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# EUROPEAN UNION-LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN RELATIONS: FOOD SECURITY CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND PROJECTIONS

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# FOOD SECURITY FROM A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE: PAST, PRESENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF "GRAIN WARS"

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## **1. Introduction**

Re-examining food security from a geopolitical perspective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means journeying back to what is basic and indispensable, to the most strategic discovery for the survival of humanity: food. Effort and ingenuity to produce food individually or collectively, by traditional means like farming or on an industrial scale or in a laboratory as we do now, remains one of humankind's primary motivations, both in times of peace and in times of war.

Recent events such as the spread of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, constant changes in the climate and acts of war like those between the Russian Federation and Ukraine are taking place amid global challenges that involve addressing food security, in other words, guaranteeing the necessary or sufficient intake of nutritious and vital food as a fundamental part of human survival.

Geopolitical analysis is an important tool to explain the limits and scope of food security at the present time. This means looking back in order to appreciate the historical-political and economic-social, as well as military, constants that shape the various geopolitical models in which conflicts over the control of strategic resources still linger. These are geographical areas devoted to food production, minerals, water, energy, or indeed anything that might become a matter of dispute, the root of a conflict in any part of the world.

The military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, then, is a conflict for control over strategic resources. At the same time, it is a watershed event that is polarising the international order and fomenting rivalries among blocs of states, as in the case of NATO headed by the United States and the European Union (EU). The same applies to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), led by Russia and China, and the BRICS mechanism, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and which has recently approved the incorporation of new members (Patiño, 2022: 165). They are joined by other actors like international bodies, banking institutions and even armies of

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mercenaries, as in the case of the Wagner Group, all of which are taking a stance – one way or the other – in this climate of instability that transcends the Eurasian geopolitical environment.

The instability at the heart of Eurasia arising from the tension between Russia and Ukraine therefore warrants examining other aspects of the conflict, particularly disputes over strategic resources. This leads us to the idea that it is a “grain war” by spotlighting the geostrategic value of productive land, but which is also important in terms of location, position, productivity and development, among other comparative advantages.

The key geopolitical question is: what does the territory of Ukraine possess to cause a confrontation between Russia and the European Union, each with its respective allies? To start with, the territory comprises a genuine space in development, with land that is a source of important commodities (food, mining, energy and water resources), making Ukraine the “breadbasket of Europe”. Russia, meanwhile, appears to accept “the deep-seated militarisation of its society and the endless search for security through the creation of a land-based empire” (Kaplan, 2015: 233). Through constant expansion and readjustment of its “living space” via the extension of its borders, it seeks at all costs and by all means to recover what Russian geopolitical theorists call its “near abroad” (González, 2012: 136). That means that Russia is moving ahead with a strategy of reconquering the territories in the former Soviet orbit in various ways, either through persuasion, in the case of Belarus, or direct aggression, as we see in the case of Ukraine.

Finally, geopolitical reflection on this prototype of “grain war” that Russia-Ukraine tensions raise highlights the importance of other “agricultural pan-regions” in the world. The German Karl Haushofer used this term to describe the different regions into which the world would be divided and which, in turn, would become “theatres of operations”, in military parlance (Portillo, 2004). We can envision this situation for Latin America at the present time, transformed into a garden and breadbasket for the world, given the course that food security is taking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. Historical context of grain wars

Delving deeper into the first “grain wars” in history, we might choose the expansion of the Roman Empire as our starting point, under Julius Caesar, first, and Mark Antony, later, at the height of Cleopatra’s reign. That helped to situate Egypt as the “great granary” of Imperial Rome, largely as a result of the rise of wheat production that spread to other parts of the world like the territories of North Africa, Sicily and Hispania. At the same time, a supply chain was established to distribute the cereal with the charting of new courses and more land and sea routes that converged in Rome, the centre of imperial power. China’s political leadership is currently pushing a similar undertaking through its Belt and Road Initiative, which consists of routes converging on the centre of power in Beijing (Frankopan, 2020).

Moving beyond the Mediterranean, in the Middle Ages the journeys recounted by Marco Polo became the means of expanding the exchange of food between Europe and the Far East, characterised by places

shrouded in legend that produced the silk, porcelain and spices traded by Arab and Muslim merchants, who were skilled pathfinders. This enabled the trade in spices such as cinnamon, pepper, salt, turmeric, mustard or cloves that would transform the way food was seasoned and conserved beyond the perimeter that covered that “great island” of continental mass known as Eurasia, what the British geographer and politician Halford Mackinder called the Heartland (Mackinder, 2010: 312).

In China, meanwhile, between 1421 and 1433, in an era prior to the voyages of Christopher Columbus and other Europeans to the lands of the New World, the Ming dynasty took to the task of exploring alternatives to meet the demand for grain amid shortages and the prospect of a period of famine among its people. To that end, the Chinese leaders devised a series of food supply strategies, starting with the naval and diplomatic deployment of the great treasure fleet, commanded by Admiral Zheng He. It increased China’s trade and influence in terms of food and botany in Asia, India, Africa and the Middle East.

The Chinese ships carried a rich variety of flora (including rice, soy, millet, wheat, mandarin orange, lime, lemon, orange, grapefruit and coconut seeds) which they intended to plant in foreign lands, partly as a benefit of the tributary system and as a way of offering food to each territory where the great treasure fleet put into port. We also know that the vessels carried dogs on board, some as pets, others as food and others to hunt rats, while there were coops full of Asian chickens, which were transported as valuable gifts for foreign dignitaries along with other signature Chinese products (Menzis, 2015: 70, 96-97).

The Chinese honed their naval skills through their “string of pearls” model, a network of enclaves spanning the Indo-Pacific region. But their naval decline would come in 1433, as they ended their voyages and chose to turn inwards and build walls, before sailing the seas of the world again as they do today.

Then, around 1492 and marked by the imprint of Marco Polo’s journeys, Admiral Christopher Columbus was inspired to extend the spice and precious metal route, based on his own transoceanic utopia (Queralt del Hierro, 2014). At that time, seafaring skill and Portuguese vessels (caravels), combined with Jewish financial backing, paved the way for the East India Company, determined to locate the sources of gold in the lands of Ophir and sight the spice lands of the East Indies.

Columbus’s odyssey did not lead him to the lands of Ophir, but to the islands of the Caribbean, where the gold hung from the noses and ears of the natives. His mistaken sighting of the spice islands, off the land mass that Columbus and his crew had come across, brought them other food-related “business” opportunities. In this case it was production in “gardens” devoted to growing tubers, starting with potatoes, cassava and yams; vegetables like pumpkins, lettuces and tomatoes; cacao, chilies and vanilla (Ha-Joon Chang, 2023: 193).

These opportunities grew with the cataloguing of corn grain and beans. And in that interchange of cultures and tastes, wheat appeared in America, soon joined by barley and coffee beans from Arabia. Pigs and horses taken from the Iberian Peninsula on these first voyages arrived on

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the plains and grasslands. Likewise, the “tropical gardens” were sowed with bananas, which would cross India and Africa, as a staple for the enslaved Africans who were taken to America to work the mines for gold and silver. Sugar cane also arrived from India and with it the spread of sugar plantations throughout the continent.

Thus, to this day, the lands discovered in the New World comprise the fertile soil and humus whose nutrients facilitate the sowing and production of vast areas of land that over time have come together to form an “agricultural pan-region”. It is no longer just the Old World. Latin America has opened up to other competitors, making the region a possible “theatre of operations” of future “grain wars”, the constant goal being to secure the carbohydrates, proteins and nutrients required to guarantee the continued existence of the human groups that inhabit the different territories on various continents.

### **3. Russia and Ukraine, a 21<sup>st</sup> century grain war**

Returning to the issue of confrontations over land and, more specifically, to explain the conflict between Russia and Ukraine through the lens of a “grain war” amid food (in)security, Ukraine’s situation is a measure of the importance of forming part of the black earth, or chernozem, belt. This is a type of soil rich in humus and carbon that allows it to retain water and nutrients, facilitating high crop yields through the seasons. This idea of belts of fertile land is present in different parts of the world, turning these geographical areas into potential sources of conflict. They are found in the great grasslands of the United States Midwest, the pampa in Argentina with its “tierras castañas” (brown earth), as well as in Russia, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia or Mexico among other locations.

Hence the reasons for a “grain war” in Ukraine are to be found in the 68% of black earth it possesses, making it an agricultural powerhouse. It even explains the colours of its flag: yellow for the golden wheat grown in its fertile fields blanketed by the blue of the sky. This puts it in the crosshairs of global agri-food corporations.

Transnational companies of US origin such as Monsanto, satisfying 40% of the demand for seeds used in Ukraine’s cultivation areas, followed by the Cargill cereal company, with wheat and oilseed processing plants, export terminals and ships in the port areas of the Black Sea, have become Russian military targets since the outbreak of the war, as part of the group of actors linked to this conflict through agricultural interests (Ostos, 2022: 20).

China too takes part in this battle of giants for domination of the agri-food sector. For years it has been committed to buying and leasing fertile land throughout the world as part of its food self-sufficiency strategy, laid out in a 1996 white paper. The main issue China must address stems from the slim margin (8%) of agricultural land in its territory, followed by the 6.5% of its water put to agricultural use. These are conditions that ultimately limit its capacity to meet the demand for food of a population numbering over 1.4 billion, a figure that accounts for close to 21% of the world’s inhabitants. (Ostos, 2022: 20).

China's business strategy (from 2010 to recently), focusing on the acquisition of fertile land and the purchase of food around the world, combined with an increase in its middle class and a rise in their purchasing power, also changed the intake of food of this segment of the population. The change could be observed in greater consumption of proteins, meat products, citrus fruit, processed food and even spirits. This prompted China's purchase of 3m hectares (29,000 km<sup>2</sup>) of farmland (an area virtually the size of Belgium) in the Ukrainian region of Dnipropetrovsk in 2013. The area amounts to 9% of Ukraine's arable land, devoted to the establishment of farms to meet the demand for cereals and livestock the Asian giant needs for its own sustenance.

This confirms the new food security challenges arising from this type of "grain war". Namely, the United States and China are also taking part in the Russia-Ukraine conflict via their agribusiness corporations, exacerbating the struggle for predominance in the markets and circuits devoted to distributing food globally.

#### **4. Controlling agricultural pan-regions: food security challenges**

Given the above, the global dynamic created by the chief competitors in the agribusiness sector carries a warning for other "agricultural pan-regions", in this case Latin America, which has 16% of the world's agricultural land and 33% of the land suitable for agriculture (ECLAC, 2023, 22). As in its colonial past, these figures make it a tropical garden under the eager eye of the current food "corporatocracies".

Two food powerhouses in Latin America stand out: Brazil and Argentina. In Brazil's case, most of its soybean and sugar exports head to China to meet the demand of Chinese consumers for this type of product. Argentina's contribution, meanwhile, is to sell soybeans, other cereals and meat products to China, via leasing agreements or acquisition on the part of China in those strategic soils typical of the pampa.

In line with the above, it might seem the matter follows the logic of supply and demand for food between countries as part of global trade agreements. But in the current circumstances, exacerbated by the global agri-food crisis, food price imbalances are not just the result of the current war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, rather they stem from over three years of economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It brought job losses, the abandonment of farm work in some places and blockages in chains of production, not forgetting the effects of climate change. All these factors combine to create the whiplash we are facing as a "global society" today.

Given this, the severity of the war and, particularly, Russia's block on communications and constant bombing of critical infrastructure (including dams for watering crops and Ukraine's main ports), combined with Western reprisals and the veto of products and supplies from the warring countries, are having a boomerang effect throughout the supply chains used to ensure global food security.

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So, we might ask what effects the Russia-Ukraine “grain war” has on Latin America. One crucial consequence is the concern of Latin American farmers, who, caught in the crossfire, face the prospect of a shortage of fertilisers from both Russia and Ukraine. This is creating a climate of uncertainty in the short and medium term over covering the demand for these inputs used in the agricultural activity characterising several countries in the region. Brazil is one of the most vulnerable countries to this situation as it relies on Russia for close to 80% of its fertilisers.

Countries including Haiti or those comprising the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras), whose agricultural capacity is limited – for want of productive soil, constant drought, rural violence and forced displacement, the erosion of arable land, or lack of water sources – are forced to import most of their food. Food prices are rising at the moment, partly because of the war in Ukraine, but also because of the bulge in inflation left over from the global expansion of COVID-19, which led to a drastic slowdown of the world’s economies.

This means that the current map of the food crisis in Latin American and the Caribbean countries reveals pockets of undernourishment. And that means we face a situation of greater inequality in terms of access to basic foods, but also the prospect of greater socioeconomic tension, as a result of rising costs of agricultural inputs like seeds and fertiliser, along with the increase in the price of fuel and, therefore, of transport. In short, these circumstances disrupt the mood of society, and in the process diminish the prospects of the entire Latin American agricultural pan-region.

## 5. Closing thoughts

This journey from the first “grain wars” to the present day, through this kind of geohistory of food, gives us a taste of the fruits, but also of the bitter flavour, of the conflicts caused by the human dilemma of survival or dominance. It is an issue that bears out the saying attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte that “an army marches on its stomach”. Wars over food become a continuation of politics or, vice versa, politics becomes a continuation of war by different means.

The geopolitical view arising from a retrospective analysis through the historical continuum of “grain wars” allows us to get to the root of the problem, the substantive issue that makes land a decisive factor of power. In the past and through to the present day, the genesis of conflicts based on strategies of occupation, expansion and domination of land or geographical spaces of strategic value, as in the case of Russia and Ukraine, leads to the involvement of other actors in these rivalries, in this case global agribusiness and food production “corporatocracies”.

These circumstances make solving this prototype of “grain war” - modern if you will - more complex. Yet they continue as they did in Rome’s imperial past in Egypt, taking in the importance of the Silk Road, which today crosses land and sea, led by China as it aims for all roads to lead to Beijing. The encounter that Columbus triggered by taking Europe to Latin America and the Caribbean through an unprecedented exchange



of food and species has driven dominance over fertile land suitable for agriculture and livestock farming, but also for mining and hydrocarbons extraction, ever since.

Lastly, we have the challenges posed by the geopolitical model of “agricultural pan-regions”, which consists of a redrawing of the world map established by the main players in the food security field. It coincides with the rise of food “corporatocracies” and the shakeup of the markets and routes for trade in strategic foodstuffs and agricultural inputs, particularly fertilisers. The situation could be an opportunity or a challenge for Latin America, whose history also forms part of the future of “grain wars” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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