

UKRAINE: NEGOTIATION UNDER A FRAMEWORK OF UNCERTAINTY

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee

The risk that the war in Ukraine escalates to the nuclear sphere has not disappeared. The director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, has made this clear when visiting that country to analyze the reinforcement of the security of the facilities in the country where the largest plant in Europe is located. Russian forces have seized power plants and attacked peripheral areas. For his part, former Russian President Dimitri Medvedev, current Vice President of his country's Security Council, publicly reiterated the doctrine regarding the use of nuclear power: it will be used if Russia is attacked with nuclear missiles, if its nuclear infrastructure is attacked, if the systems to use it are neutralized or if the "existence" of the Russian state is at risk.

The latter is the most dangerous hypothesis, since that term depends on a judgment and the specific situations in which it could take place are not defined. For NATO, avoiding the risk of nuclear escalation is priority number one. This leads it not to comply with President Zelensky's requests in terms of declaring the no-fly zone over Ukraine, handing over fighter jets and even the MIGs that Poland made available. The tactical nuclear weapons - with greater precision and less explosion expansion than in the past - that Russia possesses, increase and do not reduce the risk of their use. Putin can win or lose the war - nothing is more subject to chance and circumstances than military conflicts - but what is certain is that he will double the bet. The person in charge of External Relations of the European Union, the Spaniard Josep Borrell, said: "it can be dangerous to corner the leader of a nuclear power".

Meanwhile, the possibility of a negotiation remains open and progress is slow, as in the case of the meeting held in Turkey on March 29. President Zelensky has publicly expressed that his country is willing to suspend its request to join NATO and to accept the country's neutrality. Also the commitment that no nuclear missiles or military bases of third countries be installed in the country. These are the central demands that Putin makes to justify the invasion. For its part, the Russian government in the negotiations has proposed that Ukraine's

model of neutrality be that of Austria or Sweden. These two countries are not members of NATO, but they are members of the European Union. It is a reasonable alternative for the Ukrainian will to be part of Europe. Zelensky also raises the need to establish a group of countries that are "guarantors" of the fulfillment of this agreement. But he has warned that it should not be like the "Budapest Treaty", which guaranteed Ukraine its territorial integrity as long as it handed over its nuclear arsenal. The guarantors of this agreement - which were the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom - did not prevent the occupation of Crimea by Russian forces in 2014 or the secession in Donbas. Turkey, which despite being a member of NATO has not joined the economic sanctions against Russia, has managed to be the country that has made the most progress in the role of mediator.

Israel also plays an effective role in this field. The country's good relationship with Putin and with Zelensky - the only Jewish President outside of Israel - give it this possibility. Perhaps it can play this role because both countries are military allies of the West, but they do not belong to it and have preserved their margin of autonomy. The United States and its allies are skeptical and unbelieving about the progress of the negotiations. An upcoming diplomatic battle will be fought between the West and Russia within the G20, where the G7 countries will ask for its dropout. The group is made up of nineteen countries and the European Union as a whole. The seven most developed economies with a liberal-democratic political system (United States, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Canada and Italy) converge on it, acting as a bloc, condemning the invasion and applying economic sanctions against Russia. The five countries of the BRICS group, which brings together emerging powers: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, also make up the G20. The latter presented an alternative proposal to the condemnation of Russia in the United Nations Assembly, avoiding mentioning this country.

China and India have neither condemned the invasion nor joined the economic sanctions. Brazil did not vote in the OAS to condemn Russia for the invasion. Seven votes for exclusion and five against it can be anticipated. In the remaining countries -those of intermediate magnitude- the MITKA group is articulated, made up of Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea and Australia. The last two will vote with the G7 and the other three, probably, with the BRICS. Saudi Arabia and Argentina are possibly closer to the position against

exclusion and the European Union will vote as the G7. But the G20 does not foresee any mechanism for the expulsion of a member or the causes for which it would take place, and in this context, it will not be easy to solve the problem.

After the first month of the war that began on February 24, the impression prevails in the Western world that Russia has faced more problems and Ukraine has shown more resolve than expected. This is true, but time plays in an ambivalent way. As time goes by, Russia wears out and fights against a country with lower military capacity. In turn, Ukraine is strengthened in its image by its ability to resist, but the civilian casualties - which Russia does not have - and the devastation of its infrastructure, are becoming an intolerable cost. Between NATO and Ukraine a divergence becomes evident. Zelensky has managed to keep the negotiation with Putin open, while President Biden, who has called him a "criminal and a butcher," says he wants to "see him on his knees."

The Ukrainian president seeks to save the "existence" of his country; the American president intends to defeat the Russian president. Russia suffers the impact of economic sanctions. But these also begin to harm Western countries, as is the case with the price of energy. Washington and Brussels have succeeded in turning Putin into an international "pariah", but only in the West. China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam and other Asian countries continue to avoid condemning the invasion and joining the economic sanctions. It is true that 140 countries in the United Nations have condemned Russia for invading Ukraine, but only a third of these have applied economic sanctions.

In conclusion: the risk of nuclear escalation in the war in Ukraine remains open and Russia has not given up in this field; the negotiations between Moscow and Kiev move on, with Turkey in an effective mediating role, in the face of skepticism from Washington and Brussels; Russia's expulsion from the G20 will show the position of the members of this group, which concentrates most of the world trade and GDP. Finally, as the negotiations progress, differences emerge between NATO to defeat Putin, and Ukraine, which wants to save its existence as a country.