

MILITARY ASYMMETRY BETWEEN RUSSIA AND NATO

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee

The strategic conflict between Russia and NATO led to the war between Moscow and Kyiv two weeks ago.

The "military asymmetry" between Russia and Ukraine is clear. The Russian troops as a whole are close to a million men, adding militias, volunteers and mercenaries (the latter represent approximately 10% of the total) although a fifth of these are fighting in Ukraine.

Kyiv has mobilized about a third of the total number of men that Russia has under arms, but all of them are on Ukrainian territory, thus surpassing those that Moscow has in the theater of operations. The quantitative advantage in armor, missiles, combat aircraft and other weapons systems is very marked in favor of Russia, but the big difference is in the nuclear field, where Vladimir Putin's Armed Forces not only threaten Ukraine, but also NATO.

The latter, in turn, avoids participating in the armed conflict for fear that the escalation will reach the nuclear level, allowing the supremacy of Putin's forces to be maintained in the air and naval spheres. The forces ratio in the cyber field is difficult to measure in this conflict, for now.

However, the economic supremacy of NATO over Russia is clear. According to the IMF, the nominal GDP of the United States reaches 24,800,000 million dollars. This figure represents 14.5 times more than the 1,700,500 million that Russia has. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom, Canada and 27 other European countries are also part of the Atlantic alliance. They add up to 25,775,000 million dollars. According to this, the GDP of NATO as a whole would reach 50,575,000 million. This is 29.7 times more than the Russian, that is, an overwhelming asymmetry against Moscow.

It should be added that Russia's GDP was 8.3 times more than Ukraine's at the start of the conflict.

According to SIPRI, military spending in the United States reaches 778 billion (3.7% of its GDP). Russia, for its part, spends 61 billion (4.3%). In other words, the United States allocates 12.7 times more to defense than Russia. It should be noted that the latter spends almost the same as the United Kingdom, which spends 59.2 billion (2.7% of its GDP) on defense, Germany spends 52.8 (1.4%) and France 52.7 (2.1%). All combined, these three countries spend 2.7 times more on defense than Russia. An estimate of the defense spending of the 30 NATO countries places it almost 20 times higher than that of Russia.

How does Russia offset this huge asymmetry?

First of all, with its nuclear capacity. It has almost as many missiles of this type (with various ranges) as NATO, which establishes a virtual parity with the Western military alliance -almost all of its weapons are American. For this reason, already in the first week of the conflict, Putin put this issue on the table. Already before the Russian troops entered Ukraine, in military exercises with Belarus, they had integrated the nuclear capability.

Secondly, the projection capacity, that is, the possibility of carrying out military operations far from its own territory. Although there is a very marked difference in favor of the United States in this capacity, Russia is the second country in the world. Parallel to the war in Ukraine, it is carrying out naval exercises, of which 140 ships participate simultaneously in the waters of the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and the Arctic oceans. These exercises combine naval, air, amphibious and space capabilities.

Third, there are soldiers and mercenaries controlled by Russian intelligence services operating in Libya, Syria, Burkina Faso, Mali and other countries in the world, and Moscow has offered assistance and military presence to Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

Lastly, integrating military capabilities from 30 different countries is not easy, so NATO's nominal numbers, when put into action, are substantially reduced.

These four causes -although there are others- explain how Putin's Armed Forces compensate for the marked military asymmetry they have with respect to NATO, and military spending as a percentage of the GDP between the United

States and Russia is not the cause that explains it, since it is only slightly higher than that of the latter country.