

MILITARY EXERCISES: A DIPLOMATIC TOOL

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Military exercises have increasingly become an instrument of diplomacy. After the NATO Summit held in Vilnius, Russia and China announced joint military exercises in the Sea of Japan, the United States' most important ally at the tip of Asia. This exercise is the culmination of several smaller ones, carried out jointly to strengthen military coordination between the two countries. Five Chinese warships, including the Qiqihar guided missile launcher, participated in the exercises then announced. So did naval aviation. According to a statement from the Chinese Ministry of Defense, the objective was "to maintain the security of strategic sea lanes." But the context of the exercises is the war in Ukraine, which on August 24 marks a year and a half since the start of the invasion. The military relationship between the two countries has been an example of the use of military exercises as a diplomatic tool. To each NATO exercise, another has usually emerged in response. There is no formal military organization that integrates the two powers. But they are part of the Shanghai Group, which brings together the continent's nuclear powers (China, Russia, India and Pakistan) as well as Central Asian countries and Iran. It is not a military alliance, but it is an area where security issues are discussed. China has supported Russia financially in the face of Western economic sanctions, but has not provided this country with lethal weapons.

Chinese participation in Russian military exercises has relevant precedents. Since 2018, the Asian power has sent military forces to Russia's main exercises: Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019 and Kavkaz-2020, all held before the invasion of Ukraine. But this has given greater significance to said participation. The Korean peninsula has also been the site of military exercises as a diplomatic tool. To each one carried out by US military forces with those of South Korea, North Korea has replicated with its own. The exercises of the two Koreas are increasing their scale and take place both in the land and in the air-naval spheres. In the so-called South China Sea, the conflicts of said power with Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei, and even Taiwan, have allowed the United States to carry out military exercises, especially with the Philippines, where it has expanded its air bases in response to the tensions. In Taiwan, in recent months, reciprocal military exercises between China on the one hand and

the United States and its allies on the other, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have also been military gestures with a strong diplomatic impact.

On August 18, President Joe Biden received the leaders of Japan and South Korea at his Camp David residence - the headquarters of major international agreements. These are the two most important allies of the United States in Asia. They created the area called "Trilateral Cooperation", which the US President took care to differentiate from NATO, which is a formal military alliance. But this diplomatic gesture was a response to China and North Korea, perceived by Washington, Tokyo and Seoul as a threat. But China strongly criticized the meeting. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that "no matter how blonde you dye your hair or how sharp you make your nose, you will never become a Westerner," with a clear message to Japan and South Korea. He added that "we must know where our countries are" and urged China, Japan and South Korea to cooperate with each other. It was resolved to carry out a "program of joint military exercises over several years" and that they "will commit to consulting each other in crisis situations" according to the White House National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, who specified that this agreement of enhanced trilateral cooperation "is not a NATO for the Pacific". The military exercises scheduled for the medium and long term thus became the most relevant agreement, making them the most concrete message to Beijing.

In the Indo-Pacific, naval power is the most relevant element of military exercises as an instrument of diplomacy. The World Directory of Modern Military Warships recently ranked the world's most powerful navies in 2023 based on their strength and modernization. The ranking spanned 36 nations and looked at the number of warships, aircraft carriers and submarines, as well as factors such as a fleet's age, logistical support, and attack and defense capabilities. After the three global military powers, the United States, China and Russia, Indonesia ranked fourth, South Korea fifth, Japan sixth and India seventh. This is how in the first seven countries by their naval power, five are Asian, one Eurasian (Russia) and another Western (only the United States). Only in the eighth, ninth and tenth place are three NATO countries: France, the United Kingdom and Turkey. But the US Navy features a wide mix of warship and submarine types, as well as a balance strengthened by overall numbers (quantity) powered by its aircraft carrier fleet. It has eleven in service, with their respective attack support group, while China has only two and another two

under construction. China expects to be in a position to challenge the United States for global naval hegemony only in the middle of this century, within almost three decades. It has set 2049 - when one century has passed since the creation of the People's Republic of China – as the year to achieve this goal.

In conclusion: military exercises have become the main tool of diplomacy, as confirmed by the one carried out between China and Russia in response to the last NATO Summit; the exercises between the two powers have a history prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but this has expanded their significance, and has given greater significance to those carried out by the US with its allies; the “Trilateral Cooperation” agreement signed by Washington, Tokyo and Seoul at Camp David on August 18 has the military exercises between the three countries as its most concrete result. Lastly, the Global Naval Powers Ranking shows that of the top seven places, the United States undoubtedly has the first place, but the next six are occupied by five Asian countries and one Eurasian nation.