Policy Brief: U.S. Presidents’ use of drone warfare

Paul Lushenko
Cornell University
Lushenko - pal243@cornell.edu

Policy & Problem

In the past, scholars have classified American presidents’ use of drone warfare as a function of a bureaucratic process, while at the same time acknowledging that the pattern of U.S. drone warfare seems to shift across successive presidential administrations. The current literature on this topic lacks a discussion of the underlying logics that motivate U.S. presidents’ use of drone strikes abroad. This article helps bridge this gap in the drone warfare scholarship by introducing and testing an original typology for how U.S. presidents understand and decide to use strikes.
What We Study

We adopt the concept of “cognitive frames” to help understand how U.S. presidents interpret drone warfare. The “legal-normative” frame relates drone warfare to key international norms and social goals. The “strategic frame” defines drone warfare in terms of national security interests or state goals. These frames allow us to understand why U.S. presidents ultimately decide to use drones, which can be for four—instrumental, prerogative, prudential, and cosmopolitan—reasons. We explore two key cases of U.S. presidents’ use of drone strikes abroad to reflect the empirical purchase of this original framework. These cases consist of Obama’s use of drones in Libya in 2011 and Trump’s targeted killing of Iranian Major General Qassam Suleimani in 2020.

What We Find

The analysis suggests that both state and social goals influence U.S. presidents’ decisions to use drone strikes abroad. Obama used drones to help arrest a humanitarian crisis in 2011, which reflects that strikes are useful to help reestablish order and mete out justice. Similarly, Trump authorized a drone strike to kill Suleimani, which further protected U.S. forces in the region as well as attempted to further deter Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon to ensure global security and peace.

Why We Trust Our Results

Our case study analysis relies on primary and secondary sources, including speeches, commentaries, and memoirs, to triangulate data. We also use discourse analysis to observe U.S. presidents’ recall of cognitive frames. At the same time, the contestable nature of U.S. presidents’ use of drone warfare in Libya and against Suleimani also enable us to maximize and triangulate data. Both are crucial and pathway cases. They demonstrate the causal mechanism that we posit is most explanatory of U.S. presidents’ use of drone warfare, consisting of cognitive frames. They also instantiate a distinct causal path.

Why It Matters

Drone warfare is getting more prevalent and understanding the United States’ drone use as a leader-driven practice raises new questions for the public’s perceptions of legitimacy. There are puzzling trends concerning norms and views on the interplay between states, their leaders, and drone strikes. France, for example, incurs little condemnation for their use of drones in western Africa. America’s use of drone strikes in Africa does not benefit from the same lack of condemnation. This suggests that there is still research to be done concerning how drone strikes are used and interpreted.

Read our full study here: Lushenko (Defense & Security Analysis Politics, 2022)