

Whither the Tank?

The five-week offensive by Azerbaijan against the Armenian-inhabited enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh—the Azeris' internationally recognized territory—has ended in a clear victory for the attacker. Tens of thousands of Armenians have fled their homes in the land [they call Artsakh](#), which they had inhabited continuously for over two millennia.

This is yet another defeat of embattled Christendom facing insurgent Islam. Azerbaijan's offensive was supported by Turkey, which provided advisors, weapons, and—significantly—jihadist [volunteers from Syria](#). Russia and other actors know that the [regime of Azeri President Ilhan Aliyev](#) could not have succeeded without Ankara's active encouragement. They were presented with a *fait accompli*.

The [neo-Ottoman grand strategy](#) of Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, steadily applied for almost two decades, has been reaffirmed with gusto. In strategic terms the tiny Armenia and its unrecognized enclave totaling 3 million people [were in conflict with Turkey](#), a regional power of over 80 million, rather than just Azerbaijan and its 10 million people, as Israeli analyst Lev Stessin pointed out.

Short of a decisive Russian intervention to prevent the war, the outcome was fatally preordained. Russia's ambivalence was enhanced by strained relations between President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a “pro-Western reformer” openly skeptical of his country's alliance with Moscow.

The world has remained largely indifferent to the war's course and its immediate consequences. The political crisis has been contained for now [through Russian mediation](#). The remnant of the embattled enclave which is still in Armenian hands is now effectively indefensible, devoid of strategic or operational

depth. Beyond the ceasefire agreement's five-year term its future is uncertain, and probably grim.

Military analysts are excited about the course of the Caucasian conflict regardless of its limited geostrategic implications. They see signs of a major shift in the balance of forces on the battlefield away from heavy armor and in favor of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). As a former military attaché friend of mine told me, "This fall we have witnessed a mini-revolution in military affairs."

Cheap and numerous drones, supplied by Turkey and Israel, gave Azerbaijan a decisive edge at a fraction of the cost of maintaining a fleet of manned fighter-bombers which otherwise would be in charge of attacking tanks, armored personnel carriers, trucks, and troop concentrations.

In the first two weeks of the attack Azerbaijan had destroyed over 200 Armenian tanks and other armored fighting vehicles while losing fewer than 50 of its own, according to [impartial sources](#). The imbalance was almost entirely due to the Azeris' command of the air, which was established early. The Azeris were even able to film the gory proceedings undisturbed from their stationary airborne devices, perhaps contributing to the eventual collapse of Armenian morale.

The Azeris did not rely on expensive heavy drones, but used dozens of Turkish-made [Bayraktar TB-2](#) drones instead. Flying at just 80 mph, the TB2 carries four laser-guided missiles. They are light, but deadly to armor and manpower alike. They also deployed Israeli-developed drone models that are capable of "loitering" in the air for hours, and converted several antiquated Soviet An-2 biplanes into bomb-dropping drones.

Cheap drones make ground forces highly exposed and provide low-cost platforms for precision guided weapons. They quickly dispatched the bulk of Armenian armor and air defense systems. The pivotal role played by the inexpensive armed drone

appeared to some analysts to be a military game changer that could accelerate the demise of the conventional tank.

But does this signify the end of the tank? Not at all. Since its debut at Cambrai in 1917, the tank has provided a powerful mix of three key battlefield factors: mobility, firepower, and protection. Its imminent demise has been predicted many times, notably in the context of [William Lind's *Fourth Generation Warfare*](#).

I know and respect Lind, but he is simply wrong on this matter. The [Main Battle Tank \(MBT\)](#), supposedly vulnerable in urban zones and allegedly easy to destroy by dispersed irregulars, is still the indispensable weapon system. Current and former field commanders agree on that. The key is to use the MBT in integrated combat teams. Tanks are indeed vulnerable when deployed on their own and the Armenians fatally made the mistake of doing so.

The underlying concept of integrating mobility, firepower, and protection is still sound. Too many civilian critics of the tank look at the beast in isolation. If not used correctly it is indeed an expensive, clumsy, and vulnerable device. This was famously shown in May 1940 by the failure of the French Army to create independent armored units. By dispersing their armor as infantry support, they ensured its defeat.

In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel made the mistake of trusting its armor and air force to act in tandem in dealing with the Egyptian and Syrian armies. Belatedly and at great cost, they grasped that the key to operational success is creating combat teams that integrate armored personnel carrier-mounted infantry, combat engineers, and long-range artillery.

The Armenians made the mistake of clumping their armor in tight formations, with no visible effort to disperse or camouflage their MBTs. The Serbian Army [did the exact opposite](#)

during the Kosovo conflict in the late 1990s, to great effect. The lesson is enduring: dispersal, camouflage, and integration with mechanized infantry, artillery, and combat engineers are the keys to success.

Had the Armenians acted accordingly, creating their own stockpiles of UAVs, the outcome could have been different. Instead, they spent \$100 million on six state-of-the-art Russian jets, which didn't even take part in the operations. They could have purchased many anti-drone technology and anti-aircraft artillery devices.

In operational terms, the defeat of the Armenians was due to their flawed operational doctrine, and not to their reliance on tanks as such. In strategic terms, their defeat was inevitable because Putin did not feel that defending Armenian interests in the Caucasus was nearly as vital to Russia as defending South Ossetia or the Donbas further north. *Vae victis...*

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