslim world after 9/11, Al-Qaeda's strategy changed from terrorism to the new guerrilla model. Currently, both of these models coexist, and Al-Qaeda now exploits the alienated Muslim population. As stated above, Al-Qaeda exploits the backlash against Western intervention to obtain public support. According to [Kilcullen \(2009a\)](#), Al-Qaeda first provokes insurgency and then exploits it in its favour. To achieve its organisational objectives, Al-Qaeda applies four basic tactics essential for any insurgent movement. The insurgents commit atrocities to provoke the government. They intimidate those people who cooperate with the government. According to Kilcullen, the key purpose of the insurgents is to protract the conflict and exhaust the government.

[Kilcullen \(2010, p. 2\)](#) argues that in order to defeat the insurgency, the counterinsurgency should contain specific measures warranted by the existing environment which strengthen the resilience of the society and the government. The theory suggests that disaggregation would involve supporting the local governments, strengthening their security framework, providing them with training, and enabling them to resist the jihadist threat which aims to overthrow them. The disaggregation strategy proposed by [Kilcullen \(2009a\)](#) is helpful to understand the external dimension of insurgency in Pakistan's tribal areas; had it been applied it could have alienated the local militants from Al-Qaeda.

Conclusion

Insurgency and counterinsurgency are not new forms of warfare, however, they changed significantly after the initiation of the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. In order to fight the foreign forces in Afghanistan, a religiously-motivated insurgency also known as the Taliban insurgency began which finally overthrew the existing government in 2021 and replaced it with their own. Pakistan, which shares a long border with Afghanistan also faced an insurgency in its border region. Insurgency is likely to succeed if it is supported externally. The existing literature has discussed the role and impact of external support on insurgencies, however, the literature has overlooked the role of external support to counterinsurgents and its impact on insurgency.

This article analysed how external support to counterinsurgency influences insurgency in a

country. The study concludes that external support to counterinsurgency will likely increase insurgency if it strengthens the narrative of insurgents. The article analyses the empirical case of Pakistan's tribal areas where the US extended support to Pakistan to fight the militants. Furthermore, the US initiated a drone campaign to target Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. The drone strikes reinforced the insurgents' narrative that Pakistan is fighting the US war on terror and therefore, every tribesman has to resist and fight the war. Therefore, instead of reducing the insurgency, the drone strikes helped the insurgents to exploit the victims of collateral damage and recruit them and train them against the government. It can be safely concluded that not only external support to insurgency but counterinsurgency also contribute to the success of insurgency provided that it reinforces the insurgents' narrative.

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