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Houthi Attacks on UAE: Why are Drones becoming Weapons of Choice?

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A satellite image of a state oil company facility in Abu Dhabi targeted by Houthi rebels in Yemen on Monday in an attack that killed three Indian workers

Image Source: AP



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On January 17, 2022, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) faced the deadliest drone attacks on its key oil storage facility of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) in the southwest part of Abu Dhabi and an under-construction area inside Abu Dhabi International Airport. Yemen's Houthi rebels took the claim for this attack. The attack resulted in the killing of three people, including two Indians. This attack has brought to the forefront the security issue especially highlighting the fragility of the West Asian region. This attack comes two weeks after the Houthis hijacked the UAE's *Rwabee*—a civilian cargo vessel. This further highlights the “dangerous escalation” in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf region. Even though the monetary and financial loss for the UAE after these attacks could have been negligible, it could have affected the Emirate's peaceful stability and tourism. As per the inputs from the UAE's security agencies, there were two low intensity attacks using small projectiles to target civilian infrastructures. This attack brings Iran back into the quagmire of this region's already complicated sectarian issues. Iran is allegedly supporting the Houthi rebels, who took the claim for the attacks.

In November 2021, the Saudi-led coalition along with the Emirati forces moved towards the Shabwa front. This coalition included the “Giants Brigades”—a militia supported by the UAE which is more systemized in comparison to other military units in this coalition. This, in a way, sought to redefine the rules of engagement in Yemen. Yemen has been wrecked by the civil war between the Houthis and Saudi-led forces with the aim of restoring the internationally recognized government. The UAE joined the Saudi military operations in Yemen in 2015 and has been deeply entangled in the conflict till 2019, when it announced the withdrawal of its forces. However, the UAE continues the presence of its support forces in Yemen, along with the Saudi-led forces.

Emerging West Asian Politics

West Asian politics is marred by the competition for power and influence among major regional nations and various non-state actors, which continues to shape the regional landscape. In this scenario, the nations are operating with a greater degree of assertiveness. Several West Asian nations are trying to reanalyze and reconstruct their inter-regional relations. This is visible in various probable rapprochements between various nations, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia or Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Iran. However, the pace remains slow as this is also linked to issues such as the economy, energy, and mutual security amongst nations. With the

Taliban assuming power in Afghanistan and the hardliners coming to power in Iran—the regional political scenario is shifting.

Definitely, oil plays a crucial role in regional geopolitics. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, oil prices have gradually increased. This could also be due to signs of tensions in the oil market and persistent uncertainties about Russian intervention in Ukraine. The looming threat of a Russian-led incursion has further deteriorated the West Asian security scenario, leading to an increase in oil prices. The UAE is the third-largest oil-producing member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), producing more than 4 million barrels of oil per day. The ADNOC controls oil operations in Abu Dhabi. In such a scenario, the attack on Emirati oil facilities could be destructive to the fragile regional balance. In 2018, the Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack in the UAE during the time when the Emirati forces moved further and nearly seized the port city of Hodeidah before the UN intervention.

In terms of preparing for such kinds of attacks, West Asian nations such as Iran and Turkey have been mounting up their production or acquisition of weaponized drones. These can be utilized both for-profit through sales as well as for regional influence. The risk of military drone attacks in the region is fast increasing with the easy conversion of agricultural drones to weaponized drones. Various Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations are gearing up to integrate the risks associated with drone attacks in their national defense policies. In retaliation to the January 2022 drone attack, the Saudi coalition forces have declared that they have launched airstrikes targeting the capital city of Sana'a. Saudi coalition forces conducted strikes against the Houthi strongholds and camps in Sana'a.

Why Drone Attacks?

Drones are fast becoming the 'weapons of choice' for various non-state actors or terrorist organizations. In terms of cost and technology, the use of drones for such kinds of attacks has unmatched benefits. Drones offer a much cheaper attack option without the need for physical presence for carrying out the attack, along with providing the much-needed visibility for carrying out an attack. For this reason, various terrorist organizations and non-state actors are utilizing drone attacks as the new tool for fifth-generation warfare, with obvious advantages. Furthermore, their ability to go undetected by even the most sophisticated air defense systems in possession of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE—namely the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) air defense system is making them the better 'weapons of choice.' Also, the target

chosen by the Houthis is highly volatile. With the requirement of only some kind of high-temperature starters can cause the fire to burn fuel, sometimes for days, which can be economically drastic for the victim nation. So, it can be said that through these attacks, the Houthi rebels wanted to convey the message to one of the most important members of the Saudi-coalition¹ forces fighting against them in Yemen.

The escalation in attacks conducted by the Houthis in the past few years is their strategic choice to make it a 'costly affair,' for the regional actors and gain international attention. Previously, such kinds of attacks were mainly limited to the maritime region or civilian infrastructures in the Najran and Jizan provinces of Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich provinces of the Kingdom were seldom targeted. However, this did not deter the Kingdom from toning down its attack on Houthi installations. In fact, Saudi-led coalition has also sieged the Houthi-controlled city of Sana'a and Hodeida port city, in a way restricting the Houthis. So, it can be said that the attacks on the UAE are apparently in response to Emirate's quest to secure the oil rich city of Marib which the Houthis were trying to capture.

Effects on India

India has strongly condemned the UAE drone attacks in violation of international law. Furthermore, India has underlined the fact that such attacks can definitely alter the status quo in the unstable West Asian region. However, there remain the lessons that India needs to learn from these attacks considering that it faces two hostile neighbours and some of its significant industrial installations are along the coastal regions. The physical inability of India to keep track of inimical elements in international waters makes it imperative for New Delhi to strive for a multilayer strategy to safeguard its strategic industrial installations. In these terms, counter-drone solutions have become the much-desired option for nations to prepare against such attacks.²

NOTES

¹ Saudi Coalition includes nations such as the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Egypt. These are supported by the US, Britain, France and other Western nations by weapons, logistics and intelligence support to the Saudi coalition.