

NATO AIR FORCE EXERCISES

In the second half of June, NATO carried out the most important aerial military exercise in its history. NATO Secretary General, Norwegian Jens Stoltenberg, when visiting the Hagel airbase in Germany to inspect the "Air Defender" exercises, maintained that he was trying to send a message to the potential adversaries to the Atlantic military alliance. He assured that it is "a way of preserving peace." German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said in turn that "the threat to our security is real again." The exercise lasted for two weeks and came at the same time that several NATO countries are training Ukrainian aircrews so that they will be fit to fly the F-16 fighters, when NATO decides to hand them over. The Air Defender project was created five years ago, as an initiative of Lieutenant General Ingo Gerhartz on his first trip as an inspector of the German Air Force to the United States. The proposal came up then due to the situation created with the occupation of Crimea by Russia. At that time, several countries of the Atlantic alliance, including Germany itself, had notorious deficiencies in terms of the enlistment and training of their air forces. The German minister was clear, saying that "from a military perspective, our American partners make the difference", expressing an insuperable reality. US military power is the key to NATO's military capability.

Ten thousand men and two hundred and fifty planes from twenty-five countries participated in the exercise. The United States sent four F/A-18 Hornet fighters and Finland, another four. The F-35s were provided by the United States (six), the Netherlands (eight) and the United Kingdom (two). Germany contributed thirty Eurofighter fighters, which can accelerate to the supersonic range without combustion and fly at supersonic speed for a long period of time. Also sixteen Tornados and five Airbus A400M. More than fifteen hundred flights were carried out and one hundred planes that participated were contributed by the United States. The execution of the orders involved coordinating between forty and eighty aircraft in each case. Also the use of areas of the North and Baltic seas required the release of air zones from civilian traffic for military exercise. They reached different areas of Germany, such as Berlin, Saxony and Bavaria. This country is the point of concentration and logistical support of the NATO air forces in case of conflict with Russia. It has the necessary infrastructure to sustain operations for a long period of time. After the Cold War, US air bases in German territory, such as Rammstein or Spangdahlem, continued to operate.

It is worth mentioning that the first of these gave rise in 2022 to the so-called "Contact Group", which meets monthly at this base and coordinates the military efforts of NATO and its regional allies in military support for Ukraine.

Clearly, these exercises had as a reference the Summit of NATO Heads of Government that takes place in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, on July 11 and 12. In this meeting, important issues are discussed such as the incorporation of Sweden into the Atlantic alliance as a full member, delayed by the public burning of a copy of the Koran in the country's capital and the impact it generated on Turkey's position. Ukraine's incorporation request is also delayed. But also, when article 5 of the NATO Treaty enters into force for any new incorporation, it would imply something that the countries of the Atlantic alliance want to avoid: the entry into war with Russia. In the event of an expansion of the conflict, the US Air Force showed that it not only has the ability to cross the Atlantic quickly with hundreds of aircraft, but also has the necessary ammunition supplies in Germany to prolong operations. The figurative enemy is called Occasus. Obviously, the name covers up Russia. The German head of government, Olaf Scholtz, before the next Summit, expressed the need to provide more military assistance to Ukraine to compensate for the delay in its incorporation. He also reiterated the German commitment to reach by 2024 the investment of 2% of the country's GDP in military spending, as required by NATO (previously the date was 2025). It should be noted that the country, in 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred, allocated only 1.49% of its GDP to Defense.

On the last day of June, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, publicly expressed the US military geostrategic vision. He said that the multipolar world is made up of three military powers today: the United States, China and Russia. He spoke at the US National Defense University graduation ceremony. In simple terms, he explained that "three is more complicated than two, and certainly much more complicated than one." He added that the more multipolar the world becomes, the more challenges Russia and China will present to Washington. In his view, the armed conflict between the United States and China is not imminent or inevitable, although he recognized that at the moment the bilateral relationship between the two powers is one of the worst in recent decades, due to the growing anti-Chinese rhetoric and policies promoted by the last American governments. At an event organized by the US National Press Club, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said that the geostrategic history

of the 21st century will likely be determined by the relationship between the United States and China, and whether it remains in competition, or heads towards a great power war. According to Milley, Beijing wants to become a regional hegemonic power in Asia in the next ten years and surpass the global military capacity of the United States by the middle of the century. In this framework, the Vilnius Summit will be dominated by the urgency of the war in Ukraine. But the conflict with China will also be present in the medium and long term vision.

In conclusion: NATO has carried out the largest air exercise in its history, days before the organization's Summit of Heads of Government, which meets in Vilnius on July 11 and 12. The United States showed its ability to quickly move hundreds of planes across the Atlantic and operate militarily with ammunition depots previously stored in Germany. The German Head of Government ratified his country's commitment to raise Defense spending to 2% of its GDP and recognized Germany's role as the center of NATO air operations in Europe. Finally, at the end of June, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, stated that the relationship between the US and China will be the geostrategic key of the 21st century, a vision that will not be absent in Vilnius.