

## Does it matter that Trump suspended reporting on drone strikes?

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## Does it matter that Trump suspended reporting on drone strikes?

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On March 6, 2019, President Donald Trump revoked an Obama-era requirement that the U.S. government provide annual reporting on the number of drone strikes and resulting civilian casualties. A Trump administration official remarked, “This action eliminates superfluous reporting requirements, requirements that do not improve government transparency, but rather distract our intelligence professionals from their primary mission.”

While President Bush employed drones intermittently, it was the Obama administration that fully capitalized on their use. Within his first year in office, Obama authorized more drone strikes than during Bush’s two terms combined. This allowed Obama to be strong on terrorists without needing to put “boots on the ground,” reflective of his campaign rhetoric criticizing the military invasion of Iraq. Much like his predecessor, President Trump has found great benefit in the deployment of the drone, launching more drone strikes in his first two years in office (2,243), averaging three strikes a day, than Obama did during his eight years total (1,878).

However, the use of the drone has drawn incessant criticism due to claims of high civilian casualties, especially with so-called “signature strikes” which target the behavior of suspected militants in designated areas but often lack intelligence on who is targeted. Despite U.S. officials past insistence that the drone is a “precision” weapon that hasn’t produced a “single collateral death,” according to then-White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan in June 2011, President Obama first publicly acknowledged civilian deaths in drone strikes during his May 23, 2013 speech at the National Defense University.

With mounting criticisms, President Obama’s 2016 Executive Order was a means of introducing a level of transparency and accountability for the use of this controversial weapon. The Executive Order argued, “Civilian casualties are a tragic and at times unavoidable consequence of the use of force in situations of armed conflict or in the exercise of a state’s inherent right of self-defense. The U.S. Government shall maintain and promote best practices that reduce the likelihood of civilian casualties, take appropriate steps when such casualties occur, and draw lessons from our operations to further enhance the protection of civilians.” Moreover, according to the former National Security Council spokesman Ned Price, the Executive Order “allowed, for the first time, the US to counter disinformation from terrorist groups with facts about the effectiveness and precision of our operations.”

But with Trump’s latest move, what are the implications for the suspension of this order? To address this question, it is necessary to understand it in the context of the on-going debate over the deployment of the drone for counterterrorism. The drone’s detractors have argued that its use is counterproductive, leading to a negative, long-term impact. The drone’s high civilian casualties provide a boost to terrorist groups’ recruitment efforts and provide them further motivation for revenge attacks. For example, the former leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Baitullah Mehsud, who himself was killed in a 2009 drone strike, stated, “I spent three months trying to recruit and got only 10-15 persons. One US attack and I got 150 volunteers!” Pakistani-American Faisal

Shahzad even cited revenge for the on-going U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's Tribal Areas as one of the key motivations for his attempted 2010 attack in New York's Times Square. Against this argument, scholars and policymakers have pointed to the effectiveness of drone strikes in degrading short-term capabilities of targeted terrorist groups. They have argued that the perceived blowback from drones is a result of intervening factors such as the presence of political grievances, state repression, coercive recruitment efforts by terrorist groups, or on-going military operations. Opposition to drone strikes, according to a national survey in Pakistan, was higher in regions not targeted by the drones and largely driven by negative depictions within local media.

So, what are the implications for Trump's suspension of the Executive Order on reporting requirements for drone strikes? From both of these arguments, there are potential negative repercussions from Trump's decision.

If we embrace the latter argument presented above, the suspension of this Executive Order carries implications for the United States' ability to wage the public relations battle around the perceptions of the drone's use. While the drones may be effective in degrading the short-term capabilities of targeted terrorist groups, it is without dispute that they have been an unpopular weapon within countries where they are used. Foreign officials have portrayed them as an overreach of U.S. power and a violation of the "territorial integrity and sovereignty of states," with civilian casualties exacerbating this view. This anger towards the United States can increase domestic pressure on governments to choose not to cooperate on key counterterrorism issues. Given the important role partner states play in fighting terrorism around the world, this could severely hamper the U.S. government in challenging this still troublesome problem. Terrorist groups also have opportunistically used drone strikes and the resulting civilian casualties in their own propaganda efforts, portraying the United States as an "immoral bully". Without public data, U.S. outreach efforts effectively boil down to "he-said, she-said." The suspension of U.S. government reporting on drone strikes removes one potential tool that can aid in its information campaign and limiting the government's ability to challenge any potential disinformation.

From the perspective of the drone's opponents, Obama's Executive Order was a positive step forward as it introduced accountability and transparency for drone strikes given their concerns for civilian casualties. With the likelihood of collateral damage and the negative impact of civilian casualties, the realities of drone technology require a mechanism of restraint and accountability, such as mandatory reporting. Without this in place, the problems related to the use of the drone could worsen. Trump himself has already expressed a willingness not only to tolerate the killing of civilians but to target innocent people in strikes. In 2015, then presidential candidate Trump advocated the targeting of terrorists' families, stating, "When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families. They care about their lives, don't kid yourself. But they say they don't care about their lives. You have to take out their families." After taking office, he even reportedly pressed a CIA official for why they didn't also kill the terrorist's family and asked why they waited until he left his family's home before striking. Without any mechanisms of oversight and with Trump drastically increasing the deployment of drones, this behavior could be left unchecked and heighten the negative impact of drones in feeding violence and anti-Americanism overseas.