

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's article about the world amid the coronavirus pandemic for Chinese newspaper Global Times, Moscow, May 28, 2020

The Pandemic: Objectives and Lessons Learned

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus changed life on the planet virtually overnight. It also became a crush test for international relations, both at the level of individual countries and multilateral associations. The obvious consequences include an economic recession, a crisis of global governance and the growth of protectionist and isolationist sentiments. The pandemic has seriously limited humanitarian, cultural and tourist exchanges, as well as people to people contacts. But this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Of course, when we leave the crisis behind, which will certainly happen one day, we will need to make a comprehensive analysis of the world's ability to withstand such challenges and find common responses to them. However, we believe that some conclusions can be made already now.

Large-scale epidemics are nothing new in human history; they have happened before. But what makes the ongoing pandemic different is that it is taking place amid an unprecedented interdependence of people, countries and entire continents. Achievements in the fields of technology, information and transport have globalised people intellectually and even physically, which means that the majority of new challenges eventually become our common problems or at least acquire an international dimension. We warned long ago about the danger of underestimating the cross-border nature of numerous threats, from terrorism to cybercrime. We also said that nobody will be able to weather the storm in a safe haven, hide behind moats and fences, or attempt to settle one's problems at the expense of others. The virus effect has proved this convincingly. The pandemic is also a lesson in humility: all countries and peoples are equal before tragedy, regardless of geography, wealth or political ambitions. The coronavirus crisis has peeled away everything that is artificial and contrived, casting a bright light on the enduring value of human lives.

Far from everyone turned out to be ready for the trial of the pandemic. Even now, when the global challenge should have brought us together and forced us to set our controversies aside at least for a while, we can see negative examples of predatory attitudes. Some people have yielded to the temptation to act selfishly, believing that it's every man for himself. Others have used the situation to play the monopolist strategy, advocating their mercenary interests and settling scores with their geopolitical rivals. In this rich medium, the virus is accelerating the growth of negative trends, sharpening contradictions and differences, and promoting unhealthy rivalry.

In other words, the unavoidable natural consequences of the pandemic are being complemented with the man-made effects created by the inability of humankind, or rather a certain part of it, to abandon the friend-foe mentality even when facing a

shared adversity. This is regrettable, because it takes unprecedented solidarity and the pooling of efforts and resources to overcome the objective and obvious consequences of COVID-19.

We have to acknowledge that the pandemic has revealed a lack of humanity in some cases. It could be explained by people's confusion in the face of a spreading threat. But it seems that this deficit is deeper and results from, as I already said, the untreatable selfishness of some countries and their ruling elites. We are witnessing that, instead of consolidating the efforts and aspiring to mutual understanding, those who are used to declaring – or declaiming – their moral leadership and rich democratic traditions, are abandoning the rules of decorum and ethical restrictions and beginning to follow the law of the jungle. For instance, there are attempts to pin the blame for the spread of the infection on China, or sketchy speculations about Russia's assistance to some countries provided at the request of their governments. It even came to absurd accusations against my country of trying to use the humanitarian and medical assistance to “increase its geopolitical influence,” or humiliating bans – in violation of the basic diplomatic norms – on asking Russia for medical and humanitarian aid regardless of the severity of the situation. Apparently, the fabled solidarity of the Euro-Atlantic format is more important than the lives and health of tens of thousands of people.

What, if not the politisation of humanitarian issues and the desire to use the pandemic to punish the undesirable governments, is the reason for the reluctance of some Western countries that talk a lot about the need to adhere to human rights, refrain from unilateral economic restrictions against developing countries, at least until the global epidemiological situation normalises? Indeed, according to the UN assessment, such sanctions limit people's ability to use their social and economic rights and seriously impede their efforts to protect their health, striking a blow at the most vulnerable groups.

Russia stands firm against such inhumane practices that are unacceptable during global cataclysms. During the emergency summit of the Group of Twenty on March 26, President Vladimir Putin voiced the initiative to create “green corridors” free of trade wars and sanctions for mutual deliveries of medicines, foods, equipment and technologies. We welcomed and supported the statement by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who urged the parties to regional armed conflicts to promptly stop combat operations and introduce a ceasefire. Of course, any ceasefire should not be used to exempt terrorist groups that are considered as such by the UN Security Council from responsibility.

The attempts to use the current situation to undermine the basic principles of the UN are extremely dangerous. Its agencies must remain the main coordination mechanisms of multilateral cooperation in the interests of an efficient solution for the problems common for the entire humankind. In this regard, we are deeply concerned about the steps to defame the World Health Organisation, which, as most countries agree, has been on the frontline in the war against the coronavirus since the first days of the pandemic, helping all countries to take in the rapidly changing epidemiological situation and pick the best way to respond to the threat. Undoubtedly, the WHO, like any other multilateral agency, should improve its activity and adapt to the new conditions. But the solution is not to destroy the organisation, but to support a constructive dialogue of all of its member states and develop common professional responses to emerging challenges.

The pandemic has yet again laid bare the Western myth about the “end of history”

and the victorious advance of the ultra-liberal development model based on individualism and on the belief that market methods offer a solution to any problem. This approach has played a dirty trick on its proponents. Self-sufficient countries with established mobilisation mechanisms, clear national interests and distinct values have turned out to be more resistant to stress. Those who opted for the erosion of their independence and recklessly abandoned part of their sovereignty have proved to be the losers.

It has become clear that the states which uphold their national interests are still the main players on the international stage. This does not entail or predetermine life in conditions of rivalry and disunity, but rather indicates that the diversity of our unique potentialities should be combined so that we can find effective solutions to the world's key problems.

What we now need is a global diplomatic concert where the UN plays a central coordinating part. We hope that the ongoing epidemiological crisis will help the world see that there is no alternative to the UN-centric world order, which was created following the Second World War, has passed the test of time and still has a huge margin of safety. The principles set out in the UN Charter are the unshakeable foundation of international communication in modern conditions.

Like any other living organism, the UN needs regular tuning and an accurate and calibrated adjustment to the multipolar realities. Of course, we must also continue to make the best possible use of the potential of global governance structures such as the G20 and the World Trade Organisation.

The international associations, initiatives and concepts that are based on the values of inclusiveness, collegiality and equality hold promise as well. It is this philosophy and the principle of respect for cultural, civilisational and national identities and traditions plus the development models that underlie our cooperation within BRICS and the SCO, where Russia is holding the rotating chairmanship this year. In difficult times such as we are experiencing now, dialogue based on mutual respect serves as a safety net and helps us to steer our efforts towards constructive cooperation.

As I said at the beginning of this article, by striking individual people, the virus is also affecting the collective economic system. Business slowdown and the disruption of global production chains have become a real shock for the global economy. We must help it to go through this difficult period, and subsequently work collectively to ensure its gradual post-crisis recovery. At the same time, we must prevent this tempestuous economic weather from damaging international cooperation, from exacerbating the lack of trust and provoking new rounds of confrontation in global affairs.

In a perfect world, this objective should bring us together because the wellbeing of people in all states without exception depends on its attainment. We must work together to find new growth points that will help us overcome the common slump. This global project calls for combining the potential of various integration projects that are being implemented in the vast Eurasian space. This is the objective of President Putin's idea of Greater Eurasian Partnership based on international law and transparency and open to all countries of our huge continent, including EAEU, SCO and ASEAN nations. A gradual implementation of this initiative will not only strengthen our positive economic interconnectedness and increase the competitiveness of all participating countries, but will also serve as an important first phase in the development of the territory of peace and stability from Lisbon to

Jakarta.

I am sure that EU countries will benefit from taking part in this project as well. By joining these common efforts, they will be able to take a befitting place in a new, fairer and more democratic polycentric world. European countries should stop cutting themselves off from our common continent by looking for existential guidelines in other parts of the world and inviting foreign military presence, which is not strengthening their security but is depriving the EU of the opportunity to become an independent centre of international influence in a multipolar world. In any case, our European partners are free to make their own choice.

Of course, everyone would like to leave the COVID-19 crisis behind as soon as possible. But we must also draw lessons from this global trouble. As for whether we draw the correct lessons depends on every one of us.

Over its centuries-long history Russia has faced numerous dangerous challenges that threatened its very existence. But it invariably overcame them, not only emerging stronger but also giving examples of humanity and selflessness to others.

This is why Russia, which is a key international centre, an exporter and guarantor of security, will continue to advocate a constructive and unifying agenda and will play a balancing and harmonising role in international affairs. We will cooperate with anyone who is willing to work together on the principles of honesty and mutual respect for each other's interests and concerns. While proceeding from the principle of indivisible security in all its forms, we are always ready to give a helping hand to other nations irrespective of their governments' policies.

Now is the time to abandon the mentality of inertia based on outdated stereotypes and to start, at long last, to act from positions of morality, because a safe future for all people on Earth, our common home, is hanging in the balance.