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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif, Moscow, September 24, 2020

12-15 minutes

Ladies and gentlemen,

We held regular talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif. As always, they were confidential, sincere and informative.

We discussed bilateral cooperation, as well as the regional and global agendas. We reaffirmed the importance of continuing intensive political dialogue, including at the top level. This reflects the high level of our partnership.

We acknowledged our close interdepartmental contacts that we continue in all areas. We also praised the exchange of experience and close cooperation of our specialists in countering the COVID-19 coronavirus infection.

We confirmed our mutual striving to further enhance trade and

investment ties. Needless to say, we are faced with the US's illegal unilateral sanctions and other US pressure on Iran. These sanctions are aimed at isolating Iran economically, which is a gross violation of international law and World Trade Organisation (WTO) parameters.

We agreed to continue implementing large joint investment projects, primarily in energy, including nuclear power, transport and industrial cooperation. In this respect, we have allocated a big role to the Russia-Iran Standing Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. We agreed to hold the regular meeting of this important commission in Russia before the end of the year. The dates will be fixed with the specific epidemiological situation in mind.

We have identical or very close positions on key global and regional issues.

Naturally, we discussed in detail the situation regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme. We emphasised that Moscow and Tehran, as well as the entire international community are categorically opposed to any US demands to introduce some indefinite arms embargo and invoke the "snapback" mechanism to reimpose the former UN Security Council sanctions resolutions on Iran, which were cancelled by Security Council Resolution 2231 in 2015. The latter remains fully valid in this respect.

Moscow and Tehran believe that the US's illegal initiatives and actions cannot have any international legal implications for other countries and cannot commit any state to limit its legal cooperation with Iran.

Iran continues its constructive cooperation with the IAEA. We confirmed today that the only way to preserve the JCPOA lies through its consistent and full implementation by all parties involved, with account of assumed commitments and in strict accordance with the terms and the timeframes fixed in 2015 and confirmed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

In this context, we reaffirmed that in less than a month, the last restrictions on cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, contained in UN Security Council Resolution 2231, will expire. The remaining restrictions concern military-technical cooperation with Iran. They cease their action on October 18.

We also reviewed our cooperation in the Astana format on settling the situation in Syria. We reaffirmed our willingness to continue this cooperation in the Russia-Iran-Turkey format, including to support a political settlement process at the sessions of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, as well as regarding the continued struggle against the remnants of terrorism on Syrian territory. We also share the position according to which any attempts by external parties to remain on Syrian territory without the consent of the Syrian authorities, not to mention attempts to pursue separatist attitudes in Syria, are absolutely unacceptable and constitute a crude violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, as well as a transgression of other fundamental principles of international law.

I am very grateful to my colleague and friend for today's joint work.

Question: You said that in response to the US claims Russia had taken a very firm position regarding the efforts to activate the mechanism for settling disputes. In a month, the restrictions on

cooperation with Iran in the military and technical field will be lifted, and the remaining participants are insisting on preserving the JCPOA. Do you think the US threats to impose sanctions on the countries which will cooperate with Iran in the military and technical field after the arms embargo is lifted will influence Russia's position?

Sergey Lavrov: We, just like Iran, have repeatedly and clearly stated our position. This position completely coincides with that of the European parties to the JCPOA. The UN Security Council has considered the United States' proposal and decided by 13 votes out of 15 that it is unlawful and has no legal, political or moral grounds.

We know that the United States said that, despite the will of the entire global community, they believed the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on Iran could be reimposed by Washington at will. These attempts have no prospects. The fact that the United States has threatened to impose sanctions on those who defy the American interpretation of the current situation serves as further proof of Washington's desire to move like a bull in a china shop, putting ultimatums to everyone and punishing everyone indiscriminately because, in my view, the incumbent US administration has lost its diplomatic skills almost for good.

Nonetheless, we are continuing to maintain our dialogue with the Americans, trying to make them listen to reason and to explain to them that an approach to international law like this has absolutely no prospects, but I do not know if our efforts will be successful. I am aware that the Europeans have also made similar attempts, but we also see how arrogantly Washington is treating any appeals to it to get back to the agreements based on international law.

It was announced that all those who did not agree to Washington's interpretation of the current situation as the one that takes all of us back to the need to resume the sanctions against Iran would be punished by the United States and subjected to additional economic and other restrictions.

I can only speak on behalf of the Russian Federation. Russia definitely will not build its policy taking into account these aggressive and unlawful demands that have no legal force. Hopefully, other countries cooperating with Iran will take a principled approach and be guided by their national interests rather than the need to obey the directives issued from overseas.

Question: In the interview with Sputnik news agency Mohammad Javad Zarif mentioned the preparations for an Astana format meeting between the Syrian Government and the opposition. What is the point of this if the Constitutional Committee is now at work? Who is expected to be invited to this event?

Sergey Lavrov (adding after Mr Zarif): In addition to what my friend said I would like to recall that the Astana format was adopted to overcome the insurmountable deadlock in which the attempts of our UN colleagues to launch intra-Syrian dialogue in Geneva had stuck. When the UN negotiators repeatedly postponed the meeting between the government and the opposition in Geneva and the situation looked hopeless, Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to use their potentialities, their contacts with different political forces in the Syrian Arab Republic to break the impasse and the stagnation in our UN partner's work. It was at the initiative of the Astana Three that the Syrian National Dialogue Congress was convened in Sochi. The congress adopted the documents that proclaimed the commitment of the government

and the opposition to create a Constitutional Committee and to conduct a constitutional reform. This is the creation of the Astana Three. We are responsible for what we formed. I consider it natural that Russia, Iran and Turkey continue to closely follow the work of the Constitutional Committee, all the more so since it is encountering some tension and problems that must be overcome. Permanent close oversight over the Constitutional Committee's work, moreover, in close contact with UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen who is in charge of this work, is useful for the cause, which over the past few weeks was confirmed during our contacts with UN officials.

Question: Alexey Navalny has been discharged from the Charite Hospital. Have our attorneys contacted him? Have his relatives or family got in touch with the Russian mission? Will law-enforcement bodies talk to him to clear up questions caused by his poisoning?

What do you think about the risks of this political story for the Nord Stream 2 commercial project?

Sergey Lavrov: We have already expressed our opinion on who should cooperate and how the situation regarding Alexey Navalny should proceed.

The Prosecutor-General's Office of the Russian Federation sent inquiries to its colleagues in France, Germany, Sweden and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). It requested them to fulfill the commitment that is fixed in the 1959 European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters. This convention has several protocols that fully meet the requirements of this situation. Using this solid international legal foundation via our Prosecutor-General's Office, we requested

information that our German colleagues, as well as French and Swedish partners must submit to us, considering that the Germans told us that together with their French and Swedish colleagues they double-checked the tests that were carried out after Alexey Navalny was admitted to the Charite Hospital. We have received no answers for the time being. Moreover, we are hearing public comments, including those made by German officials that sound fairly absurd. One of their ideas is that the accident with Mr Navalny took place on Russian territory, so “we won’t help you with anything, investigate it yourselves but we demand that you admit you’re guilty.” This is simply unbecoming for any country to voice such ideas, especially for such a large and respected country as Germany.

We haven’t received so far any reply from The Hague that is home to the OPCW headquarters. Initially our German colleagues said to us: “We cannot tell you anything because this is now an international rather than Russian-German case. We have an international agency – the OPCW. You should address it.” We addressed it practically right away. They took us for a ride for several days, saying they had received no inquiries. The heads of the OPCW Technical Secretariat where the leading positions are occupied by citizens of NATO countries (I have to admit this) were trying to reassure us they had nothing to do with this.

Later on, when it transpired that they were involved (moreover, they even visited the Charite Hospital and took Mr Navalny’s tests), they began to apologise, saying this was a misunderstanding. We asked them whether they could tell us now what they think in this context and what conclusions they had made. This is what they replied: “You know, the Germans

addressed us, it was their inquiry, so go back to them, they must reply to you.” So, the Germans send us to The Hague and The Hague sends us to Berlin.

This is quite an interesting case if we consider the Western “commitment” to international law. This is why we cannot yet say anything about the conclusions of our Western colleagues. That said, our doctors who saved Mr Navalny in Omsk, shared all their conclusions with their German colleagues.

As for a meeting with Mr Navalny, a week and a half ago we officially requested consular access to our citizen from the German authorities. We haven't received any reply. We hope that our partners will eventually understand that there is no point in talking to us from a “superior position.” They don't even bother to answer our legal questions that are based on the international convention and just arrogantly demand some repentance from us.

As for Nord Stream 2, I think we should simmer down regarding this. We are seeing how the US on a daily basis is trying to humiliate in public the EU, primarily Germany. US officials demand that Germany should become aware of its happy lot and the need to enhance its energy security. They imply renunciation of Nord Stream 2 and a decision to buy much more expensive US LNG.

I believe (this is my personal opinion) that this question is a matter of honour for Germany, in all aspects and dimensions.