

News / World

Explainer: Killer drones vie for supremacy over Ukraine

AP

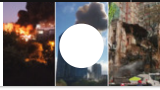
By Associated Press | 10:03am Oct 18, 2022

Fighter jet crashes into Russian apartment



They are precise, small in size, able to engage a target in relatively large numbers like a swarm of wasps and above all, they're cheap.

In [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), drones have cemented their reputation as a potent, hard-to-stop and cost-effective weapon to seek out and destroy targets while simultaneously spreading the kind of terror that can fray the resolve of soldiers and civilians alike.

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A drone flies in the sky seconds before it fired on buildings in Kyiv. (AP)

Russia's unleashing of successive waves of the "kamikaze" Iranian-made Shahed drones over Ukraine has multiple goals — taking out key targets, crushing morale, and ultimately draining the enemy's war chest and weapons as they try to defend against them.

How do wartime drones work?

The Shahed drones that Russia has rebranded as Geran-2 are packed with explosives and are pre-programmed to loiter overhead until they nosedive into a target.

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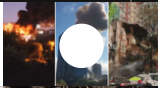
That's reminiscent of Japan's World War II-era kamikaze pilots who would fly their explosive-laden aircraft into US and other allied warships and aircraft carriers during the war in the Pacific.

According to the Ukrainian online publication *Defence Express*, which cites Iranian data, the delta-wing Shahed is 3.5m long, 2.5m wide and weighs approximately 200kg.

It's powered by a 50-horsepower engine with a top speed of 185km/h.

Behnam Ben Taleblu, senior fellow at the Washington-based think tank Foundation for Defence of Democracies, said the drone has already been deployed in Yemen and in a deadly oil tanker attack last year.

He said its range is about 1000km.

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Russia has hit Ukraine with a wave of attacks, dive-bombing the capital, Kyiv, with what appear to be Iranian-made drones. (Getty)

The new drone technology does not need trained personnel to be sacrificed nor a huge amount of money spent on building sophisticated aircraft to reach a target.

In Monday's attack on the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, the city's mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said 28 drones made up waves of successive attacks.

Fired from a truck launcher in rapid succession, the drones can fly low and slow, better able to avoid radar detection.

They can also swarm a target, overwhelming defences particularly in civilian areas.

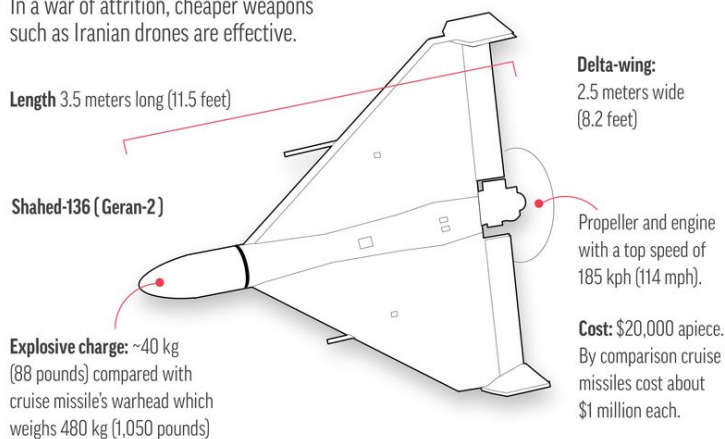
But according to Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies, the Shahed only carries a 40kg explosive charge, which pales in comparison to the explosive force that a conventional missile's 480kg warhead can deliver at a much longer range.

"It is difficult to hit serious targets with such drones," Bielieskov said.

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Russia uses Iranian drones against Ukrainian civilians

In a war of attrition, cheaper weapons such as Iranian drones are effective.



Source: Defense Express (Ukrainian online publication); National Institute for Strategic Studies

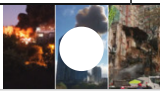
AP

Russia has deployed Iranian drones against Ukrainian cities. (AP)

Small punch but low cost

At a mere \$US20,000 (\$30,000) apiece, the Shahed is only a tiny fraction of the cost of a more conventional, full-size missile.

For example, Russia's Kalibr cruise missiles, which have seen widespread use in eight months of war, cost the Russian military about \$US1 million (\$1.6 million) each.



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In Monday's attacks, one drone struck an operations centre while another slammed into a five-storey residential building, ripping a large hole in it and collapsing at least three apartments, resulting in the deaths of three people.

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Critical infrastructure was hit in the Kyiv, Dnipro and Sumy regions, with electricity cut in hundreds of towns and villages. (AP)

Bielieskov, from Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies, said the Russian military is opting to use Shaheds on civilian targets instead of the battlefield because Ukrainian forces have "learned how to fight them effectively," managing to intercept a little more than half of them.

With no immediate end in sight, the financial burden of the conflict will weigh heavier on Moscow, which isn't receiving billions in weapons transfers from Western nations like Ukraine is.

As the conflict essentially becomes one of attrition — who can withstand that human, material and financial burden the longest — finding cheaper but still potent weapons will be key.

For Moscow, the Shahed appears to be such an alternative.

"Shahed-136 is a cheap version of a cruise missile, which Russia can't produce fast," said Bielieskov.

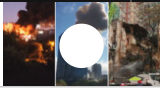


This file photo from the Iranian Army shows a military drone fired from a mobile launcher. (AP)

Taleblu said Russia will likely continue to boost its long-range strike capabilities with Iranian drones and reportedly even missiles.

"This should raise alarm bells for Europe and the world," he said.

Russian officials haven't issued any data about the number of missiles fired during the conflict, but Ukraine's defence minister recently alleged that Russia has used most of its high-precision missile arsenal — from 1844 on the eve of Russia's invasion to 609 by mid-October.



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That sound exacerbates anxiety and chips away at morale, for no one on the ground knows exactly when or where the weapon will strike.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy seized on the drones' terror element, posting on social media: "The whole night, and the whole morning, the enemy terrorises the civilian population."

"Kamikaze drones and missiles are attacking all of Ukraine," he added.



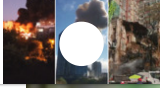
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russia had unleashed a wave of 'kamikaze' drones against civilian targets. (AP)

Bielieskov conceded that Shahed drone strikes stir up fears that Ukraine's air defences are inadequate to meet the threat.

But he said their use — even in large numbers — isn't enough to reverse Ukraine's battlefield gains.

Sky-borne terror weapons are nothing new — Nazi Germany employed them during World War II in the form of the V-1 flying bomb or "buzzbomb," the earliest type of cruise missile in the shape of a small aircraft that targeted British cities.

Eight decades later, the much smaller Shahed can be guided to its target at a much cheaper cost, potentially enabling Russian forces to launch many more drones than the 9500 "buzzbombs" that Nazi Germany unleashed on Britain.



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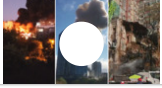
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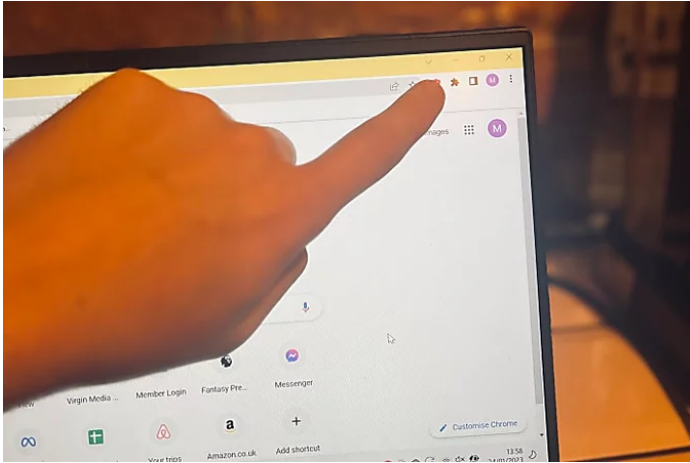
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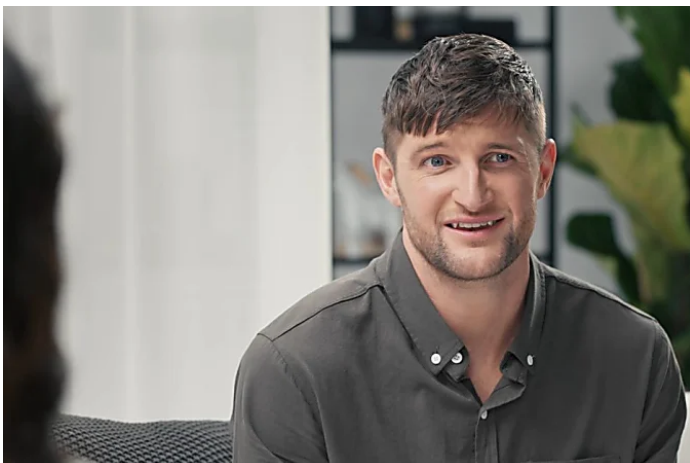
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