

Opinion **The FT View**

## The drone war in Ukraine

Use by both sides of unmanned spy and attack vehicles is a new form of conflict

**THE EDITORIAL BOARD**



The remains of an unmanned aerial vehicle after a Russian drone strike in Kyiv, Ukraine © Vladyslav Musiienko/Reuters

#### The editorial board YESTERDAY

---

Stay across the latest Ukraine coverage. [Join the FT's Telegram channel](#)



The noisy buzzing of the Iranian-made drones Russia [has been using](#) to smash power and water facilities in Ukraine is said to have earned them the nickname “flying lawnmowers of death”. Noisy, but effective. Russia’s use of these kamikaze flying bombs against infrastructure is recent, but both sides have been using unmanned spying and attack vehicles — Ukraine to largely greater effect — ever since the invasion by Moscow’s forces in February. The large-scale deployment makes this not the first, but the biggest and most visible “drone war” the world has yet seen.

That has brought to wider attention an evolution in warfare under way for some years. The US has used drones in Iraq and Afghanistan in surveillance and counter-terrorist operations. They have featured in conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Ethiopia; Azerbaijan used them decisively against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.

Their proliferation is also shifting the dynamics of the defence industry. Military advances long tended to emerge from within the military-industrial complexes of leading powers. Some of today’s drones come instead from private start-ups and countries, such as Iran and [Turkey](#), that are not historically big arms exporters. Military-use drones can be cobbled together, too, from commercial products. A

[maritime drone](#) that washed up in Crimea in September, similar to those later used to attack Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, appeared to be equipped with a Canadian jet ski engine and a Soviet-era detonator. One unproven theory behind recent, mysterious thefts of dozens of [roadside speed cameras](#) in Sweden is that they ended up in homemade Russian drones in Ukraine.

Flows of such weapons are difficult to track. They are also a comparatively cheap way of acquiring airborne reconnaissance and combat abilities not just for poorer countries but for non-state actors such as militias or insurgent groups, terrorists and organised crime. Air defences to shoot them down are relatively expensive, and the ability to deploy "swarms" of drones means they can evade such systems by creating more targets than can be tracked and intercepted at once.

Advanced militaries are starting to see the technological edge their superior surveillance capabilities have long given them being eroded. They also need to rethink how they equip their forces. Russia's assault on Ukraine has shown the age of mass tank battles is not past. But armies must be able to fight many different types of war, and provide more extensive and decentralised air defences for their troops. "If the 2003 invasion of Iraq were to happen today," says Sam Cranny-Evans of the Royal United Services Institute think-tank, "British armed forces would be very hard pushed to resist the drone attacks they would be likely to face."

One Rubicon not so far crossed in Ukraine is to use drones autonomously, allowing them to identify and destroy targets without human command. They are not the biggest cause of deaths; artillery and tanks are. But drone technology is already starting to be married with artificial intelligence, opening up a nightmarish future of armies of "[killer robots](#)". A UN body has drawn up guidelines and worked on a potential embargo on such weapons.

China, the US and others seem unlikely ever to accept a ban, fearing their adversaries would press on with such technologies regardless. The best hope may be for conventions that limit how they may be used, just as anti-personnel landmines are officially banned but anti-tank mines are not. Sadly, Russia's war crimes in Ukraine are only the latest demonstration that conventions in warfare are often honoured more in the breach than the observance.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.

---