
The Time Is Right for Ukraine to Revisit the Lessons of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 732
January 2022

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The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh that began in late September 2020 and lasted 44 days generated extensive analyses among journalists, academics, politicians, and other experts, each drawing lessons for their respective fields. As in most countries, especially those sharing a post-Soviet legacy with Armenia and Azerbaijan, Ukraine's experts closely monitored the conflict. From the many analyses of Azerbaijan's victory over the combined forces of Armenia and the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, a substantial number focused on Baku's decisive use of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 combat drones. What many Ukraine watchers seemed to have extrapolated from Azerbaijan's success was a need for Ukraine to enhance its military capabilities, especially drone technology, to stand a better chance of countering Russian aggression. However, the role of military balance in the Russo-Ukrainian war's eventual resolution might be misplaced.

Contrasting Security Challenges

While Ukraine has already been receiving security assistance from its Western partners, calls to [send](#) more weapons to Ukraine intensified after Russia started [amassing](#) troops and heavy weaponry on Ukraine's border – first in the spring of 2021 and then with more alarming deployments in November until the end of 2021 on a scale [indicative](#) of possible preparations for an imminent invasion. In response to the West's calls for de-escalation, the Kremlin [handed](#) Washington two draft treaties obliging the United States and NATO to provide legal guarantees of sweeping security assurances, including forswearing eastward NATO expansion and removing any troops or weapons from countries that joined the Alliance after 1997. However, Moscow's unrealistic demands and the manner in which they were presented and publicized suggested this was not a genuine invitation

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to negotiations but rather a potential [justification](#) for an invasion following “failed negotiations.”

In light of rising tensions between Russia and the West and renewed calls to ship more weapons to Ukraine, including combat drones, conversations about the pivotal use of drones in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war have resurfaced as well. However, comparisons between Azerbaijan’s and Ukraine’s security challenges and military capabilities are misguided. While Ukraine has traditionally sympathized with Azerbaijan due to perceived parallelism between the two countries’ challenges with self-proclaimed “republics” supported by Russia, this parallelism is flawed for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, Azerbaijan’s and Ukraine’s “breakaway republics” are drastically different problem sets. To Ukraine, supporting Azerbaijan has been a pragmatic choice, driven by economic and security interests (Black Sea security ranking first among them).

But perhaps a more significant factor in Ukraine’s diplomatic support of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is Ukraine’s [growing](#) strategic cooperation with Turkey. Capitalizing on existing narratives of the role of Turkish-made drones in Azerbaijan’s military successes, Ukrainian leaders re-emphasized both the importance of UAV technology and Turkish partnership. Thus, Ukraine’s foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba [said](#), “drones are needed to deter Russia so that Russia thinks twice before planning any escalation or any large-scale attack on Ukraine.” Some analysts [attached](#) even more significance to Turkey and its UAVs by speculating that, much like in Azerbaijan, “Turkey could tip the balance in the Ukraine-Russia standoff.” Ukraine has since purchased several Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, [signed](#) an agreement with Turkey to build a facility in Ukraine for the upgrading and maintenance of armed Turkish UAVs, and even successfully [deployed](#) a combat drone against pro-Russian forces in Donbas.

While Ukraine should continue modernizing its capabilities (as I [noted](#) in a piece on the early parliamentary elections in Armenia last year), a comparative analysis focused on military balance is prone to overlooking important geopolitical contexts and strategic cultures that inform the political choices of individual leaders, capabilities notwithstanding. Azerbaijan’s use of combat UAVs undoubtedly [offers](#) valuable tactical lessons to Ukraine. On strategic and political levels, however, Armenia’s experience presents more valuable insights. Chief among them is a tragic lesson of Armenian war optimism—stemming from previous military victories, idealistic nationalism, groupthink, and overreliance on international support—that contributed to its ultimate defeat.

Armenia’s War Optimism

Armenian leaders’ belligerent rhetoric [against](#) Azerbaijan leading up to the renewed fire exchanges in September 2020 and self-inflated confidence in Armenia’s ability to defend

itself led to serious strategic miscalculations. This misguided war optimism was in no small part [informed](#) by Armenia's military victory over Azerbaijan in the early 1990s when Armenia took control over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, despite facing an opponent significantly larger in population, landmass, and resources. At that time, Armenia's military success was largely attributed to Azerbaijan's internal structural deficiencies (including poor morale and leadership) and Russia's support for Yerevan. Based on this dated perception of military superiority, Armenian leaders seemed to have underestimated the amount of growth Azerbaijan had undergone in the past twenty-five years, not only in terms of their economic power and military capabilities, but also in terms of national mobilization, resolve, and political will to regain lost territories.

Even after suffering setbacks in the onset of hostilities, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [insisted](#) there could be no negotiations with Azerbaijan, mirroring Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev's [refusal](#) to de-escalate, despite continuous pressure from the United Nations, United States, and Russia to end hostilities. Such short-sighted nationalism also contributed to the drowning out of dissenting voices, leading to groupthink and fatally poor decisions by Pashinyan's government. The political consensus in Armenia [advocated](#) for a short-sighted militaristic solution, including poor defense procurement decisions, effectively turning young Armenian soldiers into cannon fodder.

Armenian war optimism was also based on a naive expectation that Russia would rush to its defense once it became clear that Azerbaijan was, as Michael Kofman and Leonid Nersisyan [wrote](#), "much better positioned in a sustained war of attrition" and would "eventually exhaust Armenia's military." After all, in addition to deep historical ties with Russia, Armenia is also a member of two Russia-sponsored organizations, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led collective defense organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, neither of those memberships helped Armenia in the end.

And while another foreign power, Turkey, did not try to hide its political and military support for Baku, Russia did not follow suit, claiming that CSTO obligations applied to Armenia's recognized territory, not to the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh in Nagorno-Karabakh. As Jeffrey Mankoff [argued](#), Russia did not see a need for a large-scale intervention, which could trigger sanctions and other costs, to secure its interests in the region. In other words, Armenia's loss in Nagorno-Karabakh was not perceived to subtract from Russia's standing in the region. Quite the opposite, Russia's optimal scenario included preserving its relationship with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia's eventual successful imposition of a ceasefire on both belligerents was further proof of its leverage with both sides.

Russia's Strategic Calculus

Ukraine's [improved](#) military readiness and capabilities, both defensive and offensive, will certainly help Ukraine increase the cost of escalation for Russia. But these (costly) capabilities are unlikely to alter Russia's strategic decision-making at this time. The scale and scope of the Kremlin's military engagements will remain proportional to specific political objectives in a given theater. It is for this reason that Russia did not rush to defend its ally Armenia against Azerbaijan (even though it could) because such an intervention would not achieve any of Russia's political objectives.

Similarly, Azerbaijan's military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh was not simply a function of its military capabilities. It served to achieve a long-conceived political objective of regaining lost territories. By that logic, if Russia needs to coerce Ukraine into making significant political concessions, then it might dial up accordingly (as was the case with the 2015 battle for Debaltseve, for example, when a massive loss of territory forced then-president Petro Poroshenko back to the negotiating table to sign the Minsk-II agreement, favorable to Russia).

Thus far, denying Ukraine territorial integrity has not yielded any significant concessions from Ukraine and led to prolonged Western sanctions (as Olena Sotnyk and I argued in a *Krytyka* [piece](#)). In other words, a limited conventional war in Donbas has failed to deliver the political outcomes Russia was pursuing. Given this lack of progress, exacerbated by Ukraine's [increased](#) cooperation with NATO and President Volodymyr Zelensky's anti-Russia [pivot](#), Moscow seems to be in a self-imposed rush to [change](#) the status quo by military means. Russia's current military posture indicates a willingness to use conventional forces in a large-scale offensive in Ukraine not only to twist Kyiv's arm but, more importantly, to force Western leaders to rewrite the post-Cold War security order in Europe by giving Russia control over its sphere of influence.

While the United States and NATO have so far [refused](#) to compromise on key principles of European security architecture, including other countries' freedom of making foreign policy choices, leaders in the West have indicated the willingness to hold talks with Russia. However, fears are rising that the window for a diplomatic solution is narrow or may have been missed. Regardless of whether, when, or how Russia initiates another military offensive on Ukraine, restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty will require a political solution.

Armenia's Lessons for Ukraine

Armenia's recent war with Azerbaijan illuminates our consideration of political solutions to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

First, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war was a lesson for Yerevan in misguided over-reliance on international partners and allies. That Russia proved to be an unreliable partner to Armenia was hardly a new lesson. Russia's abandonment of its commitments and promises to its partners, however formalized, is notorious. Ukraine learned this lesson the hard way. Like Armenia, Ukraine has a compelling story of a long and tragic pursuit of self-determination and independence. And while the military, economic, and political support of the United States and other Western partners has been steadfast, Ukrainians should be careful not to overestimate this assistance, especially in light of recent signals of the West's [dissatisfaction](#) with Ukraine's perceived lack of progress in implementing Western-backed reforms and fighting corruption.

The West has so far shown resolve in not giving in to Russia's demands, including U.S. [promises](#) to increase security assistance to Ukraine (beyond the most recent [increase](#) of \$50 million a year totaling \$300 million in 2022), the G-7 [warning](#) Russia of the harshest economic sanctions yet, and NATO expressing its unwavering support of Ukrainian sovereignty, including the freedom to make geopolitical choices. However, the Alliance [stopped short](#) of promising Ukraine lethal assistance. Besides, while there is bipartisan support for punishing Russia with harsher sanctions if it ups the ante in Ukraine, the U.S. Congress recently [voted](#) not to include sanctions on Nord Stream II in the fiscal 2022 National Defense Authorization Act.

Another cautionary tale from the Armenian experience is the dangers of a political culture mired in groupthink, which leads to misguided decisions and miscalculations, especially in the context of protracted war fatigue and deepened social and political polarization. The Ukrainian government should be wary of groupthink in pursuit of political consensus and public approval—tempting though it might be—lest they adopt quick fixes absent empirical analysis and long-term vision. For example, in pursuit of countering malign foreign influence, the Ukrainian government should be careful to separate Russian propaganda from dissenting opinions.

Independent analyst Brian Milakovsky, who has been living in eastern Ukraine since the war started, [warned](#) of the danger of dismissing domestic voices critical of Ukraine's "Euroatlantic aspirations" as Russian propaganda at the risk of not only violating freedom of speech but also creating significant blind spots in the government's understanding of internal political and social dynamics. Additionally, Zelensky's increasing [attacks](#) on "unfriendly" media, government [censorship](#), and persecution of opposition under the guise of fighting oligarchs (notably a new tax law [targeting](#) oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's largest taxpayer and employer, and treason charges [against](#) Poroshenko), have cultivated a culture of personal vendettas, nepotism, and fear of persecution. Zelensky's obsession with his party's ratings, political consensus, and fighting dissent at the expense of meaningful reforms and national security priorities may prove catastrophic for Ukraine.

Conclusion

While the [tactical value](#) of UAV technology is unquestionable, Azerbaijan's decisive use of drones is not an appropriate place for Ukraine to draw inspiration or encouragement in favor of a military solution in its own security challenges. This is not to say that Ukraine should not continue modernizing both its armed forces and the military-industrial complex. It should, and it has been. And the collective West should continue providing security assistance to Ukraine to bolster its defenses.

Armenia's optimism and subsequent losses should be instructive for Ukraine. As we consider the tactical, strategic, and political lessons of military conflicts in other countries, the most important lesson among them is the irreversible trauma of the loss of human life and the irreparable damage wars cause to societies for generations to come. Drawing lessons from other people's tragic experiences and mistakes is but an opportunity for self-reflection. Political and military leaders should be careful not to draw self-validating conclusions and flawed analogies from other conflicts and carefully consider opposing points of view in search of best solutions specific to Ukraine's unique situation, despite its entrapment in a great power contest between the West and Russia. While the signs for a looming Russian offensive appear worrying, it is not a foregone conclusion. The Biden administration has announced [plans](#) to hold talks with the Kremlin, in coordination with NATO and OSCE, to ease tensions and establish reciprocity. For a successful resolution, all parties involved should be [willing](#) to recognize and address not only each other's aspirations but each other's security delusions as well. No stone should be left unturned to prevent more deaths in Ukraine, only to return to the inevitability of political negotiations.