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Offering a force multiplier to its users, TB2 drones are behind Azerbaijan's rapid advance on the strategic Lachin highway linking occupied Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

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Azerbaijan and Armenia are locked in a fierce battle over the long-disputed occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, with high casualties reported by both sides.

The Armenia-backed Republic of Artsakh occupying Nagorno-Karabakh, confirmed

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(<https://www.dw.com/en/nagorno-karabakh-us-armenia-azerbaijan-announce-third-attempt-at-cease-fire/a-55391803>)its military death toll had reached 974. Azerbaijan says


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(<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/25/new-nagorno-karabakh-fighting-as-baku-issues-warning-to-russia>)65 Azerbaijani civilians have been killed and 298 wounded, but has not disclosed its military casualties.

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The current conflict is the worst the region has seen since the original devastating quarrel in the 1990s. Despite Russian-mediated ceasefires, unprecedented reports of the destruction of military hardware are emerging from the front line.

Unlike previous conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh that saw death tolls above 30,000, Azerbaijan has made major advances with significantly fewer casualties. After capturing a series of villages and strategic bridges, Azerbaijan's Armed Forces occupied the Nagorno-Karabakh region's southern border with Iran on October 22, and appeared to turn northwest on October 23 advancing on the infamous Lachin Corridor.

 **Ryan O'Farrell**
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Confirms Azeribaijan's seizure of Jabrayil





The Lachin Corridor contains the only major highway linking the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh to Armenia. Most recent geolocated updates show that Azerbaijan's advance has captured nearly 10 percent of Nagorno-Karabakh, leaving their forces only 10 km away from cutting off the Lachin highway.

Controlling the highway would prevent resupply of fuel, ammunition and military reinforcements from Armenia.

Following an Artsakh counterattack (<https://youtu.be/zYlkhz-wdwc?t=229>) to repel Azerbaijan's steady advance on the highway, Armenian forces also began a counter-offensive near the far southwestern Azerbaijan-Armenia border in a likely attempt to relieve pressure on the Lachin highway offensive.

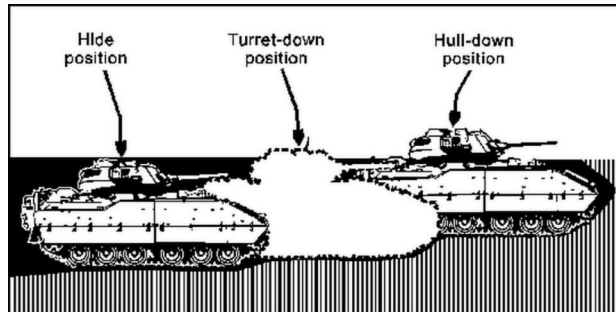
But for Azerbaijan, the strategic asset is already within its sights, and well within its range. Traditionally, artillery, mortar fire and even direct fire or guided missiles could be used during the day to prevent military convoys.

But now, even the night's darkness offers no safety. That's a big deal, and drones made it possible. In today's battlefields, if you control the sky, you control the ground. For Azerbaijan, controlling the Lachin



The mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh region doesn't lend itself well to tank movements. The long, winding, narrow roads that thread through its hills leaves tanks heavily exposed. Traditionally, tanks are used in tandem with ground forces to ensure anti-tank weapons can't be brought to bear on expensive armoured forces.

Throughout modern warfare however, tanks have proven their worth at holding positions when dug entrenchment tactics.



US Armored Tank Tactics Field Manual, 1993. (US Department of Defense)

By minimizing their exposed surface areas, entrenched tanks make the price of further advances a prohibitive one. Short of overwhelming air power, this can quickly lead to a stalemate. Even a strong air force presence can be mitigated by relatively cheap ground to air missiles, MANPADS, as the cheap anti-air missiles can cost (<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/man-portable-air-defense-systems-persistent-and-potent-threat#:~:text=MANPADS%20are%20also%20very%20cost,to%20several%20hundred%20t>) anywhere from \$5000 to \$300,000 for a more advanced variety. With fighter jets averaging anywhere from 10 to 100 million USD, the grim calculus of asymmetric warfare quickly sets in.

The very same strategic rationale promoted the CIA to arm the Taliban against USSR forces, occupying Afghanistan in the 1990's, leading to the ultimate withdrawal of Soviet Russia.

Previously, being able to push through entrenched defences was the privilege of only the most advanced militaries. No longer the purview of the powerful, modern warfare is changing, giving middle-tier powers the ability to inexpensively punch above their weight.

While the sale of drones like the US Predator drone are heavily regulated to ensure the US and its close allies maintain a military edge, that's quickly changing.



The steady Azerbaijani reclamation of occupied Nagorno-Karabakh saw a slew of articles denying that warfare had changed with the systematic use of drones in modern warfare. At their best, experts admitted

(<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/10/the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-hints-at-the-future-of-war>) that "cheap Turkish drones are slicing through Armenian defences." In spite of their nearly equal military standings, "Azerbaijan's military boasts a definitive qualitative technological edge," admits Pavel Felgenhauer, a Russian defence analyst speaking (<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/10/the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-hints-at-the-future-of-war>) to the Economist.

Another article led with (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/15/drones-tanks-obsolete-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan-armenia/>), "No, drones haven't made tanks obsolete." In it, experts make the case that Armenia's losses are due to improper training and bad terrain, not "magic technology."

But the rise of non-US drone warfare has been long in the making. In late February 2020, when 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an Idlib airstrike (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/dozens-of-turkish-soldiers-killed-in-strike-in-idlib-in-syria-reports-say>), Turkey quickly launched a five day offensive in northern Syria that gave the TB2 unmanned drone its name.

In a radically new deployment of unmanned drones targeting armoured forces, chemical weapons depots and air defence platforms, Turkey carried out hundreds of strikes, claiming more than 2,500 Syrian regime fighters had been killed. The ensuing victory halted the Syrian regime's advance on Idlib, and pressured Moscow into mediating a ceasefire.

The very same tactics were used by Azerbaijan in the opening salvos of the conflict, as it used its drones to methodically eliminate significant swathes of Armenian air defence installations, artillery and tanks using a relatively small fleet of TB2 drones.

Rising tide

After 9/11, the US was quick to establish its dominance in drone warfare, launching its first strike in 2001. Sale



cost nearly \$12 million USD) have led some nations to turn to China's CH-4, a similar albeit less sophisticated drone. In Turkey however, a new drone was on the rise.

In 2005, 26-year-old Selcuk Bayraktar, a doctoral student at MIT presented a small homemade drone to a group of Turkish officials. After taking over his father's engineering firm, originally founded in 1984, the company began to focus on unmanned drones.

"Boeing, Lockheed, these are big companies, right?"

Bayraktar asked

(<https://theintercept.com/2019/05/14/turkey-second-drone-age/>). "We are making those same systems. If Turkey supports this project, these drones, in five years Turkey can be at the forefront of the world, easily."

By 2007, Bayraktar had quit his PhD at MIT, and returned to build drones full-time in Turkey. A few years later, his TB2 drone would surpass Turkish Aerospace Industry's (TAI) drone, and completely replace the logic that it was better for Turkey to purchase them from the US instead of building their own.

The drones were a game changer, offering Turkish forces real time intelligence on PKK terrorist cross-border movements. By 2019, Turkey had fielded more than 75 TB2 drones, flying over 6,000 hours a month. With a range of 150 km, and a payload of 120lbs at the time, the drones cracked down on the PKK's movements and major activity. The rest quickly became history.

Having seen use in Syria, Iraq, Libya and against the PKK, only 8 years after its first flight, the affordable \$5 million TB2 drone is used by Libya, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Qatar, Turkmenistan, Oman and Pakistan.

For traditional powers, this has prompted concern over the changing power dynamics across the world. For Turkey, it's one step closer to eliminating any foreign dependence in its defence industry by 2023.

In Azerbaijan, however, it presents an alternative to a protracted, dug-in conflict, and hopes of restoring its occupied lands.

Source: TRT World



AUTHOR

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