

Azerbaijan's drones owned the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh — and showed future of warfare

By

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November 11, 2020 at 9:06 p.m. GMT

MOSCOW — The drone's-eye view over Nagorno-Karabakh defined much of the six-week war in the mountainous enclave within Azerbaijan: The video first showed soldiers below in trenches, then came blasts and smoke, then nothing.

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Drone strikes — targeting Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh soldiers and destroying tanks, artillery and air defense systems — provided a huge advantage for Azerbaijan in the 44-day war and offered the clearest evidence yet of how battlefields are being transformed by unmanned attack drones rolling off assembly lines around the world.

The expanding array of relatively low-cost drones can offer countries air power at a fraction of the cost of maintaining a traditional air force. The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh also underscored how drones can suddenly shift a long-standing conflict and leave ground forces highly exposed.

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On Tuesday, Armenia accepted a cease-fire on punishing terms to possibly end the latest round of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave controlled by ethnic Armenian factions but inside the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan.

“Drones offer small countries very cheap access to tactical aviation and precision guided weapons, enabling them to destroy an opponent's much-costlier equipment such as tanks and air defense systems,” said Michael Kofman, military analyst and director of Russia studies at CNA, a defense think tank in Arlington, Va.

“An air force is a very expensive thing,” he added. “And they permit the utility of air power to smaller, much poorer nations.”

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In Azerbaijan, the videos of the drone strikes have been posted daily on the website of the country's Defense Ministry, broadcast on big screens in the capital, Baku, and tweeted and retweeted online.

They were also studied by Western military analysts to track Azerbaijan's swift military gains.

Thousands of protesters gathered in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, on Wednesday as pressure grew for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to step down after agreeing to a deal that calls for a 2,000-member Russian peacekeeping mission and allows Azerbaijan to regain territory it lost in the Nagorno-Karabakh war of the early 1990s.

The deal came just after Azerbaijan took the strategic city of Shusha (known in Armenia as Shushi), a town of cultural importance to Azerbaijan perched high above the Nagorno-Karabakh capital, Stepanakert. As Azerbaijan forces advanced toward Shusha, its military propagandists published gruesome videos of drones destroying forces in trenches.

Wider use of armed drones

Armed drones have increasingly become part of warfare since the Pentagon deployed its Predator in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Missile-firing drones are now produced in many countries including Turkey, China and Israel, and have been used by various sides in battles including Libya's proxy war.

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In a matter of months, however, Nagorno-Karabakh has become perhaps the most powerful example of how small and relatively inexpensive attack drones can change the dimensions of conflicts once dominated by ground battles and traditional air power.

It also highlighted the vulnerabilities of even sophisticated weapons systems, tanks, radars and surface-to-air missiles without specific drone defenses. And it has raised debate on whether the era of the traditional tank could be coming to an end.

Azerbaijan used its drone fleet — purchased from Israel and Turkey — to stalk and destroy Armenia's weapons systems in Nagorno-Karabakh, shattering its defenses and enabling a swift advance. Armenia found that air defense systems in Nagorno-Karabakh, many of them older Soviet systems, were impossible to defend against drone attacks, and losses quickly piled up.

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Franz-Stefan Gady, a research fellow on the future of conflict at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said traditional military equipment such as tanks and armored vehicles will not become obsolete.

But Nagorno-Karabakh has shown “the ever-increasing importance” of using armed drones along with other weapons and highly trained ground forces, and “the exponentially more devastating consequences of failing to do so in future wars,” he said.

'Massive losses'

The separatist region in Azerbaijan with a largely Armenian population broke away in the late 1980s, leading to war and Azerbaijan's humiliating loss of the enclave and seven

surrounding districts. A decades-long process, led by the United States, France and Russia, failed to reach a settlement.

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Armenia became content with the status quo of a frozen conflict, retaining territory. But Azerbaijan, frustrated at a peace process that it felt delivered nothing, used its Caspian Sea oil wealth to buy arms, including a fleet of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli kamikaze drones (also called loitering munitions, designed to hover in an area before diving on a target).

When fighting flared again Sept. 27, the drone videos playing on big screens in Baku and on YouTube stoked popular support for the war, even as Azerbaijan hid figures on its own war dead.

“It’s pretty obvious that Azerbaijan has been preparing for this. Azerbaijan decided it wanted to change the status quo and that the Armenian side had no interest in a war because they wanted to keep what they had,” said Tom de Waal, an expert on the Caucasus at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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“Clearly, the decisive factor in this conflict is Turkey’s intervention on Azerbaijan’s side. They seem to be heavily coordinating the war effort,” he said, adding that it appeared Turkey had moved Syrian mercenaries into Azerbaijan two weeks before the conflict.

Turkey denies recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh.

How Syrian mercenaries turned up on the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh

And then there were the drones. Their targets included fortified positions from the 1990s.

“There were massive losses,” de Waal said. “Possibly around a third of Armenian tanks have been destroyed. That’s obviously been a critical factor in taking all those territories.”

Unable to match Azerbaijan’s drone power, Armenian forces, demoralized and racked by covid-19, suffered a series of military calamities.

'Very hard to hide'

Officials from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh said they had no choice but to sign Tuesday’s truce to avoid further losses of life and territory.

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In the early stages of the war, Azerbaijan used 11 slow Soviet-era An-2 aircraft that had been converted into drones and sent them buzzing over Nagorno-Karabakh as bait to

Armenian air defense systems — tempting them to fire and reveal their positions, after which they could be hit by drones.

Azerbaijan used surveillance drones to spot targets and sent armed drones or kamikaze drones to destroy them, analysts said.

Turkey, which took part in joint military exercises with Azerbaijani forces in Azerbaijan over the summer, supports its ally but denies direct involvement in the fighting.

But Azerbaijan probably benefited from Turkey's experience of its recent use of drones in Syria as well as Libya, where its drones trounced the Russian-made Pantsir S1 air defense systems used by the forces of renegade general Khalifa Hifter in May.

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Videos posted by both sides in Nagorno-Karabakh — including drone hits and soldiers advancing through villages and towns — enabled military analysts to tally confirmed hits.

Stijn Mitzer, an analyst writing on the military-affairs blog Oryx, noted that both sides used propaganda to play up their military gains but that analysis of video footage made it possible to verify the claims. The group published a list of the destroyed military hardware, including photographic or video evidence for each tanks and weapon system.

Their tally, which logs confirmed losses with photographs or videos, listed Armenian losses at 185 T-72 tanks; 90 armored fighting vehicles; 182 artillery pieces; 73 multiple rocket launchers; 26 surface-to-air missile systems, including a Tor system and five S-300s; 14 radars or jammers; one SU-25 war plane; four drones and 451 military vehicles.

Azerbaijan, the group concluded, had visually confirmed losses of 22 tanks, 41 armored forced vehicles, one helicopter, 25 drones and 24 vehicles. The full tally of losses on both sides cannot be independently verified, however Armenian losses appear significantly higher, according to military analysts.

The leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, Arayik Harutyunyan, said Tuesday that all of Nagorno-Karabakh would have been taken “within days” had fighting continued, citing the “very heavy human losses” inflicted by drones.

Malcolm Davis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, wrote on the RealClearDefense website that systems such as the kamikaze drone probably will become more prevalent as technology improves and costs go down.

“That’s a potential game-changer for land warfare,” he wrote.

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