

By Justin Doolittle

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Nationalism Disguised as Journalism

The New York Times, the most respected newspaper in the world, evidently remains unpersuaded of the illegality of American drone strikes, and continues to take a bizarre, tortured approach to discussing the matter in its news articles. That launching drone strikes in a foreign country whose government does not consent to said strikes is a violation of that country's sovereignty is hardly in dispute. As Ben Emmerson, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism who led an investigation into U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan [said in March](#), the drones "involve the use of force on the territory of another state without its consent and is therefore a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty." If attacking a country's residents with missiles fired from flying robots against that country's will does not constitute a breach of sovereignty, then nothing does.

Yes, "anonymous U.S. officials" continue to insist that the Pakistani government secretly supports these strikes. This might be *prima facie* plausible, but considering that the current leader of Pakistan has [repeatedly](#) and [explicitly](#) expressed his opposition, and that Pakistan's government "made it clear" to Emmerson's U.N. team that, in fact, it does *not* consent to these strikes, one can hardly throw in with "anonymous U.S. officials" who have no evidence to support their case. (Obama's May 23 speech on the topic, surprisingly enough, [did nothing](#) to persuade Pakistan of the many benefits and advantages of the drone campaign against its people.)

The latest wave of death unleashed by the U.S. drone war in Pakistan [occurred](#) on Saturday night. Two men – "militants," no doubt – were killed when a strike was launched in the northwest tribal region of the country at around 11:30 PM. The men were riding on a motorcycle when they were struck and killed. (Who among us hasn't been out for a nice

Saturday night ride when a flying robot appears overhead and starts targeting you with missiles?)

The Times report on the strike tells us that drones are “immensely unpopular in Pakistan and are portrayed as a violation of [Pakistan's] sovereignty.”

Portrayed.

These strikes on a foreign country are not, apparently, a straightforward violation of sovereignty. They are only “portrayed” as such by unspecified sources. This has become the standard for how the Times discusses the issue of sovereignty vis-a-vis the U.S. drone war. The wording, for some reason, changes ever so slightly every time, but never does there appear a simple, honest assertion of the illegality of the drone war. In the paper’s [report](#) on a July 2 strike that killed sixteen people, we are told that the strikes “are hugely unpopular in Pakistan and are

seen

as a violation of the country’s sovereignty.” In a

[report](#)

on a March 21 strike that killed four people, the strikes are “deeply resented in the country and are

seen

as a breach of Pakistani sovereignty.”

So, according to the paper of record, drone strikes are immensely/hugely/deeply (what’s next? massively?) unpopular in Pakistan, and are seen/portrayed as a violation/breach of the country’s sovereignty. There is apparently a form sentence that Times reporters must copy and paste into every piece about drones.

We might consider how the New York Times would discuss drones and sovereignty if the roles of aggressor and victim were played by different states. Suppose, for example, that the Iranian government were engaged in a drone campaign against the United States, one that raged for several years and ended the lives of hundreds of American men, women, and children. “Anonymous Iranian officials” were whispering to the Times that, in fact, the U.S. government privately consents to these strikes, even though U.S. leaders were on record vehemently denouncing the drone campaign and demanding its immediate cessation. Please consider what a New York Times report on an Iranian drone strike that killed sixteen Americans would

look like.

No one could possibly say with a straight face that, under such circumstances, the paper would continue to hedge on the illegality of the strikes, saying only that they “are portrayed in the United States as a violation of its sovereignty.” This highly convenient, cautious tone would be dismissed, and the Iranians would be doubtless portrayed as lawless thugs. Because to the New York Times, and to virtually all other establishment media outlets in this country, global norms and the constraints of international law only apply to other countries, not to the U.S.

It’s nationalism disguised as journalism.

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