



7 Seconds to Die: A Military Analysis of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Future of Warfighting by John Antal.

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In 1982, Soviet Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov warned that a “reconnaissance-strike complex,” a network of intelligence collection devices and precision-guided munitions, offered a revolutionary advantage in military affairs. Although the 1991 Desert Storm campaign verged on such an outcome, Azerbaijan’s campaign (27 Sept.–10 Nov. 2020) to regain the disputed province of Nagorno-Karabakh from its Armenian occupants showed that the reconnaissance/strike complex had finally come to fruition—in the form of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in both roles.¹

John Antal is a military consultant and retired US Army colonel (Armor) who has studied the Nagorno-Karabakh campaign and its implications for future wars. The chief but by no means only high-tech devices involved were “drone” aircraft in the roles of intelligence collectors and attack weapons (aka “loitering munitions” or LMs):

In the opening days, using a clever combination of AN-2 Colt biplanes as remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs), Azerbaijan attacked the Armenian air defense network in Nagorno-Karabakh. Using World War II-era AN-2 aircraft as decoys to “turn on” the Armenian air defense radars, the Azerbaijanis then swarmed the Armenian air defense systems with LMs, [UAVs], and precision and non-precision fires Once Azerbaijan won air supremacy, their airborne robotic systems hunted targets inside the designated strike zones, day and night, at machine speeds. Armenia lost 1,021 vehicles destroyed or disabled in these attacks. (129)

Turkey and Israel produced many of the UAVs used by Azerbaijan and, more recently, Ukraine. Just as in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, gun-camera films of these aircraft remorselessly destroying armored vehicles from afar demoralized the Armenians in 2020.

Antal describes other cases of UAV attacks, including the September 2019 attack of Iranian-furnished drones and cruise missiles, launched on behalf of Yemen, to temporarily neutralize two Saudi oil production facilities. He also warns of a future in which swarms of UAVs might overwhelm an army’s air defenses. “Matrix”-style brain-computer interfaces as well as autonomous Human Out of the Loop (HOOTL) systems offer opportunities to accelerate the use of these aircraft to acquire and then engage targets.

Nonetheless, the author is judicious in evaluating this form of technology, which he suggests is important but perhaps over-hyped. In describing the fall of Shusha in the center of Nagorno-Karabakh, Antal recounts how Russian-trained Azerbaijani special operations troops infiltrated the town in October 2020 and then worked with UAVs to clear the its defenders. Many Armenian casualties occurred after those defenders fled the town.

1. See Norman C. Davis, “An Information-Based Revolution in Military Affairs,” in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *In Athena’s Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica: RAND Corp., 1997) 84–86.

Antal allows that tanks may still have a role on the battlefield if they and other combat arms take care to reduce the threat posed by UAVs. He spends a good portion of this survey emphasizing masking, that is, “the full-spectrum, multi-domain effort to deceive enemy sensors and disrupt enemy targeting” (102). Antal identifies possible countermeasures against UAVs, ranging from electronic jamming to new forms of pixelated camouflage and heads-up displays (from multiple cameras) that could permit soldiers to maintain situational awareness while reducing their vulnerability to aerial attack.

7 *Seconds to Die* concerns an aspect of warfare that is in flux, with various armies still uncertain how new technologies and tactics will affect combined arms land tactics. Given the ill-defined nature of the topic, Antal is an excellent guide to a subject—and a current history—whose final outcome remains uncertain. At a minimum, this concise work usefully counters the extreme claims of UAV manufacturers and observers of recent conflicts.