



Karabakh War Might Spur Russian Attack UAV Development

OE Watch Commentary: As reported last month (*OE Watch*, December 2020, “Early Lessons-Learned from Nagorno-Karabakh”) Russian military analysts continue to examine how Azerbaijani forces prevailed over their Armenian counterparts. The popular daily, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, interviewed the deputy director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), Konstantin Makienko, regarding his assessment of “Azerbaijan’s victory over Armenia.” The accompanying excerpt from his analysis merits closer scrutiny.

Makienko begins by asserting that “Turkey’s participation [on the Azeri side] was, of course, very significant or even decisive.” He claims that it is likely that “the entire operation was planned by the Turkish headquarters,” and that it was not just planning, but that “Turkish officers provided support both at the headquarters level and directly on the battlefield.” He further states that, “Turkish aviation carried out jamming of radio communications of the Armenian troops.” Makienko goes on to assert that “in the Karabakh conflict, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have become not just a means of reconnaissance, target designation and carriers of high-precision weapons. In this war, with their help, air supremacy was first established.”



Russian Attack UAV Sukhoi S-70 Okhotnik (still in development).

Source: Wikimedia Commons. <https://bit.ly/2LvUo20>, Attribution: CCA SA 4.0 Intl

Makienko also describes Russia’s continued inability to produce and field an attack UAV. He recounts attending a press conference 15-20 years ago with the Russian Air Force Commander, and asking “why are we lagging behind in the development of unmanned aircraft and, in particular, in the creation of strike drones?” At the time, the commander answered, “why do we need them? We have enough planes and pilots.” Later, questions developed in the military over “who should have command of unmanned aircraft—pilots or ground forces? Who needs it more?” Makienko asserts that no one took ownership for producing an attack UAV, and the “programs for the development of unmanned aircraft were not considered a priority in the system of research and development work of the Ministry of Defense.” Even today, he argues that “there are still no centralized inter-service management bodies for such programs, including the creation of systems necessary for unmanned aviation (engines, optoelectronic systems, control systems), no proper political and administrative support, no purposeful policy to create centers of competence in this area.”

Makienko concludes the interview by repeating “as of today, there are still no attack drones in Russia... [and that] we are 20-25 years behind our American ‘partners’ in this area.” He posits that “in a typical domestic style, the demonstration of the use of drones in the Karabakh war will spur Russian unmanned programs, forcing, finally, some in Russia to finally see the importance in fielding such a weapon system.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“...As of today, there are still no attack drones in Russia....”

Source: Olga Bozhiev, “Эксперт объяснил, почему Россия отстала в области ударных дронов на 25 лет (An expert explains why Russia is 25 years behind in the field of attack drones),” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 5 December 2020. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/12/05/ekspert-obyasnil-pochemu-rossiya-otstala-v-oblasti-udarnykh-dronov-na-25-let.html>

The Karabakh war, its course and results are being actively discussed, including in Russia. It is not uncommon to hear statements that Azerbaijan’s victory over Armenia is actually a victory of Turkish weapons over Russian ones. And it was not Armenia that lost in this war, but Russia. Are these statements true? Is the Karabakh war really a bell for our defense industry, which has not done everything for the Russian army? Why don’t we still have strike drones? These questions were asked by “MK” analyst, deputy director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) Konstantin Makienko.

Has Turkey increased its military presence in Azerbaijan following the war?

-Yes, it is quite obvious that the Turkish presence in Azerbaijan has increased dramatically.... First of all, Azerbaijan won, of course.... But Turkey’s participation was, of course, very significant or even decisive.



Continued: Karabakh War Might Spur Russian Attack UAV Development

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Has Turkey increased its military presence in Azerbaijan following the war?

-Yes, it is quite obvious that the Turkish presence in Azerbaijan has increased dramatically.... First of all, Azerbaijan won, of course.... But Turkey's participation was, of course, very significant or even decisive.

In all likelihood, the entire operation was planned by the Turkish headquarters. During the operation itself, Turkish officers provided support both at the headquarters level and directly on the battlefield. There is good reason to believe that Turkish advisers were present in battle formations at the battalion level and above, and in some cases were also at the company level.

Turkish aviation carried out jamming and jamming of radio communications of the Armenian troops...

Did the war in Karabakh show the increased importance of attack unmanned aircraft?

-Of course. But unmanned vehicles in this case are interesting mainly as another mechanism for reducing the cost of using precision weapons and increasing their proliferation.... But the main thing – I draw your attention to this fact – in the Karabakh conflict, unmanned aerial vehicles have become not just a means of reconnaissance, target designation and carriers of high-precision weapons. In this war, with their help, air supremacy was first established.

So why the Russian army, in contrast to the Turkish or Israeli, lagged behind in this segment of weapons?

-The lag of the Russian Armed Forces in the implementation and development of unmanned technologies is primarily caused not by some technological reasons, but is a consequence of problems with the definition of development priorities.

-Exactly! I remember very well how 15-20 years ago at a press conference I asked the Air Force Commander: why are we lagging behind in the development of unmanned aircraft and, in particular, in the creation of strike drones. To which he answered absolutely seriously: why do we need them? We have enough planes and pilots.

...And at the General Staff, everyone was arguing: who should give command of unmanned aircraft - pilots or groundmen? Who needs it more? And it turned out that no one needed her.

-Yes, programs for the development of unmanned aircraft were not considered a priority in the system of research and development work of the Ministry of Defense. And this has become a very important reason for our lag. We are still reaping the fruits of that policy. There are still no centralized inter-service management bodies for such programs, including the creation of systems necessary for unmanned aviation (engines, optoelectronic systems, control systems), no proper political and administrative support, no purposeful policy to create centers of competence in this area.

Programs for the creation of unmanned aerial vehicles are still “on their own” and are left to the mercy of industrial organizations, sometimes rather weak. As a result, we have only a mass of light small apparatuses with extensive use of imported components.

But the use of imported components in military equipment for the Russian army is prohibited. So there is still a problem with attack drones?

-As of today, there are still no attack drones in Russia.... That is, we are 20-25 years behind our American “partners” in this area.

But now, especially after the Karabakh war, have we started to reduce this gap?

We are maturing ... In my opinion, so far in the domestic military-political circles there is no clear understanding that unmanned aerial vehicles in combination with high-precision weapons offer a cheaper and more economical version of modern warfare... So, perhaps, in a typical domestic style, the demonstration of the use of drones in the Karabakh war will spur Russian unmanned programs, forcing, finally, some of the Russian men to ‘cross themselves.’ Thunder has burst out.