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5 keys to understanding the conflict in Ukraine

Sources: Le Monde Diplomatique

The escalation in Ukraine has a history that has been going on for almost a decade, and that is explained both by the particularities of the country, divided between a Russophile east and a pro-Western west, and by the game of the great powers. Ignacio Hutin, a journalist specializing in Eastern Europe, explains the main keys to the conflict.

Russia has mobilized more than a hundred thousand men to the borders of Ukraine, from the east, north and south. The argument is that these are only military exercises, but NATO sees a potential and imminent attack. Outside of the most urgent news, the cameras and the catastrophe titles, hides an extensive conflict with too many edges and too many actors.

1. What is the origin of the conflict?

Ukraine has been at war for almost 8 years. In November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich decided not to sign a political-trade agreement with the European Union and thus privileged relations with Russia. A significant section of the population interpreted this as a turn against the democratic and liberal values supposedly embodied in Western Europe. There were protests, repression and a spiral of violence that led to the deaths of at least 100 demonstrators and the formation of paramilitary groups to confront state forces. Yanukovich's rule fell, but it was not the end of the dispute.

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The president came from the eastern region of the country, an area culturally and politically close to Russia, where most of the population speaks Russian. On the other side of the country, in the extreme west, Ukrainian is spoken: there sits an important nationalist sector. By April 2014, immediately after Russia's annexation of Crimea (disputed territory that until now was formally part of Ukraine), in the east they took up arms in the face of what they saw as a coup d'état and the advance of ultranationalist armed groups. The war began with the seizure of public buildings in Donetsk Province (*Oblast*) and, the following month, both this region and Luhansk to the north declared independence.

According to the Ukrainian state, Russia has since supported rebel groups with weapons, funding and military directives. Moscow denies any involvement and speaks of a mere civil war between Ukrainian citizens.

From that moment on, there was an extremely evident breakdown in relations between Russia and Ukraine. Not a formal diplomatic rupture, but the end of an important commercial, political and cultural proximity. So much so that there are no direct flights between the two countries since 2015. Ukraine has moved away from Moscow, trying to get out of its sphere of influence and closer to NATO. Meanwhile, the war in Donbass, the eastern region of the country, continues, although without major advances and practically stalled after two years, 2014 and 2015, of great intensity.

2. What does Russia intend with this advance?

Officially, Moscow is demanding binding assurances that NATO will not incorporate either Ukraine or Georgia, and that it will withdraw weapons from Eastern European countries that are already members, including Romania and Bulgaria. The mobilization of troops could be interpreted as pressure, a way to force the United States to discuss exactly what the Kremlin intends. But it is also a show of force and a wake-up call, as a way to show that Russia is a strong international actor, a power with determined interests, concerned about its security and its ability to influence, especially in the territories that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Eastern Europe is, from this perspective, a plug, a security cushion that separates Russian territory from NATO. Therein lies the geographical importance of Ukraine, but also of Belarus, a very close ally of Moscow.

In principle, it seems unlikely that Ukraine will be part of the Western military alliance in the short term: it is one of the poorest countries in Europe and depends on the contributions of various Western states in terms of security and defense. As if that were not enough, it is a territory at war. For the Ukrainian state, Russia is an enemy, an aggressor country that took over the Crimean peninsula and supports the separatists. If Ukraine were part of NATO, allies would be obliged to attack Russia. And no one wants an open war between the main international military alliance and the Eurasian giant, owner of the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet. That is why a deliberate Russian action, i.e. a ground incursion into Ukrainian territory, seems so unlikely. It is true that this already happened in 2014 with the annexation (or recovery) of Crimea, but the political climate is very different in 2022. Ukraine has overcome the political crisis of that time, today it has a president elected in democratic elections and a relationship with the West that practically did not exist 8 years ago.

Since 2019, the Ukrainian Constitution establishes the obligation of the State to approach the west and try to join both NATO and the European Union. Beyond the disputes within the country, Ukraine's path seems marked. But it is incumbent upon one to ask whether he can really follow him and whether he will be allowed to do so. At the time, the Russian response to this decision of Ukraine was to grant citizenship to all the inhabitants of the Donbass: more than 600 thousand have already obtained a new Russian passport. And that's a significant number of voters.

3. What does the United States intend?

Washington has supported Ukraine militarily and financially since the start of the war. Between 2014 and 2019 alone, it provided \$1500 million as "security assistance." If Russia supports the insurgency in the east of the country, the United States backs a Ukrainian state that is getting closer and closer to the West. All this would serve to show that any former Soviet republic can sideline Moscow.

So far, however, the U.S. reaction to the recent escalation has been ambiguous. More than once the Joe Biden administration has admitted that it sees no possibility of war, but at the same time evacuates some of its diplomatic staff in Kiev and insists that it has at its disposal almost 10,000 men ready to be deployed. It officially reports that NATO

members are united and agree on the steps to be taken, but countries such as Germany have refused to send weapons to Ukraine. It is a logical decision: if there is no war, the shipment of weapons would only escalate tension and increase the risks of an outbreak, even if it were accidental.

The possibility of Ukraine finally joining the Western sphere would mean winning a market. Russia used to be its main trading partner until the 2014 break forced Kiev to turn to the European Union. But the exchanges still do not compensate for the fall in GDP that meant losing both its eastern neighbor and control over much of the country's east, the most industrialized region. In March 2018, then-President Petro Poroshenko announced that the occupation of part of the Donbass meant the loss of 15% of GDP and 25% of Ukrainian domestic industry. In that sense, the United States and the EU can take advantage of this situation, adding a customer and also a supplier of raw materials, particularly wheat.

At the same time, NATO has conducted military exercises close to Russian territory. For example, last November in the Black Sea, near Crimea and the important Russian naval base of Sevastopol. Vladimir Putin described these actions as a "challenge," in the same way that Today Washington describes Moscow's "exercises." And just as Russia is concerned about the possibility of NATO installing military bases in Ukraine, Washington fears that the Kremlin will do the same in Venezuela, Nicaragua or Cuba. Russia has maintained an important rapprochement with these three countries since 2008 and Venezuela is the main buyer of Russian weapons in Latin America.

Finally, it must be considered that Russia is the main supplier of gas to the European Union. So far it exports it through gas pipelines that cross the territory of Ukraine and Belarus, so it must pay a tax to both countries. But it recently completed the construction of a new gas pipeline, known as Nord Stream 2, which connects Russia with Germany, a major gas consumer, across the Baltic Sea, avoiding Ukraine and Belarus, which would go on to receive less funding from Moscow. The United States is trying to sell liquefied gas to the European Union by sea and wrest the business from Russia. That is why it is pressuring Germany not to certify the new gas pipeline and not to allow it to be put into operation. The argument is that Nord Stream 2 would allow Russia to deepen the EU's energy dependence and thus have a greater capacity for pressure, deterrence and influence.

Of course, U.S. gas is more expensive. That is why diplomatic pressure and forcing Russia's image as an aggressor state are so necessary.

4. What role do other actors play?

France and Germany are on the same page. Both Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz say their countries will support Kiev but will not send weapons for the time being. They are merely waiting for a diplomatic resolution and distance themselves from the idea of an imminent outbreak of war. In Spain, the dilemma occupies a good part of the public debate and poses a break within the ruling coalition: Pedro Sánchez's PSOE wants to send weapons, with the support of the opposition Popular Party, but Unidas Podemos intends to follow the line of Berlin and Paris. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, supports Washington's position. Perhaps in order to avoid further post-Brexit isolation, Boris Johnson insists on the high probability of a Russian invasion of Ukraine and the necessary militarisation of the area.

Meanwhile, China seems oblivious to the whole dispute. It has no major bearing on the conflict and any false move could involve losing markets in Western Europe, Russia or Ukraine itself. For now, wait

5. What can happen from now on?

Neither Moscow nor Washington want an open war in which no one would win. The resolution of the dispute must necessarily be diplomatic. Secretary of State Antony Blinken may be able to guarantee, unofficially, that Ukraine will not join NATO, that this possibility is simply not tempting because it implies more costs than benefits, even if in public he maintains the official discourse that his country will support Kiev in any decision that Ukrainians make.

Even more likely is that the West will impose new sanctions on Russia and some government officials. It has already done so since the start of the war in 2014, which seriously affected the Russian economy. These days the ruble has been devalued, Moscow's stock market is plummeting, inflation is rising, and military spending is also growing, but none of that has managed to change Moscow's actions. The new sanctions

would only lead the Kremlin to redouble its bet, aspiring not to lose influence or authority both internationally and regionally. But they could also push Russia further into the Chinese market, strengthening the Beijing-Moscow political alliance. And that doesn't seem like a good option for either Washington or the EU. In any case, Germany has already asked the United States that, if sanctions are imposed, they do not apply to the energy sector. No one wants Western Europe to run out of gas in the dead of winter.

There is also the possibility that, even without an open war between NATO and Russia, the stalled conflict in Donbass will be exacerbated, for example with a new shipment of weapons to both sides of the line of contact. This would stimulate an indirect confrontation between the powers, a proxy war similar to the conflicts of the Cold War. In any case, what happens in these days will rethink the international chessboard and particularly the relations between Moscow and Washington, but also the link of both powers with Europe, both Western and Eastern.

Ignacio Hutin is a journalist. His latest book is titled *Ukraine. A chronicle from the front*, Indie Libros.

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