

DIPLOMACY MOVES AWAY IN THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee

On September 12, Vladimir Putin announced that the war in Ukraine will be long. He made these statements at the VIII Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok, in which representatives from various countries of the broad Asian continent participated. Putin said that Ukraine's counteroffensive had so far failed and that the country's army had suffered the loss of 71,000 men in the attacks, without clarifying how many were killed or wounded. He added that “only when Ukraine exhausts its men, its equipment and its ammunition, can we talk about peace.” He added that Kiev would use any cessation of hostilities “to replenish its resources and restore the combat capability of its Armed Forces,” making it difficult for Russia to negotiate a ceasefire in the midst of the counteroffensive. The Russian president maintained that the conflict could be prolonged if NATO delivers F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine. He said the US supply of cluster bombs would also serve to prolong the conflict. Referring to them, he said that “not so long ago, the US Administration considered that the use of cluster bombs was a war crime, he said so publicly.” He also referred to the situation of Donald Trump, considering a “persecution and political revenge that shows the underlying corruption that exists in the country” and said “we heard that Mr. Trump says that he would solve the most serious problems in a few days, including the Ukrainian crisis. Well, this can't bring us anything but happiness, that's good.” But he said the poor relationship between Moscow and Washington is unlikely to change significantly, regardless of who is at the White House.

Five days later, on September 17, in a media meeting with the German group Funke, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that “the war in Ukraine will be long” and that its end is uncertain. He said that “most wars last longer than expected when they start” and added that “if Ukrainians stopped fighting, Ukraine would cease to exist.” He added that “peace will only come when Putin stops attacking Ukraine.” After peace, according to Stoltenberg, the country will need security guarantees and “there is no doubt that it will be part of NATO.” He insisted that the member countries of the Atlantic alliance have to increase their defense spending, bringing it to the level of the Cold War. He emphasized the need to meet the objective of dedicating 2% of GDP to this purpose.

Germany has not reached this percentage, but according to the Secretary General of NATO, “it is on the right track.” For the former Norwegian prime minister, then defense spending in Germany was around 4% of GDP. He specified that “for NATO it is important that the most populous European member country meets the goal.” Stoltenberg said that from the position he had held in his country, he knows how difficult it is to increase defense spending when significant investments also need to be made in health, education or infrastructure. But he maintained that it is necessary when threats increase.

The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, acknowledged in a CNN report on September 18 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive that is in progress did not fail. But he considered that “the road to a definitive victory is still very long.” He added that this offensive, although slower than expected, “remained consistent,” and that the Ukrainians still have “a significant strike force.” He said Ukraine has “a lot of combat power remaining. “Ukrainians are not a spent force.” He added that “even if the counteroffensive fully achieved its stated objectives, it would not be able to completely expel the Russians, which is President Volodimir Zelensky's broader goal. “This is going to take a long time.” He called the current counteroffensive “long, hard and bloody.” For Milley, the current moment is crucial, because in his opinion, the counteroffensive has only between thirty and forty-five days left to reach the Sea of Azov, where Crimea lies. Once this objective is achieved, Ukraine could interrupt land communication between said peninsula and Russian territory. This deadline is because at the end of summer in the northern hemisphere, mud and snow will complicate any progress. He added that “I know some observers say this offensive has failed. It hasn’t so far.” But he nevertheless insisted that “it will take a long time to achieve the Ukrainian goal of expelling all Russians.” It should be noted that the Russian Armed Forces occupy 18% of the Ukrainian national territory, including the Crimean peninsula, and that they have two hundred thousand men permanently deployed in this area.

The agreement of Putin, Stoltenberg and Milley that the war will be long is in line with the skepticism with which the Vatican's peace efforts are perceived. The mission was entrusted by Pope Francis to Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi. The efforts began in Kyiv, where he was on June 5 and 6. He then went to Moscow, where talks were held on the 28th and 29th of the same month. Next,

on July 17 he was in Washington. He is an important official in the Vatican. There are those who see in Zuppi the successor of the current Pope. He is the archbishop of Bologna and presides over the Italian Episcopal Conference. Before arriving in China, he participated in a colloquium in Berlin, organized by the community of Sant'Egidio - to which he belongs - called "The Audacity of Peace". In it, the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister, Antonio Tajani, characterized the visit to China as the last stage of his "marathon for peace" (the minister had been in Beijing the previous week). On Thursday, September 14, the cardinal was received in the Chinese capital by the Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs, Li Hui. It should be noted that while in Washington and Kiev he met with the presidents, in Moscow he was not received neither by Putin nor by his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, but by the Kremlin's diplomatic advisor, Yuri Ushakov. Something similar happened in Beijing. Faced with the lack of results, Zuppi was responsible for pointing out that it had been a mission to help and not a mediation that sought an immediate result. In a message that the Pope sent to the aforementioned Berlin colloquium, he had said that the diplomatic effort undertaken by the Vatican sought to "cross the wall of the impossible." But the prolongation of the Ukrainian conflict creates a situation in which other military conflicts can escalate, such as the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh stronghold in the Caucasus, or the military coups that are taking place in the Sahel region in Africa.

In conclusion: President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the Vladivostok Forum, maintained that an extensive war lies ahead and will continue as long as Ukraine has men to fight and weapons to use. Next, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the war in Ukraine will be long and has an uncertain end, urging NATO countries to increase their defense spending. In turn, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, General Mark Milley, also made statements that the war will be prolonged. Finally, the Vatican's diplomatic initiative to create conditions for peace in Ukraine, carried out since June in parallel with the counteroffensive, did not yield concrete results.