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Drone Warfare's Next Frontier: Is Pakistan Ready?

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The ongoing conflict in West Asia has caught global attention for many reasons. In the domain of warfare however, the emergence of drones as central systems for offsetting technologically advanced adversaries appears to be one of the most consequential takeaways from this conflict. Tehran's prioritization of a scalable and operationally flexible drone fleet, and the consequent reliance of its military strategy on drones is allowing it to offset militarily far-superior adversaries. However, this is not entirely ground-breaking. Prior to this, the Russia-Ukraine theatre had already laid bare the disruptive potential of drones in warfare. Consequently, these two conflicts have left militaries across the world taking notes on

how warfare is transforming at break-neck speeds. At the same time, these conflicts have also ushered in a race towards procuring more and better drones, as well as towards acquiring and operationalizing effective counter-drone technologies.

Drones: A Revolution in Military Affairs?

Whether drones are truly a revolution in military affairs or not remains debatable. Nonetheless, drones are considerably altering the ways in which contemporary day wars are being fought as they are technologically adaptive, low-cost, conveniently available, and scalable systems. While traditionally known for mainly conducting Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) functions, drones have evolved to actively conduct precision strikes, logistical operations, rescue missions, and are even holding territories in combat zones. More importantly, drones are also complicating strategic calculi in conflict zones by acting as instruments of pressure by straining air defenses, unsettling civilian populations, and generating economic disruptions, even when large-scale physical destructions may be absent.

Pakistan's Threat Landscape

For Pakistan, the drone threat landscape is mainly two-pronged.

First, Pakistan faces the risk of cross-border drone attacks from India. This evidently surfaced during the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, when militaries of both countries employed loitering munitions; mainly for suppressing each other's air defense systems. Nonetheless, the employment of drones to target civilian areas expanded the battlespace. That indeed served as a pressure tool by eroding the perceived sense of security associated with physical distance from frontlines and by generating a sense of uncertainty among civilian populations. At the same time, using drones also causes significant? economic damage by targeting critical infrastructures such as oil refineries and even tech centers.

Another dimension of drone threats from New Delhi pertains to India's rapid expansion of its indigenous drone ecosystem. New Delhi has been producing a spectrum of systems ranging from micro and mini-UAVs to larger tactical platforms. New Delhi is also integrating drones into network-centric warfighting to enhance battlefield coordination. This increases the risk of saturation and drone strikes against Pakistan. Furthermore, New Delhi's collaboration with Israel for drone procurements, joint drone production and technology transfers, will further coalesce New Delhi's drone infrastructure.

However, the implications of India's expanding drone ecosystem are not merely confined to tactical advantages; and impacts escalation dynamics between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Mutual employment of drones by both India and Pakistan is more of a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can help both countries in offsetting conventional asymmetries. However, on the other hand, it also lowers the threshold for use of force. At the same time, drone warfare also holds the potential to prolong a conflict, converting a possible limited conflict into a war of attrition.

The second dimension of Pakistan's drone threat stems from non-state actors, particularly from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a UN-designated terror outfit. The group has increasingly incorporated commercially available quadcopter drones for offensive strikes against Pakistan's military installations, and lately urban centers as well. In 2025, the TTP and its affiliates conducted around 400 drone attacks using armed quadcopters in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This is reflective of TTP's newfound realization that drones could be a better substitute of its prior tactics of suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices. In addition to this, the TTP has also been employing counter-drone technologies to ward off aerial attacks and disrupt the surveillance and monitoring capabilities of police and security force.

It should be noted, that TTP's employment of drones is currently in its rudimentary stages. Their drone strikes have not yet caused significant damage. This may be due to TTP's limited technical capacity and operational shortcomings in technological adaptation, but the threat cannot be dismissed altogether. In 2026, Taliban-led drone incidents took place across Pakistani cities including Quetta, Kohat, Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Swabi, and Nowshera. While earlier phases of TTP's campaign appeared to focus on inflicting higher casualties on security forces, the emerging pattern signals its aim to generate psychological pressure among the broader civilian population.

Response Options for Pakistan

The discussion above highlights that the drone threat landscape is rapidly transforming Pakistan's strategic and counterterrorism imperatives, leaving critical military installations and civilian infrastructure vulnerable. This requires a two-pronged recalibration in Islamabad's strategy. First, the government needs to modernize Pakistan's drone fleet in both qualitative and quantitative terms, and second, it must place an equal emphasis on counter-drone capabilities.

Pakistan began working on its indigenous drone during late 1990s. During the initial years, Islamabad's indigenous drone production was supported by Beijing. Now, Islamabad operates a diverse and state of theart fleet of advanced unmanned systems, but a critical gap is scalability. It is also significant since New Delhi is making substantial investments in drone production and procurement. The Iranian theater has depicted that a scalable production of drones - particularly of one-way attack drones - allows saturated deployment of drone waves. This can inflict military and infrastructural damage while inflicting heavy interception costs on the defender. At the same time, expanding local production can also reduce import dependence while also creating opportunities for export growth.

More importantly, the rise of drones has disrupted traditional air defense paradigms, necessitating the integration of dedicated counter-drone technologies. However, unlike drones, conventional air defence systems such as airborne early warning and control systems and interceptor surface-to-air missiles are typically expensive, making them cost-inefficient for counter-drone purposes. Using these technologies can be tantamount to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. While Pakistan is currently enhancing its layered air defenses, counter-drones technologies should be cost-effective. In this regard, a relatively nascent, yet heavily battle-tested and cost-effective counter drone technology is Ukraine's interceptor drones. Interceptor drones are remotely piloted through first person-view goggles. This technology can be replicated by Pakistan.

Other cost-effective counter-drone technologies currently being produced and operated by Pakistan mainly include the Spider anti-drone system, SAFRAH drone-damaging guns, and RAAST detection guns. While Spider and SAFRAH systems are portable soft-kill platforms, however their effectiveness could be challenged by targets operating outside their engagement ranges. The RAAST Drone detection guns, on the other hand is a handheld counter-UAV system which can detect and identify drone threats through radio-frequency sensing contributing to situational awareness but cannot independently neutralize them. For hard-kill, Pakistan operates the indigenously-produced Anza MkII/III MANPADS and German-origin Oerlikon twin barrel guns.

A key constraint with anti-drone technologies pertains to its employment at a vast scale in order to preempt drone attacks. Recently, the provincial government of Punjab announced to establish anti-drone units across all districts of the province to conduct aerial surveillance against terrorist activities. But employing counter-drone technologies in urban environments comes with a good degree of technical and social constraints. To begin with, employing counter-drone technologies for counter-value purposes can be highly resource-intensive. Secondly, the dense infrastructure and electromagnetic clutter of urban centers make drone detection particularly challenging. At the same time, debris from neutralized drones may as well lead to collateral damage. Disruptive measures, including jamming or kinetic interception, may also interfere with civilian communication and navigation systems. Moreover, scaling these technologies to counter drone swarms remains an uphill task. Lastly, deploying counter-drone systems across large urban areas is likely to raise significant privacy concerns among local populations.

Conclusion: Moving Towards Resilience and Persistence

Staying ahead of the curve in modernizing drone and counter-drone technologies is indeed an uphill task, rife with great deal of constraints. However, it is an exigency too. Modern warfare is increasingly being defined not by decisive victories, but by the ability to inflict costs while ensuring endurance and resilience. Hence, modernizing Pakistan's drone and counter-drone capabilities is not merely a matter of technological advancement, but also a strategic necessity. Ultimately, success will depend on a state's capacity to absorb shocks, adapt in real time, and sustain operational continuity amid crises and conflicts.