

Reflections on the Karabakh and Ukraine Wars

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As we contemplate our current era of ongoing pandemics and wars, it is useful to utilize a comparative framework. In a geo-political strategic analysis of the 2020 Karabakh war and that of the ongoing 2022-2023 war in Ukraine, we have witnessed the continuing importance of the technological revolution in warfare. Newspaper headlines around the world have proclaimed the pivotal use of drones and satellite-based intelligence for targeting in both cases.

In the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding territories, the extensive and critical use of Turkish and Israeli-made drones by Azerbaijan led to a swift and dramatic change in the military and geo-political landscape in the South Caucasus. The widespread impact of drones was somewhat of a surprise to the Armenian armed forces. The one-sided consequences were most notably Armenian losses of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, parts of Karabakh itself, and even the Armenian state at risk since the closing days of the 44 day war.

By contrast, in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, both warring sides, albeit Russia later than Ukraine, realized the importance of and have used drones increasingly, as design, production and delivery permitted. Both Kyiv and Moscow have sought to acquire as many drones as they can from foreign sources. Turkey and the United States have been key suppliers for Ukraine, while Russia has purchased Iranian-made drones and hopes to purchase Chinese-made ones soon. Whereas Russia provided insufficient wartime assistance to Armenia during the 2020 Karabakh war, there has been a crucial and substantial supply of Western intelligence, technology, weapons (including various types of drones) and aid to Ukraine. The West has also applied major economic sanctions against the aggressor Russian state.

In the 2020 Karabakh War, Turkey provided extensive and key military assistance, including leadership personnel, to Azerbaijan. This greatly facilitated the Baku dictatorship's ability to make major territorial advances at the expense of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding territories. Armenian military losses in personnel and equipment were so extensive in 2020 that it resulted in grave threats to much of Armenia itself. It is a risk that continues to this day with the repeated cross-border military incursions by Azerbaijan and the current Lachin Corridor humanitarian crisis caused by the recently-imposed Azerbaijani blockade of food, fuel and medical supplies to the Karabakh/Artsakh capital of Stepanakert. Only the earlier intervention of Moscow with its military deterrence and offer of 'Russian peacekeepers' averted an even greater catastrophic Armenian loss in 2020. However, given Moscow's current preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, the Russian military presence in Karabakh and the South Caucasus region has proved to be less reliable and seemingly fostered only a "temporary pause" in the Aliyev dictatorship's expansionist ambitions in the South Caucasus. Baku continues to push for access to more Armenian lands and the development of a key "transport corridor" to Nakhchivan, the portion of Azerbaijan located west of the Armenian state. Such a corridor challenges Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Aliyev and his ally Turkish president Erdogan seem determined to pursue a pan-Turan linkage across the region. The situation in the South Caucasus continues to be unstable, fraught with risk of a renewed regional war, and is significantly affected by events in Ukraine. Given that Moscow's strategic attention and military troops are preoccupied with its war against Kyiv, both Baku and Ankara see opportunities in Karabakh and beyond.

In the larger overview, among the key lessons to be learned from the wars in Karabakh and Ukraine are the essential role of new, advanced modern technology and the important role of pioneering scientists in the wars' outcomes. These observations echo that of World War Two and the innovative

work of the physicist Robert Oppenheimer and mathematician Alan Turing and their respective critical work on the atomic bomb and computer-based intelligence gathering and analysis. Today, it is scientists and engineers working on drones, communications and spy satellites, and other advanced weapons and technological forms of intelligence collection.

In the third decade of the 21st century, the scientific revolution of warfare continues at an accelerated rate. Mass formations of attack drones are one vivid and foreboding example of things to come. Also of growing importance also is the gathering of massive amounts of satellite and other computerized data for advanced intelligence-targeting. The rate of scientific-technological change today is accelerating, and we can expect even more significant advances in modern weaponry. The result may well be greater destabilizing of the global and regional geo-political landscapes.

While initially the capital of Kyiv was in serious danger, Ukraine has withstood the Russian invasion which now appears virtually stalled. Supported by substantial and increasing NATO assistance, Ukraine continues its efforts to reclaim the Russian-occupied territories. The war in Ukraine continues to have a significant impact on geo-political calculations both globally and in the South Caucasus. We already have witnessed increased defence expenditures, enhanced military technology research, accelerated production of weapons and armaments, greater troop deployments and updated military alliance agreements. It seems the world has become more mobilized for war.

While technology is crucial in modern warfare, it may be that ideology is ultimately the foremost topic that needs to be urgently addressed. Often in contemporary wars, we are confronted with the dangerous challenge of the expansionist mind-set of a ruthless dictator. Whether it was Hitler in 1939, Aliyev in 2020 or Putin in 2022, fundamental questions remain: ‘How do you stop an aggressive, ultra-nationalist autocratic ruler, with his reckless imperialist ambitions? How do you constrain a dictator’s military capacity to follow through in dangerous ways?’. Historically, appeasement has not halted dictators’ ambitions, nor served the world’s democracies well in the long-run. Determined collective action is necessary, but not always forthcoming.

In the meantime, while military analysts often tend to count the dead and wounded soldiers, we also need to document the enormously disruptive impact on non-combatant populations, whether it be in the form of massive forced civilian dislocations, extensive loss of life, widespread and incalculable damage to property and cultural heritage sites. As Raphael Lemkin, the pioneering human rights lawyer and activist, noted amidst WW II, all these violent acts correlate to war crimes, crimes against humanity and even genocidal acts targeting ethnic victim populations. The situation requires a global response. The question remains: Are we doing enough?

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