

NATO'S CHALLENGE: A LIMITED MILITARY INDUSTRY

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On February 13, NATO acknowledged that it is unable to replenish ammunition supplied to Ukraine at the necessary rate. Just as an example, the Ukrainian artillery is firing ten thousand shells a day. The alliance's Secretary General, the Norwegian Jens Stoltenberg, said that "the current rate of Ukraine's ammunition spending is many times higher than our current rate of production", adding that "this puts our defense industries under pressure." He thus confirmed the information that appeared in the US press in December, reporting that the NATO reserve arsenals no longer had enough material to continue supplying the Ukrainian forces at the current rate. Stoltenberg also said that "we've been aware of this for some time and we've started doing things, we're not just sitting around doing nothing." The reality is that the Western military industry has not been able to expand its production line with the required speed in the face of the intense consumption of ammunition and material. He also said that "we are in a logistics race", adding that "essential capabilities, such as ammunition, fuel and spare parts, must arrive in Ukraine before Russia takes the initiative. Speed will save lives", coinciding in this with the request of the Ukrainian president. The underlying problem is that the military alliance had given priority to preparing for war scenarios such as Afghanistan and Iraq in the short term and China in the long term. A major European war was not foreseen as a probable scenario in the immediate future. This, beyond the discussion regarding up to what level of weapons NATO is willing to provide Ukraine.

The following day, Tuesday the 14th, the NATO "contact group" met in Brussels to coordinate, at the level of Defense Ministers, the shipment of the committed tanks to Ukraine. Normally, this group meets monthly at the US Ramstein air base in Germany. On January 20, the previous meeting of this group made up of NATO countries and almost twenty allies from different parts of the world was held, without being able to resolve the decision to deliver modern tanks to the Ukrainian forces. This decision was adopted at the political level by the Heads of Government a few days later. But it is not an easy operation to carry out. Stoltenberg himself said after the meeting that "my main priority is that the commitment of the allies to administer armored vehicles,

infantry vehicles and tanks, materialize as soon as possible because every day counts." So far, the UK has confirmed delivery of fourteen Challenger tanks, albeit with no precise date. Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands jointly confirmed the delivery of one hundred Leopard I tanks -it is not the most modern model-, but the arrival route to Ukraine is not defined. Spain is considering providing five tanks that are under review -a rather symbolic measure- and Poland and the Baltic countries, which were the first to announce the delivery of tanks to Ukraine, are now showing a certain delay in making it happen. It will not be easy to quickly deliver the hundreds of tanks that President Zelensky urgently requires. As for the F-16 planes required by Ukraine, there is no decision and Zelensky has accepted that at this stage the assistance will materialize in the aforementioned tanks, ammunition and missiles.

Meanwhile, the conflict escalates in different areas. The Norwegian intelligence service, in a seventy-two-page document, claimed that Russia has deployed tactical nuclear weapons to its Baltic Sea fleet for the first time in thirty years. Warships of the Russian Northern Fleet in Soviet times normally sailed with this type of weaponry, which is deployed on both submarines and ships. It makes reference to tactical nuclear weapons that would be used with a limited range. The document argues that Russian submarine and cyber capabilities and anti-satellite weapons could threaten both Norway and NATO as a whole. It also affirms that it cannot be ruled out that a warlike action on Norway could lead to a broader conflict involving the Atlantic alliance and the United States. The document was made public on Tuesday, February 14; the same day Moldovan President Maia Sandu accused Moscow of plotting to overthrow her pro-European government. Home to half a million Russian-speaking Moldovans, the Transnistrian enclave has declared itself an independent country and has 1,500 Russian soldiers and weapons stored from the Soviet era. Moldova, like Ukraine, has applied for admission to the European Union. In a rather symbolic gesture, the United States reported that it is considering sending to Ukraine 5,000 assault rifles, 7,000 grenades and 1,600,000 individual weapon cartridges of Iranian origin, which were seized while in transit by the pro-Iranian rebels from Yemen.

Speaking before the European Parliament, the head of EU diplomacy, the Spanish Josep Borrell, maintained that the war will be defined between spring

and summer. This means, for reference, between March 21 and September 21, 2023. This is a different idea than that of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, who on January 20 said in Ramstein that an end to the conflict was not likely during the current year. Borrell required accelerating the shipment of arms to Ukraine to stop a possible Russian offensive in the short term in the Donbass area, where intense fighting is taking place with Ukrainian troops retreating. Zelensky has said that the situation in that region is extremely serious. The Ukrainian intelligence services argue that Putin seeks to achieve a resounding objective in the coming days, such as the taking of Bahamut, but these arguments may also have been motivated to speed up decisions, such as sending tanks. Ukraine has launched a recruitment call for its assault battalions of paramilitary units (National Guard), and the authorities say they have recruited 17,000 recruits in one week. As for the multirole fighters required by Ukraine, it has been decided that they will not be supplied any time soon. The Heads of Government of the United Kingdom, France and Germany have expressed their willingness to analyze the request, but have evaded any kind of commitment. The issue was also absent from the “contact group” meeting in Brussels. Only isolated events were recorded, such as Slovakia's offer to deliver Soviet-era Mig-19 aircraft to Ukraine, which it had not provided at the start of the conflict, as required by NATO.

In conclusion: the NATO Secretary General recognized that the Western military industry is not able to supply the munitions required by Ukraine. At the meeting of the “contact group” of the Atlantic alliance for Ukraine, the shipment of tanks was confirmed, but also the difficulties in gathering and sending them quickly. At the same time, the Norwegian report on the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in the Russian northern fleet confirms the increasing risks of escalation. Lastly, the head of European diplomacy maintained that the war could be resolved between March and September, urging an increase and speed up the delivery of arms and ammunition to Ukraine.