

EASTERN GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A GEOGRAPHICAL SYNTHESIS

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In a worldwide context marked by the intensification of the economic and financial flows, the consolidation of the capitalist system on a worldwide scale and the growing tension between East and West, the current investigation tackles the main geopolitical conflicts which have been active since the beginning of the twenty-first century in countries and regions constituting the West. Using a descriptive analysis, the article goes into the causes and factors that triggered the present conflicts in greater depth, especially those related to identity, religion and structural poverty which affect a great part of the studied regions. The interest to control the abundant existing energetic resources in the area and the notable presence of the foreign armed forces, with stable and permanent military bases, together with the proliferation of nuclear arms in various Asian countries, contributes to increase the social and geopolitical tension between East and West.

With regard to these previous considerations, the article is structured in four sections. In the first section conflicts which remain active in Eastern Europe are analyzed, with a special reference to the instability in the Balkans and the spread of the separatist movement in the post-Soviet space. In the second section of this piece of research Middle Eastern conflicts of greater importance are tackled, highlighting a critical and updated point of view of the prolonged existing confrontation between Israel and the Palestine community and also the generated impact caused by the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the territorial and sovereign problems affecting the Kurdish people, made up of a population of 33,8 million inhabitants distributed amongst the regions of six countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, Azerbaijan). In the third part each of the main tension in focus is reviewed and confrontations taking place in the Far East, paying close attention to the nuclear arsenal deployed in the area and the economic potential constituting the East Asia Free Trade Area. Finally, it concludes with an epigraph which analyzes the U.S. military deployment in

the East and the spread of groups and armed organizations in that geopolitical area of the world.

The Balkans is the most significant problem in Eastern Europe. There, UN and NATO peacekeeping forces, with 15.590 troops in the area, prevent the outbreak of new confrontations among the various ethnic factions that inhabit the area. The prospect of the creation of new independent states in this part of Eastern Europe is perceived with certain uneasiness, as occurs with the present Serbian state and Montenegro (also constituted by the regions of Voivodina, Montenegro and Kosovo) which, in the following years or months, will see itself immersed in a delicate and dangerous process with the aspiration of the territories of Montenegro and Kosovo to become independent and sovereign. In the present moment, Kosovo's political and administrative power corresponds to the Regional Authorities and United Nations, through UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), more than the actual Serbian authorities. The majority of the Kosovo-Alban inhabitants which make up 90 % of the total population want complete independence. In these circumstances, the current situation is almost unsustainable, only contained by the international peacekeeping forces there. There is great uncertainty surrounding the area's future, although experts at the Institute for Security Studies of the European Union consider that the challenge passes through the viability of the new states, avoiding reinitiating confrontations and seeking protection in the future incorporation of all the Balkans' states to the European Union (EU). Meanwhile, in the post-soviet space the separatist movements are spreading, affecting the regions of Transdnister (Moldavia), Abjazia (Goergia), South Osetia (Goergia), Alta Karabaj (Azerbaijan) and Chechnya (Russia). The variety of ethnic groups in the Caucasus region (more than 28 cultural groups) and the appearance of abundant oil resources in the all Caspian Sea region; with the foreseeable multimillionaire investments in the construction of a dense net of oil and gas pipelines, is causing the intensifying of armed confrontations among various factions and Transcaucasian ethnic groups. A number of civil wars followed between 1991 and 1994 in Goergia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the conflict was especially violent and dramatic in the Russian Autonomous Republic of Chechnya, where thousands were killed and made refugees. All in scene and territorial context where the Russian Federation attempts to maintain its traditional influence and political and military dominance, every time more and more depleted as a result of the growing penetration of North Americans with the instalment of their military bases as well as NATO's. Therefore economic interest as a consequence of the exploitation of oil and the need to build future pipelines in order to also guarantee its export is favouring a growing American influence in the area, especially in Kirguizistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; these are countries where the United States already has four military Air Force bases with more than 3.500 soldiers. The above seems to indicate that the traditional soviet space of influence is being progressively substituted, in part, by the more and more obvious presence of the North American forces and NATO, who are trying to ensure and protect geo-economic and strategic interests that Western powers have in the Caucasian area and in the geographic spaces constituting the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

It is worth mentioning, with regard to the conflicts in the Middle East, that the creation of the future Palestinian State is experiencing great difficulties, such as Israel which maintains a total of 116 agricultural colonies in the occupied Cisjordan and militaries where over 186.000 Jewish people live, who are not willing to leave those territories, whilst 55 % of the 7.5

million Palestinians are conditioned to live out of Israel and in occupied territories. However, tension in the Middle East reached its highest with the military invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, where foreign armed forces, with 237.160 troops, were operative at the beginning of 2006, in Muslim countries, therefore dominating a strategic region where 63,3 % of the well-known world oil reserves are found. Many years after the military interventions had started, there are indications of the actions undertaken, far from contributing to great stabilization of the occupied countries, it is encouraging/promoting, in an indirect way, the rejection of a foreign presence and in general the Western world, which is being blamed for sacking and exploiting its main energetic resources. Nowadays, and despite the fact that democratic elections were held, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, political and social instability remains a fact in these two countries. Terrorist attacks are continuous, and the growth of opium in Afghanistan (87 % of world production) and the commercialization of heroin reaches its highest, the actions of insurgent paramilitary groups are more and more overwhelming and effective internal clashes and fighting in order to gain local power between Shiite and Sunnis in Iraq (almost a civil war) and of the great men of wars and opium in Afghanistan, mark the diary of an area where rejection is growing towards foreign presence and towards the Western world in general. In this context, everything seems to indicate that Samuel Huntington's theory and other conservative thinkers like Paul Kennedy and Robert Kaplan, seem to consolidate themselves, as the Islamic civilization is becoming the West's new generic enemy. This can be seen as a clash of civilizations which is being encouraged by radical and extreme movements in both of these civilizations.

With regard to the Far East, and beyond the armed conflicts which still remain open, it is important to highlight the importance of putting into effect the East Asia Free Trade Area. This economic association will become the world's greatest free trade area which will incorporate, in the following years, more than 3.100 million people from 13 Asian countries. However, the profound social differences and conditions of extreme misery that the majority of the population in the Far East are living in and a considerable part of the Asian continent, overall those inhabiting in rural areas and in the outskirts of the great urban nuclei, as well as the interest in controlling the abundant existing natural resources in different enclaves, favour the appearance of Maoist or communist guerrilla movements in various countries in South and Southeast Asia, especially in India, Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal (Maoists control 40 % of this country's territory), Myanmar and Sri Lanka (where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam maintain an almost permanent confrontation with the government forces in order to obtain independence in the Tamil territory). This type of guerrillas canalize a feeling of discontent of those who fear that the process of economic liberalization in development and make, on a global scale, the social division deeper between rich and poor and wipe out a great part of the values, customs and cultural traditions characteristic of Asian countries. Currently, in India Maoist guerrillas have spread from the southern state of Karnataka to the border with Nepal, already operating in 14 of the 28 states of the Hindu country. In the same way, similar armed organizations are present in the town of Khulma (Bangladesh) and in Philippines through the named New Popular Army which currently controls the numerous villages and depressed areas where radical armed communists exert absolute power, demanding a fair distribution of land in a country where most of the territory

belongs to hundreds of families. We are, therefore, before a phenomenon of geopolitical conflict linked to population structural poverty, which tends to grow in poorer and margined territories in Asia, having verified that the liberalizing measures of the economic system put into effect by national governments do not make any significant contribution to significantly reduce the abysmal differences still existent amongst the social classes in Asian countries. Apart from these conflicts linked to structural poverty, there are others such as those which contain an ethnic component like the one in the region of Kashmir, where various Islamic groups fight to become independent of India with the supposed help of Pakistan. This fact has an enormous significance on a local and world scale as it concerns two countries that have nuclear arms which may be used in supposed military confrontations between both countries. In addition to this conflict, it is important to mention the warning that China exerts over Taiwan, considered as another province in its territory. Therefore, to ensure and guarantee in the future that the island remains under its control, the Chinese government passed in 2005 the anti-succession law, it contemplates the military intervention if the island of Taiwan were to declare its independence. If due to this circumstance, a military confrontation were to occur, the world would, very probably, be immersed in a great regional conflict with global implication, altering the economic dynamism in Southeast Asia and causing a crisis in the world system of unpredictable consequences, in view of the military backing that the U.S has always provided Taiwan with, as a strategic North American ally in the Far East. And all of the above in a geographic setting where six countries (Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) stockpile nuclear arms amounting to 10.915 atomic warheads, to which we would have to add those available in the North American military bases in Southeast Asia and in the Pacific.

In relation to the above mentioned, and making a global evaluation of the military deployment of the United States in the East, it is important to mention that early in 2006, this country had a wide net of 88 military installations distributed in 31 countries in Eastern Europe, Near East and the Asian Pacific, of which two correspond to naval forces in the Indian Ocean and another in the Pacific, whilst the others are permanent terrestrial and air bases, to which we need to add the forces deployed in antiterrorist and war operations as well as logistics and communication systems, which totals to a global military force which is close to 404.000 soldiers in these Eastern countries. This type of intervention and exterior control, joint to very specific internal problems of a structural or ethnic order, that affect each state in a particular way, give rise to, with every likelihood, the West becoming the scene for numerous groups and terrorist organizations, as in this diverse and complex part of the world, 78 % of the main terrorist groups which were operating at the end of 2005 have settled or have their headquarters here. The presence of thirty-six groups and armed entities of this nature established in fifteen Asian countries and in the North of Africa have been the perfect justification for the north Americans to build new temporary military bases in areas where these operate, exerting a greater control and influence over structures of power and a decision of a significant part of the nations that integrate Western geopolitical group.

We are therefore before an enormously disputed territory and of vital importance for Western powers, which in order to maintain its gradual economic growth, need large quantities of energy, most of which proceed from oil which lies underneath the Islamic countries. Institutional frailty and generalized political corruption reigning in most of the

governments and regimes which subsist in the area, many of them protected and supported by important Western world powers, give rise to the irruption of numerous terrorist groups, frequent social convulsions and dramatic war confrontations that are doubtfully justified, putting not only the numerous interests that the Western world has over this space which is so rich in strategic resources but also progress and modernization of the group of towns and cultures which make up the Eastern diversity. The accumulation of exogenous military forces which today reach worrying proportions in this area, and the same fact that 6 countries in the area have nuclear and atomic arms, transforms the East, where currently 65 % of the population live, into gunpowder, capable of destabilizing the economic and political worldwide system.

