

## **UKRANIE: BIDEN CONSIDERS THAT RUSSIA'S ADVANCE ON DONBASS SURE IS THE INVASION**

**Rosendo Fraga**

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

The fact that the military face of the conflict between Russia and NATO began in the secessionist area of Ukraine was foreseeable. From the beginning of the Russian military deployment around Ukraine, the occupation of the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics was one of the three or four foreseeable invasion paths. But when the Russian Duma asked Putin to recognize the two republics as independent states, it was clear that their occupation became the priority alternative. When a few days later Putin signed the decree recognizing both republics as independent states, it was already a fact that their occupation by Russian forces was inevitable. A few hours later, Russian armored vehicles entered the proclaimed Republic of Donetsk, breaking the red line set by NATO and the European Union: the fact that Russian military forces entered Ukrainian territory would automatically trigger serious sanctions in the economic-financial, technological and military, which had been announced. The region that has become independent has a 200-kilometre land border with Russia. The majority of the population is Russian-speaking. It has 3.5 million inhabitants, while the whole of Ukraine is 44 million, twelve times more. At the beginning of the conflict, the secessionist region was the most industrialized in the country and its GDP per capita was twice the average for Ukraine. The fire (shells, mortars and machine guns) between Ukrainian forces and the separatist militias intensified in the days before Moscow recognized their independence.

A reference model for this conflict is the war that Russia waged with Georgia in 2008. Back then, Moscow supported two separatist republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The majority of its population was Russian-speaking. The tensions it had with Georgia -which then had a pro-European government, as Ukraine has today- led to a war in which Russia occupied part of the Georgian

territory. The incorporation of Georgia into NATO, precipitated the conflict as it happens today with Ukraine in 2022. The requests of Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO began at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, but in the middle of the third they did not have been finalized.

NATO supported it in diplomatic and military terms with cargo and supplies, but not with troops on the ground. But the conflict around Ukraine is on a larger scale. It should be noted that, when the USSR dissolved in 1991, Ukraine was the third country in the world in number of nuclear weapons. The reason was simple, the USSR had placed them pointing to the West, in case of a conflict. Furthermore, Western powers demanded that Kiev hand over nuclear weapons when Yeltsin ruled Russia. The United States and Great Britain signed an agreement committing to defend the territorial integrity of the denuclearized Ukraine. When Russia occupied Crimea in 2014, cutting off Ukrainian territory, Western powers only reacted with economic sanctions that had little effect. Western guarantees to Ukraine were then breached. The entry of Russian forces into the territory controlled by the pro-Russian secessionists in Donetsk and Lugansk puts the West under the obligation to comply with the "tough" sanctions with which it has threatened Russia. The first American reaction was to declare that US investments in the secessionist territory were not allowed from that moment on. Having confirmed the entry of Russian troops into the territory, Germany announced the certification for the Nord Stream 2 Gas Pipeline. The United Kingdom was the first country that considered that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had begun. Now it is a matter of seeing the effectiveness and scope that Western measures and retaliation against Russia will have or not. President Biden announced sanctions for two Russian banks and a fund ban on the "oligarchs" – the millionaires close to the Putin regime. Now, he is preparing to get the EU countries prevent Russia from accessing financing from their banks and investment funds. The entry of Russian troops into the two secessionist republics already makes it the most important military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II, as the US President considers it an "invasion". The movements of Soviet forces against the insurrections of the countries of the Warsaw Pact generated mobilization of troops, but not military resistance.

The rest of the world is following the conflict with interest, and not only because of its economic effects, such as the one already registered in the price of oil, gas and food. NATO has become a global military actor. At the end of the 20th century, it began to perform in Europe, outside the territory of its member countries. He did it in the conflict over the secession of Kosovo between Serbia and Albania. But the largest NATO operation was the one in Afghanistan that lasted 20 years with the rotational use of hundreds of thousands of men and that culminated in the defeat that implied that the Taliban retook power in the country and the disorderly withdrawal of Western forces. NATO troops were thus 20 years on the border of China, bordering Afghanistan. Parallel to the conflict over Ukraine, French forces were withdrawn from the Sahel countries and replaced by Russian mercenaries from the Wagner company. The reorganization of the mission, which is basically European, is carried out with the assistance of NATO. Parallel to the conflict in Afghanistan, the category of “NATO global partner” developed with countries outside Europe. For example, in Latin America Colombia has this category, Brazil is in the process of obtaining it and Mexico has received the invitation to be so. Diplomacy is still in time to prevent the extension of the military conflict, but it must move quickly. On Thursday, February 25, a summit is scheduled between United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. If this result is positive, the possibility of a Biden-Putin meeting opens up. Meanwhile, Europe, through the actions of the head of the German government and the French president, will continue to try to open an alternative path of negotiation. The latest episodes in the secessionist region of Ukraine already limit the margins of diplomacy. A permanent deal could require that Russia's claim that NATO's expansion go back to 1997 be transformed into rolling back the permanent bases it established in the Warsaw Pact countries (six in Poland, one in Romania and one in Lithuania).

The Russian demand that NATO assume the commitment not to incorporate more countries could be transformed into the unilateral commitment of Ukraine and Georgia not to join the Western alliance for a certain period (it

was suggested by Putin on February 22). The point is, in this case, what Russia concedes. It could be the withdrawal of the permanent military bases that, starting in 1997, it established on the border with Ukraine. The renegotiation of the agreement on short- and medium-range missiles pending between Russia and the United States could be integrated into this negotiation.

In conclusion: the possibility of Russian troops entering the secessionist region of Ukraine was foreseeable, but the Duma's request to Putin to recognize its independence predicted that it would happen. A reference model for this crisis is the war that Russia waged in Georgia in 2008, arguing the support for the independence of the secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The entry of Russian troops into the secessionist region of Ukraine puts the West under the obligation to comply with the announced sanctions, which it has begun to do forcefully, but gradually. The rest of the world follows the conflict with interest, not only because of its effect on commodity prices and stock values, but also because of the global military role assumed by NATO. Lastly, diplomacy has time to prevent an expansion of the military conflict, but must move quickly to find possible alternatives.