



## The second horsemen of the Apocalypse

### Resumen:

La guerra, ese segundo jinete del Apocalipsis, no deja de sembrar nuevos conflictos alrededor del globo, al tiempo que no se cierra ninguno de los escenarios abiertos en los últimos años. Palestina ha relegado a Ucrania en las portadas de los informativos, como previamente había sucedido con Afganistán, el Sahel, el resto de África, el Oriente Medio más allá de Gaza o algunos puntos de Iberoamérica y de Asia. No por olvidados estos conflictos dejan de ser relevantes: merecen que les sigamos prestando la atención necesaria.

### Palabras clave:

Guerra.

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And I saw another horse appear, red as fire.

Its rider was given the power to banish peace from the earth, so that men would kill one another; and he was given a great sword.

Revelation 6:4

At the end of each year, at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies we take stock of the number of active armed conflicts, and also of those hotspots of tension that could lead to the above. And from among the many cases that dot the world map, we are obliged to select only a small number, the most serious or the closest, even the most forgotten, to analyse them in detail and offer them to you in our annual publication *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts*. On this occasion, the edition corresponding to the year 2023 that is coming to an end.

The global conflict scenario in 2023, monopolised by the war in Ukraine, has been shaken in the final stretch of the year by the surprise incursion of Palestinian Hamas fighters into Israeli territory and the subsequent reaction of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against the Gaza Strip. The war in Ukraine had been attracting global attention in recent months, but is now in danger of taking a back seat to events in the Middle East, which is bad news for Kiev. Moreover, the initial failure of the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which was intended to take control of the entire country, points to a chronification of the conflict. Whether it takes the form of mostly conventional fighting, as it has so far, or a hybrid confrontation, the war in Ukraine will continue to stress the European environment, even if it gradually fades from the headlines. The conflict is at an impasse and has become a war of attrition that neither side can afford to lose.



This war directly affects Europe and, therefore, Spain. Because it represents an energy, economic, migratory and political *shock*, because of the risk of escalation, a consequence of the above, and because it focuses all the interest of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance on Eastern Europe. This almost exclusive focus on what is happening in Ukraine, and now also on events in the Middle East, in practice relegates the increasingly unstable Maghreb and Sahelian neighbourhood. The South also exists, but...

The repercussions of both conflicts, Ukraine and Palestine, are of a global order and affect to a greater or lesser extent the other conflicts, present or probable, however distant they may be. The most worrying is undoubtedly the conflict in the waters of the Strait of Formosa, which has been the scene of incidents between naval or air formations of the People's Republic of China and the United States. The statements by the leaders of both powers and other regional actors, as well as the initiatives led by the United States to develop an incipient security structure in the Indo-Pacific (AUKUS, QUAD, Five Eyes, bilateral agreements, etc.), only increase the feeling that a war over Taiwan could be a not-so-implausible possibility, although not in the short term. It seems more likely that the ongoing *political warfare* will deepen, particularly in the cyber and information domains, and that the situation will continue to be one of unstable equilibrium, as it has been for the past fifty years. The impact of a Chinese military intervention in Taiwan would be unpredictable and the first major casualty could be China itself, which has no interest in taking on serious commercial or economic consequences. China has good cards at its disposal and, if it is patient and plays them well, Taiwan will see its *de facto* independence compromised at some point in the future.

### **The South also exists, but...**

The security environment in the neighbouring Maghreb/Sahel region continues to deteriorate. The war in Libya and fourteen coups d'état, successful or not, since 2019 in the sub-Saharan strip are good proof of this. In the last decade, European interventions, with France playing a leading role, have had a disappointing outcome, as exemplified by the expulsion of the former metropolis from French-speaking countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso. The gap left is rapidly being filled by Russia and other powers; China in

particular, but not only, but also Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, India...

The last coup d'état, at least at the time of writing, took place, if not exactly in the Sahel, then in the vicinity, in Gabon, in August 2023. A few weeks earlier, in Niger, it was the head of the presidential guard himself who deposed his protégé, President Mohamed Bazoum, while the streets were filled, as on previous occasions in neighbouring countries, with demonstrations in support of Russia and attacks on the French diplomatic delegation. This coup d'état in Niger is not just one more after those in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Guinea-Conakry (2021). And it is not because of the risk of further destabilising the entire region. While the military focuses on seizing power, jihadist terrorists put pressure on the population and control more and more territory. On the other hand, this crisis in Niger has brought to the fore the uphill battle of strategic positioning that is taking place in the Sahel. Beyond the divergences within ECOWAS and the African Union, foreign powers are jostling for influence that will redraw a new balance of power in the region. All eyes are now on Chad: will it be the next piece on the sub-Saharan chessboard to switch from the pro-European side to the most promising of Wagner's mercenaries?



Burkina Faso has already gone through this increasingly frequent process of shifting geopolitical alliances. For several years, the country has been facing a conflict marked by growing jihadist and inter-communal violence, especially in the regions bordering Mali



and Niger. To this must be added the military coups of January and September 2022, which have only worsened the situation at a time when France's exit from the country has been accompanied by an increased Russian presence. Finding a definitive solution to this conflict, beyond the military response, and preventing the situation in Burkina Faso from spilling over into neighbouring countries requires taking into account the local and social roots of the crisis, which transcend its security dimension. Only concerted and energetic international action that takes these factors into account and prioritises regional cooperation and the development of the population will be able to respond to a conflict that has become the epicentre of the security crisis destabilising the Sahel.

Also far from the headlines is Sudan, where, after the promising overthrow of the long-serving dictator Al Bashir, war has now broken out between two military forces, leaving the happy prospects that the removal of the former president had unleashed in tatters. The situation continues to deteriorate, threatening the stability of an already very unstable area, with more than a few conflicts elsewhere nearby. The cruelty and atrocities common in a civil war are causing large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, the repercussions of the situation in Ukraine are causing alarming food insecurity due to shortages of grain from the Black Sea, and there is no sign of an international intervention, under the auspices of the United Nations, to put an end to the conflict. On the contrary, interference by third powers heralds a likely worsening of the situation by closing the door to a possible understanding between the parties.

Two other scenarios deserve special attention: the Gulf of Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The security crisis in the Sahel is spreading to the coastal countries north of the Gulf of Guinea: Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, in addition to the aforementioned coup d'état in Gabon. Until recently, counterterrorism experts were wary of jihadists' ability to expand along the West African coastline because these states, unlike their neighbours, are more politically stable and had greater control over their borders. Although coastal countries are not as fragile as those inland, they have structural vulnerabilities, perpetuated by a north-south divide in development and economic opportunities. Added to these circumstances is the religious factor: unlike the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea countries have a large Christian population and elites that have sometimes tended to marginalise Muslims. Thus, jihadist groups are proving very effective in

exploiting resentment against the state among border communities and recruiting young Muslims south of the Sahel.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for its part, has been suffering for decades from a conflict which, although it could initially be attributed to endogenous causes, combined with the interference of neighbouring states, fundamentally Rwanda, has ended up depending almost exclusively on external factors. The mutations that the conflict has undergone have generated a political and military caste whose interests contribute to the continuation of tensions in the eastern territories, and the enormous effort that foreign aid has made (the most numerous UN mission, first MONUC and then MONUSCO, and the enormous amount of money and aid from donor states) has not been able to break the vicious circle of politics and violence that has taken hold in the country, to the suffering of the population.

### **The "forgotten"...**

With all eyes on Palestine and Ukraine, other conflicts that once caught our attention are almost forgotten. Such is the case of the war in Yemen, the internal situation in Myanmar, El Salvador, Colombia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sinkiang, where the Uighurs are still victims of Chinese repression.

The Yemeni armed conflict, active for more than eight years, is a peripheral war in what is known as the 'Middle East Cold War', driven by the antagonistic interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its impact is devastating and has led to the largest humanitarian crisis in living memory. However, China's decisive intervention to try to reduce tensions between the two regional powers, as well as the worrying developments in Palestine, have introduced new parameters that require an update on the Yemeni scene. Intensive diplomatic negotiations are underway to achieve de-escalation, but the search for a peace agreement is proving difficult. The last truce period, renewed twice and extended for six months, ended in failure and fighting has intensified again.

The unresolved civil conflict in Myanmar also remains unresolved, necessitating an update, as the country is mired in a complex and multifaceted situation of instability. Since the February 2021 coup d'état, the conflict has evolved into a civil war involving multiple actors. Pro-democracy opponents have been joined by the country's many ethnic groups

that have traditionally violently opposed the central government. Violence continues, the electoral process promised by the military Junta has been delayed, and both China and the US are beginning to influence the conflict by, of course, supporting different sides. On the other hand, regional powers, mainly in the ASEAN environment, are divided between those that promote dialogue between the parties to end the conflict and those that prefer a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries.

In the Republic of El Salvador we find a controversial president, Nayib Bukele. Some see him as the most prominent leader in decades, while others see him as just another authoritarian leader. In March 2022, Bukele launched a crackdown on the gangs that had terrorised the population for years. This led to the arrest and imprisonment of more than 75,000 people, many of them accused of murder. To launch this campaign, a state of emergency was declared and fundamental rights, such as the presumption of innocence, were curtailed. Illegal detentions, allegations of torture and a high number of deaths related to the operation have been reported, according to various national and international human rights organisations. Despite these restrictions on freedoms, the population values the possibility of living in a more peaceful environment.

The programme known as Total Peace, launched by Colombian President Gustavo Petro, is in line with the plans and processes of his predecessors, whose level of ambition can be seen as overflowing. Precisely because of this, its implementation, even in its early stages, is encountering great difficulties. A great deal of political capital is required to push it forward, but the political capital available after the 2022 elections is being undermined by a number of corruption scandals unrelated to the normalisation process. Negotiating with criminal groups and drug traffickers presents, *de facto*, great difficulties in legal terms - whether at the national or international level -, political, ethical..., not to mention the reliability of compliance with what has been agreed.

The Balkans are far from settling the disputes that have been dormant since the forced end of the conflict in the 1990s with the signing of the Dayton Agreement. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, imaginative solutions are not working adequately. One country, two entities, three nationalities, three religions... Good intentions clash with reality, and basing the future of such a complex country on managing the complexity of its social composition while diluting what could bring it together is not desirable. After



almost three decades and billions of euros spent by the international community, the wound is still open.

Since 1949 Beijing has oscillated between tolerating the autonomy of the Muslim Uighur community in the Sinkiang region and its forced integration into the national unity project. The beginning of the 21st century, especially the bloody jihadist attacks of 2014, marked the starting point of a policy of 'Sinicisation' of the Uyghurs that has continued to the present day and is dressed up as a fight against terrorism. Factors such as allegations of human rights violations, the application of international sanctions, the risk of jihadism in the region and the fact that Sinkiang is home to natural resources of strategic interest to China perpetuate the repression of the Uighurs. This repression is even harsher, if possible, through the government's use of technological resources to control the population.

### **The "non-kinetic" ones, for the time being....**

However, it is not only armed clashes that fuel generalised conflict at the global level, so it is also necessary to consider other thematic areas which, due to their potential for escalation and their present or future influence on the use of weapons systems in combat, deserve special attention.

The renewed nuclear order the world is facing is nothing more than the consequence of a new global order. After a period of reduced military spending in the wake of the end of the Cold War, in recent years there has been a significant increase in military spending on both conventional and nuclear weapons. Returning to the Ukrainian scenario, it is clear that the fact that Ukraine does not have nuclear weapons has worked against it when this country has suffered the invasion of Russian troops. Or, to put it another way, if Ukraine had not surrendered the part of the former Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal that remained on its territory in 1994, the invasion would most likely not have taken place. This assumption explains why countries such as North Korea or Iran, or others in a more discreet manner, do not cease their efforts to increase or, if necessary, to gain access to this technology. China, a power that is moving inexorably towards the goal of having a nuclear arsenal commensurate with its geopolitical ambitions, deserves special mention.

Many conflicts are inevitably left out of this 2023 Panorama. However, in a year's time, we will have the opportunity to recover them, to revisit those of greatest concern at the time and to include those that may arise in the coming months. The growing, cross-cutting and multifaceted global conflict predicts that we will not be short of work.

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