

# What's the future of drones in counterterrorism operations and the Ukraine war?

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Counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine underscore the importance of unmanned aircraft to future military capabilities, said University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign political scientist Nicholas Grossman, the author of “Drones and Terrorism: Asymmetric Warfare and the Threat to Global Security.” . Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign political science professor Nicholas Grossman is the author of "Drones and Terrorism: Asymmetric Warfare and the Threat to Global Security" and specializes in international relations. Grossman spoke with News Bureau business and law editor Phil Ciciora about the implications of the U.S. killing former al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri by drone in Afghanistan.

The killing of Ayman al-Zawahri by [drone](#) was performed with minimal collateral damage, according to U.S. [military officials](#). If the U.S. military has these so-called "over the horizon" capabilities with lethal drones, does this argue against "forever wars" and occupying foreign countries?

Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri was in a Taliban safehouse in Kabul when the U.S. killed him with a drone strike. This shows that Afghanistan has become friendlier to al-Qaida since U.S. forces left last year, as critics of the withdrawal had warned. But it also shows that the U.S. retains the ability to track and kill targets there. The goal of occupying Afghanistan was to dislodge al-Qaida and establish a local partner who wouldn't allow them to return, which eventually failed. But American "over the horizon" strike capabilities have improved since then, which gives the U.S. more options.

Still, with the government of Afghanistan helping, rather than fighting, al-Qaida, the U.S. will have less intelligence about their operations, and the group will likely be more dangerous. That does not, however, automatically make devoting resources to occupying Afghanistan a worthwhile trade-off.

**How important will unmanned aerial vehicles be to the future of air combat?**

Human beings still have better situational awareness than computers, and can engage in moral reasoning and improvise if something unexpected happens. So people will continue to be responsible for the highest-level aerial tasks—air-to-air combat, top-line stealth aircraft, plane-based nuclear strikes. But with the exception of a hot war with China, which both China and America will work hard to avoid, the U.S. can probably establish air superiority against any adversary.

With control of the skies, slower, less maneuverable drones can surveil and fire upon targets. However, drones don't put a human pilot at risk, and should eventually be able to conduct maneuvers at angles and speeds that would make a pilot pass out. The Department of Defense aims for unmanned aircraft to be able to conduct all aerial missions by around 2040.

## **What role have Western-supplied drones played in leveling the playing field for the Ukrainians in their defense of their homeland against the invading Russian military?**

The most impactful weapons the U.S. and other NATO countries have given Ukraine are man-portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and especially the recent deliveries of mobile rocket artillery systems known as HIMARS.

But drones have certainly helped. Earlier in the conflict, the Turkish-provided Bayraktar TB2, a model similar to the U.S.-made Predator drone, allowed Ukraine to fire on overextended Russian ground columns.

As Russia was forced to scale back its ambitions and the war became a grinding territorial battle in Ukraine's south and east, the Ukrainians have made use of small, U.S.-provided kamikaze drones called the

Switchblade and the Phoenix Ghost. These "non-line-of-sight" weapons allow an operator to fly the drone from miles away, use the camera to pinpoint a target and then crash into it with an explosive. They're especially useful for Ukraine's counteroffensive to retake Russian-occupied cities and towns, because the Ukrainians won't replicate the Russian tactic of pounding inhabited areas with indiscriminate artillery fire before advancing.

## **How worried should we be about our adversaries creating drones capable of striking U.S. interests?**

Not very. The U.S. has extensive electronic warfare and anti-air capabilities to counter enemy drones if necessary. Terrorists could sneak some small ones through to launch attacks, jury-rigging inexpensive, commercially available models to function as kamikaze drones, like the Switchblade. Iran has a fairly advanced drone industry, which adds to Hezbollah's arsenal pointed at Israel, and would help in the event of a future U.S. invasion. China, however, may be able to develop drone swarms and other unmanned technology that the U.S. would find challenging. But America's capabilities remain more advanced and likely will be for a while.

## **Does the killing of al-Zawahri and last summer's withdrawal from Afghanistan mark the end of an era in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East?**

The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and from Afghanistan in 2021 marked the end of the post-9/11 "forever wars." Al-Zawahri was the last main 9/11 plotter still at large. The U.S. and Pakistan captured the attack's principal architect, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, in 2003, and he remains in American custody. U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, so al-Zawahri's death provides a bookend on 9/11. But the U.S.

still has some troops in Syria and Iraq, as well as counterterrorism forces throughout Africa. Al-Qaida, ISIS and other groups remain a threat. The U.S. may drop the "War on Terror" framing, but the fight against terrorists will go on indefinitely.

As for broader [foreign policy](#) questions—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, nuclear proliferation, global energy markets and other concerns will keep the U.S. engaged in the Middle East for the foreseeable future, albeit somewhat differently. But American focus has shifted more to geopolitical competition with Russia and China, especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's increased pressure on Taiwan.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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