

BUSH, WAR AND THE DESPERATE STRUGGLE FOR A SLICE OF LIFE

In the reflection titled "Bush in the Sky", published by our newspapers this past March 23rd, I claimed Bush would get up to his old tricks during the NATO meeting in the Romanian capital of Bucharest, held from the 1st to the 3rd of April.

Important events are taking place in Europe. To ignore them would be to remain ignorant of today's dilemmas. With enough patience to get through the next few pages, readers will have access to news that were extracted from a sea of information, news which see the light of day at different times and on different days, thrown together with other headlines, vital and not.

Athens, April 3rd (EFE)

According to the EFE, Greek nationalists celebrated having prevented Macedonia's entry into NATO today. At the root of this is the unresolved Athens-Skopje dispute over Macedonia's name, which has been going on for 17 years now.

The Greek press was unanimous, that Thursday, in calling the veto that prevented Macedonia's entry into NATO a success, a decision that was confirmed today at the summit meeting that this military organization held in Bucharest.

Above all else, the media underscored the intense pressures Washington brought to bear on the organization to have it accept Macedonia's entry into NATO, and expressed a sense of nationalist pride in noting Athens did not yield to these pressures.

As a headline of the Athenian newspaper Avriani announced, Bush's blackmail did not go down well, but Kostas Karamanlis will go down in Greece's history for the veto against Bush's designs.

Bucharest, April 4th (EFE)

The EFE reported that the White House expressed its satisfaction over the results obtained at the summit, where the allies promised to base more troops in Afghanistan, backed US plans to set up an anti-missiles shield in Eastern Europe and promised that the Ukraine and Georgia would be accepted as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the future.

Tirana, April 3rd (EFE)

According to EFE's article, Albania's political class enthusiastically welcomed NATO's official invitation for Albania to join the organization.

Albanian members of parliament, who convened for an extraordinary session, called the day "historical" and extolled it as the country's most important event since the proclamation of Kosovo's independence this past February 17th and the creation of the Albanian state in 1912.

President of Parliament Jozefina Topalli thanked all nations that supported Albania's entry in NATO and US President George W. Bush in particular.

The invitation, Topalli said, marks the end of Albania's political transition and the first step towards Euro-Atlantic integration the country has taken in these past 17 years of democracy.

Minister for the Economy Genc Ruli stated that Albania's entry into NATO means more stability and security and, therefore, more foreign investment, essential to the economic development of one of Europe's poorest countries.

The main streets in the Albanian capital were embellished today with the flags of NATO and Albania.

Madrid, April 4th (DPA)

This article opens with a question: Isolated from the rest of the world? The image of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, sitting alone next to empty chairs before the table at the NATO summit meeting, while George W. Bush and other leaders speak animatedly nearby, was the front-page photo of the main Spanish newspapers today and revived debates on the foreign policies of the Spanish socialist government.

In addition to commenting on the controversial photograph, newspapers and radio and television talk shows underscored the absence of a meeting between Zapatero and Bush, which La Moncloa had announced as a *fait accompli* after the US leader phoned his Spanish counterpart to congratulate him for his electoral victory of March 9th.

Bush's relationship with Zapatero has been cold and distant since the socialist came to power for, almost immediately after his election, in April 2004, the latter withdrew the 1,300 thousand Spanish soldiers who were based in Iraq.

At no point did the United States or Bush tried to conceal their disapproval towards this. Since then, there hasn't been a single bilateral meeting between the two.

Neither Bush has officially visited Spain since then, nor Zapatero been in the White House. Just the contrary occurred with the previous Spanish president, the conservative José María Aznar...his was one of four faces which appear in another well-known photo: the one taken at the Azores summit, in which Great Britain and the United States hatched the plans for an intervention in Iraq which Spain supported.

Exchanges between Bush and Zapatero in Bucharest were limited to a "Hello, hello, congratulations", from the US to the Spanish leader, which newspapers satirized as the "three-word encounter".

Bucharest, April 4th (ANSA)

ANSA reports that in his closing remarks at the NATO summit, US President George W. Bush handed over the helm to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on a silver platter.

According to analysts, the US President's farewell remarks, which marked the debut of his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkpozy and the British Premier Gordon Brown, will be remembered for Bush's absurd insistence on requesting the immediate entry of Georgia and the Ukraine into the alliance, against the obvious opposition of the remaining members.

It was "Old Europe", with the French-German axis at the helm in its criticisms of the war in Iraq, which levelled a scathing "no" at President Bush.

The US President appeared unusually nervous at the Bucharest summit. Diplomatic sources even speak of harsh words spoken with his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who tried to convince him of abandoning a "lost cause", at least at that summit.

Bush's nervousness was also evident in his sudden interruption of the press conference held at Romanian President Traian Basescu's summer residence, when the European head of state was attempting to answer a question concerning US treatment of Romanians who seek to travel to the

United States.

Bush's irritation over the length of the summit meetings, where the 26 heads of State took the floor, also came to fore. The president abandoned the debates on Afghanistan inopportunistically, leaving behind some members of his team and several journalists who were covering his trip.

Bush also reacted adversely to a New York Times article which commented on the "invisibility" of the US White House chief in the midst of the electoral campaigns and despite warnings of an economic recession.

Bush had but one triumph at Bucharest: securing NATO's support for his "space shield" plans with a view to holding a morning meeting with Putin at the Sochi spa, on the Black Sea.

According to analysts, Bush will have the opportunity to put some order to the United States' conflictive relations with Russia, which have reached their thorniest point since the conclusion of the Cold War.

Bucharest, April 4th, 2008 (AFP)

According to the AFP, in a rare cooperative gesture, Russia arrived at an agreement with NATO in Bucharest on Friday, to permit the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance to use its territory to transport non-military equipment to its troops in Afghanistan.

The agreement concerning Afghanistan was the only concrete step taken by the two parties at the NATO-Russia Council meeting held on Friday at the Bucharest House of Parliament.

Non-military equipment for ISAF (International Security Assistance Force based in Afghanistan) may be transported through Russian territory, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said.

The ISAF, led by NATO since 2003, is today made up of 47,000 officers from 39 countries.

In response to a request for reinforcements for military headquarters, to combat ferocious Taliban resistance in southern and eastern Afghanistan, NATO countries offered troops that more than substantially swell these forces.

France, for instance, will send an additional battalion of some 700 soldiers that will be deployed in the country's east.

As more troops are deployed and spending increases, the agreement with Russia should lower costs, as it will make it possible to transport, by train, supplies which had hitherto been sent to Afghanistan by air.

Rogozin, the Russian ambassador to NATO, had stated that the fate of Russia and NATO in Afghanistan were interdependent, as both stood to lose if the Taliban ever returned to power.

Bucharest, April 4, 2008 (AFP)

Though President George W. Bush affirmed that the Cold War had ended, AFP tells us, the summit meeting between NATO and Russia held in Bucharest this week demonstrated that the former enemies continue to lock horns over nearly all issues: Georgia and the Ukraine, Kosovo's independence, the anti-missiles shield, Iran and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

"NATO cannot guarantee its own security by expanding to other countries", Putin told Western leaders.

The facts are evident: since the end of the Cold War, NATO's membership has grown from 16 to 28, absorbing nearly all of the former communist block —Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria,

Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia—and three former Soviet republics: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

In the heat of this geopolitical battle, on Thursday Putin managed to convince the 26 allies to postpone granting Georgia and Ukraine the candidacy to join the organization, a move strongly backed by President Bush and a step towards becoming full members.

But Putin's partial triumph does not dispel Russia's concerns over the fact that NATO promised these two former Soviet republics that they would one day join the Alliance.

NATO's declaration adds to the questions and preoccupations in Russia with respect to the direction of NATO's evolution. A Russian authority referred to it as an alliance that assumes global functions, with no limits on its rights to use force.

Zagreb, April 4th (EFE)

The EFE reports that US President George W. Bush arrived today at 15:00 hours, local time.

The President's visit is his first official visit to Croatia since it declared independence from the former Yugoslavia.

The US president arrived from Bucharest, where he attended the NATO summit, in which Croatia and Albania received official invitations to join the Alliance.

Croatian authorities announced earlier today that everything was ready for Bush's visit, which posed the greatest challenge to the country's security forces that they had faced to date.

While these news reached us from the Balkans, in Europe's south-east, where numerous countries are fighting over the "honour" of being devoured by the empire's economic and financial system in order to improve their material living conditions, which have nothing in common with those of the underdeveloped world, a news cable issued by the EFE on April 2nd reported the following:

World Bank (WB) President Robert Zoellick called today for coordinated global action to address rising food prices which, coupled to increasingly high energy prices, threaten to destabilize 33 countries around the world.

Zoellick referred to this coordinated action as one of the four measures which need to be implemented immediately to secure a sustainable process of globalization and minimize the effects of today's international financial crisis on the developing world.

He called for a global trade agreement at the Doha round of negotiations, which must be arrived at "now or never".

He also called for greater transparency in the raw materials sector in the developing world, with a view to giving greater impetus to growth.

His speech, delivered at a hotel in the US capital on the eve of the WB and IMF spring meeting to be held in Washington next week, comes at a moment of great economic uncertainty for the world.

To achieve all this, we must confront problems such as skyrocketing basic food prices, which result, among other factors, from energy sector recovery.

Zoellick stressed that basic food prices have gone up by 80 percent since 2005. He pointed out that, last month alone, the rice and wheat prices reached their highest, reported in the last 19 and 28 years, respectively.

The World Bank estimates that 33 countries around the world face potential social or political crises as a result of high food and energy prices, he stated.

He pointed out that demographic conditions, a change in people's diets, energy and biofuel prices and climate change suggest that the high and volatile costs of food will be with us in years to come.

In view of this situation, he proposed the creation of what he described as a New Agreement for a Global Food Policy, which ought to focus not only on hunger, malnutrition and access to food products, but also on other factors such as the connections those prices have to energy or climate change.

Food policy needs to draw the attention of the top political circles, because no country or group of countries can face these interconnected challenges alone, he concluded.

These two institutions, the World Bank and the IMF, are part of the imperialist system.

The first news of Bush's risky trip to Russia came from the very military plane that took him and his vast entourage there, to Sochi, a city on the shores of the Black Sea.

Reporters from several western press agencies travelled with him.

An AFP cable dated April 4th reported:

"President George W. Bush told NATO allies that the United States would send more troops to Afghanistan next year, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Friday.

"(...) The president indicated that he expected in 2009 the United States would make a significant additional contribution," he said.

"Gates said bipartisan support for such a move in the United States was strong enough to allow Bush to make the pledge even though he will no longer be president."

From Moscow, an EFE cable dated April 5th reported:

US President George W. Bush arrived today in Sochi, where he will consult his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev, who will become Russia's head of State next May 7th.

The last meeting between Bush and Putin will focus on Washington's plans to deploy parts for its anti-missiles shield in Eastern Europe, a move which had just met with NATO's support and to which Russia is resolutely opposed.

Tomorrow, Sunday, the Russian and US presidents also plan on signing a document that will set down a strategic framework to guide relations between the two countries under the leadership of their respective successors.

The document must be an honest instrument, for there are problems that cannot be ignored, said Serguei Prijodko, foreign policy advisor for the Kremlin chief, as quoted by the Russian agency Interfax.

He stressed that significant differences still exist between Moscow and Washington with respect to anti-missile defence systems, on strategic arms reduction plans following the expiration of the START-1 Treaty and the inadmissible nature of militarizing the cosmos.

Among these differences, Prijodjo also pointed out the differing stances on NATO's expansion, particularly into the former Soviet republics of the Ukraine and Georgia.

Bush's visit to Sochi, the last in his tour of Eastern Europe, will last less than 24 hours.

On April 5th, the German agency DPA reported:

Tying loose ends, getting in step with each other, Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin prepare for their meeting at the Sochi spa, next to the Black Sea, with a view to sparing their successors political burdens.

It was Bush who chose Putin's summer residence as the venue for their last meeting: his parents had been delighted with their private visit, in 2003, to this mansion, erected following Stalin's death. The locality will also host the 2014 Winter Olympics.

The two presidents availed themselves of many of their 23 meetings to compliment each other in public.

But, beneath such personal sympathies, there are more than enough reasons for political friction. One of them is the United States' controversial plan to erect an anti-missiles defence system in the Czech Republic and Poland. In Kiev, Bush had cautiously stated he hoped to find common ground in this dispute.

The Vice-President of Russia's Academy for Security, Defence and Order, General Viktor Yessin, affirmed there were reasons for cautious optimism.

Different kinds of speculations also surround Bush and Putin's last meeting: some believe the presidents plan on an agreement to construct a means of transportation that will connect the two countries via Alaska, a project which had already been conceived in the time of the tsars.

The media began to speculate on this when the rich governor of Chukotka, Roman Abramovich, ordered the largest tunnel boring drill in the world from the construction company Herrenknecht.

A Kremlin spokesperson commented on the rumours surrounding the 42 billion-euro (66 million-dollar) 100-kilometer tunnel.

On April 6th, the French agency AFP reported:

Putin declared that he was prudently optimistic about a definitive agreement and that he felt it was feasible.

Bush stated he wants to establish a personal relationship with elected Russian President Dimitri Medvedev that will allow the two of them to work together on common problems.

Bush, who participated at the NATO summit in Bucharest on Friday, arrived in Sochi with the support of the Alliance for the US anti-missile shield project.

Plans exist to expand the US defence system with a battery of 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and an ultra-modern radar in the Czech Republic, which would be in operations until 2012.

Upon his return to the US capital, the EFE reported in a cable dated April 6th:

US President George W. Bush returned to Washington today with much pending work in his agenda as regards relations with Russia, as he himself has recognized.

The US - Russia meeting closed with the signature of a strategic framework agreement which sets down the major lines that are to guide future bilateral relations in such areas as the struggle against terrorism and the economy.

But the document also clearly reveals the profound differences that persist between Washington and

Moscow with respect to the anti-missiles shield that the United States plans on constructing in Eastern Europe, one of the thorniest issues in the bilateral relations of recent months.

Putin declared that the devil hides in the small-print. It is important for experts to decide what the guarantee measures will be and how they will be implemented.

There is also discussion surrounding matters such as the expansion of NATO towards the east, particularly towards the former Soviet republics of the Ukraine and Georgia.

When they met 7 years ago, Bush stated he had looked into Putin's eyes and had been able to glimpse his soul. The two leaders have maintained a good personal relationship, despite the deterioration of their country's relations.

Now, Bush and Medvedev have got off on a different foot. While at their first meeting the US president welcomed Putin with an embrace, he only shook his successor's hand. And if he looked into his eyes and glimpsed his soul, he certainly didn't say so, the cable ironically concluded.

For an immense country such as Russia, Eastern Europe is not only a place of culture, art, history and refined sciences or a producer of well-known wines, goose liver, all imaginable types of cheese and other exquisite and costly products from the countryside and city. It is also a consumer of Russian oil, gas, gold, nickel and raw materials, an instrument for capital flight and brain drain, for the squandering of food products, converted into the ethanol used by their luxurious and unaffordable automobiles. The whole world knows this.

Asia is far more important than Europe for Russia, for Asia's international trade institutions, through the Shanghai Group, open more doors to the World Trade Organization, where Bush has offered to support Putin in his aim to have Russia join this organization.

What interest does the United States have in setting up space bases, radars and launching platforms in Europe and everywhere, if it is not in using these to threaten Russia? Obviously, the weapons it could aim at Russia could also be aimed at China and all other countries, without exception, to turn them into the allies or enemies of an empire whose economic and political system is unsustainable.

The United States is heading towards trade protectionism to maintain employment indices at home, where its employees cannot compete against the millions of people in the Third World who, through great sacrifices, produce quality consumer goods at much lower costs, goods which transnational corporations later sell in search of surplus value.

All the while, Bush declares terrorist whatever countries he pleases.

I decided not to divide this reflection into two parts, risking a lengthy text.

I have still to address an issue which, though less significant, I would like to analyze separately because of its concrete relationship to our country. I shall do so on a different occasion.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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