The Robot War: How Drones Are Rewriting the Rules of Global Conflict

Published on 09/04/2026

From the Ukrainian trenches to the Red Sea, the face of war has changed forever. Captain Max Masley recounts the reality of a conflict where **artificial intelligence and drone swarms have rendered traditional tactics obsolete.**

In a recent interview for *Defense One*, **Captain Max Masley, of the 96th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Ukrainian Air Force**, offered a raw and technologically advanced perspective on what he calls a "robotic arms race." Ukraine, having become an open-air laboratory for the war of the future, is facing a threat that no longer concerns only regional borders but the entire security of the West.

Drones vs. Drones: The End of Large Formations

According to Masley, **the modern battlefield has become a "kill zone" dominated by robots.** The large battalion maneuvers typical of World War II or classic NATO doctrine are now extremely vulnerable: **today it is discouraged, if not prohibited, to group more than two**

or three people in the same spot. Reconnaissance drones can spot targets tens of kilometers away, leading to the destruction of vehicles or troops in just a few minutes.

The Era of AI and "Agentic" Drones

The near future will no longer see pilots manually guiding every single drone, but machines capable of operating autonomously to complete a mission.

- **Decision-making autonomy:** There is a shift from drones executing human orders to AI-based systems capable of devising their own strategies to achieve a set objective.
- **Big Data on the field:** Ukraine is already using AI-powered systems to analyze years of combat data. This also allows soldiers newly arrived at the front to instantly understand the statistics and specific threats of a given operational area.

https://youtu.be/6rGFC7VzCX8?si=Ct9p46tudbTrpBr_

Low-Cost Solutions for High-Tech Threats

A central point of the analysis concerns economic efficiency. While many Western nations use extremely expensive interceptors, **Ukraine has learned to shoot down Shahed drones (costing about $30-40,000) with systems that cost a fraction of that amount,** maintaining a very high success rate. **The key to Ukrainian success lies in decentralized and flexible production,** with hundreds of companies competing to provide the best drones directly to the brigades.

A Lesson for NATO and the USA

Masley emphasizes that the Ukrainian experience is vital for Western forces. During recent NATO exercises, **Ukrainian participation highlighted critical gaps in the conventional tactics of allied countries.** The Captain's advice for protecting critical infrastructure and human lives is almost brutal in its simplicity: **"Dig and use concrete"**. In a world where anyone can assemble a drone in a garage, **no airbase or logistics center is safe anymore without distributed air defense and massive physical protections.**

A Single Global Front

The interview closes with a geopolitical warning: the war in Ukraine and the tensions in the Red Sea are two sides of the same coin. **Russia and Iran are actively collaborating, exchanging intelligence data and tactics. It is the same war scenario: FPV drones and long-range systems are being perfected in Ukraine to then be exported and used in other operational theaters, creating an unprecedented global threat.**