

# **A Balancing Act or a Game Changer?**

## The SU-30SM and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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*Turan Gafarli*



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## Introduction

**W**ith the dissolution of the Soviet Union, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan peaked by the end of the 1980s and became violent in Karabakh in the early 1990s. The ensuing conflict led to almost one million Azerbaijanis becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the invasion of Karabakh by Armenian forces.

Russia has relationships with both sides in the conflict. Armenia's membership in Russian-led organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) makes Yerevan an official ally of Moscow. Azerbaijan continues to pursue a balanced foreign and economic policy while cooperating with the EU and NATO on one hand, and with Russia on the other. Russia has extensively supported Armenia economically and militarily. However, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan are the strongest military force in the South Caucasus, ranking 64th among 138 world armies, as reported by *Global Fire Power* (GFP, 2020). Thanks to the wealth provided by oil and natural gas, Azerbaijan has been able to modernise its army and receive political support from the West by virtue of its role in European energy security.

The current situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is uncertain. While both

sides prefer to solve the conflict through diplomatic means, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has left open the possibility of a military solution. As seen in the Four Day War of 2016, the Azerbaijani army stands ready to deploy toward the inner Karabakh region.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, retaining the military balance against Azerbaijani forces is of significant importance for Armenia, and considering Yerevan's limited military budget, there is no alternative but to resort to Russian aid. The current delivery of modernised Russian SU-30SM fighters to the Armenian Air Forces has the potential of creating a temporary imbalance in the conflict.

This discussion paper analyses the historical background of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as Russian involvement in the context of the latest SU-30SM aircraft deliveries to Armenia. In outlining the historical geopolitics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this paper will examine the fragile stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, the paper will touch upon the Russian stance in the conflict and analyse the latest purchase of SU-30SM fighter aircraft by the Armenian Air Forces. The positioning of the SU-30SM 4+ generation fighter in the region is a new development in the conflict due to the absence of an equivalent aircraft in the Azerbaijani forces. Finally, the paper will also discuss the opportunities of Baku in the purchase of cheaper and more efficient JF-17 fighters, and even the 5th generation SU-57 stealth multirole aircraft in the future.

<sup>1</sup> In 2016, clashes took place in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces. These clashes are also known as the "Four Day War" or "April War". The clashes started because of Armenian shelling of civilian areas on the Azerbaijani side. In the resulting conflict, Azerbaijani forces gained a foothold in the strategic heights in the Armenian-occupied region. After losses on both sides, oral commitment to the ceasefire ended the clashes.

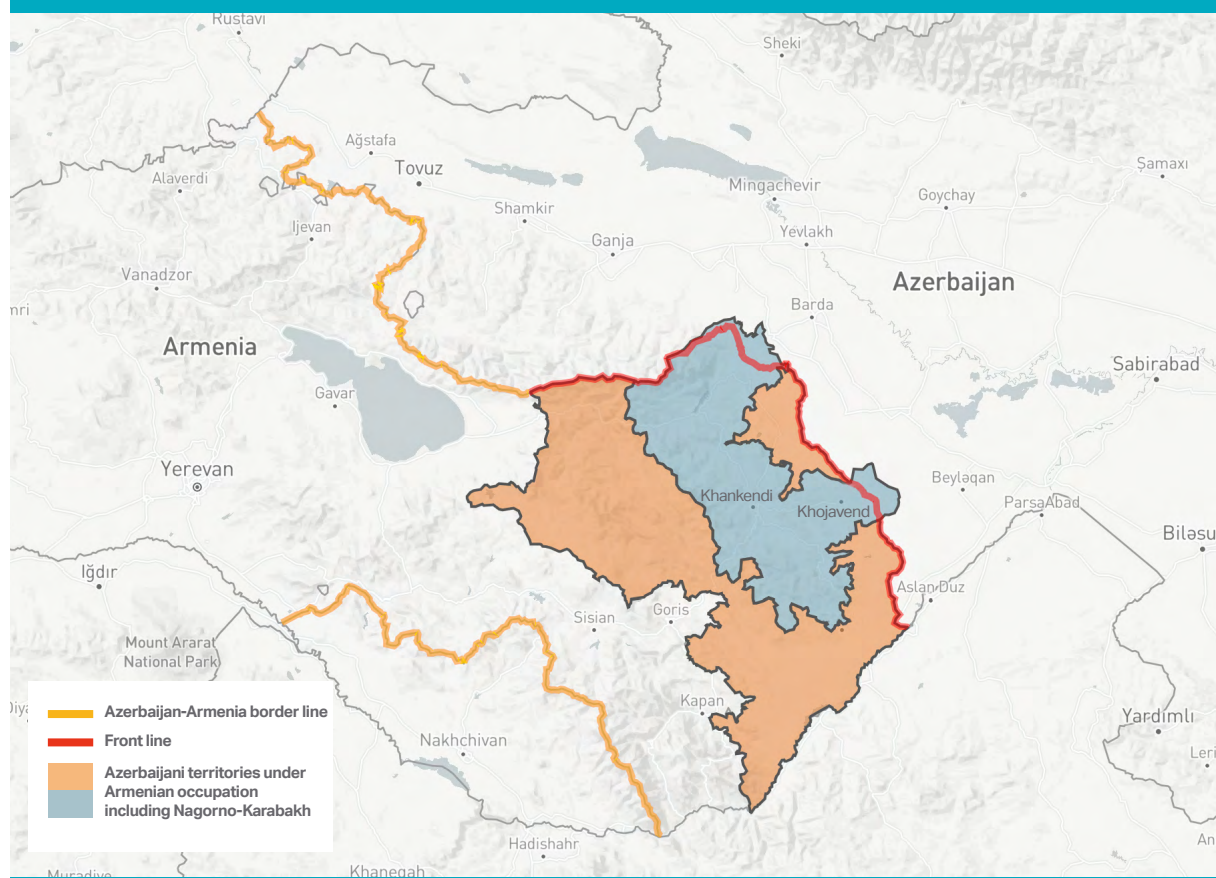
## Background

Tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis began to increase by the end of the 1980s. The absence of Soviet rule had decreased centralised authority in the South Caucasus. Foreseeing the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia seized upon the opportunity and declared their separatist demands for Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since a ceasefire was declared as part of the 1994 Bishkek Protocol, Azerbaijan lost control over almost all sections of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Armenian forces remain as occupants of the seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, which means the occupation of almost 20% of Azerbaijani sovereign territory. While separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh have declared *de*

*facto* independence, which is not even recognised by Armenia due to the area's status of 'strategic ambiguity', the territory remains as a *de jure* and internationally recognised part of Azerbaijan. Armenia understands that recognising the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic may lead to the total breakdown of peace talks and leave war as the only solution for Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Armenia does not want to lose the potential support of the international community, which has upheld the territorial sovereignty of Azerbaijan through the United Nations. These factors have led to a never-ending debate in Armenia about the issue of the official recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as a stalemate in Yerevan's foreign policy in the context of ultra-nationalist demands for the annexation.

### The current border and front lines in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict



(Source: TRT World Research Centre)

The conflict remains in a stalemate and both parties continue to hold sporadic high-level meetings. While the OSCE Minsk Group<sup>2</sup> acts as the official main mediator, the Russian president has also hosted talks between his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts. The sides of the conflict have two main arguments which contradict one another. Armenia demands self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh, whereas Azerbaijan holds fast to principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and international law. The ultra-nationalist demands for the annexation of occupied Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia are significantly supported in the power circles of Yerevan, and this makes finding a solution to the conflict more difficult.

The stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh is a 'powder keg', despite both parties having repeated commitment to finding a peaceful solution. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, has consistently repeated the diplomatic solution as Azerbaijan's first choice. However, he has not taken the military option off the table (AzerTAC, 2018). The Azerbaijani army has developed significantly since the 1990s when mostly irregular Azerbaijani detachments lost the war in Karabakh against Russian-backed Armenian separatists. Due to the oil boom of the mid-2000s and huge new natural gas projects, dramatic increases in the state budget and military spending have led to modern armament purchases such as drones and ground missiles supplied by key partners, notably Turkey, Israel and Russia. The creation of the independent Azerbaijani defence industry and a new generation of officers educated in various globally high-ranked military academies are among the reasons for Baku's spirit of confidence.

The 'powder keg' notion was proven correct during the Four-Day War in April 2016, when the Azerbaijani army responded to Armenian shelling with a military operation (Abbasov, 2019). Although the fighting lasted only four days, it clearly showed the potential for the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh to escalate. The Azerbaijani side argued that some strategic heights were recaptured during the operation, marking the first significant Azerbaijani military advance in occupied Karabakh. Some experts have also claimed that the starting date of the April War was not a coincidence

since it occurred while the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan were in a meeting in Washington. Their arguments highlight the factor of Russian involvement in the case. Moscow sent messages to both sides, telling Yerevan that without Russian involvement, Azerbaijan was strong enough to recapture its occupied lands. At the same time, there was also an important message to Baku, warning that Russia would never allow Azerbaijan to use its full military might to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict without Moscow's consent. This argument demonstrates the height of Russian influence in the region and Moscow's dominance over the conflict.

Despite the talks about preparing people from both conflicting sides for peace in early 2019, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan triggered controversy while provoking the masses in Nagorno-Karabakh, stating 'Artsakh<sup>3</sup> is Armenia, and that's it' (OSCE, 2019) (Kucera, 2019). The statement by a top Armenian official demanding the annexation of the occupied territories broke down the hope for a just peace. This came with the naïve belief that the Velvet Revolution could democratise Armenia, and therefore solve the conflict according to international law. Therefore, all Armenian arguments for the right of self-determination for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh have failed, especially after the Armenian Prime Minister's call for *Miatsyal Hayastan*<sup>4</sup>, an Armenian ethno-nationalist and irredentist ideal. In an atmosphere of mutual mistrust, especially after the demands for annexation, it is difficult to break the stalemate. The interests of the parties in the region, especially Russian military and strategic interests, make the conflict more complicated and durable.

<sup>2</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group is headed by a co-chairmanship consisting of France, Russia and the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Armenian word for Karabakh

<sup>4</sup> United Armenia or Greater Armenia represent Armenian ultra-nationalist land claims that includes parts of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. For detailed information about the official Turkish answers for the Armenian claims please check: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/DISPOLITIKA/Ermeniliddialari/ArmenianClaimsandHistoricalFacts.pdf>



# Russia's Stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Russia's interests in the region did not end after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Despite the independence of the countries of the South Caucasus and the huge energy interests of Western states, Moscow still tries to exert pressure on both domestic and foreign politics in the region. The South Caucasus has always kept its strategic importance for Russia as it is at the doorstep of the Middle East. It is also a buffer zone between Russia, Turkey (NATO ally) and Iran. It holds significant energy wealth and it hosts multi-ethnic communities.

The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine defined three different types of war: local war (*lokalnaia voina*), regional war (*regionalnaia voina*) and large-scale war (*krupnomashtabnaia voina*) (The Embassy of Russia to the UK, 2015). A local war has limited political and military goals and mainly involves opposing states. It is understandable that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict easily fits into the category of a local war according to Russian military priorities. However, Russian's Foreign Policy Concept also draws attention to the potential involvement of a major power in a local war; the scene could then become a large-scale war.

Russian involvement in the ongoing instability and conflict in the South Caucasus shows that Moscow enjoys the stalemate and constant state of alert between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In contradistinction to the separatist movements in Georgia, where Russia was directly involved, Moscow works with both sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the degree and motivation behind the aid given to both nations differs according to the latest developments in the conflict.

Matthew Bryza<sup>5</sup> has stated that Russia has always seen the South Caucasus as a soft belly, a buffer zone in an area of great competition for power, which Moscow is determined to win. From the Russian perspective, to win is to maintain control over the region. A degree of instability is required, where the conflict remains alive,

but nothing is blowing up (Bryza, Personal Interview in Istanbul, 25 February 2020).

Ambassador Galib Israfilov<sup>6</sup> has argued that what differentiates Azerbaijan from its neighbours in the South Caucasus is the direct relationship between the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia, which is built on trust and partnership. On the other hand, the Ambassador claimed that Armenia's relationship with Russia is mainly built on various economic and corporative interests, along with a shared common history (Israfilov, Personal Interview in Vienna, 24 January 2020).

Considering Armenia's historic ties to Russia, it is not surprising that it is the only country in the region, which is an official economic and military ally of Moscow. Armenian membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Organisation (CSTO) clearly shows that Russia's official partnership in the South Caucasus is not a secret, effectively ruling out Armenian involvement in NATO exercises. On the other hand, Azerbaijan is trying to maintain a balance in foreign policy; Baku purchases arms from Russia, and at the same time supports NATO peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. While Azerbaijan understands that historic and economic ties with Russia are unavoidable, Baku still develops significant relations with the EU, NATO and Israel. Yerevan understands that only Moscow is willing to secure Armenian borders and guarantee its security. As seen in the example of Georgia, the cost for complete diversion from Russia in favour of changing direction toward the West can result in a loss of communication with Moscow or even the concession of territory. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, which protects Armenia's border with Turkey, the choice is limited for Armenia. Armenia's refusal to sign the European Union Association Agreement in 2013 clearly shows a priority for security over economic integration toward the West (Ter-Matevosyan, 2017). The deal between

<sup>5</sup> Former Ambassador of the United States to Azerbaijan and former Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group Matthew Bryza interviewed in Istanbul.

<sup>6</sup> Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Austria, Republic of Slovenia and the Slovak Republic, as well as the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the OSCE and Vienna-based UN organizations, Galib Israfilov, interviewed in Vienna.

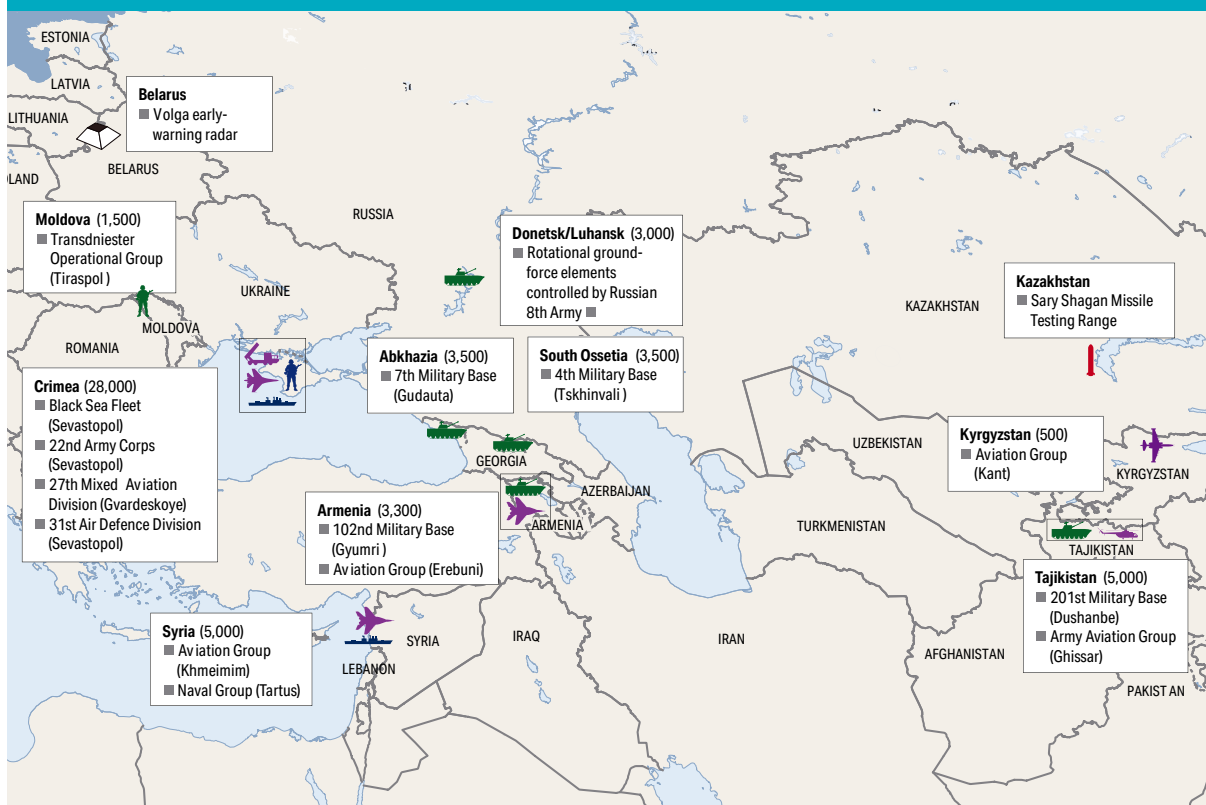


Armenia and the EU on Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership (CEPA) marked the limit of Russian toleration of Yerevan's flirtation with Europe. Azerbaijan is less dependent on Russia. However, the ties between Moscow and Baku comprise various fields, including arms sales. Azerbaijan is neither a member of the CTSO or the EAEU because of Armenian membership in both organisations. Neither is Azerbaijan interested in joining the EU or NATO due to its strategic outlook of balancing relations with Russia. Even though the EU is still Azerbaijan's largest economic partner, remittances from Azerbaijani workers in Russia and the export of important agricultural products to the Russian market make up a significant part of the daily income for Azerbaijani citizens. Furthermore, NATO's limited and cautious arms sales toward non-NATO countries push Azerbaijan toward the Russian armament market. However, due to an extensive military budget,

Azerbaijan has succeeded in diversifying its arsenal with significant unmanned aerial vehicles and missile systems supplied by Israel and Turkey.

Russia's greatest advantage in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh can be summarised in three main points: a) diplomatic power, where Russia holds the official chair in the OSCE's Minsk Group for mediation of the peace talks; b) soft power over both sides in the conflict, where Moscow still holds tight to economic, historic and political ties; c) hard power, where the Russian air force and army bases in Armenia are the closest military forces of any major power. These three major points make Russia an inevitable third party in the conflict, making the security balance in the region more complex. It should also be noted that Russian arms are used extensively by both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

## Russian military bases abroad and in disputed territories



(Source: THE MILITARY REPORT 2020)

## Comparison of personnel and defence spending numbers, and major air defence systems of Azerbaijan and Armenia

	Azerbaijan	Armenia
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>10,128,025</b>	<b>3,030,288</b>
<b>Active (Reserve) Personnel</b>	<b>66,950 (300,000)</b>	<b>45,000 (200,000)</b>
<b>Air Force and Air Defence Personnel</b>	<b>7,900</b>	<b>1,100</b>
<b>Defence Budget (USD)</b>	<b>\$1,790,000,000 (2019) *</b>	<b>\$650,000,000 (2019) *</b>
<b>Major Air Defence Systems</b>	<b>S-200 Vega (SA-5 Gammon); S-300PM/PMU2</b> <i>Long-range surface-to-air missile systems</i>	<b>S-300PT (SA-10 Grumble); S-300PS (SA-10 Grumble)</b> <i>Long-range surface-to-air missile systems</i>
	<b>TOR-M2E</b> <i>Short-range air defence missile systems</i>	<b>TOR-M2KM</b> <i>(Modular) Surface-to-air defence missile systems</i>
	<p>* Numbers are mentioned in the <a href="#">Military Balance 2020 by IISS</a>.  <a href="#">SIPRI Yearbook 2019</a> stated that Azerbaijani defence spending was  \$1,850,000,000 while Armenia spent \$673,300,000.</p>	

(Source: THE MILITARY REPORT 2020)

# Current Air Force Purchases

It is a fact that both Armenia and Azerbaijan are different countries than they were in the early 1990s in respect to their economic, social, political and military situations. These differences are more visible in Azerbaijan due to its significant development in infrastructure and economy, thanks to its oil and gas wealth. Azerbaijan's military budget is nearly triple that of Armenia. Even though Yerevan still relies on Russian military support after Pashinyan's Velvet Revolution, Armenian leaders clearly understand the necessity of modernising the army.

The clashes in April 2016, which resulted in the recapture of some strategic heights in Nagorno-Karabakh by

the Azerbaijani army, clearly showed the military potential of Azerbaijan in a full-scale war against Armenia.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the modern Azerbaijani army pushed Yerevan to think of immediate modernisation of the military, where they began their reforms with the Air Force. Russian credit, worth \$100 million, as part of continuous military aid to Armenia and based on the CSTO agreements, created an opportunity to purchase new fighter aircraft. This would have been impossible without the economic support of Moscow, considering Armenia's limited military budget. As previously mentioned, Armenian membership in the CSTO has brought various advantages to the country, one of them being the ability to purchase Russian armaments at a discounted price.

## Comparison of Azerbaijani and Armenian air forces

	Azerbaijan		Armenia (between brackets are the assets pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army Air Force <sup>8</sup> )	
Combat Aircraft	MiG-21	5	Su-25/UBK	13/1 (2)
	MiG-29/UB	13/2	Su-30SM *new delivery	4
	Su-25/UB	16/3		
	Su-24	2		
Transport Aircraft	An-12	1	Il-76	3
	Yak-40	3	A319CJ	1
Combat/Multi-Role Helicopter	Mi-24	26	Mi-24K/P/R	11 (5)
	Mi-17-IV	20+	Mi-8MT/9	12 (5)
Training Aircraft/ Helicopters	L-39	12	L-39	4
	MFI-395	10	Yak-52	10
	Mi-2	7	Mi-2	7
UAV	Heron	1	Krunk light UAV	15
	Aerostar	4		
	Hermes 450	10+		
	Hermes 900	1		
Total	€120 + 16 (UAV)		66 (12) + 15 (light UAV)	
Airports	37		11	
	Numbers are derived from <a href="#">Military Balance 2020 by IISS</a> ; <a href="#">Global Firepower 2020</a> and <a href="#">World Air Forces 2020 by Flight Global</a>			

<sup>7</sup> For detailed information about the background and implications of the Four Day War, please see 'The "Four-Day War": new momentum for Nagorno-Karabakh resolution?', The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. Accessed: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13356-the-four-day-war-new-momentum-for-nagorno-karabakh-resolution?.html>

<sup>8</sup> The self-proclaimed de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has developed its own so-called 'Defence Forces', with Armenia being the primary supplier of arms.

Based on the agreement made between Moscow and Yerevan, the Russian military credits would be spent on the purchase of SU-30SM multipurpose aircraft. The choice of the SU-30SM is not coincidental since the aircraft is classified as a 4+ generation fighter<sup>9</sup> and superior to those in the current inventory of Azerbaijan (Tirpak, 2020). According to Armenian Defence Minister David Tonoyan, after the first four deliveries of the aircraft in December 2019, eight more aircraft are expected. This means the creation of an Air Squadron consisting of twelve SU-30SM fighters (Sputnik Armenia, 18 Feb. 2019). He further claimed that after the full implementation of the new Air Squadron by the Armenian Air Defence, the country will be capable of hitting multiple targets simultaneously by using the multirole specifications of the aircraft.

According to Armenian military expert David Aratunyov, the purchase of warplanes is the best option if Armenia wants to change its military doctrine (Sputnik Armenia, 09 Jan. 2020). However, some experts claim that spending approximately \$25 million per unit could be challenging for the Armenia economy and the country should focus on purchasing cheaper and lighter fighters, even though the price of the SU-30SM is cheaper compared to the international market sales<sup>10</sup>. Aratunyov also agreed with the economic concerns and mentioned the necessity of having a strong economy to sustain such purchases.

While the presence of a 4+ generation fighter in the South Caucasus is an interesting development, the more immediate question revolves around the possibility of a shift in the military balance of the region in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. According to the head of the Defence Studies Department at the Armenian Research & Development Institute (ARDI), Leonid Nersisyan, the SU-30SM will not give complete air superiority to Armenia in the South Caucasus. However, in the absence of fully functioning Georgian Air Forces<sup>11</sup> and outclassing the previous generation of fighters in the Azerbaijani Air Forces, Armenia will have a temporary advantage (Sputnik Armenia, 23 Dec. 2019). He claims that the comparison between the SU-30SM and the Azerbaijani MiG-29 is the difference between 4+ and 4th generation jets: The SU-30SM

has superior modernisation in the electronics system, weapons and groundwork. He agrees that the SU-30SM is heavier and more expensive to fly. However, Russian expertise can decrease the maintenance costs while the heaviness of the plane can help to carry more weapons.

Armenian experts mostly agree that the purchase of the SU-30SM will not allow Armenia to rule the skies. However, they argue that it could trigger an armament race in the region, which will put pressure on Azerbaijan. Yerevan argues that the SU-30SM was in demand by Baku as well, but this did not happen for political reasons. This could lead to Azerbaijan's purchase of a cheaper, lighter and more efficient fighter such as the Chinese-Pakistani JF-17.

On the other hand, Russian officials are quite happy about the deal. The former Commander in Chief of Russian Aerospace Forces General Victor Bondarev praised Yerevan for the purchase and stated that Armenia had made an excellent choice in deciding to buy the SU-30SM (Sputnik Armenia, 07 Nov. 2019). It is not a surprise to hear praise for the fighter from General Bondarev due to his deep belief in the enduring prospects of military-technical cooperation between Russian and Armenia. It is well known that the weapons that defend the airspace and borders of Armenia, including the occupying forces in the Karabakh region, are produced by Russia.

General Bondarev also argued that MiG-29s located at the Russian Air Base in Yerevan, which is a vital part of the defence of Armenian air space against Azerbaijan and Turkey, should be enough for Russian air presence in the region for upcoming years. However, the Commander of the Yerevan Air Base, Colonel Alexander Petrov, opposed Bondarev stating - "I am very happy for our Armenian comrades. We even envy our Armenian colleagues a little for the fact that they have new aviation equipment. We also want such aircraft." (Sputnik Armenia, 28 Jun. 2019) Colonel Petrov was also supportive in Armenian purchase of SU-30SM and defended his argument by giving the example of "Russian Knights" air show team that tested new planes' capabilities. General Bondarev also argued that the MiG-29s located at

<sup>9</sup> The fourth and a half-generation (4+) jet fighter is the generation of fighter aircraft made between the late 1980s into the 90s. They are mostly modernised versions of the fourth-generation fighters and the most prominent examples of this generation are F/A-18E/F by McDonnell Douglas and SU-30SM by Sukhoi. For detailed information on the fighter generations please check: <https://www.fighterworld.com.au/az-of-fighter-aircraft/five-generations-of-jets>

<sup>10</sup> The international sale price of the modernised and dominant version of the SU-30, which is the SU-30SM, alternates between approximately 35-35 million USD.

<sup>11</sup> The Georgian Air Forces were effectively wiped out during the 2008 conflict with Russia. Georgia has been trying to rebuild its Air Forces since 2016. Thus, it cannot be compared to either the Armenian or the Azerbaijani Air Forces. Furthermore, Georgia shifted its purchases to drones and helicopters instead of fighters. For detailed information please check: <https://dfwatch.net/georgia-get-rid-su-25-favor-drones-helicopters-48245>

the Russian airbase in Erebuni, which is a vital part of the defence of Armenian air space against Azerbaijan and Turkey, should provide enough of a Russian air presence in the region for the upcoming years. However, the Commander of the Erebuni Air Base, Colonel Alexander Petrov, has opposed Bondarev, stating, 'I am very happy for our Armenian comrades. We even envy our Armenian colleagues a little for the fact that they have new aviation equipment. We also want such aircraft' (Sputnik Armenia, 28 Jun. 2019). Colonel Petrov was also supportive of the Armenian purchase of the SU-30SM and defended his argument by giving the example of the 'Russian Knights' air show team that tested the new planes' capabilities.

Azerbaijan rejects the Armenian claims regarding the failure of the SU-30SM purchase by Baku. Azerbaijan's interests have been focused on the JF-17 'Thunder' for a long time. In contrast to the Armenians and Russians, Azerbaijani experts argue that the SU-30 aircraft family is notorious for failures and accidents, the latest being in Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria, where two pilots were killed after the crash of an Algerian SU-30 on 27 January 2020 (The Defense Post, 2020). Even though the Armenians claim that the SU-30 is a proven stealth weapon, the fighter has much weaker stealth than other aircraft in the 4+ generation, and it loses its air superiority against same generation fighters. The clashes between the Pakistani and Indian Air Forces in early 2019 showed that the first fight of JF-17s against Russian-made Indian fighters was effective, as the squadron of Pakistani JF-17s successfully destroyed SUs and MiGs with air-to-air missiles (Ordu.Az, 2019).

Azerbaijani Air Force Reserve Colonel Ogtay Badalov has argued that the Armenian SU-30 would not change anything in the conflict (Sonxeber.Az, 2020). First, the Armenian military budget is limited, despite Russian credits and Minister Toloyan's promise of an increase. In addition to the \$50,000 hourly flight price of the SU-30, the triggering of an arms race is potentially an expensive gamble for Yerevan. Second, a heavy aircraft such as the SU-30 will have limited manoeuvre capability in a small region such as the South Caucasus, especially considering military operations in the high mountainous areas of Karabakh. Therefore, Colonel Badalov argues that the purchase is just to show off for the benefit of local politics in Armenia.

The Armenians claim that the main threats to the SU-30SM from Azerbaijani Air Defence Forces (ADF) are 'air-ground' and anti-radar missiles (X-29, X-31 and X-58,

X-59) and high manoeuvre capabilities. However, the terrain in the region is difficult and mountainous, blocking low-altitude flights of the SU-30, which would let the Air Defence Forces detect the aircraft. The Azerbaijani Air Defence Forces own Spanish mid and long-range modern Lanza radiolocation systems, which guard the Armenian-Azerbaijani border (Ordu.Az, 2020). Thus, stealth, the greatest advantage of the SU-30, may lose its importance during a low-altitude assault. Common exercises between Azerbaijani and Turkish Air Forces in 2019 showed that the Turkish F-16 squadron could not pass the Air Defences of Azerbaijan and they were 'destroyed' in low-altitude scenarios (AzerTAC, 2019).

Ambassador Israfilov has claimed that the purchase of the SU-30SM is completely a business deal for Russia and will not help Armenia achieve any kind of military superiority (Israfilov, 2020). He argued that for both sides in the conflict, the use of military helicopters or UAVs might be wiser than heavy fighters since the combat zone is a geographically small area. Matthew Bryza has argued that Armenia may increase its military capability and gain temporary air superiority, but at the end of the day, it is clear that the side Russia supports will have ultimate superiority. Russia gains from both sides of the conflict, as does the US when it sells arms to both sides in a war (Bryza, 2020). He further claimed that investing in heavy armament and high-end technology was useless, considering that both sides in the conflict have some serious armament shortages in terms of ground forces. Even the US needed strong ground troops during the Gulf War, where air superiority was not enough to win.

Azerbaijan needs an urgent update of its Air Forces since the MiG-29s purchased from Ukraine in the early 2000s are already becoming out-dated. On 27 July 2019, Azerbaijan lost one of its most experienced pilots, Rashad Atakishiyev, in an accident that was explained by a bird strike (Turan News Agency, 2019). In any case, Azerbaijan needs a new generation of both pilots and aircraft to reassert its dominance in the air of the South Caucasus. However, even without purchases of new planes and taking into account Armenia's acquisition of SU-30SMs, the Azerbaijani Air Defence still holds numerical superiority in the region; this could turn into permanent air superiority if supported with modern purchases.

The Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* reported that President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and President Vladimir Putin of Russia have discussed the possibility of negotiations for the purchase of the SU-57 5th-generation

fighter aircraft (Vedomosti, 2019). Considering Azerbaijan's \$5 billion armament purchases from Russia over the past decade, it would not be a surprise to see the SU-57 in Baku at the approximate cost of \$42 million per unit. The presence of 5th-generation aircraft would be a real game-changer for a country of the scale of Azerbaijan, and this could be an overreaction to Armenia's SU-30SM purchase. However, due to the cost, Azerbaijan is planning to buy no more than one squadron. If Azerbaijan does purchase 5th generation aircraft and stealth technology, Baku can gain superiority not just in the conflict, but in the greater region as well. At the same time, Azerbaijan can maintain the

highest level of relations with Moscow. Even if the SU-57 purchase becomes a reality, Azerbaijan still plans to buy the JF-17, which is also built with Russian technology. The JF-17 is much cheaper and more practical than the heavy and multirole SU-57 for a country like Azerbaijan. Apart from JF-17, as reported by the Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan, recent Azerbaijani delegation visit to Rosoboronexport<sup>12</sup> indicates that Baku interested in purchasing 4++ generation SU-35 which proved its ability of air dominance in the Syrian Civil War and MiG-35 from the same generation (Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan, 2020).

## Conclusion

The risk of renewed war in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is high, as seen in the example of the April War of 2016. The parties adhere to two contradictory principles: for Armenia, the principle of self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh, and for Azerbaijan, territorial integrity. This makes a pragmatic solution more difficult considering Armenia's reoccurring demands for annexation. From the Russian perspective, this impasse prevents external powers from gaining influence in this troubled region and secures an effective position of dominance for Russia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a 'powder keg' that needs to be solved peacefully and with respect for international law. However, even on the 26th anniversary of the Bishkek Protocol for a ceasefire in the region, we cannot see the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884, which call for the immediate withdrawal of Armenian occupying forces from Azerbaijani lands. Therefore, the continuous increase in military spending in the region and Russian aid to Armenia show that both sides continue to hold the military option as a Plan B.

However, the question emerges why Armenia did not buy the SU-35 or SU-57 instead of the inferior SU-30SM. This purchase indicates that it is Russia that is modernising its arsenal while selling obsolete weapons to its allies. It is also forcing the opposite side, in this case, Azerbaijan, to spend its wealth on Russian armaments.

In this context, the argument for modernisation of the Armenian armed forces, beginning with the Air Force and the purchase of a SU-30SM squadron, is in some ways illogical and unfair. If the SU-30SM purchase did give Armenia an advantage, it is only temporary. In the long run, Baku could potentially put pressure on Moscow, arguing that the balance has changed and that something must be done. In addition to the JF-17 purchases from Pakistan, Baku may also strike a deal with Moscow for the SU-35 or even SU-57, which could be a real game-changer. On the other hand, however, there is a possibility for a new stage in Russia's military supplements to Armenia after the possible SU-57 deal with Azerbaijan, and this would maintain the balance. In all cases, Russia will remain the main barrier to a solution to the conflict.



Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan (L) and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (R) attended the 56th Munich Security Conference where they held a conversation on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For details please watch: [https://youtu.be/yF\\_NpbClQcw](https://youtu.be/yF_NpbClQcw)

<sup>12</sup> Rosoboronexport is the only state company authorized for Russia's armament exports/imports.



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