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Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Role of Airpower

By Ben Ho

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing war in the Nagorno-Karabakh has been notable for how airpower is deployed. What are its key features?

COMMENTARY

ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2020, the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict broke out when Azerbaijan launched a ground offensive against the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, supported by Armenia, in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. A month into the fighting, one can glean from it various trappings of 21st century warfare, including the extensive use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and information operations waged on social media.

While definitive figures for combat losses for both sides are currently unavailable, it is believed that Armenia's losses, especially in its armoured units, exceed that of Azerbaijan. This is due to no small part to the exploits of Azerbaijan's much-vaunted UAVs. What do we make of what has transpired in the airpower realm of the conflict?

Where are the Manned Aircraft?

One of the integral features of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war is the limited role manned airpower has played so far. Baku has an overwhelming advantage over Yerevan in this regard, and yet the former has chosen not to capitalise on this advantage. According to *The Military Balance 2020*, Azerbaijan has 36 tactical jets comprising mainly SU-25 attack aircraft and fourth-generation MIG-29 fighters.

On the other hand, only 14 SU-25s and no fighters whatsoever make up Armenia's manned combat airpower. In addition, Armenia's air defences consist largely of

anaemic Soviet-era surface-to-air missiles like the SA-3 and SA-4 dating back to the 1960s.

One plausible reason holding the Azeris back from deploying their manned jets is Armenia's possession of a limited number of the more sophisticated long-range SA-10 and medium-range SA-11 anti-air systems, with the former especially noted for its range and detection capabilities. It is also worth noting that even a small quantity of these high-end assets could arguably have a deterrent value out of proportion to their numbers.

These systems have not been deployed yet for operations as they are probably held in reserve. It is also telling that even after a number of Armenian SA-10s were reportedly damaged or destroyed by Azeri UAVs, Baku has not deployed its manned combat airpower to any significant degree. After all, Azerbaijan sees a *reasonable* alternative to crewed aircraft in drones and their use has been making the headlines thus far.

Advantages of UAVs

Most airpower experts maintain that one of the key advantages unmanned aviation has over its manned counterpart is cost (in financial and human terms), and this is arguably one reason behind the almost-exclusive use of the UAVs in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. To illustrate, the ubiquitous Turkish-made TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) that has featured in various propaganda videos released by Baku costs about US\$5 million each.

On the other hand, an MIG-29 costs few tens of million dollars. To be sure, the payload of an MIG-29 can be equalled only by a few TB2s, though the MIG-29s are way ahead in various other attributes like speed and range.

However, to deploy a manned jet even in the more permissive environs of the Nagorno-Karabakh war would still risk its pilot, not to mention the prodigious training time and dollars invested in him, being shot down and killed or captured. If cleverly exploited, this could lead to a propaganda coup for the opposing side.

Think Jordanian flyer Muath Safi Yousef al-Kasasbeh whose execution by ISIS in 2015 was shown to the whole world as well as downed Allied pilots during the 1991 Gulf War. On the other hand, given their larger numbers, lower costs, and lack of a human in the cockpit, the loss of UAVs can be better tolerated.

Harbinger of Future Warfare?

Going forward, a number of commentators have proclaimed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a harbinger of future warfare. For instance, they make proclamations along the lines of UAVs being game-changing or that their exploits thus far portend a new era of warfare. These comments, usually made in inexperienced journalistic terms, are slightly off the mark.

Firstly, the drone era is already upon us. It has been so ever since the Predator UAV made its first kill during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in October 2001.

Since then, the continued sensitivity to the loss of human pilots has accentuated the use of drones. Ditto the relatively low intensity of wars being fought during this period.

Indeed, what has happened in the Caucasus over the past month is just another confirmation during recent times of the usefulness of drones – in permissive operating environments. These capabilities have proven their operational worth in, for instance, the September 2019 strikes on Saudi oil facilities as well as the ongoing Libyan civil war because they were given relatively free rein in the absence of significant air defences.

That being said, Azeri UAVs have been *primus inter pares* in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war simply because their opponents cannot put up a decent fight. Indeed, observers have praised the performance of Baku's Israeli-made Harop "kamikaze" drone during the war. It can stay in the air for up to six hours sniffing out any target of opportunity before attacking it in a suicide dive. The UAV might not have such luxury of time in other circumstances, especially against much more credible opposition.

True UCAVs Some Time Away

In a high-intensity exchange between great powers with significant counter-air capabilities, however, do not be surprised if the life expectancy of drones is measured in terms of a couple of hours, if not less. And this would be par the course until the day a true UCAV is deployed, one whose attributes equal or at least approach that of manned aircraft.

However, this does not seem to be any time soon. Indeed, with states becoming ever more cognisant to the threat posed by UAVs, expect even lesser powers to beef up their counter-drone capabilities going forward. All in all, while the recent good performance of drones in the Caucasus shows their utility to some extent, do not read too much into it. As is often the case in extracting lessons from a particular battle or war, *sui generis* should be the watchword here.

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