

From Tactical Counterterrorism to Strategic Blowback: Socio-Political, Security and Legal Implications of U.S. Drone Warfare in Pakistan, 2004–2024

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Abstract

The use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, transformed counterterrorism operations in Pakistan after the first known U.S. drone strike in 2004. The campaign was designed principally to disrupt al-Qaeda, Taliban, and associated militant networks operating in Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), particularly where militant organizations benefited from difficult terrain and cross-border sanctuary. This study examines the U.S. drone campaign from 2004 through its last reported strike in Pakistan in July 2018 and evaluates its strategic legacy through 2024. Using secondary data, academic literature, public-opinion surveys, conflict research, international-law scholarship, and policy databases, the study develops a Strategic Blowback Framework to distinguish tactical effectiveness from broader strategic consequences. The analysis finds that drone warfare should not be assessed solely through militants killed or networks disrupted. Although drones offered persistent surveillance and high-value targeting capabilities, their strategic effects were mediated by perceptions of civilian harm, sovereignty, political legitimacy, militant adaptation, and the wider Pakistan–U.S. relationship. Importantly, newer empirical research complicates the conventional argument that civilian casualties automatically produce terrorism. The paper recommends stronger legal accountability, transparent civilian-harm assessment, improved intelligence standards, political oversight, community engagement, counter-drone preparedness, and a broader counterterrorism strategy that combines kinetic action with governance, justice, and legitimacy.

Keywords: drone warfare, Pakistan, counterterrorism, civilian harm, sovereignty, terrorism, radicalization, militant adaptation, international law, strategic blowback

Introduction:

The attacks of September 11, 2001 transformed the international security environment and significantly expanded the role of remote and technologically enabled counterterrorism. The United States increasingly relied on targeted killing, intelligence-led operations and remotely piloted aircraft to strike suspected terrorist organizations beyond conventional battlefields. Pakistan became one of the most important theatres of this emerging form of warfare because al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and later Pakistani militant organizations operated in and around the country's western borderlands.

The first known U.S. drone strike in Pakistan occurred on June 19, 2004, in South Waziristan and killed Taliban commander Nek Muhammad. The campaign subsequently expanded, particularly after 2008, and reached its highest operational tempo in 2010. New

America's historical database identifies 122 U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan during 2010. The campaign subsequently declined, and the final reported U.S. drone strike in Pakistan occurred on July 4, 2018.

There is a fundamental paradox of the campaign. It can be argued that drones could achieve operational success by eliminating senior militants while simultaneously generating broader political and social consequences. This paper specifically emphasizes sovereignty, collateral damage, anti-American sentiment, psychological insecurity, radicalization, and terrorism. However, it is difficult to demonstrate that drone strikes directly caused specific terrorist attacks or that civilian casualties automatically produced radicalization. The newer literature indicates more complicated causal mechanisms. In particular, drone strikes may alter militant behavior, displace militants geographically, and influence public perceptions even when the number of civilian casualties is disputed.

The central argument of this paper is therefore: U.S. drone warfare in Pakistan produced measurable tactical counterterrorism benefits, but its overall strategic effectiveness was constrained by political legitimacy, sovereignty concerns, civilian-harm perceptions, militant adaptation, and the broader social and political environment in which the strikes occurred. The paper consequently moves beyond the simple question of whether drones “worked” and instead asks what kind of success they produced, for whom, and at what strategic cost.

Background: The Emergence of Drone Warfare in Pakistan:

Table 1: Evolution of U.S. Drone Warfare in Pakistan¹

Period	Main development	Strategic significance
2004–2007	Campaign established	Introduction of remote targeted killing
2008–2010	Rapid expansion	Major escalation of counterterrorism strikes
2010	Peak of campaign	122 reported strikes according to New America
2011–2015	Gradual decline	Increasing emphasis on high-value targets
2016	Mansour strike and reduced operations	Shift toward selective targeting
2017–2018	Limited Trump-era campaign	Reduced operational tempo
After July 2018	No reported U.S. drone strike	Historical campaign effectively enters prolonged suspension
2019–2024	Legacy period	Broader proliferation of drone warfare and counter-drone challenges

Following the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban and al-Qaeda personnel moved across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Pakistan's tribal areas offered difficult terrain, limited state presence, and established social networks through which militant organizations could operate. The movement of militants into FATA followed the intervention in Afghanistan and brought the difficulty faced by Pakistani security forces in controlling the mountainous border region, leading to the CIA's commencement of drone operations in FATA in 2004. Drones provided several operational advantages. Unlike manned aircraft, they could remain

¹ Author's curtsy

airborne for long periods, conduct persistent surveillance, and attack targets without exposing pilots to direct battlefield danger. The previous research correctly identified dependence on intelligence as a major weakness: precision weapons cannot compensate for inaccurate target identification.

The campaign became particularly intense during the Obama administration. According to New America's historical research, strikes increased sharply after 2008 and peaked in 2010, after which they declined substantially. President Obama's final reported strike in Pakistan killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in Balochistan on May 21, 2016. The Trump administration resumed strikes in 2017, but the campaign remained comparatively limited. The final reported U.S. strike occurred on July 4, 2018.

Literature Review:

The literature on drone warfare in Pakistan can broadly be divided into five categories. First, strategic and military studies emphasize operational advantages, including persistent surveillance, precision targeting, and the elimination of senior militant leaders. Second, human-rights and international-law scholarship focuses on civilian casualties, sovereignty, distinction, proportionality, accountability, and the legal basis for cross-border targeted killing. Third, social and political studies investigate psychological insecurity, anti-Americanism, public opinion, legitimacy and social cohesion. Fourth, terrorism research examines whether drone strikes encourage radicalization, recruitment or retaliatory violence. Fifth, more recent scholarship emphasizes militant adaptation and challenges the assumption that killing militants necessarily reduces terrorism.

The initial research draws upon all of these perspectives to some extent. It identifies both military gains and political costs and emphasizes that Pakistani public opinion was generally hostile to U.S. drone strikes. Later research complicates the picture. Fair, Kaltenthaler, and Miller (2015), using a nationally representative survey of 7,656 Pakistani respondents, challenged the simplistic assumption that Pakistani attitudes were shaped only by mass-media coverage. Their analysis emphasized informal political communication and the social environment through which people developed beliefs about drone strikes. Silverman's (2024) research adds another important dimension. He finds that the U.S. campaign was more targeted than it was commonly perceived to be in Pakistan, but argues that perceptions of inflated civilian casualties were themselves politically consequential. Such perceptions contributed to opposition to the campaign and were associated with broader political alienation and violence. This finding is particularly important because it demonstrates that strategic consequences can result not only from actual physical harm but also from perceptions of harm, legitimacy, and injustice.

Theoretical Framework: Tactical Success versus Strategic Blowback:

The conventional assessment of counterterrorism operations often relies on operational indicators: militants killed; senior leaders eliminated; training camps destroyed; terrorist plots disrupted; and intelligence networks degraded. These measures matter, but they do not necessarily show strategic success. A broader counterterrorism evaluation should also consider: public legitimacy; civilian harm; political stability; militant adaptation; recruitment; retaliatory violence; diplomatic relations; sovereignty; social cohesion. This paper therefore proposes the following conceptual relationship: Drone Strike → Tactical Effect → Militant Response → Social/Political

Reaction → Strategic Outcome. The strategic outcome can be positive, neutral, or negative depending on the interaction of these variables. This framework improves on a simple causal claim that “civilian casualties cause terrorism.” Instead, it treats terrorism and political backlash as possible outcomes of multiple interacting mechanisms.

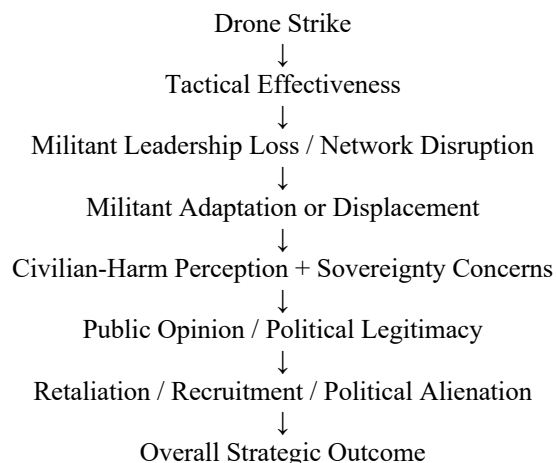


Figure 1: Strategic Blowback Framework²

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative secondary-data methodology primarily based on secondary sources, surveys, and briefings from military leadership involved in operations against militants. The sources include: peer-reviewed academic literature; books and book chapters; public-opinion surveys; conflict databases; New America’s drone-strike database; United Nations documents; human-rights research; legal scholarship; and contemporary reporting.

The study is interpretive rather than experimental. Therefore, it does not claim that every terrorist attack following a drone strike was caused by that strike. Instead, the analysis identifies patterns, associations and plausible mechanisms. A particular methodological problem is the absence of reliable casualty information.³

Tactical Effectiveness of Drone Warfare:

Drone warfare offered the United States several important operational advantages. First, drones enabled persistent surveillance. Second, they reduced risks to U.S. personnel. Third, they enabled rapid targeting of individuals believed to be associated with militant organizations. Fourth, they allowed operations in difficult geographical environments where conventional military operations would have been costly. New America's research confirms that numerous senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders were killed during the campaign. The targets included important figures within al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and the Haqqani network. The elimination of high-value

² Author’s curtsy

³ The paper notes conflicting and unconfirmed reporting because media access to FATA was limited. Therefore, this paper treats casualty statistics cautiously and distinguishes between verified casualties, reported casualties, and perceived casualties.

targets represents a genuine tactical benefit. It would therefore be inaccurate to characterize the drone campaign as an operational failure. However, tactical effectiveness should not be equated with strategic effectiveness. Militant organizations can: replace leaders; decentralize command structures; change communications; relocate; recruit replacements; modify operational tactics.

This distinction is supported by research by Khan (2022). The study found that militant deaths from drone strikes were associated with increased terrorist attacks against civilians in urban areas, while attacks against government targets declined. The authors interpret this as evidence that militant organizations adapt to drone pressure by shifting their operations. Thus, the relevant question is not merely “Did the drone kill a militant?” but “What happened to the militant organization and the wider conflict after the militant was killed?”

Civilian Harm and the Problem of Casualty Estimates:

Civilian casualties became one of the most controversial issues surrounding the drone campaign. Previous research presents sharply divergent casualty figures. It cites Pakistani authorities claiming 708 deaths in 44 attacks during 2009 and another source claiming that the overwhelming majority of deaths during the campaign were civilians. The problem resulted partly from limited access to affected areas, the secrecy surrounding the CIA program, and difficulties distinguishing militants from civilians. Consequently, different organizations produced substantially different estimates. New America's methodology attempts to address this problem by identifying combatant and civilian casualties while recording uncertainty where available information does not permit reliable classification. The uncertainty itself had strategic consequences.

When governments do not disclose who was targeted; why the person was targeted; how many civilians were killed; what investigations were conducted; and whether compensation was provided, communities may fill the information gap with their own interpretations. This leads to an important distinction: Actual civilian harm and perceived civilian harm are analytically different, but both can influence political legitimacy. Silverman's 2024 research is particularly important here. He finds that Pakistani perceptions of inflated civilian casualties were among the strongest drivers of opposition to the drone campaign.

Public Opinion and Anti-Americanism:

Table 2: Selected Pakistani Public-Opinion Indicators⁴

Year	Indicator	Finding
2012	Support for U.S. drone strikes	17%
2012	Among those aware, viewing strikes as bad	97%
2013	Opposition to U.S. drone strikes	68%
2013	Believe strikes kill too many innocent people	74%
2014	Believe strikes kill too many innocent people	67%
2014	Believe strikes necessary to defend Pakistan	21%

⁴ Author's curtsy

Public opinion provides strong evidence that drone warfare generated substantial opposition in Pakistan. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey found that only 17% of Pakistanis supported U.S. drone strikes conducted in coordination with the Pakistani government, while 44% opposed them. Among those familiar with the strikes, 97% regarded them as a bad thing. The 2013 Pew survey found that approximately 68% of Pakistanis opposed U.S. drone strikes, while 74% believed that drone strikes killed too many innocent people. The 2014 survey continued to show substantial opposition: approximately two-thirds of Pakistanis believed drones killed too many innocent people, while only 21% believed they were necessary to defend Pakistan against extremist groups. These figures demonstrate that drone warfare became a major source of anti-American sentiment. However, the relationship between drone warfare and anti-Americanism must also be understood within the wider context of U.S.–Pakistan relations, including the war in Afghanistan, the Raymond Davis affair, the Abbottabad operation, NATO supply routes, Pakistan's domestic politics, and broader perceptions of American foreign policy. Thus, drones were one major contributor to anti-Americanism rather than its sole cause.

Psychological Effects and Social Insecurity:

The psychological dimension of drone warfare is more difficult to quantify but remains important. Previous research identifies fear, psychological insecurity, social disruption, migration, radicalization, and community instability among the consequences of drone warfare. The presence of drones can create a unique form of insecurity because surveillance is persistent and the timing of attacks may be unpredictable from the perspective of civilians. The psychological effect may therefore extend beyond actual strikes. A community that believes it is constantly under surveillance may alter movement patterns; social gatherings; communication practices; funeral attendance; religious gatherings; and interaction with strangers. This can weaken social cohesion even when a particular strike causes limited physical damage. The important qualification is that these effects vary across communities. Silverman's 2024 study suggests that people living closer to the areas experiencing violence did not necessarily share the same misperceptions about drone warfare that existed elsewhere in Pakistan. This means that national perceptions and local perceptions should not be treated as identical.

Radicalization and Militant Recruitment:

Previous research argues that civilian casualties and resentment could provide opportunities for militant recruitment. It cites claims that militants exploited civilian deaths to recruit individuals into militant organizations. The theoretical mechanism is plausible: Civilian harm → grievance → anger → militant propaganda → recruitment. But this should not be presented as a universal or automatic causal relationship. Militant recruitment is affected by many variables: ideology; tribal networks; unemployment; political grievances; state repression; religious narratives; family connections; organizational incentives; territorial control. Drone warfare may therefore function as an amplifier of pre-existing grievances rather than an independent cause of radicalization. Recent empirical research reinforces the need for caution. Khan (2022) states that civilian casualties did not have a discernible statistical effect on terrorism, although militant deaths from drone strikes were associated with increased terrorist attacks against civilians in urban areas. A 2023 modelling study by Shapiro and Crooks similarly investigated a possible delayed relationship between drone strikes and terrorist events in Pakistan, suggesting

that responses may occur over time rather than immediately. The evidence therefore supports a conditional blowback hypothesis, not a deterministic one.

Militant Adaptation and Displacement:

One of the most important developments in the literature is the increasing emphasis on militant adaptation. Militant organizations are strategic actors. When drones increase the cost of operating in a particular region, militants may: move to urban areas; disperse; reduce communications; operate in smaller cells; use civilian populations as cover; and change attack methods. Khan's study (2022) provides empirical support for this mechanism. It found that drone strikes killing militants were associated with increased terrorist attacks against civilians in urban settings but reductions in attacks against government targets. This finding substantially improves the paper's argument. The strategic problem is therefore not necessarily that drones directly create new militants. Rather, they can alter the behavior and geography of existing militant organizations. Consequently, an operation can be tactically successful and strategically problematic at the same time.

Sovereignty and International Law:

Sovereignty represents one of the most significant legal and political controversies surrounding U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. The data revealed that drone strikes were widely perceived as violations of Pakistan's territorial sovereignty and examined the competing legal arguments concerning self-defence. The legal debate involves several questions: Was Pakistan's consent obtained? Did the United States possess a valid right of self-defence? Were the targeted groups sufficiently connected to an armed conflict? Did particular strikes satisfy distinction? Were attacks proportionate? Were all feasible precautions taken? Were investigations conducted after disputed incidents? The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism emphasized the importance of transparency, independent investigation, and accountability in relation to remote targeted killings. The report specifically highlighted concerns surrounding strikes in areas such as Pakistan, where targets could be embedded within civilian communities.

The legal debate should not be reduced to a simple statement that "all drone strikes were illegal." The legality of an individual strike depends on the applicable legal framework and factual circumstances. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency surrounding the program created a legitimacy problem independent of the underlying legal arguments.

Pakistan's Ambiguous Policy:

The data collected for this research places considerable emphasis on the contradiction between Pakistan's public condemnation of drone strikes and allegations of private cooperation. This ambiguity created several problems. First, it made it difficult for the Pakistani public to understand whether the government supported or opposed the campaign. Second, it allowed political opponents to accuse the government of compromising national sovereignty. Third, it weakened the government's ability to communicate a coherent counterterrorism strategy. Fourth, it contributed to mistrust between Pakistan and the United States. The issue therefore illustrates an important principle of security policy: Counterterrorism operations require not only operational effectiveness but also political legitimacy. A government that cannot explain its counterterrorism

policy to its own population risks losing public support even when operations achieve military objectives.

Pakistan–U.S. Relations:

Drone warfare became embedded in the wider deterioration of Pakistan–U.S. relations. The relationship was already complicated by U.S. military operations in Afghanistan; Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. after 9/11; allegations of Pakistani support for selected militant organizations; the Abbottabad operation; NATO supply routes; aid dependence; and sovereignty disputes. The drone campaign added another layer of mistrust. Pew's 2013 survey found that only 11% of Pakistanis gave the United States a favorable rating, while 64% viewed the United States more as an enemy than a partner. It would be methodologically inappropriate to attribute all of this hostility to drone warfare. Nevertheless, drones became a powerful symbol of U.S. military intervention and perceived disregard for Pakistani sovereignty. The strategic consequence was therefore broader than the immediate effects of individual strikes.

The End of the U.S. Drone Campaign:

The data collected for research anticipated continued drone warfare and discussed the campaign as an ongoing phenomenon. The historical evidence now demonstrates that the campaign declined sharply. New America reports that the last known U.S. drone strike in Pakistan occurred on July 4, 2018. By July 2019, Pakistan had experienced a full year without a reported U.S. drone strike. Therefore, 2019–2024 should be treated as the legacy period rather than a period of continued U.S. drone warfare. This distinction is important because it changes the research question from: “What are the current effects of U.S. drone strikes?” to: “What is the long-term strategic legacy of the U.S. drone campaign, and what lessons does it offer for Pakistan's contemporary drone-security environment?”

Drone Warfare in Pakistan's Security Environment:

Although the U.S. campaign had effectively ceased, drones remained relevant to Pakistan's security environment. The technology increasingly became accessible to states and non-state actors. Drones are now used for surveillance; reconnaissance; border monitoring; intelligence gathering, precision attacks; smuggling; terrorism; and counterterrorism. The regional security environment also demonstrates the growing importance of unmanned systems. In January 2024, Pakistan and Iran exchanged cross-border strikes involving drones and missiles. This demonstrated that drone technology was becoming part of conventional regional security calculations rather than being limited to the U.S. counterterrorism campaign. Research on India–Pakistan security has similarly identified drones as an emerging instrument of cross-border terrorism, surveillance, and payload delivery. Consequently, the historical U.S. campaign provides an important case study for Pakistan's contemporary drone doctrine.

The Strategic Blowback Framework

The central contribution of this paper is a framework that distinguishes first-order effects from second-order effects.

Table 3: Strategic Blowback Framework⁵

Dimension	First-order effect	Second-order consequence
Targeting	Militant killed	Leadership replacement/adaptation
Surveillance	Persistent intelligence	Psychological insecurity
Precision	Reduced need for large-scale forces	Increased reliance on intelligence quality
Civilian harm	Physical casualties	Anger, grievance and legitimacy costs
Sovereignty	Foreign strike	Political backlash
Militant disruption	Network weakened	Possible displacement
Public opinion	Opposition to strikes	Anti-Americanism
Retaliation	Militant response	Terrorist attacks
Secrecy	Operational protection	Reduced transparency
Counterterrorism	Short-term disruption	Possible long-term adaptation

The framework demonstrates that tactical success and strategic success are not identical.



Figure 2: Conceptual relationship⁶

The strategic outcome depends on whether the operational benefits exceed the political and security costs.

Findings and Discussion:

The evidence supports five major findings.

- i. **Drone warfare produced genuine tactical benefits:** The campaign successfully targeted senior militant figures and disrupted terrorist organizations. It would therefore be inaccurate to characterize it as militarily ineffective.

⁵ Author's curtsy

⁶ Author's curtsy

- ii. **Tactical effectiveness did not guarantee strategic success:** Militant organizations adapted. Some violence may have shifted geographically or tactically rather than disappearing.
- iii. **Civilian-harm perceptions were strategically important:** Even where casualty estimates were disputed, perceptions of civilian harm generated strong opposition to the campaign. Silverman's 2024 research demonstrates that these perceptions were politically consequential.
- iv. **Radicalization cannot be explained by drone strikes alone:** Economic, ideological, political, tribal and organizational factors also influence recruitment and terrorism. The relationship between drone strikes and terrorism is therefore conditional rather than deterministic.
- v. **Legitimacy is a security variable:** Sovereignty, transparency and accountability were not merely legal or moral concerns. They affected public attitudes, Pakistan–U.S. relations and the broader political environment in which counterterrorism was conducted.

Policy Recommendations:

- i. **Establish a clear national drone policy:** Pakistan should develop a comprehensive national policy governing military and security applications of drones, including surveillance, targeting, intelligence, border security and counter-drone operations.
- ii. **Strengthen legal oversight:** Any use of lethal force through drones should be governed by clear rules consistent with international humanitarian law and applicable human-rights obligations.
- iii. **Improve civilian-harm documentation:** Pakistan should establish independent mechanisms to document civilian casualties associated with security operations.
- iv. **Develop transparent investigation procedures:** Where civilians are allegedly harmed, investigations should determine who was targeted, what intelligence supported targeting, what precautions were taken, who was killed, and whether the attack complied with applicable law.
- v. **Strengthen counter-drone capabilities:** Pakistan should develop counter-UAV capabilities for military installations, airports, nuclear facilities, critical infrastructure, border areas and major public events.
- vi. **Integrate social-impact assessment:** Counterterrorism evaluations should measure not only militants killed but also public trust, civilian harm, displacement, community perceptions, recruitment, retaliatory violence.
- vii. **Improve strategic communication:** Governments should communicate clearly about counterterrorism operations while protecting legitimate intelligence requirements.
- viii. **Strengthen parliamentary oversight:** Covert or cross-border counterterrorism operations should receive appropriate institutional oversight to ensure accountability.
- ix. **Engage affected communities:** Community leaders, civil society organizations and local administrations should be incorporated into counterterrorism planning and post-operation assessment.

- x. **Learn from the historical U.S. experience:** Pakistan should avoid assuming that technological precision automatically produces strategic effectiveness. Drone technology should be integrated into a broader counterterrorism strategy involving: intelligence + law enforcement + justice + governance + development + political legitimacy.

Conclusion:

The history of U.S. drone warfare in Pakistan from 2004 to 2018 provides an important case study of the difference between tactical counterterrorism effectiveness and strategic success. The research correctly identified the central paradox: drones could eliminate important militant leaders while simultaneously generating political and social consequences. The updated evidence through 2024 allows this argument to be refined.

First, U.S. drone strikes produced genuine tactical benefits. Important militant leaders were killed, and networks were disrupted. Second, the strategic consequences were more complicated. Militant organizations adapted to the pressure, and empirical research indicates that militant deaths from drone strikes could be associated with subsequent terrorist attacks against civilians in urban areas. Third, civilian casualties should not be treated as a simple causal explanation for terrorism. The available evidence is more nuanced. Nevertheless, perceptions of civilian casualties were politically significant, contributing to opposition to the campaign and broader political alienation. Fourth, sovereignty and legitimacy mattered. Even when governments claimed that strikes were necessary for counterterrorism, secrecy and conflicting public positions generated distrust. Finally, the U.S. drone campaign should now be understood historically. The last reported U.S. strike occurred in July 2018, meaning that the principal research issue by 2024 is the campaign's long-term legacy, not its continued operation. The most important lesson is therefore that technology cannot substitute for strategy. Precision weapons may improve the ability to kill a particular target, but strategic counterterrorism requires more than targeting. It requires legitimacy, accurate intelligence, civilian protection, legal accountability, public confidence and the ability to prevent militant organizations from adapting.

Pakistan's experience demonstrates that the ultimate effectiveness of drone warfare should be measured not simply by the number of militants eliminated but by whether the broader security environment becomes more stable, legitimate and resistant to violent extremism.

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