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Defending America's Skies

Public Support for Homeland Counter-Drone Operations



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Executive Summary

What shapes public support for counter-drone operations in the United States? Despite the proliferation of drones across America, policymakers and defense officials are hesitant to authorize counter-drone operations in the US homeland. They fear backlash for unintended consequences, especially the loss of American lives and damage or destruction of their property. In this study, we challenge this assumption by investigating what conditions shape public support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. Contrary to a prevailing belief among policymakers and defense officials, we find that Americans generally support counter-drone operations in the US homeland. However, we also observe that public support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland is shaped by three key factors. These include the characteristics of the drone incursion, who authorizes a response, and the effects in terms of Americans' safety. These results provide

the first experimental evidence for what shapes public support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland, which have important policy and strategic implications for US national security.

Introduction

In 2016, coinciding with operations against the Islamic State, defense leaders started characterizing drones, especially small-unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), as a threat to US military personnel and installations. By 2020, the US Department of Defense (DOD) established the Joint Counter-Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Office to enhance force protection of personnel and installations, both at home and abroad. Then, in 2021, the first Trump Administration issued an executive order limiting the use of US taxpayer dollars to purchase drones manufactured by "foreign adversaries."

Since 2021, drones have proliferated across the US homeland, constituting a new threat to national security. In 2024 alone, there have been 350 drone detections at more than 100 different US military installations. In December 2023, "a dozen or more" drones disrupted military operations at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, forcing the relocation of F-22 Raptor jets responsible for defending the US homeland. According to US Air Force General Gregory Guillot, Commander of US Northern Command, this incursion suggests that drones now represent "a safety and



security risk to military and other critical infrastructure for the foreseeable future.”

Despite increased drone disruptions at civilian and military sites across America, US policymakers and defense officials are hesitant to conduct counter-drone operations in the US homeland. At the same time, the US Congress has adopted statutes that constrain the use of military force in the US homeland, thus promoting counter-drone operations by law enforcement and federal agencies. Even then, police officials note that the Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA) “regulations prohibit state and local law enforcement from taking action against reckless drone operators, even when they pose a clear and present danger.” For instance, the FAA recently led the US government’s response to numerous sightings of “mysterious” drones flying over New Jersey. What explains this reluctance to take more aggressive action against unauthorized drone use within the US homeland?

One possible explanation is that some officials fear public blowback if there are unintended consequences of counter-drone operations. This presumption echoes new research showing that Americans favor only limited coercive interventions in the US homeland, especially those that are unarmed. Most problematic for officials is the potential for inadvertent harm caused to Americans. The use of the counter-drone capabilities to intercept drones, especially in densely populated urban areas, could result in falling debris that may injure or kill

Americans. According to US Northern Command’s Deputy Test Director, Jason Mayes, lethal counter-drone capabilities are “not appropriate for the homeland.” Casualty aversion, then, “becomes a strategic priority that can supersede operational success,” which Jacquelyn Schneider and Julia Macdonald note shapes military innovation over time. Thus, both material and normative considerations, consisting of statutes and the potential for collateral damage, have combined to discourage counter-drone operations in the US homeland.

But do Americans agree that counter-drone operations are always unacceptable in the US homeland? What if intelligence officials blame China or Iran, America’s identified adversaries, for drone incursions in the US homeland? Public opinion on this issue matters because research shows that “US officials routinely invoke polling data to enhance the legitimacy of their policy actions.” Experts also show that public opinion shapes policy outcomes, including for the use of military force. More directly, the Trump Administration has developed the “Iron Dome for America” initiative to protect the US homeland from hypersonic and ballistic missiles, and public opinion may help inform this new policy.

To understand Americans’ views of counter-drone operations within the US homeland, we fielded an original single-module conjoint or cross-over survey experiment among a representative sample of 551 Americans in January 2025. This



design allowed us to assess the degree to which several factors, when considered in tandem with one another, shape Americans' attitudes toward counter-drone operations in the US homeland. Specifically, we investigated whether technical considerations for counter-drone capabilities shape public attitudes, or whether other considerations, such as the effect on Americans and their property, the type of incursion and its perpetrator, or the approval authority for operations matter more.

We find that Americans generally support counter-drone operations in the US homeland. At the same time, public opinion is strongly shaped by three key considerations. These include the characteristics of drone incursions, especially who launches drones, where, and why; approval authority, particularly the US President, Secretary of Defense, and Commander of US Northern Command; and, effects in terms of personal safety. Policymakers have the responsibility to protect Americans and, in doing so, acknowledge they should reflect on the preferences of voters, who determine electoral outcomes. Seen in this light, our results contradict a prevailing belief among policymakers that the potential risks imposed by counter-drone operations necessarily limits their use in the US homeland. Americans do care about risk and personal safety, but they also consider the nature of drone incursions and entrust senior political and military officials to

interdict drones, especially when they are perceived to threaten US national security.

How do we study public opinion for counter-drone operations in the US Homeland?

To study US citizens' support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland, we created hypothetical but realistic drone incursion scenarios for Americans to consider. In total, we varied eleven attributes that could affect public attitudes toward these operations, which frame our novel conjoint survey experiment. Together, these attributes capture the realism and complexity of counter-drone operations in the US homeland, and are consistent with studies for military attitudes toward these interdictions. The attributes relate to the counter-drone capabilities themselves, including their effects, as well as the unique characteristics of drone incursions and the approval authority for counter-drone operations in the US homeland.

First, we varied characteristics about the counter-drone capabilities, including their lethality, level of autonomy, and precision. This reflects research showing that these technical characteristics shape Americans' attitudes for the use of Artificial Intelligence



(AI) across society, such as for police surveillance and surgery. Second, we varied the outcomes of counter-drone operations, focusing on the risks to Americans and the damage or destruction of property. Specifically, we varied how many Americans are saved or killed, which research shows shapes public attitudes for the use of military force abroad as well. Similarly, we varied the implications of counter-drone operations for property, toggling between no damage or destruction, damage, and destruction.

Third, recent research shows that event type shapes public attitudes toward the domestic use of coercive state power. Thus, we defined drone incursions in terms of the perpetrator, whether a foreigner or US citizen, as well as the drone used, where, and its intent. This allows us to test if ethnocentrism, where Americans think in terms of in- and out-groups, shapes their attitudes for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. We also assess if different types of drone incursions shape public support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland, drawing on research showing that public opinion for the use of force is conditioned by how threats are presented. In this case, we varied the drone incursion between a small drone, swarm of small drones, and large drone, which could be used to observe, disrupt, or attack US commercial, military, and government sites.

Finally, we presented respondents with different approval authorities for

counter-drone operations in the US homeland. In doing so, we integrate findings from studies that show the position and stature of officials can shape public support for the use of force. Including this attribute also allows us to proxy for the type of police or military organization responsible for interdicting the drone incursion, which a recent study finds shapes public opinion regarding the domestic use of force.

After reading each scenario, we asked Americans to gauge their support for these operations using a five-point scale. One corresponded to "strongly oppose" and five corresponded to "strongly support." We rescale these responses from zero to one, reflecting the percentage of Americans who support counter-drone operations across each level of the attributes we varied. Afterwards, we asked respondents to explain why they did or did not support the counter-drone operations.

What shapes public support for counter-drone operations in the US Homeland?

Contrary to a belief among some US policymakers and defense officials that Americans will not tolerate especially lethal counter-drone operations in the US homeland, we find that public opinion is largely favorable. However, our results also show that US citizens care about the nature



of drone incursions, who authorizes a response, and implications in terms of collateral damage. These three considerations combine to shape more or less public support of homeland defense against drones.

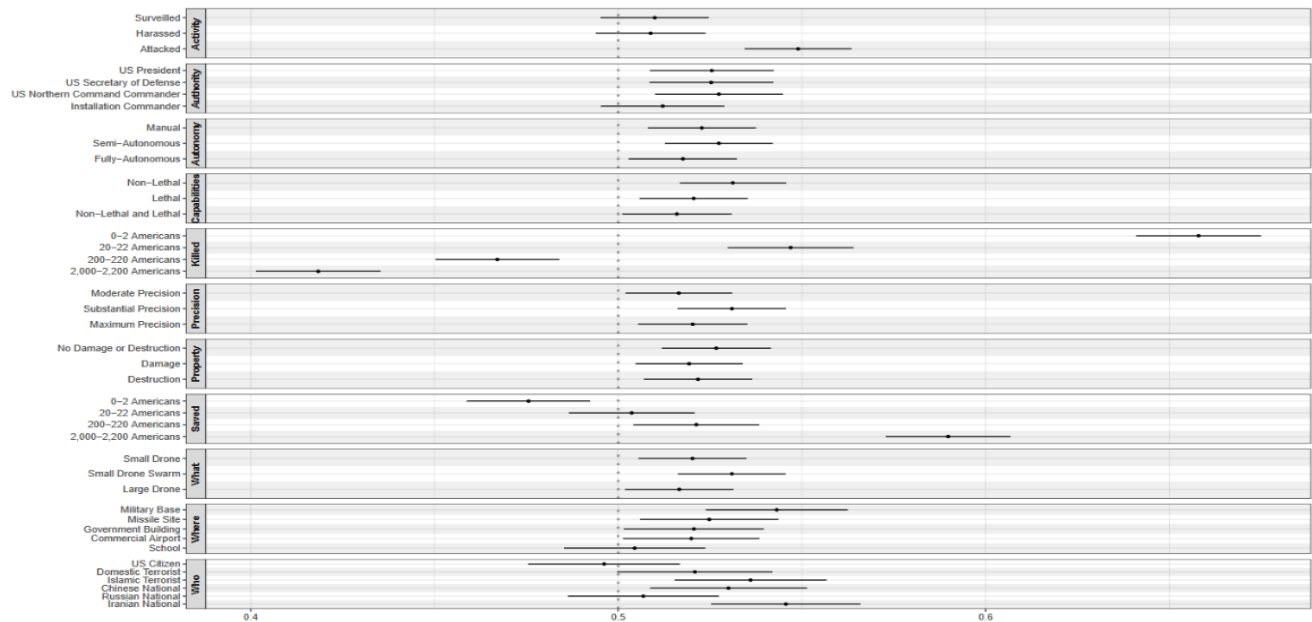
We find that Americans are sensitive to threats imposed by drone incursions in the US homeland. Higher perceived levels of threat lead to stronger levels of public support. Public support is highest when an operation responds to an attack (55%) at a military base (54%) by a swarm of small drones (53%) that is launched by an Iranian (55%). One American stated that support is shaped by the “number of lives saved vs. number of lives lost; target of the attack; who authorized/launched the drone/which country.” Another American cautioned a counter-drone operation at a school “makes me nervous,” explaining why we observe poorer public support for drone mitigation efforts at this (50%) and other civilian locations.

Americans paid less attention to the capabilities of the counter-drone operation. We do observe slightly more preference for capabilities that have greater precision (53%), a degree of human control (53%), and which are non-lethal (53%). However, we also observe no significant variation in support for counter-drone operations based on the level of autonomy for counter-drone capabilities. These findings are consistent with research for public and military

attitudes toward AI-enhanced weapons used during conflicts abroad.

As seen in the chart below, our respondents were also very sensitive to American casualties. Most respondents noted that American casualties weighed heavily on them when determining their support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. Killing less Americans, and saving more, dramatically enhances support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland, with approval rates at 66% and 59%, respectively. Indeed, counter-drone operations that resulted in 200 or more American lives lost received considerably less support than other operations with lower death tolls. Thus, while saving Americans is important, not killing them is more consequential. We find that this results in a 24% swing in public support for homeland defense against drone incursions when holding other factors constant.

Finally, we did find variation in public support for counter-drone operations based on who in the US authorized the operation. On average, Americans are more supportive of counter-drone operations in the US homeland when the US President (53%), Secretary of Defense (53%), or Commander of US Northern Command (53%) authorize these interdictions. Comparatively, public support for counter-drone operations authorized by installation leaders is not as strong, though it is still over 50%.



Indeed, US presidential authority, when holding all other factors constant, results in a three-percentage point gain in public support. This is not an insignificant bump considering the complexity of Americans' beliefs. In their written explanations, Americans reflected on civilian control of the military. One respondent argued, "I feel the president is capable of doing what is best." Another stated, "the buck stops" with the US President. Similarly, another American stated, "I have complete trust in our military command," overseen by the Secretary of Defense and led by the Commander of US Northern Command in terms of homeland defense against drones.

A demand signal for action?

Taken together, our findings suggest a disconnect between public and US policymakers' support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. However, our results should not be interpreted as granting a broad license for counter-drone operations in the US homeland.

Policymakers have a duty to protect Americans. Indeed, as reflected in our results, the public is sensitive to American casualties during counter-drone operations in the US homeland, especially at sensitive civilian sites such as schools. Unlike warzones, counter-drone operations in the US homeland must carefully balance civil liberties and privacy with national security. Certain counter-drone operations, such as



jamming that disrupts the transmission of radio or electronic signals, may have far-reaching implications for different modes of transportation that result in greater, not lesser, harms against Americans. Finally, new research from the RAND Corporation shows that Americans often inflate the threat imposed by drone incursions, which shapes a false sense of urgency and encourages escalatory responses that are potentially dangerous.

Yet our study, the first to examine public attitudes toward counter-drone operations in the US homeland, shows that Americans expect government action. Indeed, our results largely mirror the complexity of US citizens' attitudes toward the use of force abroad. Public support for war, even amid mounting casualties, is context dependent, shaped by cues from elected officials, and further conditioned by perceptions of operational success. There are three primary implications of our research.

First, although we specified the user of the drone, it is often difficult or impossible to determine where a given drone came from. The proliferation of hobbyist drones in the US makes it challenging to determine "friend from foe" during potential drone incursions, even at military bases. This was a key lesson from recent drone sightings in New Jersey. Policymakers should encourage legislation that requires registration of drones at point of sale to facilitate better detection, identification, monitoring, and tracking of these bodies.

This remote identification, which aviation experts refer to as "electronic conspicuity," implies the requirement for a nationwide airspace control system to aggregate, parse, and enable interdiction of malicious drones. This key task requires better data-sharing and institutional support between the US military and federal agencies like the FAA. At the same time, policymakers should encourage legislation mandating all drone operators obtain a license, and complete requisite training, prior to using drones in the US.

Second, while we find that Americans are sensitive to the authority that approves counter-drone operations, the current decision-making process is complex and should be simplified. Guillot discussed this challenge during recent congressional testimony as well. One example is the requirement for potentially paralyzing "coordination" between the military and FAA, as defined in Title 10 of US Code, for defense of military bases against drones. How can policymakers overcome this challenge? Democratic Senator Gary Peters from Michigan previously introduced legislation that may offer a new regulatory framework to facilitate timelier US-based counter-drone operations. The 2025 National Defense Authorization Act also mandates that the DOD establish a task force to expedite decision-making for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. Similarly, policymakers should also consider developing a new defense agency, similar in scope to the now defunct



Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, to help implement decision-making changes while preparing the military for all-domain drone warfare.

Finally, US military bases and critical infrastructure require more and better equipment to facilitate counter-drone operations. This ranges from sensors to detect, identify, monitor, and track drones; software to provide targeting data; and, non-lethal and lethal effectors to interdict drones, with Americans clearly preferring the use of low-collateral capabilities to safeguard schools and other sensitive civilian sites. The DOD's Replicator 2 initiative, designed to enable counter-drone operations in the US homeland within 24 months of congressional funding, is a useful starting point. Policymakers should encourage industry partners to match this investment in terms of research and development, thus fulfilling a critical vulnerability increasingly recognized by the US citizens.

Conclusion

A concern about public safety is understandable to inform decision-making for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. Unfortunately, this consideration has biased policymakers and defense officials in terms of homeland defense against drone incursions. Policymakers and defense officials often conflate public

support for counter-drone operations in the US homeland with Americans' interest in their personal wellbeing.

Using a novel survey experiment, where we varied many factors that help approximate the complexity of drone incursions and mitigation efforts in a US context, we observe that Americans' wellbeing constitutes only one of several considerations that shape their overall approval for counter-drone operations in the US homeland. We find that Americans also consider the drone incursion itself and who authorizes a response. These results provide new insights on US attitudes toward drone mitigation efforts in the homeland, which are useful to inform policy and strategy for US national security. Going forward, analysts should extend this research cross-nationally, especially among US allies and partners in Asia and Europe, to help enable the US to lead the development of a multilateral or integrated approach to counter-drone operations globally.

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