

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – zero point of future conflicts?

Col. advanced instructor Cătălin CHIRIAC, Ph.D.*

*"Carol I" National Defence University

e-mail: catalin_chi@yahoo.com

Abstract

The 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan from September to November 2020 was the latest escalation of unresolved tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The war gained widespread attention, particularly due to the extensive use of unmanned aircraft systems. These systems, regardless of their country of origin, were assigned various missions, from reconnaissance to artillery fire support or even missions to destroy military targets or equipment. Analyzing the preparation process of the Azerbaijani army and their approach to the conflict, through the use of a wide range of technologies and systems that often did not require the physical presence of soldiers, allows for the detection of important trends and perspectives on how future conflicts will be shaped by the widespread use of missiles, unmanned aircraft systems, and artillery.

Keywords:

Nagorno-Karabakh; air defence; unmanned aircraft systems; drone; missiles; UAS; technology.

How a state wins a war is a complex problem, combining the tangible aspects (forces, means, technique available) with the intangible ones (decisions). If we add here the frequent technological revolutions, where the main point is information, surveillance, recognition and communications, then we will see that the answer to this question increases in complexity (Dahlgren 2022).

With the eyes of the world fixed on Ukraine, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan carried out in 2020 has come again to the attention of military analysts, primarily due to its approach by the two belligerents which both started from a shortage of air assets. The second reason is Turkey's involvement in the conflict, especially in the role of ally, equipment supplier and strategist. As usual, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which began in late September 2020 and lasted for 44 days, has generated extensive analysis among journalists, academics, politicians and military experts, each of them trying to identify lessons according to their own fields of activity.

Both this conflict and the ongoing one in Ukraine have shown that victories on the battlefield are not always related to the amount of equipment or the numerical ratings of the armed forces in various journals. The ability to obtain information ahead of the adversary or to overrun the adversary's decision-making speed is only part of the ingredients of military success. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijanis were aided technologically and doctrinally by the Turks and managed to destroy or neutralize an impressive amount of Armenian military equipment. The painful defeat of the Armenians demonstrated to military leaders in Yerevan that war is won by developing, innovating, and acquiring the latest technology. At the same time, it showed military leaders around the world that modern warfare is rapidly evolving, and the binomial of unmanned aircraft systems and artillery missile systems becomes predominant and extremely difficult to counter. Currently, the conflict in Ukraine demonstrates this trend with each passing day.

Since several terms will be used throughout the article to denote what is generically known as a *drone*, further I have chosen to present a brief terminological delimitation. Thus, the terms *unmanned aircraft* and *drone*, as well as their variations, *unmanned aerial vehicle* or *remotely piloted aircraft* are often used interchangeably, both in the military and civilian environments. At the same time, it should be noted that in the military field these terms are distinctly defined, subject to a certain taxonomy and have a concrete use.

Within NATO, the term UAV is out of use, but it can still appear in civilian environments, in articles or even in the names of institutions that debate this topic. The terms used in the military environment are *Unmanned Aircraft – UA*, respectively *Unmanned Aircraft System – UAS*, having precise classifications, missions and characteristics, existing in the doctrines and specialized manuals.

The term *drone* is widely used and accepted in the civilian environment for all types of unmanned aerial systems, whether commercial or military. In the military field, the same term is sometimes used for certain systems whose size and complexity are comparable to those of commercially available models. It should be noted that, at the national level, the military field applies and implements the provisions and the existing standards at NATO level¹.

Considering the above, throughout the article, both the name *unmanned aircraft system/UAS* and the one of *drone* will be used, since the information taken comes from both the military environment and from online publications or sources available on websites.

South Caucasus

Armenia and Azerbaijan are located in the South Caucasus region, a region that also includes Georgia, all of which are ex-Soviet republics. For the three republics in the south of the Caucasus Mountains, the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought both independence and the resumption of old ethnic disagreements, generating bloody conflicts and loss of human lives. Over time, Azerbaijanis and Armenians have historically intermingled, but have maintained their ethnic and religious identities (Azerbaijani are mostly Muslim, Armenians mostly Christian), fighting each other in violent wars.

In order to understand the motivation of the belligerents in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, some key elements regarding their geographic positioning, as well as their past or future ambitions, must be understood². First of all, the history of conflicts in the Caucasus is not recent, the territories of the Caucasus being disputed, conquered and claimed over many centuries. In the 20th century, a key role in creating tensions and then starting conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh was played by Joseph Stalin. He, as commissioner of nationalities, “oversaw the creation of maps and administrative boundaries, in some cases arbitrarily drawing borders that intentionally divided communities, with the aim of diluting the political power of ethnic groups” (Europa Liberă 2020).

Stalin’s strategy was to keep the small nations absorbed by the Soviet Union and to hold them captive in the long term after the breakup of the Russian Empire in 1917, for strategic, commercial or energy reasons, at the same time wanting to suppress any nationalist or religious manifestations or feelings, which could create discomfort in the future. The brutal way in which Stalin presented this in the late 1920s is eloquent in this regard, as Hélène Carrère d’Encausse highlights in the book *Imperiul Eurasiei, o istorie a Imperiului Rus de la 1552 până astăzi*: “The Caucasus is important for the revolution,

¹ N.A.: For more details, see *A Comprehensive Approach to Countering Unmanned Aircraft Systems*, developed by Joint Air Power Competence Centre, *Regulamentul delegat (UE) 2019/945 al Comisiei din 12 martie 2019 privind sistemele de aeronave fără pilot la bord și operatorii de sisteme de aeronave fără pilot la bord din țări terțe și Regulamentul de punere în aplicare (UE) 2019/947 al Comisiei din 24 mai 2019 privind normele și procedurile de operare a aeronavelor fără pilot la bord.*

² N.A.: More details are available at *Cinci lucruri-cheie de știut despre conflictul din Nagorno-Karabakh*, URL: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cinci-lucruri-cheie-de-%C8%99tiut-despre-conflictul-din-nagorno-karabakh/30894640.html>

because it is a source of raw materials and food products. It is also important due to its geographical position, between Europe and Asia, between Europe and Turkey, and due to the existence of trade routes that are of considerable economic and strategic interest” (Fati 2020).

Regardless of the means, the feelings could only be dimmed and not repressed, so that on the territory of the arbitrarily formed enclaves (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia) bloody conflicts broke out in the early 1990s, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Later, they were frozen as a result of fragile agreements guided by Russia, which had an interest in perpetuating such conflicts in order to exercise control over regions that were considered strategic (Fati 2020).

The Nagorno-Karabakh enclave is an internationally recognized territory belonging to Azerbaijan, but it is controlled by ethnic Armenian separatists, supported by Armenia. The first military clash in the modern history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict took place in February 1988, amid the glasnost and perestroika policies initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. The first major war between the two sides broke out in February 1992 (Europa Liberă 2020). The ceasefire of May 1994 approved the Armenian occupation of almost all of Nagorno-Karabakh and several districts around the region, which was considered humiliating for the leadership in Baku. The future status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the fate of the neighboring areas constituted an impediment to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and made the ceasefire an unstable one.

The defeat of Azerbaijan led the political class to accept and begin a large program of modernization of the armed forces, which political analysts interpreted as the first step towards a new conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The year 2020 – a new conflict, a new approach

In the fall of 2020, a six-week war in the South Caucasus brought the disagreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia back to the forefront of public opinion and the memory of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis. As expected, the dispute centered on the Nagorno-Karabakh region and surrounding territories, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but populated predominantly by Armenians following the 1994 ceasefire. Azerbaijan’s strategic objective, which later proved to be achievable, was to recover the occupied territory, or large portions of it.

Military analysts believe that this second conflict was not a surprise. With peace talks deadlocked, Azerbaijan had been threatening a new conflict for over a decade and had been ostentatiously arming itself to do so. At the same time, the outcome of the war was not a surprise either. The Azerbaijan’s army, better equipped, staffed and heavily supported by Turkey, overwhelmed the smaller and outdated neighboring Armenian army (Reynolds 2021).

The reality on the battlefield proved that the joint level planning of the Azerbaijani armed forces, training and equipping of the forces proved decisive in comparison with the Armenian opponent. Thus, it should be emphasized that the success of the Azerbaijani forces was possible due to the Turkish military assistance carried out over an extended period of time, the acquisition of capabilities that later made a difference on the battlefield or the sustained professionalization of military institutions ([Lt.Col. Erickson 2021, 1](#)).

Military analysts have assigned much of this victory to the technical and financial component of the war: Azerbaijan allowed itself to change its mindset and equipment/endowment at the level of armed forces and wanted (and at the same time benefited from) the technological support of Turkey and Israel. The technological support provided at that time was superior to that of the Armenian armed forces. But the conclusions of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war brought to the fore rationales and arguments that overshadow the real and deserved success of technology acquisitions. It is universally recognized that the success of the Azerbaijanis was largely due to the existence, but above all, to the way in which the unmanned aircraft systems were used. However, it should not be forgotten, that the careful balancing of ends, ways and means at the operational level ensured the achievement of strategic objectives and the achievement of the desired end state, thus proving that the Azerbaijani military strategy was the winning one.

The end of the war established Azerbaijan's control over much of the territory it had lost to Armenia in previous clashes and had not dominated for three decades. Armenians retained control of the remaining territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, including the urban center of Stepanakert. The ceasefire agreement, intermediate by the Russian Federation, led to the introduction of Russian peacekeeping forces (about 2,000 troops), who established observation posts along the cease fire line and in the Lachin corridor to monitor the ceasefire, ensuring the residents' safety and the security of transit between Armenia and Stepanakert ([Welt and Bowen 2021, 15](#)).

The local and regional consequences of 2020 war are still visible. The war accounted for more than 6,000 combatant deaths and another 150 civilian deaths, and displaced tens of thousands of people from both countries. The war also led to political disturbances in Armenia, strengthened the influence of the Azeri government, and allowed regional powers Turkey, Russia, and potentially Iran to grow in influence in the area ([Welt and Bowen 2021](#)).

The conflict attracted the attention of public opinion through the unique way in which Azerbaijan used the technical and technological capabilities of defense, correlated with the resources at its disposal and with the establishment of drones as an indispensable element of the military strategy. Before this war, at the tactical level, the Armenian army was superior in the quality of officer training, motivation of soldiers and much more dynamic leadership, things that proved decisive in all

previous conflicts with Azerbaijan. But Azerbaijan found a way to counter these advantages, primarily through the acquisition and use of drones, which at least solved the problem of identifying the positions of Armenian troops and reserves and bombing them (Gressel 2020). During the fighting, Azerbaijan relied on the use of drones for a wide range of missions, thus demonstrating technological advantage over the air defense systems of the Armenian forces. This way, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan may go down in history as the first modern war decided primarily by unmanned aircraft systems.

Military analysts agree that three factors were behind Azerbaijan's success on the battlefield in 2020, unlike the war almost 30 years ago, when it lost to Armenia: technology, tactics, and Turkey (Synovitz and Popescu 2020). The synchronization of new weapons systems (e.g., drone – artillery or drone – missile systems in the case of Azerbaijan) have made the operating environment much more lethal than the individual use of the same systems. Perhaps this was best expressed by Matthew Bryza, former US ambassador to Azerbaijan and former US mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, who believed that this conflict “*demonstrated that Russian weapons systems, whether they be the S-300 air defense missiles or the T-72 tanks, even those with reactive armor, are of a different era when you have this combination of modern Israeli and Turkish drones*” (Iddon 2020).

The first piece of information about the acquisition of drones in Azerbaijan dates back to 2008-2009, when the country acquired a number of Israeli UAVs (Hermes 450, Aerostar and Orbiter M), while domestic production was launched in March 2011, when the Azerbaijani president inaugurated *Azad Systems*, a joint venture between the Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense Industry and the Israeli drone manufacturer *Aeronautics Industries* (Garibov 2016). By comparison, Armenia's drone program was quite modest compared to the extraordinary effort of the Azeri. Existing information shows that Armenia began indigenous drone production in 2011, in parallel with importing drones from Russia, its traditional arms supplier (Garibov 2016).

At the same time, the intention of the Azerbaijanis to acquire combat drones was not hidden, with Zakir Hasanov, the Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan, declaring this in the summer of 2020, the only unknown element being their type. However, Turkish sources stated that the Azerbaijanis were interested in the Bayraktar TB2, a medium-altitude long-range tactical UAV (Bekdil 2020). Regarding the Bayraktar drones, Fuad Shahbazov, an Azeri analyst at the Center for Strategic Communications in Baku, stated that they proved their effectiveness against Russian combat equipment in the conflicts in Libya and Syria, and “*in Syria, these drones destroyed a lot easily the Russian anti-aircraft systems, such as S-300 and S-400*” (Synovitz and Popescu 2020).

It is already known and recognized that Azerbaijan was supported in this war by its powerful ally, Turkey. The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, stated in a press conference that “*the famous Bayraktar which is made by the Turkish*

defense industry, was a gamechanger and played an important role in our success“ (Ostrovsky 2021). It is no longer news that the president was referring to the drones made available and already being used quite successfully in Turkey’s campaigns in Syria. The fact that the drones provided by Israel and Turkey proved decisive for Azerbaijan was confirmed, if needed, by the same president, who glorified his country’s drones responsible for the destruction of a 1 billion dollars’ worth of Armenian military equipment (Iddon 2020). What could Armenia, or another country with Armenia’s military capabilities, do in this situation? One answer may be that of Matthew Bryza: “*if you want to be equipped for this modern battlefield, and if you’re Armenia, you might eventually want to get that type of equipment*” (Iddon 2020).

The number of drones lost by the Turks in Syria, Libya or the South Caucasus is not known or made public, and may not be of much concern to military commanders, if the country’s prestige is increasing. During the fighting in the South Caucasus, Turkish experts even spoke of the “*dronization of war*”, stating that they had developed a revolutionary war concept that would be implemented from one military theater to another (Urcosta 2020). If it was necessary, the war theater in Ukraine proves this once again.

The Turkish analyst Can Kasapoglu appreciates that the entire campaign of using drones in Azerbaijan was very similar to Turkey’s *Operation Spring Shield* against the Syrian Arab Army, from the beginning of 2020, because it seems that “*Ankara has not only transferred unmanned aerial systems (UAS) to its natural ally in the South Caucasus, but also a complete robotic warfare doctrine and concept of operations (CONOPS)*” (Kasapoglu 2020). The same analyst identifies at least three common elements between *Operation Spring Shield* and the drone campaign in Azerbaijan³:

- The artillery of the land forces was used in close coordination with the unmanned aircraft systems (UAS’ missions were *gathering information, establishing targets and BDA*⁴);
- Systematic hunting of the enemy’s mobile air defense (within two weeks, 60 components of Armenian ground-based air defence systems, most of OSA and Strela-10 and at least one S-300 component were destroyed by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces). It is important to mention here the role of the old Russian An-2 biplanes, transformed into drones, a novel and daring approach, with the help of which the exposure of Armenia’s anti-aircraft defense was achieved⁵;
- Execution of information operations (the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan published daily footage of drone actions on its YouTube and Twitter accounts).

Two years after the end of the conflict and after the last turmoil that took place in the region, it is unanimously accepted that Turkey helped the traditional

³ N.A.: The presented elements are detailed in Can Kasapoglu, *Turkey Transfers Drone Warfare Capacity to Its Ally Azerbaijan*, URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-transfers-drone-warfare-capacity-to-its-ally-azerbaijan/>, accessed la 06.01.2022

⁴ Battle Damage Assessment.

⁵ N.A.: More details on the use of Russian An-2 biplanes in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be found at ANALIZĂ Tehnologie, comando și Turcia. Cum a câștigat Azerbaidjan în Nagorno-Karabakh (europalibera.org) and The ‘Magic Bullet’ Drones Behind Azerbaijan’s Victory Over Armenia (forbes.com)

ally Azerbaijan, not only by supplying drones, but also through the assistance offered by the Turkish military advisers, with experience in training and fighting battles. Furthermore, there are opinions that Turkey has not only participated in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with drones, military advisors or special forces commandos, but there is also evidence suggesting that the Ankara' government played an important role in Azerbaijan's decision to launch the offensive in September. Several high-ranking Turkish officials met with their Azeri counterparts throughout the summer of 2020 to discuss the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Turkish arms sales to Baku exploded in the months leading up to the September offensive (Episkopos 2020a). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's participation in Azerbaijan's victory parade held in Baku presented a rather significant picture in this sense: the two leaders sat side by side, and behind them was a row of Turkish and Azerbaijani flags, equal in number. The omnipresence of Turkish and Azerbaijani flags could also be seen on the streets of Baku (Episkopos 2020b).

There are opinions that Azerbaijan's concept of operations is far from revolutionary, resembling the AirLand Battle doctrine of the United States, but scaled to the defence budget of about \$2 billion (Dr Watling and Dr Kaushal 2020). What is worth noting is that, from a strategic point of view, a country like Azerbaijan has been able to carry out precision strikes deep in the theater of operations (a capability once reserved only for the great powers), using a type of equipment relatively cheap to make up for the lack of robust air power (Dr Watling and Dr Kaushal 2020). We should therefore not be surprised at the end result, given that the conflict was fought between the 21st century tactics of Azerbaijan and the 20th century army of Armenia.

Conclusions

The conflicts of the last decade were decisive in terms of the importance of the use of drones, regardless of the category or weaponry used. Thus, the new battlefield tactic that has proven successful in recent regional conflicts has been the use of relatively inexpensive missile-equipped drones against armored or ground-based air defense forces. This new tactic has changed the strategic perception around Turkey and Russia, as Turkish-built drones with affordable digital technology have destroyed armor and air and missile defense systems of Russian protégés in conflicts in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan. The same drones have also become effective against Russia's own systems in the conflict in Ukraine.

In the short time since its completion, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become perhaps the best ambassador of how small and relatively inexpensive UAS can bring about change in conflicts once dominated by traditional air power and large-scale land battles. The increasingly diverse range of UAS and their affordable prices can give countries an air advantage at a much lower cost than maintaining a traditional air fleet. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has shown how drones can suddenly

change the outcome of a conflict that seemed lasting and can contribute decisively to the achievement of the objectives of a military campaign.

The brief analysis of the allies of the two belligerents should not be overlooked either. Judging today, during the course of the conflict in Ukraine, it can be said that Russia has learned nothing from the mistakes of Armenia, at least in terms of the threat posed by the use of drones in military actions and the ways to combat it so as to obtain and maintain control over the airspace in the theater of operations. On the other hand, Turkey has achieved both immense commercial success with drones provided to Azerbaijan and later Ukraine, as well as international recognition for its military capabilities.

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