
Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Implications for India

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Abstract

Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in September-November 2020, was followed keenly by military strategists across the world. It was the first time a nation had been comprehensively defeated by the use of drone warfare. The changing nature of warfare and use of disruptive emerging technologies to change the tide of battle was an issue of interest across the world. Employment of drones on the battlefield of Nagorno-Karabakh had been a game changer for Azerbaijani forces which destroyed the Armenian air defence (AD) resources, mech columns and arty guns. The low-cost option of employment of drones by Azerbaijan in a non-contact yet highly kinetic warfare resulted in minimizing of their own casualties and ensuring a crushing defeat for Armenia. As India embarks on the modernisation of its Armed Forces in line with its growing stature on the world stage, there has to be a balance struck between the acquisition of conventional weapon platforms and the embracement of new emerging technologies in India's strategic security calculus. There is a need for building of anti-access bubbles as deterrence which are difficult to penetrate and use of technologies which provide leverage in this competitive space.

Introduction

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict will go down in the annals of history as the first conflict in which drones deployed by one side turned the tide in the

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44 days war. Military strategists around the world closely watched this conflict to study its ramifications on the future of battlespace. It ended in a humiliating defeat for Armenia and has important lessons for the military planners. The changing character of warfare and use of disruptive technologies to change the course of battle has been an issue of interest across the world. Employment of drones by Azerbaijan on the battlefield of Nagorno-Karabakh has been a game-changer and brought a shift in the dynamics of warfare.¹

Emerging technologies have always brought changes to the character of warfare. For instance, when Babar used gunpowder it made the use of elephants lose their significance. Each War gets characterised by some innovation whether in tactics or by use of some disruptive technology. World War I witnessed the emergence of trench warfare and World War II saw the use of Mech forces in the blitzkrieg operations. In the last two year plus there have been many incidents of use of drones in warfare such as the attack on the Aramco oilfields by Houthi rebels, assassination of Soleimani, Operation Spring Shield launched by Turkey in Syria and the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In this perspective, the article seeks to assess the use of drones in changing the character of warfare in 21st century. In doing so, the study will examine the case of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict based on lessons drawn and assess the factors that shaped the fate of the conflict. It will also assess implications for India and draw suitable recommendations.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Historical Underpinning

The Caucasus mountains are the continental divide between Asia and Europe. They stretch between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. This region is very rich in oil and minerals. The Caspian Sea has huge reserves of oil and the Baku-Tiblis-Ceyan (BTC) pipeline is vital for crude oil supply to Central Europe and a major source of revenue for Azerbaijan,

Georgia and Turkey. Armenia, Azerbaijan along with Georgia are part of the Caucasian countries. Because of the strategic and geographical significance of the Caucasian region the major stakeholders Iran, Russia and Turkey try to dominate the geopolitics of this region and hence the powerplay.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the erstwhile Soviet Union when it was formed in the 1920s. Armenia is a landlocked country with Georgia to its North, Turkey to its West, Azerbaijan to its East and Iran to its South. Eighty-five per cent of the terrain is mountainous with fast-flowing rivers. The economy is primarily dependent on industrial output and minerals. It is a landlocked country with an average elevation which is the tenth highest in the world. Its capital is Yerevan and Prime Minister is Nicole Pashinyan who came to power in 2018, in what he describes as his Velvet Revolution. This was different from the other coloured revolutions as there was no foreign interference and it was a movement fuelled by domestic issues. The majority of the Armenian population is of ethnic origin (98 per cent) who follow Christianity. It is an ancient country and one of the oldest cradles of civilisation.

Azerbaijan on the other hand has a majority of Muslim Shia population with 97 per cent of them being of Turkish origin. Azerbaijan has an area of 87,000 sq km and its capital is Baku. The terrain has Caucasus mountains to its North-East, flatlands in the centre and Caspian Sea on its Eastern coast. It has high economic development, a fall out of the new found petro-dollars coupled with a high literacy rate. Its head of state is President Ilham Aliyev, who has been in power since 2003 and is a strong authoritarian leader. Azerbaijan, when it gained independence was split into two parts.-The part separated from the mainland is called the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, a case similar to that of erstwhile East and West Pakistan, in the Indian sub-continent.

Geographical Underpinning

Nagorno-Karabakh is an autonomous region, having a majority of ethnic Armenian population of Christian faith and therefore is backed by Armenia who regards it as an integral part of their country. It has important towns of Stepanakert which is its capital and another town of Shusha which has Azeri population. There is a Lachin corridor which has strategic importance as this corridor connects it with Armenia. The name Nagorno-Karabakh itself implies Black Mountains but the Armenians prefer to call it as Artsakh. It has a population of 1.5 lakh and an area of 44,000 sq km. This region has internationally been recognised as part of Azerbaijan, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This area has been the bone of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a cause of many conflicts. Nagorno-Karabakh parliament had voted for unification with Armenia in 1988. This was unpalatable to Azerbaijan which always considered this region as an integral part of their territory. It led to guerrilla warfare; and unrest in the region. A referendum was conducted in 1991 at Nagorno-Karabakh, which was boycotted by the Azeri Muslims living in the region. It declared itself as an independent republic although this wasn't recognized by any of the UN-led nations. In the early 1990s, a war erupted between the two nations which resulted in an Armenian victory backed by Russian military. Armenia gained control of around 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territories (7 districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh region). It became an emotive issue between both the countries and led to an escalation in arms race along with a low intensity conflict. There was a four-day war in the year 2016 and the skirmishes have left 30,000 persons dead with more than 100 million people displaced on both sides of the border.²

Figure 1: Map depicting Area of control after the conflict of 1990s

Source: Adapted from *TRT World*.³

Geo-politics and Important Stakeholders to the Conflict

Different nations have sided with the two sides based on their own national strategic interests. The geostrategic importance of this region, rich in oil and minerals has resulted in a power play by various stakeholders trying to increase their spheres of influence and a power struggle to control it. Armenia gained the support of Russia as well as Iran, which itself is a Shia Muslim country and backed a Christian majority state. There are many reasons attributed to good relations between Armenia and Iran, such as: historical ties having been part of the earlier Mesopotamian Empire, and also as major trade partners. Russia too has been a cementing factor building relations between Armenia and Iran. Iran also has a population of around 20 million Azeri Turks who have been influenced by the rising Turkish nationalism and raised demands of Greater Azerbaijan including territories of Northern Iran. Therefore, Iran readily supports Armenia as a counterweight against Azerbaijan. The close ties of Azerbaijan with Israel, a sworn enemy of Iran, also makes it side with Armenia as a natural partner. Iran through its partnership with Armenia, also wants to balance out the growing nexus between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Russia, on the other hand, has a strategic alliance of CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) with Armenia and has its 102 Russian Military Base stationed at Gyumri, in Armenia.⁴

Azerbaijan enjoys the support of all Muslim nations, especially Turkey as its staunch ally. Turkey and Azerbaijan share deep-rooted historic, cultural and ethnic ties. It has been described as one nation and two states by the erstwhile President and father of the incumbent President Ilham Aliyev. The international organisations striving to bring a resolution between the two warring nations are the UN and the OSCE (Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe) also called the Minsk Group. All other global powers have been giving a clarion call for a ceasefire and an amicable resolution.⁵

Course of the Conflict

With the newfound petro-dollars economy, Azerbaijan went in for a systematic modernisation of its armed forces. Armenia, on the other hand, has been dependent on vintage Russian defence equipment, while Azerbaijan has been on a buying spree of latest arms and equipment. Azerbaijan has a defence budget which is as high as 5.4 per cent of its GDP while Armenia has a modest outlay of 1.5 per cent of GDP.⁶ This has resulted in conventional and numerical superiority for Azerbaijan in the number of tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, Arty guns and the number of fighter jets.

There were many factors which led to the escalation of hostilities between the two countries and the war which ensued. The recent conflict had many triggers such as, when Prime Minister Pashinyan took over, he rejected the basic principles of the Minsk group. Armenia adopted a new military doctrine and a movement supporting Artsakh becoming a part of Armenia took place in August 2019. This was followed by rejection of peace talks in March 2020 by Armenia. A military exercise was conducted with Russia by Armenia in July and early September 2020.⁷ Azerbaijan conducted a military exercise with Turkey in July-August 2020 and pro-war demonstrations erupted with Turkish support. Clashes erupted between both the countries on 27 September 2020 where even the civilian

areas were targeted. A two-prong offensive was launched by Azerbaijan, in which the Northern offensive was stalled but the Southern offensive made progress.⁸ The war ended up with Azerbaijan reclaiming the areas it had lost earlier securing its borders with Iran. It captured the important town of Susha while threatening Stepenkart and the strategic Lachin corridor. This was unacceptable to Armenia and at the behest of Russia it agreed to come on to the negotiating table for a ceasefire.

Fallout of the Conflict

A ceasefire was signed between both the countries with Russia playing a major role in cessation of hostilities. The 2020 conflict helped Russia consolidate its own position in the geopolitics of the region by playing the role of peace broker and stationing more of Russian troops in the disputed region.⁹ Turkey backed Azerbaijan to the hilt in this conflict, which was in line with its own ambitions of playing a bigger role on the world stage and staking a claim for the leadership of the Muslim world.

In the recent conflict, Azerbaijan not only reclaimed their lost territories but also decimated Armenian forces in a crushing defeat. Armenia agreed to return back all territories of Azerbaijan which it had captured earlier and provide a safe corridor (Meghri Corridor) along the border of Iran for connecting the Nakhchivan Autonomous Enclave with the mainland of Azerbaijan.¹⁰

The number of casualties suffered by Azerbaijan in terms of equipment were 1/7 of those suffered by Armenia. Heavy casualties were suffered by Armenian AD resources, mech columns and Arty guns due to drone attacks and targeting by long vectors.¹¹ There was a public outcry in Armenia seeking the stepping down of Prime Minister Pashinyan. Even the speaker of the house was assaulted in Parliament. On the other hand, in Azerbaijan there was a victory parade taken out with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as its chief guest for the unstinted support in the conflict.¹²

Lessons to be Learnt from the Armenian Defeat

Important lessons which can be drawn, are as follows:

- The balance of power in the conflict shifted in favour of Azerbaijan because of their effective use of Turkish and Israeli drones, which destroyed the Armenian AD resources, mech columns and arty guns. The low-cost option of employment of drones by Azerbaijan in a non-contact yet highly kinetic warfare resulted in the minimising of their own casualties while ensuring a crushing defeat for Armenia.¹³
- Armenians made limited use of their Air Force and it was largely an uncontested airspace.
- There was no coordinated AD battle, the radars were unable to detect the small radio cross-section of the drones.
- Poor battle craft and fieldcraft, bunching of mechanised columns in a constricted battlespace with no camouflage, concealment and an absence of organic AD cover left them vulnerable.
- Poor training and non-tactical manoeuvres led to the vulnerabilities of the land units.
- Azerbaijan borrowed their concept of operations from Turkish operations during Operation Springshield in which they went for a systematic hunt of enemy AD, arty and mech columns.¹⁴
- Azerbaijan used old AN T2 surveillance aircraft as a bait to force the Armenian AD to open up and their radar signatures were picked up by the loiter ammunition in air and neutralised.
- Azerbaijan did not respond to the missile attacks from Armenian soil as they did not want to force the hand of Russian Forces. Due to the CSTO agreement between Armenia and Russia, the latter was obliged to bail out Armenia in case of an attack.¹⁵
- Azerbaijan ruled the battle of narratives by effective use of social media. It projected the conflict as a crusade between Christianity and Islam on European soil. The Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan kept releasing video footages of the devastation that their drone attacks

were inflicting on the Armenian positions which demoralised the frontline Armenian soldiers and led to their unsystematic withdrawal.

Why Azerbaijan Won—Factors at Play

Use of Drones

Two drones were extensively used by Azerbaijani forces. The Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), Bayraktar drones is a Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) drone, flies to heights of up to 27,000 feet and has endurance of 27 hours. It carries a payload of 150 kg of precision-guided and laser smart ammunition. The second, was the Harop drones, manufactured by the Israeli Aerospace Industries. They are the Kamikaze or suicide drones which are also called loiter ammunition. They have a very small radar cross-section and are anti-radiation drones which destroy enemy radars.

Israel also supplied Azerbaijan with Skystriker and Orbiter 1K suicide drones. Armenian AD was subjected to a duck shoot scenario. Vintage equipment, incompetent handling, no anti-drone measures resulted in destruction of even the lethal S-300 system. Use of loiter ammunition keep tracking, lock-on and neutralise the targets without any other collateral damage was highly effective and also conserved precious manpower.¹⁶

Geo-Politics and Power Play

The dynamics of the relations between various countries, as well as, the ongoing global politics also impacted the fate of the conflict. They are:

- Azerbaijan maintained good relations with both Russia and Turkey. Russia was supplying arms and military equipment to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Prime Minister Pashinyan, tried to wean away from the strategic relationship Armenia enjoyed with Russia and woo the Western powers. These changes in foreign policy did not go down well with Kremlin. During this conflict, Russia did not come to the

rescue of its old ally Armenia taking the plea that it did not have any obligations under the CSTO agreement as the conflict was not on Armenian soil. In October end, when Russia did interfere, it was because it wanted to check the growing influence and dominant role being played by Turkey in the conflict, reassert and strengthen its own position in the region. It deployed its Karsukha-4 EW system to bring down the Azerbaijani drones and send a strong message. Russian deployment of 2000 peacekeeping forces has further granted them a foothold in this region.¹⁷

- The military operations began and ended during the peak of US elections and while there was domestic turmoil in France which was heading the chairmanship of OSCE. NATO was also not able to keep Turkey under check, which has been displaying very aggressive foreign policies.
- OSCE was powerless to bring about a peaceful negotiation. Peace finally was brought about as a consequence of negotiations done after the war.
- Armenian suffered a humiliating defeat and loss of territory which did not go down well with the local population.
- This conflict also highlighted the rise of authoritarian regimes in Azerbaijan and Turkey with a nationalist fervour.¹⁸
- Turkey has been following very aggressive foreign policies on the world stage in a bid to stake claim as a leader of the Ummah or the Muslim world.
- All stakeholders were finally just trying to further their own national interests and no one was really interested in finding a lasting and peaceful resolution to the issue.

Implications For India

There are numerous implications which can be drawn out from this conflict, which are as follows:

- The use of emerging, disruptive technologies can shift the balance of power in a short duration war.
- The growing nexus between Azerbaijan-Turkey-Pakistan-China,¹⁹ needs to be factored in India's security calculus and therefore, there is a need to counter this nexus. Azerbaijan and Turkey have also been voting against India in many UN resolutions especially those concerning J&K and in support of Pakistan.
- This hostile alignment of forces also threatens India's International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—an over 7200 km length corridor that provides India, trade connectivity with Central Europe over a multi-mode network of transports.
- It also has implications for our energy security and for safeguarding our strategic energy assets. ONGC Videsh has made an investment of 1 billion USD in Azeri-Chiag-Gunashali (ACG) and Baku-Tiblis-Ceyhan (BTC) oilfields.²⁰
- There is growing Chinese influence in South Caucasus, by means of financing developmental projects in the region. The Meghri safe corridor agreed to be provided by Armenia as part of a ceasefire agreement to connect Azerbaijan mainland with its autonomous enclave could also provide an alternative route for China's Belt and Road Initiative project which bypasses Iran.
- China is making huge investments in R&D for drone and counter-drone technologies. There is a growing nexus and cooperation between Pakistan-China-Turkey in these fields.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan have also become dialogue partners in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
- India had inked a contract to sell Swathi Weapon Locating Radar, made by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) to Armenia in 2020. The supply could have been expedited as there is no greater sales pitch than having one's equipment validated for its efficacy in a live conflict,

especially keeping in view India's growing ambitions of being seen as an important and credible arms exporter.²¹

- The battle of attrition solely based on conventional, numerical superiority may no longer be as decisive with the advent of newer domains of warfare being embraced. India's modernisation plans have to be pragmatic, accompanied by changes in our doctrines and strategies. A recent example of this can be seen in the adoption of the new Overall Defence Concept by Taiwan in building up of asymmetric defences against a stronger adversary.²²
- It also needs to be ensured that the conventional combat capabilities remain effective in face of use of disruptive technologies and the rapid technological shifts.
- Need for building of anti-access bubbles as deterrence which are difficult to penetrate and use of technologies which allow us to leverage this competitive space.
- Swarm drone attacks can be a game-changer in saturating the enemy's AD resources. India needs to develop indigenous counter-drone technologies to safeguard its assets. Civil-Military fusion along with synergy in efforts with the public sector undertakings would be essential in development of these technologies.
- There is a need to institute mechanisms to ensure an effective media management to win the battle of narratives so aptly demonstrated by Azerbaijan.
- Use of Syrian mercenaries²³ and non-state actors who came via Turkey to participate in the warfighting alongside Azerbaijan military is also an issue of concern and needs to be factored in our security calculus.
- Importance of fieldcraft and use of camouflage and concealment cannot be overemphasised. The relevance of traditional warfighting capabilities cannot be understated. It is not the question of development of these or the newer emerging technologies but

the concurrent, judicious development of both with jointness of operations and greater synergy.

- Use ofUCAV in the network-centric future battlefield is going to be an important element, as is the case with all other disruptive technologies being embraced. Pakistan and China are actively employing these in their operational tasks. The efficacy or effect of the use of armed drones may not be as devastating as it was in Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in the context of our sub-continent because neither will the battlespace be so constricted nor the air space so permissive, there will also be a heavy AD cover, counter-drone technologies and a very effective Air Force. Though, the use of drones for surveillance of border areas, smuggling of arms and ammunition, drugs, terrorist attacks and limited targeting of important military and civilian installations will definitely need to be factored in our operations.

Recommendations for India

Recommendations for the course of action for India from this conflict are as follows:

- India must continue to strengthen its bilateral ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan in sync with its national strategic interests.
- India needs to go in for a sensible modernisation of forces giving due thought to force structure, its application and protection.
- Strategic military future with enhanced threats and shrinking defence budgets would need technology as a central pillar for improving our combat worthiness.
- India needs to build a transformative, digital era military with speed and scale which draws imagination and innovation into the combat.
- War games must factor in drone attacks, use of emerging technologies, aspects of perception management and building of own narratives effectively.

Conclusion

As India embarks on the modernisation of its Armed Forces in sync with its aspirations of playing a greater role at the world stage, it must safeguard its own national interests. The role of disruptive emerging technologies needs to be factored in our strategic security calculus and changes incorporated for faster procurement procedures and building an eco-system for self-reliance. There is a need for greater civil-military fusion in order to modernise the armed forces at the desired pace. India is purposefully moving in this direction with a time-bound roadmap to achieve a technology-enabled force with many indigenous drone and counter-drone projects by DRDO, HAL and some stellar work by civilian firms in pipeline.

Modifications need to be made in the war doctrines and strategies in order to embrace the newer domains of warfare along with the acquisitions of traditional warfighting platforms which will always remain relevant in the operations for holding, denying and occupying territories. The mech tactics need to be integrated with the new realities to remain relevant and effective in future operations with an organic AD cover. The AD resources need to have counter-drone technologies to detect, and neutralise the drone attacks. Counter drone systems should consist of multiple weapon systems including short-range weapons with a fast rate of fire, effective electronic warfare systems, direct energy weapons, hunting drone technologies, electromagnetic pulse systems and incorporating the new developments in magnetic shield systems. This military campaign does provide a good understanding of the changing character of warfare and the accompanied changes which need to be brought about in our warfighting capabilities.

Notes

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