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The Vertical Threat: Commercial UAVs Proliferation and the Asymmetric Logic of TTP's Drone Warfare

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Abstract

Terrorism is no longer limited to roadside bombings and suicide attacks, but has also been seeping into the airspace. This study explores how the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is integrating commercially modified, off-the-shelf drone as a new weapon in its arsenal in the wake of the 2021 security landscape. It contends that drone use by Tehrik-e-Taliban presents a ‘low-cost stand-off capability', which fosters the powers of surveillance, intimidation, propaganda and selective strike. Taking a qualitative approach that relies on security reports, incident databases and academic work the study reveals that the drone capability of TTP can be attributed to the spread of commercial technology into the militant sphere. Drones serve both operational and symbolic purpose, as they combine intelligence, surveillance, propaganda, and attack elements, and appear technologically sophisticated and increase the psychological pressure. Security reports show that 2024 was an experiment and 2025 was the year for wider use of armed quadcopters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as around 246-armed quadcopter attacks were reported, while till June 2026, around 53 attacks were reported. This development is explained by the Terrorist Innovation Model that connects technological diffusion, organizational adaptation, tactical deployment. It concludes with policy recommendations. While drones have not yet proven to be strategically decisive, their accessibility and influence have increased the reach of militant violence to a greater extent.

Keywords: Asymmetric Warfare, violent non-state actors (VNSAs), counter-unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)

Introduction

The Violent Non-State Actors do not adopt new technologies without a calculated cost-benefit analysis. Technological innovation is dependent on resource constraints, operational risks, and organisational survival (Dolnik, 2007). This makes Violent Non-State Actors VNSAs more likely to adopt what they have to hand: those are readily available, cheap and flexible when compared to the system that is complicated and highly regulated. Since the majority of attacks over the last few decades have been with small arms and explosives in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) has proliferated. It is demonstrated to modify comparatively easy technologies to create sustained costs of operation and psychological impact for the traditionally superior forces (Boyle, 2013). So, Innovation will occur not through any technological development at the high end, but through opportunistic adaptation of readily available systems.

This trend is accentuated during periods of technological diffusion, when civilian-developed capabilities become available to VNSAs. The use of small unmanned aerial systems (UAS), especially the readily modifiable mass-produced quadcopter, has made aerial capabilities more affordable and accessible (Horowitz, 2010). The current phase is an example of the low end of exploiting technology in which commercial platforms are being taken over for both tactical and symbolic uses in asymmetric warfare. This is now becoming a growing phenomenon in Pakistan. Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, Tehrik-e-Taliban and allied groups have become a more cohesive and adaptive militant group, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the erstwhile tribal areas of Pakistan (Sayed & Hamming, 2023). The focus of the existing literature has been on structural changes to the sanctuary, organisational consolidation, and increased strategic confidence. Still, much less attention has been paid to the ways that the militants have used commercially available technologies. The new weapon of violence is the modified quadcopter drone, particularly those of the popular DJI system.

The available data indicate that TTP's drone capability has rapidly evolved from experimental use to the operational environment. According to a security report, TTP militants had attacked 410 times with armed quadcopters in 2025, (Jalal, 2026) most of which were in Bannu (320 attacks), North Waziristan and South Waziristan (34 attacks), and Bajaur (21 attacks). In Bannu itself, police installations and civilian areas were attacked by drones, resulting in 19 police injuries, 9 civilian deaths and 33 civilian injuries (PICSS, 2026). The trend continued in 2026, with at least 53 drone-related incidents, resulting in at least 22 deaths and 72 injuries, between January and June, suggesting that the use of drones is no longer an experimental phenomenon but is now a new and recurring feature of militant violence (PIPS, 2026).

This paper asks the question: How are TTPs use of commercially available drones changing their tactical practices and the nature of militant violence in Pakistan? It says that “modified” commercial quadcopters are “an asymmetric tactical dual-use adaptation that is emerging.” Operationally, drones bring sophistication in several ways, including the ability to monitor troop

movements, reach into hard-to-reach areas, conduct low-cost, stand-off attacks, and conduct surveillance of security installations. This boosts operational use, as seen in repeated attacks on police stations, check posts, and security personnel across areas such as Bannu, Mir Ali, Takhti Khel, Khyber, and South Waziristan. However, the actual damage from any particular attack is limited. In symbolic terms, the drone has a propaganda and psycho-social impact as it is seen as a symbol of technological ability and instils fear. Importantly, this does not represent a change in TTP's traditional tactics, but rather an attempt to use drones as a force multiplier, while TTP continues to use traditional methods of proximity-based violence.

Literature Review

The literature on TTP's drone-enabled violence can only be comprehended in the context of two interrelated aspects: the post-2021 resurgence of TTP and the growing availability of commercial drones to violent non-state actors (VNSs). TTP-specific scholarship indicates that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan provided a more conducive environment for the revival of the TTP by providing sanctuary, operational longevity and space for experimentation of operations. The TTP is reorganised, stronger and more flexible than the TTP Pakistan of the mid-2010's. The existing literature explains TTP's newfound ability to innovate, but doesn't adequately describe how the drone capability fits with the new operational behaviour.

According to (Tønnessen,2018), greater threat of the terrorist groups is not based on their very sophisticated military technology, but on the 'handmade' exploitation of the technologies which are easily available for use in militant activities. Chávez and Swed (2021) believe that the commercialisation of drones has lowered the bar for violent non-state actors to acquire aerial capabilities, as civilian drone platforms are cheap and easily modifiable to be used for the functions previously reserved for state militaries, including for reconnaissance, strike or signalling purposes. Strategically, (Horowitz, 2010) analysis of the spread of technology is especially important, showing that more militarily strategic technologies are adopted by weaker actors when the conditions for adopting them shift. In the case of TTP, the use of drones, therefore, must not be seen as a move towards adopting more sophisticated forms of warfare but as a continuation of its long-term pattern of adapting to changing circumstances and using low-cost and improvised means of violence.

The study by (Haugstvedt & Jacobsen, 2020) of 440 incidents shows that armed UAVs are not attacking easy targets but are being used to attack more challenging targets: military forces, military facilities, and other well-defended facilities. This is ongoing, similar to Haugstvedt's 2024 update, which was based on 1,122 attacks in Iraq and found that most are relatively small, involving one UAV, but that multi-UAV attacks are increasing. (Kreps & Lushenko, 2023) are correct in their analytical observation that drones may be evolutionary or revolutionary, depending on the aspect of the platform one is examining or the doctrinal change that accompanies them. In the case of TTP, this body of work suggests that thinking about the integration of drones cannot

simply be a question of lethality: it is a question of the form, distance, rhythm and reach of violence. Drones provide the organisation, which has long been associated with suicide bombings, ambushes and improvised explosives, with a means to exert pressure from a distance and remain tactically flexible.

Beyond the kinetic use of drones, (Archambault and Veilleux-Lepage, 2020) point out that the drones in the propaganda of the Islamic State were a visual means of surveillance, governance and performative statehood. They demonstrate that drone images can deliver a sense of technological capability, geographic reach and symbolic supremacy, even if the tangible effects of an attack are relatively insignificant. This is particularly pertinent to TTP, as violence has always been imbued with a communicative element: attacks are made not only to inflict casualties but also to make the public lose faith in the Pakistani state, discourage the masses from cooperating with the state in countering terrorism and show militants are still around despite counterterrorism campaigns. (Silverman, 2019) Pakistan-based research also demonstrates that beliefs about violent events are not only influenced by what actually happened during the event, but also by political predispositions and how they happened, so the significance of drone violence will be as much subject to contestation as its immediate impact. The TTP drones should be viewed as part of the broader narrative warfare and considered for visibility, propaganda, blame, intimidation, symbolic competence, and tactical utility.

(Clarke & Bennett Moses, 2014) show that civilian drone control was slow to keep up with the public-safety consequences of the technologies that have a myriad of legitimate civilian uses. It has also some known and rapidly growing malicious uses. (Sotoudehfar et al., 2026) says legal and humanitarian problems of using low-cost drones are beyond the existing legal and security framework. It is significant here because such a TTP drone campaign will not only expose the tactical gap in local policing, but also pose a bigger institutional challenge because of the easy availability of commercial drones in the world, the dual use of such platforms and the lack of harmony in the regulatory framework. The TTP case is not only a terrorist or tactical case but also part of the broader discussion of the international governance failure of cheap aerial technologies.

The literature on drones suggests that this would be more indicative of the adaptation of violent non-state actors to the use of improvised and inexpensive technology than of conventional military capabilities. Drones not only alter the dimension of targets of violence, but also the communicative and psychological dimension of violence, with a projection of reach, resilience and technical skill. A long-term TTP drone campaign would reveal a gap in the regulation of low-cost, dual-use drones. The central literature gap thus becomes apparent: literature on the resurgence of TTP and on the use of non-state drones has developed in isolation from each other, and there is no major study that systematically links the current evolution of TTP with the integration of drones into Pakistan's conflict sphere.

Theoretical Framework

The Terrorist Innovation Model (TIM) by Rueben Dass is used to understand the evolution of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in adopting commercially available drones as a new weapon in its tactical arsenal. (Dass, 2026) posits that the primary rule for the development of new technologies for militant organizations is to adapt, emulate, and incrementally make better, commercially-available technologies. However, Innovation comes from the combination of intrinsic organizational factors such as strategic objectives, leadership, ideology, technical capacity, organizational capacity and extrinsic enablers global technological developments, availability of commercial hardware, knowledge transfer, territorial access, external supports (Dass, 2026). The framework is a good one when it comes to the TTP's adoption of a drone, as it is not an organisation that has invented something new for the drone, but rather civilian technologies have been adapted to fit their operational needs.

The first explanatory variable used in Dass's model is the intrinsic organisational drivers. Since the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in August 2021, TTP has experienced organisational consolidation, improved sanctuary, and a rejuvenated confidence. The developments created conditions within the area for the trial of tactics. Dass argues VNSAs build up the asymmetric power with cheap technology to enhance surveillance, minimise exposure to fighters, allow for propaganda, and increase stand-off attack power. The use of drones is therefore a sensible option within the organisational approach, aligning with the broader objective of TTP to increase operational efficiency with minimal risk of direct skirmishes.

The second intrinsic element of Dass's model concerns leadership and organisational capacity. It is only with the combination of strategic vision, technical capability, and organisational learning that terrorist innovation can occur. The militants have always demonstrated a great capacity to adapt commercially available technologies and equipment, whether it is for making IEDs, doing propaganda or for surveillance in the conflict zone in the north west of Pakistan. Commercial modifications of quadcopters thus represent a continuation of the evolutionary learning cycle, rather than a change in the quadcopter's militant behaviour. Avoiding the development of indigenous drone technology, militants instead used inexpensive commercial platforms that needed relatively minor technological changes to be used operationally Dolnik, A. (2007).

This innovation pathway is based on empirical data from Pakistan. In July to September 2024, at least six incidents involving the use of drones for the launch of an IED were reported in North Waziristan, allegedly perpetrated by the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group. These attacks were made with commercially available DJI quadcopters with homemade explosive devices, with the majority of the 400-700 grams of explosive being directed at security installations (Dass & Basit, 2025). Though the systems were faulty, they have demonstrated that militant groups are not only interested in the concept of commercial drones as weapons, but are actually experimenting with them. It was a step forward, it was revealed a few months later in October that DJI Matrice 350

RTK platforms were also entering South Waziristan (Dass & Basit, 2025). Dass' view that these are not technological inventions, but rather an iterative process of experimenting, adapting, and slowly developing to operationalise innovation.

The second major aspect of Dass's model concerns the “extrinsic enablers.” Technology is a significant factor in the diffusion of other technologies globally. Dass points out that commercial drone technology is becoming more affordable, widely accessible, technically feasible, and can be customised using open-source techniques, sources from the civilian market, and tutorials online. Terrorist groups tend to replicate innovations in other parts of the world, rather than developing their own technologies (Dass, 2026). The operational experience of Al-Qaeda supporters, the Islamic State and other non-state violent groups with the use of drones in combat has demonstrated the tactical utility of commercially available UAS for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, propaganda and limited precision strike. These foreign precedents facilitated the easy adoption of technology on the part of militant groups in Pakistan.

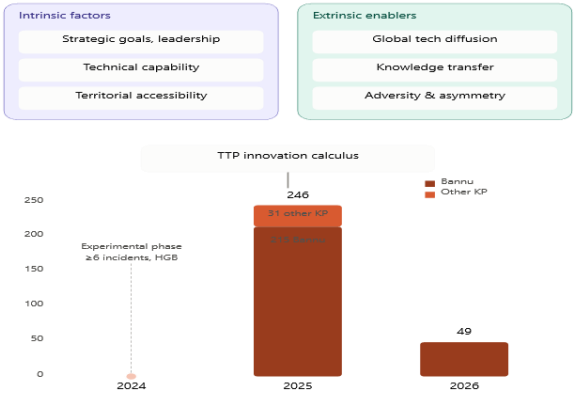
Dass says, It's the need for tactical innovation that heavily depends on hardware, raw materials, land and money. Much of this enabling to be found in the militant climate of Pakistan. Commercial quadcopter aircraft are still not particularly expensive; their parts are readily available on the civilian market, and locally manufactured explosive payloads do not require a high degree of technical expertise. In the instances observed, adaptive patterns have been observed for the rapid diffusion of small arms and sophisticated weaponry that were ‘left behind’ in Afghanistan following the pullout of the U.S. When technologies are found to be suitable for use, they spread rapidly in Pakistan's militant groups. The total number of attacks by TTP quadcopter drones was 410 in 2025, of which 320 were conducted in Bannu, 34 in North and South Waziristan, and 21 in Bajaur (PICSS, 2025). This transition from basic UAS-IEDs in 2024 to future, more complex operational applications is not due to any single innovation; it reflects the symbiotic development of technological maturity and permissive operational conditions.

Knowing how to transfer this knowledge further enhances the innovation process. Learning by observing, emulating and cooperating is vital, which will allow terrorists to be innovative. Terrorist groups have a rich history of drone warfare, an understanding of trans-border operations and examples of drone warfare across the world (Lubrano, 2023). As TTP has done before, they are using commercial drones here, but an example of how they can find and apply successful innovations to their operations.

The interactive dynamics between within-organisational incentives and technological opportunities can be understood through Dass' Terrorist Innovation Model, which explains how drones have been acquired by the TTPs. The required low-cost capabilities were deliberately planned; the technical capacity to integrate commercial systems into the local context was cultivated by learning within the organization; and the conditions for global technological diffusion, access and knowledge transfer were established. So, the move towards using commercially modified drones is no indication that TTP is becoming a conventional powerful

military force. Instead, it is the way terrorists have innovated, incorporating commercial technology that is part of an existing arsenal of ambushes, raids, sabotage and suicide bombing in an iterative manner. Thus, drone capability is an additional tactical capability that enhances the existing factors of surveillance, operational reach, intimidation and selective strike. It already has a violent and inequitable character of militancy in Pakistan. This theoretical framework is useful for analyzing the process of the growth of drone use and the importance of drone use for militant groups in Pakistan. The transition from experimentation to drone operationalization, and the commercial acquisition of UASs has been the preferred choice of Pakistan's militant groups.

Figure 1: The Terrorist Innovation Theory



Discussion and Analysis

TTP's tactical adaptation is from a purely contact-based version of violence to a more hybrid one. It integrates the latest in commercially modified drones with an older set of tactics that involve ambushes, suicide bombings, sabotage and raids. Proximity-based violence is its operational lifeline; it has added another layer to the violence that is conducted in the airspace. The risk calculus of engagement has changed. Its methods involved physical infiltration, personnel to drop the bombs, and direct, sometimes lethal, contact between the fighters and the guns of the state, all of which were elements of asymmetric warfare and were not something the group could cut down on (Dolnik, 2007). This was the one thing that changed starting in 2024: no fighters in a delivery system.

This change has been more of a path to the capability maturing than a swift adoption. This was the first tentative and exploratory use of quadcopters: between July and September 2024, it was reported that six quadcopter-launched IEDs were used in North Waziristan, on commercial DJI platforms equipped with 400-700 grams of explosives in a bottle (Dass & Basit, 2025). The improvisation isn't a fluke; it seems to be a process of purposeful adaptation, iteration, learning, and consistent with testing something new in the operational setting (Dolnik, 2007). A turning

point was reached in late 2024, where more and more advanced and durable platforms such as DJI Matrice 350 RTK, where the militants no longer just proved a point, but were moving towards tactical sophistication. The platform capabilities and durability were of a higher order and likely precision as well.

By 2025, this trend was certainly strong. Drones were not merely symbolic and experimental weapons for sorties, but were a regular part of TTP's violence, targeted civilian and security forces when they were shot at check posts, police stations, and elsewhere. This is an astounding rate of change, TTP in 2025 alone, 410 drone attacks in KP, with 320 in Bannu, 34 in North Waziristan, and 21 in South Waziristan (Basit, 2025) This imbalance indicates that the region has no new experience in drone warfare, but a more tactical activity, with "some tangible operational and psychological impact" even if precision is not a given. According to the PICSS security report, the capability is being used in the current year, 53 attacks between January and July (PIPS, 2026).

This shift, in the context of 'asymmetric warfare', is not only an opportunistic move but also a logical and rational shift in structure. A weaker VNSA against a stronger conventional security apparatus, meets an incentive to acquire low cost, commercially available aerial capabilities by enabling an VNSA to fight past infiltration on ground, drones extend its reach (Arreguín-Toft, 2005). It allows the VNSA to keep trained fighters, off the front line of the fight; they make the logic of fixed security infrastructure based on land-born threats more complicated. They also continuously apply psychological and resources pressure on the local population without achieving force parity (Cronin, 2020). When viewed from this lens, drones are an arm that can make TTP more capable because they protect it from its primary weakness, the lack of confrontation capability.

The importance of this evolution, therefore, is not that drones superseded the TTP but rather that it recognises the drone as an extension of the TTP's approach to implementing violence, a new method for reducing risk, and a sign of the organisation's technological and organisational development. This is not an 'either-or' situation. Still, rather an 'either-and' situation, as stand-off aerial capacity is both a force multiplier and a risk mitigation measure and a clear indicator of the TTP's technical and organisational sophistication (Basit, 2025). The Bannu-focused nature also points towards an uneven spread. This is not a development that occurs throughout the theatre, but is being fertilised by specific centres of technical expertise, which forms another way of thinking about how to counter the threat, as it may be necessary to disrupt these specific nodes of capability rather than counter the threat as a whole across the theatre.

Figure 2: TTP Tactical Evolution Timeline (2021-2026)

Phase	Period	Characteristics	Key Indicator
Phase I: Resurgence	2021-2023	Post-Kabul organisational consolidation; traditional tactics dominant (ambushes, IEDs, suicide attacks)	No confirmed UAS use; insurgent raids on security posts
Phase II: Experimentation	Jul-Dec 2024	First documented quadcopter IED drops; DJI platforms carrying ~400-700g payload; experimental, opportunistic	≥6 drone-borne IED incidents, North Waziristan
Phase III: Operational Deployment	Jan-Dec 2025	Repeated strikes on check posts, police stations; DJI Matrice 350 RTK observed; ~410 armed quadcopter attacks in KP	19 police injured; 9 civilian deaths; 33 civilian injuries in Bannu alone
Phase IV: Widening	Jan-Jun 2026	Broader target set: schools, football grounds, residential areas, peace-committee targets; multi-district pattern	≥18 incidents Jan–Mar 2026; ≥5 deaths, 72 injuries

Figure 2: Four-phase evolution of TTP's tactical integration of commercial drones, from organisational resurgence to widening operational deployment.

Modes and Purposes of Drone Use

There are two intertwined aspects to TTP's utilisation of commercial drones: mode and purpose. As for mode, they seem to be coalescing around an ISR-equipped stand-off configuration, where commercial modified quadcopters are used as surveillance platforms, keeping an eye on various troop locations, police stations, security checkposts, and route weaknesses; and, in some instances, providing delivery platforms to drop explosive attacks against these plateaus. The drawbacks are that it is a strategic sequencing, militants who use drones get to cross areas where conventional military aircraft have trouble moving, evade fixed military obstacles, and hit from afar, where there is less risk to them, and targets are available that would be too expensive or difficult to be reached by ground troops. The drone's deployment in repeated harassment raids, in the formation of strike aircraft, or as a counter-surveillance tool reveals that it is no longer a simple weapon but a sophisticated tactical weapon.

TTPs use drones for operational and psychological purposes. From an operational standpoint, it is a low-cost force multiplier that combines surveillance, target acquisition, and strike delivery on a single platform. The psychological aspects of drones are tools that try to influence an actor's behaviour (Coercion is the art of manipulating costs and benefits to influence an actor's behaviour) (Pape, 1996). TTP can track the homes, localities and the alleged collaborators from the air and then attack them, thus changing the equation of the civilian population in favour of a

compliant or silent majority, and also reducing the cost of the civilians' cooperating with the state in counterterrorism operations. It is sufficient to intimidate to observe an individual's behaviour to cause a change in that behaviour, but it is not sufficient to destroy an object to change its behaviour. It also portrays drone-related messaging and imagery as a technologically flexible, modern, and well-coordinated effort, as well as a resilient one in the context of continued counterterrorism pressure, and as a recruitment tool (Lubrano, 2023). The TTP's drone is not only a weapon, but also a sensor, capable of striking targets and a coercive tool, wrapped into one low-cost package, one that's as much about manipulating the cost/benefit equation as it is about killing or maiming.

Figure 3: TTP Drone Dual-Use Matrix

Capability Dimension	Operational Function	Propaganda/Political Function	Counter-UAS Challenge
Surveillance / ISR	Monitors troop movement, police posts, and route security	Demonstrates territorial reach and persistent watch	Detection of low-altitude, slow-moving platforms
Explosive Drop	Low-cost stand-off strike; reduces fighter exposure	Proof of aerial strike capability; recruitment signal	RF jamming; point defence at fixed sites
Psychological Coercion	Intimidates collaborators; deters civilian cooperation	Embeds fear of surveillance; narrative of omnipresence	Counter-narrative: civilian education and trust-building
Media Exploitation	Footage of strikes is used to assess damage	Distributed via Telegram/X to signal competence	Forensic exploitation of captured drone data

Figure 3: Dua use capability matrix illustrating the operational, propaganda, and counter-UAS dimensions of TTP's drone use.

Operational Effectiveness of Drone Use by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

The efficiency of the drone capabilities of the TTPs should be assess by the additional tactical flexibility they offer, not their capacity to kill in spectacular fashion, or offer a more resilient form of stand-off violence. The record also suggests that commercially-produced quadcopters have been operationally useful to TTP and its affiliated groups. They can enable them to create a vertical mode of violence, compress surveillance, strike into a single platform, and harass the police and FC/military posts at very low cost, in a more limited and relevant sense. The pattern of the incidents, minor damage in Sararogha (24 February 2025), no casualties in Miryan (19 July 2025), and the casualty rate in Takhtikhel post (4 soldiers) in the quadcopter IED strike

on 23 July 2025 means that the ability to use drones against more difficult state targets is increasing (PICSS, 2026). Drones were seen operating in all the coercive envelope including security posts to a wider front. By June 2026, 53 drone attacks were witnessed, (PICSS,2026) including attacks on a school, peace committee-related targets, security infrastructures, a football ground, residential areas and commercial establishments, using quadcopters against these targets. The growing list of targets suggests that payload may be easier to come up with utility, utility in terms of the disruption of the surveillance and short-term precision harassment over a broad battle field. The larger security context supports this reading as the PICS in their database had recorded 410 attacks in 2025 by terrorists in Pakistan while the PICS had pointed out that the use of drones was not a new ploy but rather a part of an extensive resurgence of militant activity, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal areas.[1]TTP's drones are strategic and they are not decisive, but they can make a cheap drone a potent ISR-strike and intimidation device that weakens the strength of state security, decreases the aggressor's exposure and eventually normalizes a stand-off terrorism campaign.

iFigure 4: TTP Drone Incident Data in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2025–2026)

District / Area	Reported Incidents	Security Deaths/Injuries	Civilian Casualties	Target Types
Bannu	~320 armed quadcopter attacks (2025)	19 police injuries	9 deaths, 33 injuries	Police stations, residential
N. & S. Waziristan	~34 incidents (2025)	6 soldiers injured (Takhtikhel, Jul 2025)	Varied	Check posts, FC positions
Bajaur	~21 incidents (2025)	Ongoing	Ongoing	Security infrastructure
Multi-district (2026 Q1)	≥18 incidents Jan–Mar 2026	Ongoing	≥5 deaths, 72 injuries	Schools, football grounds, commercial spaces, residential
KP Total (2025)	~410 armed quadcopter attacks	Multiple	Multiple	Hard & soft targets

Figure 4: District-level incident data for TTP drone attacks in KP (2025–Q1 2026). Sources: PICSS (2026); PIPS (2026); OSAC (2026).

[1] Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), *Pakistan Security Report 2025* (Islamabad: PICSS, 2026).

The TTP adopting commercial drones poses a tactical, strategic and policy challenges for the security forces of Pakistan. One of the most obvious effects is the end of the paradigm of force protection on the ground; police stations, checkposts, and convoy routes are now vulnerable in the air as well. They can be easily overlooked by low-cost, easily installed systems and replacements. The number of attacks on police rose by 56 per cent in KP while 625 security personnel were killed in 2025 as compared to 327 in 2024, according to the 2026 Pakistan Country Security Report. The number of drones attacks in KP in June 2026 was reported as 53; not only in remote areas of Mir Ali, Tank, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, Khyber, Domel, Mamand Khel and Quetta but they were also trying to escalate the number of drone attacks (OSAC, 2026).

Implications for Pakistan's Security Forces

The more significant implication of TTP's commercial drones is about intelligence, not infrastructure. The counterterrorism strategy in KP has always relied on human intelligence rather than hardware: local informers, tribal chiefs, and community tips that go directly to police and military counterterrorism units. The drone footage is TTP's preferred ammunition for propaganda. TTP's aerial imagery not only intimidates the general population but also sends a message to those who are cooperating with the state against terrorism, underscoring that homes, streets, and people are being observed from above (Basit, 2026). This directly undermines the HUMINT used by the Pakistani security forces more than any physical asset, and possibly has a greater strategic impact than the drone's payload. If the drone threat is framed as an extra weapon security forces have to defend against, the only solution is to develop jamming and detection technology, but if the drone threat is viewed as a weapon that undermines the very foundation of defence, by breaking the bond of trust between security forces and local communities, then protection and reassurance of community informant structures must be the primary focus.

Another related aberration in resource allocation is becoming apparent. Drone strikes have psychological and propaganda value even when they are not targets of military importance, as witnessed in drone attacks on a school and a football ground, rather than military targets. The attack on a school or playground inflicts minimal physical damage. It intimidates the public because the most mundane civilian targets are subject to being monitored and attacked from the air. When that alarm rings, it puts the pressure on the state to visibly defend civilian sites and, since there are limited supplies of counter-UAS equipment (jammers, detection systems, trained personnel), every unit deployed to defend a school or market is not deployed to a military base, border post or intelligence facility that would have more substantive defensive value. In other words, TTP can shift the attention of Pakistan's security forces by targeting soft, symbolic targets rather than hard military ones, thereby diverting the limited counter-drone capability. This is a strategic goal that has been attained without the need for TTP to hit any significant military target; it is simply a matter of allocating resources, and the result is that this is the kind of thing the state is putting more effort into protecting (Basit, 2026).

The distortion is brought about when drone strikes fail to hit their intended target and instead target civilians. TTP has been taking advantage of these incidents to create fake propaganda and has been attributing the dead of civilians to the activities of security forces' quadcopters. The anonymity of the commercial drones allows TTP to take advantage and say that it is damaging the same people it's supposed to be protecting. It does two things: one, it takes the heat off TTP's targeting mistakes; and, second, it reinforces the notion that common people are not safe because of state action. In this sense, ‘precision' has misread and become part of the propaganda value that can be obtained from the missile strike, as well as the one that fails, due to the lack of clarity regarding the attribution of the drone.

Figure 5: Pakistan Counter-UAS Response Framework (2026)

Response Layer	Actor	Measures	Current Status (2026)
Point Defense	KP Police / FC / Army	Man-portable jammers; electro-optical detection; hard-kill backup at critical sites	THE KP UAV Division was established in March 2026; partial deployment.
Mobile Protection	Pakistan Army / Paramilitary	Relocatable counter-UAS for convoys and forward posts in S. KP and tribal districts	Under evaluation; no confirmed doctrine
Intelligence / Forensics	CTD / ISI / Police Telecom	Drone data exploitation (serial numbers, RF signatures, video caches); supply-chain targeting	KP Police drone-data extraction active; no national fusion cell
Regulatory	CAA / Interior Ministry	Bulk-purchase monitoring; repair-shop oversight; border controls on components	Nascent; no dedicated legislative framework
Provincial Expansion	Punjab Government	Anti-drone units in all districts; surveillance drones and jamming systems	Ordered Mar 2026; rollout pending

Figure 5: Multi-layered counter-UAS response architecture as of mid-2026, showing responsible actors, measures, and current deployment status.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

The policy of Pakistan in response to the militant drone warfare should now be shifted from the reactive to a proactive and multi-layered counter-UAS for neutralizing the threat from procurement to assembly to launch and on to strike and propaganda exploitation. Drone use is not an isolated phenomenon; it is happening in the midst of a larger militant resurgence, with PICSS documenting 1,066 militant attacks across the country in 2025, resulting in 1,510 deaths and nearly 2,000 injuries, as well as an increase in the number of security-force operations (482).

First of all, a layered defence system needs to be put in place instead of the current patchwork approach to anti-drone assets. To provide point defence against small police stations, Frontier Corps checkposts, and convoy routes, man-portable jamming and electronic warfare systems are needed. The fixed or semi-fixed systems that integrate radar, electro-optical detection, and hard-kill backup are required at cantonments, district headquarters, and critical installations. Static defence will remain structurally too slow, as the militants are taking advantage of mobility, distance, and terrain. So forward-deployed forces, including convoys and semi-static posts in southern KP and in the former tribal districts, will also need mobile, relocatable, short-range counter-UAS platforms that can move quickly between hotspots. This tiered architecture should be implemented as a collaborative effort among KP Police, the Frontier Corps, the Counter Terrorism Department, and community members. It should be built on an exclusive and set of SOPs, rather than the current provincial-level fragmentation, where KP's UAV Division and Punjab's district anti-drone efforts are not linked to an inter-provincial threat-sharing mechanism.

Second, rather than being expanded, intelligence architecture needs to be institutionalised and be specific to the drone. The institutional framework for this response is the establishment of the National Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (NIFTAC) in Pakistan, which comprises around 50 federal and provincial agencies and needs to be expanded to systematically monitor drone procurement networks, attack patterns, and operator identities. It should go hand-in-hand with a forensics-based exploitation chain: all aircraft destroyed or captured should be considered an intelligence asset, not just a piece of hardware; every aircraft's serial, control software, payload design, SIM data, video cache and RF signature should be added to a single national database accessible to police telecom branches, CTDs, military intelligence, cyber units and forensics labs. If it does not happen, Pakistan could be fighting drone attacks one by one while ignoring the networks that enable the continuous attacks, and the fact that the militants are already getting hold of security-force drones and using them to harvest their data makes future drone cells more difficult to detect.

Thirdly, defence is not enough; Pakistan needs a proactive campaign to counter the drone eco-system. This involves not just targeting individual attacks by procurement, retrofitting workshops, launch teams, and technical specialists, but also treating them as high-value targets for intelligence-based operations. This vertical action needs to be complemented with continued

diplomatic efforts against the Afghan Taliban to curb drone transfers to proscribed groups operating from Afghan territory, as well as a push for licensing and other restrictions on commercial drone manufacturers to limit platform functionality in designated conflict zones through geo-fencing.

Fourth, the regulatory and commercial aspects of the threat call for strengthening internal regulation. The ready availability of cheap dual-use platforms, the possibility of modifying and reusing them, continues to be a fundamental weakness; this should be addressed by measures such as limiting large-scale sales of drones, batteries, payloads, and signal amplification equipment in sensitive areas, and by monitoring repair shops, online sales platforms, and smuggling routes. This is not a civilian-administration issue that is unrelated to counterterrorism, but rather an integral part of internal security policy.

Lastly, the answer must also address the human-capital side of the equation, as well as the technical and regulatory sides. Training for police, Frontier Corps and army units in high-risk districts should be repeated regularly to include spotting drones, electromagnetic discipline, camouflaging from overhead surveillance, and rapid-dispersal drills. The design of guard posts, vehicle parks, and ammunition points should be rethought to provide overhead protection and drone-denial spacing, assuming not every drone will be intercepted before it hits.

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