

RUSSIA VERSUS NATO: GEOGRAPHY IS THE KEY

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The struggle between Russia and NATO is a clear example of what Robert Kagan calls "the return of geography." That is what geopolitics is ultimately about. NATO - the United States' military alliance with Western Europe - was created in 1949 to deal with the "Soviet menace". It was then composed of 12 countries: Canada, Denmark, the United States, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Three years later, in 1952, it spread to the Balkans, incorporating Greece and Turkey. The 15th country was West Germany, which joined in 1955. That was the time when the USSR made the Warsaw Pact to confront NATO. The countries of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania), those of Central Europe (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland), Eastern Germany and Albania in the Balkans were part of it. The "observers" of this military alliance then showed the extra-continental alliances of the Warsaw Pact: they were China, North Korea and Mongolia. Since then, and until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO admitted only one more country: Spain in 1982.

With the fall of communism, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved and NATO spread across Europe. In 1999 the three Central European countries joined in: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, which had been part of the Warsaw Pact. Five years later, in 2004, a second wave of post-Soviet-era NATO inclusions took place: the two Eastern European countries (Bulgaria and Romania), Slovakia (which split from Czechoslovakia), Slovenia (the first country of the dissolved Yugoslavia to do so), and the three Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). The latter was key to Putin, who was then beginning his long government.

These three countries were part of the Soviet Union until its fall and share a border with Russia. It was no longer about the adherence to NATO of the countries that had signed the Warsaw Pact, but that of former republics of the USSR, the belt of countries with which Russia, since the tsars, sought to protect itself from the advance of Western Europe. When this happened, Putin began his rule and did not have the power or capacity like today to prevent the arrival

of NATO to its borders through these adhesions. Furthermore, he was facing the Muslim rebellion in Chechnya - which he rigorously repressed - within Russia's own borders. But the reaction was immediate: in 2008, faced with the project to include Georgia - a former republic of the USSR, which is at the same time the most westernized country in the Balkans - in NATO, Russia invaded it, claiming protection of rights of the Russian-speaking minority of the Ossetia region, and defeated, predictably, the Georgian forces. However, it was Ukraine's eventual inclusion into NATO that hastened the largest military operation in post-Soviet Russia: the occupation of Crimea and Ukrainian secession. In 2009 NATO's expansion into the Balkans continued. That year Croatia and Albania were added. However, in 2014, with the intention of the pro-Western Ukrainian government at the time to join NATO, Russia felt that it was time to put a limit. He proceeded to occupy Crimea, the historic peninsula over which Britain, France, Turkey, and Sardinia went to war against Russia in the mid-19th century, and which is Moscow's main naval base on the Black Sea.

As part of this same operation, Russia supported and achieved the secession of eastern Ukraine, where there is a significant Russian-speaking population, as in Crimea. Ukrainian forces not only failed to prevent the occupation of Crimea, but also failed to prevent the secession of its eastern region. The reaction of the West was sanctions of economic nature and declarations of political condemnation, against which Putin responded with the policy of *fait accompli*. Since then, the extension of the Western military alliance continued towards the Balkans: in 2017 it incorporated Montenegro, which had separated from Serbia, and in 2020 North Macedonia. NATO was thus constituted by 30 countries. In the second decade of the 21st century, NATO troops settled in Poland and small contingents in the Baltic countries.

In 2011, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Georgia became NATO aspiring countries, and Ukraine did the same in 2018. The latter two are former republics of the USSR, where Russia had already staged war to prevent NATO from reaching its borders, as mentioned. There are two countries in Europe that are not part of NATO, but have participated in military exercises with it in the Arctic region: Sweden and Finland, formally neutral in the conflict between Russia and NATO. The "NATO global partner" status -as extra-regional allies- is held by Japan and South Korea in the Far East, Mongolia in the vicinity of China,

Pakistan -country strategically located between India and China-, Australia and New Zealand in Oceania and Colombia in Latin America.

Putin has demanded from Biden that NATO go back to the geographical extension that it had prior to the dissolution of the USSR and has called for "legal guarantees" that no weapons will be deployed, and in particular mid-range missiles, that threaten Russia from their countries. However, the real priority of the Russian leader is that NATO does not extend to its borders, as it already happened with the three Baltic countries, and as it would have happened with Ukraine and Georgia if the Russian military intervention had not taken place. Putin's priority is that the Western military alliance does not spread to the 14 former Soviet republics, which were Russia's "defensive belt" since the time of the tsars. This implies the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan); the three from the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia); the three that are between Russia and Europe (Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus) and the three Baltic countries already mentioned, where NATO arrived. This will be the limit that Putin will not allow to exceed, and at the same time he will seek a kind of "finlandization" of the three Baltic republics.

In conclusion: NATO was established in 1949 with the United States and 11 countries allied to the USSR in Western Europe - which at the fall of communism were 16 already - and against this, Moscow replied with the Warsaw Pact in 1955. With the dissolution of the USSR, the Warsaw Pact disappeared and NATO began to incorporate countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic republics. The possibility of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 joining NATO, led Russia to successfully prevent it militarily, setting a concrete limit to expansion over its borders. Finally, since then, the incorporation of these two former Soviet republics into NATO has been kept on hold. Ukraine is the most important country of the two and therefore is the center of the crisis between Russia and NATO.