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Drones Are Playing a Growing Role in Afghanistan

By [CHRISTOPHER DREW](#)

When American and allied forces pushed into the [Taliban](#) stronghold of Marja, in southern [Afghanistan](#), last week, they had the advantage of knowing where dozens of roadside bombs had already been planted. And when some troops came under fire, they called in help from a weapon that has quietly become one of the military's most versatile tools on the Afghan battlefield: the [drone](#).

The use of the drones has expanded quickly and virtually unnoticed in Afghanistan. The Air Force now flies at least 20 Predator drones — twice as many as a year ago — over vast stretches of hostile Afghan territory each day.

They are mostly used for surveillance, but have also carried out more than 200 missile and bomb strikes over the last year, including 14 strikes near Marja in the last few days, newly released military records show. That is three times as many strikes in the past year as in Pakistan, where the drones have gotten far more attention and proved more controversial for their use in a country where the United States does not have combat forces.

There, they are run by the [C.I.A.](#), as opposed to the military, and the civilian casualties that they have caused as they have struck at leaders of [Al Qaeda](#) and the Taliban, amid Pakistani sensitivities over sovereignty, have stoked anger and anti-Americanism.

But in Afghanistan, a country with nearly 70,000 American troops, the drones have stealthily settled into an everyday role, and military commanders say they are a growing part of a counterinsurgency strategy that seeks to reduce civilian casualties. They expect to field more of them as 30,000 more American troops enter Afghanistan this year.

Trying to bring down civilian deaths, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the commander of the American-led forces in Afghanistan, has tightened the rules for airstrikes, especially by military jets, which usually drop larger bombs than the drones and have less time to follow the targets.

The drones can linger over an area with their video cameras gathering intelligence for as long as 20 hours, and then strike without warning. The [United Nations](#) says it recorded no civilian deaths from drone strikes in Afghanistan last year. But because the drones have mainly been used to attack low-level Taliban fighters in remote places, it may be hard to tell.

Since the start of 2009, the [Predators](#) and their larger cousins, the Reapers, have fired at least 184 missiles and 66 laser-guided bombs at militant suspects in Afghanistan, according to the records.

That compared with what independent researchers believe to be 69 attacks by drones in Pakistan over the same period. The C.I.A. does not comment publicly on its drone program.

As the flights increase, the military is also finding that the drones can offer continuous protection and a broad view of their surroundings that the [Army](#) and the [Marines](#) have long said they needed.

“The power behind it is more about the video downlink and the huge ability to bring information into the system,” said Maj. Gen. Stephen P. Mueller of the Air Force, a top air commander in Afghanistan.

Given Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain, having that steady bird’s eye view “means that our ground forces can get out and about amongst the population and into smaller units than you would typically think about,” he said.

He said the military was counting on the drones to help create a safer environment and give the counterinsurgency campaign time to unfold.

General Mueller said the missile firings occurred on only a small fraction of the flights, which had expanded as drones have been shifted to Afghanistan from Iraq and new planes added.

He said the strikes typically came when troops were caught in firefights or the drones came across people who appeared to be planting homemade bombs, the biggest source of allied casualties.

The counterinsurgency strategy “isn’t about going out and finding those,” he said. “But when we do find them, we obviously do what’s necessary.”

General McChrystal recently told Congress that the intelligence from the drones and other planes was “extraordinarily effective” in dealing with the broad mix of demands.

Military officials said the Special Forces were using the drones to attack Taliban leaders and bomb-making networks in eastern and southern Afghanistan, often by stacking two or three drones over a compound to track everyone who came and went.

Since last fall, the Predators and Reapers have also been massed over Marja, a farming community in the southern Helmand Province.

Military officials said the remote-controlled planes had identified Taliban fighters, monitored their weapons storehouses and their routes in and out of the area, and mapped where they were planting roadside bombs.

Much of that data was analyzed in the United States, where the drone pilots are stationed. But ground commanders also receive the video feeds on special laptops.

Andrew M. Exum, a former Army captain who is an analyst at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington policy group, said the video links were “incredibly helpful” in counterinsurgency operations in Iraq in 2007.

Since then the supply of the laptops has mushroomed, with the Predators and Reapers now supplying more than 400 hours of video a day to troops in Afghanistan.

In fact, the video is in such demand that the Air Force has added cameras on its fighters and bombers to provide an extra 100 to 120 hours of video per day. The Army and the Marines have smaller drones, including tiny models that soldiers toss like footballs to peer past hills.

Some of the Reapers will soon carry 10 cameras instead of just one, and 30 by 2011, adding to the profusion of video.

Under the figures released by the Air Force, the Predators and Reapers set off 219 missiles and bombs in Afghanistan in 2009 and 31 more so far this year. That compared with 183 in Afghanistan in 2008 and 74 in 2007.

The number of weapons fired in Iraq, where about 10 Predators still fly each day, dropped to 6 in 2009 from 77 in 2008 and 46 in 2007.

The Predators can fire only Hellfire missiles, which have relatively small warheads. But the newer Reapers fly faster and also carry 500-pound bombs like the jets.

P. W. Singer, a scholar at the [Brookings Institution](#), cautioned that growing use of the bombs could increase the chances for civilian casualties. He said officers also had to keep in mind that “not everyone digging by the side of the road is automatically an insurgent.”

But, he said, “What we’re seeing is something that was once abnormal becoming the new normal, not just in counterterrorism, but in warfare over all.”

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