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Soldiers, Militants, and Small Drones

By Henrik Paulsson

Synopsis

Small drones are seeing an explosion in its popular use, from state troops to non-state actors such as militants. Indeed, the non-state actors are threatening to match conventional forces in offensive weaponry by acquiring drones that can even drop bombs. How will the future look like?

Commentary

LARGE AERIAL drones have become ubiquitous in any air force discussion on modernisation. Indeed, having gone from being rare and only operated by a handful of countries, they are now more common than ever. Yet, and perhaps even more importantly, small drones are seeing their own revolution in availability and spread. Small drones – both commercially available and home-made – are now widely proliferated and found globally among both state and non-state actors. Increasingly groups of non-state actors are obtaining, producing, and modifying small drones for their own needs.

However, the creativity has not been limited to non-state actors. Government forces around the world are finding both uses for these drones in their operations, and in their organisations. The utility of these have been recognised by both sides – a recognition that will require significant changes for militaries in the times to come. The lesson is clear: states cannot surrender this capability and opportunity to militants, and must keep up in the future.

Operational Presence

The most famous, or infamous, use of small drones have been ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Inspired by American drone footage, ISIS started deploying cheap and commercially

available drones across the territory they controlled. Initially these were seen in propaganda roles, filming suicide bombers for online videos.

Their use evolved quickly, with command centres appearing, coordinating intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations of these small drones. The supply chain for their budding drone-force stretched from Turkey to Bangladesh, highlighting the global nature of accessibility to drones today – and of ISIS's reach.

However, the creativity and innovation of ISIS did not stop there. News of Kurdish Peshmerga and French special forces being killed and wounded by a downed drone carrying explosives highlighted what was a new reality for the forces facing ISIS: the tactical use of drones is not just limited to their utility as camera-bearing reconnaissance tools, also having an improvised capability to act as bombers.

While surprisingly accurate, these were small and functioned mostly as a form of psychological warfare, creating stress and interrupting the Iraqi offensive against Mosul. Regardless of the effectiveness of the bombs, it essentially gave ISIS – a non-state insurgent organisation besieged by opponents all around – access to tactical airpower. ISIS had built a Jihadi air force.

On the battlefield in the eastern Ukraine we find clear parallels to the usage of drones in Syria. Both the Ukrainian separatists and government forces have used a large number of drones effectively, primarily for reconnaissance. With the war having bogged down into trench-warfare, the drones have started to play a significant role in where they act as spotters for artillery, both for identifying targets but also adjusting the fire.

While overall these drones have been of the cheaper commercial variety, the rebels have also been using more advanced ones operated by Russian forces. These have included everything from cell-phone tower spoofers for psychological operations, to electronic warfare equipment to jam enemy communications.

Inspired by ISIS, some drones have even been used to drop bombs and assassinate rivals. It would be a mistake to not take lessons from these groups just because they are militants and rebels – the lessons are no less true.

Keeping Up with Militants

Distinctly so, some states have been taking these lessons and are learning from them. While the Ukrainian separatists have a large drone presence – in much thanks to Russian support – the government side has also seen an evolving process of its drones. Because of an initial lack of funding, most early drones were provided by crowd-sourced commercial drones purchased by civilian support groups.

This would lead to a cottage-industry of sorts, with drones being designed by engineers and university students in their workshops and dormitory rooms. But the simplicity should not mislead either: The Ukrainian forces prefer the homemade ones over the advanced ones donated by the Americans, whose drones are too easily jammed.

The same students and engineers have now formed companies producing small drones, including one model that carries a rocket-launcher. While the Ukrainian Air Force has been forced to sit out the war because of Russian anti-aircraft missiles, it does not entail a complete loss of air power.

These developments have been mirrored in the Asia Pacific region. Lacking their own, the Philippine government forces had to borrow American drones during the fighting in Marawi. In the aftermath, they have redoubled their efforts to obtain more, which is already increasing their operational capabilities in their fight against ISIS-affiliated groups in Mindanao.

Further south, in Indonesia, there is also a large push for drones throughout the military. The Army has found themselves acquiring small drones at an exponential rate – and being very happy of the result. Faced with the need to surveil huge areas, they have already been deploying small drones at the tactical level. These have now been used in both Papua and Sulawesi in active missions.

Similar to Ukraine, the Indonesian domestic industry has been growing to meet this demand. Today, a growing number of small companies are now producing drones, both licensed from others and self-designed.

Tactical Necessity

The widespread usage of small drones highlights their fundamental role in modern combat. The commercial availability and low pricing gives any military – or rebel group – the ability to have, in effect, a tactical air force. Indeed, their utility is undeniable, be it for propaganda, cheap reconnaissance, or having an advantage that is hard to counter at best.

The bombs dropped by ISIS drones in Mosul were not overly deadly, yet they provided a lopsided weapon that caused outsized psychological and logistical strains. This leads to a necessity of speeding up the development and deployment of counter-drone tools, as any opponent regardless of size can gain advantages over established militaries.

Militaries need to obtain the same capabilities as their non-state opponents. Within the US Marine Corps there is an ongoing project to reorganise the lowest level fighting unit by including small drones and an operator in all their rifle squads.

A similar project is taking place in the Australian Army, with drones having become accepted as not just a nice thing to have, but a necessity. Fundamentally, all militaries must now start acquiring, training with, and figuring out how to use drones tactically. Vitaly, if a military does not do this now, they will be left behind.

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