The confirmation process for John Brennan—formerly President Barack Obama’s chief counterterrorism advisor—to lead the CIA, ignited a divisive debate regarding the legality of drone strikes. The debate has largely focused on the constitutionality of killing alleged American terrorists without the privilege of a trial. A dangerously small portion of the debate, however, has focused on the Obama Administration’s imprudent reliance on the drone program as a centerpiece of its national security policy. To be certain, drones can be one of the most effective tools in America’s intelligence and military arsenals when used sparingly and discriminately. But drone strikes are a tactic, not a strategy, and the United States’ overreliance on them will neither allow it to defeat Al Qaeda nor hinder the global terrorist network’s expansion.

President Obama has authorized drone strikes on at least 370 terror suspects during his presidency. Yet the global Al Qaeda network is no weaker today than it was on his inauguration day in 2009. The terror network consists of four very active official Al Qaeda regional franchises situated in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and North Africa, as well as several groups closely affiliated with Al Qaeda in Pakistan, Syria, Southeast Asia, and the Northern Caucasus. All of these groups are competing to become the premier Al Qaeda franchise. Moreover, nearly all have articulated a desire to strike at American interests. Groups in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan have demonstrated the capacity to conduct international terrorist attacks.

Since President Obama has taken office, Al Qaeda and its associated movements have launched at least three terror attacks aimed at the American homeland that reached operational status. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the franchise based in Yemen, deployed an operative to detonate an “underwear bomb” on a plane in the skies over Michigan on December 25, 2009. In October 2010, the same franchise sent two explosive-laden packages to synagogues in Chicago. A third attempted attack in the past four years on U.S. soil was the 2010 Times Square car bomb attempt carried out by an operative trained by the Pakistani Taliban.

All three attacks failed, and hundreds of American lives were spared. But so too was scrutiny of President Obama’s drone program. The Obama administration has

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authorized over three hundred drone strikes on targets in Pakistan. Nearly all of the strikes have occurred in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of northwest Pakistan, the precise region where Faisal Shahzad received training in bomb-making before the attempted attack in Times Square. Likewise, while the administration has authorized between forty and fifty drone strikes on AQAP targets in Yemen, this use of force has not prevented the franchise from continuing to plot attacks on the United States. It was diligent work by the CIA in May 2012 that foiled AQAP’s second attempted “underwear bombing,” not a drone strike.

To be sure, drone strikes do have some merits. The United States has eliminated a long string of al Qaeda senior deputies by using drones, and it dealt a devastating blow to al Qaeda’s English-language recruiting efforts when drones killed propagandists (and American citizens) Anwar al Awlaki and Samir Khan in Yemen in the fall of 2011. But drones kill members of organizations, and these members can be replaced by others. Drones do not kill an ideology or deny al Qaeda territory. To the contrary, especially when strikes inadvertently kill innocent civilians, they can harden a population’s adherence to an ideology and help secure safe havens by generating greater local sympathy for al Qaeda.

Defeating al Qaeda and protecting the American homeland will require the Obama administration to recognize that drone strikes cannot serve as a sustainable national security strategy. Keeping America safe will demand that President Obama’s national security team devise a robust strategy aimed at denying al Qaeda territory and limiting its expansion. Such a strategy must include a range of military, intelligence, and diplomatic tools, including occasional drone strikes on high-value targets. But the strategy must also include politically inconvenient measures that would aim to reduce the amount of territory in which al Qaeda groups can operate with impunity. The deployment of Special Forces to train regional militaries on counterinsurgency tactics to combat al Qaeda-linked groups should be a key prong of such an approach. But such a strategy must also include the deployment of Foreign Service Officers and USAID officers to al Qaeda hotspots in an effort to weaken local support for al Qaeda-linked groups and protect vulnerable populations from militant Islamist influence.

Embracing such a comprehensive strategy to defeat the global al Qaeda network would entail a certain amount of risk and may put the lives of some of America’s finest servants, both military and civilian, in dangerous situations. But such a multi-pronged strategy stands the chance of achieving one thing that drones never will: eliminating al Qaeda safe havens. President Obama’s national security team must decide whether it wants to continue relying on drones to prevent the next attack on American soil or if it wants to go on the offensive by rolling back al Qaeda-controlled territory. If the administration elects to stick with drones as a strategy, it will have to hope for the same string of good luck that has so far denied al Qaeda success in attacking Americans on U.S. soil despite some very close calls.

— Jake Nelson served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.
NOTES

1 All drone statistics are current as of March 25, 2013 and come from The New America Foundation, a think tank that tracks drone strikes. Drone statistics are available on their website at: http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones.

2 This op-ed was written shortly before the Boston Marathon terror attack on April 15, 2013. At the time of publication, it was unclear whether or not al Qaeda, or any of its associated networks, was involved in the attack.
