

THE WAR IN UKRAINE IS HEADING FOR ESCALATION

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Almost one year has passed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war shifts from a chronic conflict to an escalation. At the end of ten months on December 24, it was clear that the possibility of a negotiation and eventual agreement was not going to occur in 2023. This was ratified by the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, after the summit of the "group of contact" of NATO for this war, which met in Ramstein (Germany) on January 20 of this year. The possible scenarios then were stagnation in a chronic war or escalation. The former is the one that has gone on in the last quarter of 2022. Neither party was able to define relevant situations in their favor and the trenches characterized the operations with similarities to the First World War. The latter is escalation, which is that the expansion of the use of men and weapons systems leads to a stage in which NATO governments increase the quantity and quality of weapons supplies to Ukraine. At the same time, countries that directly or indirectly supply Russia with weapons, such as Iran, North Korea and Belarus, will become increasingly involved in the conflict. In this scenario, the eleventh month of conflict was completed on January 24. The risk of the use of nuclear weapons - which everyone thinks will only be at the tactical level, that is, circumscribed - reappeared in statements by members of the Russian government. The use of uranium in the projectiles fired by the new tanks that NATO supplies to Ukraine has been taken by Russia as an argument for nuclear escalation.

NATO's decision to provide Ukraine with the most modern tanks was the event that defined the transition from chronic to escalating warfare. On January 20, at the aforementioned meeting of the NATO "contact group" for Ukraine, which brought together the defense officials of the 30 Alliance countries and almost 20 of its allies from Asia, Africa and Oceania, there was intense discussion if this step was taken or not. Germany maintained that it was not willing to deliver Leopard II tanks if the United States would not deliver the most modern version of its Abrams tank either. The division was not resolved. The negotiations that took place in the following days overturned the decision to affirmative. The United States announced that it was sending 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine and

then Germany announced that it would deliver 14, the same quantity that Poland and Lithuania will give, which will be added to another 14 Challengers provided by the United Kingdom. It will not be easy or quick to assemble in the theater of operations - the zone of Ukraine occupied by Russia - the hundreds of tanks required by the Ukrainian government. Germany fears for the ghost of its past. Between July and August 1943, 80 years ago, the greatest tank battle in history took place in the Russian town of Kursk. Thousands of tanks were used by both sides. The Germans lost 400 and the Russians 700, but they won the battle, which was the beginning of their counteroffensive that would culminate almost two years later with the fall of Berlin.

However, already at the end of January, Ukraine raised a new step in the escalation, by requesting that fourth-generation fighters be delivered to it. The American F-16 model in its various versions and similar aircraft that other NATO countries have. President Joe Biden, when asked if these planes were going to be delivered to Ukraine, answered with a laconic “no”. But the discussion has begun and the group of NATO countries that maintains that the only alternative is the military defeat of Russia - the Baltics, the Nordics and those of Central and Eastern Europe - maintain that they should surrender. Germany has also ruled in the negative. The escalation is materializing and the divisions within NATO as well. Meanwhile, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff insists that the only possible solution is the negotiating table (the view that Henry Kissinger has been publicly raising since May 2022). The two sides expect a Russian counteroffensive for the boreal summer, that is, between June and September, which coincides with the date of the Battle of Kursk. In this season of the year the terrain allows the movement of large masses of tanks. Some 8 months ago, the destroyed Russian tanks were shown as evidence that this type of armor was not suitable for the current war. Today, however, they are considered decisive for attempting a definition. The Ukrainian request to receive the fourth generation fighters also seems to resemble the scenario of 80 years ago. It was a great battle of tanks supported by aircraft.

But escalation poses particular risks in weapons systems with longer ranges and spreads. The United States carried out the experimental launch of a new version of its hypersonic missile. It is a weapons system in which Russia has the advantage and which allows it to bypass conventional systems, having a range of thousands of kilometers. For its part, Russia announced that it is suspending

the validity of the nuclear arms control treaty that provides for mutual inspections. In turn, the UN International Atomic Energy Organization maintained that the warfare around the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant dangerously increases the risk of explosions, which is the largest power plant of its kind in Europe. Faced with the scale of NATO with its support for Ukraine, Russia, in Putin's own words, has indicated that each step will have a response - even nuclear - and that NATO tanks will be destroyed. Moscow is not facing an unforeseen or surprising situation and, consequently, it prepares response alternatives, some of which are foreseeable and others not so much. The conflict is spreading outside the West. Iran, a supplier of drones and missiles to Russia, suffered an attack at the end of January on its manufacturing facilities for these weapons systems, the extent of which is still unknown in the West. Then the Israeli government announced that it was considering breaking its military neutrality in the conflict in order to provide Ukraine with weapons. The escalation of the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians and between the Pakistanis and the Taliban escalate, although with no apparent connection to the war in Ukraine. The visit of Olaf Scholtz, the German Head of Government, to Chile, Argentina and Brazil, asking these countries to hand over their weapons of Soviet origin and their Leopards to Ukraine -which was rejected-, shows an attempt to extend the conflict to Latin America. But it is in Asia where the escalation between the United States and China is projected as the "greatest challenge", in the words of the NATO Secretary General. He and the Secretary of State visited South Korea in the last days of January, ratifying their military alliance. For its part, China staged an unprecedented military demonstration against Taiwan.

In conclusion: As February begins, the war in Ukraine is shifting from the arena of chronic conflict to escalation. NATO's decision to provide Ukraine with its most modern tanks implies the start of such escalation. Volodimir Zelensky's call for fourth-generation fighters to be delivered now is an attempt to take a further step in this direction. Finally, the conflict is also escalating, increasing the nuclear risk and including more countries in the conflict, either directly or indirectly.