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Интервью Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова радиостанциям «Sputnik», «Комсомольская правда» и «Говорит Москва», Москва, 14 октября 2020 года

69-88 minutes

Question: Good afternoon, Mr Lavrov. We are not going to shake hands today to comply with the coronavirus requirements, even though we are not wearing masks right now. We have been told that you are pressed for time because the Italians are waiting for you. Therefore, we won't interrupt your answers, so that you can answer all of our questions or our audience.

While preparing for this interview, we told each other half-jokingly, although this is sad humour, that we should browse the social media before the minister comes in to see if a new war began anywhere. Everything is so sudden this year, and it would be bad if a war began five minutes ago and we didn't ask you about it.

Thankfully, no new war has begun, but the most recent war is ongoing despite the ceasefire, which was coordinated through titanic efforts, including by you (is it true that you didn't smoke for those 11 hours? I can't imagine how you managed it). But in

fact, there is no ceasefire. Is it possible anyway? We keep saying that there is no alternative to a peaceful settlement. But is it possible? Can the sides stop fighting?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, those were unique negotiations. I would like to say that President Vladimir Putin made the decisive contribution. He monitored our all-night meeting, and we spoke twice in the middle of the night.

Question: Did he phone or come personally?

Sergey Lavrov: He phoned. Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu was involved as well, because we needed to coordinate the ceasefire, which cannot be complete without a verification mechanism. It is stipulated in the second paragraph of the document we have coordinated.

Over the past few days, I spoke several times with my colleagues in Baku and Yerevan. Sergey Shoigu spoke with the two countries' defence ministers. President Putin spoke with the leaders of the conflicting sides. Our main idea was that the military must meet to coordinate a ceasefire verification mechanism, which is mentioned in the document but has not even been discussed so far.

I reaffirmed this again barely half an hour ago, when Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov phoned me. We are sending the same signal to our Armenian colleagues as well. I believe that this [mechanism] is key to a lasting secession of hostilities, which damage civilian facilities and bring misery to people.

Question: What exactly is this miraculous ceasefire verification mechanism? Is it a no-fly zone?

Sergey Lavrov: When politicians and diplomats who are mediating in a conflict announce a ceasefire agreement, their

military coordinate practical measures for its implementation and who would monitor the ceasefire on both sides. There is nothing miraculous about this. It is what we did in Transnistria, as well as in Donbass, by the way, although ceasefires there have been announced many times, but only the latest one is more or less effective, thanks to the additional ceasefire verification measures coordinated in the Trilateral Contact Group. This was also done in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994, when a ceasefire agreement was complemented with the coordination by the military of its implementation on the ground.

As for the second part of your question, yes, of course a political settlement is possible. The proposals that have been and are being coordinated in the OSCE Minsk Group are still on the table. Their essence is well known: a staged and gradual withdrawal of the sides' armed forces from the districts bordering Nagorno-Karabakh on the conditions of its security and the maintenance of reliable communications between Armenia and Karabakh until the region's final status is agreed. It is a well-known scheme. I believe that there is a silver lining to these unfortunate events: the latest tragedy should help revitalise the political process simultaneously with the settlement of security issues on the ground.

Question: Mr Lavrov, does the phrase “reliable communications” refer to the Lachin corridor and the 5-2 scheme?

Sergey Lavrov: All agreements that were discussed recently and that the sides are seriously considering stipulate the withdrawal of armed forces from five districts at the first stage and two districts at the second stage, when the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh is to be defined. Troop withdrawal from five districts at the first stage is to be complemented with the

restoration of communications, economic ties and transport contacts, as well as the deployment of peacekeeping forces to guarantee the non-resumption of hostilities.

Question: So, peacekeepers are the mechanism you have mentioned?

Sergey Lavrov: No, this mechanism should be used now on the contact line, rather than in the five districts that are stipulated in the co-chairs' proposals. At this moment it would even be enough to have military observers there, rather than peacekeepers.

Question: Russian ones?

Sergey Lavrov: We believe that it would be best to send our military observers there. But the decision rests with the sides. We hope that Yerevan and Baku will take into account our allied relations and strategic partnership.

Question: Mr Lavrov, the current war in Nagorno-Karabakh, if we call a spade the spade, has been inspired by Turkey. In general, we regularly "run into" Turkey, in Libya, as well as in Syria, where Ankara is emerging as a military opponent to us rather than an ally. At the same time, we regularly declare that it is our strategic ally. How will all of this work today in the light of the current developments? Where do we, and Turkey, stand? What are we in relation to each other?

Sergey Lavrov: Turkey has never qualified as our strategic ally. It is a partner, a very close partner. In many sectors, this partnership is of a strategic nature.

In fact, we are working in Syria, and we are trying to help settle the Libyan crisis. Turkey is also seeking to promote its interests in this region. The main thing is that this is absolutely legitimate,

if interests are legitimate, be it Turkey, Iran, UAE, or Qatar.

Many countries in this region have interests of their own, which are projected outside of their state borders.

In what Syria is concerned, I think that these transparency and legitimacy have been ensured, despite the fact that the Turkish military are present on Syrian territory without an invitation from the legitimate authorities. The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, and his government have accepted and supported the establishment of the Astana format. They are cooperating in the implementation of all those initiatives that have been advanced by the threesome of the Astana guarantors. In this sense, the Russia-Turkey-Iran partnership plays a very important role. It is this actual partnership that has made it possible to cut down the terrorist-ruled territories, in fact, as far as the Idlib de-escalation zone.

The eastern bank of the Euphrates is a topic apart. Regrettably, the Americans are promoting separatist ideas in those territories, where they are running the show, and these activities are non-transparent and absolutely unlawful. They are encouraging the Kurds to establish residence and functioning rules other than those approved by the central government.

In Libya, we are also collaborating with Turkey. Diplomats, the military, and secret service officers have met on numerous occasions to use the capabilities of each of the sides. We are in contact with everyone. I am referring to both eastern Libya, where the parliament has its seat, and western Libya, where the Government of National Accord (GNA) is based. The Turks, as you may know, are supporting the GNA, but they are well aware that it is necessary to look for compromises between the approaches of all regions and all Libyan political forces. For now, the political processes are rather chaotic, but they are

developing and starting to align. This concerns the Berlin Conference on Libya and the initiatives proposed by Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt as neighbouring countries. This is absolutely understandable and we support it. What is important now is to channel all this into a single pattern under the aegis of the UN, a pattern that will be based on all Libyan sides being encouraged to sit down and negotiate, rather than put forward ultimatums to one another, as we have seen lately between Tobruk and Tripoli.

Currently, our UN colleagues are trying to reduce all these efforts to a common denominator. We are helping this proactively. I hear that Turkey is also interested in these processes gaining strength. In any case, diplomacy is about taking into account the positions of all sides to a conflict in this or that crisis-hit country. But it also has regard for the interests of regional states, which interests are legitimate and accepted by the sides to the conflict themselves.

Question: You mentioned the consideration of interests of all players. Do we regard Turkey's interest in Nagorno-Karabakh as legitimate? Are we going to take it into account?

Sergey Lavrov: Now let me go over to Nagorno-Karabakh. We do not agree with the position that has been voiced by Turkey and enunciated on several occasions by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. It is no secret. We cannot share statements to the effect that there is a military solution to the conflict and that it is acceptable. Regrettably, Turkey has been able to do this, confirming that it will support any actions undertaken by Azerbaijan to solve this conflict, including military ones.

We are in contact with our Turkish colleagues. I had several conversations with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavasoglu

during the period of crisis. We are upholding our point of view to the effect that a peaceful settlement is not only possible but is also the only method to ensure a durable solution to this problem, because all other things will only preserve the conflict in a subdued state. If a long-term political accord is lacking, the military solutions will one day prove untenable and hostilities will be there anyway.

Question: The deferred war effect?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, like the Palestinian problem.

Question: There is no escaping the fact, and it is obvious to everyone, that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become more active. He is playing his own game in the Middle East, namely in Libya and Syria. It is obvious that he considers this region the area of his interests and he talks about it openly.

He also plays his game in Cyprus and has again aggravated the situation in this region. They were one step away from war with Athens. Plus, his words that Jerusalem is also an Ottoman city. At the moment, they are doing the same in the South Caucasus. In his inauguration speech, he called Turkey an Ottoman land. In Turkey itself, they call him a “new sultan.” He openly states that he wants to recreate the Ottoman empire and hence has begun working in all these directions. Let alone his decision on Hagia Sophia, which openly contradicts Ataturk’s wishes.

Regarding this activity of the Turkish leader and the entire Republic of Turkey, are we going to adjust our policy in this area in any way?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, some adjustments can be kept in mind, but our policy in the Turkish or any other direction should be based on reality and avoid the “war is an extension of policy” principle. This is what I firmly believe. Naturally, there could be

situations when there is aggression against you, and you must strike back.

Question: As we say, if you don't listen to Lavrov, you will listen to Shoigu.

Sergey Lavrov: I did see a T-shirt with that on it. Yes, it's about that.

But first, I would like to outline the general situation – who is trying to advance their interests, where and how. In any place you say Turkey is active, it appears that countries located 10,000 miles away from that region are also active, sometimes even more active than Ankara. There are states that are closer, but the United States plays a very active role in each of these places.

In Syria, the Americans are strongly undermining the very idea of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which reaffirmed Syria's territorial integrity and required others to respect it. They create quasi-state authorities on its territory without a second thought. First, they announced a ban on the purchase of Syrian oil by all countries, and then allowed their company to mine oil there and used the proceeds to strengthen Kurdish units that are not controlled by Damascus. By the way, Turkey is also active on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, trying, as it believes, to suppress Kurdish terrorism. Ankara's concerns about the security of its border with Syria on the east bank of the Euphrates and in the Idlib region are, at the very least, far more legitimate than what Washington is trying to do by fuelling separatist tendencies in Syria.

The US is very active in Libya. Again, they are trying to “resolve” the conflict in that country to suit their own interests, such as to weaken Turkey and, as it happens, also the Russian

Federation. They are saying so openly. There, too, oil plays an important role, because putting Libyan oil on the world markets again and lifting the moratorium announced by Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar are issues of great political and practical importance, directly affecting energy prices.

As regards the Palestinian problem, Jerusalem, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the creation of a Palestinian state – the United States has pushed almost everyone else aside, claiming they will sort this out themselves. There was the Arab Peace Initiative that envisaged first creating a Palestinian state, followed by the normalisation of Israel's relations with all Arab states. But the US turned it upside down. They want to begin with promoting the establishment of Israel's relations with all its Arab neighbours, and then see what they can do about the Palestinian problem, or maybe it won't need to be resolved at all.

We support an improvement in Israel's relations with its neighbours as well as with all other countries in the region. What we are opposed to is this being done at the expense of the Palestinian people's interests enshrined in UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which proclaimed the creation of a Jewish state. That state is alive and kicking, is our close friend and partner. But there is still no such thing as a Palestinian state. Of course, promises, promises (he who expects from a promise a lot must wait for three years or maybe not). But it has been a little more than three years.

These kind of statements from Islamic world leaders such as President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan should obviously be expected in a situation where the UN Security Council's decision that Jerusalem's future and status as the capital of three monotheistic religions should be determined with due

respect for the interests of all the concerned parties is scrapped and written off, and where access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque – a matter to be decided as part of the final status agreement in the context the creation of a Palestinian state – is revised and cancelled again.

An even broader context to consider: there is an obvious fight for leadership going on in the Islamic world. There are several power centres. There is Turkey, and there is Saudi Arabia as the leader and home of two of the greatest Islamic shrines. Let us not forget that, besides the Turks and Arabs, there are also Pakistanis and Indonesians. Indonesia is the largest Islamic state in the world. We have ties with the League of Arab States, and with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which unites all the Islamic states of Asia and Africa without exception regardless of geographical location. Unfortunately, this confrontation within Islam, the competition for leadership, has been increasingly taking on rather fierce forms recently. In contacts with our colleagues from the OIC, we strongly urge them to develop common approaches, find consensus-based positions, and strive for harmony between all branches of Islam. In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan held a summit of all Muslims, which led to the adoption of the Amman Declaration that confirmed the unity of all Muslims and a commitment to promote it in various practical situations. This is not working even now.

Regarding the Hagia Sophia, we recognise the right of Turkey and the Istanbul authorities to determine the specific parameters of its use, while of course taking into account its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The discussion within this organisation is still going on. Our Turkish colleagues have given us assurances that all things related to Orthodox culture will

remain open for access by visitors, tourists, and pilgrims. Let's see how this works in practice, since the appropriate measures have not yet been technically implemented.

As for the South Caucasus – again, look who is trying to be active there. Americans are no less active there now.

Question: The Americans say openly that their zone of interests is the entire world. They have positioned themselves as an empire. The Turks have never said so, but they have entered this path as well.

Sergey Lavrov: What is permitted to Jove is not permitted to an ox?

Question: We need to understand what they have in mind.

Sergey Lavrov: Maybe all of us should be like the oxen? Otherwise, all of us should be like Jove?

Question: You mentioned that if the EU doesn't understand that dialogue with Russia can only be based on mutual respect, Russia could stop talking with them. What did you have in mind?

Sergey Lavrov: That's not what I said. I was saying that the point at issue is not whether there can be business as usual, but whether we can do business with the EU at all, which is not simply talking down to Russia but is doing so extremely haughtily and arrogantly, demanding that we answer for the sins which we are allegedly guilty of. I don't think that we have to answer to anyone. We have our own Constitution, laws and other mechanisms.

Question: This reminds me of your famous answer to UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who suggested that we should change the Constitution, "Who are you to lecture me?"

Let's get back to my previous question. How can we stop dealing with them? Can we do this at all? Did you have something different in mind?

Sergey Lavrov: Economic interests must be respected, but economic operators are free to decide what would or wouldn't benefit them. I believe that grovelling is beneath us. They may try to ruin our economic partnership, including Nord Stream 2, but they can hardly destroy the entire system of gas transportation interaction maintained via many other agencies and companies. Let things run their course based on the objective interests we have in common.

They have told us that we have not yet matured sufficiently to be a geopolitical partner of the EU, as [President of the European Commission] Ursula von der Leyen noted recently. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has said that having differences with Russia doesn't mean that Germany cannot have good or at least reasonable ties with it. Our relations will hardly be good in the foreseeable future, and not through our fault. We are always ready to resume, normalise and improve relations based on equality and mutual respect. But all aspects of reason should now be analysed by our counterparts. I seriously hope that reason will prevail there. But we don't see this happening so far.

Speaking about undercover trends and the possibility of a new EU approach to Russia, the brain trusts and political analysts with close ties to the German government have openly started working on a new Eastern policy. In fact, they propose to dismantle the current bilateral agenda. According to them, we did have a strategic partnership, but it is now a thing of the past. We used to have Partnership for Modernisation, which Frank-Walter Steinmeier promoted when he was foreign minister.

These political analysts believe that these projects have not been realised. Russia has allegedly refused to accept the views of the EU and NATO and has finally become their adversary when it comes to the main issues of the world order. This is what these wise men with close ties to the German Government say. They have proposed abandoning their strategic plans for partnership with Russia. Moreover, if, until recently, the EU used to say that although it disagrees with Russia strategically it can nevertheless collaborate with it in the spheres where we have common interests, these new analysts that formulate the new approach suggest a paradigm according to which cooperation even in these spheres can only be possible if the Russians change their behaviour. This idea is gaining momentum. Of course, when such ideas are formulated by political analysts, this is evidence of changing sentiments of the ruling elite. We will look into how this trend influences practical politics, but as of now the policy of the EU leaders, including France and Germany, is not optimistic. On the other hand, I believe that Paris is more inclined to maintain strategic relations with Russia. At least, this is the position of President Emmanuel Macron, which is being implemented in the framework of his agreement with President Putin in a number of Moscow-Paris instruments created to discuss and coordinate joint approaches to strategic security and stability in Europe. We will see which turn this situation and thinking takes.

Yesterday I talked with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell. I believe that he is an experienced person who understands that it will be very difficult to deal with many issues of interest to the EU without Russia. Therefore, it would be in the EU's own interests to maintain partner ties and work together with Russia.

However, in my opinion and based on Josep Borrell's reaction to some of my questions, the EU is so far unable to get the better of its Russophobic minority, which is taking advantage of the principle of consensus and solidarity to block the more or less constructive approaches to the development of relations with Russia.

Question: Is the Russophobic minority the Baltic countries?

Sergey Lavrov: The Baltics and Poland.

Question: "The Russians must change their behaviour." We can change it in a variety of ways, though. For example, why is it that a criminal case against Mr Navalny has not been opened? Why does Chancellor Merkel meet with Alexey Navalny, and why do many Western leaders meet with Ms Tikhonovskaya while we are always on the side of caution, always on the defensive? Perhaps, we should also start meeting with the opposition, at least at the Foreign Ministry level, with the people in these countries who sympathise with Russia? We are way too cautious now that things have gone haywire.

Sergey Lavrov: We tried to behave properly and have always respected the decisions concerning the choice of leaders, members of parliament, etc. made in the countries with which we have relations. Yes, we see that our Western colleagues always meet with the opposition, not just the mainstream opposition. This matter was discussed several years ago. We decided we would go ahead and start working with the opposition. We did not shy away from such contacts before, but we will now do so without looking over our shoulders at those who criticise us.

Question: Who shall we start with?

Sergey Lavrov: The 2017 election in France. Marine Le Pen –

the leader of a parliamentary party, a legitimate mainstream politician – came to Moscow at the invitation of our parliamentarians. She talked with them and was received by President Vladimir Putin. The then Foreign Minister of France Jean-Marc Eyraud publicly stated that it was an attempt to interfere in his country's electoral process, that Paris didn't want to interfere in Russia's internal affairs and hoped that Moscow would reciprocate. You have given examples of the persons with whom President Macron and Chancellor Merkel have met, and how they have received Ms Tikhanovskaya. Everyone appears oblivious to the fact that this is, in fact, interference in Belarus' internal affairs.

Question: Perhaps it is because we are polite and cautious?

Sergey Lavrov: We are free to talk with the opposition unless it promotes the idea of a violent overthrow of our partners' constitutional government. We can talk with anyone, which, in fact, is what we are doing in a number of cases.

Question: Why not initiate a criminal case against Navalny?
This has become some kind of contention. They are saying we haven't even opened a criminal case.

Sergey Lavrov: We have provided clarifications on this matter many times. A criminal case is opened when it is based on facts leading the authorities to suspect a criminal offence. Such a decision is always preceded by a preliminary inquiry, which the Interior Ministry is now carrying out. They have interviewed over 200 people and taken testimonies from the doctors, hotel staff, the aircraft crew, and the list goes on. Various TV channels are talking about numerous irregularities and absurdities in this case. That bottle; what made these people rush to the hotel room; they were in their underwear and barefoot, but no one

else got sick... A host of inconsistencies there. We will insist that our German colleagues comply with their international legal obligations arising from the 1959 European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters and its protocols.

With regard to criminal prosecution and who should explain what to whom, not so long ago, our official representatives said they have information about the CIA contacts with Navalny. Mr Navalny's lawyer demanded right away to prove that. Just like that. This is their position. When we ask proof of the existence of a criminal element in what happened to Mr Navalny, or ask the Germans to show us the results of his tests, they ask us if we really don't believe their words. They are telling us they cannot let us have the test results, because they need the patient's consent, and he has not given it.

Question: This is a classic principle of international politics in recent years: All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

You mentioned Germany and Nord Stream 2. The narrow question is what will we do if Germany abandons Nord Stream 2 after all? But I will formulate it more broadly; I've been wanting to put it to you – and others – for a long time. No matter what we do, we get sanctions in response. Some people believe that this doesn't depend on what we do at all, doesn't depend on our behaviour. There is an array of sanctions that was devised long ago and will be introduced in order to contain our economic, military and trade development, rather than make us change our behaviour. There will always be a "Magnitsky case" or something else to be used as a pretext for sanctions. A lot of people die in US prisons, but we don't introduce sanctions for this reason. Nor do we have the leverage to impose any more or less painful sanctions on them. If they are doing this anyway,

isn't it more advisable to stop deferring to them and defend our interests in the world on a broader basis? Isn't it perhaps high time for us to decide what we would like to do about integration and whether we want to return to some form of a broader Union State? Should we perhaps articulate this in a clearer and more aggressive manner and work towards it, if sanctions are going to be introduced anyway?

Sergey Lavrov: This is precisely what I said. It is time to stop judging ourselves on the basis of marks given by the collective West or individual Western countries. And that's just what we're doing. There are people in this country who can judge the actions taken by the Russian Federation as a state. We have the Constitution and the relevant authorities. There are the people of Russia, who decide whom they can trust with running the country. That's all. If we have partners (and they are an overwhelming majority), who are ready to look for a balance of interests on a mutually respectful basis, we should continue cooperating with them. There is, I repeat, an overwhelming majority of them.

Of course, we have organisations that we created largely at our own initiative and which we would like to strengthen. In the military-political sphere, this is the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The CIS embraces both security in the post-Soviet space and the economic, social, humanitarian and educational projects. There are the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the EAEU, and the Union State, which should be strengthened. I think that this must be done more energetically. Relevant instructions have been formulated by President Vladimir Putin. The Russian government is studying them.

Of course, we should do our best to make these projects more

appealing for members of these organisations. I don't think that we need to constantly think about what the West is saying about us. I agree with you one hundred percent that the West does not particularly need to exert itself to find pretexts for containing our development. The West can create these pretexts on its own, as we have seen.

Question: Shouldn't we perhaps *act* more boldly? Send troops to Donbass? Put things in order openly? Where is the problem, if sanctions are pending anyway?

Sergey Lavrov: We are polite people, as you know. I am convinced that our hands-off position with regard to the situation, where we defer to the West and what the West will think about us, should after all remain within the confines of international law. We must remain committed to all the agreements that have been achieved with our involvement, including, in the case of Donbass, the Minsk Agreements.

It is another matter that we must ourselves urge the signatories of some or other decisions on [conflict] settlement to abide by their own commitments. I have sent a dozen letters or so to my colleagues in France and Germany, directly drawing their attention to the absolutely unacceptable actions, ones diametrically opposite to the Minsk Agreements, taken by officials in Ukraine, including President Vladimir Zelensky, head of the Ukrainian delegation to Contact Group talks Leonid Kuchma, and Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba. Their replies were absolutely helpless, just formalities. I explain to them that Zelensky has urged a revision of the content and sequence of the Minsk document. They reply: "We are still committed to it." I cite examples of how, in violation of Ukraine's Constitution and its international obligations, they are practicing Russian-language discrimination under the language and education

laws. They say: “Yes, we will focus on this at the OSCE and the Council of Europe.” This is yet another sign that they think they are above the law and above the Russian Federation. The feeling of superiority is a dangerous thing.

Question: But it is in short supply sometimes.

Sergey Lavrov: We have our dignity and that is enough. I think this is what should be kept in mind.

Question: Our listeners are calling us all the time telling us that Russia should stop expressing concern about a particular situation, but rather be more assertive or even aggressive in promoting our agenda and initiate processes rather than respond to someone else’s moves.

We talked about Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. She is going places, meeting with presidents and making a home in a neighbouring EU country. Are we ready for a change of power in Belarus? Do we have Plan B other than President Lukashenko? Often, the power changes in the wake of certain events, sometimes a revolution, sometimes something else, and we find out that we don’t have a plan and are not sure what we should be doing.

Sergey Lavrov: I believe we must see the picture in its entirety, especially when it comes to our closest allies. We have lived in one state for many years, even centuries. However, we should not behave like the Americans. I cannot agree with this. They are rude, impolite and brazen, although they are trying to teach everyone to respect the right of each nation to decide on their future. They are trying to articulate this right through their embassies, as was the case in Kiev during the two Maidan protests. Everyone is well aware of the location and the number of FBI and CIA officers in the Ukrainian government buildings. They are now doing the same thing in Moldova, by the way. We

can see this from the US ambassador's public statements. They are promoting their interests in the South Caucasus republics which we are also aware of.

However, I'm convinced that we should not be using these methods. It is important for us to see the potential future of our allies and the steps that will allow us to maintain good and mutually beneficial relations with them regardless of their domestic political events.

As far as Belarus is concerned, I'm convinced that our policy seeking to support the constitutional reform process, which, as I just mentioned, was initiated by President Lukashenko, and which we see (and talk about this publicly) as a good opportunity to start a truly national dialogue with the involvement of that country's political force, is the best we can come up with under these circumstances.

We said we will recognise the results of the presidential election. We are convinced that our Western partners' attempts to question them, or to claim that the percentage was lower, or to demand that we now agree to have the OSCE intervene and resolve this situation, are an exercise in futility.

It was our and Minsk's Western partners who slapped the OSCE on the wrist so that it doesn't accept President Lukashenko's invitation to send observers for them to see how these presidential elections were being organised and held. Claiming that only the OSCE is in a position to make a difference in these circumstances at a time when it simply missed its chance to contribute to channeling the events towards an outcome conducive to further development of the Belarusian state, is at least incorrect. President Lukashenko said that he is not holding on to power, and that, following the constitutional reform, he is

prepared to consider early presidential and parliamentary elections. If we want to help the Belarusian people maintain its unity and achieve prosperity, we must cut short anyone's ultimatums and attempts at violent protests and, of course, encourage law enforcement officers to also be guided by the law and respond in a proportionate manner. This is our position which we publicly stated on many occasions.

Question: Cut short the protests? People take to the streets every Sunday.

Sergey Lavrov: Cut short the calls for violent protests or blocking motorways. We are now hearing Ms Tikhanovskaya uttering such calls from Vilnius. "Uttering," because, most likely, these calls were written for her by someone else.

With regard to us not being able to put forward the initiatives that serve our interests, this is not true. The Minsk Agreements were formulated in 2015 in Russia's interests and were supported by the then President of Ukraine Poroshenko, as well as by the leaders of Germany and France. Ukraine claiming it can't comply with the Minsk Agreements, because Russia wants to implement them as it sees fit, is a lie. The international legal interpretation approved by the UN Security Council, and the fact that these agreements reflect our focus on ensuring the Ukrainian people's interests on a sustainable basis, is pet peeves for those in Ukraine who realise that they do not want to take the interests of eastern Ukraine into account.

Question: They have been articulated in Russia's interests, only they are not complied with. This is why, when you say that we must uphold our interests under the international law, I'm always tempted to ask you if it really exists. But I won't ask you this question, because it is a rhetorical one. We, journalists,

think there is no longer such a thing as international law. The only real thing is what is happening “on the ground” and what we can see with our own eyes.

We can see how Belarus almost went up in flames and how Kyrgyzstan effectively blazed up. This is what is happening now. We have already covered Nagorno-Karabakh. Our colleagues from Sputnik in Moldova and Georgia are telling us that they are bracing up, because things will get scary too. Is this the result of our confrontation with the United States and other above-mentioned forces? Or, is it about deliberately rocking the boat and wreaking havoc near our borders? Or, is it because these countries are just a mess? Do we need to be more proactive in order to stop this?

Sergey Lavrov: Clearly, domestic troubles in these countries have a significant role to play. I will not dwell on this right now. The countries you named have their internal problems, especially Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. You mentioned in one of your previous questions that no matter what we do, the West will try to hobble and restrain us, and undermine our efforts in the economy, politics, and technology. These are all elements of one approach.

Question: Their national security strategy states that they will do so.

Sergey Lavrov: Of course it does, but it is articulated in a way that decent people can still let go unnoticed, but it is being implemented in a manner that is nothing short of outrageous.

Question: You, too, can articulate things in a way that is different from what you would really like to say, correct?

Sergey Lavrov: It’s the other way round. I can use the language I’m not usually using to get the point across. However,

they clearly want to throw us off balance, and not only by direct attacks on Russia in all possible and conceivable spheres by way of unscrupulous competition, illegitimate sanctions and the like, but also by unbalancing the situation near our borders, thus preventing us from focusing on creative activities. Nevertheless, regardless of the human instincts and the temptations to respond in the same vein, I'm convinced that we must abide by international law.

Question: Are you an old-school man, Mr Lavrov?

Sergey Lavrov: I am not. But I think that this is, anyway, our future and that mankind has invented nothing more reliable than the UN Charter. At least, moral superiority is on the side of someone who can always explain his positions by the universal international legal norms undersigned by all countries, without exception, upon their accession to the UN. Later they developed the international legal framework by working on numerous conventions, etc.

The Minsk Agreements have been approved by the UN Security Council. They form part of international law. The Nagorno-Karabakh settlement and the role of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, where we hold a dynamic and proactive position, have also been recorded by the UN Security Council.

We have just mentioned the fact that there are attempts to increase the number of intermediaries. On the night of October 10, the Foreign Ministry's Reception House, where we are now, hosted the signing of a document, the last item of which said: the negotiating format shall remain unchanged. Today, this is also part of international law as an understanding reached between the sides.

Being human, you would like occasionally to say rude things or

show indignation at your colleagues' behaviour in some other offensive manner, but you have to restrain your temper.

Question: If we decipher what you have said, it will transpire that the best option is to come to terms with the United States rather than Moldova. Their elections are several months away. Do you have any predictions or hopes? Do you see any signs? Will things improve or deteriorate after the elections? What should we expect in general?

Sergey Lavrov: Pragmatism is also part of our foreign policy concept outlined by President Vladimir Putin. The concept implies that cooperation needs to be promoted with all those who are ready for this, based on equality and in the areas where we have common or overlapping interests. We and the Americans, incidentally, despite the irreparably deteriorating conceptual approaches to further cooperation, collaborate nicely in a number of specific areas.

In Syria, for example, we fundamentally disagree with the fact that the Americans, first, have come to that country without any invitation and actually occupied a large part of the Syrian Arab Republic. Second, we disagree with what they are doing there in practice, pilfering hydrocarbon wealth and using the proceeds for purposes directly related to fomenting separatism, etc. Nevertheless, the Russian and US militaries maintain steady communications channels. This is a reality: they fly their aircraft, as we do ours. There is an agreement as to who flies and where, and how to react to unforeseen incidents. There is an early warning mechanism.

As far as political dialogue is concerned, let me note Afghanistan, where there is the Russia-US-China mechanism, which is occasionally joined by Pakistan and may well be joined

by Iran. At least the participants in this dialogue have no contraindications thereto. We collaborate on the Korean Peninsula in fits and starts, despite occasionally diametrically opposite approaches to this or that situation.

Question: And what about Nagorno-Karabakh?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, we cooperate on Nagorno-Karabakh and can cooperate, by the way, on Transnistria, where there is the 5+2 mechanism. The two parties – Chisinau and Tiraspol – plus Russia, Ukraine, the US, the OSCE and the EU. So far, regrettably, this Transnistria settlement mechanism is not working, primarily because of what we have talked about. The Americans would like to bring Moldova to heel and turn it into yet another abscess in the post-Soviet space. Their aim is to prevent Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon's Socialist Party from materialising in practice the coalition they formed somewhat earlier. They want an outright victory for the pro-West forces.

The United States is still the most powerful country, but it is no longer able to solve any international problems single-handedly. The US is trying to do this. But this inertia is dying down. They are trying to do this primarily in the post-Soviet countries, where they openly promote an anti-Russia agenda. They are seeking to shape to their benefit the processes of state building in Central Asia, Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Moldova, as we have ascertained just now. I know that they are taking stock of Belarus, where they would like to lay the basis for similar developments. We must oppose this, primarily by living up to our commitments to our strategic partners and allies. This has been announced in a sufficiently clear manner, including by President Vladimir Putin. On top of that, we have other forms of cooperation at the level of executive and legislative authorities and at the level of civil society. I think we should engage civil

society more vigorously and, I would say, proactively. This includes such matters as financing, because, although they are known as “non-governmental organisations,” it is common knowledge that the most active and effective Western NGOs – the US Republican and Democratic institutions – get one hundred percent of their funding directly from the federal budget. In addition, hundreds, if not thousands, of NGOs that mostly operate in the post-Soviet space get subsidies from the United States Agency for International Development, also a governmental organisation financed from the federal budget.

Question: Shall we do the same?

Sergey Lavrov: We say that we should master “soft power” as a practical form of people’s diplomacy. So far, of course, we cannot match the Americans in this regard. Margarita Simonyan admitted this herself during a recent TV appearance, saying that we in the Russian Federation cannot match the financial scale of public support extended to the media in the West.

Question: Funny to compare.

Question: The main thing is that we now understand that we should follow this path. And this is fine.

Question: Mr Lavrov, it is a paradoxical situation: Komsomolskaya Pravda is published in the United States but has been banned in Belarus.

Sergey Lavrov: It is only a temporary setback. However, you shouldn’t have mentioned this, as it will now be definitely prohibited in the United States. They just didn’t get around to it. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the other day that US think tanks need to disclose their foreign funding sources and foreign grants, adding openly that the sources were most likely from Russia and China and that such funding would damage the

United States.

Question: Well, it's now or never. Let's interfere in the internal US affairs right now, in front of our audiences! Who shall we stand for, Joe Biden or Donald Trump?

Sergey Lavrov: We have already been denounced as one of key masters of America's destiny. President Putin mentioned this in an interview with Rossiya 1 television channel. Why squander money if they already think so highly of us?

Question: And yet, who will we stand for?

Sergey Lavrov: I hope they will continue to provide an objective coverage of developments.

Question: Isn't this boring?

Sergey Lavrov: No, not at all.

Question: They will say that we did it no matter who wins the election.

Sergey Lavrov: So let them. As President Putin said, we will work with any future US president and administration whom the American people give their vote of confidence to. This is our position of principle. I don't think we should change it. It is another matter that the loser will accuse us of his defeat anyway; I fully agree with you on this score. One of the main arguments both parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, are using is that the Russians want to bring their adversary to power. One way or another, the one thing we can be sure of is that the situation in our relations will not change dramatically. There can be minor changes either way, but not more than that.

Question: Will it become worse?

Sergey Lavrov: Maybe, I don't know for sure. But we are

optimistic anyway. Only a pessimist says that it can't get any worse. And an optimist says things can always get worse.

Question: Our diplomats have been expelled from the Czech Republic, Austria, Norway, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Why? What has happened to make them race each other?

We always respond in kind. It is our principle of reciprocity. Maybe we should not respond in kind but do something more energetic, so as to put an end to this “epidemic”?

Sergey Lavrov: This has indeed become an element of good behaviour towards the United States and Britain. Britain is traditionally playing an extremely negative role, particularly recently. You probably remember the Skripal case, when 60 Russian diplomats were expelled from the United States alone. Britain, which was an EU member at the time, forced the overwhelming number of EU countries to expel Russian diplomats as well. Far from all EU countries withstood the pressure. At the same time, as we have said more than once, our partners from the countries that expelled our diplomats told us that the British had not provided any proof of our alleged responsibility. Likewise, Germany is not providing any proof either, despite its obligations under international law.

We respond in kind. This is normal diplomatic practice and normal diplomatic response. Of course, we also come to conclusions, and our conclusion is that our partners' decisions to expel Russian diplomats on suspicion of espionage or something else are not simply part of diplomatic practice (this is the formal side of the matter), but also evidence of their susceptibility to Russophobic trends. The Americans are doing their utmost to promote such trends in Europe and to convince it to stop buying Russian gas, military items and other goods, so

as to export their own more expensive products there. On the other hand, the countries that accept the deal will be able to breathe more easily. The Americans will not bother them too much, at least for some time. But then they will definitely increase their pressure on them with new vigour. Of course, we come to conclusions on the reliability of our partners on a broader, symmetrical and conceptual level.

Question: Do you remember the saying, If a fight is inevitable, throw the first punch? Let's do something at long last, so that we don't feel sorry when yet another package of sanctions is slapped on us.

Sergey Lavrov: I may not go into detail, but I believe that this is exactly what we have done quite a few times over the past years.

Question: Karen Shakhnazarov recently published a post and put a question mark in the end. The text is about whether Russia is an empire or not. Very much depends on this. What do you think about this as the Foreign Minister? Are we an empire? If we are, our foreign policy should correspond to this idea.

Sergey Lavrov: This is a rhetorical question for Mr Shakhnazarov. He unequivocally considers Russian an empire. I respect his interest in analysing what is going on. Not every practical politician can do this. Sometimes, there is just no time for this analysis. He thinks that it is the empires that have a future in the modern world, considering that miniscule countries cannot compete with large associations. He assumes the USSR was an empire just like the Russian Empire.

Today Russia's interests in the world arena largely boil down to it preserving influence on its closest neighbours and enjoying

their support. Of course, the EU is also essentially an empire. The United States is a global empire. Promoting its ambitious projects, the Belt & Road Initiative, the Ice Silk Road and the community with a shared future for mankind, China is certainly projecting its global interests and wants to exert influence on countries far beyond its borders.

Probably, Mr Shakhnazarov uses the term “empire” for simplicity’s sake. It is possible to coin a more precise term that would nonetheless show that the objective formation of that very polycentric world implies the increased importance of and dialogue between major powers, rather than 193 UN member states. This includes the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Let me recall at this point President Vladimir Putin’s statement that they bear special responsibility under the UN Charter. Nobody has cancelled the UN Charter. This also includes, of course, new associations that have emerged in the past few decades. The European Union is the clearest example. As it happens with any past classic empire, problems start cropping up with their expansion. There are many EU countries, primarily the Visegrad Four, that are beginning to express their serious discontent with the bureaucracy that has a tendency to reproduce itself, as any bureaucracy does, and to strengthen its influence at the expense of other regions, in this case, EU member-countries.

With the expansion of its influence that is now particularly pushy and aggressive, the United States will face various problems.

Take Afghanistan where the Americans want to achieve something by hook or by crook. For the time being, they haven’t managed and they will not be able to achieve anything without the assistance of other countries. Iraq is the clearest example. In 2003, they got at Baghdad and “proclaimed democracy”

there, but the country has gone. Libya was bombed by NATO at the initiative of the US and also France, which at that time was one of the most active participants in these efforts. Barack Obama preferred to play second fiddle at that time. No matter where the US developed its expansion in the past two decades, democracies haven't been established anywhere, although this was the main goal. There is no tranquility anywhere.

Question: Chaos is everywhere.

Sergey Lavrov: Destruction is everywhere.

Question: Not a single example in the past two decades.

Sergey Lavrov: I believe that the multilateralism about which we are talking must certainly be aimed at establishing cooperation, "fitting in," and searching for compromise and a balance of interests between the key global centres that have territory and population, as well as both civil and military economic and technological capacities. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council is an obvious choice for me, but it is important to remember that France and so far Britain are part of Europe. The UK will soon become a country across the channel from mainland Europe. However, it is very hard to ignore the EU.

Question: To another empire. What will happen with Japan now?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think Japan counts as an empire.

Question: I said it tongue in cheek.

Question: It has an emperor.

Question: It is more of a formal empire.

Sergey Lavrov: The new Prime Minister of Japan Yoshihide

Suga and President Vladimir Putin have been in touch. They exchanged messages. President Putin congratulated him on his election as party leader and prime minister and received a detailed response. Recently, they spoke on the phone. As far as I can tell, Japan still needs to wait and see the way practical policies unfold in many areas. So far, I sense, despite numerous forecasts, that our Japanese neighbours have reaffirmed continuity in our relations and their commitment to expanding them across all areas. We welcome this because it reflects Russia's principled approaches enshrined in joint agreements with Mr Suga's predecessor. According to them, only a full-fledged partnership in the economy, technology and culture and in converging and coordinating our foreign policy approaches can take out relations to a new level, which is absolutely necessary for us to be able to seriously approach any of the issues that remain on the agenda.

Question: There is no question about our confrontation with the United States. These are big and complex countries. There's also China. But there are countries (I'm talking about soft power) that are completely dependent on us, such as Abkhazia or Tajikistan. I have already mentioned our drama with regard to Belarus. They even issued a ban on selling our books there. In Abkhazia, older Russian women were evicted from their homes. You are aware of this problem. The Russian Embassy is constantly dealing with this. In Tajikistan, Rossiya Segodnya has failed to open an office. Komsomolskaya Pravda was closed there as well. The country is completely dependent on us. There are hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians there. These countries are doing whatever they want.

I have two proposals. Maybe, we should include a provision about our media presence into the agreements with these

countries straight away. You know, it hurts to see Abkhazia or Tajikistan throw us out. I'm talking about the Russian people and their interests. They do as they please. And there's nothing we can do in response.

Sergey Lavrov: And the list goes on. In particular, the problems with our media have not yet been fully settled in Armenia and Kazakhstan, where transition to the “public multiplex” did not automatically account for our allied ties. The Ministry of Communications and Mass Media had to sit down and discuss this. I'm confident we will resolve these issues.

I agree that these problems shouldn't have emerged there in the first place. Based on our relations and everything that we do in practice and our participation in numerous associations, our interests should have been taken into account much better. But these items are on our agenda. The property of ethnic Russians and ethnic Georgians – also citizens of the Russian Federation – in Abkhazia is the subject of our constant focus.

I hope now that things in Abkhazia have calmed down, we will definitely revisit this issue. Although, again, we are a little surprised that this matter remains unresolved. Now, after these events, I think we will put more effort into promoting our approaches with regard to the countries you mentioned. In most of these countries, our business presence is predominant, including fully Russian-owned companies and joint ventures. Let's face it, teaching the Russian language in most of them is at a very good level. Under an existing agreement, special programmes are being developed in Tajikistan to train Russian language teachers and to create additional schools to support the state policy for preserving Russian as the main language of interethnic communication in the country and the CIS. The same processes are underway in Kyrgyzstan.

It is hard for me to judge on the matter, as each time I deal with some practical aspect of our relations with our allies and strategic partners. Perhaps, you are better positioned to have a full and objective picture, so your tips are important to us. But whenever your media or your other colleagues are faced with practical matters, we, of course, will always be there to not only listen to and take into account your inquiries, but also to make them part of our practical policies.

Question: We keep talking about some country rewriting a piece of our history, another country demolishing monuments to our Great Patriotic War generals, and yet another vandalising a war memorial. It's an endless story. And every time it happens, we say we will not allow it. But is there anything we can really do to prevent it?

Sergey Lavrov: Again, this is about whether we should stick to international law, or “to hell with it.”

Question: I am for “to hell with it,” to be honest.

Sergey Lavrov: If we choose the “to hell with it” approach, I will tell you what scenario will develop. In this case, all the memorials in tribute to the Czechoslovak Legion simply need to be destroyed. Just tell people that those memorials have been installed here in accordance with an international legal document, but “to hell with it,” so it's a free-for-all now, everyone can do as they please.

This would be an outright invitation to make the aforementioned incidents –especially numerous in Poland, but now also occasional incidents in other countries such as Bulgaria – the new normal. And then the last limit will be crossed and all barriers removed.

Question: This has become normal for them anyway. It's us

that don't think it is normal.

Question: They continue doing this. We drove to Minsk for an interview with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. We passed a sign saying Katyn, the site of the Polish plane tragedy. We have a memorial there, and it is in excellent condition. We monitor such places at the state level, and they know very well that Russia will never allow anything to be done with them. This is a fresh example that just came to mind. But they do not stop there; they demolish and demolish memorials. Can't you at least intimidate them?

Sergey Lavrov: I repeat, in this specific area – the protection of memorials and historical truth – I can see no other way but to insist on the fulfilment of their international legal obligations. Yes, they demolish a lot. They demolish memorials, not only in Poland, and the rationale they use, I would say using such arguments is a dishonour for a normal person: “But we are only dismantling monuments that are not installed above burial sites; our legal obligations only concern what is above burial sites.” First, the documents mention all monuments, which means they lie. And, second, they have already demolished those monuments that stood over graves, such as the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn. But if we begin to reciprocate, it will run contrary to our Orthodox principles.

Question: I wanted to ask this. At first you said that we cannot do this because it is against international law. So let's do what is in our best interests: we do not reciprocate, because we are Christians, because this runs contrary to Russian traditions, but this is not about international law.

Sergey Lavrov: No, this is because of international law. I just mentioned Orthodoxy because it is my conviction that to destroy

graves or monuments is inappropriate for us. If we announce that international law no longer works, at least in this area, relating to all our memorials that remain in Poland (and in other countries too, this process will become irreversible), they will say – right then, we have no more obligations, because Russia withdrew from these agreements. This is probably not a good comparison, and might be taken as sacrilege, but it's like in poker – who's the first to blink. Now if we blink first – say that our patience has run out, shrug off all responsibility – if we take the initiative here and abandon international law, I mean, why would we do this? The only motive could be to be able to destroy monuments on our territory...

Question: Well, specifically in this sphere, yes. What about in a broader sense?

Sergey Lavrov: But we are talking about this specific sphere now. We are talking about this war going on over history, about the gross attacks on the World War II results, which Russia and other countries that fought against the Hitlerite coalition paid for with blood. Russia annually submits to the UN General Assembly a resolution on combating the glorification of Nazism. It is always supported by the overwhelming majority of countries, except the United States and Ukraine that vote against it. The European Union abstains, which I think is a shameful position for the EU. This year, at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, we submitted a draft resolution on the end of World War II. It introduces a new term, or rather a new proposal – for all UN members to recognise the Victory in World War II as common heritage of mankind. Because the United Nations is common heritage, and the Victory was crucial for its creation. That draft resolution is opposed by the United States, the entire European Union, Canada, Ukraine and

Georgia.

Question: How do they explain it?

Sergey Lavrov: They don't. They say it is superfluous: we never said it until now, but now you want us to say it. This is unacceptable, and it confirms our suspicion that they really want to rewrite history, not only in order to whitewash their predecessors, but also in order to now use it in practical politics for anti-Russia purposes. Therefore, we will fight this. But I cannot agree with the idea that it is in our interests to abandon or throw out entirely international law as a norm.

Question: You are still avoiding the question about a bright future with the Americans. Are there any chances for this?

Sergey Lavrov: I didn't avoid it. I said it's not going to get any better.

Question: I'll try another tack. Don't we have a chance to take advantage of the differences between China and the US? Isn't this in Russia's interests? There are many indications that the US is creating a coalition against China. Why don't we use this situation? Say, we could move a bit away from China, giving the Americans a signal that we could work with them? Is there any room for manoeuvre with these new alliances?

Sergey Lavrov: We are still proceeding from real life in everything we do. Or, at any rate, we try to. I don't see any reason that would prompt us to move away from anybody. It would be foolish to give up agreements that are mutually beneficial and efficient. Moving away from China just to show that we can intrigue as well? What for? This is to our detriment. I believe the Americans are saying openly, without any diplomacy, that Russia should help it punish China, make it disarm or freeze its level of armaments. They are exploiting this

issue impudently like shell game artists.

Recently, an American representative made a statement that Russia supported the US, that we “are about to reach agreements on freezing all nuclear warheads before the US election” and that “Russia badly wants China to join these efforts.” Well, this is simply indecent.

Question: What is the real situation with regard to START III? They are saying they are ready and have proposed freezing nuclear weapons. They claim they are just a step away from extending the treaty on their terms. Is that right?

Sergey Lavrov: We have always proceeded and continue to proceed from the premise that strategic stability agreements must be based on the presentation of interests by each contracting party, on the analysis of threats that the opposite side poses, and the search for compromise that considers the interests of each party on a well-balanced foundation, and thus, the real threats. This primarily applies to vehicles that can deliver nuclear warheads to the other’s territory.

Now the US has turned everything upside down. It wants to leave aside delivery vehicles because it has developed many facilities that are not subject to talks now. The Americans keep talking about our new resources, which we have announced, that have been introduced in our armed forces. Of the five new types, we are willing to include two in the current treaty. They know this.

Question: And what types are we prepared to include in the treaty?

Sergey Lavrov: I won’t go into details now. These are arms that are in the categories covered by the current treaty: ICBMs, SLBMs and strategic bombers.

Question: If the Americans were in our place they would say that these arms are not covered by the treaty. They are not part of it, and that's it.

Sergey Lavrov: The Americans are in their place and claim that these arms do not fall under the treaty. This is because they have a programme for a lightning global strike. Under this programme, strategic rather than nuclear carriers can reach any point in the world within an hour. They have not yet included this in our conversations. Likewise, they are not touching on the issue of space militarisation, although officially their doctrines include outer space as well as cyberspace in the arena of hostilities. We are bound to consider this.

They do not want to be clear about the fact that they have officially put an end to their participation in the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and many other agreements. Instead of dealing with specific delivery vehicles that pose a threat to each other's territory, they suggest counting warheads and charges. In this way, they want to start a practical discussion of non-strategic nuclear weapons, that is, tactical nuclear arms. There was a clear understanding that before including these arms in the discussions on their limitations, the Americans must first withdraw these tactical missiles with tactical nuclear warheads to their own territory. Now they are stationed in five NATO countries. Moreover, in violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Washington is involving other NATO states in military exercises to get practical skills of using and handling nuclear arms. This is a crude violation of the NPT. Instead of clearing the field for talks by withdrawing these arms to their territory, they want them accepted as a fact of life and suggest counting everything. This is not going to happen.

And their second requirement is to return to the mechanisms of verification that existed back in the 1990s and were by and large humiliating. At that time, their inspectors sat at an entrance checkpoint of the included plants and used a tape-measure to determine the size of containers in which missiles were brought out. They also measured what was brought into these plants. Yes, we also had the right to stay at the facility in the city of Magna. But when the current New START Treaty was approved, the sides decided to abandon these intrusive practices that were not quite in the spirit of partnership. In effect, they are not suitable in the modern conditions when we have seriously moved to equitable agreements concluded in this document. However, the Americans want to count every warhead and return to the tough verification measures I mentioned. They also want to compel us to persuade China to do what they want. This is what they are talking about.

Question: They haven't invented anything new in this respect. Many years ago we filmed joint work on the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) in this building. And when this treaty was almost ready for signing, they simply replaced the term "nuclear weapon carriers" with "high-precision weapon carriers" and said seriously that they had reduced the number of these carriers, primarily aircraft. But if they stick to these positions, does this mean that there is no possibility of extending New START?

Sergey Lavrov: No, personally, I don't see much chance for this. My colleagues who work in the interdepartmental format and meet with the US delegation do not see this possibility, either. That said, we will never say that we are closing the door to talks and stop all contacts. No. We simply explain that it is impossible to hold talks based on an ultimatum, completely

ignoring all the principles that have for decades been recognised as the foundation of our agreements on START I and similar documents.

As for the SORT, this was not a legally binding document but a political declaration that at that point at least helped us to keep the process of maintaining strategic stability going.

Question: Who is better for us? Joe Biden or Donald Trump? And can one of them be better at all?

Sergey Lavrov: I think Semyon Slepakov, who wrote a text with the words “America doesn’t like us,” has a serious understanding of this issue.

Question: I’d like to note this historical moment of Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov quoting Semyon Slepakov in his interview with three large Russian radio stations.

But my question is somewhat different. To leave behind the awful subject of the impossibility of extending the New START Treaty, which I think is the most pessimistic of all, I’d like to ask you about Kazakhstan and some other more general questions as we usually do here. I don’t know whether you agree with the opinion expressed by some analysts and experts and I don’t know myself because I’m not an expert on Kazakhstan, but they claim that we will face disagreements in that country that will be similar to those in Ukraine. I’m referring to what happened between ethnic Russians in the north and Kazakhstan as a state. I have heard this from several people and have read about it in some publications. I don’t know whether this is correct. Hopefully, not. I visited Kazakhstan several times but did not notice anything of the kind, but this was long ago. Do you believe these apprehensions are justified? Do you see an

escalation in tensions? And a more general question: When will we do something to help our compatriots (mainly, ethnic Russians) to return to their homeland? We've been talking about this for years and have simplified some procedures, but the situation is basically the same.

Sergey Lavrov: As for Kazakhstan, just like you, I don't see any threat of an ethnic divide. The authorities are well aware of the need to strengthen ethnic accord and ensure the reliable territorial integrity of their country. In this respect, it is very important to consider the interests of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan, in particular, to teach the Russian language, maintain the Russian space and ensure the right of parents to send their children to Russian-speaking schools.

All these measures are part of the agreements in the CIS and bilateral agreements between Russia and Kazakhstan. Of course, it is important to make Russians feel involved in running the regions and the state of Kazakhstan. I am convinced that President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and its first President Nursultan Nazarbayev are well aware of this. At any rate, we see this understanding in our meetings at the top level and between our ministers.

As for others that also maintain relations with Kazakhstan, I cannot believe wholeheartedly in the purity of their motives. We are seeing (once again this is borne out by how the Americans work in the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia) that they are trying to sow discord not just on yet another territory that is located near Russia but a country that is very close to us in the historical, political, and military-political terms, a country that is our ally. Indeed, they are making these kinds of attempts. At any rate, US-funded NGOs are trying to encourage nationalist attitudes in a titular nation, thereby maintaining the potential for

conflict.

China also has a programme of its own in Central Asia. It is primarily interested in promoting its economic interests. I have already commented on the question that was raised with regard to Mr Shakhnazarov's article. China has accumulated economic might, doing this under the rules introduced by the West, primarily the Americans in the context of globalisation. Now there is a fuss largely because of this. The Americans don't like the rise of China which followed the rules and played the music they composed. This is why the US wants to quit the WTO now and discard other agreements that limit its freedom of action in one way or another. Projecting its economic power, China is pursuing its absolutely natural interests. We are trying to take part in this and harmonise the interests of Central Asia and other post-Soviet states, including Russia, through the opportunities that are offered by China.

The EAEU has already signed two agreements with China. They are aimed at harmonising Eurasian integration with Chinese Belt and Road projects, and in a broader context, promoting a certain philosophy that President Vladimir Putin referred to as the formation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. We invite all those who live in this vast Eurasian continent to join it, including the ASEAN states and the countries that are not members of any integration associations. Plus, as was emphasised, we keep the door open for the EU because it would be foolish not to use our God-given advantages, the geography of the most rapidly growing and promising continent, for the development of each of our countries.

Let me emphasise that we have a very trust-based and comprehensive dialogue with Kazakhstan and the other CIS countries. Any topic that might cause concern is raised in the

open, in a friendly manner and is successfully resolved in the overwhelming majority of cases. I hope that in the final count, we will be able to find solution to any similar issues.

Question: Here's a question from our listeners. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has travelled all over the world. What are the five most beautiful places in your opinion?

Sergey Lavrov: Every place is beautiful in its own way. But I am inclined to share the views that Vladimir Sungorkin and I gained. Travelling all over the world, it is important to remember that you will never have time to travel all around our country. There is enough beauty in it for generations to come.

Question: I have a debate with Mr Lavrov. He is fond of Altai and I like the Far East. The debate continues.

Question: And our favourite is the Krasnodar Territory.

Question: Sochi, the Black Sea Coast.

Question: We took a vacation there with our families this year. We also visited Yalta.

Sergey Lavrov: This is a passive holiday, speaking about fitness and exercise.

Question: It depends on what you do.

Sergey Lavrov: But these are not physical fitness exercises. I know what people are doing there.