

The US and NATO respond to the Kremlin's demands: Russia's reactions

Witold Rodkiewicz

On 27 and 28 January, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov commented for the first time on the responses which the United States and NATO gave on 26 January to Russia's ultimatum on European security from December 2021. The Russian officials called them unsatisfactory due to the rejection of their demands for legal guarantees of the further non-enlargement of NATO and the liquidation of the Alliance's military presence on its eastern flank. Lavrov did also admit that the answers contained "seeds of rationality in secondary matters", and that for this reason Moscow would not break off talks with the West, but he insisted that Russia would not give up its claims. The minister announced that, after inter-ministerial consultations, proposals for the next steps would be submitted to the president for approval. To the question of Russia's reaction if the talks failed, Lavrov stated that Vladimir Putin would make a decision on the basis of the options submitted to him by the military.

When asked whether war could be expected to break out, Lavrov gave an ambiguous answer: this would not happen if it depends on Russia, although it will not allow "the brutal disregard of its interests". He also announced that on 28 December he had asked the United States and NATO for their interpretation of two principles contained in OSCE documents: that of the indivisibility of security, and that no OSCE member state can enhance its security in a way that would reduce the security of any other member state. The minister also reiterated that the application of harsh sanctions announced by the West would result in the severance of relations.

Lavrov also accused the United States, and the West more broadly, of trying to provoke a conflict between Ukraine and Russia (including by supplying weapons to Ukraine); he also stated that Kyiv allegedly does not control all military formations in Ukraine, and therefore it should be expected that they will start active hostilities. He also added that he still hopes – although he "hardly believes it" – that Washington would force Kyiv to implement the Minsk agreements. At the same time, he cast doubt as to whether Paris and Berlin had either the ability or the desire to take any effective measures in this matter.

Commentary

- Moscow's reaction indicates that Russia intends to continue its two-track approach for the time being. On the one hand, it will continue to hold talks (especially with the US), while counting on divisions emerging within NATO, particularly between Washington and

Berlin. It is noteworthy that Lavrov complimented the American response as “a model of diplomatic decency”, while harshly criticising that of NATO. On the other hand, the Kremlin will step up its propaganda and hybrid measures to increase tensions, while continuing to attempt to intimidate the Western side with the threat of armed conflict on an undetermined scale.

- It is to be expected that should the West refuses to make further concessions, Moscow will decide on a military escalation in Ukraine, most likely preceded by a provocation in the vicinity of the contact line in the Donbas. This can be inferred from the consistent build-up by the Russian media and Russian diplomacy of a narrative about an upcoming Ukrainian attack on the separatist republics (700,000 of whose inhabitants have Russian passports). The Russian narrative accuses the West of inciting Kyiv to launch such an attack. At the same time, there are voices within the Russian elite (including the former president Dmitri Medvedev and the former foreign minister Igor Ivanov) warning against possible war, which should be interpreted as an attempt to influence President Putin’s decision, and not to escalate the conflict.