



## Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Counter Terrorism Operations

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Modern warfare has undergone a significant transformation in the last two decades. Being more cost effective and target oriented, technology today makes an attempt to enable deeper and more comprehensive conflict resolution.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, unmanned aerial vehicles or drones have turned into the new face of war.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the most sought after and 'favoured weapon' in the present conflicts being fought in the Middle East and South Asia due to its 'supposed visual superiority'.<sup>3</sup> Drones have been used extensively for counter-terrorism operations, especially in carrying out pre-emptive strikes, surveillance on specific locations as well as eliminating threats.

### **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles – Types and Functions**

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) have been referred to variously as drones, robot planes, pilotless aircraft, Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs), Remotely Piloted Aircrafts (RPAs), and other terms, which describe aircrafts that fly under the control of an operator with no person aboard. They are most often called UAVs, and when combined with ground control stations and data links, form unmanned aerial systems (UAS) or lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS).<sup>4</sup> UAVs vary widely in size and capacity. UAVs, in non-military roles, operate in diverse environments and high risk areas, which include scientific research in the fields of atmosphere, oceanography, geophysics, mineral exploration, imaging spectrometry, telecommunications relay along with police surveillance, border patrol and reconnaissance,

survey and inspection of remote power lines and pipelines, traffic and accident surveillance, emergency and disaster monitoring, cartography and mapping, search and rescue operations, agricultural spraying, aerial photography, promotion and advertising, weather reconnaissance, flight research, and fire-fighting monitoring and management. There are four main UAV technologies: micro and mini UAVs, tactical UAVs, strategic UAVs and special task UAVs.<sup>5</sup> The types and forms of UAVs are elaborated in the Table below.

**Table 1. Types and Forms of Drones and Their Activities<sup>6</sup>**

	Category	Maximum take of weight (kg)	Maximum Altitude (m)	Flight Hours	Missions
Micro/Mini UAVs	Micro (MAV)	0.10	250	1	Scouting, NBC sampling, surveillance inside buildings
	Mini	<30	150-300	<2	Film and broadcast industries, agriculture, pollution measurements, communications relay and EW
Tactical UAVs	Close Range	150	3000	2-4	RSTA, mine detection, search & rescue, EW
	Short Range	200	3000	3-6	BDA, RSTA, EW, mine detection
	Medium Range	150-500	3000-5000	6-10	BDA, RSTA, EW, mine detection, NBC sampling
	Long Range	-	5000	6-13	BDA, RSTA, communications relay
	Endurance	500-1500	5000-8000	12-24	BDA, RSTA, EW, communications relay, NBC sampling
	Medium Altitude, Long Endurance	1000-1500	5000-8000	24-48	BDA, RSTA, EW weapons delivery, communications relay, NBC sampling
Strategic UAVs	High Altitude, Long Endurance	2500-12500	15000-20000	24-48	BDA, RSTA, EW, communications relay, boost phase intercept launch vehicle, airport security
Special Tasks UAVs	Lethal	250	3000-4000	3-4	Anti-radar, anti-ship, anti-aircraft, anti-infrastructure
	Decoys	250	50-5000	<4	Aerial and Naval Deception
	Stratospheric	TBD	20000-30000	>48	-
	Exo-stratospheric	TBD	>30000	TBD	-

Drones are best known for their use in military operations including the use of weaponized drones for targeted killing.<sup>7</sup> Drones provide several advantages over manned armed flights and sea-based launches. They are claimed to do less collateral damage than either missiles or manned aerial bombing; they can hover overhead for relatively long periods of time to gather information for a strike; they can strike quickly, and the missile can be

diverted from its original target in an intentional miss.<sup>8</sup> They are also less expensive than manned platforms. Unlike other delivery systems, however, they require a permissive environment, which is likely to limit their utility in some theatres, which has been witnessed in the forests of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh of India where Naxal or Maoist insurgency is taking place.<sup>9</sup>

### **Challenges of Using UAVs in South Asia**

Though none of the governments in South Asia has opened up its skies for such UAVs, which is not under the command and control of local or national law enforcement, its easy accessibility makes the entire security structure volatile. It has been recently reported by the Indian media that Pakistani spy drones were spotted flying just 300m away from the Indian territory near the international border adjoining Ganganagar, Jaisalmer and Bikaner in Rajasthan. It can be noted that Pakistan has developed indigenously armed UAVs, 'Burraq and Barq'.<sup>10</sup> In China, there are more than 250 developers of UAVs. It has adapted the technology extensively in military, R&D, and is fast turning it into an economic delivery system for commercial use. China tested its first stealth combat drone, "Sharp Sword" on November 22, 2013, making it the fourth power capable of putting a stealth drone in the sky after the US, the European Union and Britain.<sup>11</sup> The detection of such drones within the Indian airspace remains a serious issue of worry.

Another distinct problem that the countries in the South Asian region face is its geographical nature and its overlapping borders. UAVs can pose a major challenge within nations, which already have long persisting misunderstandings and mutual suspicions within and about each other. Naturally, neither the Bhutanese government would take a Nepali drone in their territory very lightly, nor will Bangladesh consider an Indian drone in its airspace as a friendly mistake. The situation is same in the West with Pakistani drones flying in Indian or Afghanistani air space or vice versa.

Drones can be outfitted with high definition and infra-red cameras, and even license plate readers and Internet packet sniffing technology. Drones "present unique threats to privacy," in the words of one privacy advocate, and when such technology can be easily

misused, the challenge of UAVs then becomes significant.<sup>12</sup> It seriously challenges and undermines the safety and security of national institutions, hacking of sensitive information, which concerns national security as well as the flying of unauthorised UAVs, especially in high-risk zones, especially like airports, military bases, important government institutions, etc. It poses a serious threat to public safety, aviation safety and national security. It also threatens to seriously jeopardise the protection provided by security and law enforcement agencies to national, international and important dignitaries, leaders and individuals, due to their practical invisibility and easy accessibility. In 2014, drones caught the attention of the common masses as airwaves and newspaper columns were filled with the news that Amazon planned to use drones for parcel delivery, while nationalist football fans used one to disrupt a match between Serbia and Albania. As the year drew on, drones were found 'buzzing' close to a nuclear power station in France, and a near miss was reported between a small drone and a passenger aircraft landing at Heathrow airport.<sup>13</sup> The issue of the federal wiretapping statute gets further complicated with the advent of UAVs, as it strengthens the argument of the protection of the privacy of the common citizens.<sup>14</sup>

In documents retrieved from terrorist cells, it has been found that with devices costing less than US\$ 3000, one can infiltrate the drone's waves and frequencies, finding out the intention and mission of the drone.<sup>15</sup> With the widespread rise of extremist groups and terrorist organisations throughout South Asia as well as in its extended neighbourhood, unbridled use of such technology will seriously challenge the general well being of nations.

In e-commerce portals, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, more than 7600 units of UAVs were sold per week in 2014.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, there is no law in India that allows the usage of UAVs by civilians as well as for commercial purposes. But as it has been seen that the misuse of this technology is rather easier than other sophisticated gadgetry and technology, it seriously necessitates the government to put in place immediately measures, which should include both legal as well as technological knowhow, which could act pre-emptively in preventing the misuse of such technology or can speedily put in place a strategy to counter such threats as well as have in place remedial technologies.

The use of UAV's would significantly bolster counter-insurgency and counter terrorism operations in the states experiencing conflict and violence on the basis of Communist ideologies, the Kashmir Valley as well as in specific areas in the North Eastern states of India. However, if this exact technology falls in the hands of the insurgent and terrorist groups, it would become a significant challenge to counter and deter such operations, as pinpointing the location from where the UAV is being operated would remain difficult.

As has been rightly pointed out by analysts that “down the ages, weapons of war have become increasingly lethal providing an operational edge to the side which possessed technological superiority”<sup>17</sup> and when such weapons of war get enmeshed in non-war zones, the chances of these being misused remains high.

### **Drones in Counter Terrorism in South Asia**

In the present century, there is a growing interest in Unmanned Aircraft Vehicle (UAV) in most of the developed and developing states. Presently, UAVs are proving as an efficient application for a wide spectrum of military missions.

There have been reports that terrorist and extremist groups made elaborate plans to carry out their attacks on military and non-military targets with the use of UAVs, though carrying out such operations successfully still remains rare.

**Table 2. Media Reports of Terrorist Attempts to Employ UAVs<sup>18</sup>**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Organisation/Individual</b>	<b>Nature of Threat</b>	<b>Level of preparation</b>	<b>Support Base</b>
1995 <sup>19</sup>	Aum Shinrikyo, Japanese Terrorist Group	Attacked the Tokyo subway	Planned to use Remote control helicopters to spray sarin gas	Japanese Terrorist Group
2001 <sup>20</sup>	Osama bin Laden	Planned to kill George W. Bush and other heads of state at the G-8 Summit in Genoa, Italy	Considered using remote-control airplanes packed with explosives	Al-Qaeda
June, 2002 <sup>21</sup>	Al-Qaeda	Planned to attack passenger aircraft	Considered using model airplanes	Al-Qaeda
November, 2003 <sup>22</sup>	A British National held at Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba	To attack the House of Commons	Acquire a drone to attack with anthrax	Al-Qaeda
March, 2004	A Palestinian Extremist Group	To attack a Jewish settlement in Gaza sect	Use of a UAV loaded with explosives	Palestinian Extremist Group

From a technical standpoint, the use of UAVs to deliver weapons of mass destructions (WMDs) is a feasible task for terrorists. In fact, terrorist UAVs may cause considerable damage even if they carry conventional payloads. The most worrisome situation stems from model aircraft, where uncontrolled access to the knowledge, skills and equipment required for mini-UAV assembly exists. Existing air defence systems are ineffective against terrorist mini-UAVs, since they are developed to detect different kinds of threats. This is where the real challenge exists for the state. The main effort of dealing with the threat of terrorist UAVs needs to be on preventive measures.<sup>23</sup> Under such circumstances, the role of actionable intelligence becomes very important. Also, there is a need to make the public aware of this likely threat and its potential consequences.<sup>24</sup> No dignitary or leadership, whatever level of security he or she might be provided with, can be protected from such threats.

International regimes, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and the Wassenaar Agreement aim at preventing such threats.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the MTCR prohibits export of any UAV capable of delivering a payload weighing more than 500 kilograms and it restricts exports of all UAVs capable of flying farther than 300 kilometres. In addition, it restricts a list of technologies and accessories, which is regularly revised at MTCR sessions.<sup>26</sup>

However, UAVs have been extensively used in both Afghanistan and Pakistan in counter-terrorism operations. The terrain in these regions has remained extremely beneficial in carrying out such operations. The problem of carrying out successful counter terrorist operations has been witnessed in the Naxal affected states of Chhattisgarh in India, as due to dense forest cover, UAVs failed to properly distinguish between Naxal insurgent camps and regular rural hamlets, which led to risking as well as actual loss of lives of counter insurgency operatives during raids carried out on the information collected from the UAVs.<sup>27</sup>

The counter-terrorist operation in Pakistan has also received a mixed bag of reaction. Pakistan has absorbed more drone strikes—some four hundred in its northwest region—than any other country, and has been a test bed for Administration's hypotheses about the future of American airpower.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 3. Drone Attacks in Pakistan<sup>29</sup>**

Year	Incidents	Killed	Injured
2005	1	1	0
2006	0	0	0
2007	1	20	15
2008	19	156	17
2009	46	536	75
2010	90	831	85+
2011	59	548	52
2012	46	344	37
2013	24	158	29
2014	19	122	26
2015	4	27	7
<b>Total*</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>2743</b>	<b>343+</b>

There is a problem regarding UAV attacks as there always remains a difference between perceived and practical targets, attacks and casualties. It has also been seen that immediately after a drone attack, there is a retaliatory terrorist attack that weakens the logic of a UAV attack. One study conducted by the CUNY Graduate Center and the Institute for the Study of Labour in Bonn, Germany stated that the drones have been more effective in Taliban movement and activities in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, which ‘varied from a positive vengeance effect in the first week following a drone strike to a negative deterrent/incapacitation effect in the second week following a drone strike.’<sup>30</sup>

In 2010, 118 UAV strikes were reportedly launched in Pakistan, of which 14 were successful.<sup>31</sup> (Success may have been too narrowly defined as a strike in which a militant “leader” was killed.) The bulk of studies, to date, contradict this finding and detail the erosion of core al Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban leaders. UAV strikes are designed to deplete or incapacitate enemy ranks and deter future attacks. However, the vengeance effect that is created on targeted groups proves to be more detrimental than a deterrent. In general, at least one study concluded that there was little or no [statistically significant] effect of drone strikes on Taliban violence in Afghanistan, but “only on Taliban violence in Pakistan.”<sup>32</sup>

Analysts commented that the drone strikes have not helped to win the war on terror and they are actually a major reason of why this victory has not yet occurred.<sup>33</sup> Most of these counter terrorist operations have been carried out by the US; it created serious ramifications regarding violation of every conceivable international law as well as the sovereignty of Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.

Hina Rabbani Khar stated, "What the drones are trying to achieve, we may not disagree. If they're going for terrorists, we do not disagree. But we have to find ways which are lawful, which are legal."<sup>34</sup> Pakistan has maintained a steady double standard regarding bad and good terrorists. So, when the US drones targeted foreign al-Qaeda operatives and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the opposition from the Government as well as the Pakistani Army was weak. However, when the US drones started targeting the Haqqani network and Pakistani Taliban commanders, such as Hafiz Gul Bahadur, the signatory of a peace deal with the military in North Waziristan, Pakistan government seriously admonished the US government against such attacks in all forums.<sup>35</sup>

Obama himself accepted the fact that drone attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan have not been foolproof and there had civilian casualties, which for him are "heartbreaking tragedies", which would haunt him and those in his chain of command for "as long as we live."<sup>36</sup>

The use of UAVs for more than a decade has also developed the skills within terrorist groups of avoiding being seen by them. Starting from the use of body covers, which hide heat signatures,<sup>37</sup> using Anti-Drone Technology, such as EW/ECM Data link Jammers, GPS/RF Jamming Technology for Micro-drones, using Russian made Sky Grabber Software for signal hacking, using reflective glass or Plexiglas on roof/car tops, hiding under trees, underneath dense concrete structures, affixing woven reed mats to vehicles, and using counter-surveillance techniques, such as using mannequins, dolls, and staged equipment to trick drone operators, the primary focus is placed upon visual camouflage and evasion.<sup>38</sup> Such evasion has been successful many a times as many human targets survived multiple attempts on their lives.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Though the UAV has been used as a major element in counter terrorism operations, its rate of success, its practicality and manner of use has been under significant scrutiny and apprehension. Still, there is little doubt that UAVs are becoming increasingly important and it will be difficult to keep the technology entirely under the aegis of the military and the government. With a globalised world, the role of technologies would reach fast different corners of the society, which would enhance the scope of such technology being seriously misused if it falls into the wrong hands. Though such technology has not yet been used by extremist and terrorist groups, one should not be sluggish in having preventive measures in place.<sup>40</sup> As a counter terrorist measure, it has been mostly used by the US and NATO forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and has not yet been adopted by the ANSF or the Pakistani or Indian Army. Though some local law enforcement agencies in India have started the use of UAV's in crowd dispersal and management, its usage in South Asia for counter terrorist activities still remains largely under-utilised or untapped. With the increasing number of extremist, anti-national and terrorist groups in the nations falling within the South Asian region as well as in its immediate neighbourhood, there is a need to innovate the use of UAVs rather than keeping its function well within the perimeters of functioning as chalked out by the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan

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## End Notes

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