

Of UCAVs, Psychology and Political Correctness



mining the credibility of the Pakistani government for its refusal/incapacity to stand up to Washington on this matter, and as such it cannot be expected to remain without political consequences indefinitely.

Given that one would certainly wish to believe that the US forces are not up to deliberately inflicting wanton collateral damage, the key question is thus as

The ongoing US air campaign, based on the use of MQ-1 PREDATOR and MQ-9 REAPER armed UAVs to attack various types of Taliban/Al-Qaeda targets in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and most particularly inside Pakistan itself, is the first large-scale use of “quasi-UCAVs” by the US Armed Forces (as opposed to the well-publicised pioneer role by the CIA in “taking out” some selected terrorist leaders). Even more significantly, the campaign marks the very first case whereby UAVs have deliberately been selected over manned aircraft for certain combat roles, based on their performance characteristics as well as the perceived psychological implications of their use. As such, a first preliminary analysis of certain aspects of the current operations seems to suggest a number of important considerations.

In strictly operational terms, there is ample evidence to indicate that combat UAVs have proved to be markedly superior to manned aircraft (in the totally uncontested Afghani and Pakistani airspace, that is) on several counts. In particular, their vastly more extended endurance and combat persistence over the operational area allows for a nearly continuous presence to strike at time sensitive or fleeting targets, while in parallel their much reduced acoustic and visual signatures (relatively small size, turboprop engines, no contrails) enable surprise attacks on an enemy, who is totally deprived of any surveillance assets other than the Mk1 eyeball. The results of operational experience thus point at combat UAVs/UCAVs being a very useful tool in asymmetric warfare and counter-insurgency scenarios, in that the specific conditions of these conflicts emphasise their advantages and minimise their shortcomings.

Despite these operational advantages, however, it is quite obvious that by far the single most important factor in the decision to use UAVs rather than manned aircraft for combat missions inside Pakistan’s airspace was their perceived lower adverse psychological impact on the Pakistani authorities and population at

large. That is, it was assumed that the Pakistani government and military alike could be made to tacitly tolerate the routine violation of their borders by UAVs (indeed, they would even accept for such UAVs to operate from secret bases within Pakistani territory), whereas even irrespective of their own feelings public pressure would most assuredly compel them to try and use force to repulse any such violation by foreign combat aircraft.

This assumption has proved correct so far, which would seem to indicate that there is more to the psychological implications of UCAVs than meets the eye. On the one hand, public opinion in many Western countries remains very hostile to the very notion of “killer drones”. This is indicated, amongst other developments by the MQ-9 being marketed abroad under the name of PREDATOR B rather than REAPER, with both the German and Italian Air Force having been forced to go to quite considerable lengths to reassure their public that their current or planned PREDATOR B purchases do not include, horror!, any combat capability. Now this is a largely irrational posture within the whole irrational phenomenon of political correctness applied to military matters, but still it cannot be ignored or overlooked that easily. On the other hand, at least certain governments and populations around the world will feel less violated and insulted if an unmanned machine, rather than a piloted vehicle makes a mockery of their sovereignty.

So far, so good. Certain rather alarming consequences of the PREDATOR/REAPER missions, however, would seem to point in a very different direction, and despite US diplomatic and political pressure might end up forcing the Pakistani government or/and military into reversing their current posture.

The attacks by armed UAVs on targets inside Pakistan are routinely causing a very high, and indeed less and less tolerable number of casualties amongst the civil population. This situation is increasingly fuelling a bitter resentment if not hatred against the US and its military activities in the region, as well as under-

to whether these excessive civilian losses are inherently due to the characteristics of the UAVs per se and the way their missions are planned and executed, or rather have their roots in other aspects of the US warfighting machine and would thus remain at more or less the same unfortunate level irrespective as to whether UAVs or manned aircraft are the platforms of choice.

There are no unequivocal indications in one direction or the other, at least not in the public domain – even though the increasingly alarming record of the results of US/Coalition bombing raids by manned aircraft in Afghanistan would seem to absolve combat UAVs as such from any inherent evil. It is quite evident, though, that the issue will need to be examined very thoroughly. Any credible analysis to the effect that combat UAVs are actually responsible for more serious collateral damages than it would otherwise be the case, would point at their use in the particular Af/Pak theatre being completely counter-productive, with the initial psychological advantage being turned into its very opposite.

And, needless to say, on a broader perspective such an analysis would create an imperative need for the balance between what UCAVs can do, and what we are prepared to let them do, to be fine-tuned in very clear terms. The question as to whether it is legitimate (or convenient, or prudent, or sensible, or moral – choose your own preferred adjective) to willingly accept higher losses amongst the civil population in the conflict areas, in order to reduce to risks to our own pilots and curb the costs of our combat platforms, admits no easy answer.


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