



MILITARY POWER CENTERS WITH ACTIVE MANIFESTATION IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN INSECURITY AREA

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The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the support of Eastern Ukraine's instability and the Russian Federation's actions aimed at restoring the ex-Soviet sphere of influence, driving away Europe from the US, bring the Eastern European area to public attention and generate a resettlement of regional and global power centers. Within this context, the Eastern European region has become the site of direct and indirect confrontations between the world's dominant military power centers (NATO, USA and the Russian Federation), in order to achieve a stable balance of power in the Black Sea region.

Keywords: power centers; the Eastern European area; military power; stability; insecurity.

The Eastern European area, as part of the Euro-Atlantic area, is located in a "clash of civilizations" region, and represents a real mosaic of peoples, religions and cultures; from this point of view it has been, is and will be a region that gives rise to controversies among the great powers of the world. Therefore, it continues to this day "to be the scene of confrontation of the interests for control, access and major influences of the great world geopolitical actors, which give multipolarity to the international relations"¹.

The change of the communist regime in the countries located in this area has changed the existing balance of power and has led to a resettlement of regional and global centers of power. Moreover, the political environment has undergone important changes, most states moving from authoritarianism to democracy, and within this context, we have seen an increase in the influence of supranational entities and the emergence of competing centers of power, with active manifestation in the Eastern European's area of insecurity.

The Russian Federation – the main actor in the Eastern European arena

The Russian Federation, the largest country in the world, occupies an important place in the

international arena due to its strategic position, on two continents, and due to the existence of important mineral and energy resources on its territory. Throughout its existence, Russia has been subjected to several attacks by the great powers of the time, and this might have caused the birth of the "fear of being conquered" and the need to have a safe space ensuring the necessary time to react.

The expansion of NATO and the European Union towards Eastern and South-Eastern Europe led to a series of negative reactions from the Russian Federation, which, with Vladimir Putin's coming to power, pursued an aggressive foreign policy towards the two major organizations, determined by Kremlin's strong desire of leadership to reaffirm its status as a world's superpower and to restore the sphere of influence that the former USSR had.

Although immediately after USSR's disintegration, the Russian Federation had a defensive position and a *soft power* behavior, due to problems mainly of an internal nature, later it switched to offensive actions and a *hard power* behavior, focusing politically and economically, on the ex-Soviet region. In very short time, the Russian Federation moved from a Western-oriented policy based on cooperation and the use of non-military tools to an anti-Western policy based on threats, involving the use of military power to achieve its international goals.

Understanding very well what military power represents for a state, the Russian Federation has been continuously concerned with the development

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of its military capabilities, being permanently in competition with its great rival and main ideological opponent – the USA. Thus, the Russian Federation focused on developing its intelligence, space and, last but not least, the nuclear component of its military power. Basically, today the Russian Federation is the second largest military power in the world² and has the largest arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles in the world, which gives it the opportunity to project its military power anywhere in the world. Moreover, the Russian Federation has become one of the leading exporters in the field of defence (second in the world after the US³), supplying weapons and military equipment worldwide, but especially in the crisis outbreaks of the Middle East, the main market for the global level.

Russia's military actions over the past 20 years (the Second Chechen War, the Georgian War, the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilizing actions in Eastern Ukraine) reinforces the hypothesis that the Russian Federation intends to regain its sphere of influence and to become again one of the main actors at the table of international negotiations. They received a weak response from international organizations, which encouraged the Russian Federation to continue its actions in areas of strategic importance, some of which were specific to the Cold War period (unauthorized entry into the airspace of other states, military ships that monitors / accompanies ships of other states, etc.), and others from the sphere of asymmetric and / or hybrid warfare (cyberattacks, electoral interventions, fake news, etc.). By annexing the Crimean Peninsula and supporting instability in Eastern Ukraine, the Russian Federation challenges the existing world order and indirectly calls for the relocation of the world's dominant centers of power, including a privileged place for international decision-makers.

In most cases where the Russian Federation has carried out classical military actions, they have been accompanied or preceded by asymmetric/hybrid actions that are less visible and cannot be proven and amended by international law, which aimed to "destabilize the government and the opponent's main institutions, thus creating chaos and power vacuum"⁴. The successful use of hybrid operations in Ukraine has allowed Russia to expand its scope, carrying out a series of actions specific to the cyber, information, political and even economic warfare, aimed at NATO Eastern flank states, especially the

Baltic countries. In addition, the use of the *hybrid war* model against NATO's Eastern flank states allows Russia to test Article 5 of the Alliance Treaty without starting a major conflict with it.

In addition to the military actions carried out, the Russian Federation has also undertaken a series of blackmail actions against European countries, being well known that most of them are dependent on the supply of Russian gas (the share of Russian gas represents over 40% of EU gas imports). Russia is using this dependency to destabilize Eastern European countries, offering significant price reductions to countries such as Bulgaria (a reduction of about 40%⁵) and facilities to countries such as Hungary, which will benefit from Russian gas through the Turkstream pipeline (pipeline bypassing Ukraine and Romania) since 2021.

Another step taken by the Russian Federation is to attract the great European powers (Germany and France) to its side, offering natural gas directly from Russia (NordStream 2 pipeline), by avoiding states such as Ukraine, Poland or Romania, which are in tense relations with Russia and which strictly follow the sanctions imposed by the European Union. Thus, by carrying out the NordStream 2 project, Germany will benefit from a double amount of Russian gas directly from the source, and in this context France will align itself in the policy of rapprochement with the Russian Federation (despite sanctions imposed on Russia, France continues to maintain a very good bilateral relationship, the two states having common interests). The proximity of the two major European powers to the Russian Federation threatens the existing stability at the level of the Alliance and the EU, especially since there are other states that have a positive attitude towards the Russian Federation (Hungary and Italy).

Through these actions, Russia seeks to destabilize the European security environment by dividing EU Member States into two categories: states that are in favor of maintaining sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation and states that are in favor of canceling them and resuming cooperation with Russia, especially because of the benefits received. The instability created allows Russia to continue its planned actions unhindered, in order to maintain control over the Eastern European operational environment and to influence the states bordering the Black Sea. In this context, disregarding NATO and EU warnings, Russia



continues to strengthen its military presence on its western flank, by deploying forces and means near the border of the Baltic countries, and conducting large-scale exercises in the mentioned regions of NATO vicinity, as well as by deploying high-performance weapons systems (some of them with nuclear capabilities) in the Crimea and the Kaliningrad region.

The referendum held in Russia from June 25th to July 1st, 2020, a referendum to amend the constitution, validated by the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation, will allow the current president, Vladimir Putin, to continue running and remain in office until 2036⁶. This allows the Kremlin government, led by President Putin, to continue its expansionist policy and achieve its internationally set goals. In these circumstances, we believe that the states on the Eastern flank of NATO, the country under Soviet influence for many years, are in danger because the Russian Federation will continue to manifest itself at the whole geostrategic level, continuing to carry out various actions, from those specific to information and cyber warfare, to those of energy blackmail. Although a major military conflict between Russia and NATO is unlikely at this time, it should not be ruled out, and NATO-backed countries on the Eastern flank of the Alliance should prepare for such a scenario.

NATO and the USA – key role in maintaining Eastern European regional stability

Following the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation, considered "the most important event on the European scene in recent times"⁷ and the strongest action to challenge world order, NATO has moved to a series of measures aimed at limiting the destabilizing actions of the Russian Federation addressed to the Eastern European security environment and strengthening the Eastern flank. Thus, after the summit in Wales (2014) the decision was taken to strengthen the military power of the countries on the Eastern flank of NATO through a series of measures as follows:

- 4 (four) multinational fighting groups were set up in the Baltic countries and Poland, an area of strategic interest on the border with the Russian Federation;
- NATO's Rapid Response Force (NRF), a force created in 2003 (declared operational since

2006), was significantly increased in order to have an immediate response in the event of a collective defence crisis, from 13,000 to about 40,000 soldiers from all categories of forces existing within the Alliance⁸;

- multinational command structures were established in Poland and Romania (army corps level in Poland and division level in Romania);

- a decision to create a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was taken, "that would be able to deploy contingents within a few days of any challenge that might arise"⁹;

- 8 NFIUs (NATO Force Integration Unit) were set up to facilitate the rapid preparation and deployment of VJTFs along the Eastern flank.

Two years later, amid growing tensions between NATO and Russia, at the summit in Poland, new measures were taken to strengthen the Eastern flank by increasing the military presence in the area (increasing the number of air, naval and ground forces present in the Eastern flank, which also included the deployment of four battalions in the Baltic countries and Poland, as well as intensification of multinational exercises in the Eastern European space) and by operationalizing the missile defence system, initially developed by the US and later handed over under NATO command. Moreover, NATO imposed other additional measures, of which the Air Police Combat Service is of particular importance, designed to detect, track and identify all Russian Federation aircraft that repeatedly violate NATO airspace.

Another collective defence capability developed by NATO, as a result of the hybrid/asymmetric actions carried out by the Russian Federation in the Eastern European region, is cyber defence. This has become a priority for the Alliance and for most states on the Eastern flank that do not want to follow the example of Estonia (2007), when the banking and public emergency system was paralyzed, or Georgia (2008), when the communications system was paralyzed and the Georgian army no longer had the capacity to react, thus allowing Russian troops to invade the country. In addition, the cyber-attacks launched on Ukraine (2014) demonstrated the military nature of these actions, by involving specialized military units, which carried out offensive actions resulting in "temporary or permanent effects, decommissioning of capabilities, degradation or

blocking the functionality or access of opponents to information stored in their own systems"¹⁰.

NATO does not want such episodes to be repeated with any of its member states and therefore invests heavily in the creation and development of military structures, which in cooperation with the private sector companies in the field, will be able to counter these attacks/threats. In the near future, we will certainly discuss the operationalization of NATO cyberspace, the synchronization and coordination of cyber actions with traditional military operations and their integration into the planning and decision-making process.

NATO is currently making considerable efforts to achieve a credible defence that involves an effective combination of an allied presence on the Eastern flank and an increase in the military power of the states in the area. These NATO efforts are also supported by the EU, an economic and political organization that has imposed a series of economic sanctions on the Russian Federation, sanctions that were intended to be a peaceful way to resolve differences between Russia and the West, but which did not determine the Russian Federation to abandon its expansionist plans and its intention to move Europe away from the US, which would allow it to have a greater political, economic and military influence over Eastern Europe and even Central Europe.

However, NATO remains open to dialogue with the Russian Federation, through the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), the dialogue between the two major military powers being considered the optimal solution at this time to resolve any differences and ensure a climate of stability in Eastern Europe. The two centers of military power must find solutions to avoid escalating existing tensions and create a stable security environment in the Eastern part of the European continent.

NATO's efforts to strengthen the Eastern flank have been complemented by US initiatives to make Europe a reliable partner in its foreign policy. Through *the European Reinsurance Initiative*¹¹ and later through *the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI)*¹², the US has deployed an impressive number of forces and means across Europe to strengthen the defence of allied and partner states on the Eastern flank of NATO. The presence of American forces on the European continent is a guarantee of security and stability in this area, the US being the largest

military power in the world, the only one able to deal with a military conflict against the Russian Federation.

The US commitment to maintaining stability on the European continent is very serious. In addition to ensuring a permanent presence in Europe (rotating system, approximately 9,904 US troops¹³), the US intends to invest in existing infrastructure in countries on the Eastern flank of NATO, allocating large sums for the modernization of air bases and training centers in the area. Of the approximately \$ 264 million planned for 2021¹⁴, a significant amount (approximately \$ 130.5 million) is earmarked for the modernization of the air base at Câmpia Turzii (Cluj County), a base that is planned to become "a key point for US military air force operations in South-Eastern Europe"¹⁵ and a hub for Allied forces in the Black Sea region. Moreover, the USA intends to deploy on this basis a number of unmanned fighter jets / drones of the MQ-9 Reaper type, intended mainly for research and surveillance missions, but with the possibility of being used for ground operations (the MQ-9 Reaper drone was used for the "Soleimani" operation, in which AGM-114 Hellfire air-to-ground missiles were launched).

The strategic partnerships concluded by the USA and the first two major military powers on the Eastern flank of NATO, Poland and Romania, strengthen the US commitment to security and stability in the area, as well as the US concern for increasing the military power of the two states on the Eastern flank which through the promoted foreign policy, represent two "outposts" against the Russian Federation's "divide and conquer" type policy.

By ensuring a balanced presence on the Eastern flank, the US and NATO maintain their 2014 commitment to discourage potential risk factors for the Eastern European security environment and to stop the hegemonic ambitions of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The actions of the two major centers of military power are primarily aimed at continuously discouraging the Russian threat and defending against Russian neo-expansionism. Within this context, collective defence is and will remain the mainstay of the Alliance, with NATO's Eastern flanking states continuing to receive support and assistance to ensure a strong and stable flank, able to meet future challenges from destabilizing and expansionist powers.



The Eastern European countries part of NATO and EU, which are the first line of defence in the event of an attack by the Russian Federation or other Middle Eastern states, are making considerable efforts to increase their military power, increase defence funds/spending and deploy extensive programs for modernization and endowment of the armed forces. Achieving modern military capabilities is a major challenge for NATO's Eastern flank countries, most of which are developing countries with a modest economic and military force, but which are aware of the danger coming from the East.

In conclusion, both the US and NATO will continue to act, by all available means, to maintain a climate of peace and stability in the European region and to reconfigure the balance of power in the Eastern European insecurity area. It is obvious that the countries on the Eastern flank of NATO will not be able to cope alone with an aggression from the Russian Federation, without the support of NATO and the great European powers. In addition, without a substantial US commitment to Europe, in return for Russia's aggressive intentions, the situation could at any time escalate into a major regional conflict that would have a direct impact on NATO member states on its Eastern flank.

NOTES:

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