

India's Drone Challenge: Rethinking Security in the South Asia

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Introduction

The 21st Century has seen rapid advancements in the field of warfare, with the most important and potent threat coming from drones. Drone warfare has shifted the tide when it comes to recent conflicts. The loss of life incurred in the European theatre, especially with the Russia-Ukraine war going into its 5th year, is just unimaginable. Other conflicts, such as the current West Asian conflict between Iran and the United States (US) (plus Israel and other allies), reiterate the importance of understanding drone warfare. The swarms of drones are overwhelming the air defence systems, and it is not very financially viable to deal with the asymmetry that is posed by counter-drone warfare.¹

South Asia is another such theatre that has already seen the potency when it comes to drones. The tactical usage of drones during last year's Operation Sindoor was a testament to how conflict could shape up in the South Asian region.² Multiple militant groups in Northeast India are also being provided weapons and other resources by regional actors through these drones.³ This raises the threat level exponentially, especially considering the volatility in the regions mentioned above. Narcoterrorism could be another major threat India faces in the coming years^{4,5}, given advancements in drone technology and the vacuum created in narco markets with multiple conflicts in the Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle regions affecting their sales.^{6,7} The increasing stockpile of drones in the South Asia can shift the regional balance against India.

Changing Dynamics and their implications

Initially made for surveillance purposes, the on-ground usage of the drones has shifted to more attacking roles in contemporary times. Drone usage in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has seen shifts that have entirely changed tactical warfare. Small tweaks in the cheap commercial drones have made them attractive to any country defending its territory and raised the scales by fighting asymmetric warfare. Increased affordability has led to production on a war scale.⁸ Improved accessibility can be a gamechanger in the 21st Century, as major defence companies are finding it extremely difficult to replenish required stockpiles of counter systems.⁹ The US military-industrial complex officials have often been quoted as saying that diminishing industrial capacity is leading to a gap in the supply chain for counter systems.^{10,11}

With increasing effectiveness, there is a noticeable shift from reconnaissance drones to armed drones and loitering munitions. The use of swarm drones was often seen during the US-Israel-Iran conflict.¹² Iran, even though an inferior military power, very effectively overwhelmed the counter-drone systems. Other powers in the region are noticing and making critical observations out of these instances. India's civilian infrastructure could be deeply vulnerable if put into similar situations. Operation Sindoor saw multiple instances where religious sites and civilian infrastructure were targeted, but due to competent systems such as the Spyder, Akash Air Defence, Quick Reaction Surface-to-Air Missile, etc., the threat was mitigated.¹³ In a situation where low-cost drones are engaged, the chances of overwhelming these air defence systems could greatly increase. With India wanting to develop Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast region of India to the levels of other regions of the country, it becomes more important than ever to mitigate these vulnerabilities from adversary states.

Drone warfare in the South Asian context

Drone warfare in South Asia is changing quite rapidly. The main stakeholders in the conflict have realised the potential of drones. There is a huge push towards modernisation in the militaries worldwide, including China. With growing competition in the Indo-Pacific Region and the US asserting its dominance, China's push is stronger than ever. A huge part of that modernisation includes the integration of drones into the People's Liberation Army and its other forces.¹⁴ With huge industrial capacity and intent, India could face a huge vulnerability from the north when it comes to drone warfare. China has already emerged as one of the leaders in drone production and exports. In addition to this, multiple reports suggest that there's illegal proliferation of drones in the South Asian region.¹⁵ This works as a threat multiplier, with proxies such as Pakistan and Myanmar posing a great threat to the development of critical infrastructure in far-off border areas.

There's a deeper integration between Pakistan and China, with a lot of assistance given in the technological sector by the Chinese. This is helping Pakistan in indigenous drone development, greatly increasing its capabilities.¹⁶ With the Pakistani military taking almost all the strategic decisions, it could become a huge vulnerability for India. The increased capability in surveillance and illegal cross-border activity is detrimental to the regional balance, as Pakistani military leadership uses them to wage a proxy war against India on a larger level.

Another trend that can be seen throughout South Asia is that non-state actors have started getting access to sophisticated technologies. Many militant organisations are operating within close range of Indian borders, with close support from adversary states.

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data have reported multiple incidents where drone strikes were recorded very close to the Indian borders.¹⁷ With reduced costs and operational deniability, it becomes a matter of time before these militant organisations can carry out operations with no impunity due to lack of credible attribution. Increased tension in Manipur is not making the situation any easier, with resources that were supposed to tackle external actors are involved in conflicts going on inside the country.

Recommendations

India is also working on its indigenous drone and air defence programs, with the private sector providing support to the Indian Armed Forces under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India) initiative.¹⁸ Defence Research and Development Organisation, along with private companies, has been filling the gap till now, and that too with potent platforms capable of performing in intense environments. Improvements are needed, and the scaling up of drone manufacturing could help the Indian defence ecosystem as well. Integration with other Paramilitary forces is also needed, as their needs could be very different compared to traditional forces. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability is an area where more work can be done. Enhanced ISR capabilities are the need of the hour, and the smart border concept should be pursued as much as possible for real-time battlefield awareness.^{19,20}

Cross-service engagements need to happen more often. The push towards Theaterisation could be a gamechanger for India, but in addition to that, defence and paramilitary forces also need engagement. Lack of engagement is leading to an information gap, where forces guarding critical infrastructure are not aware of the technological advancements in drone warfare, effectively leading to a situation where intent is not converting to capability, even with ample budget to fill that gap. Private players also need to engage with these forces and need to understand what exactly is needed on a tactical level. It will help make platforms tailor-made for those specific environments.

A national strategy involving drones should be made, focused on mitigating the risks and filling the gaps in the supply chain and making India's counter-drone architecture the best in the world. Increased risks present India with an opportunity to fill that gap with competency. With the best talent in the world, it is not a far-fetched dream that India could not focus on. The strategy should also focus on the acceleration of drone production, with a major percentage of them developed indigenously. The strategy needs to include aspects such as inclusion of drone training, and a few specialised technical groups for drone warfare should be raised in the forces. The strategy can also have sections that could make a pathway for Indian diplomats to promote responsible use of drone technology in international

platforms. The unregulated use of drones in warfare with no legal implications will eventually shift to a very dangerous territory.

Conclusion

To conclude, drones are no longer a phenomenon that is emerging in the field of modern warfare. They have been integrated to a level that is forcing all the countries into reassessing their defence strategies. With a changing world order, the future of such a potent weapon is only going to increase with time. Total transformation of the battle space is detrimental to the defence of any country, and with multiple adversarial actors in and around India's neighbourhood, it becomes increasingly important to have mitigation strategies. India's intent to develop the periphery regions will come under serious scrutiny if effective border security strategies are not in place properly. The critical infrastructure also needs to be protected, and integration of it in the drone's strategy is very much needed. The whole change in the security dynamics of the region will significantly influence India's military effectiveness and national security posture.

Endnotes

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