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## ***NATO and imperialist military expansionism***

The war on European soil is accelerating the tendencies towards greater political, commercial and military confrontations between the powers



On June 29 and 30, the NATO Summit will be held in Madrid under the umbrella of a police and security operation of enormous proportions. Pedro Sánchez, president of the "most progressive government in history" formed by the PSOE-Podemos-PCE coalition will preside over the deliberations. Ukraine's war and NATO's confrontation with Russia set the political agenda at a summit where a new "Strategic Concept" will be defined. [1].



The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is currently composed of 30 states, with Finland and Sweden as aspirants, after announcing in recent days the intention to join. Founded in 1949 in Washington, it brought together in its first four decades a dozen states. Its most important expansion occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, reaching in the late 90s the borders of Russia. [2]

In its 73 years of existence, the history of this political-military organization, hegemonized by the United States in alliance with European imperialisms, has passed not without strong internal tensions. [3] However, after what may have been the moment of greatest internal deterioration during the presidency of Donald Trump, the war in Ukraine has generated an unexpected revitalization of it. Several member states have pledged to increase their military budgets to the 2% of GDP demanded by the organization (something that, until now, few except the US complied with). The militaristic escalation and rearmament of all imperialist states in the name of the "defense of democracy" is the dynamic that will mark the summit.

In this article we go through part of its recent history to polemicize with the idea that it is possible for a NATO to play a "democratic" or "progressive" role at the international level, an ideology that abounds in the Western media. But not only. We have also seen on several occasions and more now before the war in Ukraine, positions that from "progressivism" or the left embellish the role played by NATO, as if it were a progressive camp against the reactionary regime of Putin.

NATO is a warlike machine of imperialism at the service of American and European expansionism. A greater confrontation between the powers, as the war in Ukraine shows, is inscribed in the trends of our time.

*"Not a single centimeter" [Not one inch]*

"Not one inch" is the latest book by American historian Mary Sarotte [4], a professor at Johns Hopkins University. The author reconstructs the recent history of NATO's expansion and in particular the Atlantic Alliance's growing tensions with Russia. Based on declassified documents, memoirs of some of the protagonists and interviews, Sarotte gives an account of the key political decisions (between 1989 and 1999) that led to a dynamic of "unlimited" enlargement of NATO to the east. The book was published shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so it does not address the events of this year. But many of the coordinates it proposes allow us to analyze the current war largely as a result of policies that were taken long before and beyond its territory, in Washington, Berlin and Moscow.



The main thesis of Sarotte's book is that in that decade decisions were made that, at every step, prevented going back and "closed options" in the relationship between NATO and Russia. That is why he uses the metaphor of the "ratchet", a cogwheel on one side, which can turn in only one direction. He maintains that this ratchet was activated in at least three moments. Between 1989 and 1992, during the process of reunification of Germany; in the middle of Bill Clinton's term with a turn towards NATO expansion to incorporate the former members of the Warsaw Pact; and finally with the accession of the Baltic States, territories that had been part of the USSR.

The phrase "Not one inch" was uttered by James Baker, secretary of state to U.S. President George Bush Sr., in February 1990. Its recipient was Mikhail Gorbachev, at that time head

of state of the now defunct USSR. Baker's promise that NATO would not extend "a single inch" eastward would have been made in the context of negotiations for German reunification. For the United States, it was key that this happened with the guarantee of permanence in NATO (something that was not assured in advance). This implied that the USSR accepted the extension of NATO beyond the "iron curtain" and opened the way to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, something that would end up happening soon after, along with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991.

The author documents with various sources that Baker made that promise to Gorbachev, but that it was dismissed almost immediately by Bush and his team. "To hell with that" would have been the U.S. president's response. The author also reconstructs a dialogue between Bush and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl: "We win and they don't. We cannot let the Soviets tear victory out of the jaws of defeat," the American would have said.

The resolution that was given to German reunification (1989-1992) within NATO was a qualitative conquest for the interests of the US and the Atlantic alliance in the situation opened after the fall of the wall. It guaranteed the continuity of American military bases, troops and nuclear weapons on German territory and, as a counterpart, the withdrawal of the USSR. Not least, since it is estimated that in 1991 Russian troops in East Germany amounted to a total of "338,000 military, 207,400 family members and civilian personnel, 4,100 tanks, 8,000 armored vehicles, 705 helicopters, 615 aircraft and thousands of artillery pieces, all distributed in 777 barracks, 3,422 training centers and 47 military airports." [5]

The second key turn for NATO expansion came, she said, toward the middle of Bill Clinton's first term. After a brief interregnum of "honeymoon" in Russian-American relations with Yeltsin and Clinton as protagonists, there is a significant deterioration of these. Until that time, the idea of a "middle" path for the integration of eastern European countries had prevailed, through the Partnership for Peace that would allow collaboration without fully including them in NATO. But that changes quickly. While Russia's geopolitical maneuverability is increasingly limited, in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis that followed the disintegration of the USSR, NATO's expansionist line is advancing.

## NATO's Expanding Membership



The expansion of NATO since 1949.

The author recovers some words of Clinton significant in this regard. The American president refers to the urgent need for credits from the IMF and other international organizations by the Russians, which could be used as a bargaining chip: "Russia can be bought." Despite Russian unrest, the future expansion of NATO would be done by ensuring the "coverage" of Article 5 for Eastern European states. [6] With this status, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined the military organization in 1999.

That same year the third turn of the ratchet begins to take shape, with the decision that the next to join are the Baltic nations. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were officially invited to join in 2002 and completed that process two years later. Albania and Croatia joined in 2009 and finally in 2017 paved the way for the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Macedonia. Ukraine, the great physical border with Russia, formally applied to NATO in 2008 and reaffirmed its intention to join in 2014 after the Euromaidan.

For Sarotte, these strategic decisions by the US, Germany and NATO increased Russian hostility and nationalism in the face of what was perceived as boundless humiliation. Combined with other policies taken in Moscow, there was an increase in tensions between Russia and the Western powers. The author analyzes the period from Gorbachev's pro-

market reforms to the disintegration of the USSR, the economic crisis and the proliferation of mafia oligarchies, Yeltsin's presidency and its subsequent decline (not only political but also physical), the two chechen wars, as well as the growth of nationalist and Bonapartist tendencies that are consolidated with putin's arrival to power.

In February 1997, U.S. diplomat George Kennan published an article in the New York Times claiming that NATO expansion had been "the most fateful mistake of U.S. policy in the entire post-Cold War era." Sarotte takes up that idea at the end of his book to support the thesis that the possibility of an alternative path was blocked, which could have led to better relations between the United States and Russia (a greater "multilateralism"). Sarotte defends the existence of NATO and also its enlargement. He says so in a recent interview, but maintains the illusion that another U.S. policy would have prevented what he describes as a Russian alienation from the Western international order. And that would have prevented Putin from making the decisions. He considers that there was "a wide range of possibilities" and that a "more sustainable and less violent relationship" could have been reached. Their analysis is ultimately based on the illusion that the United States could maintain its hegemonic presence in the world while moderating its militaristic interventionism. Some kind of geopolitical order where "consensus" prevailed and not force.

These types of positions are shared by sectors of the European social democratic or reformist intelligentsia, which aspire to a more multipolar international order, and even to greater political-military independence of the EU from the United States. However, they start from a total misunderstanding about the imperialist character of the main powers that make up NATO, as well as the indissoluble relationship between the military, the political and the economic dynamics of capitalism.

### *NATO, an imperialist machine for American war and expansionism*

In a speech alongside Finland's president and Sweden's prime minister on May 19, Biden presented NATO as a "defensive" alliance, which "has never been a threat to anyone" and is only active in the face of possible aggression. NATO's association with the defense of freedom and democracy is undoubtedly a brilliant expression of military political marketing. U.S. imperialism has made an extraordinary school in this field.

Evidently there is a "defensive" function of NATO, which is to preserve the interests of US imperialism and, alternatively, of its European allies. Its emergence in 1949 was based

on confronting the Soviet advance through a system of "collective defense", by which the member states of the Treaty agreed to defend any of its members in case it was attacked by a foreign power. And this was despite the fact that the key to the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy was "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism, having played a key role in defeating the post-war revolutions and collaborating with the recomposition of the bourgeois state in imperialist countries such as Italy or France. Even in 1954 the Soviet Union proposed to join NATO with the aim of maintaining "peace in Europe", but the allies rejected the proposal. This, together with the incorporation of West Germany into NATO on May 9, 1955, had as an immediate consequence the creation of the Warsaw Pact, signed on May 14, 1955 by the Soviet Union and its allies. [7]

With this strategic framework, NATO's extension was sustained over time. As we explained before, the qualitative leap came after the dissolution of the USSR. Since then, NATO's advance has been overwhelming. And at the same time that a real siege was established on Russia, NATO intervened in dozens of military conflicts, sowing death and destruction with the aim of extending and propping up the interests of US imperialism in different regions. This has been and continues to be NATO's true "offensive" function. NATO's most significant military interventions were the Kosovo war in 1999, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the intervention in Libya in 2011.

In the context of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the successive wars of independence in the region between 1991 and 2001, the first joint attack operation by NATO in its history took place, the incursion in 1995 in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina against Serbian forces. But it was in 1999, during the Kosovo war, when NATO deployed its might: 600 aircraft from thirteen countries bombed Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, leaving a balance of between 2,500 and 5700 civilians killed, thousands injured and immense material and environmental damage from the use of uranium bombs. The justification for NATO's intervention was to stop the ethnic cleansing carried out by Serb forces in Kosovo, who were carrying out aberrant crimes against the civilian population. However, its aim was not to defend the legitimate right to self-determination of the Kosovo Albanians, but fundamentally to install a pro-American government that would expand the contours of NATO over Russia's area of influence in the Balkans.

This type of war justified on "humanitarian" grounds became doctrine in the establishment of the American Democratic Party. It is what was called "liberal interventionism", inaugurated by Bill Clinton. And NATO's incursion into Kosovo was perhaps the most

paradigmatic example. As Claudia Cinatti argues, "The United States did not have national interests, but it did have two geopolitical objectives: the first, to show itself as the 'indispensable nation' in the face of the impotence of European allies to contain the dismemberment of the Balkan countries. The second, and perhaps more important, is to extend NATO toward Russia's borders as part of a policy of overt hostility." [8]

The only time so far that a NATO member country invoked Article 5 of the treaty claiming aid in its defense was the United States in 2001 after the attack on the Twin Towers. In the framework of the beginning of the so-called "War on Terror" born of neoconservative plants, the United States enlisted all NATO members in the invasion of Afghanistan through Operation "Enduring Freedom".



The justification for the invasion was the search for and capture of Osama bin Laden. That was the perfect excuse for an imperialist operation whose objective was none other than the attempt to circumvent the decline of US imperialism, whose vulnerability had been exposed before the eyes of the world, through a strategy based on its military power and that of NATO.

The operation had great legitimacy at the beginning and strong support in the population generated by the aberration of the attacks. But after the fall of the Taliban in October 2001, the extension of the occupation for years of Afghanistan to deploy a policy of "nation building" and the generalization of "preventive war" as a method, this was changing. The Iraq war in 2003 was the continuation of this interventionist policy. And it had the support of some unconditional allies such as the United Kingdom and the Spanish State. [9] The justification that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction



turned out to be, as everyone knew, real fake news. Important anti-war movements developed in countries such as Germany, France, the Spanish state, Italy and the United States.

After two decades of occupation, hundreds of thousands of dead and devastated territory, the war in Afghanistan culminated in a humiliating withdrawal of NATO troops and the establishment of a Taliban government, while an Iranian-allied government was installed in Iraq. An unexpected outcome for the neocon strategy of "redrawing the map of the Middle East."

Finally, NATO's intervention in Libya took place within the framework of the uprisings and open revolutionary processes in the Middle East and North Africa, popularly known as the "Arab Spring". Under the aegis of the UN, whose Security Council gave the green light to a military airstrike on Libyan territory to "protect civilians," NATO bombed and intervened militarily in Libya for five months. The real objective of the military intervention was not "humanitarian aid", but to abort the development of the armed popular uprising and prevent the fall of Gaddafi from leading to the emergence of a regime that would call into question the interests and business of US and European imperialism. Especially from France, the United Kingdom and Italy, whose oil companies had strong interests committed there. Imperialist intervention resulted in a wave of destruction, death and millions of displaced people. [10]

### *Imperialist progressivism?*

In late 2019, French President Emmanuele Macron claimed that Trump's policy was causing NATO's "brain death," suggesting it was time for Europe to rethink its geopolitical project and its own defense strategy. At the same time, many analysts were referring to NATO's "strategic disorientation." While U.S. strategists had been focusing on the strategic challenges posed by China's emergence, it was unclear what future the Atlantic alliance would play.

Of course, Macron's proposal at that time did not have an iota of leftism. His questioning of NATO, in a kind of ultra-degraded Gaullism, was only intended to look after the interests of French and European imperialism – even to have its own game in relations with Russia or China. And French imperialism has nothing to envy of the American in terms of a history of brutal colonialist interventions, racist crimes and plundering of peoples.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has revitalized NATO, projecting American hegemony over Europe. However, if this war is prolonged in time, as they seem to seek from the White House, the fissures will re-emerge. With a war that is unfolding on European territory, the economic consequences of it are already being felt in the EU. Can Europe implement its energy conversion plan to become autonomous from Russian gas before next winter? How will the war continue to impact inflation and rising food prices in European countries? How long will this alignment, which seems quite unanimous of the European bourgeoisies with the strategic definitions of the United States towards Russia, be maintained? Here are some questions that open up.

Among the reformist left, criticism of NATO has also been heard, such as those expressed by Pablo Iglesias or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, but without taking their feet off the plate of imperialist politics. The program of the electoral coalition (NUPES) headed by Mélenchon for the legislative elections in France together with the PS, Greens and Communists, does not include the proposal to leave NATO. In Mélenchon's words, proposing that point would "prevent union from occurring." In the case of Mélenchon, when he has flirted with this idea, he has done so to propose as an alternative a European defense system or to prioritize the defense of France's imperialist interests. The same happens in the case of Pablo Iglesias, since while he questions the role of NATO in his podcast, Podemos and the Communist Party are part of the government that will preside over the Madrid summit and that advances in imperialist rearmament. In several articles of this supplement we have also polemicized with other positions that from the left embellish the role of NATO interventions in conflicts such as libya or the war in Ukraine.

Since 2014, in parallel with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the civil war in Ukraine, NATO countries have significantly increased their military expenditures (by 24.9% between 2014 and 2021). But since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, all states have announced qualitative leaps in these budgets. In this context, it is essential to promote mobilizations against the war, against the Russian invasion and also against the imperialist rearmament of the NATO governments.

The day of mobilization against the war, driven by grassroots trade unionism in Italy, is a good example in this regard. There, several unions called a strike against the war in Ukraine, but also against the arms escalation of their own government, and against the rising cost of living. In dozens of cities there were demonstrations with the slogan "lower your weapons, raise wages". On June 26, a massive mobilization will be held in Madrid

against the NATO summit, where the battle is also fundamental because an anti-imperialist and independent policy can be expressed in the mobilization.

The war on European soil is accelerating the tendencies towards greater political, commercial and military confrontations between the powers. The Leninist definition that we live in a time of wars, crises and revolutions is updated and announces convulsive scenarios for the twenty-first century. In this scenario, an independent, internationalist and anti-imperialist policy is urgent.

Notes

[1] NATO's last Strategic Concept was defined in 2010

[2] The founding members were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the United States, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. These were joined by Greece and Turkey (1952), Federal Republic of Germany (1955), Spain (1982), the former German Democratic Republic becomes part of NATO with reunification (1990), Hungary, Poland and czech Republic (1999), Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania (2004), Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), North Macedonia (2020).

[3] The primacy of American interests in the Atlantic alliance and tensions with its European allies were evident at different times. One of the most prominent was French President Charles de Gaulle's questioning of the hegemonic role of the United States in the Organization in 1958. De Gaulle demanded a tripartite leadership – together with the United Kingdom – and the extension of NATO operations to the areas of influence of French imperialism, especially Algeria, where a process of workers' and people's insurgency was underway. The result was France's withdrawal from the alliance's military structure between 1966 and 2009, while also creating its own independent defense system and its own nuclear arsenal. France tested its first nuclear bomb on February 13, 1960 in the Sahara Desert. The other major rift within NATO was the product of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, initially rejected by Germany and France.

[4] M. E. Sarotte; Not One Inch. America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate, Yale University Press, Nov. 2021

[5] Angel Ferrero, "Twenty Years of the Withdrawal of Russian Troops from Germany," August 31, 2014, El Diario.es

[6] Since the founding of NATO, that article states that any aggression against a member state will be answered by all the states that make up NATO as a whole.

[7] For further development of this theme, see: Albamonte, Emilio and Maiello, Matías; Socialist Strategy and Military Art, IPS Editions, Chapter 8: Cold War and Grand Strategy

[8] Claudia Cinatti, "United States: from the war on terror to the conflict between powers", ideas of the Left, 11/09/21.

[9] Germany and France opposed it at first, generating a significant gap in NATO, although they ended up endorsing the intervention.

[10] The fall of Gaddafi, killed by a mob of opponents on October 11, 2011, gave way to an internal civil war that is still ongoing.

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