

[mid.ru](https://www.mid.ru)

## **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions at the presentation of the Valdai International Discussion Club analytical report "History, To Be Continued: The Utopia of a Diverse World," Moscow, October 13, 2020**

Mr Lukyanov,

Colleagues,

There is no need to say that you are flattered by my participation – this is in our interests: you cannot be left on your own, since otherwise you will dream up something else, and later we will have to, as you said, exist in a new reality and sort out the mess.

But, joking aside, thank you for inviting me. I always look for ways to attend events organised by the Valdai Club, especially on the occasion of the publication of what I think is a very interesting, provocative and, as always, unconventional report, which is worthy of being studied and gives much food for thought. Let me welcome all the participants in this session. It is clear that Valdai's intellectual and creative energy is inexhaustible. This is a good pretext to discuss, as it follows from the report's title, what world we live in and how history is set to continue. I can state with certainty that the report is on the whole optimistic.

We should not focus only on the ways in which the world is likely to change in the foreseeable future, but also on whether we will be able to influence this change. Our position with regard to what is going on in the world is basically the same as the formulas used in the report: the "volatility" and "impulsiveness" of international life. We have been saying for a long time that the world is going through profound transformations, with the global balance of power being reshaped. There is no doubt that the substance of the modern epoch is an objective process of formation of a more democratic, multipolar international order. It is a difficult and long process. It will probably take an entire epoch.

Thus far, we can see that the rise of new centres of economic growth, financial power and political influence and these growth and influence centres' sincere desire to establish mutually beneficial and equal relations with all others are running into resistance from a

group of Western states, which are neither ready for, nor used to sharing their privileged position in the international hierarchy. This standoff is behind the state of turbulence and uncertainty described in the report.

As I said, the clash between the old and the new will take, judging by all appearances, an entire historical epoch. The sign of the current juncture is that the maximally selfish behaviour of certain state leaders is increasingly influencing real events on the international arena. A case in point is that a well-known, very rich and well-armed country bought up, at an early stage in the pandemic, or administratively redirected to its own havens cargoes with protective gear against COVID 19 intended for others. Of course, there are numerous examples of this sort and we cannot rejoice at the loss of the culture of dialogue and compromise and generally the skill of listening to others. Often there prevails the desire to issue accusations, ultimatums and demands. We believe that today, as never before, it is important to try to return to the sources and basics of diplomacy, to the painstaking, protracted, occasionally thankless, but eventually effective search for points of contact and compromises, and to the coordination of positions. We are ready for this work and are ready to conduct it with all our partners without exception.

It is encouraging that the report includes a forecast, even though Fyodor Lukyanov has described it as utopian, that in 2045 the UN will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Despite criticism, which is quite often reasonable, the organisation is serving its purpose. It is thanks to the UN that a catastrophic conflict between great powers has been prevented. Even though it has quite a few obvious drawbacks, since human products and ideas tend to be flawed, yet there is no alternative to it. In our opinion, the UN-centred architecture based on the results of WWII still has a margin of safety and untapped creative potential, first of all when it comes to maintaining a global balance between the leading international players.

It is also obvious to us that it is in the interests of the entire international community to remain committed to the fundamental principles of international law sealed in the UN Charter. It is often noted indeed that these principles have been violated, and quite frequently. But we don't abandon traffic rules only because of regular road accidents, do we?

I believe that what we need now is something different: we must work to ensure that all countries strictly comply with the norms and principles of international law and their obligations under international conventions, and to prevent the erosion of international law or its replacement with the rules-based order promoted by our Western partners, who even avoid using the very phrase "respect for international law." There are quite a few examples.

We can see that these “rules,” as I have pointed out more than once, are being created in a narrow circle of the so-called like-minded people without any consideration for the opinions of the international community or the universal norms of international law formalised in the UN Charter, numerous universal conventions and the statutes of specialised agencies. Like traffic rules, international law has been written in blood, as we are well aware, including the blood of those who fought during WWII and who defeated Nazism. This doesn't make it any less significant. Quite to the contrary. I believe that those who do not respect international law are risking a great deal.

I would like to cite a quotation by Dmitry Mendeleev, who not only arranged the periodic table and allegedly invented popular drink recipes, but was also an accomplished philosopher. He pondered the importance of non-violent sustainable development. He wrote in one of his works, *The Cognition of Russia: Cherished Thoughts*, which was published in 1905: *The idealists and materialists see the possibility of change only through revolutions, while realists say that real change only happens through gradual evolution.*” This may look like a self-evident thought, but it is more important in the current international environment than ever before. For all intents and purposes, it is now crucial for politicians to remain true to realism.

The world is becoming increasingly diverse and competitive. It is hard to argue with this. It can no longer be governed from any one centre. Ironically, as Fyodor Lukyanov has already said, the novel coronavirus pandemic has become a marker of equality of all countries in the face of this common evil. It has all of a sudden shown that people in the countries that regard themselves as the beacons of the free world and democracy are as vulnerable to this disease as everybody else. We would like to hope that they will draw the right conclusion from this “discovery,” which has hit us all, both the West and the developing countries, as well as Russia, like a ton of bricks.

We are not going to force our position on anyone, but we are trying to use this medical challenge as an opportunity for developing constructive cooperation, and not only in combating the disease. We are grateful for the positive views on our coronavirus vaccine and medicine expressed in a great number of states – actually, dozens of countries have done this. I believe that this is a good example of how we should really join our efforts even in the most difficult situations and try to avoid the temptation to take advantage of the current problems to gain unilateral benefits.

This year we celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Victory and of the United Nations. We strongly believe that it is more important now than ever before in the past decades for the leading countries' heads to show wisdom, foresight and political will. In our opinion,

the first to do this must be the leaders of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. You are aware of President Putin's initiative to hold an in-person meeting of these five countries' leaders. We hope that it can be held as soon as the sanitary and epidemiological situation allows. As of now, we maintain contact with our partners, discussing the summit's concept and agenda, including some details of the potential final documents.

One more thing I would like to mention is environmental protection and adapting to the climate change. It is thoroughly addressed in your report, and with good reason, as I see it. Environmental and climate problems are no less significant today than economic or political ones, because it is human habitat that we are talking about. The Earth is our common home, which has become especially obvious in this age of globalisation and interconnectivity. We believe that we must take a non-political approach to this package of issues. Instead of turning the green agenda into yet another sphere of confrontation, mutual accusations and underhanded competition, we must use it to bring our nations together. The green agenda must not be an end in itself or a source of fortune for the corporations, which often use people's environmental idealism for purposes that have little in common with environmental protection.

To conclude my address, I would like to say once again that it was very interesting to see how the Valdai Club leaders see the global situation and the scenarios of its further development. As Fyodor Lukyanov noted, the authors of the report did not spare words so as to help themselves and the readers to fight cognitive inertia, which is a vital condition for ordinary human activity, let alone success. The title of this report, *History, To Be Continued: The Utopia of a Diverse World*, has reminded me about a recent online joke according to which [Turgenev's] *Mumu* is a utopia and [Nekrasov's] *Grandpa Mazai* and the *Hares* is an anti-utopia. Of course, there's a grain of a joke in every joke. But we would certainly choose an anti-utopian scenario, which we like much more. Unfortunately, there is no *Grandpa Mazai* to save humankind. As another saying goes, *If you need a helping hand, it's at the end of your arm*. We are ready to look for mutually acceptable solutions together with all those who need a helping hand as well.

Thank you.

**Question:** How expedient is it to battle for multilateral organisations that are past their prime?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I remember the report has special speculations on this topic: the UN is a good thing, but for a revival of its spirit, it is not at all mandatory to hold on to the "letter"

(judging by all appearances, the letter of the UN Charter that was written in the first half of the last century); all our reasoning should centre on the understanding of what is good and what is evil. You put all of this into the mouth of an imagined UN Secretary-General, who will rule the organisation in 2045, the year of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Incidentally, you have given him a name that reflects, if I understand it correctly, either Burmese, or North Korean, or generally Korean traditions. I do not overestimate my linguistic or historical abilities.

But let us go back to what you said – good and evil. Is sovereign equality of states good or evil? I think it is good. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, peaceful settlement of disputes, the principle of great power accord – all of this is the letter of the UN Charter and is written in black and white. I do not think that mankind should give up these principles despite the prospects for the modification of the structure of international organisations. Otherwise we will again find ourselves in a period of imperialist wars, colonial domination and other inequality on the international arena.

During your opening remarks, you mentioned that modern institutions were becoming inefficient and losing their importance and meaning. I would like to know what led you to this conclusion. The thing is that the only obvious and universal reason for making generalisations of this kind is, as I see it, the US policy starting from the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. After that, there was a relatively long pause, followed by an across-the-board demolition of all arms control and non-proliferation instruments: the INF Treaty, the Treaty on Open Skies, and the START-1 Treaty that will go the same way soon. These form the international legal infrastructure of stability, which actually the entire world community definitively regarded as good and not evil.

I am also referring, apart from international treaties and agreements, directly to multilateral organisations – both the UN, and the specialised agencies it has created, and, of course, the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and the World Bank Group). The US has withdrawn, if I recall rightly, from UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council, and has announced that it will pull out of the World Health Organisation (WHO). In my view, the US is also studying in a detailed and concerted manner a possibility of leaving the WTO, whose operations it has impeded for a number of years now. It uses the filibuster to block personnel appointments to the agency that deals with the resolution of disputes, thus preventing it from acquiring a quorum needed for disputes to be in fact resolved based on the WTO and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

One can also recall instances, where the United States simply does not want to implement any treaties that at least in some way restrict Washington's free hand internationally, be it

economic, trade, investment or any other sphere. The levers used are obvious, sanctions, threats, ultimatums, and so on.

Yet another trend that also gives food for thought from the point of view of the existing institutions' viability is the following. Our Western colleagues are seeking to privatise these multilateral international organisations, as is manifested in the activities of the UN Secretariat, to mention just this body. I will not dwell upon this, but everyone is well aware who takes and how the key decisions are made and who exerts the decisive influence on the position of the Secretariat, which must be absolutely impartial and reflect the approaches of the international officialdom that takes an oath of impartiality and rejection of directives coming from any government. This also transpires in the activities of specialised agencies.

I have repeatedly cited examples of how, in fact, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) has been "raped." In a direct and gross violation of all rules, the West has insisted on an illegitimate vote, following which it declared that the OPCW Technical Secretariat would from now on be vested with the UN Security Council's functions and have the right to identify those to blame for various situations, where there were reasons to assume that CWC-prohibited chemical weapons had been used. Before the West "violated" this universal document, the Technical Secretariat only had the right to establish the fact of use or non-use of a prohibited chemical in response to an application from any CWC member state.

When they fail to organise and rush a "privatisation revolution" through legitimate organisations, topics are taken outside of universal discussions and various partnerships are established, as our French colleagues did by creating a partnership against impunity for the use of chemical weapons and a partnership against human rights violations, although there is the UN Human Rights Council, a legitimate and universal agency. But, in all evidence, not everything is working out there to the benefit of our Western colleagues. They want to have a venue where they will decide who should be punished based on their own rules rather than international law. Established outside the universal organisations of the United Nations, these partnerships create structures to fit their own needs and interests, which will punish those whom these people will identify as culprits.

The EU is actively following in the footsteps of the US, increasingly relying on the threat of sanctions. Brussels has created two mechanisms to punish those, who, in its opinion, will use chemical weapons and violate human rights. All of this is outside of the UN Security Council and in no way tallies with the principles of the UN Charter. If this is understood to be a new reality, then, in my view, we must fight it. Good and evil will not disappear

anyway. I am convinced that not only the spirit, but also the letter of the UN Charter are absolutely fine for the modern-day world, if we want it to be a little bit more democratic and just.

**Question:** When you are engaged in everyday diplomacy, you have no time to make analogies or reflect on which periods of time are similar and which aren't. Still, do you have a feeling that we are living in a time that is a repetition of other periods that we either remember or don't, but just know about from textbooks or fiction?

**Sergey Lavrov:** There is this good formula, a belief about how many times history repeats itself and in what form. Karl Marx was probably unaware of this, but it can repeat many times. I would say the most distinctive feature of our time is this – everyone understands that a redistribution of power is taking place, and this is exactly what our Western colleagues are fighting so adamantly, clinging to their centuries of dominance. For the sake of justice, I agree that over those past centuries (half a millennium in fact) a fierce fight for a place in the sun, for being King of the Mountain, was certainly very relevant. I agree with Dominic Lieven that humankind's nearly unlimited ability to invent new deadly technologies is hardly reassuring. In this sense, probably, that closing phrase of his cannot be simply ignored.

Once in the midst of 'perestroika' one of our politicians was asked at an election campaign meeting: "Why is our life so bad?" He replied: "But is it? Our grandchildren will envy us for the life we had." There is a homely truth in that of course, but I would prefer some lesson to be learned from the bloody wars of the past. Alas, there is another wise maxim: history teaches nothing.

**Question:** So, if we are in for such terrible events in the future, and will not see heaven for another 25 years, if at all, as our report tries to explain – if things are so bad, maybe Russia should, as they say now, self-isolate during the period of these terrible shocks and entirely concentrate on itself, abandoning or minimising any foreign policy ambitions? As they say, do not get angry, but focus. And let others fight their battles for global dominance or whatever prize there is.

**Sergey Lavrov:** I think this is another homely truth here. But it is not about self-isolating and ceasing to take care of the outer perimeter, which is of key importance from our security perspective. There is a lot of debate about this. One of the founders of Valdai Club and the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Sergey Karaganov, recently spoke on television about what stance we should take in this respect. Some of his ideas are questionable, but I do agree with some political analysts (this is not my invention, but they

just instinctively guessed the feeling we are starting to have) that we must stop considering our Western colleagues, including the EU, as a source of assessment of our behaviour that we need to follow, or measuring ourselves with the same yardstick. They don't know Russian arshins, they have inches. I think we need to stop looking over our shoulders at them.

Look at what happened at the recent EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting, all the moralising and lecturing there, statements that Russia missed its chance to explain what happened to Alexey Navalny. More conceptually, not so long ago, a couple of weeks ago, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen stressed how important it was to shed the illusion that Russia under the current government will be able to regain the status of the EU's geopolitical partner. That was a drastic statement from the highest official in the European Commission. It seems to me that we need to stop looking back at these assessments.

Today I spoke with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell for more than an hour; we got deep into detail. I told him frankly and I said so publicly: if the EU is arrogant enough to declare, with this sense of unconditional superiority, that Russia must understand there will be no "business as usual," well, Russia wants to understand whether there could be any business at all with the European Union under these conditions. I will not go into detail, although there is a lot that could be said, about the EU behaving in an absolutely inappropriate, unacceptable manner, with regard to the same Navalny incident. This is the case with the statement that as many as five EU countries have already established the truth, and that our attempts to ask them to provide the facts that led them to those conclusions are outrageous and we cannot even question them. Remember the great actor and governor Arnold Schwarzenegger playing that tough guy in films who always, every time someone tried to express doubt, just said, trust me. Even so, I trust him more than I trust the European Union, which is now trying to use the same approach. I mean use it as a rule, and not within the framework of international law. We would like the EU and Germany to follow international law in the situation with Navalny. There is the 1959 European Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and the protocols thereto. We are referring to those. We ask Germany to fulfil its obligations under these international legal instruments. But Germany says, you have international law, but we have a rule. And the rule is that if we do not trust them, the blame is on us.

In the last twenty years, we have always had self-esteem. But those people who are responsible for foreign policy in the West do not understand the need for mutually respectful communication. So we should probably stop communicating with them for a while. Moreover, Ursula von der Leyen declares that geopolitical partnership is not working with the current Russian government. So be it, if that's the way they want it.



**Question:** If institutions are giving way to multilateral cooperation, what should we do about the so-called near-abroad? How can we resolve problems, especially since their number is growing?

**Sergey Lavrov:** It is probably correct to monitor the current trend where, although we do need the multilateral organisations, despite the fact that they are facing a crisis (I have mentioned the attempts to undermine them or to replace their universal framework with some “rules” created outside the UN Charter and its very system), they should of course be complemented with more flexible forms of interaction, without a rigid structure or conventional documents. A relevant example is the G20. It is a network structure that is becoming institutionalised without losing flexibility. It does not have any written or ratified rules, but it reflects our views on the development of a multipolar world, which we are discussing now. The G20 has risen to the summit from the level of quite informal contacts maintained among finance ministers before 2010. It was decided to hold annual G20 summits after the 2008 crisis.

The fact that the G20 has been brought to the summit level is proof that from now on the G7 will not be in a position to deal with global economic matters. It is the economy and finance that were proposed as the main goals of the G20 summits since the G20 incorporates the G7, the BRICS countries and the apparently like-minded members of the BRICS Five – Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Mexico and Argentina. In other words, the G20 is an almost open recognition of the multipolar world and the inability of the West in the broad meaning of the word, which includes Japan, to deal with global economic and financial problems unassisted.

At the same time, we should think about reforming the existing institutions. In this sense, the UN is an organisation that needs a regular upgrade. But this process must be gradual, consistent, coordinated and based on consensus, without any abrupt movements that could undermine the UN's ability to function. Much attention is being given now to the deadlocked reform of the UN Security Council and the conflicting ambitions of states that have risen to new heights in the global economy and politics. When the UN was established, some of them were colonies, like India, while the People's Republic of China did not even exist, even though the victorious nations recognised China as one of the winners in World War II, in which over 35 million Chinese lost their lives.

The situation has changed since then, and more countries are claiming a permanent seat on the UNSC. Discussions on this are underway. We believe that first of all we must correct the grossly unfair state of affairs: at least five, but often six and always more than one third of the 15 UNSC members represent Europe, whereas the developing countries are seriously

underrepresented. Therefore, our position during debates on increasing the number of permanent UNSC members is that the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and definitely Africa deserve to be included. This would correct the injustice.

Since this subject is highly controversial at the UN, the countries that have recently held the chairmanship of the G20 proposed holding annual meetings of foreign ministers, who have never met in this format since the G20 summit meetings were first held. This can be interpreted as a desire to make up for the lack of progress in coordinating the new format of the UNSC by discussing many key topics within the G20 framework. When it comes to the economic and financial agenda, the G20 decisions are not binding unless approved by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Likewise, the G20 cannot take decisions that are the purview of the UN Security Council and General Assembly. But the G20 is a good platform for finding ways to align different approaches in a broad-based manner free from red tape. Another relevant example is BRICS. I believe that many more such target-oriented alliances will be established in the future.

Take the Astana format set up to coordinate a Syrian settlement. It is clearly a one-off format created to deal with a particular problem. Turkey, Iran and Russia had not created similar formats before. Russia has wonderful relations with Iran and solid ties with Turkey, but the Astana trio is a one-off group brought together to address a specific case. One more format of this kind is the OSCE Minsk Group, where the burden of decisions, even though the group is based at the OSCE, is carried by the co-chairs – Russia, the United States and France. They have been acting in a fairly well-coordinated manner, but it is nevertheless a one-off format.