



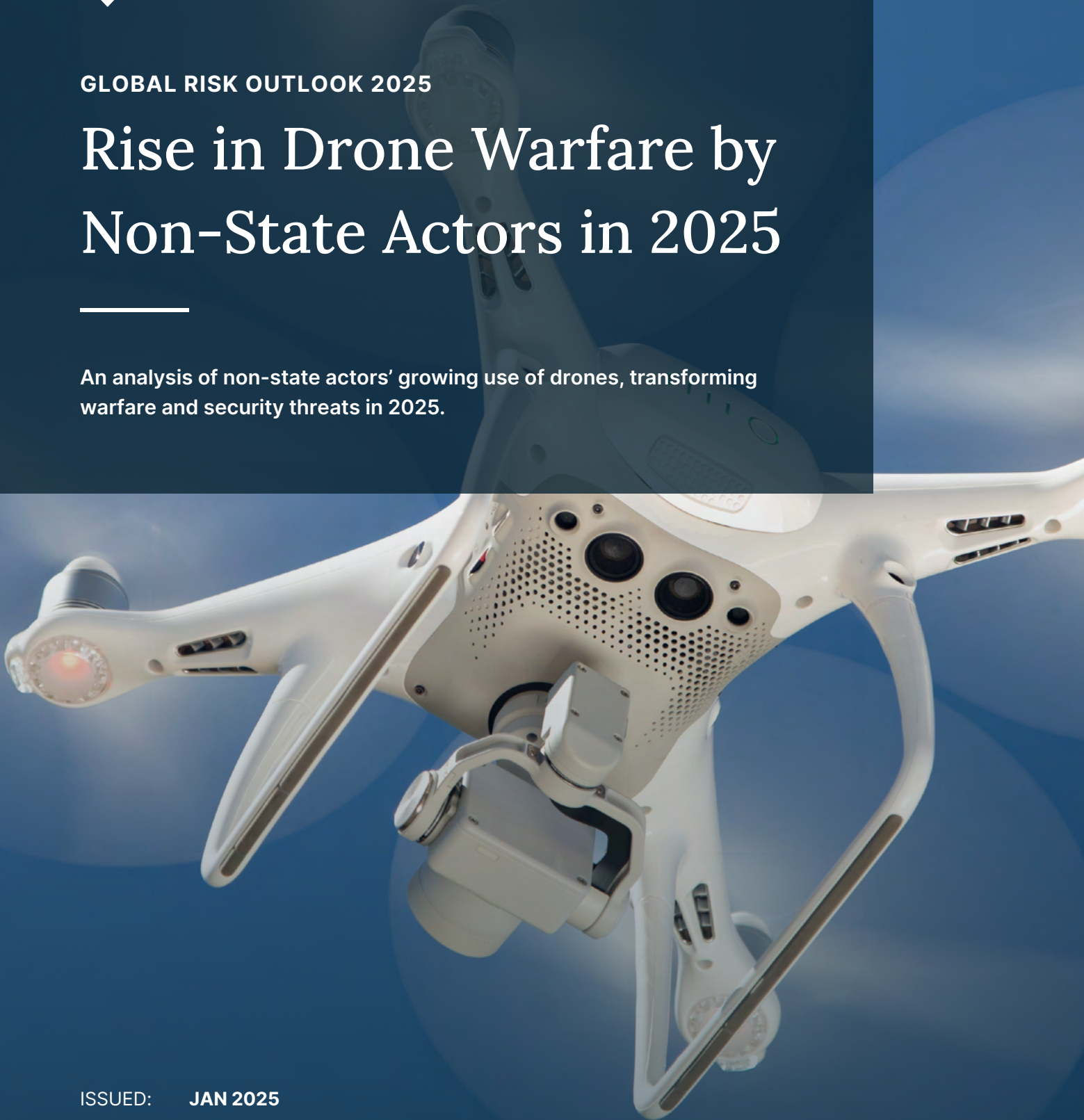
GLOBAL RISK OUTLOOK 2025

# Rise in Drone Warfare by Non-State Actors in 2025

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An analysis of non-state actors' growing use of drones, transforming warfare and security threats in 2025.

ISSUED: **JAN 2025**



## FOREWORD FROM OUR SENIOR INTELLIGENCE ANALYST

As we reflect on another year of operations at Solace Global Risk, we are reminded of the importance of adaptability and collaboration in navigating the complexities of an ever-changing risk landscape. Throughout the past year, our mission to provide tailored, people-first solutions has remained steadfast, enabling our clients to operate with confidence, no matter the challenges they faced.

Our intelligence team has worked tirelessly to deliver insights that empower informed decision-making. From assisting routine business travellers to guiding operations in volatile environments, we've seen how a combination of expert human insight and innovative technology can provide clarity and reassurance, even in the most unpredictable circumstances.

This year's achievements are a testament to the partnerships we've built with clients across industries. Whether it's creating bespoke risk management plans, enhancing traveller tracking with intuitive technology, or providing on-the-ground expertise, our commitment has always been to go further - delivering excellence, reliability, and care every step of the way.



MARK OVERINGTON  
SENIOR INTELLIGENCE ANALYST, SOLACE GLOBAL

This summary captures the highlights, but the full report goes further - offering detailed insights tailored to your specific needs. If you'd like to explore how an extended, bespoke report could support your decision-making, we're here to help.

Contact **Robert Aldous, Chief Customer Officer**, to explore how we can support you with intelligence tailored to your organisation's priorities.

# The Review

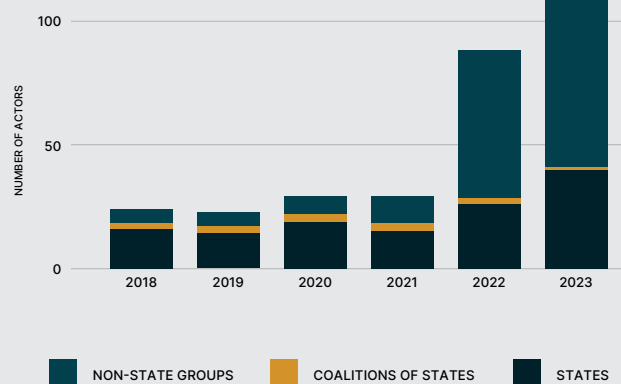
## 2024: Non-State Actors Intensify UAV Operations Globally

The use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones) by non-state actors in 2024 has further intensified. Internationally, non-state groups have been observed to increasingly use both commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) first-person view (FPV) UAVs, such as the FPV quadcopter-type Mavic series produced by the Chinese company DJI, and cheaply produced fixed-wing UAVs produced in local workshops with COTS technology.

Non-state groups are able to leverage the low cost, operational flexibility and easy procurement of these UAVs to asymmetrically challenge conventional state militaries and security forces who previously typically had a monopoly on violence from the aerial domain.

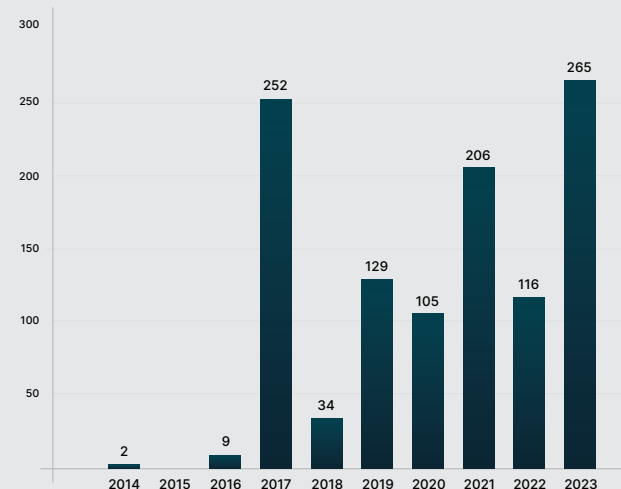
In 2024, numerous non-state actors have been recorded as using UAVs. Firstly, Mexican transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), which have a dedicated unit called Drone Operators (Operadores Droneros), have deployed UAVs to conduct aerial intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions and attacks against rival criminal groups, particularly in the states of Michoacan and Jalisco. According to Mexican media, authorities “dismantle up to eight drones with explosives in Michoacan daily”.

USE OF DRONES BY GROUP TYPE:  
2018 - 2023



SOURCE: VISIONOFHUMANITY.ORG; ACLED; IEP CALCULATIONS

NUMBER OF ATTACKS BY UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLES  
OR DRONES BY VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS, 2023



SOURCE: PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

In the Punjab region of India, security forces have regularly intercepted UAVs attempting to smuggle drugs over the border from Pakistan. The use of UAVs to smuggle drugs and contraband has in recent years become an increasing challenge for law enforcement across the world, with a November 2024 report by the UK's HM Inspectorate of Prisons, detailing how the prolific use of UAVs to conduct smuggling has made the high-security prison HMP Garth feel "like an airport".

Insurgent groups and militias, such as Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents and the Iran-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah, have heavily integrated the use of UAVs into their attacks and ISR operations. In April 2024, the Colombian military reportedly seized "197

explosives hidden in underground containers in the southern department of Cauca", for use by UAVs, and in January 2024, Kataib Hezbollah killed three US troops and wounded over 40 with an attack against a US outpost in Jordan near the Syrian border using a one-way attack UAV (OWA-UAV).

In previous years, VEOs such as Islamic State (IS), particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), have deployed COTS UAVs to great effect, enabling VEOs to "access air power without the possession of an air force". For VEOs, COTS UAVs can also help build their credibility, in addition to their tactical utility, as they can demonstrate prestigious participation in the aerial domain without necessarily having the patronage of a state.



**Non-state groups are able to leverage the low cost, operational flexibility and easy procurement of UAVs to asymmetrically challenge conventional state militaries and security forces.**

# The Assessment

## 2025: Drones as a Force Multiplier for Non-State Groups

By either weaponising COTS UAVs (remotely activated release mechanisms can be easily manufactured or 3D printed to modify COTS UAVs) or manufacturing purpose-built fixed-wing UAVs, non-state actors have been able to infiltrate previously hard-to-reach and/or well-defended areas to conduct ISR operations, conduct attacks using explosive munitions (such as grenades, mortar shells or improvised explosive devices/IEDS), or illicitly traffic drugs and other contraband.

For non-state actors, who typically do not have access to conventional airpower, the increased acquisition of even COTS aerial technology will highly likely disproportionately serve as a force multiplier.

The widespread use of FPV quadcopter UAVs and cheaply produced fixed-wing OWA-UAVs (such as the Iran-produced Shahed designs) in Ukraine, has almost certainly provided inspiration for their increasing use by non-state actors.

By using UAVs, groups are able to minimise the risk to their own members but can increase the threat posed to adversaries, highly likely additionally posing greater risks for civilian populations.

In 2025, there is a realistic possibility that a high-profile figure and/or political leader could be assassinated with the use of a UAV.

In 2018, an alleged assassination attempt against Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro using two small UAVs armed with explosives took place (though it may have been a 'false flag' operation). Furthermore, in 2021 UAVs were used to drop explosives on the home of Iraq's Prime Minister al-Kadhimi.

More recently in November 2024, rebels in Myanmar used unsophisticated fixed-wing UAVs in a likely attempted assassination attempt against the Tatmadaw junta's leader General Min Aung Hlaing on a runway at Naypyidaw International Airport.

One particularly concerning possible development in the use of UAVs could be the use of dispersal or spraying modifications to deploy chemical or biological agents. The fanatical Japanese group Aum Shinrikyo made plans in the 1990s to use small remote-controlled drones with liquid storage tanks to disperse sarin across Japanese cities, though ultimately opted for more unsophisticated methods.

VEOs could also use UAVs to deploy IEDs at densely populated events, such as a football match or music concert, or to attack critical national infrastructure (CNI). One such high-profile attack would highly likely inspire other VEOs and lone-actor terrorists to increasingly adopt UAVs into their attack methods.




## Interested in the Full Report? Let's Talk.


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