

Pentagon deploying drone aircraft within the US

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A report released by the Department of Defense inspector general reveals that for nearly ten years, the US military has been coordinating the domestic use of drones with local officials and the National Guard. It has done so without any public accountability or reporting by the media.

The Pentagon report, prepared last month, was made public last week only after a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the Federation of American Scientists.

The inspector general report provides only a glimpse into the extensive use of the military within the borders of the United States. It refers to “less than 20” instances since 2006 when drones were requested by US agencies for use outside of military bases. It does not include a complete list of cases where drones were used, but instead provides nine examples occurring between 2011 and 2016.

While the report is accompanied by the usual reference to “protecting the American public’s civil liberties and privacy rights,” the use of drones (or unmanned aircraft systems, UAS) within the country is a serious warning. It is part of a broader expansion of domestic military activity over the past fifteen years and complements the much more extensive deployment of drone aircraft by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Several of the examples listed include large-scale training exercises that involve a simulated natural disaster. Such exercises provide an opportunity for the military to practice the coordination of its assets with local, state and federal civilian agencies.

The cases listed include Exercise Guardian Shield 2015. In this exercise, carried out last summer in Ohio, the Ohio Air National Guard, the FBI and state and local agencies simulated incidents throughout the state. Exercise Ardent Sentry 2011, another example listed in

the report, was a nationwide exercise simulating an earthquake along the New Madrid Seismic Zone, which includes parts of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi and Tennessee. The exercise was overseen by the US Northern Command, set up in 2002 under the Bush administration as the first-ever command in charge of military activity within the United States.

Military drones were also reportedly deployed during several natural disasters, including flooding in the Mississippi River Valley at the beginning of this year and in South Carolina last October. Of the nine cases listed, six took place in the last 10 months, indicating a significant expansion of military drone use.

The use of drone aircraft is part of the integration of the military with domestic agencies (through a program known as Defense Support of Civil Authorities, or DSCA), under the authority of the US Northern Command. In 2006, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signed an interim order that, according to the inspector general report, “encourages the use of DoD [Department of Defense] UAS to support appropriate domestic mission sets.”

The current DSCA policy guidelines (adopted in 2012 under the Obama administration) contain extremely broad language calling for the military to respond to requests “from civil authorities for domestic emergencies, law enforcement support, and other domestic activities, or from qualifying entities for ‘special events.’”

The ground is being laid for a much broader use of military drones. A 2012 Department of Defense report to Congress identified 110 potential drone bases within the US and called for expanded military access to domestic airspace, ostensibly for the purpose of training individuals to meet the vast growth in

“operational demand” abroad, i.e., the assassination program of the Obama administration in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries.

The potential drone bases cited in the 2012 report were located in 39 different states throughout the country.

Since the US Northern Command was first established, the Pentagon, under the Bush and Obama administrations, has pushed for a reinterpretation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits the use of the military for domestic purposes. In 2008, the Pentagon established an “anti-terror” unit within the framework of the Northern Command composed of 20,000 regular Army troops that could be used within the US.

A Department of Justice “white paper” on drone assassination, leaked to the press in February 2013, outlined the Obama administration’s position that the White House has the authority to kill anyone, including US citizens, anywhere in the world without judicial process. In the spring of that year, Attorney General Eric Holder refused to rule out the possibility that the president could, under “extraordinary circumstances...authorize the military to use lethal force within the territory of the United States,” including by means of drone strikes.

Over the past several years, the Pentagon has carried out a series of domestic exercises simulating large-scale military operations. These include most significantly Operation Jade Helm, begun in July 2015 and involving drills in parts of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico and Texas.

The expanded use or simulated use of military forces within the country has coincided with the militarization of local police and the use of the National Guard to impose effective martial law in response to terrorist attacks or social protests, including the lockdown of Boston following the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, and the states of emergency in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland during protests against police violence in 2014 and 2015.

Last June, FBI Director James Comey acknowledged that his agency had used drone surveillance aircraft to monitor the protests in both Ferguson and Baltimore. An Associated Press report prior to Comey’s testimony revealed that the FBI had conducted more than 100 flights in 11 states during a single month that year,

employing shell companies to operate the aircraft.

The events in Ferguson and Baltimore revealed the essential purpose behind all of these measures. Utilizing the “war on terror” as a pretext, the White House and the Pentagon have worked systematically to expand the apparatus of surveillance and repression—military and police—to utilize the instruments of war ever more directly against social opposition within the United States.



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