

Ukraine aces drone game, but may lose ballistic match

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By [Shashank Ranjan](#)

The combined military casualties in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war have exceeded 1.8 million, as per reports. Given its capacity, Russia has generally prevailed. However, recently, Ukraine has claimed that it has managed to turn the tide. Since November 2025, Kyiv has liberated large chunks of territory, with Moscow suffering a net loss for the first time since the invasion began.



Ukraine's long-range drones have struck targets as deep as 2,500 km inside Russia, reaching locations like Moscow and St Petersburg, among others. (Reuters)

Russian casualties have mounted, and so has strain on Moscow with reports of an acute manpower shortage. The single most important factor behind Ukraine's success is its ingenious deployment of drone warfare, targeting Russian logistics, supply lines, and command centres.

Ukraine's long-range drones have struck targets as deep as 2,500 km inside Russia, reaching locations like [Moscow](#), St Petersburg and the Urals, among others. Ukrainian drone expertise has become so advanced that its specialists are now advising [Saudi Arabia](#) and other Gulf nations on countering Iranian drones. The evolution of Ukrainian military into a formidable force is now widely acknowledged. As per Michael Weiss in the Financial Times, "the country Trump once disdained as a burden has become a military powerhouse."

Despite Ukraine's growing military capabilities, especially in drone technology, Russia has consistently developed countermeasures to maintain its strategic upper hand. Ukraine's drone successes have not shielded it from Russia's massive missile campaigns. Inability to intercept the Russian ballistic missiles has left Ukraine quite vulnerable. In July 2026 alone, Russia launched 139 ballistic missiles — the highest monthly total this year, according to the Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). Casualties in Ukraine are mounting. The UN has verified at least 1,396 civilian deaths and 7,978 injured in Ukraine during the first six months of 2026 — a 37% increase over the same period in 2025. This toll is largely driven by long-range missile attacks, with June 2026 being the deadliest in four years (at least 293 killed).

Ukraine's air defence faces a deepening crisis. Its shield has primarily depended on Patriot interceptors supplied by the US. The supply over the last few months has dried up due to US commitments in West Asia. In fact, experts attribute President Trump's repeated ceasefire offers in the war on Iran to the US's shrinking munition buffer stock. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently stated on social media that Ukraine has received only one-third of the air defence missiles that it received in 2025. Russia produces over 1,000 ballistic missiles annually, while Ukraine has received only 600 Patriot interceptors over four years of war. Russian ballistic missiles such as Iskander-M and Kinzhal are best intercepted by Patriot systems, and Ukraine's stock is critically low.

In addition to diverted US supplies, several other factors have compounded the crisis. In 2025, the US unilaterally suspended key aid packages for Ukraine without coordination with allies; among other things, it is believed to be rooted in the Trump administration's strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis Russia. European efforts have also fallen short due to a profound mismatch between battlefield needs and Western industrial capacity. Europe's indigenous SAMP/T system produces only about 200 Aster-30 interceptors annually, while Russia manufactures approximately 1,440 ballistic missiles per year — far outstripping combined western production. The shortfall is reflected in the fact that the European production of the SAMP/T has not increased since the invasion began.

Technically, the Patriot remains the only system that can reliably intercept Russian ballistic missiles through "hit-to-kill" technology. The European Aster-30 blasts in the vicinity of the targeted missile and uses fragmentation warheads rather than kinetic impact, making it less foolproof against incoming ballistic missiles. While Europe has launched initiatives like the "Freya" Project to develop a lower-cost Ukrainian-designed anti-ballistic missile system, experts estimate it will take years to materialise, with a prototype not expected until mid-2027. NATO announcements in July 2026, regarding licensed Patriot production in Ukraine, will also take significant time to materialise, subject to clearance from original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). As per The Atlantic, US defence giants Lockheed and Raytheon are reluctant to license Patriot missile production to Ukrainian manufacturers, fearing that they will be able to improve the Patriot and then produce it at faster scale and for much less money.

As a way out, Ukraine has been targeting Russian missile production facilities. In June 2026 alone, Ukraine carried out a record 13 long-range strikes on Russian defence-industrial facilities, resulting in almost a 50% drop in Russia's monthly production of key missiles. Notwithstanding these strikes, as per Ukrainian intelligence reports, Russia still maintains significant production capacity and plans to produce hundreds of ballistic

missiles in 2026. This shall potentially facilitate for up to 100 strikes per month without depleting reserves.

Ukraine's air defence shall have to be supported by allies, in all possible ways. Russia's campaign against civilian infrastructure constitutes a war crime and poses an existential threat to Ukraine. Ukraine has suffered one of the severest bombardment campaigns in modern warfare. Notwithstanding the extraordinary resilience of the Ukrainian people, to expect them to continue bearing these attacks without the international community coming to their aid is simply unacceptable.

Colonel Shashank Ranjan (retired) is associate professor of practice, JSIA, OP Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal