

HSPI Commentary Series

AFTER BIN LADEN THE THREAT REMAINS: DRONES, CIA AND SOF STILL THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

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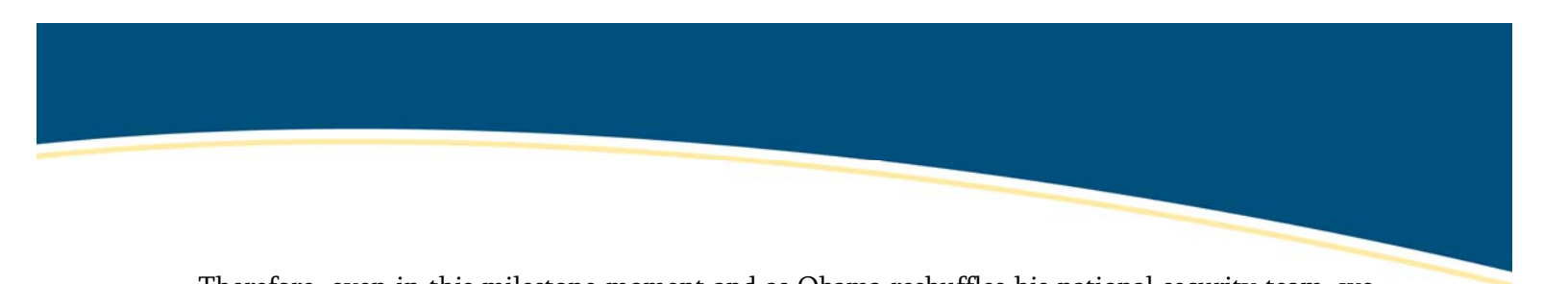
Frank J. Cilluffo

Usama bin Laden is dead, a significant blow to al Qaeda. Yet on this first day after his death, much remains to be done — al Qaeda and legions of jihadists remain a threat. As President Obama announced the outcome of American actions in the Abbottabad Valley, he was correct in his assessment that, “The cause of securing our country is not complete...”

Would-be successors to bin Laden wait (and likely not for long) in the wings. Ayman al Zawahiri, Ilyas Kashmiri, Anwar al Awlaki, and others continue to pose a grave threat to the United States. We should expect them to fast-track any and all plots that have the chance to produce high-visibility mass-casualty attacks against US targets overseas or on the homeland. Zawahiri, Kashmiri, Awlaki and others (known and perhaps unknown) will be motivated to prove they are relevant, that they can continue to pose a threat, and most of all that they deserve to be the heir apparent to bin Laden. It is this last potential outcome, an internal power struggle, that might spawn the greatest uptick in the terror threat.

The continued threat, however, does not simply come from the top rank of jihadists. The image of a hierarchical structure simply does not fit here, operational decisions in terms of tactics, targets, and timing are routinely pushed down to relatively low levels. Bin Laden’s twisted narrative, and the intent it communicates, does and will continue to inspire a range of fresh recruits who are eager to take up his mantle. Somalia, Yemen, the Sahel, and Southeast Asia (and even the West) will continue to attract and be the breeding ground for jihadi terrorism — and Pakistan will continue to be a central front in the struggle to combat an ever metastasizing threat that seeks to glean resources from and hide under the cover of a modern nation-state.





Therefore, even in this milestone moment and as Obama reshuffles his national security team, we must be mindful of the work ahead. Pakistan remains the test of the administration's ability to counter an increasingly diffuse yet interconnected terror threat. In the defense of the United States, we must continue to be able to work with, and in, Pakistan. Yet, when and if, elements of its government or bureaucracy choose through omission or commission to work against the interests of the United States and the international community, we must be willing to act alone. Under such circumstances, as the events of the last few hours bear witness, America's unconventional forces will (and must) continue to play a leading role.

There are reasons to be hopeful, because for General Petraeus and Mr. Panetta the challenge is a familiar one. For years each has struggled with how best to ensure the continued presence of a stable, pro-American regime in Islamabad while protecting the US' ability to conduct counterterrorism operations within the FATA region. Although Petraeus and Panetta will be addressing this task from new vantage points, both have an experienced-based understanding of the operational context, imperatives that await them, and the diplomatic swamp.

In May 2009, just four months into his tenure as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Panetta assessed the situation this way: "Very frankly, [drone strikes are] the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al Qaeda leadership." That same year, Petraeus highlighted the imperative behind applying "a lot of pressure" while arguing that "for us, a terrorist is a terrorist, whether he operates on this side of the border or that side of the border." Today, their assessments remain as valid (if not more so) than they were two years ago.

American drone strikes, in conjunction with countless clandestine operations carried out by the CIA, US Special Forces teams (and the Pakistani military), have placed unrelenting pressure on al Qaeda, its offshoots, and fellow-travelers. Although admittedly imperfect and perhaps at times heavy-handed, these reconnaissance and strike missions have served our national interests and helped shield us from harm.

In effect, these missions have provided suppressive fire against a concert of jihadi terrorists that now includes not only al Qaeda, but the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This suppressive fire has degraded the performance of these jihadists, limiting their wherewithal to organize, plan, and carry out the large-scale mass-casualty attacks for which they yearn.

Yet, suppressive fire is only effective for the duration of the fire. Let up, and the terrorists will quickly regain their lost capabilities and recover the operational time and space they need to go back on the offensive. Now is certainly not the time to let up.

Nevertheless, strike missions are not a panacea and should not be taken lightly. For more than twenty years, the US has worked to cultivate relationships with foreign intelligence services, police, and militaries to aid in the fight against global terrorists. Although these efforts have met with

limited success, they must continue. The difficult situation we face today would be far worse if we had not undertaken such — and it would quickly deteriorate if we were to walk away now.

The dearth of capable, stable, and trustworthy partners in the FATA region means we will be increasingly forced to rely on these and other unconventional tools of statecraft. Islamabad remains unable to exercise the writ of government over much of its territory (or bureaucracy). Under these circumstances, history teaches us that governments also lack the ability to prevent their soil, citizens, and resources from being usurped. Thus the US must maintain its political flexibility and tactical maneuverability. The US must maintain its ability to carry out unconventional reconnaissance and paramilitary missions.

This represents a critical, and increasingly important argument — for Pakistan is not an isolated case. In Yemen, in Somalia, in Sudan — and in a growing list of other un- and undergoverned nation-states we are witness to a similar pattern.

In the world's most dangerous places, the US has few partners and fewer options. At the same time, we face a continued threat from those who would do us grave harm. Under these conditions, and with the capability and moral imperative to protect our citizens, the United States must reject demands to curtail the use of drones, CIA, or Special Forces. When it comes to disrupting the activities of jihadi terrorists, these foils remain the only game in town — their value again demonstrated last night. Today, we owe a debt of gratitude to those nameless, faceless individuals who pilot the drones, collect and analyze the intelligence, and when called upon carry out the paramilitary missions. As we move forward, I hope we continue to provide them with the tools, resources, and room to maneuver necessary to do their jobs as well as they have in the last twenty-four hours.

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