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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

No Secrets in the Sky

By PETER BERGEN and KATHERINE TIEDEMANN

Washington

THE highly classified C.I.A. program to [kill militants in the tribal regions of Pakistan](#) with missiles fired from drones is the world's worst-kept secret.

The United States has long tried to maintain plausible deniability that it is behind drone warfare in Pakistan, a country that pollsters consistently find is one of the most anti-American in the world. For reasons of its own, the Pakistani government has also sought to hide the fact that it secretly agreed to allow the United States to fly some drones out of a base in Pakistan and attack militants on its territory.

But there are good reasons for the United States, which conducted 53 such strikes in 2009 alone, and Pakistan to finally acknowledge the existence of the drone program.

First, there is the matter of Pakistani civilian casualties caused by the drones. In a poll last summer, [only 9 percent of Pakistanis approved](#) of the drone strikes. A key reason for this unpopularity is the widespread perception that the strikes overwhelmingly kill civilians.

[A survey we have made](#) of reliable press accounts indicates that since January 2009, the reported strikes have killed at least 520 people, of whom around 410 were described as militants, suggesting that the civilian death rate is about 20 percent.

It's possible, however, that the number is even lower. An American counterterrorism official told The Times in December [that the civilian fatality rate](#) is only 5 percent, saying that "just over 20" civilians and more than 400 militants were killed in 2009. Should the American government's claims about the small number of civilian deaths be verified, some of the Pakistani hostility toward the United States might dissipate. This would be much easier if the now-classified videotapes of drone strikes were made available to independent researchers.

Acknowledging the drone program would also help advance our efforts — and improve our profile — in the region by providing an excellent example of the deepening United States-Pakistan strategic partnership. Since January 2009, up to 85 reported drone strikes have killed militants who are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Pakistanis. A good deal of the intelligence that enables these strikes comes from the Pakistanis themselves.

Last, Pakistanis once considered any military offensive against the Taliban as fighting America's war. But because of the cumulative weight of the Taliban's atrocities against politicians, soldiers, police and civilians, Pakistanis now believe that battling the militants is in the country's own interest. As a result, over the past

year, the public's support for the Pakistani Army's efforts in the Swat Valley and South Waziristan has surged. If Pakistan came clean about its involvement with the drones, public backing for the program might similarly increase.

Of course, by acknowledging the drone strikes, the Obama administration would also have to admit that civilians are sometimes killed in these attacks. When Afghan civilians are killed by American forces, their families are often compensated by the United States. Surely, the families of Pakistani civilians killed in American drone strikes deserve the same.

Peter Bergen is a senior fellow and Katherine Tiedemann is a policy analyst at the New America Foundation.

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