

Lessons Learned from the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War over Nagorno-Karabakh

LTC Maciej Zaborowski, POL AF, CSAG/CCJ5

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Key Points

- Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, considered frozen by most of the international community and experts, is in fact smoldering and unresolved.
- Russia is likely the war's biggest winner, having achieved substantial gains while avoiding risk.
- The Turkish-aided Azerbaijani victory came with a price - renewed Russian troop presence and the return of Moscow's influence in the region.
- Russia acquired real first-hand data on how Turkey's modern drone systems operate.
- The West must be sharper, more self-critical, and suspicious of Moscow.

Introduction

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the autumn of 2020 gained the attention of the international community.¹ The conflict has long been considered, albeit wrongly, a frozen one by a majority of Western experts. However, the outcomes of the war were misguided by many analysts and observers, mostly due to typical Western biases and approaches focused on specific aspects of the conflict.² These aspects are seemingly relevant from military, operational, and strategic perspectives, whereas some of the accompanying gains of the victors went unnoticed and were not addressed properly. The debates continue on about the winners, the losers, and the visible and practical lessons learned such as: the successful use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS); a battlefield dominated by sensors limiting freedom of movement; alleged obsolescence of armored vehicles; and the need to redesign air defense systems. The analysis and debates continuously talk about the previously mentioned aspects yet rarely talk about the Russian gains. The war provided plenty of food for thought, especially to smaller and regional powers, while seemingly neglected by global powers. Nevertheless, a thorough look at the Kremlin's behavior, its alleged lack of engagement, and the less obvious gains should draw attention for more analysis.

¹ Congressional Research Service, Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, 7 Jan 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46651.pdf> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

² European Council on Foreign Relations, How Russia is Winning on its own Game, 29 Oct 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/article/upheaval-in-belarus-and-nagorno-karabakh-how-russia-is-winning-at-its-own-game/> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

Responsible Statecraft, How the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict is a Lesson to the West in a Geopolitical Reality, 28 Jun 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/06/28/how-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-is-a-lesson-to-the-west-in-geopoliticalreality/> (Accessed 17 Sep 2021).

Background

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has its roots in ethnic and territorial disputes and clashes. This mountainous region is located in the Eastern parts of the Lesser Caucasus range. This area has historically been dominated by an ethnic Armenian population. The Armenian people have long cherished the memory of the Kingdom of Armenia (sometimes referred to as the Armenian Empire), however the Kingdom has long been removed from the modern map and its people fell under the rules of external powers over time. The most tragic time for Armenians was during the Ottoman rule, during which the genocide of Armenians occurred and a hatred of Turkic people sprouted. Tensions between Armenians and Azeri had been managed quietly during the Soviet Union era. The most significant events in recent history started in 1988 when Armenia demanded the region be included into Soviet Armenia which then escalated into an all-out war in 1990. This so-called First Nagorno-Karabakh War left Armenia as the victor. This outcome resulted mostly because both sides used roughly the same post-soviet equipment and tactics, but the Armenian side had more post-soviet cadres who were better educated, trained, and experienced. A ceasefire in 1994 halted the fighting for nearly 20 years (with only minor skirmishes on a limited scale). With the absence of a unifying and enforcing influence from Moscow, a return to fighting seemed inevitable. A fatal breach of the cease-fire occurred in April of 2016 lasted for only 4 days. Nevertheless, the conflict, considered frozen by majority of international community and experts, was in fact smoldering and reerupted in September of 2020. However, this time both sides entered into a full-scale war from completely different positions.

Both sides represented the post-Soviet paradigm, but the preparation by each was vastly different. Because of the differences in preparation, the outcome of the war was different than expected and at some points even surprising when compared to prior conflicts.

Analysis

After hard lessons learned from previous conflicts, Azerbaijan invested heavily in its military. Between 2008 and 2019, Baku spent over \$24 B, which is six times as much as spent by Yerevan.³ Azeris also decided to acquire modern weapon systems, particularly drones and sensor systems, and stopped relying exclusively on Russianmade armament.⁴

However, what mattered maybe even more than the equipment and skills of combatants on both sides was the external influence and interventions. Armenia, which is considered to be traditionally aligned with Russia, but did not receive the expected support from Moscow. In fact, the Kremlin remained mostly silent and inactive. Moscow was accused by many Western sources of disabilities and military vulnerabilities, because of its inability to act.⁵ The Armenian military was in possession of numerous, mostly Russian-made weapon systems, though lacked vastly in modern air-defense systems.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan benefited decisively from its new, or 'old-new' ally – Turkey. Ankara has been known for its increasing activity and interest in conflicts in the region in the past few years. In 2019, Turkey captured vital

³ Eurasianet.org , Armenia-Azerbaijan: Who's the Big Defense Spender?, 28 Oct 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/armeniaazerbaijan-whos-the-big-defense-spender> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

⁴ EVN Report, Arms Supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan, 17 Feb 2021, <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/arms-supplies-to-armenia-and-azerbaijan> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

⁵ Bayram Balci, Russia and The Karabakh War. Is Moscow Still The Game Leader?, 11 Dec 2020, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/russia-and-karabakh-war-moscow-still-game-leader-0.html> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

territories along its southern border with Syria, using a pretext of fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups. Earlier in 2020, Ankara provided support to Libyan government forces, which then allowed President

Erdogan to acquire valuable natural resources and more access to the Mediterranean. In July 2020, President Erdogan saw an opportunity in Caucasus. Calling upon pan-Turkic narratives, he threw his support behind Baku. Turkey provided several small and medium sized drone systems to Azerbaijan, amongst other military support. Therefore, Azerbaijan's military acquired state-of-the-art equipment such as high-tech precise HD sensor systems from outside the Russian armaments industry umbrella.⁶

This political-military situation, where a major and long engaged power (Russia) remained mostly silent/neutral, not providing for its ally, whereas a new or re-emerging regional power (Turkey) vividly supported its new (though old historically and tradition based) ally, drew a lot of attention and comments throughout the West. Many experts even allowed themselves to follow narrative of calling the situation a clash between the Russian air-defense system and Turkish drones.⁷

Armenia appears to be the biggest loser of the war politically, militarily, and morally. If the loss of territory on its own was not bad enough, the country entered into internal instability and waves of anti-governmental protests after the ceasefire. The most visible and obvious winners of the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war are Azerbaijan and Turkey. Baku got back once lost territories, humiliated the old opponent, and acquired a renewed partnership with an important regional power. Turkey managed to prove the value of its arms industry. President Erdogan acquired and multiplied much needed internal and external endorsements of its weapon systems.

Astonished at what they thought they had seen in Karabakh, Western observers immediately started to analyze their own observations in order to employ their findings.⁸ However, the above observations focus mostly on practicality and technicalities, but do not address a hidden nature and importance of the biggest winner's gains and how Russia benefited from the conflict. The Kremlin has been so much criticized for its surprising inability to act and abandoning its ally, in fact took a posture which should not be a surprise at all. A 'too early' Russian intervention would have triggered international protests and posed unwanted problems for President Putin. Instead of acting and drawing criticism (maybe even sanctions), Putin chose to wait until the rest of the world came asking for Moscow to react. This way Putin brought Russian troops back to places where they withdrew from years ago, and this happened without any protests.⁹

⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies, The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense, 8 Dec 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

⁷ James Marson and Brett Forrest, Armed Low-Cost Drones, Made by Turkey, Reshape Battlefield and Geopolitics, 3 Jun 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/armed-low-cost-drones-made-by-turkey-reshape-battlefields-and-geopolitics11622727370> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

⁸ The Guardian, UK wants new drones in wake of Azerbaijan military success, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/29/uk-defence-secretary-hails-azerbaijans-use-of-drones-in-conflict> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

⁹ Poliitikasta.fi, The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War in Russia's Geopolitical Puzzle, 17 Feb 2021, <https://poliitikasta.fi/en/the-2020-nagorno-karabakh-war-in-russias-geopolitical-puzzle/> (Accessed 17 Sep 2021).

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Russian Crisis Behavior, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey?, Number 19, January 2021, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/perspectives/russian-crisis-behavior-nagorno-karabakh-and-turkey-0> (Accessed 17 Sep 2021).

The relationship between Moscow and Yerevan did not suffer much because the Armenian people know this is how Russia functions. Furthermore, Russian generals and experts had the unique opportunity to observe the real-life use of the most advanced Turkish weapon systems in action. Now, Russian military planners have plenty of data on its traditional regional competitor, in case they might need to act against Turkey. And even though the destruction of equipment was significant, it was only legacy equipment from the post-Soviet era, which has long since become obsolete and useless to Russia. Moreover, in the interest of the coming competition with China, Moscow gained some higher ground and a little more direct insight (influence) into the areas penetrated by Beijing. Finally, regardless of how enthusiastic and boastful Turkish and Azeri impressions after the war seem, both had to accept that the Russian presence in the region is back, and that Moscow can use the playbook of Caucasus conflicts to even bigger extent than at any point throughout the last three decades. It seems that Moscow might have actually outsmarted everybody once again.

Conclusion

Apart from obvious technical and practical assessments, it is vital to recognize and understand the whole spectrum and how much Russia gained from the 2020 Armenian-Azeri war. The paradigm of this war was that Moscow managed to achieve things that were mostly not noticed in the West or overshadowed by Western biases, prejudices, and expectations.¹⁰ Moscow did not exercise the same It was not hybrid warfare or irregular activities as it had in Syria or in the Ukraine. In Karabakh, it was a much different test, and the Kremlin once again showed, it is not about things we see, but more about things we do not see.¹¹ Putin achieved more than expected without losing anything or spending an enormous amount on resources. Moscow's strategies and actions can be versatile, devious, and effective simultaneously. Instead of analyzing the conflict from a Western perspective, perhaps focusing on Russian interests would be the best course of action. The Caucasus has always been and will always be vital to any Russian ruler that cares about the status of great power.

Recommendations:

- Closely monitor narratives, events, and security situation in the Caucasus.
- Promote trans-institutional communication channels allowing better situational awareness of the region.
- Investigate and assess interactions between Russia and other major regional powers and roles of Azerbaijan.

¹⁰ European Council on Foreign Relations, Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: winners, losers, and a new status quo in the Caucasus, 23 Nov 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/event/conflict-in-nagorno-karabakh-winners-losers-and-a-new-status-quo-in-thecaucasus/> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).

¹¹ German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Russia's Stake in the Game in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Accident or Design?, 12 Nov 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-stake-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-waraccident-or-design> (Accessed 17 Jul 2021).