

While drones did not introduce targeted assassinations, 9/11 and new technologies have pushed the boundaries of the tactic's acceptability.

*Despite its rejection by the Ford administration in the 1970s, the tactic of state-led assassination has been resurgent since 9/11, and has found its latest expression in the use of unmanned drone strikes. **Andris Banka** writes that innovative drone technologies have refashioned the centuries old tactic of targeted assassination in previously unimaginable ways by making the risks minimal and success rates high. He argues that while 9/11 created the opportunity for lawmakers to push again for targeted assassinations, drone technology itself has helped to expand the boundaries of what the public considers to be acceptable.*



State-led assassinations are not a novelty in international affairs; they have been with us from medieval to modern times. What is significantly different today however is the systematic basis in which assassination is delivered from above the clouds via Predator drones. As a method targeted killing was supposed to be left on a dusty shelf, and revisited only during dire security crises when other means of changing the course of events have been fully exhausted. Instead, compiling kill-lists and striking specific individuals has evolved into a routine monthly event – a trademark US policy praised by the political elites and accepted by the American people.

Historically, the idea that assassination should not be part of America's tool-box emerged in the 1970s with the so called **Church Committee**. After Congressional investigation had shed light on numerous CIA initiated plots against foreign heads of states, like Fidel Castro and Congolese Patrice Lumumba, the US government for the first time publically and principally drew a red line with respect to assassination as a method of foreign affairs. The key conclusion reached by the committee was that targeting specific individuals was morally disgraceful, practically unreliable and simply irreconcilable with America's democratic character. As a result President Gerald Ford issued executive order **stating** that: 'No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination'.

Every once in a while temptation to roll the dice with targeted killings resurfaced in Washington's corridors of power. During the presidencies of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton transnational terrorism and rogue state dictators, or at times the combination of both, profoundly tested previously set normative boundaries. In its modern shape terrorist activities generated tensions between domestic norms, which were there to restrict certain actions, and global realities, which increasingly demanded swift and flexible measures to protect the American people. Presidents and their advisors grappled with the sensitive issue of assassination, and at times wanted to follow slogan of 'an eye for an eye'.



Credit: US Air Force (Flickr CC-BY-NC-2.0)

While two cases in particular speak to the fact that America tried to solve some of its problems through targeted killing – Reagan bombed Colonel Gaddafi’s tent and Clinton sent cruise missiles to kill Bin Laden – on the whole these episodes represented rare exceptions. Targeted assassination was treated as a last resort temporal measure, and lawmakers were highly cautious of not setting it on a permanent footing. Lessons from the 1970s had left a bad aftertaste, and occupants of the White House believed that US foreign policy can be successfully steered without having to systematically engage in the dark business of covert killings. Before September 11, 2001 only one country – Israel, regularly utilized targeted assassinations and was harshly criticized for that by America.

The conviction that ‘nailing the bad guys’ is something off-limits disappeared almost overnight on 9/11. Methods that were previously listed as too radical and ill-advised were now given a second look. Targeted killings seemingly promised the best insurance policy against future terrorist attacks. Secretive order signed by President George Bush, just days after September 11, eliminated previous normative and legal barriers, and as a result the United States embarked on a [massive man-hunting operation across the globe](#). In the wake of the security crises government untied its own hands, and re-introduced lethal authority to go after specific individuals, in many ways resembling the pre-Church committee era times.

Even if the United States had not developed armed drone capabilities, it is likely that targeted killings would still have been an integral part of the ‘war on terror’. Drones did not introduce targeted assassinations. Diverse tools ranging from poison to hammer, car bombs and even lamp stands have been used for such operations. That being said, advancement of cutting-edge UAV technology greatly influenced how policy makers thought about this policy option, and clearly increased quantity of such missions.

In order to fully grasp the importance of drones it is useful to remember that the United States historically had considerable practical difficulties executing assassination plans. At the end of the day, no matter how carefully designed, government initiated plots against Castro, Gaddafi, Bin Laden and others, all had failed. With the introduction of drones this was no longer the case. Armed Predators markedly increased the success rate of such operations. Suddenly killing unwanted foreign persons became easy, impersonal and seemingly clean. For the attacking side the risks were minimal and the body count of those killed high.

Absent of 9/11 targeted assassinations would have not become a permanent feature of US foreign policy. One however should not oversimplify the processes that lead to such profound policy shift. While terrorist attacks created a window of opportunity for lawmakers to change existing practices, new technological developments also played an important role in pushing the borderline of what is seen as ‘acceptable’ much further away.

The issue here is not only of normative importance. Each drone strike promotes a new code of conduct – that killing targets based on secretive memos and fuzzy threat perceptions is justifiable. Each strike not only kills someone, but also invites reciprocal action. Long gone are the days when the United States could claim a monopoly over this technology. Having droned for almost a decade without any restrictions or visible consequences, United States might one day realize that the same advancements and methods that allowed it to look so invincible are successfully being copied by others, and has in turn made it vulnerable.

This article is based on a talk given at the [LSE US Foreign Policy Conference](#) held on September 17-19th, 2014. You can watch video highlights from the conference in the player below:

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About the author

Andris Banka – *University of Birmingham*

Andris Banka is a PhD student at the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham. His research interests include U.S. foreign policy, security, and terrorism.

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