

FOR WHOM THE CLOCK TICKS IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

As the sixth month of the war in Ukraine begins, the ‘time’ factor begins to play a more relevant role. Perhaps it was Boris Johnson, the head of government of the NATO countries, who expressed it more explicitly: on January 24, a month before the invasion, he said that Russia would have a prolonged attrition like in Chechnya, and at the end of June he announced that the war would last for years. This is the position that he assumed days later, at the NATO Summit in Madrid. Johnson openly said what was shared by both the President of the United States, Joe Biden, and the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg. In the initial months of the war, the leadership of the Western military alliance considered that a prolonged war was against Russia, which could not bear the cost of the economic and technological isolation with which it had been threatened in the days before the invasion. It was speculated that Russia's initial missteps in its attempt to take the Ukrainian capital were going to generate the weakening of Putin's leadership and an internal crisis regarding that leadership. But this opinion proved to be in fact an expression of desire. It was a perception that ignored history, showing that Russia is perhaps the country in the world that has the highest resistance to the cost of its dead in war. Calculations such as the fact that Russia has had more deaths in Ukraine in weeks than the United States in twenty years in Afghanistan and Iraq, seem to forget Russian history and culture, ignoring past events such as that of the Second World War, in which Russia suffered 25 million fatal casualties and the United States and Great Britain, together, less than a million.

For its part, Russia today believes that the prolongation of the war plays in its favor, producing a growing cost for NATO governments due to their energy dependence. According to this vision, the longer the war is prolonged, the greater the discomfort of the peoples with respect to their rulers. The fall of the governments of Johnson in the United Kingdom and Draghi in Italy -both members of the G7-, and the resignation of the Prime Minister of Estonia on July 14 -one of the most staunchly anti-Russian countries for historical and geopolitical reasons. These are situations that can spread to other countries. Polls for the US mid-term election indicate that the Democrats could be defeated, and even lose the majority in both Houses. This seems to be due to the economy rather than to the war, but there is a close relationship between the two in the world today. In the election that will take place in Italy next September,

the populist right-wing forces, which are anti-European, may win. The French election showed that although Macron was re-elected, he lost the majority in the Assembly and the opposition is in the hands of populist forces from the right and left. But economically, the situation in Germany is key. If Russia decided to reduce gas exports to this country to zero, its GDP could fall by up to 6% in 2023, putting the coalition government headed by Scholtz at risk.

Regarding the duration of the conflict, US Admiral James Stavridis, who was NATO Commander in Europe a decade ago, considers that it will last between four and six months. He argues that the Ukrainians have put up a very strong resistance. According to him, Putin's military strategy has shown little effectiveness, because he has gained a small territory since the conflict began. He highlights a repeated argument in Western media regarding the number of Russian generals killed in combat. In May, he argued that "in modern history, there is no comparable situation regarding the death of generals. Here on the Russian side, in a period of two months, we have seen at least a dozen, if not more, Russian generals killed. He also said that "not a single general was lost in actual combat" while the United States participated in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he did not notice is that as early as April, American newspapers such as the New York Times reported that the death of the Russian generals was due to their location as targets by US intelligence, which allowed, through the capture of telephone communications in its various variants, to physically locate the place where these generals were, so that the Ukrainian forces could precisely eliminate them. Also the conspicuous presence of Russian generals on the front line demonstrates their determination and willingness to take risks.

But this former US naval chief defines a precise scenario as to how the war can end. For this, he cites the Korean War, which was fought between 1950 and 1953. North Korea had the military support of the Soviet Union and South Korea, the alliance of the United States, which deployed a significant number of troops on the ground. This conflict ended with an armistice in July 1953, which created a demilitarized zone. Formally, the countries are still at war to this day, never signing a peace treaty or a permanent agreement. Specifically, Stavridis maintains, "I see this conflict heading towards an end like that of the Korean War, that is, an armistice, a demilitarized zone between the two parties, a continuing animosity, a kind of frozen conflict". In his vision, the Ukraine war will last only months, because "neither side can sustain it much beyond that."

This solution is far from the objective set by NATO, to continue the war against Russia through Ukraine, until Moscow loses its military capacity to invade another country. This implies the destruction of its offensive military capacity. In reality, as long as it maintains its nuclear capability, Russia will not lose the chance to invade again. But the situation is changing: the economic consequences of the war deteriorate the Western countries more than expected, and the electoral defeats and the resignation of Heads of Government and Presidents who promote the war, can change the course of events.

In conclusion: time plays an important role in defining war conflicts and this is relevant in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Initially, the idea was that a prolonged conflict would wear Russia down and benefit NATO, and now it could be the other way around. As for the specific duration, an admiral who was commander of NATO in Europe maintains that neither of the two parties is in a position to maintain the war beyond four or six months. Finally, he also proposes the Korean War as a likely scenario, in which the conflicting parties signed an armistice and established a demilitarized zone between them, but never signed peace.