Ukraine VS Russia: the battle in the skies intensifies

Published on 26/08/2026

For years, the war in Ukraine's skies remained almost locked in a particular equilibrium: Russia failed to achieve air superiority, while Kyiv, while keeping its own defenses operational, did not have a fighter component capable of openly challenging Moscow's.

In summer 2026, this equilibrium is changing.

On one hand, Russia has moved its fighters and fighter-bombers increasingly closer to the center of operations, leveraging **Su-34, Su-35, glide bombs and stand-off missiles**, up to the growing use of the cutting-edge **Su-57**. On the other hand, Ukraine now has a Western component built around the **F-16**, supported by Mirage 2000-5s, and is accumulating operational experience in their use.

We are not yet facing a classic battle for air supremacy on the model of the great conflicts of the past. But the distance between the two air forces is narrowing and a new phase of the war is opening in Ukrainian skies.

Russia: Su-34, Su-35 and now also Su-57

The Su-57 is the most modern Russian fighter currently in service, designed as a multirole fifth-generation platform with reduced radar observability characteristics.

Its presence in the conflict, however, **is not an absolute novelty**.

Already in January 2023, British intelligence believed that Moscow was using the Su-57 against Ukraine at least since June 2022, primarily staying within Russian airspace and launching long-range missiles.

The Royal United Services Institute had also subsequently emphasized how the aircraft had had an extremely limited role up to that point, both because of the reduced number of available examples and because of the political and military risk represented by the possible loss of one of the most prestigious fighters in the Russian arsenal.

The novelty of the operation on Odessa would therefore be mainly **the greater operational visibility of the Su-57 and the simultaneous use of multiple aircraft in an attack mission**, rather than the absolute debut of the aircraft in the war.

And it is a detail that could indicate how the increase in the available fleet is allowing Russia to use a system that in previous years it had substantially preserved.

The Su-34 remains Russia's hammer

What impacts daily on the front are not so much the few Su-57s, but especially the **Su-34 Fullback**.

The fighter-bomber represents today one of the main tools of Russian tactical aviation.

And it is precisely around the Su-34 that Moscow built one of the most important tactical evolutions of the entire conflict: the transformation of old bombs from the FAB family into glide weapons.

Through guidance kits and aerodynamic surfaces, ordnance originally conceived as free-fall bombs can be dropped from tens of kilometers away from the target.

The result is simple but extremely effective: the fighter can remain far from Ukrainian anti-aircraft batteries while delivering hundreds of kilograms of ordnance on target.

RUSI highlighted how precisely the large-scale production of these kits allowed Russian aviation to dramatically increase its weight on the battlefield.

The difference compared to FPV drones is substantial.

A small drone can strike with extreme precision a vehicle, a position or a single group of men. A bomb of **250, 500 or 1,500 kilograms** can instead demolish a fortification, a building or an entire defensive position.

According to a RUSI analysis, practically any artillery position located in the immediate rear of the front can become vulnerable to this type of weapon.

Moscow changed the way it fights

The change is even more interesting when compared to what happened in February-March 2022.

At the start of the invasion, Russia had on paper an enormous numerical superiority in aviation.

Yet it failed to gain control of the skies.

The network of Ukrainian air defense systems survived the initial attacks and continued to represent a threat such as to force Russian fighters to operate with great caution.

According to the analysis published in July 2026 by RUSI, precisely Russian inability to complete an effective **Suppression and Destruction of Enemy Air Defences – SEAD/DEAD** campaign prevented most of the Russian tactical component from significantly influencing ground operations during the first phase of the war.

Moscow therefore progressively adapted its operational model.

Instead of trying to cross the Ukrainian air defense network, it began looking for systems to **strike while remaining outside its range**.

Glide bombs probably represent the most obvious example of this transformation.

Kyiv's limit remains air defense

In parallel, the situation of Ukrainian air defense has become more difficult.

Much of the stockpiles of Soviet systems available at the start of the war has been progressively consumed and Ukraine today depends mainly on Western systems such as **NASAMS, IRIS-T, SAMP/T and Patriot**.

The problem is not just possessing the launchers.

What is needed above all are the missiles.

According to RUSI, in 2026 the availability of interceptors became the main limitation of Ukrainian air defense coverage, particularly regarding Patriot PAC-2 and PAC-3 systems.

The issue became even more evident in recent weeks.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly denounced the shortage of Patriot missiles, while France and other allies are trying to accelerate new supplies of anti-aircraft systems and ammunition.

And it is precisely this scarcity that creates an operational problem.

A Patriot could theoretically be brought close to the front line to attempt to hit Su-34s before the launch of glide bombs.

But it would be a risky choice.

Patriot batteries are few, precious, and also necessary to protect cities, infrastructure, and bases from missile attacks.

Bringing them closer to the front line also exposes them more to Russian drone reconnaissance and subsequent attacks.

The result is a sort of **zone of relative safety from which Russian aircraft can launch their own stand-off weapons**.

Ukraine: F-16 and Mirage change the scenario

This does not mean that Ukraine has abandoned the air battle.

On the contrary.

The Western component of Ukrainian aviation has now become central and represents the main novelty in the confrontation between the two air forces.

According to RUSI, in the summer of 2026, the **F-16 constitutes the main core of Ukrainian combat power**, supported by a more limited number of Mirage 2000-5 and the last available MiG-29 and Su-27 aircraft.

F-16s are used mainly for air defense against drones and cruise missiles, but are progressively taking on other tasks as well.

In July 2026, moreover, a particularly significant episode occurred: according to RUSI, a **Ukrainian F-16 shot down a Russian Su-35**, a sign of the growing experience acquired by Kyiv's crews and the possibility, at least under certain conditions, of directly challenging the Russian fighter component.

This is probably the most interesting element of this new phase. Ukraine continues to have fewer aircraft and depends on Western supplies, but no longer fights only with aging Soviet fighters. It now has modern Western platforms, weapons compatible with NATO standards, and pilots who are rapidly accumulating experience.

Russia ahead, but the sky remains contested

This is probably the most important point.

Speaking of **Russian dominance of Ukrainian skies** risks therefore providing an overly simplified picture.

Russia maintains a significant quantitative advantage and has aircraft, long-range missiles, and an extremely powerful air defense network. But it does not yet have the freedom to operate undisturbed over Ukraine as a force that has truly achieved air superiority would.

Russian fighters generally continue to avoid penetrating deep into the space protected by Ukrainian defenses.

Moscow, however, found an alternative solution: strike from a distance.

And it is an increasingly effective solution.

The combination of Su-34, glide bombs, long-range missiles, drones, and increasing pressure on Western interceptor stocks is progressively increasing the operational space available to Russian aviation.

At the same time, Russia too must face a similar problem.

Ukrainian long-range drone attacks have forced Moscow to disperse some of its air defense systems to protect airfields, infrastructure, and military installations in the interior of the country.

RUSI observes that this dispersal is in turn creating new vulnerabilities and greater opportunities for Ukrainian attacks.

The new challenge in the skies

Four and a half years after the start of the invasion, the war in Ukraine's skies has entered a new phase.

In 2022 Russia failed to achieve the objective of rapidly eliminating enemy aviation and air defense.

In 2026 Moscow has not yet achieved complete air superiority, but has gradually learned to **fight around Ukrainian defenses rather than necessarily penetrate through them**.

At the same time, Kyiv has moved from Soviet-origin MiG-29 and Su-27 aircraft to a force in which F-16 and Mirage have assumed an increasingly important role in the defense of the country and, occasionally, also in offensive missions and in countering the Russian air component.

On one side therefore **Su-34, Su-35, and Su-57**, supported by Russian industrial production that continues to fuel the conflict. On the other **F-16 and Mirage 2000**, which allow Ukraine to gradually raise the level of its response.

And so the decisive battle also becomes an industrial one.

Moscow must continue to produce fighters, glide bombs, missiles, and drones.

Kyiv must receive enough F-16s, air-to-air missiles, and especially interceptors for Patriot, SAMP/T, IRIS-T, and NASAMS.

The confrontation remains unbalanced in favor of Moscow, but it is far from closed. And precisely for this reason, the challenge in the skies could become one of the most interesting fronts in the next phase of the war.

Whoever can sustain this competition longer, keeping aircraft, pilots, air-to-air missiles, and anti-aircraft interceptors available, could determine not only the future of war in the skies, but also that of ground operations.