

## **THE FOURSIDED FRONT THAT THREATENS THE WEST**

**Rosendo Fraga**

**Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee**

On November 29, the NATO foreign ministers met in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, in the same place where 14 years ago they accepted the request of Ukraine and Georgia to join the organization. The then US president, George W. Bush, convinced the members of the Alliance to support this decision, despite criticism, objections and warnings from Russia. The statement then read: "NATO applauds the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia to join the Alliance. We agree today that these countries will be members of NATO." Putin attended that meeting in 2008, calling the decision a "direct threat" against Russia's security. Four months later, Russian forces invaded Georgia. Some think that decision 14 years ago was a mistake that left Russia feeling cornered. Now, the Atlantic alliance will ratify a commitment to support Ukraine in the long term against Russian air and ground missile attacks, many of which have damaged power plants and various Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

The idea of a NATO war with Russia through Ukraine is accepted as such, despite the doubts of some European countries, which internally express their concern. Nine months into the conflict, it is clear that Putin may win or lose, but he will always redouble the bet. Faced with the success of the Ukrainian offensive in the Donbass weeks ago, the response was forceful: attacks against the Ukrainian infrastructure as winter approaches. The same capital of the country, Kyiv - like other cities in the country - has seen its electricity and water services affected at a time when temperatures are already below zero. For now it does not seem that Russia is going to abandon a strategy that has allowed it to resume the initiative. The Ukrainian response was to request anti-aircraft weapons with greater range and precision and more frequent ammunition shipments to NATO. But beyond the Western willingness to remain engaged with Ukraine, the US and European arsenals are beginning to feel the effects of a protracted conflict of conventional characteristics. It is that NATO's plans were focused on a conflict like the one that ended last year in Afghanistan or, in the best of cases, campaigns like the one in Iraq.

Regarding China, after the détente that the meeting between Biden and Xi implied at the G20 Summit in Bali, on November 27 the Chinese foreign minister once again expressed solidarity with Russia in the long term. He did so when receiving Putin's new ambassador in Beijing, stating that the strategic relationship between the two powers will not be altered. China is facing economic difficulties and the drastic measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid have generated protests in big cities, which some believe are reaching the level of those carried out by students in 1989. Xi will not relent and will not hesitate to intensify the repression to contain and nullify them, and he will probably succeed. But in the short term it is likely that the internal political-economic situation will lead him to leave the Taiwan conflict in the background. In addition, the recent local elections held on November 26 on the island have meant the defeat of President Tsai Ing-Wen, who is averaging her second term, which ends in 2024. She leads the progressive Democratic party that is inclined to declare independence from China, which China categorically rejects. The defeat led the President to resign the leadership of her party. The victory went to the Kuomintang, the traditional nationalist party, which opposes declaring independence. Military escalation around the island becomes less likely with these two facts.

At the same time, tension is growing over the intensification of missile launches by North Korea. November has set a record for this type of launch. Both Japan and South Korea feel threatened by the attitude of North Korean President Kim Jong-Un, who holds a record in terms of his missile launches. He has shown the use of intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the United States. He claims to have the ability to combine them with nuclear warheads, about which there are doubts in Western intelligence services, but cannot be ruled out. He proclaims his strategic and military alliance with China and would be providing certain weapons to Russia. Xi has the last word regarding North Korean strategic decisions, but there are doubts about the balance of the North Korean dictator, who has succeeded his grandfather and father in office, and who in the last week of November attended the launch of an intercontinental missile accompanied by his 10-year-old daughter, whom some already see as his successor.

Iran is the fourth vertex of this quadrilateral that today threatens the security of NATO and its allies. The negotiations of the G6 (the five permanent members

of the Security Council plus Germany) with the Iranian regime to return to international control of the agreement signed in 2015 -from which Trump removed the United States- have had no results. The truth is that since 2017 Iran has made significant advances that bring it closer to having nuclear weapons. Western intelligence services disagree on how long it would take Iran to complete the uranium enrichment required for an atomic bomb. This country has provided Russia with low-cost drones, which in the past two months have proven effective for Putin's forces. Technicians from the Iranian forces deployed in Crimea collaborated in the training so that the Russians can use their drones. But the riots caused by the death of a young woman at the hands of the Iranian religious police generated strong protests that in more than two months have caused more than 400 deaths due to the repression. The United States and its allies see in this situation the possibility of a crisis that leads to the fall of the theocratic regime that took power in 1979.

In conclusion: the summit of NATO foreign ministers that takes place in Bucharest -the same place where the request for the incorporation of Georgia and Ukraine was accepted 14 years ago- ratifies the commitment with Kyiv. Russia redoubles its bet after the defeats in the Donbass, intensifying attacks against the Ukrainian electricity infrastructure as winter approaches and temperatures are already below zero. The Chinese foreign minister has ratified the strategic alliance with Russia, when the protests over the confinements due to Covid and the electoral defeat of the President of Taiwan reduce the risk of conflict around the island. November marked a record for missile launches by North Korea, a Beijing ally and Russian arms supplier, raising tensions with Japan and South Korea; Finally, Iran is advancing in its policy to obtain a nuclear weapon, while the United States and its allies believe that internal protests could lead to regime change.