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## Maneuver, Modernization, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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Eastern and Western perceptions of military affairs surface in the region of South Caucasus, a historic crossroad of multiple cultures and warring parties<sup>1</sup> and erupted into a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020 over a region called Nagorno-Karabakh, the mountainous enclave between two countries for which both nations maintain their cultural, national, and strategic claims. Prolonged military build-ups, defense coalition initiatives and military modernization are the backdrops for what is now called the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.



Azerbaijani forces stand in formation for the opening ceremony of exercise Rapid Trident, Yavoriv, Ukraine, Sept. 3 2018. (Photo by: Pfc. Andrea Torres, ARNG)

This article offers an assessment of the military campaign conducted in a six-week war period. The first part of the article elaborates on maneuver, terrain, and command and control. The second part highlights the decisive role of military modernization.

## **Gradually Changing Qualities of Warfare**

The region of Nagorno-Karabakh historically has become a source of rivalry between the two nations<sup>2</sup> and extended interests from the regional actors Russia and Turkey<sup>2</sup>. The European Union also sought to influence the region through the Eastern Neighborhood initiatives.

Some broader repercussions of this war have become evident. They are worth assessment in terms of qualities of warfare. The term “qualities” in this article is referred to as “a qualitative category to describe relevant differences in military conduct between two parties at war”. Qualities of warfare of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War should be discussed by highlighting the following aspects: command and control, tenants of maneuver warfare, flexibility of tactics, and the joint capabilities of the armed.

The quality of the command and control is a key capability that can disrupt or enhance operational tempo in contemporary warfare. The practical implications and theoretical works of the US Air Force colonel John Boyd laid a solid background<sup>2</sup>.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has highlighted two of the most important competing factors of Command and Control (C2) capabilities: reliability of secure communications and sensors’ integration into data sharing. For the Azerbaijanis, continuous upgrades of armed force’s capacities also included communications technology. During the war Azerbaijani armed forces conducted synchronized flanking maneuvers through southern and northern grounds towards Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>3</sup>. Given the steep elevation and reduced line of site of the area, the capability to control maneuver on two avenues of approach would suggest a more robust, timely paced C2 capability on their side. Integration of surveillance and reconnaissance sensors data into tactical decision cycle assisted advancing Azerbaijani forces. Research suggests<sup>4</sup> that technology supplied by Turkey and Israel led to enhanced situational awareness of Azerbaijani forces and rapid decision making at various tactical levels<sup>5</sup>.

Armenian forces were eager to fight on the defensive and hold prepared defenses across elevated areas<sup>6</sup>. That operational choice led to the preparation of deliberate defensive positions with a more static, landline and short distance communication capacity<sup>7</sup>. The setup of pre-planned defenses was ineffective when confronted by rapidly advancing and direct strike supported Azerbaijani units and the Arminian forces were unable to adjust C2 for a mobile defense<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, the second quality of warfare became evident, highlighting tactical differences between two adversary forces. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war showed different conduct of the maneuver warfare. The campaign fought by the Armenians was based on a static deliberate defense. That concept was developed due to the need to protect dominant high grounds in Nagorno-Karabakh provinces. Those areas have been controlled by Armenian forces since 1996. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani forces’ relied on offensive maneuver in this steep terrain and required rapid displacement and movement to provide continuous support of integrated direct and indirect fire systems. Conduct of this offensive campaign was a tactically demanding task given the restricted avenues of approach of Nagorno-Karabakh. A limited space for maneuver of weapon systems and the increased need to overwhelm the adversary with fires effects was the essential

tactical challenge. It has turned out that the success in handling this challenge caused the break-through advantage.

The success of the fire support integrated maneuver has brought overwhelming enabling effects for Azerbaijani forces. In this war tanks and armored infantry fighting vehicles were hunted as valuable targets and the neutralization and destruction of these targets significantly downgraded Armenian capabilities<sup>9</sup>. Fire engagement at longer distances were more successful on Azerbaijani side. For the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War tanks were less the agile hunters and more the hunted targets<sup>10</sup>. The success of hunting down Armenian tanks was implied by their tactical choices in the defense. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh has demonstrated that the advantage of maneuver is not based solely on unshakable tactics and exploitation of surrounding terrain. Although that could have been estimated as an operational guarantee on Armenian side<sup>11</sup>.

Military practice from that war suggests that the success of maneuver warfare would be highly dependent on integrated combat support capabilities<sup>12</sup>. Western views of maneuver warfare is based on technological enhancements. There are two examples suggesting that the technology-enabled form of maneuver warfare was more effective during the Second Nagorno Karabakh war. The first is the dominance of UAVs as an integrated weapon system and their effectiveness against armor targets<sup>13</sup>. The second is the integration and use of C2 capabilities. Azerbaijani maneuver was covered by outreaching UAV capability and target data transmission. This is a modern quality of deliberate and dynamic maneuver that requires extended situational awareness and rapid target elimination with all available weapon systems. This effectiveness of Azerbaijani offense suggests that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has brought broader implications for the changing understanding of warfare. In those high grounds deliberate defense on dominant terrain supported by massive artillery has met with rapid maneuver supported by increased situational awareness and precise strike capabilities. The later set of war fighting options has gained a winning hand.

The initial outcomes of the war suggested a more devastating fire and maneuver to be applied by Azerbaijani forces. Initial battle damage assessments indicated that Armenia lost about 6 times more tanks and about 16 times more artillery pieces, never mention the destruction of air defense positions by integrated surveillance and strike capabilities of Azerbaijani forces<sup>14</sup>. Tactical outcomes of that war suggest that advanced maneuver supported by technological capabilities has spared some additional troops for Azerbaijani forces to implement additional offensive in the north<sup>15</sup> and conduct an astounded light force maneuver to retake the highland town of Shusha<sup>16</sup>. The success at Shusha had a broad operational effect as Armenian positions were disrupted and military units were forced to abandon high ground defensive positions. Soon after Shusha fell, the Armenian prime minister declared the agreement to start negotiations for the cease fire. Thus, the takeover of historical Shusha town brought a decisive tactical victory for Azerbaijani forces.

## **The Decisive Role of Modernity**

The overview of gradual changes of qualities of warfare suggests that Azerbaijani side was well prepared and technologically advanced. The comparison of C2 capabilities, maneuver warfare execution and joint interaction suggests that those were the main qualities exploited during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Practical achievements on Azerbaijani side also suggest that technologically advanced military forces have more flexibility of where and for what to task infantry. That was the driving factor enabling their offensive maneuver on two different avenues of approach. As the war over Nagorno-Karabakh has shown, the pure role of the infantry is still essential for consolidation of the gains.

The Second Nagorno Karabakh War was different from the first one. The outstanding difference was the usage of modern technology that provided a significant dominance for Azerbaijani side. This finding suggests that there are a few key lessons to be learned from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Firstly, there is an increased need to have a reliable and adaptive decision cycle in contemporary war campaign. That decision cycle needs to be agile and resilient despite of environment features, operational changes, and adversary effects.

The second lesson suggests that armor formations need to be protected and exploited more thoroughly. Danger to armor maneuver is comes from terrain obstacles, mine fields and concentrated fire power of adversary and armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). As Gen. James C. McConville, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, has suggested, unmanned aerial vehicles should be estimated as a new improvised explosive device type of threat for the next ten years<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the enablement of maneuver warfare implies a two-fold solution for protective armor maneuver. Dispersed, fast and coordinated maneuver forms one way for solution, as technological innovation for early detection and neutralization of selective type of aerial platforms leads to important supplementary role.

The third lesson indicates the importance of the joint approach to the application of military forces. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War two different war fighting capabilities have collided. The outcome of this war reassures that there is no second place in the contemporary war. More than that, this war teaches us that the joint force employment based on speed, range and convergence provide victorious achievements. The contemporary warfare has become a competition based on joint capabilities of irregular warfare elements, regular forces, and combat support empowered by educated, well trained specialists. All needed elements must be addressed seriously in order to adjust and build-up contemporary war fighting capabilities.

## **Conclusions**

Southern Caucasus became an illustrative case of how different qualities of warfare can compete on the contemporary battleground. The campaign over Nagorno-Karabakh was waged between two forces with different operational visions. Azerbaijan have forced a deliberate extension of armed force capacities, in cooperation with Turkey and other partners have strived for a better trained force that would manage advanced technology. Meanwhile, Armenia has concentrated on quantitative capabilities of

weapon systems positioned to dominate and defend key high grounds of Nagorno-Karabakh.

It turned out that the qualities of warfare based on rapid communication, enhanced maneuver and integration of precise strike capabilities has played a winning part in this war. This suggests that the Western way of war based on technological developments and joint force capabilities has been adjusted by Azerbaijani forces. Thus, the modernity had a decisive impact in this war.

Observations provided in this article are worth further considerations. That is due to two reasons. First, the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh is not fully determined and might cause additional escalation in the future. Second, the outcomes of this war are examined by regional powers, Russia being one of them. NATO allies should not disregard the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war but pay a sufficient attention to qualities of warfare demonstrated there. This is a helpful case analysis that could assist in strategic decisions of how to adjust and improve war fighting capabilities aimed at confronting near-peer competitors.

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## End Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Osinga F., "The Enemy as a Complex Adaptive System: John Boyd and Airpower in the Postmodern Era", Olsen A., ed., *Airpower Reborn: The Strategic Concepts of John Warden and John Boyd*, Maryland, Naval Institute Press, 2015, p. 48-54.

<sup>3</sup> *Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis*, Lithuanian Land Force Command Staff, G2 Intelligence Analysis Branch, Vilnius, December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Shaikh S., Rumbaugh W., "The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense", Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>, 2021 07 29.

<sup>5</sup> Mirza H., Presentation of Azerbaijani tactical solutions and aspects of war, Conference of the Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis, Vilnius: Lithuanian Military Academy, March 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis*, Lithuanian Land Force Command Staff, G2 Intelligence Analysis Branch, Vilnius, December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Mirza H., Presentation of Azerbaijani tactical solutions and aspects of war, Conference of the Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis, Vilnius: Lithuanian Military Academy, March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> *Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis*, Lithuanian Land Force Command Staff, G2 Intelligence Analysis Branch, Vilnius, December 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis*, Lithuanian Land Force Command Staff, G2 Intelligence Analysis Branch, Vilnius, December 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds N., Watling J., "Your Tanks Cannot Hide", RUSI Defense Systems publication, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/your-tanks-cannot-hide>, 2020 03 20.

<sup>11</sup> Remler P., Giragosian R., et al, "OSCE Minsk Group: Lessons from the Past and Tasks for the Future", OSCE In-sights Vol. 6, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748922339-06>;

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<sup>13</sup> Watking J., Dr., “The Key to Armenia’s Tank Losses: The Sensors, not the Shooters”, RUSI publication, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/the-key-to-armenia%E2%80%99s-tank-losses-the-sensors-not-the-shooters>, 2020 06 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Nagorno-Karabakh War Analysis*, Lithuanian Land Force Command Staff, G2 Intelligence Analysis Branch, Vilnius, December 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kramer A., “Azerbaijan Claims Capture of Key Town in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *New York Times*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/08/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan-shusha.html?searchResultPosition=3>, 2021 07 25.

<sup>17</sup> *General James McConville: “Not Fighting the Last War Better”*, *Western Way of War, Podcast Series, Episode 58*, 5 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/podcasts/western-way-of-war/episode-58-general-james-mcconville-not-fighting-last-war-better>.

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