

ESCALATING WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

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As was foreseeable, cold weather has slowed down military operations on the ground between Ukraine and Russia. The winter season begins on December 21 and lasts until March 21. Both parties take the opportunity to entrench themselves to face the severity of the winter, reorganize the troops and cover casualties and shortcomings. But this does not imply a cessation of hostilities, but that these take place in other areas. It is clear that Russia, after the loss of Kherson, has responded with intense missile bombardments to destroy the Ukrainian electrical system, which is making the living conditions of the population more difficult in the face of the cold. However, in the case of Ukraine, it has begun to respond with missile barrages on Russian military installations within its borders. In turn, Moscow moves forces to Belarus, where DictatorAlexandr Lukashenko maintains his loyalty to Putin. This raises the possibility that land operations could be expanded with the participation of that country. The negotiation alternatives that were considered during the last week have not been successful and thus a scenario of prolonged war is imposed (which the Russian government continues to call a "special military operation"). The shift from land to missile warfare showed that the Western intelligence estimate that Russia was losing its arsenals of this weapon system was not correct. For its part, Ukraine has made the decision to reactivate its military industry -it should be remembered that, in Soviet times, in addition to having the highest concentration of missiles, it manufactured the largest transport planes in the world- realizing that the arsenals of the NATO are finding it increasingly difficult to resolve urgent requests.

But the conflict has also spread to the energy area, with the decision of the European Union to limit the price of oil that Russia exports to 60 dollars. Despite the importance of the measure, it has been a disappointment for the Ukrainian government, which demanded that the price be at most 30 dollars to make it economically unfeasible for Russia to sell it at this value. The decision of the 27 countries of the European Union is supported by the members of the G7, which implies that the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom and Canada join the decision, and Australia is also added. This is a strategic decision

of which the NATO countries and their allies in Asia and Oceania are part. All of them, moreover, have decided not to provide services (transport ships, ports, insurance, etc.) to oil that goes to countries that buy for more than 60 dollars. It is thus a significant economic sanction, which attempts to limit Russia's economic capacity to finance its war effort. For its part, OPEC and the group called OPEC Plus (made up of nine oil-exporting countries that are not full members of the organization) in response to the decision of the EU and its allies ratified the reduction in oil production decided in October, in an attitude that may favor Russia. It should be noted that China and India are today the main buyers of Russian oil and do not join this sanction.

In the future, the forecast of the conflict is based on calculating what the two political-military leaders of the conflict will do: Putin and Zelensky. The former is simple: he may win or lose the war, but he will always double down, as he has now done with the missile bombardment of the Ukrainian electrical infrastructure. At the same time, he never gives up the possibility of resorting to tactical nuclear weapons (it was ratified again by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov towards the end of November). For Western intelligence services, it is vital to know when the Russian leader might make this decision. The doctrine that he will take it "when the existence of the Russian state is at risk" can be read as "when it loses the war." In turn, Zelensky's central parameter is the support of Ukrainian public opinion. As long as the war remains popular - as it has been up until now - it will continue to drive the war effort forward. That is why his military decisions have for now been taken in terms of a prolonged war. NATO's position is that the Ukrainian President is the one who will decide how and when he will negotiate with Putin if he finally does. But the incident with the Russian missile that landed in Poland and that would have been launched by the Ukrainians shows that the Western alliance wants to avoid an unnecessary and dangerous military escalation, beyond Zelensky's will. At the same time, it gives signs of its decision to maintain the war even if NATO's support falters. In this context, there does not seem to be room for a successful negotiation in the short term.

But the aforementioned missile attacks by Ukraine confirm the risk of escalation in the conflict. First, Russia was defeated by losing the city of Kherson. This country responds with massive missile attacks against the Ukrainian electricity grid. In turn, at the beginning of November, Ukraine responds to missile attacks

on military installations in Russian territory, beyond the border. In parallel, in November Russian missiles were fired at Poland, which NATO finally considered to have been fired from Ukrainian territory by mistake. The case of Poland showed the Atlantic alliance maintaining prudence in the face of the first information, and then imposing its thesis of the accident. Thus, it prevented NATO territory from being involved in the war between Russia and Ukraine, which would have led the thirty countries that make it up to a situation of open war with Russia. The extent to which NATO has used or supported the Ukrainian offensive on Russian territory is still unclear. But Putin will respond and this creates a risk of lack of control over operations and escalation to other plans or levels of the use of weapons systems, without ruling out the extreme case of using nuclear weapons. In the first days of November, South Korea sent its first shipment of weapons to Ukraine, thus showing the extension of the conflict beyond the borders of Europe, at a time when said Asian country feels threatened by missile launches from North Korea and Japan fears the placement of new missiles on the Kuril Islands, which are in Russian possession, but which the Japanese government has claimed since the end of World War II.

In conclusion: as was foreseeable, the cold weather has slowed ground operations in the war in Ukraine; but these are taking place in other areas, such as Russia's missile war attacking Ukraine's electrical system and Ukraine doing the same with military installations within Russian territory. Going forward, the key is to anticipate the behavior of the two leaders in this war, Putin and Zelensky: the former will always double the bet and the latter will depend on the support of his public opinion. Lastly, the war has entered its tenth month, adding to its prolongation the risk of escalation in terms of the use of weapon systems that can generate greater damage.