



U.S.-led drone war is self-defeating

By Ken Ballen, Peter Bergen and Patrick Doherty, Special to CNN
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- New poll, first of its kind, shows widespread opposition to U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan
- Poll: Residents of tribal areas would accept Pakistan-led drone program
- Poll: They are not inherently anti-American, do not support al Qaeda presence
- Co-authors: Tribal regions have suffered from years of neglect, poor economy

***Editor's note:** CNN National Security analyst [Peter Bergen](#) and [Patrick Doherty](#) are members of the staff of the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank that looks for solutions across the political spectrum. [Ken Ballen](#) is president of [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism.*

(CNN) -- For the United States there are few more strategically important places today than the tribal region of Pakistan, headquarters of al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, and also home to a syndicate of other militant jihadist groups from across Asia.

It is where Faisal Shahzad, who tried to blow up a car bomb in Times Square in May, was trained. So was Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan-American who plotted to explode bombs on Manhattan's subways in 2009. It is also the source of a good deal of the violence that is wracking neighboring Afghanistan.

Yet this critical region is one of the most opaque places in the world; international journalists and aid organizations rarely venture there, there's little open dialogue because, until last year, most political parties were banned from operating there. As a result, the views of its inhabitants have largely been a mystery.

We recently conducted the first comprehensive public opinion survey covering sensitive political issues in the region, which is known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA. The poll found that nearly nine out of every 10 people oppose U.S. military operations in the region. This view is intensely held. While only one in 10 FATA residents think suicide attacks are justified against the Pakistani military and police, almost six in 10 believe these attacks are justified against the U.S. military.

The United Nations has found that many of the suicide attackers in Afghanistan hail from the Pakistani tribal regions.

Our poll finding that shows these suicide fighters enjoy widespread popular support inside FATA explains in large measure the success of their sanctuary inside the tribal areas -- a safe haven that has had devastating consequences for American soldiers inside Afghanistan.

Much of the antipathy to the United States stems from the anger against CIA-directed drone attacks on militants living in the area. More than three-quarters of FATA residents oppose the drone strikes. Only 16 percent think these strikes accurately target militants, while 48 percent think they largely kill civilians and another 33 percent feel they kill both civilians and militants. (In fact, according to media reports about the drone attacks examined by the New America Foundation, the civilian casualty rate has been dropping from around 30 percent several years ago to around 10 percent today.)

President Obama has dramatically ramped up the drone program, authorizing at least 122 strikes so far during his administration, more than double the number authorized by President George W. Bush during his entire eight years in office. This may help account for why Obama is viewed unfavorably by 83 percent of FATA residents.

Opposition to American policies in the region does not mean, however, that the people of FATA embrace either al Qaeda or the Taliban. Quite the opposite: fewer than 10 percent support the presence of al Qaeda and fewer than 20 percent the Pakistani Taliban. And if al Qaeda or the Pakistani Taliban were on the ballot in an election, not even 1 percent of FATA residents said they would vote for either group. Instead of supporting the militants, nearly seven out of every 10 FATA residents want the Pakistani military -- alone and without American help -- to pursue the militants living in their midst.

The antagonism to U.S. policies in the region does not spring from general anti-American feelings. Almost three-quarters of the people in the tribal

area said that their opinion of the United States would improve -- most by a great deal -- if the United States increased humanitarian aid and visas to work or study in the States. While hating the American drones above them, the people of FATA would welcome the chance to have the ground of America beneath their feet.

The tribal regions have suffered from decades of neglect. Our poll found that only one in five residents have full-time work. As a result, FATA residents overwhelmingly cite lack of jobs, poor education, health care and access to water as important problems. Indeed, in a region that is religiously conservative, large majorities want public schools built for both boys and girls.

What our poll suggests is that if the premise of the American counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan is winning the support of the population, the United States is in danger of losing that support in the Taliban's rear bases inside Pakistan.

The Obama administration has some options. Our poll found that opposition to the drones dropped dramatically if they were operated by Pakistanis, so some control of the program could be handed over to them. The quid pro quo is that the Pakistani government has to take more public ownership of the drone program that they already provide a good deal of the intelligence for. The Pakistani military should also more aggressively pursue the Taliban and al Qaeda presence in the tribal regions, action that our poll found that FATA residents strongly favor.

Obama officials could also devise a more transparent program to assure locals that the drones are hitting their intended targets, for instance, by releasing videotapes of the strikes. Given that those officials privately claim that the civilian casualty rate from the drones is now close to zero, it would be helpful to have that claim proved publicly.

Some change is required. To just continue the current policy is not only to risk alienating the local people and the valuable intelligence they can provide, but it also may lead to more popular support, recruits and protected sanctuary for both the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Note: The FATA poll was conducted with the locally based Community Appraisal & Motivation Programme from June 30 to July 20, 2010, with face-to-face interviews of 1,000 residents and a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points. Funding for the poll was provided by the United States Institute of Peace, a congressionally funded think tank, which had no other role in the poll.