

Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States

By Mara E. Karlin

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Reviewed by John L. Hewitt III

Have you ever wondered why the United States has such an “uneven” record when it comes to building foreign militaries? Since the United States has been involved in building militaries since World War II, one would think it would be adept at doing this, particularly considering its military funding, training, and equipping apparatus. However, this is not the case, as illustrated by measured, objective studies.

Mara Karlin, former Pentagon policy-maker and current associate professor of practice of strategic studies at The Johns Hopkins University, has taken a serious look at the nuts and bolts of building militaries abroad—why strategies do and do not work—and the results of U.S. attempts to build militaries in fragile states.

In *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, Karlin provides a thoughtful,

well-researched, and comprehensive account of the components of and challenges associated with U.S. attempts to build militaries through four case studies: Greece (1947), South Vietnam (1955), Lebanon (1982), and Lebanon (2005). As she notes, according to former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, security cooperation or building militaries “is one of the serious security challenges of our times” and must be addressed appropriately. Karlin further asserts, “It can be done cheaply and potentially reduce casualties,” which the U.S. populace would undoubtedly support. Moreover, “building partner militaries will likely be increasingly seen as an easier and cheaper way to handle them” in the future.

Karlin states that it is not more training, equipping, and funding that are needed. These things do not address a foreign military’s key requirement, which is, Karlin concludes, “to exert the government’s sovereignty throughout its territory.” Instead, she contends, the United States must be “deeply involved in the partner state’s sensitive military affairs, not operating on the periphery (or passively), and ensure that antagonistic external actors play a diminishing role, instead of degrading the gains brought about by U.S. involvement.” This is important as it determines whether “the partner state military is likely to establish an internal defense.”

Karlin’s book includes much useful data, via charts, tables, and other graphical aids, and is bolstered by personal accounts from leaders, decisionmakers, diplomats, general officers (both U.S. and foreign), Department of Defense (DOD) officials, and others who are charged with structuring or restructuring, funding, equipping, training, and leading efforts to build nascent or immature militaries. Best of all, Karlin offers a glimpse behind the secretive curtains of the Oval Office (Presidents Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama), DOD and Department of State, U.S. Embassies, and the National Security Council, where readers become privy to somber, prudent, and reflective accounts regarding the complexities and challenges of these missions.

Karlin introduces readers to a volatile mix of dynamics including frail and stout egos, domineering and acquiescing personalities, strong and fragile leadership, Presidential entreaties (and blunders), wavering and staunch commitments, intra- and inter-departmental infighting and cohesion, and discordant approaches and points of view toward mission strategy and implementation. The dynamics manifest themselves throughout the study and generally yield predictable results—success or failure. In Greece, for example, the U.S. “involvement in military affairs was deep, the U.S. did not become co-combatants, and it managed to reduce the impact external actors had on Greece.” In Vietnam, U.S. involvement in military affairs was “limited, and it overreacted to concerns to external actors.” The case was similar in Lebanon (1982 and 2005), where external aggression in the form of Syria, Iran, and Israel, and internal aggressors like Hezbollah induced considerable pressure on Lebanon and the United States, requiring the two sides to essentially agree to disagree on the appropriate strategy.

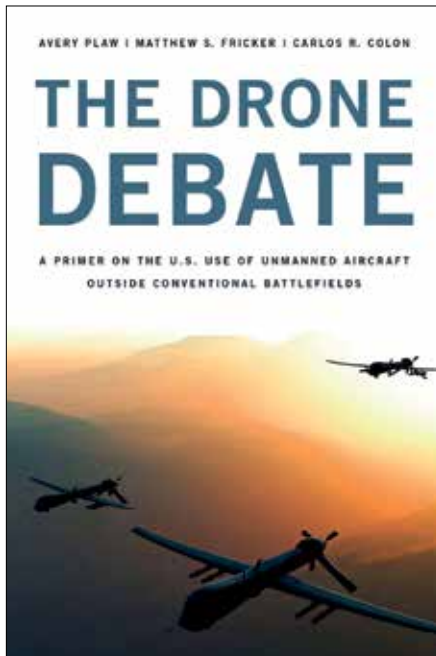
Karlin closes the book with a thought-provoking chapter devoted to recommendations. She succinctly recaps the cases, identifying where the host nation and the United States succeeded or failed. Her bold prescriptions for policymakers to consider in future endeavors are helpful. The author herself admits the book’s lone limitation, with respect to the relatively small number of countries analyzed, acknowledging that “this book laid the groundwork for future research on strengthening partner militaries for internal defense.”

To be clear, the book is not a school solution or completed answer sheet to the test. Instead, it serves as a playbook for policymakers to analyze and deduce historical problems, juxtapose those against today’s challenges, reconcile them, and then identify mechanisms that contribute successfully to building militaries.

Building Militaries in Fragile States is a formidable contribution to this field of study; it is prescriptive, detailed, and informative. The author provides readers a roadmap for further investigation that

should elicit robust conversations, deeper analysis, and decisive actions. I recommend this book to foreign policy analysts, policy wonks, military personnel, and anyone interested in foreign affairs. Mara Karlin illuminates a problem that will no doubt bedevil the United States for decades—her insights are both enlightening and frightening. JFQ

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The Drone Debate: A Primer on the U.S. Use of Unmanned Aircraft Outside of Conventional Battlefields

By Avery Plaw, Matthew S. Fricker, and Carlos R. Colon
Rowman & Littlefield, 2015
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Reviewed by Matthew Mueller

Since the first use of a drone strike outside a conventional battlefield in November 2002, the United States is credibly reported to have carried out at least 500 covert strikes in

Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, killing around 3,500 people, including civilians. Indeed, drones became the poster child for U.S. counterterrorism operations under the administration of President Barack Obama and have generated growing attention and controversy. The authors of this book sought to develop a primer that summarized the debate on several key issues related to drones. It is important to note, as the authors do at the outset, that this book focuses only on the use of drones *outside* of conventional battlefields and for this reason excludes operations conducted by the United States in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. While *The Drone Debate* covers a wide range of material, it does so with exceptional clarity and objective analysis that allow readers to come to their own conclusions surrounding the important questions drones raise.

The book proceeds through the different dimensions of the debate, beginning with a concise overview of the history of drone operations. This sets up the rest of the book by providing readers with the historical development of drones since the end of World War II until today, as well as an understanding of the different open-source databases that catalog drone strike casualties. Regardless of which database is being considered, the evidence shows that as drone technology has evolved, civilian casualties have decreased, suggesting that their use is becoming more discriminating due to better technology and/or stricter targeting guidelines. The authors' careful attention given to explaining the differences among the four main open-source drone strike casualty databases (New America, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Long War Journal, and the Center for the Study of Targeted Killing) is commendable. While similar, each database uses its own coding that produces different results; the authors have provided readers an easily digestible explanation of the differences. Picking up from this, the authors conduct an exceptional tour de force through the strategic, legal, ethical, and political issues surrounding the use of drones in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

The authors also provide a good presentation of the debate surrounding the efficacy of drone strikes by looking at issues surrounding their precision and whether drone strikes are indeed an effective strategy for combating terrorism. Many critics have asserted that the use of drone strikes has had a paradoxical effect on al Qaeda; while these strikes have succeeded in removing mid- to senior-level leaders, they have also opened the opportunity for younger, more radical leaders to take their places. The occurrence of civilian casualties has only invigorated al Qaeda's recruitment efforts. In response, defenders of the drone program have argued that the number of civilian casualties is inflated and that the operational and psychological impact of drone strikes on al Qaeda leadership has had a significantly disruptive effect on the group's operations. The authors conclude that, while there are many forceful arguments on both sides, there is not a single knock-out argument for either.

The legality and ethics of using drones outside of conventional battlefields are hotly debated. The authors sketch an overview of the legal issues present under both U.S. domestic law and international law. The third chapter is admittedly a slightly difficult chapter to read due to the debate surrounding the conflict classification between the United States and al Qaeda and affiliated forces. The authors do their best to walk through the application of the international law of self-defense and international humanitarian law, but the lurking issue of what type of conflict (international armed conflict, noninternational armed conflict, or—as some in the literature base on conflict classification have argued—transnational armed conflict) is at hand is evident in any discussion of the legality of drones strikes under international law. In contrast, the fourth chapter provides an excellent overview of the different ethical issues surrounding drones, including the application of Just War Theory, the effect on military virtues, the question of whether drones will increase the propensity for armed conflict, and the ethics of the use of fully autonomous weapon systems.