COMMENTARIES

Are Drones a Revolution in Air Power or Just a Supplementary Capability?

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Drones have transformed modern battlefields by democratising access to the air, enabling persistent surveillance, improving tactical strike capability and changing the economics of attrition. However, they do not yet constitute a full revolution in air power because they cannot independently deliver air superiority, survivable penetration, strategic coercion or theatre-wide command dominance.Their real value lies in how they integrate with aircraft, missiles, sensors, electronic warfare, satellites and command networks. The next revolution in air power will not be drones alone, but autonomous, AI-enabled, networked air warfare where crewed and uncrewed systems operate as part of a resilient combat cloud.

The rise of drones has produced one of the most important debates in contemporary military affairs. From Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine, Gaza, the Red Sea and the India-Pakistan border, unmanned systems have reshaped how states and non-state actors observe, strike, harass and exhaust their opponents. The image of a cheap FPV drone destroying an armoured vehicle, a loitering munition hunting a radar, or a quadcopter dropping explosives into a trench has created the impression that drones have revolutionised air power. This impression is partly correct, but only partly. Drones have revolutionised access to the air, but they have not yet revolutionised air power itself.

A true revolution in military affairs does not occur merely because a new platform appears on the battlefield. It happens when technology combines with doctrine, organisation, training, logistics and command systems to fundamentally alter the way wars are fought. By this standard, drones have produced a major tactical disruption, but they have not yet replaced the core functions of air power. They have changed reconnaissance, tactical strike, artillery correction, battlefield transparency, attrition warfare and psychological pressure. However, they have not independently solved the older and harder problem of air power, which is the ability to gain, sustain and exploit control of the air against a capable adversary.

The most important contribution of drones is that they have democratised the air domain. Earlier, meaningful air surveillance and precision strike required formal air forces, trained pilots, air bases, complex maintenance chains, expensive aircraft and sophisticated command systems. Today, a platoon, militia, insurgent group or economically weaker state can put an eye or an explosive payload in the sky at relatively low cost. This has broken the monopoly that advanced air forces once held over tactical aerial observation. A soldier in a trench can now see over the next ridge. A small unit can correct artillery fire in real time. A non-state actor can threaten a military base, oil facility, ship or border post without possessing a conventional air force.

Drones have also made local air presence persistent. A fighter aircraft may dominate a sector temporarily, but a cheap quadcopter or fixed-wing drone can loiter, observe, track and guide fire for extended periods. This has made concealment and movement far more difficult. In Ukraine, both sides have had to adapt to a battlefield where roads, trenches, artillery positions, supply routes and vehicle hides are under constant observation. The result is not merely better targeting. It is a deeper transformation in battlefield behaviour. Troops move less freely. Logistics become more fragmented. Camouflage, deception, dispersion and electronic silence become survival requirements.

The third major change is economic. Drones have altered the cost curve of modern warfare. A relatively cheap FPV drone can disable or destroy a vehicle, radar, artillery system or logistics asset costing many times more. This creates an attritional imbalance. If a defender uses expensive missiles to shoot down cheap drones, the defender may win the tactical exchange but lose the economic contest. This is why counter-drone warfare has become as important as drone warfare itself. Directed-energy weapons, high-power microwave systems, jamming, spoofing, drone interceptors and layered short-range air defence are no longer optional additions. They are becoming essential components of modern force protection.

Yet these changes should not be mistaken for a complete revolution in air power. Most drones do not control airspace. They use it, contest it, exploit gaps in it and sometimes deny it locally, but they rarely establish air superiority. Control of the air requires defeating enemy aircraft, missiles, drones, radars, surface-to-air missile systems, command nodes, electronic warfare assets and sensor networks at scale. Small drones can assist in this mission as decoys, scouts, strike systems or electronic payload carriers, but they cannot replace fighters, bombers, AEW&C aircraft, aerial refuelling, stealth platforms, standoff weapons and suppression of enemy air defence packages.

Drones are also vulnerable. Their strength lies in numbers, affordability, adaptability and expendability, but they remain highly exposed in dense electronic warfare environments. Many rely on GPS, datalinks, video feeds, operator control and electromagnetic connectivity. Once jamming, spoofing, direction-finding, cyber interference and air defence systems enter the battlefield, drones become part of a larger electronic duel. Their survival depends less on the airframe and more on the resilience of communications, navigation, autonomy and supporting networks.

Payload and range remain additional limitations. Small drones are lethal at the tactical edge, but they cannot carry the payload, speed, survivability or range of strike aircraft, cruise missiles or bombers. Larger drones can operate at longer ranges, but in heavily defended airspace they remain vulnerable unless supported by electronic attack, stealth, decoys, suppression of air defences and standoff fires. This is why drones are powerful inside an integrated strike complex but

fragile when treated as a standalone solution.

The correct assessment, therefore, is that drones are supplementary to air power, but increasingly indispensable. “Supplementary” should not be understood as marginal. Radar was once supplementary to fighters, but no air force can fight effectively without it. Precision-guided munitions were once supplementary to aircraft, but they transformed air campaigns. Drones are entering the same category. They are not replacing air power. They are changing its structure, reach and tactical grammar.

The coming revolution will not be drones alone. It will be autonomous, networked, AI-enabled air warfare. The decisive shift will occur when crewed aircraft, unmanned combat systems, loyal wingmen, expendable drones, missiles, electronic warfare platforms, satellites, cyber tools and command systems operate as a single adaptive kill web. In that future, the platform will matter less than the system. The fighter, drone, missile and sensor will not fight as separate assets. They will function as nodes inside a combat cloud that can detect, decide, allocate, strike and reconfigure faster than the adversary.

This is where the real revolution lies. Collaborative combat aircraft and loyal wingmen will extend the reach of manned fighters. Autonomous systems will conduct sensing, decoying, electronic attack, missile carriage and high-risk penetration. AI-enabled command systems will process large volumes of battlefield data and compress the kill chain. Edge autonomy will allow unmanned systems to operate even when communications are degraded. Distributed aerial mass will saturate enemy defences, while high-end stealth platforms will retain the ability to penetrate and command complex operations.

For India, the lesson is clear. Drones must not be treated as a cheap substitute for air superiority. India needs drones, but it also needs stealth aircraft, AEW&C, aerial refuelling, electronic warfare, long-range precision fires, counter-drone systems, passive sensors, hardened bases, resilient datalinks and space-based ISR. The debate should not be framed as manned aircraft versus drones. That is a false binary. The real question is whether India can build a crewed-uncrewed, AI-enabled, survivable aerospace architecture suited to a two-front threat environment.

Drones have changed war, but they have not yet replaced air power. They have revolutionised tactical access to the air, not the full logic of air dominance. The future belongs not to the side that simply has more drones, but to the side that can fuse drones, aircraft, sensors, missiles, electronic warfare and AI into one coherent system. The next revolution in air power will not be unmanned flight alone. It will be autonomous, networked and adaptive air warfare.

The aircraft that flies first may matter less than the system that senses, decides, adapts and strikes first.

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