

Plans to vastly expand drones in US

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The enormous expansion of the use of drones—Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)—over US territory has received increasing bipartisan support within the political establishment, and has provoked growing popular opposition.

Attention was called to the subject of official use of drones for surveillance purposes by a recent comment from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. In a radio interview, the billionaire mayor offhandedly dismissed the growing concern over drone use by critics who raised issues of privacy and civil liberties. Bloomberg compared drones to surveillance cameras already in use around Manhattan.

“What’s the difference whether the drone is up in the air or on the building?” Bloomberg said on a WOR-AM program. “We’re going into a different world, uncharted...you can’t keep the tide from coming in.”

The mayor’s remarks were significant not because they announced a brand new policy, but because he was signaling the growing approval in ruling class circles for measures that amount to the scaffolding of a police state. Bloomberg does not worry that his own privacy will be infringed – he regularly uses his private jet for weekend trips to his luxury beach house in Bermuda with barely a mention in the media. For the lower orders, however, Bloomberg’s advice can be summed up in four words: “Get used to it.”

The US use of drones for purposes of overseas assassination has become notorious over the past decade. In the past four years, the Obama administration has escalated its predecessor’s ruthless program of mass killing and assassination in its “global war on terror,” with Obama boasting of his role in approving “kill lists” in secret White House meetings. Less than a month ago, John Brennan, the architect of the Obama administration’s drone assassination program, was confirmed by the Senate as the new director of the CIA.

The WSWS reported a year ago that the US military has a fleet of about 7,500 of these unmanned vehicles, used for surveillance but also for killing, as in the case of US citizen and Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and his 16-year-old son who were targeted in Yemen. The use of these drones in Pakistani tribal areas in the past 8 years has cost the lives of at least 2,700 men, women and children, the vast majority innocent bystanders in Washington’s brutal aggression (See, “Drones come to the US”).

Now, however, attention has also been turned to the domestic use of drones. Department of Homeland Security director Janet Napolitano recently testified before Congress that the DHS was planning to increase its use of drones in order to ensure “public safety.” The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) expects up to 30,000 drones in US airspace by 2020. Drones have already been used in the name of border security, including on the border between the US and Canada in the Pacific Northwest as well as in the southwest along the border with Mexico.

The *Los Angeles Times* has reported in the past on the use of drones by local law enforcement, beyond their use by Homeland Security to search for smugglers and immigrants. The *Times* gave an example of sparsely populated North Dakota, where a drone was used for surveillance purposes that led to arrests.

A recent report in the *Huffington Post* revealed the sinister implications of the supposed moves toward a bipartisan and “progressive” framework for immigration reform. The outline of possible bipartisan immigration legislation in the Senate, while holding out the hope of easing the threat of imminent deportation for some of the approximately 11 million undocumented workers in the country, would also include the stepped up use of drones in the name of securing the border against “illegal” immigrants.

According to this report, the Department of

Homeland Security has already spent about \$200 million for a “small fleet” of 10 Predator drones that are mostly deployed along the US-Mexican border, and this number can be expected to increase greatly.

Immigrant rights advocates have denounced the use of drones to patrol the border, with one advocate warning specifically about “the notion that legalization for undocumented immigrants should have to wait for additional border security measures that would further militarize the southwest with aerial drones.”

Nor is the use of drones confined to the massive Homeland Security Department. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the largest component of Homeland Security, has loaned drones to both federal and local agencies for purposes such as the interdiction of illegal drugs. According to the *Huffington Post* report, however, a drone crashed in Nogales, Arizona and narrowly averted disaster in a populated area. The Homeland Security Department has itself criticized CBP’s purchase of drones without plans to use them, but all signs continue to point to a vast expansion in the number of drones.

A representative of the Stanford Law School Center for Internet and Society warned, according to an account in the *LA Times*, that “Any time you have a tool like that in the hands of law enforcement that makes it easier to do surveillance, they will do more of it.”

Another concern, raised by the American Civil Liberties Union and others, is the development of the “DIY armed drone.” Commercially available equipment could be used to build private, do-it-yourself armed drones. Jay Stanley of the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy and Technology Project has discussed the example of a radio talk-show caller who demonstrated his own experiment in a possible effort to call attention to the dangerous potential of drone technology.

Until the recent filibuster by Kentucky Republican Rand Paul that briefly blocked the confirmation of new CIA director Brennan, there had been almost no discussion in Congress on the increased use of drones domestically. Former California Congresswoman Jane Harman, a leading Democrat and senior member of the House intelligence subcommittee, was one of the few who had raised concerns several years ago. Harman, who had been one of the most enthusiastic backers of the invasion of Iraq and had no problem with US

aggression in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, complained that use of drones domestically would violate the Posse Comitatus Act, which bars the military from exercising police powers inside the US. Harman retired from Congress two years ago.

The extension of drone surveillance for domestic purposes lays the basis for the use of armed drones as well. Privacy concerns, though important, are only the beginning of what is raised by the relentless militarization of daily life in America. The talk of using drones for purposes of “public safety” reflects the preparation of the ruling class to meet an upsurge in the class struggle with repression and the methods of a military-police dictatorship.



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