

Flying terror

International cooperation is a must in combating new modes of terror attacks

The use of drones to attack an Indian Air Force base in Jammu on June 27-28 brought to the fore a troubling, though not unanticipated, new mode of terrorism for the country. Though there were no casualties at the base, the fact that there were at least two more subsequent attempts to use drones to attack military targets points to the future of terrorism. The use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), autonomous weapons systems and robotic soldiers by states in warfare and policing has raised moral and practical questions that remain unresolved. Non-state actors have caught up quickly. In 2018, Syrian rebels used homemade drones to attack Russian military bases in Syria; later, the same year, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro had a narrow escape after a drone flying towards him exploded a short distance away. In 2019, Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for bombing Saudi oil installations using drones. New modes of sabotage and violence enabled by technology reduce costs and risk of identification for terrorists while increasing their efficacy. Simultaneously, security agencies would find conventional tools redundant in combating terrorism. Terrorism may not even require organisations, as individuals with sufficient motivation and skills can carry out such attacks and remain under the radar like the drones they use. The existing international framework for controlling the proliferation of technology that can be weaponised, such as the Wassenaar Arrangement and Missile Technology Control Regime, is also largely useless in the emerging scenario.

States including India have sought to deal with terrorism with a combination of stringent laws, invasive surveillance, harsher policing and offensives against other countries that support terrorist groups. This approach has only had limited success in ensuring peace anywhere while the human and material costs have been high. The exponential proliferation of new technologies and Artificial Intelligence, vertically and horizontally, will make the task of combating terror even more challenging. The Jammu drone attack, Indian authorities reportedly suspect, was carried out by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is patronised by Pakistan. The same group was behind the 2008 Mumbai terror attack in which perpetrators came by boats from Pakistan. India has tried to punish Pakistan for its support to terror groups in recent years which has shown some success. The entry of drones calls for a more complex response to terrorism. Terror groups do capitalise on state patronage but technology is enabling them too to be autonomous in an unprecedented fashion. From turning passenger planes into missiles in 2001, terrorism has come a long way, and one cannot foresee where it will go next. Enhanced international cooperation and consensus on the development and deployment of technologies are required to deal with the challenge. India can and must take an active role in the process.