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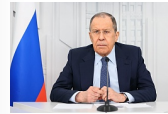
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Dear friends,

I would like to greet you and express my gratitude for your continuing to invite me even though I chair the Supervisory Board. It is important for me to see you, listen to your questions and understand what worries you in this uneasy period.

This meeting takes place against the backdrop of events now occurring in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly spoken at length about the origins of this crisis. I would like to briefly reiterate: this is not about Ukraine. This is the end-result of a policy that the West has carried out since the early 1990s. It was clear back then that Russia was not going to be docile and that it was going to have a say in international matters. This is not because Russia wants to be a bully. Russia has its history, its tradition, its own understanding of the history of its peoples and a vision on how it can ensure its security and interests in this world.

This became clear in the late 1990s-early 2000s. The West has repeatedly attempted to stall the independent and autonomous development of Russia. This is rather unfortunate. From the start of President Vladimir Putin's "rule" in the early 2000s, we were open to the idea of working with the West in various ways, even in a form similar to that of an alliance, as the President has said. Sadly, we were unable to do this. We repeatedly suggested that we should conclude treaties and base our security on equal

rights, rejecting the idea of strengthening one's security at the expense of another.

Neither were we able to promote economic cooperation. The European Union, which back then showed some signs of independent decision-making, has now devolved toward being completely dependent on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the US. The story of Nord Stream 2 was the highlight of this change. Even Germany, which defended its interests in the project to the very end, was persuaded that the "project was not in its interests." Germany and its people were told what their interests were by people on the other side of the Atlantic. Many other international areas were blocked despite our commitment to close cooperation on an equal basis.

The West did not want equal cooperation and, as we can now see, has kept true to the "will and testament" of Zbigniew Brzezinski who said that Ukraine should not be allowed to side with Russia. With Ukraine, Russia is a great power, while without Ukraine, it is a regional player. We understand that this is a mere exaggeration. But it fits nevertheless the philosophy and the mentality of western leaders. No effort was spared to turn Ukraine into an instrument to contain Russia. Into an "anti-Russia," as President Putin said. This is neither a metaphor nor an exaggeration.

What has been happening all these years is the significant accumulation of physical, military, ideological, and philosophical threats to the security of the Russian Federation. The militarisation of Ukraine, which was injected with weapons (including assault weapons) worth many billions of dollars over these years, was accompanied by the Nazification of all spheres of society and the eradication of the Russian language. You know the laws that were passed there concerning education, the state language, and the indigenous peoples of Ukraine that made no mention of Russians. It was not only the language that was being edited out, but simply everything Russian. They banned the mass media, which broadcast from Russia and transmitted in Ukraine. Three Ukrainian television channels that were considered disloyal to the current government were shut down. Neo-Nazi battalions with insignia of Hitler's SS divisions held marches; torchlight processions took place with a presidential regiment assigned as an official escort; fighters were trained in camps by instructor programmes from the US and other Western countries. All this was done with the connivance of civilised Europe and with the support of the Ukrainian government.

To my great regret and shame, President Zelensky has been asking how he could be a Nazi if he has Jewish roots. He said this on the exact day when Ukraine demonstratively withdrew from the Agreement on Perpetuating the Memory of the Courage and Heroism of the Peoples of the CIS Countries During the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. When he personally patronises the tendencies I have mentioned, it is difficult to take the policy of the Ukrainian leadership seriously. Just as in the early stages of his presidency, and even earlier, when he was a stage and soap opera star, he assured me in every possible way that it was unthinkable for him that the Russian language could be infringed upon. So here we are: life demonstrates what a person's word is worth.

These accumulated tendencies took on a new form following the coup d'etat in February 2014. Despite the guarantees of the EU countries — France, Germany and Poland — that were part of the agreement between the opposition and the then-President of Ukraine, they tore up that agreement the morning after, disregarded the guarantees, humiliated the nations above, and the EU as a whole, before announcing their new regime. In our conversations with our western partners, including the Germans and the French, we have been asking them how they could allow this to happen. We kept reiterating, you provided guarantees to this agreement. They say this happened because Yanukovich left Kiev. Yes he did, but he left for Kharkov to take part in his party's congress. Yes, he faced a number of issues and did not enjoy broad support, but he never fled. Still, this is not about Yanukovich.

The first point of the Agreement read that the Government of National Accord was to be established as an interim stage for early presidential elections. Most likely, the then president would not have won, and everyone knew this. All the opposition had to do was to wait and fulfil what it agreed to. Instead, they immediately ran back to "Maidan." They seized the government building and said, "congratulate us, we have created a government of winners." And this is how their instincts were immediately manifested. Winners. First of all, they demanded that the Verkhovna Rada abolish any privileges granted to the Russian language. This, despite the fact that the Russian language was and is still enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine, which declares that the state must guarantee the rights of Russians and other ethnic minorities. They demanded that Russians get out of Crimea because they would never think like Ukrainians, speak Ukrainian or honour Ukraine's heroes

Bandera and Shukhevich. They sent combat battalions and "friendship trains" to that peninsula to storm the Supreme Council building. At this point, Crimea rebelled, and Donbass refused to accept the coup d'état and instead asked to be left alone. But they were not left alone. Donbass didn't attack anyone. But they were declared terrorists and an anti-terrorist operation was launched, with troops being sent in, with nearly all of the West applauding the move. That's when it became evident exactly what plans were in store for the future role of Ukraine.

The massacre was stopped with enormous effort and through Russia's active participation. The Minsk agreements were signed. You know what happened to them next. For seven long years, we tried to appeal to the conscience of those who signed the agreements, above all, to France and Germany. The end was tragic.

We held several summits and meetings at other levels, and Ukraine, either under Poroshenko or under Zelensky, just did not want to comply with the agreements. First of all, they refused to open a direct dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk. We asked the Germans and the French why they would not make their proteges at least sit down at the negotiation table. The answer was that they did not think that the republics were independent, and that it was all Russia's fault. End of conversation. Contrary to its commitments under the Minsk agreements, late last year and early this year, Kiev began to build up its forces along the line of contact up to 120,000 troops. Contrary to the ceasefire agreements that had been signed and violated many times prior, they dramatically increased their heavy shelling, always targeting residential areas. The same has been happening for all these eight years, with varying degrees of intensity, amid complete silence from all the international "human rights" organisations and Western "civilised democracies."

Shelling intensified at the start of this year. We received information that Ukraine wanted to implement their Plan B, which they had long threatened, to take the regions by force. This was made worse by the West's stonewalling of Russia's initiative to reach an agreement on an equal and indivisible security architecture in Europe. President Vladimir Putin put forward this initiative in November 2021, we drafted the necessary documents and relayed them to the US and NATO in December 2021. They responded that they were willing to negotiate certain issues, including where missiles could not be deployed, but that Ukraine and NATO was none of our business. Ukraine was said to have reserved its right to appeal to join NATO, which would

then deliberate whether to admit it, and all this without asking anyone else (likely ending up granting Ukraine's membership). This was the essence of what they told us.

This is why when Ukraine commenced its shelling, signifying a clear sign of preparations to launch a military offensive in Donbass, we had no other choice but to protect Russian people in Ukraine. We recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics. President Vladimir Putin responded to their request by ordering the launch of a special military operation. I am certain that you are following the events and know that the operation has brought to light our worst fears about Ukraine's military plans and has helped us derail them.

You know that facts have been uncovered of a dangerous bioweapons programme that the Pentagon has been carrying out in many cities of Ukraine. Now that Russia's armed forces have acquired access to these documents, the US has been trying to cover its tracks. We will be fighting for the truth to come out. This bioweapons research is not limited to Ukraine and is being conducted in over 300 laboratories in various countries, most of them located in former Soviet Union nations along the borders of Russia and the People's Republic of China.

This was not our choice. We saw how the West's attitude was communicating one simple truth – if you were a Russophobe; if you were set on eradicating Katsaps and Moskals (a quote from statements made by Ukrainian politicians); if you were to say that anyone who considers themselves Russian and is a citizen of Ukraine should get out for the sake of their future and their children, (as President Vladimir Zelensky said in September 2021); if you obediently fulfill Western bidding so as to constantly irritate, unnerve and unbalance Russia, then you have the universal green light to do anything.

The unprecedentedly hysterical reaction in the West to our military operation, the way they are encouraging and indulging everything anti-Russia and anti-Russian is sad news indeed. I regularly read about the ill treatment that Russian people face in other countries, including citizens of those countries who are of Russian origin. It appears anyone can demand that these people be persecuted in the West now, even on social media. I cannot wrap my mind around this.

But this all proves one thing: the anti-Russia project has failed. President Vladimir Putin has listed the goals of the operation, and the first on the list is to ensure the safety of people in

Donbass, and the second one, to eliminate the growing threats to the Russian Federation from the militarisation and Nazification of Ukraine. When they realised that our policy line had helped to thwart their plans, they literally went ballistic.

And yet, we have always supported diplomatic solutions to any problems. Over the course of hostilities, President Vladimir Zelensky proposed negotiations. President Vladimir Putin agreed. The talks are underway, although the Ukrainian delegation did start by, as we say, simply going through the motions. Then dialogue actually began. Even so, there is always the feeling that the Ukrainian delegation is manipulated by the West (most likely, the Americans), and is not allowed to agree to our demands, which are bare minimum, in my opinion. The process is underway.

We continue to be open to cooperation with any countries, including Western ones. However, given how the West has behaved, we are not going to propose any initiatives. Let's see how they will get themselves out of this self-imposed impasse. They have got themselves into this impasse along with their "values," "free market principles," rights to private property and the presumption of innocence. They have trampled on all of this.

Many countries are already beginning to rack their brains in search of ways to slowly "creep away" from the dollar in international settlements. Look what has happened. What if they do not like something else tomorrow? The United States is sending its diplomats around the world, its ambassadors in every country have orders to demand that these countries end cooperation with Russia under the threat of sanctions. We would understand if they did this with small countries. But when such ultimatums and demands are given to China, India, Egypt, or Turkey, it looks like our American colleagues have totally lost touch with reality, or their superhuman complex has overwhelmed their sense of normalcy. We have seen such complexes in human history, and we do know about this.

I do not want to be the only speaker, though. I would like to hear from you. What questions do you have, what are you interested in?

Question: For those who do not know, Riga was part of the Russian Empire longer than Sevastopol was. How long will Russian people need a visa to travel to Russia? Is it possible to issue maybe a card or something for compatriots from the Baltics and European countries, so that they could travel or work in Russia? There is a residence permit, but if you leave for more than six months you lose your residency. In the current situation,

when Russophobia is on the rise, this would be especially relevant.

The mistakes made by the public, the “soft power,” then have to be corrected by the army (as we see in Ukraine). Perhaps in countries where Russia faces direct opposition it would make sense to work not through Russian Community Councils (which quickly find themselves under the control of local authorities), but rather to decentralise work. For example, Americans have 20 different funds. You can be anything – green, blue, light blue, whatever, but if you are anti-Russia, this opens all the necessary doors.

Sergey Lavrov: I agree with you about visas. This is an old problem. We have a complicated bureaucracy. This discussion between liberals and conservatives has been going on since the late 1990s and early 2000s. The liberals believed we needed to remove as many barriers as possible so that people with Russian roots, who speak Russian and are involved in cultural and humanitarian events, enjoyed a preferential entry regime. The debate was quite lively when the law on compatriots was adopted, and they discussed the “compatriot card” option. This was one of the most important matters discussed. However, no agreement was reached, including for legal reasons – because it is not a passport or a half-passport. For example, Poland issues Pole's Cards. These can essentially be used as passports. There are other instruments to liaise with their diasporas in Western countries (with ethnic Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians), and in the Middle East, too. Even in Syria, there is an entire ministry (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates). We are currently working on additional steps that we can take in this direction.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin has appointed me to head the Commission for International Cooperation and Support for Compatriots Abroad. The commission will meet at the end of March. This question will be one of the main ones on the agenda. We will discuss it in the context of a broader approach called repatriation. I believe that repatriation must be legally formalised with all the necessary formalities and the with all legal norms observed. This must be done in order to dramatically facilitate the procedure for those who identify as Russians to relocate or come to stay in Russia. We will try to consider your question as well as part of this approach.

As for the soft power, the Russian Community Councils and the American method – there must be some school of thought that prompts such action. As we promoted the movement of

compatriots, we sought to make their actions transparent, so that they did not arouse any suspicion of being involved in underground activities. Unfortunately, that was all in vain. All this transparency backfired. What they are doing with the management of the Russian Community Council in the United States is pure McCarthyism. Its leaders had to return to Russia, otherwise the FBI threatened to imprison them for a long time because they promoted projects between compatriots who maintained cultural and humanitarian ties with Russia. Recall how the Americans treated Maria Butina. She worked openly and completely freely in the United States, promoting joint projects. In the US, all NGOs for the most part explicitly declare they are supported and funded by the Agency for International Development. Other Western countries have many projects that prefer to keep this information to themselves. I wouldn't want us to act like this. First, it would be dangerous for the people concerned. Secondly, these are the methods of the intelligence services, not soft power methods. On the other hand, American soft power relies heavily on the CIA and other special services.

We will think of ways to support our compatriots in situations where a true witch hunt has been unleashed against them. I think more flexible forms of support could be implemented, including the Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad. The essence of this is the provision of legal assistance to those who find themselves in a difficult situation. There is also the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. We will think about some additional formats, naturally, fully legitimate ones.

Russia needs to toughen its policy with regard to shadow agencies engaged in things that do not coincide with their charter and other documents. Thank you for showing such an interest. We will certainly try to take this into account.

Question: What contribution do you think representatives of other states can make to the development of international relations with the Russian Federation?

Sergey Lavrov: We will support any public initiatives aimed at developing cooperation in the post-Soviet space. There are many forms for interaction in the CIS, in the CSTO, and in the EAEU, which are of interest to public movements and organisations and that can be used to organise events.

I sincerely would not want to give you any specific ideas here. You know better. You have a feel for what life is like in your

country, and how it is affected by relations with Russia on the official, investment, and trade tracks.

As for the Russian Community Councils, in some countries our compatriots are beginning to create alternative councils. It is possible that people are just being competitive, which is only natural, but if you have an interest in doing something on the ground, we will only welcome this. If you need some advice, I am available to listen to your ideas and see how we can support them together with our Kazakhstani colleagues.

Question: I have a proposal, not a question. We have set up a pressure group on this track, and we have already drafted our own proposals. We are ready to help promote Russian culture and the Russian language in Germany, the Baltics and other countries. We would like to become independent analysts and experts and to develop culture, the Russian language and to support compatriots and foreigners who love the Russian language, and who aspire to culture. We would be happy to take part in this process.

Sergey Lavrov: That's wonderful. Could you please leave your proposals and contacts with the organisers? The Foreign Ministry exercises various functions within the framework of the Government Commission for Compatriots Abroad, and I head this Commission. Our Ministry is also the main body responsible for the implementation of a new federal targeted programme to promote international cooperation. This is what soft power is all about. We also have a programme for supporting the Russian language abroad. In effect, opportunities still exist for the kind of projects you mentioned. I look forward to reading your letter.

Question: As of late, many Western activists, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, have addressed the people of Russia. If you were able to address all the peoples of the world in the West, the East and in Latin America, what would you tell them to make sure they hear you?

Sergey Lavrov: I would tell them that all peoples should be true to themselves, and that they should not abandon their traditions, history, aspirations and world outlook.

Getting back to Ukraine, the Americans are gloating over this situation and rubbing their hands with glee. In all, 140 countries voted against Russia at the UN General Assembly. We know how these countries reached this decision: US ambassadors have been shuttling from capital to capital and demanding that

even the great powers comply with their demands, and they don't shy away from speaking about it in public. They either want to offend others, or they have completely lost all sense of proportion, while comprehending their own superiority. However, out these 140 countries voting on US orders, not one imposed any sanctions except the West. An overwhelming majority of countries did not impose any sanctions on Russia. It appears that, by voting, some of them wanted to minimise damage, but they don't want to shoot themselves in the foot, and they will continue to develop their economy. Many independent leaders are saying openly that they don't want to fulfil US instructions to their own detriment.

So, people of the world, be true to yourselves.

Question: What should the West do now that events have dramatically escalated to move things back towards a realm of peace, tranquility, kindness and cooperation?

Sergey Lavrov: The West should start minding its own business and stop lecturing others. Because right now, all we hear is "Russia must.." Why must we do anything, and how have we so upset the West? I really do not understand. They've dragged out our security guarantees initiatives. They told us not to worry about NATO expansion because it does not threaten our security. Why do they get to decide what we need for our security? This is our business. They do not allow us anywhere near discussions of their own security. We are constantly reminded that NATO is a defensive organisation. First, this defensive alliance bombed Yugoslavia. We only recently recalled how in 1998 Joe Biden was so proud that he personally contributed to the decision to bomb Belgrade, and bridges over the Drina River. It was fascinating to hear this from someone who claims Russia is led by war criminals.

NATO also acted in Iraq without a UN Security Council resolution. In Libya, it did have a resolution, but it only covered establishing a no-fly zone, so that Muammar Gaddafi's aircraft could not take off from their airfields. They didn't. On the other hand, NATO bombed all the army positions from the air, which the UN Security Council did not warrant, and brutally killed Muammar Gaddafi without trial or investigation. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went live on air to celebrate the event.

Strategically speaking, there was indeed a collective defence alliance when the Berlin Wall and the Warsaw Pact existed. It was clear where the line of defence was then. When the Soviet

Union and the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist, NATO foreswore not to expand to the East, but began to do just that. We have seen five waves of expansion by now, contrary to its assurances. And each time, the imaginary Berlin Wall was moved further east. The alliance assumed the right to determine the boundary of its line of defence. Now Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has declared that NATO must bear global responsibility and is obliged to ensure security in the Indo-Pacific region. It is their name for the Asia-Pacific region. So, NATO is ready to "defend itself" in the South China Sea now. They are building defence lines against China now, so China, too, needs to be on the alert for that. A really unusual type of defence.

As for the Indo-Pacific region, which we have always called the Asia-Pacific region, there is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) there, as well as mechanisms created around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has a dozen partners. We participate in holding the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Security Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, a platform for ASEAN and its twelve partners which include China, Russia, the West (including Australia) and India – all the key players. Those formats work on the basis of consensus. This does not suit the Americans though, because to pursue their policy to contain China, they need an anti-China mechanism. But no platform where China is a member can produce such a result. They proclaimed the Indo-Pacific strategies and created Quad – a group of four nations including the United States, Australia, Japan, and they also lured India into this group. Our Indian friends are well aware of what we are talking about. They said they would participate in this only in the context of economic and infrastructure projects, but not military ones. So, because they needed to build up the military component, they created a parallel format, AUKUS, which included Australia, the UK and the United States. Now they want to expand it by adding Japan and South Korea, and even some ASEAN countries. This will lead to the collapse of the ASEAN ten.

When the Indo-Pacific concept was announced, we asked what was wrong with the Asia-Pacific label. We were told it mixed two different things because Asia did not refer to an ocean, but the Pacific did. Hence the Indian Ocean and Asia. We asked, if this includes the Indian Ocean, does this mean the whole of East Africa will be involved in this cooperation? They said no. That region had too many problems they did not want to deal with as they had enough on their plate. Is the Persian Gulf also part of

the Indian Ocean? They said no to that too, disowning it. This makes it clear that the Indo part has been included with the sole purpose of cozying up to India and trying even harder to turn it into an anti-China player.

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India in early February 2022. I spoke frankly with them. Our Indian friends understand everything perfectly and will never be open to such "cooperation" or play someone else's games. India is a great country. Making such provocations against great powers is simply disrespectful.

Back to our discussion – we tried to negotiate with the West up to the last minute. But relations with the EU were destroyed back in 2014. All mechanisms, and there were plenty of them: biannual summits, annual meetings of the Russian Government and the European Commission, four common spaces being developed under four roadmaps, 20 industry-based dialogues – all that was derailed simply because the people in Crimea, faced with a radical neo-Nazi threat, voted for reunification with Russia.

Our Western colleagues do have this curious approach towards politics – when considering any problem in international politics, they cut off periods of time that are not favourable to them. When we discussed Ukraine with them, they said that we "annexed" Crimea. Wait, but what happened before that? They failed to make the opposition do what they themselves had signed on to. The opposition violated all guarantees and, contrary to the agreements, carried out a coup d'état and proclaimed an openly anti-Russia policy line. They began trying to suppress everything Russian. But Westerners called it "the price one has to pay for democratic processes." They could not even say the word coup.

Last autumn, I asked the Germans and the French, how is this so? It is the Minsk Agreements we are talking about. Why are you so stubborn about this annexation part? It all started then. "This is the price one has to pay for democratic processes." You see, this is their approach – they ignore what is unfavourable to them. They just single out one of the symptoms and begin to build their entire policy on it.

Question: Politics is about forestalling. I would like to take a look into the future. How do you, as an absolute professional in this area, see the future of the Slavic peoples' coexistence in this space? I am sure that everything will be well. However, the forms of such coexistence may differ. What is your opinion of its stability and preferred forms?

Sergey Lavrov: We should follow the lines dictated by life itself. We have reached an extremely important milestone. I am referring to the 28 union programmes. They are described as roadmaps. These programmes are being actively and efficiently transformed into normative acts. We need to have many of them. The majority have already been drafted, and the rest are at the advanced stage of preparation. They will ensure not just our rapprochement but the creation of a common economic foundation, which is necessary to level out rights in absolutely all spheres, including trade, investment, the implementation of economic projects, access to state orders and more.

As for the political superstructure, we have the union parliament, the union cabinet of ministers, and the Supreme State Council chaired by our presidents. These bodies will deal with economic business development to see if our political bodies should be additionally adjusted to our superstructure. I am sure that we will rely on the opinion of our peoples, who regard each other as fraternal and truly close peoples.

Question: I have a question about soft power. School education concerns not only the external but also the internal contours. For the past seven years, I have been closely monitoring developments in children's culture, which can be described as extremely pro-liberal. Today we need to overhaul the cultural space here and to quickly launch the introduction of our cultural codes abroad. Here is a simple example: the animated television series Masha and the Bear has done more in the external contour to improve Russia's image abroad than many official programmes. Are there any programmes, or plans to launch programmes to change the cultural code both in the internal and the external contours? I have a proposal, which I would like to formulate and to submit through this event's organisers tomorrow, if I may.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, of course. I would like to urge everyone, including those who don't have formulated proposals, to share their ideas with us. We will discuss all of them.

You have touched upon a very important issue. I am not directly involved in these efforts, but we have always been speaking about the need to start promoting our culture from the cradle, primarily in Russia. There is too much external influence now, and internal influence is not always effective in shaping the right worldview in our children. I am not talking about brainwashing people. But we need to prevent the brainwashing of our children by other forces. This is the issue. Children's access to

information must not be limited to one source. Do please submit your ideas. We will look at them together with the Culture Ministry.

Question: A colleague has mentioned the issue of visas. The lady from Kazakhstan has said what we should do abroad and how we should do it. Can you say what Russia's priority is: to collect as many compatriots as possible in Russia, or to form a cordon or a barrier of compatriots outside the country?

Sergey Lavrov: I know that some political analysts are pondering this idea. I believe that people have a free choice. We must create the right conditions for those who want to return. I have already mentioned repatriation today. We will certainly deal with this matter at the United Russia's Commission [on International Cooperation and Support for Compatriots Living Abroad]. I will do my best to help draft a law on this matter.

As for the interests of those who want to live where they are living, we must work with the authorities of their countries of residence to prevent discrimination against Russians, Russian education, [Russian] media outlets, etc. It will be more difficult to do this now, because our Western colleagues are encouraging Russophobia in all areas. Regrettably, they are trying to set the Georgian people on this track. When they recklessly adopted these horrible, inhuman sanctions, leaving 200,000 people outside the national territory, preventing them from using national airlines and prohibiting Western air carriers from bringing these people home, the Prime Minister of Georgia announced that they were ready, in view of that humanitarian situation, to allow Georgian airlines to bring Russians from Europe and the EU closer to their home country. You remember how fiercely he was attacked for this. It was an elementary human desire to help people in difficult circumstances. If you have any complaints about your authorities, please write to us.

Question: There are no complaints. We will submit the proposals regarding possible support for our compatriots in foreign countries.

Sergey Lavrov: We have a channel for communication. We are interested in normal relations with our Georgian colleagues.

Question: All states are playing the same game: the author has trump cards and a support team in case there are dissenters. I am referring to the UK and the United States. This will go on until one of the parties ceases to exist. Is it not high time Russia started its own game within the framework of the Eurasian

continent and friendly countries to promote peace, justice and security? Given its nuclear arsenal, Russia could guarantee the security of states (where it has been confirmed – Syria, Ukraine) for countries that currently depend to some or other extent on big, major players so that they can feel they are also involved.

Sergey Lavrov: I wouldn't call it a game in the sense implied by Zbigniew Brzezinski's terms "great Game" and "grand chessboard". We proceed from the premise that our friends are people, states, and political parties which are our equals. Unlike the Western organisations, where there is little democracy. They invented consensus, but in NATO and the EU this consensus is a sham.

They adopted sanctions in instalments even before the current stage in the development of our geopolitical space (there has been a series of sanctions for no reason at all since 2014).

Everything seems to have happened – Crimea, Donbass, the Minsk agreements... But every six months, they imposed new sanctions. Many of my European counterparts tell me confidentially: we understand that this is stupidity and a dead end, but we have consensus. I told one of them: a consensus means that a decision is not taken if there is even one "nay" vote. If you object, say so! This is a case of collective responsibility. Everyone says: I am against it, but all of them want a consensus. This consensus is shaped by an aggressive, Russophobic minority, primarily by the Baltic states (to my great regret), Poland, and recently Denmark.

Today, it is a sign of good manners for them to demonstrate that you are more of a Russophobe than your neighbours. In NATO, it is the United States that rules the roost. The EU is being dominated by the alliance. The neutral countries, which are not NATO members – Sweden, Finland, and Austria – are being drawn into cooperation under the cloak of "collective mobility." This means that the neutral countries will allow NATO to use their roads and territories when it needs to move its military infrastructure east. This is being palmed off as NATO-EU partnership. I have mentioned Nord Stream 2 as an example. There is no longer any independence in Europe. They were just told: Stop taking care of your energy security on the terms that are beneficial to you; we will guarantee your security at a much higher price, but we will be in chips. President of France Emmanuel Macron is the only politician who continues to focus on strategic autonomy. Germany has resigned itself to the fact that they will have no such autonomy. There is no diktat of this sort in our country.

The difficulties arising in the work of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are contingent on and explained by the democratic nature of these organisations rather than their weakness. They decide all matters by consensus and nothing can be imposed on them from outside. We have allied relations with Syria and good relations with Iran. I don't think it will be a good idea to "knock together" a bloc. This will tie everyone's hands, if we look at the situation pragmatically. It is better to have allied relations or an unprecedentedly close relationship of the kind we have with China. Our leaders said in one of the [bilateral] documents: relations have reached an unprecedentedly high level that in some respects even exceeds the traditional allied relations. That is absolutely true and hence we have multivariance.

The Russian Empire was created as follows. There was no melting-pot like in the United States. They have melted everyone into Americans. Generally, all Americans favour human rights. Practically all the states have an equal balance of rights. In the Russian Empire, as ethnic groups joined, Moscow and St Petersburg always sought to have regard for their unique identities and made efforts to preserve their cultures and religions. Multivariance in relations with foreign partners seems more effective and enables greater freedom of action in cases where such actions will be necessary.

Question: I am a citizen of the People's Republic of China. I was born and grew up there. For many years, I have been involved in humanitarian cooperation (education) between China and Russia. I believe that Russia and China are two great powers that enjoy historical and cultural affinity. What areas of cooperation between China and Russia have best prospects?

Sergey Lavrov: It would be impossible to list the promising areas of cooperation between Russia and China. It would need an entire session of its own. Through Moscow and Beijing, we disseminate detailed information on what our two countries are working on together. Currently, this cooperation will be growing stronger. At a time when the West is most flagrantly eroding the entire bedrock that the international system stands on, we as two great powers have to think about our future in this world.

For the first time in many years, China has been declared the main target, previously it was Russia. Now we are targets on rotation. At this stage, their proclaimed goal is to deal with Russia and then go after China. When we communicated with

the Western countries during less turbulent times, we asked them why they were allowing the American course against China to be built up and why was everyone being dragged into it? What did China do? "China is a threat." What makes China a threat? "They are starting to defeat everybody economically."

If you look at the beginning of China's economic elevation, China started by simply accepting the rules of the game, which had been essentially created by the West, led by Americans. These rules included the international monetary system, the international trade system, the Bretton Woods System and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). China started playing by their rules and is now outplaying them on their home field by their rules. Is it a reason for changing the rules? It appears so. Who is proposing to reform the WTO? The West. Because the World Trade Organisation in its current form is providing rules that are fair. Therefore, if we just forget about the situation in Ukraine and the sanctions for a minute, the actions of the West confirm it is not reliable, either as a part of the world that generated the major reserve currencies, or as economic partners or as countries to store gold and currency reserves. We have things to work on. Our leaders and other members of the Government, foreign affairs agencies are working on this extensively as part of our traditionally regular dialogue.

Question: Russia is conducting an operation in Ukraine. It is not a secret that Russia is building a Greater Eurasia. Can you clue us in a little: is Sergey Shoigu going to stop at the border with Poland? Or are we going into Transnistria and Moldova? What is the plan? Are we going to unite further?

Sergey Lavrov: We declared our goals. They are fully legitimate and clear: to protect the people of Donbass (with which we are now allies) that are subject to blatant aggression. For these purposes and based on our treaties, we applied Article 51 of the UN Charter on collective self-defence. Another goal is to eliminate any threats to Russian security posed by the militarisation of Ukraine that is carried out by the West. There must be no strike weapons in the country or threats in the form of Ukraine's nazification, for obvious reasons. The aggressive spirit of the Ukrainian elite has been consciously created to be like this by Western instructors throughout these decades. They trained neo-Nazi battalions, showing them how to conduct aggressive combat operations, etc. We have no other goals beyond these.

Alternatively, the other side may come up with some curious goals. For example, Prime Minister of Poland Mateusz

Morawiecki has proposed an idea that will be discussed soon, which is to send NATO peacekeeping forces to Ukraine. It is possible that, should this decision be made all of a sudden, it will entail that Polish personnel will make up the core of these peacekeeping forces and they will take control over Western Ukraine, including the major city of Lvov, to remain there for a prolonged period of time. It appears to me that this is the plan.

I believe this initiative is doublespeak. NATO will realise they should be reasonable and realistic.

Question: It is now clear to everyone that the world will never be the same again. There is much talk these days about the new global architecture and the fact that its foundations are now being laid. I do agree with the notion that we have no need of a world without Russia. But what kind of a world do we want to build? What place will Russia and the Union State have in the new international order?

Sergey Lavrov: What we want is an equitable world, free from war, aggressive projects or attempts to pitch one country against another. Equitable is also the way we see Russia's place in the world. Similarly, the Union State must enjoy all the benefits of this ideal world as you have described it.

What we want is to discuss how to live on this planet in the future. Too many problems have been piling up, and the existing institutions have been unable to resolve them. This is the gist of the initiative President of Russia Vladimir Putin put forward two years ago to convene a summit of UN Security Council permanent members. Almost everyone supported it but the West will now drag its feet. There is a preliminary agenda. We have coordinated it with our Chinese friends, while the others are reviewing it. But now everything will be put on hold. This is not about the P5 reimagining a "new Yalta," as some claim. Under the UN Charter, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have primary responsibility for maintaining international peace.

When we express the need for more democracy in international relations, this does not mean cancelling the UN Charter. It means stopping violations of the UN Charter. The sovereign equality of states and the requirement to respect territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination – it is all in the Charter. Had all its provisions been respected, this would have ensured peace and cooperation in good faith among all

countries. However, the West manipulates them for its own benefit.

For example, we stand accused of violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, starting with Crimea and Donbass. Crimea held a referendum. Everyone knew that this was an open, honest process when people expressed their will. The Americans know this too. Let me share a secret with you (I hope that no one will get cross at me). In April 2014, after the Crimea referendum then US Secretary of State John Kerry told me that they understood that this was an honest vote. However, he noted that we fast-tracked it by announcing the referendum and holding the vote in a matter of just one week. I explained to him that the Ukrainian radicals posed a direct threat at the time. All the formalities had to be completed in order to protect this territory. He suggested that we hold another referendum in the summer or autumn, announce it about two months in advance and invite foreign observers. The result would be all the same but they would be there to "bless" and verify it. This was not a matter of substance, since everyone understood where it was all heading, but about creating a favourable image for the outside world in order to be able to report that the people of Crimea cast their ballots in a referendum, while the Western "comrades" verified the results.

As for sovereignty and territorial integrity, ever since the founding of the UN in 1945, it has been debating whether sovereignty takes priority over the right to self-determination or vice-versa. A negotiating process was put into motion, paving the way for the adoption by consensus in 1970 of a Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States under the UN Charter. This is a lengthy document with an entire section on the relationship between sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right to self-determination. It says that everyone must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states whose governments ensure the right to self-determination and represent the people living in their territory. Has the Ukrainian leadership ensured Crimea's right to self-determination? All they did was curtail Crimea's rights within Ukraine. Did the Petr Poroshenko regime or the current leadership represent all the people of Ukraine, including Crimea, as they pretend? No. They did not represent Donbass either. They have been ignoring all these principles.

According to the principle of indivisible security, everyone is free to choose alliances but no one can reinforce their security at the expense of others. They say that only alliances matter and nothing else. However, when it suits their interests, the principle

of self-determination comes to the fore, relegating Yugoslavia's territorial integrity into the background, as happened with Kosovo. Its self-determination took place without a referendum. They engineered the creation of a parliamentary structure of sorts, and it voted on the matter. Serbia took the case to the International Court, which issued a curious ruling, saying that consent from the central government was not required for a declaration of independence. President of Russia Vladimir Putin has quoted this landmark ruling by the International Court on multiple occasions.

Question: The West is planning to replace Russian oil and gas in the coming years. What is Russia's interest in participating in the Iran-US nuclear deal? Iran will have an opportunity to increase oil production and replace the Russian market in Europe. How ready are our Venezuelan partners for a deal with the Americans to replace Russian oil?

Sergey Lavrov: We never betray our friends in politics. Venezuela is our friend. Iran is a close state. Unlike the Americans, we do not act only out of selfish interests. If they need to "teach the Russians a lesson," then it's okay to agree with the regime in Caracas (as they called it). The United States would rather restore the programme with Iran, just to punish Russia. This reflects problems not so much with international institutions as with "liberal democracy." As it turns out, it is not "liberal" at all, and it is not "democracy" at all.

When the leading country of the world (which the United States is) solves the problem of global, planetary importance, primarily on the basis of its own domestic interests, which are determined by two-year electoral cycles, then the biggest problems are sacrificed to these electoral cycles. What we can see now in US actions is a desire to prove that a Democratic president and administration are doing well and feel strong enough ahead of the November congressional elections. China does not understand this. What is two years? Nothing. Although the Chinese say that "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," they see the horizon of that great journey. Here, in addition to the US desire to command everything, there are no more horizons. They will act the way they need to today.

It has been noted that the Americans are running around with the issue of oil and gas, turning to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. All these countries, like Venezuela and Iran, have made it clear that when they consider new entrants to the oil market, they are committed to the OPEC+ format, where quotas for each

participant are discussed and agreed upon by consensus. So far, I see no reason to believe that this mechanism will be broken in any way. No one is interested in that.

Question: What formats do you see for post-crisis settlement and intra-Ukrainian dialogue? What role might the DPR and LPR play? Ukraine's governance and education system are permeated with Ukrainian nationalism. Several generations have grown up with this discourse. War criminals will be held accountable under criminal law. What about cultural aspects?

Sergey Lavrov: We have announced the goals we are working to achieve. As for the intra-Ukrainian dialogue, this will be up to the Ukrainians after the special operation ends – I hope, with the signing of comprehensive documents on security issues, Ukraine's neutral status with guarantees of its security.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, commenting on our initiatives on the non-expansion of NATO, said: we understand that every country needs security guarantees. We are ready to negotiate and work them out for ourselves, for Ukrainians and Europeans outside the framework of NATO expansion. Therefore, a neutral status, security guarantees and bringing the legal framework to a civilised level with regard to the Russian language, education, the media, and laws that encourage the country's nazification, as well as the adoption of a law prohibiting this. Most European countries have such laws, including Germany.

As for the DPR and LPR's involvement in the all-Ukrainian dialogue, it should be a sovereign decision of the people's republics.

Question: Why was the military operation launched now and not eight years ago? At that time, a pro-Russian "anti-Maidan" movement emerged in Odessa and Kharkov, which installed the Russian flag on top of the Kharkov regional administration without firing a shot. The city supported Russia. Now these people are hiding from shelling.

Sergey Lavrov: A lot of factors influence developments at each specific historical moment. Back then, it was a shock, primarily because the West turned out to be an absolutely unreliable guarantor of the things that we supported. US President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the French leaders called Russian President Vladimir Putin and asked him not to interfere with the agreement between Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition. Vladimir Putin said that if the incumbent president was signing something, it was his right, and he had the

authority to negotiate with the opposition. But the West dumped us and immediately began to support the new government because they announced an anti-Russian policy line.

People got burned alive in the House of Trade Unions in Odessa; combat aircraft fired at the centre of Lugansk. You must remember the Novorossiya movement better than anyone else. We also had a public movement for support.

We certainly relied too much on what remained of our Western colleagues' conscience. France initiated the Normandy format; we were asked not to state categorically that we refused to recognise Petr Poroshenko's election at the end of May 2014. The West assured us they would do everything to normalise the situation, so that Russians could live normally.

We must have trusted them because of some naivety and kindness of heart, which is something Russians are known for.

I have no doubt that lessons will be learned.



Additional materials

Photos



Technical information

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