

Opinion – The Case for a New Armenian Armed Forces Doctrine

Written by Jack Dulgarian

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JACK DULGARIAN, MAY 18 2025

Survival has remained the most fundamental principle in the minds of Armenians. Despite genocide, ethnic cleansing, and geopolitical location in the crossroads of hostile neighbors, Armenian civilization's survival for over two thousand years is tremendously impressive. There have been many questions since at least the 2016 Four-Day War regarding Yerevan's national security strategy, military preparedness, and arms procurement. In a 2022 academic article for the U.S. Army War College, Armenian Colonel Zhirayr Amirkhanyan wrote that, "the root cause for the defeat of the Armenian forces in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020) was flawed military doctrine inherited from the Soviet Union."

Colonel Amirkhanyan, who is the current Assistant to the Chief of the General Staff for the Armenian Ministry of Defense, articulated three crucial arguments. First, he analyzed how Azerbaijan was able to defeat his country's armed forces. Second, he criticized Soviet Doctrine as a viable method of warfighting for Armenia, and third, he outlined several lessons Yerevan did not learn in the 30-year period from the First Nagorno-Karabakh War through the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. This analysis will bulwark Colonel Amirkhanyan's criticism on Armenia's reliance to the Soviet method of warfighting. It will offer new considerations for Yerevan to focus on maneuver and survival.

Soviet Attrition Warfare Works for Some, But Not for Armenia

Soviet military doctrine was unique in its strict top-down hierarchical system to levy overwhelming mass to outmatch and exhaust the enemy through long periods of attritional warfighting. "Attrition" means to grind the opposition down through sustained attack and pressure to force the enemy to expend resources. If one side cannot (or is unwilling to) exert necessary manpower, firepower, and/or economy, among other methods of state power, the losing side will be compelled to cede most or all of its authority to the winning side. The Soviet attritional model has been heavily used by each side in the Russia-Ukraine War. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff and one of most important modern Russian military strategists, has praised Soviet military doctrine forefather Aleksandr Andreevich Svechin and others. Through attrition doctrine, Moscow has utilized a similar attritional method of warfighting which may prove to succeed in Ukraine despite taking more casualties. Yet, Russia can employ Soviet warfighting whereas Armenia cannot.

The Armenian Armed Forces' (AAF) reliance on Soviet military doctrine comes from its legacy as a former Soviet Republic and the AAF's leadership historically trained in the Soviet thinking. However, it is difficult to compare modern Armenia's security posture to the Soviet Union, Russia Federation, or Ukraine. Armenia is drastically smaller in size and population. Consider how many casualties the Soviet Union's Red Army suffered in Stalingrad alone, or how Nazi Germany was able to capture vast amounts of Soviet territory before its Eastern Front collapse. Would the same Soviet method of attritional warfighting work against an Azerbaijani offensive with possible Turkish support? No.

A Call for Yerevan to "Maneuver" and Incorporate Doctrine for "Survivability"

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If Armenia cannot leverage Soviet attritional warfighting, what should Yerevan replace it with? Colonel Amirkhanyan suggests “maneuver warfare.” He wrote, “Soviet-legacy operational concepts prevented the Armenian forces from conducting maneuver warfare during the war proper and preordained decisions...well before the hot phase of the conflict.” In other words, Colonel Amirkhanyan desires to change Yerevan’s warfighting doctrine from Soviet attritional warfare to the opposite spectrum, “maneuver,” a modern Western school of thought. When Azerbaijan is attacking swiftly with combined arms including heavy precision fires, one-way-attack and air-to-ground drones, Armenia simply cannot win with through attrition. Yerevan is limited in many capabilities and resources which prevent its military to fight in the same way Russia and Ukraine utilize against each other.

In addition to maneuver doctrine, the AAF should also prioritize the continuation of operations over battles where there is low confidence in victory. For example, terrain which may not prove vital to wholistic national defense goals can be sacrificed if it means that operations can continue to support other high priority objectives. The AAF must be designed to accommodate and save as many military lives as possible to ensure the continuation of operations and civilian lives to continue support from citizens. The objective must be to fight for as long as possible and to prevent, at worst, total capitulation in which adversaries can limitlessly dictate the terms of surrender. Secondly, for the AAF to buy time for Yerevan’s diplomacy and 3rd party interventions to halt Azerbaijani and/or Turkish attacks. Instead, the AAF must implement strategy, doctrine and intent to maintain force survivability which includes but is not limited to: resources, manpower, and morale to continue fighting. Survivability compliments maneuver thinking. To implement these concepts, should the Armenian Government borrow money and sacrifice taxpayer wealth to purchase the latest technology? No. Because technology does not win wars alone.

Unfortunately, when countries seek to Westernize their militaries quickly, they may procure extremely state-of-the-art equipment that is niche, too difficult to broadly train troops, and expensive. The AAF must be keenly aware of its weaknesses and strengths in order to exercise thrift when procuring new equipment and implementing new doctrine. In the Russia-Ukraine War, very inexpensive first-person video and one-way attack drones have proven to change the battlefield in favor of the attacker. Lessons such as this one should be greatly considered rather than throwing money at the problem. At the same time, however, Yerevan must understand that some large weaknesses will require a larger portion of the military budget, such as advanced integrated air defense systems, these specific capabilities must be considered for heavy investment.

A Few Considerations When Implementing Reform

Armenian intelligence must be able to precisely assess well in advance: (1) Armenian national security strengths and weaknesses, (2) adversarial capabilities, (3) adversarial intent on when, where, and how the enemy may execute its missions, (4) vital locations for defense and national level objectives, and (5) perform its intelligence duties with ample time for military and civilian decision makers to adapt and act accordingly. Yerevan must never be surprised by an attack or unprepared by how the adversary is attacking. Proper warning intelligence should inform the decision makers at least several days prior to an attack for military, civilians, and diplomats to thwart and deter the aggressor.

If a conflict indeed breaks out, AAF decision makers should already be prepared to execute an operational plan of attack to eliminate adversarial “center of gravity.” For example, if Azerbaijan attacks, Armenia must target that which provides Baku the moral and/or physical strength, freedom of action, or the will to act. If this is targeted and denied, damaged, or destroyed, it can significantly weaken or defeat Baku. Therefore, if successfully executed, it will limit Azerbaijan’s ability to competently continue attacking Armenia. Questions in Yerevan must be raised and answered immediately (if they have not been already), such as, “How can the AAF can eliminate the enemy’s important driver(s) to maintain the battlespace in our favor?”

One can argue that Azerbaijan assessed that the “land connection” between the Artsakh Republic and Republic of Armenia was the center of gravity for the ultimate objective to seize the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Through maneuver warfare, Azerbaijan prioritized capturing the southern and flat terrain in the Hadrut region and then leveraged its air assets to target Artsakh and Armenian air defenses in the mountainous north, according to retired U.S. Colonel John Antal in his book, *7 Seconds to Die: A Military Analysis of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War*. After gaining air superiority, Artsakh and Armenian personnel, logistics, and strategic positions connecting the two

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became extremely vulnerable. Baku succeeded by cutting off Armenia from Artsakh through sustained fires from the air domain. It was only a matter of time between the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020), siege (2022–2023), and the Fall of Artsakh (2023).

Last, information warfare must be relentlessly utilized. According to David Patrikarakos' book, *War in 140 Characters*, Israel in the 2014 Gaza war succeeded in its military operations but failed in its strategic objectives due to information warfare. Mr. Patrikarakos analyzed that Israel's unorganized and unfocused engagement in social media was the primary failure in shaping global opinion. Surprisingly, he concluded that an ordinary girl's advocacy transformed modern warfare as Western households became skeptical towards Israel unlike ever before. Teenage Palestinian girl Farah Baker became famous in what Mr. Patrikarakos calls "homo digitalis," a modern information warrior. Mr. Patrikarakos credited Ms. Baker's successful English language skills and live Tweets (now called "X posts") which gained her a large following. This eventually received Western 24/7 cable news attention granting her interview time. Mr. Patrikarakos stated that the Israeli military has since reformed and adapted because of Ms. Baker, among others. Global perceptions of war have exponentially been shaped by social media since 2014 and *War in 140 Characters*.

When learning from information perception campaigns, it should be asked, does Armenia have one of the most successful and widespread diasporas? Does Armenia have an incredibly robust tech sector? Do diaspora Armenians over-represent their respective countries in media, politics, business, and culture? If any of these are true, it should not be challenging for the homeland and diaspora to work with the AAF to develop formal and informal media perception campaigns. There are plenty of lessons to learn from any ongoing conflict. The ultimate goal should be to convince great power nations to action, therefore stopping attacks against Armenia. If the AAF is fighting to buy time, the domestic media wing and global diaspora should be fighting for the international community to intervene and end the assault.

Conclusion

Armenia must continue to challenge their old Soviet ways of warfighting and implement significant reform at the strategic (national, long term oriented), operational (theater specific) and tactical (smallest levels of combat) levels of war. A new Armenian military doctrine based on maneuver over attrition should not be one size fits all. It is both a science and an art. It is a vision rigorously committed to objectives, but malleable in how it is executed by leveraging strengths and accommodating for weaknesses. It must require meticulous considerations and an unwavering commitment to preparation and vigilance.

Armenia may be without an overtly committed ally, but Yerevan has a significant advantage in defending its territory thanks to its dynamic and well-educated population now making significant technological and economic advancements. Furthermore, Armenia's unity under democratic values is inherently more advantageous than its radically unfree adversaries, as free speech and reason can shape how militaries reform, promote personnel based on merit, and reward contracts which are economically viable. Armenia can survive.

The views herein are this author's only.

About the author:

Jack Dulgarian is a Washington, D.C. based analyst and consultant working in national security and defense on Near East and Eurasian issues. He previously wrote on building a pragmatic Armenian Space Doctrine and Azerbaijan's 2025 diplomatic strategy. In 2023, he authored an analysis scenario-casting how Russia would thwart Armenia's security prior to the fall and ethnic cleansing of Artsakh. Mr. Dulgarian has been referenced by National Defense University's Joint Quarterly Magazine and given lectures to the State Department's Foreign Service Institute.

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