Pre-empt, Defend & Punish: Improving The Defensive Position Of Armenia With Lessons From Ukraine

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Armenia's security environment remains volatile and exposed to acute risks, particularly from Azerbaijan. In the absence of a signed and implemented peace agreement, Armenia faces the persistent threat of localized incursions, hybrid operations, and, though less probable, a sudden conventional military escalation. Unlike many states, Armenia must treat the possibility of invasion as a credible scenario, warranting urgent and sustained military reform.

Given its comparative disadvantages in territory, population, and economic scale, Armenia must act decisively to offset Azerbaijan's numerical and technological edge. Drawing on lessons from recent and ongoing conflicts, most notably in Ukraine, Armenia must embrace asymmetrical strategies to deny the aggressor operational initiative.

Emerging technologies, especially in the field of small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), offer a rare window of opportunity. Drones can confer a significant tactical advantage in disrupting and neutralizing an initial enemy advance. However, this advantage is time-sensitive and conditional: should surprise or other circumstances enable the aggressor to occupy Armenian territory, this battlefield logic inverts. Entrenched positions, once established, confer their own defensive resilience, making any counteroffensive more costly and uncertain.

For this reason, Armenia must be ready to deliver an immediate and overwhelming defensive response to any aggression. At the same time, Armenia must have the capacity to project force deep into Azerbaijani territory Azerbaijan in unpredictable and difficult to counter ways. This would serve to punish aggression, reshape escalation dynamics, and create conditions favourable to a rapid cessation of hostilities, ideally on terms that secure Armenia's sovereignty and deter future threats. In this strategic context, deterrence is not solely about capabilities, it is about credibility, responsiveness, and the ability to impose costs in ways the adversary neither expects nor can easily counter.

- **Seek the asymmetric advantage**: Azerbaijan is investing heavily in the modernization of its armed forces with an emphasis on high value 'exquisite' systems. Given the disparity in scale and focus, Armenia cannot, and should not, attempt to mirror this directly. Instead, Armenia should pursue asymmetric capabilities designed to outsmart and outflank Azerbaijan's conventional forces. This approach would aim to deter aggression by complicating the adversary's decision-making process, and by threatening that which the Aliyev regime holds dear. Should a conflict nonetheless occur, Armenia can leverage recent advancements in battlefield drones to stabilize the front. Simultaneously, Armenia should prosecute a long-range strike campaign across the width of Azerbaijan. This would not only impose material costs but also shape the narrative so that politicians see that Armenia can win.

- **Focus on aerial drones (UAVs):** Armenia must continue to invest in modern uncrewed air vehicle (UAV) capabilities that can be deployed immediately at the outset of any conflict. Timely use of drones can decisively halt

enemy advances and establish battlefield dominance. Conversely, delayed deployment risks ceding this advantage to the adversary, enabling them to entrench and utilize similar technologies defensively. This capability offers a low-resource and cost-effective counter to enemy aggression.

- **Leverage and expand operational drone expertise**: building on the experience gained during the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, Armenia should deepen its operational knowledge by closely studying the evolving use of drones in Ukraine. These lessons should inform both doctrine and acquisition strategies.
- **Modernize and diversify the drone arsenal**: existing indigenous development (e.g. *Hresh* and *Aralez* drones) should be supplemented with foreign technologies to ensure access to the most effective platforms. Long-range strike drones capable of reaching strategic targets such as Baku (approx. 400 km range) and operating at higher altitudes would complicate enemy air defence responses and provide a deep strike capability. Nowhere in Azerbaijan is beyond the reach of the drones already being used successfully by Ukraine. On the first night of open conflict Armenia should be ready to launch vast raids, larger than those seen in Ukraine, with over a thousand drones striking key targets such as airfields.
- **Create a known threat of infiltrators or agents using drones**: Ukraine's Operation Spiderweb can act as inspiration. While missions are difficult to plan and implement, the overwhelming nature of the threat created adds greatly to the cost of rear-area defence for Azerbaijan.
- **Mass-procuring tactical battlefield drones**: Armenia should invest heavily in low-cost FPV drones and other tactical UAV variants for frontline operations, taking into account mountainous terrain at high elevations. These should include basic FPV strike, bomber, mothership and intelligence types. Fibreoptic guidance should be considered.
- **Develop effective low-cost air defences to counter enemy drones**: It can be assumed that the enemy will be effective practitioners of drone warfare with an extensive arsenal of strike drones. Ukraine's low-cost interceptors and passive acoustic detection network can act as an inspiration to develop effective ways to counter this threat.
- **Secure key navigation and communications technologies**: Navigation and communications for longer range drones presents a challenge. Armenia should invest in satellite communications, but also ways to extend line-of sight communications such as masts on top of mountains, aerostats and relay drones. Visual navigation technology should be acquired to allow autonomous drone targeting of static targets in the enemy rear – the AI needs training so it is important to start early.
- **Train a cadre of skilled drone pilots**: Foster a culture of excellence in drone operations by cultivating skills early, well before conscription. Introduce drone piloting and racing as competitive activities within youth programs and military training environments, positioning them as both sport and strategic skillset. Actively identify and recruit conscripts and volunteers with backgrounds in gaming or simulation-based skills, as they often possess the reflexes, spatial awareness, and coordination ideal for drone operations.
- **Secure supply chains and ramp-up domestic production of both local and imported designs**: Harness existing local industries to ensure immediate readiness in the event of hostilities, Armenia must establish domestic drone manufacturing facilities and stockpile critical imported components, such as engines. A robust inventory of drones must be available from day one of any conflict.

- **Blockade the port of Baku**: Armenia could exploit Azerbaijan's maritime position to its strategic advantage, turning Azerbaijan's access to the sea into a liability. Baku International Sea Trade Port is a major hub for Caspian and trans-Eurasian trade. Halting shipping could achieve a surprising and disruptive effect, not only against the adversary but also its trading partners. The Bay of Baku is shallow, with depths under 50 meters, making it vulnerable to shallow-water mining. Armenia could declare a minefield and deploy long-range drones, similar to those used for striking ground targets, to drop 50-100kg bottom-sitting smart mines into the bay. The Azerbaijani Navy's small force of legacy minesweepers would likely prove inefficient and ultimately ineffective. And the minefield could be periodically replenished to maintain a persistent threat. Such a strategy would likely halt marine trade through the bay, significantly impacting Azerbaijan's economy and logistics. The nearly Sangachal oil & gas terminal and coastal gas platforms are also vulnerable to

- **Exploit energy infrastructure vulnerabilities:** Azerbaijan's energy sector, particularly the Sangachal Terminal and its network of pipelines extending into Georgia near the Armenian border, constitutes a critical strategic target. Disrupting these assets would undermine Azerbaijan's economic stability and logistical resilience. Striking Sangachal Terminal would have both strategic and morale effects. The adjacent coastal gas platforms are also vulnerable to strikers by drones.

- **Target strategic rail infrastructure**: Azerbaijan's ambitions as a regional freight hub, with over 2,000 km of railways and key nodes including tunnels (e.g., the Horadiz-Aghband corridor) and bridges, present exploitable vulnerabilities. Armenia should develop both kinetic and cyber capabilities to disrupt signalling systems and sever logistics arteries during a conflict.

- **Maintain pressure on hydro-infrastructure**: The dams on the Mingachevir Reservoir represent high-value strategic targets. Armenia must develop the capability to credibly threaten this infrastructure, not necessarily to destroy it outright, but to force Azerbaijan to divert resources and prepare for escalation scenarios.

- **Threaten regime sites**, particularly visible signs of opulence. The Presidential Palace appears ideal; this seeks to cause reputational damage and reinforce any gaps between the country's elite and population. This may also cause a positive redistribution of air defences away from more militarily valuable sights.

- **Develop open-source and cyber intelligence**: OSINT (open-source intelligence) offers a low-cost way to gather operational and strategic intelligence, and to build indicators of an impending attack.
    - **Leveraging the Armenian diaspora to crowd source OSINT**: A tool could easily be implemented allowing volunteers to assist professional defence intelligence collection and analysis.
    - **Key Western allies could assist with training and knowhow**, possibly providing a lightweight system. This may be a win-win, allowing the ally knew routes into other targets.
    - **Use cyber vectors to target webcams** overlooking transportation and public spaces to provide real-time intelligence of Azerbaijani troop movements. Potentially, additional cameras could be sown by drones during open conflict.

- **Develop a resilient cellphone communications network** capable of supporting military operations even at the front, while being of minimal use to the adversary.

- **Improve cyber resilience**: It is vital for Armenia to develop cyber resilience to prepare for, respond to, and recover from cyber attacks or disruptions while continuing to operate effectively.

- **Forge Special Forces links with West**: While Western allies may be reticent to commit troops for peacekeeping, special forces could provide valuable training. These need not be exclusively top-tier units, for example the Royal Marines Mountain Leader Training Cadre might be particularly suitable.

- **Mortars** can play a central role in frontline operations in mountainous terrain. The integration of precision-guided munitions, particularly laser-guided mortar rounds designated by drones, offers a cost-effective and highly responsive strike capability. These systems are especially well-suited to Armenia's rugged geography and can provide accurate indirect fire in support of static defences. When employed alongside anti-tank guided missiles and tactical drones, they are tailored to the demands of modern trench warfare expected at the front.