



From Ukraine to NATO Drone Edge: the Alliance's 40 billion plan that brings drones and counter-UAS to the center of future warfare

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The war in Ukraine is not just transforming the European battlefield. It is forcing NATO to review some of the assumptions on which doctrine, training, acquisitions, and military planning have been built for decades.

The availability of low-cost drones, the massive use of electronic warfare, the growing vulnerability of large platforms, the need for layered air defense, and the speed at which new technologies are introduced on the front are changing the relationship between cost, effectiveness, and survival of weapon systems.

One of the most important points concerns a belief that has long accompanied Western operations: **the possibility of rapidly gaining air superiority.**

In Ukraine, this assumption has not proven true. Neither Russia nor Ukraine has managed to achieve stable dominance of airspace, while surface-to-air systems, electronic warfare, drones, and distributed sensors have made it extremely risky to operate near the front line.

For NATO, this is a fundamental lesson.

Air superiority can no longer be taken for granted

For decades, Western Armed Forces have operated in scenarios in which the air component generally had overwhelming technological and operational superiority.

Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans consolidated a model in which combat aircraft, ISR, and precision strike could operate with a level of freedom hardly replicable against an adversary equipped with a modern air defense network.

Ukraine has shown a completely different scenario.

A network composed of long, medium, and short-range systems, radar, passive sensors, and electronic warfare can deny or limit the use of aviation even without completely controlling the sky.

According to various military analysts cited by Reuters, some NATO exercises still start from the assumption of available air superiority. This is precisely one of the aspects that the Ukrainian experience is most calling into question.

The drone costing a few thousand euros against the platform worth millions

The second major lesson concerns cost-effectiveness.

A tank, an armored vehicle, a radar, or an artillery position can be identified and targeted by drones whose cost represents a minimal fraction of the target's value.

This does not mean that tanks, artillery, or traditional aircraft have become useless.

However, it does mean that **they must operate differently.**

Camouflage, dispersal, mobility, electronic protection, and the ability to rapidly neutralize enemy drones have become fundamental requirements.

NATO itself now openly recognizes this transformation. In July 2026, Secretary General Mark Rutte stated that drones have profoundly changed the character of modern warfare and have become a decisive factor on the battlefield.

The Alliance has therefore launched **NATO Drone Edge**, providing for investments exceeding **40 billion dollars over the next five years** in counter-UAS capabilities and the goal of quintupling by 2027 the number of drone operators trained in Allied Armed Forces.

Electronic warfare returns to center stage

Another element that emerges from Ukraine is the return of **electronic warfare as a front-line capability**.

Disrupting satellite navigation, data links, and drone control systems can have immediate effects on combat.

But the report is dynamic.

When a new jamming system is introduced, the adversary modifies frequencies, software, procedures, or link architecture.

The result is a cycle of innovation that can last weeks or even days.

It is exactly the opposite of traditional Western procurement programs, where from requirement definition to service entry many years can pass.

The problem of acquisition timelines

The war in Ukraine has highlighted one of the main limitations of Western systems: **slowness in acquisition and capability updates**.

A technologically advanced system can become operationally obsolete if it requires years to be modified while the enemy updates drones, software, or electronic warfare systems in a few months.

The Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, Admiral **Pierre Vandier**, emphasized precisely this point in his dealings with Ukrainian forces: what matters is not only technological sophistication, but the speed at which a solution can be integrated, tested, and brought to the battlefield.

NATO and Ukraine today work together through the **Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre - JATEC**, established in Poland precisely to transform the operational lessons of the conflict into doctrine, training, and new capabilities.

Large platforms do not disappear, but must change

The Ukrainian lesson is not that large platforms are destined to disappear.

Tanks, fighter jets, heavy artillery, ships, and missile systems will continue to be essential.

The problem is that they can no longer be considered isolated systems.

A tank must be integrated into a network of sensors, electronic warfare, anti-drone defense, and reconnaissance.

An artillery system must be able to fire and relocate quickly.

A command post must be able to operate in a distributed manner.

An airfield must be protected by a multilevel system capable of simultaneously addressing missiles, drones, and low-altitude threats.

It is the transition from a force centered on individual platforms to a force built around **distributed networks of sensors, effectors, and command and control systems**.

Air defense: one of the most important lessons

Probably no sector has acquired greater importance than **air and anti-missile defense**.

Ukraine has shown that defense cannot be based solely on the most sophisticated systems.

Using a multi-million euro interceptor missile against a much cheaper drone creates a sustainability problem.

The solution therefore involves a layered structure:

- long-range systems against ballistic and aerodynamic threats of high priority;
- medium-range systems;
- short and very short-range defense;
- cannons;

- electronic warfare;
- counter-drone systems;
- cost-effective interceptors produced in large quantities.

The problem is not just to be able to neutralize the threat, but to do so using **the economically and operationally most appropriate effector**.

SAMP/T NG: the weight of the Franco-Italian alternative grows

It is precisely in this scenario that **SAMP/T NG** acquires particular importance, the evolution of the Franco-Italian system developed through **EUROSAM**, a consortium involving MBDA and Thales.

The system integrates the new generation of interceptors of the **ASTER** family, including the ASTER B1 NT, and is designed to face increasingly complex aerodynamic and ballistic threats.

According to MBDA, the first SAMP/T NG systems intended for French and Italian forces are expected in 2026 for the operational evaluation phase.

The program is also evolving towards a **multilayer** configuration, with the integration of additional effectors and greater capability to select the missile most suited to the threat.

For Europe, the meaning is also industrial.

The war has shown how dependence on a limited number of suppliers can become problematic when the demand for interceptors grows rapidly.

SAMP/T NG therefore represents not only a military capability, but also one of the main tools through which France and Italy seek to maintain an **autonomous European capability in the field of air and anti-missile defense**.

Patriot and SAMP/T are not simply competitors

The comparison with the **U.S. Patriot** is inevitable, but it is reductive to interpret it exclusively as commercial competition.

The European problem is mainly quantitative.

More batteries, more radars and above all more interceptors are needed.

The Ukrainian experience shows that in a high-intensity conflict, stocks can be consumed much faster than industry can replenish them.

Having both Patriot and SAMP/T capabilities simultaneously also means diversifying industrial supply chains and increasing the overall number of systems available within NATO.

The most important lesson: adapt more rapidly

Arguably the most significant feature of the war in Ukraine is the speed of innovation.

A drone that is effective today may not be effective six months from now.

An electronic warfare system can force the adversary to change frequencies.

New software can modify the operation of a weapon without physically changing the platform.

Military superiority therefore does not depend solely on the technology available at the start of a conflict.

It increasingly depends on the ability to **adapt during the conflict**.

And this is precisely the transformation that NATO is trying to accelerate: faster procurement, industrial production on a larger scale, greater integration between industry and the Armed Forces, and the ability to bring new technologies to the field in much shorter timeframes.

Ukraine is demonstrating that the future of combat will not necessarily be dominated by the most expensive platform, but by the force capable of combining **mass, technology, resilience, integration, and speed of adaptation**.

For NATO, this is probably the most important lesson of the entire conflict.

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