

DOD WON'T BE TAKING OVER DRONE STRIKES ANYTIME SOON

In today's Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the AUMF, Carl Levin asked Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict Michael Sheehan whether CIA should get to use drone strikes, in addition to DOD. (at 1:29)

Levin: Should the use of these drones be limited to the Department of Defense or should other government agencies be allowed to use such force as well, for instance the CIA.

Shaheen: Mr. Chairman, the President has indicated that he has a preference preference for those activities be conducted under Title 10 [that is, DOD], we're reviewing that right now, but I think we also recognize that that type of transition may take quite a while depending on the theater of operation.

That language – depending on the theater of operation – would seem to suggest the problem is target country dependent. Which is to say, the CIA will not give up its authority to use drones in Pakistan and/or Yemen anytime soon.

The reasons why that's true presented in this Defense Week article aren't all that convincing. The article starts with the claim that moving CIA's drone targeting to DOD wouldn't make much difference, in part because it's always a uniformed Air Force pilot pulling the trigger to kill someone.

It does point to some nifty toys that CIA has acquired through its more "agile" contracting regime.

The CIA has outfitted its Air Force UAVs, all purchased from General

Atomics, with special features, sources say. They say the agency has a more “agile” contracting process than the Air Force.

The refits include four-bladed propellers, which enable the CIA UAVs to take off from shorter runways and may give them a higher operating ceiling as well. With more blades, “you can slice through more air,” one UAV expert said.

The UAVs assigned to the CIA also carry more advanced sensors. For example, they shoot high-definition, 1080p full-motion video, while the Air Force UAV sensors offer just standard definition. Air Force drones may be used as much to gather intelligence as for airstrikes, where CIA UAVs are configured so they can watch, gather intelligence, and eventually kill.

But in either case – at least this article claims – whether DOD or CIA flies the drones, the targeting relies on Counterterrorism Center intelligence.

One former intelligence officer points out that the most important part of the entire program isn’t the UAVs at all. It’s the intelligence that officials use to pick their targets. And that’s the part the Air Force would have the most difficult time getting, if it were not for the CIA.

“Where is the intelligence going to come from in the first place?” he asked rhetorically. “The targeting? It’s the CTC,” the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center.

Which of course doesn’t explain what about the theaters in which CIA owns the drones rather than DOD (which the article agrees are Pakistan and Yemen) would make it so hard to transition.

I suspect the reasons are different for each. In Pakistan, we're facing a new Prime Minister in Nawaz Sharif who has claimed to be skeptical of drones. And we're facing the tensions between Pakistan's security establishment and its democratic government that necessitate a thoroughly unconvincing kabuki about whether Pakistan consents.

There's a similar tension in Yemen, too. In addition, I suspect we're captive to what our drone base hosts in Saudi Arabia want. And there was never much chance they were going to accept a partner other than the old Riyadh Station Chief, John Brennan, run their drone program.

In other words, nothing will change anytime soon. As has been clear in every single piece that simultaneously said DOD would be taking over drone killing even while admitting there would be exceptions tied to Brennan for quite some time.

Surprise: Obama's National Security people are going to keep saying they're moving drones to DOD, even while admitting they don't mean that's happening right now.