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## Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Sputnik News Agency, September 18, 2020

39-50 minutes

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**Question:** I would like to begin this conversation with Russia-US relations. If I may, my question will be on the upcoming elections in the United States in less than two months. The American elite, regardless of party affiliation, often talks about the exceptional role of their country as an absolute global leader. To what extent does this domestic agenda affect the US foreign policy, its relations with its allies and partners, including its relations with Russia? In your opinion, how does the principle of American exceptionalism affect international processes?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Overall, I think that everyone has already drawn their conclusions. I am referring to those who keep a close eye on the political struggle within the country, or have a professional duty to do so. Positions adopted by the republicans and the democrats have always been rooted in this political struggle. What we are witnessing today is not an exception. What matters the most is to have as many arguments as possible to outperform the competition in the media space, in rhetoric and controversies. The candidates of the Democratic and the Republic parties will soon face off in debates. The "Russian issue," the question of Russia's

“meddling” in US internal affairs (this has become a cliché) are already at the top of the agenda. Truth be told, over the past couple of weeks or probably months we have been sidelined by the People’s Republic of China, which now proudly tops the list of America’s adversaries intent on doing everything to wreak havoc on the United States.

We have got used to this over the past years. It did not start with the current administration, but during Barack Obama’s presidency. It was he who said, including in public that the Russian leadership was intentionally seeking to damage relations between Moscow and Washington. He also said that Russia interfered in the 2016 elections. He also used this as a pretext for imposing sanctions that were totally unprecedented, including seizing Russian property in the United States in what amounted to a hostile takeover, and expelling dozens of Russian diplomats together with their families, and many other actions.

Both democrats and the republicans share the idea of American exceptionalism, as do all other political forces in the United States, as far as I can see. What can I say? We have said on numerous occasions that history has already witnessed attempts to pose as the ruler of destinies for the entire humanity, pretending to be without sin or fault, and to understand everything better than others. They did not yield any positive results.

We reaffirm our approach which by the way applies to all countries and their domestic policy: this is an internal affair of the United States. It is sad that its domestic policy is imbued with so much rhetoric that fails to reflect the actual state of affairs on the international stage. It is also a pity that those who contradict the US representatives on the international stage are faced with illegal

sanctions for the sake of winning as many points as possible in electoral races, which is done without hesitation or scruple. Unfortunately, this “instinct” for sanctions in the current administration (although Barack Obama was also active on this front) is spilling over into the European continent with the European Union using the sanctions “stick” more and more.

The conclusion is quite simple: we will work with any government elected in any country. This also applies to the United States. However, we will discuss all the questions in which Washington is interested only based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit, and commitment to respecting a balance of interests. Presenting ultimatums is pointless. If someone still fails to understand this, they are not fit to be politicians.

**Question:** You mentioned the sanctions pressure. In many cases, it's not the political circles, but the mass media that are behind it. This happens fairly often in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. The US media accused Russia of colluding with the Taliban and targeting the US military in Afghanistan. The British Foreign Office argued that Russia “highly likely” interfered in the 2019 parliamentary elections. This week, the EU countries are discussing another package of sanctions against Russia in connection with the alleged violations of human rights. Is there any chance that this approach and this policy of demonising Moscow will somehow change or, on the contrary, will intensify?

**Sergey Lavrov:** So far, we have not seen any indications that this policy will change. Unfortunately, the “sanctions itch” keeps intensifying. Here are recent examples. They want to punish us for the developments in Belarus and the incident involving Alexey Navalny, but vehemently refuse to fulfill their obligations under the

European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters or to respond to official inquiries filed by the Russian Prosecutor General's Office. These are completely contrived pretexts.

Germany says it can't tell us anything and suggests that we go to the OPCW. We went there several times. They told us to go to Berlin. We've been there and done that already. There is an idiomatic expression: "Ivan passes the buck to Peter, and Peter passes the buck to Ivan." This is about how our Western, if I may say so, partners are responding to our legal approaches. They vocally declare that the fact of poisoning has been established and no one except Russia could have done it, so we must admit our guilt. We saw that already with the Skripals.

I'm sure that if it were not for the current situation with Navalny, they would have come up with something else. At this point, everything serves the purpose of undermining relations between Russia and the EU as much as possible. There are EU countries that understand this, but they still stick to the consensus and "solidarity" principle. The countries that are part of the aggressive Russophobic minority are grossly abusing this principle.

As I understand from the report by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, the EU is discussing a possibility of making decisions on certain issues by voting rather than consensus. It will be interesting to see this, because then we will know who is in favour of abusing international law, and who is conducting a thoughtful and balanced policy based on pragmatism and realism.

You mentioned that we were accused of establishing relations with the Taliban in order to encourage them to carry out special operations against US troops for financial reward. The Taliban is

fighting for its own interests and beliefs. I think that suspecting us of carrying out this kind of actions (purely bandit-like) is beneath even the US officials. By the way, the Pentagon had to refute this kind of lies as it failed to find anything that would back them up. The Taliban said this is absolutely not true.

In the age of social media, disinformation and fake news, it suffices to let out any made-up piece of information into the media, and no one will ever read refutations later. The wide media coverage produced by this kind of, if I may put it that way, “sensations” is what the people behind them look forward to happening.

We have told the Americans and the British many times: if you have any complaints, let us sit down and have a professional fact-based diplomatic dialogue. Since most of the interference-related complaints are about the cyberspace, we are accused of almost state hacking and breaking into every conceivable and inconceivable life support systems of our Western colleagues. We proposed resuming the all-encompassing international information security dialogue and stated that we would be willing to consider mutual concerns. We have registered quite a few instances that allow us to suspect the interference of Western hackers in our vital resources. What we got in response was a vehement “no”. Do you know what their excuse is? “You invite us to conduct a dialogue on cybersecurity, the very area that you use to interfere in our internal affairs.” It’s about the same approach as with Mr Navalny. And the same arguments: “What, you don’t believe us?”

When Rex Tillerson was US Secretary of State, he publicly stated that they had “irrefutable evidence” of Russia’s interference in the US elections. I took the trouble of asking him to share the irrefutable evidence with me, since we are interested in sorting it

out, because it is absolutely not in our interests to have aspersions cast on us. Do you know what he told me? He said: "Sergey, I won't give you anything. Your special services, which are behind this, know everything perfectly well. Talk to them, they should be able to tell you everything." That was all he had to tell me on a topic that has become almost the most important one in relations between our countries.

We are convinced that at some point they will have to answer specific questions and present the facts concerning this situation, the situation with Navalny and the poisoning in Salisbury. I have a point to make about Salisbury. When this situation was unfolding two years ago, Russia was tagged as the "sole manufacturer" of Novichok. We backed up our position with the facts from the public domain which indicated that several Western countries were developing Novichok family agents. Some of them were patented in the United States. There are dozens of patents for the combat use of agents from this group. We mentioned Sweden among the countries which carried out this kind of work. Two years ago the Swedes told us not to mention them among these countries, since they had never been involved in the Novichok-related work. Now, as you are aware, Sweden, in addition to France, was one of the two countries which the Germans asked to validate their findings. They said they confirm the Bundeswehr laboratory's finding that it was Novichok. However, two years ago Sweden didn't have the competence to figure out whether it was Novichok or not. Two years later, such competence appeared meaning that something had happened. If something had happened that made Sweden competent in these matters, perhaps, this should be looked at as a potential gross violation of the CWC.

We are open to talking with anyone, but we don't want to be forced to apologise without facts. We remain open to a professional conversation based on specific and clearly articulated concerns.

**Question:** In addition to disagreements with our Western partners regarding current developments, there are interpretations of history which we refuse to share with them. The widespread protests and demonstrations in the United States have led to more radical developments. In fact, a sizable portion of the US and world history and culture has come under revision. Monuments are being desecrated. Descriptions of events are changing. Such attempts were made and continue to be made regarding WWII and the role of the Soviet Union in it. What can the attempts to revise history eventually mean for the United States? What might the global implications be?

**Sergey Lavrov:** You are absolutely right. We are worried about what is now going on with regard to world history and the history of Europe. Truth be told, we are witnessing an aggression against history aimed at revising the modern foundations of international law that were formed in the wake of World War II in the form of the UN and the principles of its Charter. There are attempts to undermine these very foundations. They are primarily using arguments that represent an attempt to equate the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany, aggressors who wanted to enslave Europe and turn the majority of the peoples on our continent into slaves with those who overcame the aggressors. We are being insulted by outright accusations that the Soviet Union is more culpable for unleashing WWII than Nazi Germany. At the same time, the factual side of the matter, such as how it all began in 1938, the policy of appeasing Hitler by the Western powers, primarily France and

Great Britain, is thoroughly swept under the rug.

There's no need to talk a lot about this, as much has already been said. In a generalised form, the well-known article written by President Putin contains our key arguments. Based on documentation, it convincingly reveals the senseless, counterproductive and destructive nature of attempts to undermine the outcome of WWII.

By the way, the overwhelming majority of the international community supports us. Every year, at the UN General Assembly sessions, we introduce a resolution on combating the glorification of Nazism. Only two countries vote against it, namely, the United States and Ukraine. Unfortunately, the EU abstains, because, as they tell us, the Baltic states don't want them to support this resolution. As the saying goes, a guilty mind is never at ease. This resolution does not mention any country or government. It's just that the entire international community is encouraged not to allow any attempts to glorify Nazism and not to allow the destruction of monuments, etc. That's all there is to it. But this means that the countries that demand that the EU not support this absolutely obvious and straightforward resolution, with no strings attached, feel that they cannot subscribe to these principles. In fact, this is what's happening. We see the SS troop marches and the destruction of monuments. Primarily, our neighbours in Poland are involved in this. In the Czech Republic, similar processes are underway. This is unacceptable. In addition to the fact that this undermines the outcome of World War II enshrined in the UN Charter, it also grossly violates bilateral treaties with these and other countries that focus on protecting and maintaining military burial sites and monuments in Europe in memory of WWII victims



and the heroes who liberated the respective countries.

Importantly, those who oppose our policy of cutting short the glorification of Nazism tend to bring up the issue of human rights. They claim that freedom of thought and expression that exists in the United States and other Western countries is not subject to any kind of censorship. So, if this freedom of thought and speech is limited by the unacceptability of glorifying Nazism, this will violate those laws. But let's be straight about this: what we are now seeing in the United States probably has something to do with what we are saying about the unacceptability of revising the outcome of World War II. Rampant racism is clearly part of American life and there are political forces that are trying to stoke the racist sentiment and use it in their political interests. We see this happen almost daily.

You mentioned other history-related matters that fell prey to fleeting political interests. On the spur of the moment, those in the United States who want to destroy their own history and dismantle monuments to the Confederates because they were slave owners, had the monument to the first governor of Alaska, Alexander Baranov, in Sitka which enjoyed the respect of the local residents and guests visiting Alaska, removed from the town square. True, we heard the Governor of Alaska and the Sitka city officials say the monument would not be destroyed. It will be relocated, as we were assured, to a historical museum. If this happens as promised, I think we will appreciate Sitka's approach to our common history. I hope that the monument to Alexander Baranov in the historical museum will make it possible to hold a special additional exhibit about the history of Russian America.

**Question:** President of France Emmanuel Macron has been in

power for three years. His first official invitation to the head of a foreign state was addressed to President of Russia Vladimir Putin with a view to improving bilateral relations. Can you tell us what real changes have taken place in diplomatic relations with France since then? Was the September 16 meeting in Paris postponed because of Alexey Navalny?

**Sergey Lavrov:** To begin with, France is one of our key partners. We have long described our cooperation as a strategic partnership. Immediately after his election, President Macron sent an invitation to the President of Russia, which was one of his first foreign policy steps. Following this visit in May 2017, the leaders of the two countries confirmed in Versailles their striving to promote a partnership, including in bilateral cooperation, international relations, and regarding the regional and global agendas. Following this summit in Versailles, the two countries established a forum of civil societies under the name of Trianon Dialogue that has seen success up to this day, although personal meetings are not being held now because of coronavirus restrictions.

Since then President Macron has visited Russia and President Putin has been to France. Their latest meeting took place in August 2019 when President Putin visited the Fort de Bregancon for talks with President Macron. They had a very productive, trustworthy and serious discussion on the need for strategic relations that will be aimed at addressing the key issues of our time, primarily, of course, in Europe and the Euro-Atlantic Region, and enhancing security there. During that meeting the presidents agreed to create diverse mechanisms for cooperation between their foreign and defence ministries. The 2+2 format was resumed (it was created long ago but it had been suspended). A regular meeting for

strategic dialogue was held in Moscow in September 2019.

Apart from the 2+2 format, the sides decided to discuss strategic stability issues at the level of presidential foreign policy assistants. President Putin and President Macron approved over 10 working groups in different areas linked with cooperation on strategic stability, arms control, and WMD non-proliferation, to name a few. Most of these mechanisms are functioning and are aimed at making joint initiatives on stabilising relations in Europe and normalising the current abnormal situation where dividing lines are deepening and NATO is building up its military infrastructure in its new member states, which violates the Russia-NATO Founding Act that was signed way back in 1997 and was considered a foundation for cooperation.

There are many alarming trends. One of the manifestations of these destabilising factors is the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and the US officially declared intention to deploy intermediate and shorter range missiles not only in Asia but also, judging by what we see, in Europe. At any rate, the missile defence systems deployed in Romania and which are currently being deployed in Poland, can well be used for launching antimissiles not only for defensive but also for offensive purposes. They can be used to launch attack cruise missiles. This was banned by the INF Treaty but now that the treaty is gone, the Americans have a free hand.

Almost a year ago (soon we'll mark the anniversary of this message) President Putin addressed all leaders of the European countries, the US, Canada and a number of other countries. Since the Americans destroyed the INF Treaty he suggested announcing a voluntary, reciprocal moratorium on the attack weapons banned by the INF Treaty instead of fueling an arms race. None of these

leaders except President Macron replied to this message. We appreciated his attitude. It made it clear that the French leader was sincerely interested in using any opportunity for dialogue with Russia. Without this dialogue it is impossible to ensure security in Europe. This idea is being more openly accepted. So we really planned meetings in the 2+2 format but due to reasons that we could probably only guess at, a regular meeting of our foreign and defence ministers was postponed to a later date. Our French colleagues said they simply had to revise a bit the schedule for our meetings. I won't speak about the reasons but the current general atmosphere and the general attitude that is being fueled by the EU with respect to Russia, certainly impact the schedule for our meetings. Nevertheless, recently we had consultations on a number of important issues: on countering terrorism and enhancing cyber-security. All this conforms to the plans approved by presidents Putin and Macron.

**Question:** Permanent Representative of Russia to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich noted recently that the situation around Sputnik has not improved in France. Our journalists are still denied access to events at the Elysée Palace. What possible ways to settle this problem are being considered? Have you discussed this with the French side?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Yes, we did discuss it. We believe it is unacceptable that Sputnik and RT correspondents are subjected to open discrimination in France. It is a fact that there is anti-Sputnik bigotry in the Baltics as well. It is certainly regrettable that RT and Sputnik have been denied accreditation at the Elysée Palace for the past few years, or more precisely, since 2017.

It is even more surprising that our French colleagues have refused

to cancel their decision despite a declared commitment to “liberté, égalité, fraternité” (we see that fraternité is now being complemented with sororité). They deny accreditation to RT and Sputnik allegedly because they are not media outlets but propaganda tools. I don't think it is necessary to comment on the absurd and ridiculous nature of these allegations, because RT and Sputnik are hugely popular in more and more countries. Their audiences are growing; I have seen the statistics. I can assume that this attitude is yet further proof that those who used to dominate the global information market are afraid of competition.

We have raised these questions, and not just with the French, demanding that they stop discriminating against media outlets registered in Russia. They argue that there is such a thing as state funding. But some “beacons of democracy” such as Radio Liberty and BBC are financed by the government as well. However, no restrictions are placed on them, including online where censorship is being openly introduced. Google, YouTube and Facebook clearly take decisions under pressure from the US authorities, which are discriminating against Russian media outlets by hindering the placement of their materials on these resources. We have raised this question not only at the bilateral level, but also at the OSCE and its Media Freedom Representative, Harlem Désir, at UNESCO, one of whose responsibilities is to uphold freedom of the media and of expression, and at the Council of Europe.

In the early 1990s, a period of perestroika and the development of a new political reality in Russia, we opened up to the world, as it was described then, and our Western partners advocated the adoption of OSCE decisions on free access to any information based on both domestic and foreign sources. This was clearly

designed to reinforce the opening-up trend in Russia. When we remind our Western partners about these decisions and demand respect for the free of access to information, including information from RT and Sputnik in France, they avoid confirming the decisions that were adopted at their initiative 30 years ago. Double standards and hypocrisy – regrettably, this is how we can describe their stand. The next OSCE Ministerial Council meeting is scheduled for December. These questions will be on the agenda, and our Western colleagues will have to answer them.

**Question:** Over 90 cooperation contracts were signed with African countries at the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. How fast can Russia resume the implementation of these agreements when the pandemic is over? Which of them have priority importance and in which African countries?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We did not take any time off after the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi in October 2019, which was an obvious success for our foreign policy, as all our African guests openly noted. The pandemic changed the format of communication, but we continue working remotely. This is quite possible in foreign policy and diplomacy.

Vladimir Putin has had many telephone conversations with African leaders, including the presidents of South Africa, Congo and Ethiopia. There have been videoconferences between the foreign ministers of Russia and the current, former, and future African Union chairpersons (South Africa, Egypt and the Democratic Republic of the Congo). We have created a special secretariat of the Russia-Africa Forum at the ministry (the decision to establish the forum was adopted in Sochi). The secretariat is fully manned now.

In fact, yesterday I had a meeting with the head of a subregional African organisation, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The former foreign minister of Ethiopia, Dr Workneh Gebeyehu, is the Executive Secretary of IGAD. We discussed concrete plans for Russia-IGAD cooperation. We also have similar cooperation plans with the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other organisations in addition to the pan-African organisation, the African Union. These plans include consultations on issues of priority importance for Africa, namely, conflict settlement, joint events in culture and education, the further development of economic cooperation, support by foreign policy missions to the operation of Russian companies in Africa and their African partners. We have many plans, and our African colleagues really appreciate our efforts.

During the pandemic, we have helped dozens of African countries by supplying them with test kits, PPE and medicines, and this cooperation is ongoing. African countries, just as our partners in Asia and Latin America, have shown interest in the production of the Sputnik V vaccine in their countries. The concerned Russian agencies are choosing the potential candidates for this, because it is clear that the world will need a huge amount of the vaccine.

We can report positive experiences in Guinea and Sierra Leone. When Ebola was raging there, Russian doctors deployed mobile clinics and launched the production of the Ebola vaccine in Guinea. That experience largely helped our doctors create a COVID-19 vaccine so fast, because they used the platform of the vaccine created for the Ebola virus.

We have very good plans. We have agreed to increase the number

of scholarships for African students. As for economic collaboration, several weeks ago we established the Association of Economic Cooperation with African States. We will be implementing all these plans even more actively when the coronavirus restrictions are lifted. So far, we are mostly working via videoconference.

**Question:** What do you think about the US Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act which affected not only Syria, but Damascus' closest partners as well? What else can be done to improve the humanitarian plight in that country, which is caused by the dire economic circumstances?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As you said, this plan, the Caesar Act, calls for, by and large, the imposition of sanctions, which they would like to use as a chokehold on the Syrian leaders. In fact, these sanctions, like the previous packages (there have been quite a few from both the United States and the EU as well as a number of other Washington's allies), affect primarily ordinary Syrians. The other day, the UN Security Council in New York discussed the humanitarian situation in Syria. Our Western colleagues defended their innocence with much zeal and ardour, stating that the sanctions were aimed solely at limiting the actions and capabilities of the officials and representatives, as they say, of the "regime," and that ordinary people are not affected, because the sanctions decisions provide for humanitarian exceptions for medical supplies, food and other essential items. This is not true, because no supplies from the countries that have imposed sanctions with existing sanction exemptions for such products are being delivered to Syria, perhaps with the exception of a few small shipments. Syria mainly trades with Russia, Iran, China and several Arab countries.



The number of the countries that are aware of the need to overcome the current abnormal situation and resume relations with Syria is increasing. More countries, including Gulf countries, are reopening their embassies in Syria. An increasing number of countries are realising that continuing the stifling sanctions has become absolutely unacceptable from a human rights perspective. These sanctions are unilateral and illegal.

The other day, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres reiterated the appeal he first made six months ago to the countries that imposed unilateral sanctions against developing economies to suspend the sanctions at least while the pandemic lasts. The West turned a deaf ear to this appeal, even though the overwhelming majority of UN member states supported it. We will seek further condemnation of this practice. The UN adopts special resolutions that declare unilateral sanctions illegitimate and illegal. It reiterates that only UN Security Council sanctions, which are the only legal instrument based on international law, should be respected.

We are working on the Syrian settlement as part of the Astana format with our Turkish and Iranian partners. Recently, in conjunction with Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov, we visited Damascus. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his ministers renewed their commitment to implementing the agreements reached at the initiative of the Astana troika between the Syrian government and the opposition. The Constitutional Committee has resumed its work in Geneva, and its editorial commission had a meeting. The parties are starting to agree on common approaches to Syria's future, which will be followed by work on constitutional reform.

The space controlled by the terrorists in certain areas is gradually

shrinking as well, primarily in the de-escalation zone in Idlib. Russian-Turkish agreements, including on the need to separate normal oppositionists who are open to a dialogue with the government from the terrorists who have been recognised as such by the UN Security Council, are being gradually implemented, although not as quickly as we would like. Our Turkish colleagues are committed to them, and we are working with them.

We are concerned about the situation on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River where the illegally stationed US troops clearly encourage the Kurds' separatist longings. To our great regret, they are pitting the Kurds against the government thus holding back the Kurds' natural desire to start a dialogue with Damascus.

Of course, this raises concerns both from the point of view of Syria's territorial integrity and from the point of view of the explosiveness that US actions are creating around the Kurdish problem. As you may be aware, this is important not only for Syria, but also for Iraq, Turkey and Iran. This is a dangerous game in this region. The Americans habitually take this course of action to create chaos that they hope will be manageable. They live far from there and they do not really care. But the consequences for the region can be disastrous if they continue to promote separatism.

Recently, the decisions of this illegal US group in eastern Syria were announced. In conjunction with the Kurdish leaders, it signed an agreement allowing a US oil company to extract hydrocarbons in the sovereign Syrian state. This is a gross violation of all conceivable principles of international law.

Syria is facing many problems. Nevertheless, the situation has substantially stabilised compared to what it was a few years ago.

The Astana format and the initiatives that we implemented played a decisive role in this process. Now, the agenda includes finding solutions to acute humanitarian problems and rebuilding the economy that was devastated by the war. We are maintaining a dialogue with other countries, including China, Iran, India, and the Arab states, in these areas. We believe that the priority steps should involve UN agencies in the activities aimed at humanitarian assistance to Syria. The next step should include mobilisation of international assistance in rebuilding the economy and the infrastructure destroyed by the war. This is a lot of work, but at least it is clear in which directions we should be moving.

**Question:** What are the current prospects for Russia's cooperation with Persian Gulf countries? Does Russia have any high-priority countries in this sub-region? Does Russia consider it possible to resort to mediatory services for resolving the Qatar crisis that has been dragging on for over three years?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I don't think it's exaggerating to say that of all the countries now maintaining relations with the countries in this region, we were the first to compile a long-term plan for stability and neighbourly development in the Persian Gulf.

Back in the 1990s, Russia suggested a concept for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf. The concept has been updated several times since then, and a renewed version was completed last year. In September 2019, we held an expert discussion of this concept. The discussion involved scientists and the expert community from Russia and the Persian Gulf countries, including the Arab countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The concept suggests using the experience of the Conference on

Security and Cooperation in Europe at the height of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation had a complicated relationship with the Western bloc, NATO.

Nevertheless, a comprehension of the need for coexistence induced all countries in the Euro-Atlantic region, including Europe, the United States and Canada, to meet and work out trust-based rules of conduct. This included special confidence-building and transparency measures. The mechanisms set forth under this conference made it possible to consider any issues being raised by any party.

We suggested that the same principles form the basis for cooperation under the concept for security in the Persian Gulf. We presented it to the members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), specifically the six Middle East monarchies, and to our Iranian colleagues. A number of GCC members expressed an interest in discussing it. Some of them took some time to study it in greater detail. The dialogue is underway. Discussions at the academic community level helped to advance these initiatives. The trouble is that the current US administration has been demonising Iran for the past few years. Iran has been labeled the main problem of the entire Persian Gulf region and other regions of the world where it is accused, one way or another, of interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries.

The United States is trying to refocus the entire dialogue on the Middle East and North Africa on an anti-Iranian track. There is no future in this because it is only possible to address problems in a stable and reliable manner through agreements between all the participants, and the entire logic of US policy hinges on the assumption that Iran should become the focus of all efforts to

contain and punish the country, and that only a regime change will, at long last, allow the entire region to breathe a sigh of relief. This approach can only lead to a dead-end. The sanctions with which they are trying to strangle Iran have never worked; nor will they work today. Iran has repeatedly expressed interest in a dialogue, and this interest is still there. However, a dialogue cannot be based on the ultimatums that regularly come from the US.

We will be ready to facilitate the beginning of this dialogue. Together with European countries and the People's Republic of China, we support the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear programme, which was approved by the UN Security Council in 2015. But the United States continues to undermine this plan under its policy of demonising Iran in every way possible.

Discussions are now underway at the UN Security Council. Thirteen of 15 countries have emphatically opposed the attempts to discard the JCPOA and to blame the Islamic Republic of Iran for these developments.

You mentioned disagreements within the GCC where some countries from this organisation and our colleagues from the Arab Republic of Egypt confronted Qatar some time ago. We are ready to offer mediatory services in any conflict matter, if all the parties ask us to. We have not received any such requests so far. We maintain good relations with all countries without exception, including with all the GCC members.

I know that the US administration is trying to reconcile the antagonists and to persuade Saudi Arabia, its closest partners, to establish contacts and to mend relations with Qatar. We wish

success to any efforts aiming to consolidate countries, rather than disunite them and create lines of division. I repeat, we will be ready to help if they ask, and if all the countries involved are interested in this.

**Question:** The Russian Embassy in Libya resumed its work several weeks ago. Could it become, to a certain extent, a venue for dialogue between the Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Our Embassy is still working from Tunis. I hope it will soon return to Tripoli, as soon as elementary security is ensured there. Some embassies continue working as before, but security is fairly fragile. This is why it was decided that our diplomats would work from Tunis for the time being.

As for the mediation between the main protagonists in Libya – the Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord, the Embassy is certainly in touch with all Libyan sides, but this issue is much broader. Moscow is actively building bridges between the conflicting parties. Russia's foreign and defence ministries are trying to facilitate practical steps on coordinating compromise solutions that will make it possible to settle the Libyan crisis. This work is not easy. All the problems that Libya is experiencing now began in 2011, when NATO carried out direct military aggression in Libya to overthrow the Muammar Gaddafi regime, in gross violation of the UN Security Council resolution. He was brutally murdered, which was welcomed with acclaim and cheers from then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This was shown on the air with some kind of pride. It was creepy. Since then we and all the neighbours of Libya that want to restore it as a state, which was destroyed by NATO, have been trying to launch an international

process. There were many attempts to do this. There were conferences in Paris, Palermo and Abu Dhabi, as well as the 2015 Skhirat agreement.

For a long time, most external players tried to cooperate with just one political force on which they placed their bets. We renounced this approach from the very start, and, considering our contacts and historical ties, we began working with all political forces of Libya: Tripoli, which hosts the Presidential Council and the Government of National Accord, and Tobruk, where the House of Representatives is located. All the leaders of different groups visited the Russian Federation more than once. We tried to arrange personal meetings between the Commander of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar, and the Head of the Government of National Accord, Fayez al-Sarraj. We welcomed them in Moscow on the eve of the Berlin conference in the beginning of this year. Largely owing to these efforts that we made in cooperation with our colleagues from Turkey, Egypt and the UAE, we managed to draft proposals that made a substantial contribution to the success of the Berlin conference on Libya, which our German colleagues prepared for several months. An important declaration that was later approved by the UN Security Council was adopted at this conference.

Regrettably, at that stage little attention was paid to the Libyan parties' endorsement of the ideas suggested by the international community. Some of our partners believed that as soon as the international community represented by the UN Security Council and the Berlin conference on Libya made certain decisions, it would only remain to persuade the Libyan protagonists to agree with them.

Now practice shows that we were right in warning against this

approach. The problem is that the agreements reached in Berlin were not fully elaborated by the Libyan sides. The conference provided a good foundation, but the work on details has to be done now. We have seen some fairly positive changes in this respect. Speaker of the Parliament in Tobruk Aguila Saleh and Head of the Government of National Accord Fayez al-Sarraj supported a ceasefire and a sustainable truce, and, against this background, favoured the resumption of efforts to resolve military issues in the 5+5 format and the renewal of talks on economic issues, primarily on the need for a fair solution to the problem of using Libya's national resources.

Mr Saleh proposed a very important initiative in this context. He emphasised the need to consider the interests of not only Tripolitania and Cyrenaica but also Fezzan in the south of Libya, which was not often mentioned during all the previous discussions. Therefore, the ideas that were reviewed by the sides are already on the table. The meeting that was arranged between the Libyan protagonists in Morocco played a positive role in this respect. Today, we continue making our contribution to these common efforts in cooperation with our colleagues.

Recently we had consultations with our Turkish colleagues in Ankara. We continue this work. We talk to Egypt and Morocco. I spoke by telephone with my colleagues, the foreign ministers of Morocco and the Arab Republic of Egypt. Recently I also spoke with the Foreign Minister of Italy. He is very interested in facilitating a settlement in Libya for obvious reasons.

A promising solution is in the offing. We will actively support this process to contribute to a settlement. We consider it important to break as soon as possible the pause with the appointment of the



UN Secretary-General's special representative for Libya, which has already lasted for over half a year. The former special representative resigned in February. For some reason, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has not appointed his successor up to this day. There are grounds to believe that some Western countries want to push through their own candidates. Our position is very simple: the appointment of the special representative for Libya must be coordinated with the African Union. This is an obvious requirement. Libya is an active member of the African Union that is interested in helping to resolve this problem.

I have described the current situation in enough detail. There are grounds for cautious optimism.