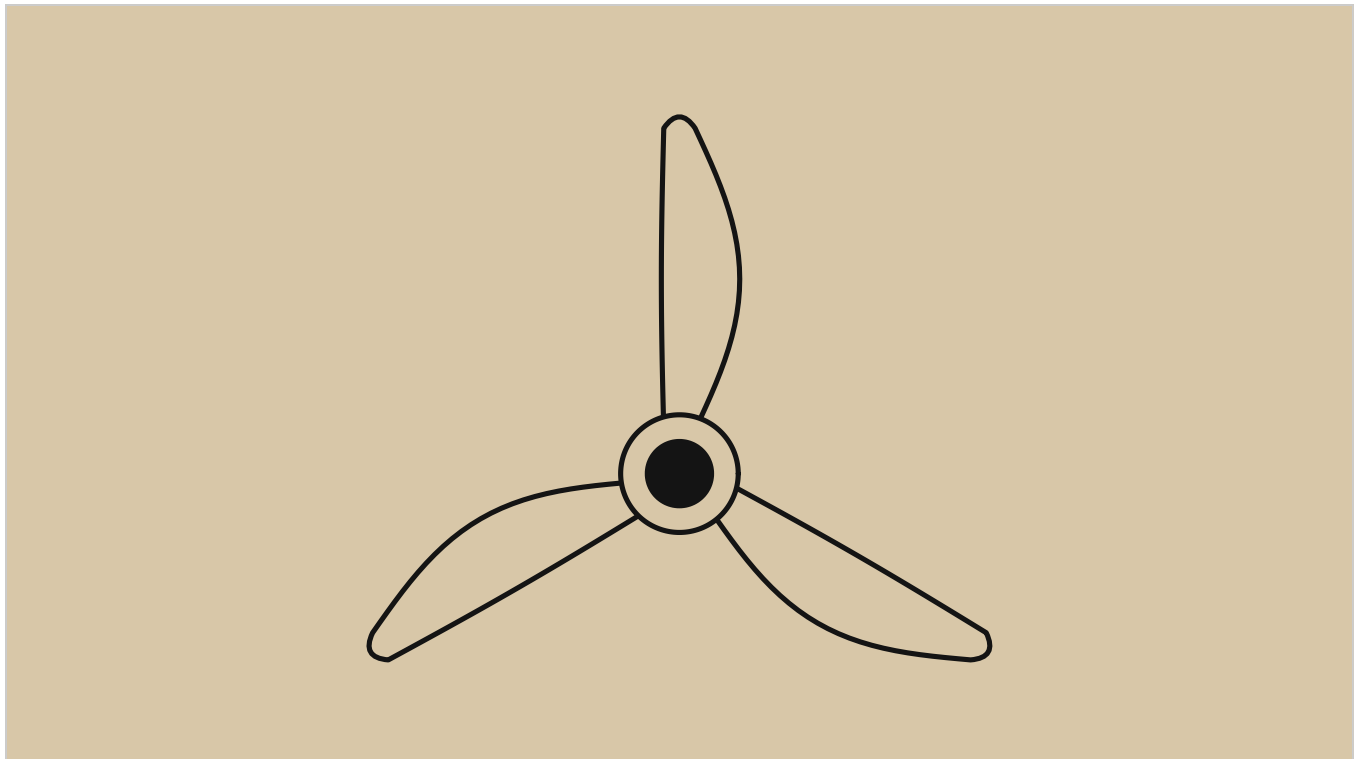


## Technology

# The Tomorrow War Is a Drone War

Cheap drones are rewriting the rules of warfare in real time. The first drone-on-drone war is not far away.



Emmanuel Awosika ■ 21 June 2026 ■ 4 min read

A weapon that once cost as much as a small aircraft can now be assembled from parts sold for a few hundred dollars.<sup>1</sup> That collapse in price is what makes the current moment in warfare different, because a cheap drone can destroy a target worth many times its value. The change is not about any single machine but about the economics that a hundred thousand of them create.<sup>2</sup>

The result is a shift in the logic of the battlefield, one that favors whoever can build the most, and that points toward a kind of fighting the world has not seen before.

## The collapse in cost

Small drones are built from parts that mass production has made cheap: motors, batteries, cameras, and radio links produced in enormous quantities for consumer electronics. A device that can carry a small explosive to a precise point now costs a tiny fraction of the guided weapons it competes with.<sup>3</sup>

That price does more than save money. It changes what a military can contemplate, because losing a drone no longer means losing something precious. When the weapon is cheap, it can be spent freely, and the calculations that once limited how force was used begin to loosen.

## The economics of the attacker

The core of the shift is a simple imbalance. When a single strike costs less than the defense it defeats, the attacker wins the exchange even when the attack fails, because the defender has spent more to stop it. A cheap drone that forces the firing of an expensive interceptor<sup>4</sup> has already done its job.

That imbalance rewards volume. The side that can build the most units gains the advantage, and both sides are pushed to produce drones by the thousand rather than the dozen. Warfare starts to resemble manufacturing, where output matters as much as ingenuity.

## War at factory scale

Once quantity decides the exchange, the fight moves partly into the factory. The relevant question becomes how many units a side can produce per month and how quickly it can adapt the design as the enemy responds. Supply chains and production lines become as important as tactics.

This favors economies that can turn out electronics at scale and iterate fast. A drone that works today can be countered within weeks<sup>5</sup>, so the advantage goes to whoever can redesign and re-ship faster, not just whoever built the best machine first.

## Drones that hunt drones

As airspace fills with small machines, the most valuable weapon becomes the one that can find and destroy them. Shooting down a cheap drone with an expensive missile loses the economic exchange, so the natural answer is a cheap drone built to hunt other drones.

That is the coming step, and the first sustained drone-on-drone fighting is no longer far off. It points to a battlefield where machines contest the air with each other before either side reaches a human target.

## The defense problem

Defending against swarms of cheap drones is genuinely hard, because the attacker only has to get a few through while the defender has to stop nearly all of them, and has to do it cheaply enough to keep the exchange in its favor. Expensive defenses lose that math even when they work.

The most promising answers are ones that lower the cost of each interception, from electronic jamming to directed energy<sup>6</sup>, but none is yet a complete solution. For now the advantage sits with the side that can build cheaply and in bulk. ■

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## ■ Footnotes

1. The cheapest attack drones are built from [first person view](#) racing quadcopters, flown by a pilot wearing video goggles, with a small explosive charge strapped on. The parts for one can run to only a few hundred dollars. ↩
2. Ukraine and Russia have each moved to make drones in the millions per year, turning what were once niche machines into standard, expendable battlefield equipment. ↩
3. Purpose built [loitering munitions](#), sometimes called kamikaze drones, sit in the middle of the range, far dearer than a hobby quadcopter but still a small fraction of the price of a cruise missile. ↩
4. A guided air defence missile can cost hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars. Spending one to down a drone worth a few hundred wins the engagement but loses the exchange, which is the pressure now driving cheaper defences. ↩
5. Both sides change radio frequencies, software, and tactics constantly, so a design that works one month can be neutralised the next. The edge goes to whoever can redesign and re-ship fastest. ↩
6. Jamming breaks the radio link between a drone and its operator, but fibre optic drones that trail a thin cable are immune to it, and directed energy weapons that burn drones out of the sky are still mostly experimental. ↩