

Assessing the Credibility of Manned Platforms in Contemporary Drone-Rich Combat Environment

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Proliferation of unmanned systems in modern warfare has popularized the notion that traditional platforms have reached the end of their operational relevance. Particularly, the Russia-Ukraine war has deepened the perception that small, agile, and inexpensive drones have rendered manned platforms in land, air, and sea domain obsolete.

This argument gains credibility while assessing drones' performance against [manned armored vehicles](#) which are now [routinely labelled](#) as outdated systems against drone-enabled precision strikes. Yet, what is often depicted in the media is only one side of the coin. Drones often fail to find targets, are intercepted, or manage to hit their target, thus not achieving intended results. Despite proliferation of first-person view (FPV) drones, armored vehicles continue to play a vital role in maneuver warfare and protected mobility. Modern armor strategies have evolved to include combined arms and dispersion rather than mass for increasing survivability and combat efficiency. In the Russia-Ukraine war, several [rudimentary measures](#) like installation of cope cages atop turrets, have been implemented by both militaries to enhance the survivability rate of tanks against kamikaze drones. Vehicle mounted [jammers](#) have also shown promising results. Defensive technologies, like active protection systems (APS) and electronic countermeasures (ECM), have proven their efficiency against FPV drones. Thus, it can be argued that drones have not turned armored vehicles obsolete; they have forced them to evolve into more refined systems.

Similarly, in the aerial domain, many analysts perceive unmanned aerial systems (UAS) as [cost effective alternative](#) vis-à-vis manned aircraft. Yes, UASs have shown impressive evolution. From dropping laser-guided bombs (LGBs) to firing [cruise missiles](#), [air-to-air missiles](#), [torpedo](#), and [even smaller drones](#), drones have come a long way in changing warfare. Increasingly, drones have pushed manned aircraft aside as a more efficient option for operational engagement. In Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan [innovatively employed](#) aerial drones to expose Armenian air-defenses' positions making them vulnerable to subsequent Azerbaijan's targeted strikes. This unique use of drones as a crucial component of SEAD/DEAD (Suppression & Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses) kill chain marked a watershed moment in modern warfare.

However, the [inherent limitations](#) of drones are obvious too. UASs are more susceptible to electronic warfare (EW) disruption and have unproven records in complex battlespace with dynamics rules of engagement (ROEs). Claims that unmanned systems will soon replace fighter jets overlook the enduring advantages of human decision-making in contested and escalation-sensitive environments. Manned aircraft provide operational flexibility and command judgment that are yet to be replicated through automation alone. The developmental trajectory suggests that instead of perceiving UAVs as one-one-one substitute for piloted aircraft, the future lies in Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T) where manned aircraft will serve as command nodes while accompanied unmanned systems will provide mass, persistence, and attainability.

In the naval domain, the successful employment of kamikaze surface and aerial drones by Ukraine in the Black Sea conflict is now frequently cited as an indicator that large surface combatants will soon turn into relics of past. Besides [sinking multiple Russian warships](#) in the Black Sea, Ukraine has even damaged a Russian Kilo class submarine stationed at Novorossiysk harbor using an [underwater suicide drone](#). The Russian Black Sea Fleet, despite having overwhelming superiority over Ukrainian counterpart, has failed to establish sea-control in the Black Sea primarily due to remarkable performance of Ukrainian naval drones.

Similarly, in the Red Sea crisis, the Houthis' rudimentary drones have challenged the operational persistence of Western naval powers. Kamikaze drones have compelled [American](#), [British](#), [French](#), and [German](#) warships to deplete expensive air-defense missiles, which in some cases resulted in [pre-mature withdrawal](#). Close-in Weapon Systems (CIWS) is usually considered a potent point of defense against all types of aerial threats in the maritime domain. However, both gun-based and missile-based CIWS have limited magazine capacity and engagement range. This suggests that against a more capable adversary, drone swarms can saturate warships' defenses and can cause mission-kill by damaging critical instruments onboard, rendering them inoperable for extended time duration.

Although naval drones have added an additional layer of threat for warships, they do not, in themselves, render them obsolete. Novel defensive capabilities for countering drone threats are already in the developmental phase. Few systems have been deployed and evaluated in real combat. For example, on 03 March 2024, an Italian *Andrea Doria* class destroyer [shot down](#) an incoming kamikaze drone threat in Red Sea using [DART projectiles](#) fired from 76mm deck gun, a move far more economically feasible than air-to-surface missile. Similarly, [high-energy lasers \(HELs\)](#) onboard warships are being tested for countering drones. Besides kinetic defensive application, [soft-kill measures](#) such as jammers and decoy systems are also emerging as critical components of warships defensive suite.

In addition, the Black Sea and the Red Sea are enclosed bodies of water, offering limited operational space for naval forces and providing tactical advantage to drone-based asymmetric tactics. In blue waters, however, the effectiveness of such drones would diminish considerably. In open seas, it is unlikely that even mass formations of drones would be able to penetrate modern naval armadas. Although suicide drones can be used in formation with cruise and ballistic missiles to [outclass adversary air-defenses](#), but repeating such a feat against time-sensitive and well protected high-value naval ships would be a very challenging undertaking. Thus, it can be argued that sea drones can be employed as enablers or force-multipliers in conjunction with other systems, but not as decisive instruments of naval warfare.

The future of warfare will not be defined by the triumph of drones over manned platforms. Today, drones have turned into a potent tool of warfare and are also an integral part of the kill-chain of modern militaries around the globe. However, limitations cannot be ignored. In practice, drones work less as independent war-winning weapons but are enablers and force-multipliers. In the age of viral narratives and simplified conclusions, misperceptions regarding military technologies are bound to persist. No single military system determines the outcome of war, and no single innovation renders all others irrelevant. Military power is cumulative and contextual.



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