

RUSSIA-NATO: THE CONFLICT PROTRACTS WITHOUT A SOLUTION IN SIGHT

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NATO's conflict with Russia protracts with no solution in sight. The written responses sent by both NATO and the US government to the demands presented by Moscow through the same means, constitute a more relevant instance in the diplomatic avenue. The direct dialogue between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has not made any major progress in the virtual meeting they held on February 1. The Security Council meeting held the day before at the request of the Western powers was a confrontation to reaffirm positions, without any progress.

The West asks that Russia begin a gradual withdrawal of its troops deployed in the country and Belarus around the Ukrainian border. For its part, Russia demands that NATO forces stop increasing their deployment in the Alliance countries bordering with Russia and Ukraine. The diplomatic avenue of the European Union - of whose members, two thirds are also members of NATO - has been consolidating in recent weeks. On Friday, January 28, a virtual meeting between French President Emmanuel Macron and his Russian counterpart took place. There was no progress, but they agreed to continue working with the "Normandy Format", which involves Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, and was established in 2014 as a result of the crisis generated by the occupation of Crimea by Russia.

Europe begins to express a different tactical vision than the United States. Russian and NATO officials insist that Russian military intervention in Ukraine is likely or imminent around the second half of February. For his part, the Ukrainian President maintains that the conflict is not imminent. This same idea has prevailed in the meetings of diplomatic representatives of the so-called "Normandy Format".

The United States and its allies are advancing in the conflict, increasing the threat of economic sanctions against Russia and showing diplomatic and

military solidarity. In this area, the United Kingdom plays an important role - today outside the EU-, as has been a historical constant. At the beginning of February, the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, visited Kiev to support the Ukrainian government. Other heads of government, such as Poland, do the same.

The United Kingdom has already agreed with the United States on economic sanctions that could go as far as the seizure of assets of Russian citizens abroad. A list of the 500 most important assets in Russia and their economic interests outside their country, has been assessed. The idea - used on a smaller scale and without success in 2014 - seeks to break the solidarity of Russia's great fortunes with the Putin regime. At the same time, work is being done on the alternative energy supply for Europe, in the event that the Russian government cuts off the supply to the continent (40% of the gas it consumes comes from Russia).

The United Arab Emirates, the United States and other producers have already advanced in negotiations in this regard, and the logistical plan prioritizes the ports of Spain for the entry of fuel. The military support is seen in the increase in the delivery of weapons to Ukraine by NATO countries -especially anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles-, in the face of a possible Russian armed action that would combine armored vehicles on the ground and combat aircraft. This is articulated with an increase in the military deployment of NATO forces in the three Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) and in Poland. The UK has more than 1,000 troops in these countries and Johnson has announced that he is going to double their numbers.

For its part, Ukraine has announced an expansion and modernization of its Armed Forces, which is more a gesture that conveys political decision than an effective measure in this crisis. It announced that it would incorporate 100,000 more men into its Armed Forces, which already have a quarter of a million troops (to which 300,000 reservists can be added). It also announced that Ukrainian soldiers will have a salary with a floor of three minimum wages, and that it will go towards a military force of professional soldiers, as the United States and the United Kingdom have, and to a large extent also Russia.

But the reality is that the bulk of the Ukrainian military structure has significantly lower levels of weapons, training and logistics, both with respect to

NATO standards and Russia's capabilities. It should be remembered that the population of the latter is 144 million inhabitants, more than three times greater than that of Ukraine, which is 44 million. As for the GDP, the Russian is 1,483 trillion dollars, approximately nine times more than that of the Ukraine (155 billion). For its part, the United States announced that it is shortening the readiness deadline to reinforce deployment of its forces in the NATO countries bordering Russia. The military readiness to bring US NATO forces to Europe takes normally 10 days. The decision has been made to reduce the deadline to 5 days for a contingent of 8,500 men - mostly paratroopers - to be used in the Baltic countries and Poland. It should be noted that the United States has 60,000 men of its Armed Forces permanently in Europe, and 50,000 of them are stationed in Germany. Biden himself acknowledged that the troops were not many given the dimension of the conflict, but maintained that it was a concrete show of support. While the United States and its allies focus on tightening possible economic sanctions on Russia, the economic situation in Ukraine is rapidly deteriorating. In the last days of January, the Ukrainian government reported that since the beginning of the crisis with Russia, from December to the end of January, more than 12 billion dollars had left the country, due to the uncertainty and fear generated by the risk of military escalation. It also argued that \$5 billion to \$6 billion in aid was needed to bolster the country's rapidly falling currency reserves.

On January 24, the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, announced that the organization was preparing financial aid for 1.2 billion euros for Ukraine. It seems that this country is in need of urgent economic assistance, in parallel to diplomatic and military assistance. Meanwhile, at the end of January, China has carried out its largest military exercise in Taiwan's air protection zone, with the participation of 39 combat aircraft, in view of the new launch of missiles by the pro-Iranian militias in Yemen against the United Arab Emirates. The United States sent a ship as a sign of support for the government of Abu Dhabi; Mali's military commanders, who have brought Russian mercenaries into the country, staged a coup against the pro-French government. In South America, an Iranian oil tanker arrived in Venezuela, violating the blockade imposed by the United States on the Maduro regime.

In conclusion: the Russia-NATO crisis continues with no solution in sight for now. The United States and its allies escalate threats of economic sanctions, while showing diplomatic and military support for Kiev. In a symbolic gesture, NATO increases its military deployment in its countries bordering Russia and Ukraine, while Ukraine announces the increase of 100,000 men in its Armed Forces. Finally, in this context, the Ukrainian economy deteriorates fast, especially due to foreign exchange outflows, without receiving effective support to prevent it.