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Drones Are The New Proxies: Arms Diplomacy As A Turkish Foreign Policy Instrument

Sartaj Javed
sjaved22@uwo.ca

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Drones Are The New Proxies: Arms Diplomacy As A Turkish Foreign Policy Instrument

Abstract

The rise of the Turkish drone program marks a fundamental shift in national security by democratizing air power, a domain traditionally dominated by the US and Israel. This transition marks an aggressive change in Turkish foreign policy and will be echoed by other nations.

Contextual

If one man could be credited for Azerbaijan's recent victory over Armenia, it would be Selçuk Bayraktar. The scion of a religious industrial family, Bayraktar is credited with developing the eponymous TB-2 drone that drove Azeri gains in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Orthodox Turkish foreign policy dictates a reliance on American and Israeli technology with a secularized military. But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's administration has been anything but conventional. With ties with traditional Turkish partners fraying and President Erdogan's bid for supremacy of the Muslim world, Turkish foreign policy has taken a more muscular turn. In order to preserve Turkish autonomy, Erdogan has developed a robust domestic arms industry against the backdrop of looming friction with traditional import partners. With Bayraktar's marriage to Erdogan's daughter and his celebration by the Erdogan's political base due to his opposition for Turkish reliance on Israeli technology, Bayraktar's family company Baykar has emerged as a critical technological partner in the militarization of Erdogan's foreign policy.

Central to Turkey's ambitions have been its nascent yet increasingly advanced drone program. Whereas fielding a capable air force is prohibitively expensive yet accessible only to large industrial economies, drones level the playing field and enable smaller countries to achieve military objectives without using fighter jets, which can be viewed as a provocation. In a period where militaries are often fighting proxies and non-state actors, drones are becoming increasingly prized for their tactical support of ground troops, reconnaissance capabilities and precision guided munitions. These factors are what precisely enabled Azerbaijan to secure a lop-sided victory against the self-styled Republic of Artsakh in Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding regions. With the destruction of over 250 tanks and hundreds of military vehicles according to Azeri claims with minimal losses, the Bayraktar TB-2 was lauded as the critical weapon in the Azeri arsenal to turn the war. With reconnaissance and tactical capabilities, the TB-2 affords its operators the ability to receive intelligence and achieve military objectives in the same fashion as the US in the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan without the same billion-dollar investments. Furthermore, the growing sophistication of the TB-2 in its successful destruction of multiple Russian Pantsir and S-300 air-defence systems poses a grave concern for Russia, especially given that these system were designed to be safe from drone strikes.

Political Forecast

Prior to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey had already enjoyed modest export success with the Bayraktar TB-2 as import orders from Ukraine, Oman, Turkmenistan and Qatar arrived. However, combined with Erdogan's muscular foreign policy under the banner of Islamic unity, exports for the TB-2 could boom as a battle-tested weapon system. As countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia and African partners start enhancing their military capabilities, the TB-2 represents a political palatable but more importantly technically sound investment. With TB-2 drones costing only \$5 million in comparison to the US MQ-9 Reaper (\$15 million) or the RQ-4 Global Hawk (\$123 million), which are only available to select security partners, Turkey has forcefully carved out a niche for itself in the highly profitable arms trade. Whereas the US is selective in its drones exports due to technology sharing and strategic concerns, Turkey has no such qualms over its export policy. Nascent Turkish ambitions, alongside other aspirational militaries pouring capital in research, represent a turning point and the broader "democratization of airpower".¹ Affordability and technical expertise has been the historic barrier but is now a legacy of the past. As technical advancements and commercial barriers lower the barrier to entry, a boon for the global arms trade, especially amongst developing countries looking to bolster their air capabilities is on the horizon.

Despite international partners such as Garmin and Canada-based Wescam ending technical partnerships with Turkey over its usage of their technology in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey remains unbowed as it marches towards industrial self-sufficiency in its quest for technological autonomy and represents a broader paradigm shift.

¹ Hammes, T. X. (2016, October 18). The Democratization of Airpower: The Insurgent & The Drone. War on the Rocks.