



A New Look at Deterrence: What Do a Series of Attacks on Iran and the Karabakh War Tell Us About Next Generation Warfare?

By: Ramil Kazimov

Ramil Kazimov is a Masters of International Affairs candidate and Fulbright student at the Bush School of Government and Public Service where he focuses on the Middle East region. He also writes articles for European Horizons - TAMU Chapter on topics including Middle East security and defense, national security, and international affairs.

Application of next-generation technologies against Iran, and during the Karabakh war, are harbingers of future warfare. They present a new way of ensuring deterrence for states. This should not sound as a doomsday for security organizations like NATO or states with predominantly conventional armaments in their arsenal. What this means is states will be facing more pressures to make choices given their budgetary constraints to carry out inescapable reforms for adapting to the demands of next generation warfare and deterrence.

Iran has been the target of [unprecedented attacks](#) since the beginning of 2020. It started with the [killing](#) of the commander of Iranian Quds forces with a UAV strike in Iraq. The remaining two attacks occurred inside the country - first, an [explosion](#) at a key Iranian uranium enrichment facility in Natanz, and later, the [assassination](#) of Iran's top nuclear scientist.

Tehran [calls](#) the last assault on its scientists as a "new method" [employing](#) a machine gun equipped with a "satellite-controlled smart system" on a pick-up truck. There could be numerous [policy inquiries](#) on consequences, legal and ethical grounds of these cases. But one of the essential questions that needs consideration is - what do these attacks and other modern battles reveal in terms of future warfare with a deterrence focus?

There are two unique features combining the three attacks against Iran: they were carried out from distances via remotely operated systems. No conventional military methods such as heavy artillery, air, land and maritime troops on the ground were involved. This showed how futuristic warfare is highly likely to change the battlefield.

We have seen targeted UAV attacks [against](#) militants and proxy groups in surrogate warfare after September 11. But this has started already changing with states explicitly using these technologies against another states for the first time since the end of the Cold War. The US killing of the top Iranian general back in January of 2020 in Iraq with a UAV strike demonstrated there is no need to be omnipresent on the ground to make a difference against an adversary state. The usage of this futuristic method was meant to achieve what the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [termed](#) "real deterrence" that seems to be part of a broader strategy of the US using force against its foes.



Similarly, the last two attacks inside Iran from an unknown source(s) take the phase of distance technologies and intelligence to a new level seemingly serving the same motive - attain deterrence. Although there are contradicting reports on the types of technologies and/or human factors used against the Natanz nuclear site and the killing of the top nuclear scientist, what is unprecedented is that an attacking side(s) has not identified itself leaving the opponent further in anguish. This shows the nature of warfare has shifted into a truly autonomous battle space. No defined battle ground and no official hostile state source. It makes targeted retaliation complicated and hence, could be an effective tool for deterrence as part of advantages of next generation warfare.

Just to the north of Iran, neighboring Azerbaijan prevalently [applied](#) Israeli and Turkish made drones on its decisive victory over Armenia during the second Karabakh war that ended with the signing of a capitulation agreement on November 10, 2020. Unlike the last two incidents in Iran, the battle space and the parties were known in this war. However, one of the idiosyncratic characteristics of the Azerbaijani usage of these UAVs was information advantage over the adversary. Azerbaijan released almost daily aerial video footage during the 44-day war using drones to receive correct target coordinates of military leadership convoys, equipment, trenches, and then publicized videos from the assault scenes on the adversary. This put immense pressure on its opponent which lacked similar capabilities and eventually ended up surrendering. This war was closely watched by many states, including the US as one of its generals [hinted](#) that America is analyzing its tactics as part of future warfare for its troops.

States now have a series of difficult questions to answer, the most important being: Is it worth so heavily investing in conventional weapons (tanks, ships, etc..) when opponents are technologically stronger and the usage of conventional forces is futile? Whether deterrence can remain effective depends on the answer.