

is also the matter of anxiety. What do those

pologist Stella Nyanzi, blogger and activist

When war becomes a math problem

I used to think that war was just about fighting, and whoever was physically stronger or had a bigger army would overpower the other side. Blame it on all those movies where everything comes down to a dramatic battle and the toughest side wins.

But the reality turns out to be a lot more than that. Wars are also fought in spreadsheets, where the numbers behind the war matter just as much as the strength of the army.

A good example of this can be seen in discussions about the war involving Iran, the United States, and Israel.

After the US and Israel strikes on Iran, Iran responded by launching Iranian-designed one-way shahed drones that are built to fly towards a target and explode on impact and ballistic missiles towards the US bases in the Gulf and Israeli military bases and cities. According to various reports, these drones can cost roughly \$20,000 (Shs74.9m) to \$50,000 (Shs187.4m) each. Given how expensive military weapons can be, \$20,000 to \$50,000 per drone can be argued to be very cheap. This means they can be built and launched in large numbers.

But intercepting a drone before it explodes is where the math starts to matter.

Given the current technology, a single interceptor can cost around \$4m (Shs15b). These are incredibly expensive. If Iran launches a drone costing about \$35,000 (Shs131.1m) and the United States responds

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War

with a \$4m interceptor missile, that creates a huge financial imbalance. In simple terms, for every \$1 (Shs3,800) spent on drones, the defending side may spend about \$114 (Shs428,000) to intercept them.

Analysts often argue that this imbalance may reflect a broader strategy. Over time, the goal can be to drain the opponent's resources, forcing them to spend far more money than the other side spends.

Speaking of resources, let me further put this into perspective. The US defence budget for fiscal year 2025 was roughly \$900b, the largest military budget in the world by a wide margin. At first glance, that number feels almost limitless until you run the numbers. A major international news outlet reports that by the sixth day of the war, Iran had launched more than 2,000 low-cost drones. Assuming each drone costs roughly \$35,000, Iran would have spent about \$70m (Shs262.3b). If the US intercepted each drone using missiles costing around \$4m,

the defensive response could reach \$8b (Shs30 trillion). If an attack of that size happened once per week, the defending side could spend about \$8b every week intercepting drones. Over a year, that would add up to roughly \$416b. That is about 46 per cent of the United States' roughly \$900b annual defence budget. In other words, nearly half of the entire US military budget could theoretically be consumed just shooting down drones, even before paying soldiers' salaries, ships and aircraft, fuel and logistics, intelligence operations, bases around the world, and so much more. At that scale, the battlefield starts to look more like an equation than physical strength.

With that, it turns out that war isn't always about who has the physically strongest army. Sometimes it is about who can make the numbers work in their favour. This is one reason alliances have become such a central feature of war strategy. When countries build alliances, they are not only sharing military strength but also defence budgets.

Not exactly the kind of battle you see in the movies, but in the real world, it's also a math problem. And that's not all that happens behind the scenes. Wait until you hear about AI's involvement. Fortunately, my brothers are all IT gurus, so I'll ask them to tell you more about it next time.

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