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# Strategic Digest

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## Armenia-Azerbaijan Clashes

On 12 July 2020, clashes broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan after Armenian troops allegedly opened artillery fire on Azerbaijani positions in the border district of Tovuz. These clashes are the most serious since the 2016 ‘four-day war’ between the two former Soviet republics. 12 Azerbaijani soldiers including a Major General and a Colonel were reportedly killed in the latest clashes, while Armenia reported the loss of four soldiers. Armenia has accused Azerbaijan of conducting drone attacks on civilian areas in the town of Berd as well as of launching cyber-attacks on government websites.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have a history of conflict, which, in the contemporary era, is centred on the province of Nagorno-Karabakh. The two countries fought a war between 1988 and 1994 over this landlocked, mountainous, region, which is populated by ethnic Armenians but was made a part of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. During the war, about 20 per cent of the province came under Armenian control, which Azerbaijan naturally wishes to reverse. Although a ‘no war no peace’ situation has prevailed between the two countries since then, there have been periodic ceasefire violations including the 2016 ‘four-day war’ mentioned above.



Nagorno-Karabakh is not, however, the location of the latest clash, which has broken out about 200 kilometres to the north in the province of Tovuz. A complex combination of reasons appears to have impelled Armenia to initiate the clash: exact retribution for the 2016 ‘war’, deny Azerbaijan the propaganda advantage of portraying the conflict as over Nagorno-Karabakh,

enlarge the war and thereby enlist Russian support against Azerbaijan, and, divert the minds of people from internal problems.

On the heels of the clash, Azerbaijan and Turkey carried out large scale military exercises named “The TurAz Eagle Exercise” between 29 and 10 August. The exercise, which involved both land and air forces, was aimed at fostering interoperability, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of personnel and weapons systems, and testing logistical support during combat operations. While the ground component of the exercise was held at Baku and Nakhchivan, air combat drills involving both fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft were carried out in Baku, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Kurdamir and Yevlakh.

Turkey openly supports Azerbaijan in the latter's conflict with Armenia. A week after the July clash between the Armenian and Azeri forces, Turkey's Defence Minister met Azerbaijan's Deputy Defence Minister and the commander of Azeri forces in Nakhchivan to discuss the regional security situation, and declared that the Turkish armed forces would undoubtedly continue to do what they have to do. Turkey is in particular committed to helping Azerbaijan defend the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, which shares a border with Armenia, Iran and Turkey.

### Tsirkon: Russia's Hypersonic Nuclear Missile

On 26 July 2020, the eve of Navy Day and the Main Navy Parade in St. Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin announced that the Navy would be equipped with hypersonic nuclear missiles and underwater nuclear drones. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, the Poseidon underwater nuclear drone designed to be carried by submarines and the Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile to be deployed on surface ships are in the final phase of testing.

Poseidon is the largest torpedo to be developed by Russia. At around 2 meters (6.5 feet) in diameter and over 20 meters (65 feet) in length, it is approximately twice the size of submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and 30 times the size of a regular 'heavyweight' torpedo.



Artist impression of 3M22 Tsirkon / Zircon hypersonic missile  
Source: [www.navalnews.com](http://www.navalnews.com)

Tsirkon was first test launched in January 2020. According to informed speculation, the missile could reach an altitude of 30 to 40 kilometres at which height reduced air resistance enables it to reach speeds of Mach 9 and gain additional range. The missile's length is between 8 and 10 metres, and its payload is estimated to be between 300 and 400 kilogrammes. Tsirkon has been

designed for firing from universal vertical launchers based on warships and submarines as well as from Bastion mobile coastal missile launchers.

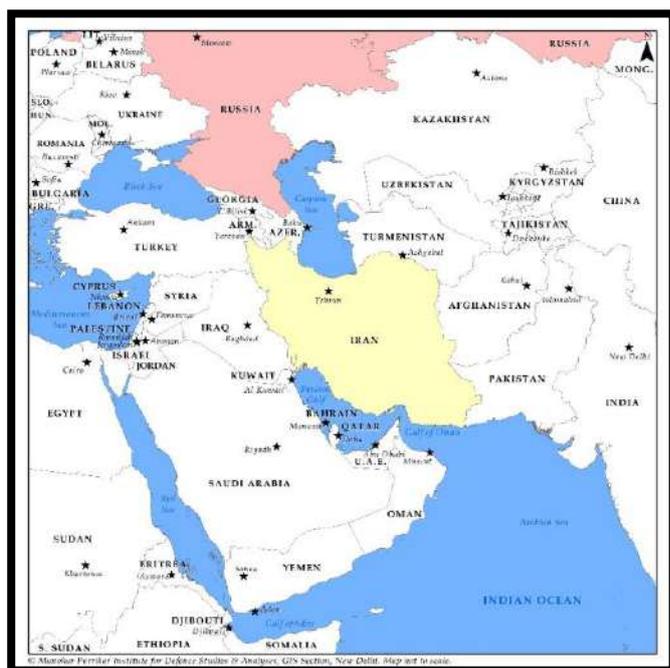
The combination of speed, manoeuvrability and altitude of hypersonic missiles which are capable of travelling at more than five times the speed of sound makes them difficult to track and intercept. Because of the secrecy of the project, not many details and images are available in the public sphere. Nevertheless, based on the exterior of hypersonic missiles, experts have come to the tentative conclusion that no missile shield can intercept them and they would be able to

strike like a bolt of lightning. Hypersonic missiles, in short, lend a major military edge to countries fielding them.

### Iran Seeks to Extend 2001 Treaty with Russia

Close on the heels of news about Iran negotiating a 25-year agreement with China, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has announced that Tehran is also seeking to extend the treaty it had first signed with Moscow in 2001 covering cooperation in defence, nuclear and other energy sectors. Zarif visited Moscow in the third week of July 2020 and initiated talks on extending the 2001 agreement, which was originally valid for 10 years but has been extended twice by five years each until March 2021.

The 2001 agreement reportedly contains an Introduction and 21 articles. Article 6 deals with cooperation in the field of energy, including nuclear energy. Other provisions speak of cooperation in different economic sectors, energy transportation, politics and security. At the time of its first signing, the treaty was seen as a diplomatic turning point since it restored Russia-Iran relations after several decades.



Although the 2001 agreement does not commit Iran and Russia to render military aid to the other in the event of aggression by a third party, it nevertheless enjoins them “not to give any help to the aggressor” and to assist in the forging of a settlement on the basis of the UN Charter and international law. If this provision were to be retained in the renewed treaty, Russia would be committing itself not to join a US-led coalition to initiate military action against Iran.

The renewed treaty is expected to help Iran better withstand the continuing US economic sanctions on the issue of its nuclear programme as well as garner Russian support for its interests in Syria. At a time when the Trump administration is pursuing a policy of “maximum pressure” against Iran, the renewal of the treaty is likely to ensure Russian supply of weapons and equipment to Iran, and thus cement the Russia-Iran strategic relationship.

## Sabah Dispute Resurfaces between Philippines and Malaysia

A historic dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over the Malaysian State of Sabah on Borneo Island has resurfaced, potentially challenging ASEAN unity. The controversy arose when the Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin wrote on his Twitter account on July 27 that “Sabah is not in Malaysia, if you want to have anything do with the Philippines”, in reaction to an innocuous post by the US Embassy in Manila. Malaysia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hishammuddin Hussein, dubbed his Philippine counterpart’s comment as “irresponsible”, asserted that “Sabah belongs to Malaysia and will remain a part of Malaysia forever”, and summoned the Ambassador of Philippines for an explanation.



The Philippine claim rests on its status as successor to the Sultanate of Sulu, which earlier ruled over Sabah. Manila may have raked up of the issue due to a combination of reasons: support and encouragement afforded by elements in Malaysian territory to the separatist movement in the southern Philippines, the availability of natural resources on Sabah

including hydrocarbon reserves, and uniting Filipinos at a time of economic downturn.

## Sri Lanka’s Maritime Doctrine 2020

The Sri Lankan Navy published the *Maritime Doctrine of Sri Lanka* in July 2020. This appears to be a part of its bid to transition from a largely ‘green and brown water’ force into a blue water one. Since 2017, the Sri Lankan Navy has acquired two new Offshore Patrol Vessels from Goa Shipyard, a refurbished Hamilton class cutter from the United States, and received as gift a refurbished Type 053H2G frigate from China. Sri Lanka had earlier released its *Maritime Strategy 2025* in November 2016.



Military doctrines focus on the future but extract lessons from the past to devise structures for current situations. Putting the Sri Lankan Navy's doctrinal thought in perspective, the force's Commander points out that, being primarily a maritime nation, Sri Lanka is expected to utilise maritime power to nurture a 'stable environment at sea'. The doctrine, in his view, would serve as a guide to steer

the employment of the force for a period of five years. As acknowledged by the team which developed it, the doctrine is richly influenced by the maritime doctrines and other military documents of several countries including India, Australia, United Kingdom, United States and Pakistan. However, a noticeably novel aspect of the Sri Lankan Maritime doctrine is its consideration of 'The Human Factor' right in the beginning, thus giving the 'man behind the machine' an antecedence not seen in documents of a similar nature.

A key takeaway of the doctrine is its emphasis upon managing the overseas access and maritime needs of 'developed countries' and 'global players' while maintaining sovereignty and leveraging them for development. This needs to be seen against the backdrop of a near certain increase of naval forces in the Indian Ocean in the coming years as well as the growing strains in the relationships between China and India and China and the United States. The doctrine acknowledges that the Sri Lankan Navy may not be able to, on its own, handle the challenges thrown up by this evolving maritime environment. It highlights the importance of establishing cooperative maritime security arrangements to share the burden of maintaining maritime security and stability. This is a striking statement given that the India-led maritime initiative started in 2008, namely, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), of which Sri Lanka is a founding member, envisages a similar burden sharing scenario.

Along with its previously published *Maritime Strategy 2025*, the Maritime Doctrine highlights the Sri Lankan Navy's efforts to reinvent itself after the conclusion of the decades-long internal conflict with the LTTE and emerge as a force that has the capacity to tackle emerging security challenges.