

RSC | REGIONAL STUDIES CENTER

NAGORNO-KARABAKH SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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 Armenian-held territories of Azerbaijan

As an independent think tank based in Yerevan, Armenia, the Regional Studies Center (RSC) regularly monitors the military security situation related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As part of this effort, the RSC produces a series of brief analytical security products, or “Situational Assessments,” in conjunction with our monthly monitoring of ceasefire violations. This latest “RSC Nagorno-Karabakh Situational Assessment” covers the most recent escalation, from 4-11 December, in which at least half of dozen deaths were reported from all sides, a military UAV was shot down and a tank unit was used for the first time since the signing of the 1994 ceasefire.

Our Situational Assessments are derived from our analysis of force posture, order of battle and deployment, threat perception and broader trends in procurement. The RSC also regularly produces a set of policy recommendations, targeting both the local parties to the conflict as well as the international community, aimed at defusing tension and promoting a de-escalation of tension.

SUMMARY

Within the past ten days, there has been yet another significant *escalation of hostilities* over Nagorno Karabakh, with mounting violations of the fragile ceasefire that resulted in at least 6 deaths of all sides. The latest round of clashes began with an initial incident on 4 December, when an Azerbaijani reconnaissance unit attempted to probe defensive positions along the “line of contact” on the Karabakh border with Azerbaijan. That initial Azerbaijani operation was repulsed, but both a Karabakh conscript and an Azerbaijani officer were reportedly killed in the incident.

The most notable development in this recent escalation, however, was the active *use of an armor unit, for the first time since the 1994 ceasefire*, when Azerbaijani deployed battle tanks in an assault on 9 December. At least two Azerbaijani tanks fired nine rounds targeting frontline positions along the southeastern defensive perimeter of Karabakh. Operationally, however, the use of direct fire by the tanks, rather than the more effective deployment of artillery, such as howitzers, suggest that the Azerbaijani side was either seeking to bolster their firepower in a frontal assault on defensive positions, or equally plausible, demonstrated their continued inability for the effective use of combined arms for offensive operations.

During the overnight period of 8-9 December, there was a *surge in ceasefire violations* prior to the deployment of Azerbaijani armor, with reports of a sustained assault by Azerbaijani forces consisting of “more than 300 mortar shells and 27 rocket firings.” During the first night, Azerbaijani sniper fire also killed a 24-year old Karabakh contract serviceman and an Armenian officer the next day. Ceasefire violations increased on the night of 9 December, and clashes continued on 11 December, two Armenian soldiers were killed in separate incidents by Azerbaijani sniper fire and Armenian forces downed an Israeli-made Orbiter-2M Azerbaijani military unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) or “drone.”

More Offensive Weapons

Yet it is the introduction of much more *modern offensive weapons systems* by the Azerbaijani side that is the most significant concern. Far exceeding more limited incidents of changes of sniper fire, the increasingly common use of mortars, grenade launchers and light artillery has greatly increased both the severity of attacks and the number of casualties. More recently, Azerbaijani forces have also *expanded this arsenal*, with reports of repeated fire from mortars (60mm, 82mm and 120mm), AGS-17 and RPG-7 grenade launchers, as well as TR-107 rocket launchers. Moreover, the Azerbaijani use of the latter weapon system, the Turkish-made TR-107, is also a significant development, especially given the fact that the vehicle-mounted 107mm multiple rocket launcher (MBRL) is highly mobile and provides intensive close range fire support for small and rapidly moving units, further heightening the risk of more robust, and more effective, assaults in the future.

Higher Casualties

Over the past several years, the escalation in ceasefire violations, direct clashes and outright assaults have led to a marked *increase in casualties on all sides*. Most significantly, ceasefire violations are no longer measures in the number of sniper fire incidents, but rather, are now measured in the number of casualties. For example, since 2013, the rate of casualties (both soldiers and civilians) has almost tripled. The total number of deaths from these clashes stood at 19 soldiers in 2003, but surged in 2014, with 64 soldiers and 8 civilians losing their lives, representing the highest level of deaths in the over twenty years since the ceasefire agreement. For the 11 months of this year, there has been at least 53 military fatalities and another 3 civilian deaths on all sides.

The Broader Significance

In terms of the significance of this latest escalation, there are four key components:

- **greater operational intensity**, whereby recent ceasefire violations have included the use of mortars and grenade launchers, well beyond more routine sniper fire, and evident in the November 2014 downing of a Karabakh Mi-24 army helicopter, as well as the **first use of armor** since the May 1994 ceasefire;
- **increased operational tempo**, with much more frequent attacks that also include more advanced reconnaissance missions and probes of defensive positions involving better trained Azerbaijani units brought in from Baku and endowed with greater operational autonomy and authority than standard front-line units;
- less deterrence and **more willingness to use force**, as Azerbaijan's force posture has become significantly more assertive, rooted in a sense of frustration over the peace process;
- **expanded battlespace**, with Azerbaijani attacks on Armenia proper, targeting largely civilian population centers in the southern and north-eastern regions along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, as well as the risk of a possible new "air war" dimension to the theater of operations, with the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or "drones" along the "line of contact" separating Karabakh forces from the Azerbaijani side. This also contributes to the escalation of attacks due to the benefit of more accurate real-time reconnaissance and operational intelligence from the UAVs.

The Timing of the Escalation

Largely reaffirming the role of diplomatic activity and domestic political considerations as drivers of Azerbaijan's offensive operations, the timing of this recent escalation stems from several factors:

- A move **related to the upcoming presidential summit meeting** between the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders later this month, as part of the Karabakh peace process. As usual, a surge in Azerbaijani ceasefire violations and an increase in offensive operations tend to coincide with the diplomatic activity of the OSCE Minsk Group mediators, this recent escalation represents an attempt by Azerbaijan to strengthen its diplomatic position prior to the presidential summit (for more on this element of the Azerbaijani strategy, see below);
- A belated **response to Russia**, following Azerbaijani concern over the visit to Armenia of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on 9 November. Although the subsequent Russian move to bolster its forces in Armenia, with the deployment of Mi-24P combat and Mi-8MT transport helicopters on 9 December, is a much stronger trigger, the launch of Azerbaijani operations on 4 December suggest that the Russian deployment was more of a factor in the heightening of the escalation, and not necessarily as a driver for the start of hostilities;
- An **inaccurate reading of the domestic situation within Armenia**, whereby Azerbaijan sensed an opportunity for military gain based on its assessment of internal instability within Armenia over the country's constitutional referendum on 9 December. This further reveals the danger of miscalculation specifically, and threat misperception in general, stemming from a lack of awareness or analysis of the domestic situation within the country.

The Azerbaijani Strategy

Beyond the military context, it is important to understand the timing and context of this escalation. Generally, the broader series of Azerbaijani attacks are driven by a unique set of factors, ranging from the diplomatic activity of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process to domestic political considerations by the Azerbaijani leadership. This presents a unique challenge, as the pattern of military operations do not necessarily follow military science or logic, making the application of diplomatic or political pressure difficult and greatly weakening any effective deterrence.

Moreover, there are five key components of the Azerbaijani strategy:

- The first element of the Azerbaijani strategy is to rely on *military escalation as a way to bolster diplomatic leverage* within the peace process. Although this has never delivered any tangible or demonstrable diplomatic dividends, and usually tends to only weaken the Azerbaijani position within the negotiations, this posture is also driven by a justified degree of frustration with the peace process, and a general disdain for diplomacy and, at times, directly expressed at the mediators themselves;
- Second, Azerbaijan has attempted to *widen the conflict to draw Armenia more directly into the conflict and to provoke an Armenian over-reaction*. This is evident in the pronounced expansion of the geography of fighting, well beyond the “line of contact” separating Karabakh from Azerbaijan proper, largely targeting more vulnerable civilian population centers in Armenia’s north-eastern and southern border areas. Although this strategy has failed to provoke an Armenian overreaction, it has fostered the development of an Armenian policy of “overwhelming response,” aimed at retaliating for Azerbaijani attacks, but which also contributes to a dangerous “spiraling up” of the conflict;
- The third component of the strategy consists of a *deeper trend of an underlying military buildup* by the Azerbaijani side. Although the military buildup has included a steady surge in defense spending and a recent procurement of more modern, serious weapons systems, the absence of real defense reform or any attempt to tackle corruption within the armed forces have tended to negate any real improvement in Azerbaijan’s combat readiness or force capabilities, however;
- The fourth element is rooted in the *domestic political situation* in Azerbaijan, driven by a politically convenient use of nationalism to distract from a crackdown on civil society and stemming from the inherent challenges to the Azerbaijani leadership from a pronounced lack of legitimacy;
- A fifth component of the Azerbaijani strategy is a more recent recalculation of the geopolitical approach. This recalculation is based on a *shift in perception that sees Russia as the key to the conflict*. Stemming from Azerbaijan’s perception that the West has little leverage, this is also based on Russia’s reassertion of its power and influence throughout the former Soviet Union, or the so-called “near abroad.” This shift has been only further deepened by the limited Azerbaijani interest in the West, or the European Union more specifically, and by a more cooperative approach by Russia. Although Azerbaijan neither fully embraces nor trusts Russia, this latter factor is especially significant, as it has been matched by the emergence of Russia as the primary arms provider to Azerbaijan, and has prompted new doubts over Russia’s military and security commitments to Armenia.