

Drones of Terror Expose India's Defences

Yogesh Joshi

Summary

The recent use of drones by terrorists to ship arms and ammunition across the international border exposes India's under-preparedness in defending against such asymmetric warfare. New Delhi needs to think hard not only on the use of, but also on a defence against, drones.

Riding high on the success of the drone campaign in Afghanistan, former US [President Barack Obama](#) once postulated the “drones-strikes as cure-all for terrorism.” Drones combine lethality with precision, allowing states to conduct anti-terror operations without the risk of contact with the hostiles. Thus, [drones](#) have reduced the burden of anti-terror operations, both in terms of its economic and human costs. In doing so, drones have also shielded decision-makers from any domestic backlash in case of failed attempts or collateral damage. However, the tables in this battle between states and non-state actors has slowly started turning to the latter's favour. [Non-state actors](#) are increasingly incorporating unmanned aerial vehicles in their repertoire of terror.

On 22 September 2019, the police in the Indian state of Punjab unmasked [a terror network](#) using drones to ferry arms and ammunition across the international border (IB) from Pakistan. A large number of AK-47 assault rifles, explosives, and satellite phones were dropped with an intent to foment trouble in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The fact that the drone took a total of eight sorties to complete its mission points to a massive intelligence and security failure on the part of Indian government. It also, however, points towards a new trend in terror operations worldwide. Just two weeks back, the Saudi Arabia's largest oil field was attacked using a [swarm of drones and cruise missiles](#). Though early investigations point towards Iranian provenance, there are suggestions that Yemeni rebels may be responsible. The Abqaiq oilfields were heavily fortified with anti-aircraft and ballistic missile defences; however, they were not geared towards defending against low-flying, terrain hugging swarms of drones and cruise missiles. This was not the first time such tactics have been used by hostile non-state actors. In March 2017, an [ammunition dump in Balakliya in Eastern Ukraine](#) was attacked by a small drone, loaded with a Russian-built thermite hand grenade. The use of drones in terror operations has also been effectively used by [the Islamic State](#), which in 2016 established a Mujahideen UAV unit and carried out drone terror over coalition forces.

Several factors explain why terror outfits are turning towards drones. First, if spreading terror is the principal aim, drones offer a cheap and precise method. Recruiting, training, and handling of human terror operatives is far more costly, and complex compared to operating drones. When designed to inflict damage on critical infrastructure or highly symbolic targets, drones present a very attractive option for terror outfits. Second, using drones can help terrorist organisations to avoid an attrition of cadres as terror operations can be conducted from safe havens across international borders. Moreover, given the ubiquity of drone

technology, locating the provenance of such attacks is always a challenge. More important, however, is the fact that over the years, states have developed very robust anti-insurgency and anti-terror combat techniques but also penetrated terrorist networks using intelligence and surveillance, both human and electronic. However, drones present a completely unique challenge to anti-terror operations. Police and security forces, trained in conventional methods to counter-terrorism, find themselves clueless when confronting unmanned aerial vehicles as new instruments in the terrorist's toolkit.

The nature of drone abetted terror operations in the Indian state of Punjab validate most of the premises. The international border with Pakistan has been highly fortified with fences and pickets all along the frontier, making any physical transgression nearly impossible. Drones provided a cheap and effective way to supply arms across the border. Though Indian security forces retrieved the charred remains of the drone used for these operations, it will be difficult to pinpoint the identity of terror handlers across the border. In any case, Pakistan has always washed its hands off supporting anti-India terror activities, claiming instead that non-state actors operating from its territory are beyond its control. The use of machines, rather than operatives, makes it easier for Pakistan to abnegate any responsibility. However, from the Indian point of view, what is most alarming is the lack of any preparedness in countering the threat of terrorism posed by drones. In fact, as [one senior officer](#) in the security establishment has argued, the drone incident in Punjab is a "collective failure of the BSF, Intelligence Bureau, and Research and Analysis Wing." However, Indian security forces are simply not geared towards this kind of terror tactics. As one BSF officer argued, [the Force](#) "does not have the capacity to monitor aerial movement of such low flying objects." It is doubtful whether the Indian Air Force, which is primarily responsible for maintaining the sanctity of the Indian skies from Pakistani transgressions, is ready to counter such unconventional threats.

In the last decade or so, the use of drones by Indian security forces have increased dramatically. India now employs UAVs, primarily obtained from Israel and the US, for both external and internal security. India's defence forces have availed drone systems such as Searchers and Heron for intelligence and surveillance along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, and the Line of Actual Control along the border with China. However, [little attention](#) has been given to defending against drone attacks. India's Defence Research and Development Organisation has made some investments in [anti-drone technologies](#) such as the ADITYA Directed Energy Weapon (DEW) and laser dazzles, but these are far from fully developed.

Indian security commanders have [reassured the public](#) that the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force can defend against any drone incursions from across the border. However, the Punjab incident must serve as a lesson for the Indian government and its security establishment that technological change is rapidly shifting the terrain of terrorism and insurgency. For unconventional and asymmetric threats such as the use of drones by terror outfits, conventional tools and methods will not suffice.

.....

Dr Yogesh Joshi is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasyj@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.