

UKRANIE: BEYOND THE TROOPS, THE HYBRID WAR HAS BEGUN

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On January 16, Russian intelligence hacked seven Ukrainian ministries; if the conflict were to escalate to the military level, that date could be considered the start of the "hybrid" war. The last few weeks have shown the unfolding of this type of conflict by Russia in concrete terms. The "fake news" aimed at the Ukrainian population has accentuated their fear. They have coincided with repeated announcements by the United States and the United Kingdom that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is imminent. Mass hoax bomb alarms have been another instrument of this hybrid war, which has increased uncertainty and strain on the Ukrainian military and population. The disruption of public services may be another step that Russia takes, also covertly. The presence of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner company seems to be growing and they could carry out violent actions under a "false flag" that could justify military actions by Russia, focused especially on the secessionist region of eastern Ukraine. The Duma has asked for its independence to be recognized.

If it happens, this causes the conflict to escalate and limited military actions may occur in that region. The country's economic deterioration in the face of uncertainty is growing - since December 1, 12.3 billion dollars would have left the country due to the risk of war - and financial aid from the West to sustain Ukraine's reserves is late to come. The suspension of flights over Ukrainian territory, the call by Western countries for their citizens to urgently leave Ukraine and the withdrawal of diplomats have contributed to increasing uncertainty and fear among the Ukrainian population. All of this has already led to a triumph for Putin, with the Presidents of the United States and Ukraine publicly expressing different positions on the military side of the conflict. Biden has repeatedly said that war is imminent; Zelezky, on the contrary, has reiterated that this is not the case, and that the statements of his American colleague are generating "panic". At the same time, the western strategy to support Ukraine is confirmed in the model of "asymmetric warfare". Western leaders, starting with Biden and Johnson, have said that their forces will not enter Ukraine because the country is not a NATO member, but that they will hand over weapons and military equipment so that Ukraine can withstand a

Russian military incursion. The arrival of weapons, ammunition, and especially anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, is intensifying, but there are important NATO countries, such as Germany, that are decisively joining the economic sanctions, but not the supply of military equipment.

Ukraine is intensifying the mobilization of its reserves, the organization of its militias -especially those deployed in front of the secessionist region of Dombas - and the military training of its civilian population. Western intelligence has reported that Russia is preparing an alternative Ukrainian government to seize power if the conflict, once military, breaks the Ukrainian front. On the same day, February 15, that Putin announced the withdrawal of some units, the Internet systems of the Armed Forces, the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs and 7 banks were hacked.

A possible solution to avoid war between Russia and Ukraine could begin by giving more importance to the specific deployment of weapons and military facilities than to the formality of belonging to the alliances. The conflict is raised around the concept of sovereignty. For NATO, limiting the incorporation of Ukraine affects the sovereignty of the European countries that aspire to it. Ukraine joining NATO is as unacceptable to Russia as preventing it from doing so is to the United States. However, Moscow's specific claim to bring back the deployment of NATO to 1997 - the year from which the 16 countries that make it up became 30 - makes it possible to find a shortcut between legal formality and concrete military deployment. Russia is not really asking that the 14 countries that have joined NATO in the last quarter century leave it. However, it does call for permanent military bases, and in particular missile deployments targeting Russia, to go back to 1997, a time when Russia was extremely weak under Yeltsin. In Poland, the United States has four permanent military bases, as well as a base with multinational forces and a ballistic missile defense facility. In Lithuania there is a permanent NATO military base and another with multinational forces of the Alliance -especially British- on the borders with Belarus; in Latvia a base with multinational forces of the Alliance and in Estonia another, plus a base with multinational forces. In Romania, there is another US troop base, an air base and a ballistic missile defense facility. As for Russia, it has permanent troops in Moldova, in the region known as Transnistria. In turn, Moscow has eight permanent military facilities on the border with Ukraine. Is it possible to make an agreement to move permanent

military bases by both parties? As for membership in NATO, the requests of Ukraine and Georgia that have motivated the war with the latter country, the military occupation of Crimea and the Ukrainian secession, have been delayed for more than a decade. Would an agreement be possible to delay the execution of the sovereign right of certain countries that aspire to be part of NATO?

The same day that Russia announced the withdrawal of some mobilized units, in the joint press meeting they had with the head of the German government, Putin said that he rejected the "deployment of attack systems near Russian borders" and that his country was seeking "transparency in military exercises, discuss short-range ground-based missile issues, and confidence-building measures." NATO's conflict with Russia has a side conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in Mali. On January 28, the French ambassador in that country (which is a former French colony) was expelled. In the region known as the Sahel, which crosses the territory horizontally, a multi-European and anti-terrorist military operation led by France unfolds. It takes place in five countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mauritania and the aforementioned Mali, which together account for 100 million inhabitants. The French forces deployed in the region represent 5,100 men, the largest in the contingent. In 2021, following the disorderly withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to begin a gradual withdrawal from Mali, announcing that he was going to reduce his troops by 40% for a start. A military coup then overthrew the pro-French government in Mali and quickly negotiated the arrival of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner company to replace the French. As 2022 began, 1,100 of them were already in Mali. In said country, in the border region with Niger, there are large deposits of uranium, which feed the French nuclear development, that is key to the country. Not only because France has become the only country in the European Union with a nuclear weapon, but also because its energy matrix is basically supplied by nuclear energy. On February 12, President Macron announced that France will be the first country to have replaced fossil fuels with nuclear energy by 2052, in order to contribute to the defense of the environment. At a time when Macron tries to play a relevant role in the conflict between Russia and NATO, the takeover of Mali by Russian mercenaries constitutes a threat to its long-term central project regarding energy and the environment.

In conclusion: since January 16, when Russia hacked seven Ukrainian ministries, a “hybrid war” has started against this country. The United States and its allies intensify the supply of weapons to Ukraine so that it resists the possible military raid of Russia, in the concept of "asymmetric warfare". The conflict around Ukraine seems to have no solution, based on the conception of the sovereignty of the States, but the deployment of permanent troops allows a more flexible and different vision. Finally, a sign that Russia is acting in global terms is given by Mali, an African country in which Russian mercenaries have taken control of a key country from France for the provision of uranium for its nuclear plan.