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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview given to Channel One's Bolshaya Igra (Great Game) talk show, Moscow, April 1, 2021

50-63 minutes

Vyacheslav Nikonov: The word “war” has been heard increasingly more often lately. US and NATO politicians, even more so the Ukrainian military, have no trouble saying it. Do you have more reasons to be concerned now than ever before?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes and no. On the one hand, the confrontation has hit bottom. On the other, deep down, there's still hope that we are adults and understand the risks associated with escalating tensions further. However, our Western colleagues introduced the word “war” into the diplomatic and international usage. “The hybrid war unleashed by Russia” is a very popular description of what the West perceives as the main event in international life. I still believe that good judgment will prevail.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Recently, the United States has ratcheted the degree of confrontation up to never-before-seen proportions. President Joe Biden said President Vladimir Putin is a “killer.” We have recalled Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov.

Sergey Lavrov: He was invited for consultations.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Hence, the question: How do we go about our relations now? How long will this pause last? When will Mr Antonov return to Washington?

Sergey Lavrov: What we heard President Biden say in his interview with ABC is outrageous and unprecedented. However, one should always see the real actions behind the rhetoric, and they began long before this interview back during the Barack Obama administration. They continued under the Trump administration, despite the fact that the 45th US President publicly spoke in favour of maintaining good relations with Russia, with which he was willing to “get along,” but was not allowed to do so. I’m talking about the consistent degradation of the deterrent infrastructure in the military-political and strategic spheres.

The ABM Treaty has long since been dropped. President Putin has more than once mentioned how, in response to his remark that George W. Bush was making a mistake and there was no need to aggravate relations, the then US President said that it was not directed against Russia. Allegedly, we can take any steps that we deem necessary in response to the US withdrawing from the ABM Treaty. Allegedly, the Americans will not take these actions as directed against them, either. But then they started establishing anti-missile systems in Europe which is the third missile defence position area. It was announced that it was built exclusively with Iran in mind. Our attempts to agree on a transparency format received support during the visit to Moscow by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, but were later rejected. We now have a missile defence

area in Europe. Nobody is saying that this is against Iran now. This is clearly being positioned as a global project designed to contain Russia and China. The same processes are underway in the Asia-Pacific region. No one is trying to pretend that this is being done against North Korea.

This is a global system designed to back US claims to absolute dominance, including in the military-strategic and nuclear spheres.

Dimitri Simes can also share his assessment of what is said and written in the United States on that account. A steadfast course has now been taken towards deploying intermediate and shorter-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region.

The INF Treaty was discarded by the Americans on far-fetched pretexts. This was not our choice. In his special messages, President Vladimir Putin suggested agreeing, on a voluntary basis and even in the absence of the INF Treaty, on a mutual moratorium with corresponding verification measures in the Kaliningrad Region, where the Americans suspected our Iskander missiles of violating restrictions imposed by the now defunct treaty, and at US bases in Poland and Romania, where the MK-41 units are promoted by the manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, as dual-purpose equipment.

To reiterate, this rhetoric is outrageous and unacceptable. However, President Putin has reacted to it diplomatically and politely. Unfortunately, there was no response to our offer to talk live and to dot the dotted letters in the Russian and English alphabets. All of that has long since gone hand-in-hand with a material build-up in the confrontational infrastructure, which also includes the reckless eastward advance of NATO military facilities,

the transformation of a rotational presence into a permanent presence on our borders, in the Baltic States, in Norway, and Poland. So everything is much more serious than mere rhetoric.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: When will Ambassador Antonov return to Washington?

Sergey Lavrov: It's up to President Putin to decide. Ambassador Antonov is currently holding consultations at the Foreign Ministry. He has met with the members of the committees on international affairs at the State Duma and the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly. He has had conversations at the Presidential Executive Office as well.

It is important for us to analyse the current state of our relations, which did not get to this point overnight, and are not just because of this interview, but have been going this way for years now. The fact that inappropriate language was used during President Biden's interview with ABC shows the urgency of conducting a comprehensive analysis. This does not mean that we have just been observers and have not drawn any conclusions over the past years. But now the time has come for generalisations.

Dimitri Simes: Now that I am in Moscow, after a year in Washington, I see a striking contrast between statements by the leaders of the two countries. I think you will agree that when officials in Washington talk about relations with Russia, their pattern is simple and understandable: "Russia is an opponent." Sometimes, Congressmen are more abrupt and call it "an enemy." However, political leaders from the administration still call it "an opponent." They allow cooperation with Russia on some issues that are important to the US, but generally it is emphasised that

militarily Russia is “the number one opponent,” while politically it is not just a country with objectionable views but a state that “tries to spread authoritarian regimes throughout the world,” that “opposes democracy” and “undermines the foundations of the US as such.”

When I listen to you and President of Russia Vladimir Putin, I have the impression that in Moscow the picture is more complicated and has more nuances. Do you think the US is Russia's opponent today?

Sergey Lavrov: I will not go into analysing the lexicon of “opponent,” “enemy,” “competitor” or “rival.” All these words are juggled in both official and unofficial statements. I read the other day that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that for all the differences with Russia and China, the US does not have anything against these countries. As for what the US is doing, it is simply “promoting democracy” and “upholding human rights.” I don't know how seriously one can take this description of US policy towards Moscow and Beijing. However, if they are promoting democracy, practice must justify theory.

George W. Bush announced that democracy was established in Iraq in May 2003. Aboard an aircraft carrier, he declared that Iraq's liberation from its totalitarian regime was completed and democracy was established in the country. There is no point in elaborating. It is enough to mention the toll of the US-unleashed war – hundreds of thousands of people. We should also remember that the “rule” of the notorious Paul Bremer resulted in the birth of ISIS, which was rapidly joined by members of the Baath Party, employees of Saddam Hussein's secret services, who had lost their jobs. They simply needed to provide for their families. ISIS emerged not because of ideological differences. Relying on US

mistakes, the radicals actively used this fact. This is what democracy in Iraq is all about.

“Democracy” in Libya was established by bombs, strikes and the murder of Muammar Gaddafi which was accompanied by Hillary Clinton’s cry of admiration. This is the result: Libya is a black hole; refugee flows bound for the north are creating problems for the EU that does not know what to do about them; illegal arms and terrorists are being smuggled through Libya to the south, bringing suffering to the Sahara-Sahel Region.

I do not wish to describe what the Americans feel towards the Russian Federation. If their statements about us being their “opponent,” “enemy,” “rival” or “competitor” are based on the desire to accuse us of the consequences of their reckless policy, we can hardly have a serious conversation with them.

Dmitri Simes: When officials in Washington, the Joseph Biden administration or Congress, call Russia an opponent and emphasise this, I think they would not agree that it is simply rhetoric. Nor would they agree that it is designed solely for domestic consumption. The Biden administration is saying that the US did not have a consistent policy towards Russia and that former US President Donald Trump let Russia “do everything the Russian Government of Vladimir Putin wanted.” Now a new sheriff has come in and is willing to talk in a way he sees fit without paying much attention to how Moscow will interpret it; and if Moscow doesn’t like it, this is good. This is being done not to evoke discontent, of course, but to show that Russia is finally realising that it cannot behave like this anymore. Is there any chance that this new Biden administration policy will compel Russia to show some new flexibility?

Sergey Lavrov: The policy you mentioned, which is promoted in the forms we are now seeing, has no chance to succeed. This is nothing new: Joseph Biden has come in, started using sanctions against Russia, toughening rhetoric and in general exerting pressure all along the line. This has been going on for many years. The sanctions started with the Barack Obama administration and, historically, even earlier. Like many other restrictions, they have simply become hypertrophied and ideology-based starting in 2013, before the events in Ukraine.

Dimitri Simes: They will tell you, and you know this better than I do, that this policy has not been pursued sufficiently consistently, that it was not energetic enough, and that now they and their NATO allies will get down to dealing with Russia seriously so as to show us that we must change our behaviour fundamentally not just when it comes to foreign policy but also our domestic policy.

Sergey Lavrov: Dimitri, you are an experienced person, you know the United States better than Vyacheslav Nikonov or I do. What else can they do to us? Which of the analysts has decided to prove the practicability of any further pressure on Russia? How well do they know history? This question is for you.

Dimitri Simes: Mr Minister, you probably know that I am not a fervent supporter of the policy of the Biden administration.

Sergey Lavrov: I am asking you as an observer and an independent expert.

Dimitri Simes: In my opinion, the Biden administration still has a sufficient set of tools it can apply against Russia, including new sanctions, the promotion of NATO infrastructure in Europe, a more “harmonised” pressure on Russia together with its allies, the

advance of the US policy not closer to the traditional Old Europe (I am referring to Britain and especially to France and Germany) but to Poland, and lastly, the supply of lethal weapons to Ukraine. It is now believed in Washington that it is very important to show Russia that its current policy in Ukraine has no future and that unless Russia changes its behaviour it “will pay a price.”

Sergey Lavrov: My views on the current developments range from an exercise in absurdity to a dangerous play with matches. You may know that it has become trendy to use examples from ordinary life to describe current developments. All of us played outdoors when we were children. Kids of different ages and with different kinds of family upbringing played in the same places. In fact, we all lived as one big family then. There were two or three bad boys on every street; they humiliated other kids, disciplined them, forced them to clean their boots and took their money, the few kopecks our mothers gave us to buy a pie or breakfast at school. Two, three or four years later, these small kids grew up and could fight back. We don't even have to grow up. We do not want confrontation.

President Putin has said more than once, including after President Biden's infamous interview with ABC that we are ready to work with the United States in the interests of our people and the interests of international security. If the United States is willing to endanger the interests of global stability and global – and so far peaceful – coexistence, I don't think it will find many allies for this endeavour. It is true that the EU has quickly towed the line and pledged allegiance. I regard the statements made during the virtual EU summit with Joe Biden as unprecedented. I don't remember ever hearing such oaths of allegiance before. The

things they said publicly revealed their absolute ignorance of the history of the creation of the UN and many other events. I am sure that serious politicians – there are still some left in the United States – can see not just futility but also the absurdity of this policy. As far as I know, the other day 27 political organisations in the United States publicly urged the Biden administration to change the rhetoric and the essence of the US approach to relations with Russia.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: This is unlikely to happen. I believe that your example with “tough guys” on every street is too mild. The United States has gone beyond the pale, let alone the street ethics, which have always been respected. We can see this happening in Ukraine. President Biden is one of those who created modern Ukraine, the Ukrainian policy and the war in Donbass. As I see it, he takes the situation very personally, and he will try to keep it in its current tense state. How dangerous is the situation in Ukraine in light of the ongoing US arms deliveries, the decisions adopted in the Verkhovna Rada on Tuesday, and the statements made by the Ukrainian military, who are openly speaking about a war? Where do we stand on the Ukrainian front?

Sergey Lavrov: There is much speculation about the documents that the Rada passed and that President Zelensky signed. To what extent does this reflect real politics? Is it consistent with the objective of resolving President Zelensky's domestic problem of declining ratings? I'm not sure what this is: a bluff or concrete plans. According to the information published in the media, the military, for the most part, is aware of the damage that any action to unleash a hot conflict might bring.

I very much hope this will not be fomented by the politicians, who,

in turn, will be fomented by the US-led West. Once again, we see the truth as stated by many analysts and political scientists, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, being reaffirmed. They look at Ukraine from a geopolitical perspective: as a country that is close to Russia, Ukraine makes Russia a great state; without Ukraine, Russia does not have global significance. I leave this on the conscience of those who profess these ideas, their fairness and ability to appreciate modern Russia. Like President Vladimir Putin said not long ago; but these words are still relevant, – those who try to unleash a new war in Donbass will destroy Ukraine.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: The US and Western diplomacy have definitely accomplished one thing: they put Russia and China in one boat. Indeed, we have already become strategic partners in deeds not just in words. You have just come back from China. You go there more often than once a year, for sure. During this trip, was there anything new that you sensed from Chinese leadership, which has recently come under unprecedented and rude attacks from the Americans? How strong are the bonds that are being established between Russia and China? How high is the bar that we can or have already reached in our relationship?

Sergey Lavrov: Like Russians, the Chinese are a proud nation. They may be more patient historically. The Chinese nation's national and genetic code is all about being focused on a historical future. They are never limited to 4 or 5- year electoral cycles. They look further: “a big journey begins with a small step” and many other maxims coined by Chinese leaders go to show that they appreciate a goal that is not just on the horizon, but beyond the horizon. This also applies to reunifying Chinese lands – incrementally and without haste, but purposefully and persistently.

Those who are talking with China and Russia without due respect or look down on us, or insult us are worthless politicians and strategists. If they do this to show how tough they are for the next parliamentary election in a couple of years, so be it.

Winston Churchill famously said that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” A big debate is underway about which one is more effective. The coronavirus infection has taken the debate up a notch. To what extent the Western democracies have shown themselves capable of opposing this absolute evil and to what extent countries with a centralised, strong and “authoritarian” government have been successful. History will be the judge. We should wait to see the results.

We want to cooperate; we have never accused anyone of anything, or mounted a media campaign against anyone, even though we are being accused of doing this. As soon as President Putin announced the creation of a vaccine, he proposed establishing international cooperation. You do remember what was being said about Sputnik V. At first, they said that it was not true, and then that this was propaganda and the only purpose was to promote Russia's political interests in the world. We can see the ripple effect of this. On March 30, Vladimir Putin held talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. We sensed a more realistic commitment to cooperate rather than try to engage in “vaccine discrimination” or “vaccine propaganda.”

Getting back to the heart of the matter, by and large, no one should be rude to other people. But what we see instead is a dialogue with a condescending tone towards great civilisations like Russia and China. We are being told what to do. If we want to say

something, we are asked to “leave them alone.” This was the case in Anchorage when the discussion came to human rights. Antony Blinken said that there were many violations in the United States, but the undercurrent was clear – they would sort it out themselves and are already doing so. However, in Xinjiang Uygur, Hong Kong and Tibet, to name a few, things should be approached differently. It’s not just about a lack of diplomatic skills. It runs much deeper. In China, I sensed that this patient nation, which always upholds its interests and shows a willingness to find a compromise, was put in a stalemate. The other day, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson made a relevant comment. I don’t remember that ever happening before.

With regard to whether we are being pushed into the arms of China or China is being pushed into our arms, everyone remembers Henry Kissinger’s words that the United States should have relations with China which are better than relations between China and Russia, and vice versa. He saw this historical process and knew which way it could go. Many are writing now that the United States is committing a huge strategic mistake making efforts against Russia and China at a time, thereby catalysing our rapprochement. Moscow and Beijing are not allying against anyone. During my visit to China, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and I adopted a Joint Statement on Certain Issues of Global Governance in Modern Conditions, where we emphasised the unacceptability of violating international law or substituting it by some secretly drafted rules, of interference in other countries’ internal affairs and, overall, everything that contradicts the UN Charter. There are no threats there. The documents signed by the leaders of Russia and China always emphasise the fact that

bilateral strategic interaction and multifaceted partnership are not directed against anyone, but focus exclusively on the interests of our peoples and countries. They build on a clear-cut and objective foundation of overlapping interests. We look for a balance of interests, and there are many areas where it has been achieved and is being used for the benefit of all of us.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Have you noticed any change in China's position? It is clear that Beijing is in a very tight situation. How far is China willing to go in its confrontation with the United States? It is obvious that they are now responding harshly. Sanctions are being introduced against Beijing, so it responds with tough counter-sanctions, and not only against the United States, but also against its allies, who are also joining the sanctions. Europe has joined this confrontation. Are we prepared to synchronise our policies with China, for example, our counter-sanctions, as we did with Belarus? Do we have a common strategy to counter the increasing pressure from the so-called alliance of democracies?

Sergey Lavrov: There is a general strategy, and I just mentioned it. Along with the Statement signed during my visit to China, a comprehensive Leaders' Statement was adopted last year. Now we are preparing the next document, which will be signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, and dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Treaty on Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. Our strategic treaty will be renewed.

These documents spell out our line of conduct. We are not planning, and will not plan, any schemes to retaliate for what they are doing to us. I do not think that we will synchronise our

responses to any new sanction acts against China and Russia.

Our level of cooperation continues to grow qualitatively.

You mentioned military alliances. There is popular speculation out there that Russia and China might conclude a military alliance.

First, one of the documents signed at the highest level underscored that our relations are *not* a military alliance, and we are not pursuing this goal. We regard NATO as an example of a military alliance in the traditional sense, and we know that we do not need such an alliance. NATO clearly breathed a sigh of relief after the Biden administration replaced Donald Trump. Everyone was happy to again have someone to tell them what to do.

Emmanuel Macron still occasionally tries to vainly mention the EU's strategic autonomy initiative, but no one else in Europe even wants to discuss it. It's over, the boss is here.

That kind of alliance is a Cold War alliance. I would prefer thinking in terms of the modern era where multi-polarity is growing. In this sense, our relationship with China is completely different from that of a traditional military alliance. Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: The “alliance of democracies” will be created. This is obvious although fewer people in Russia still believe that it's about democracy. In its election, its attitude towards freedom of the media and opportunities to express opposing views, the US has made it very clear that it has big problems with democracy. Europe also gives examples that compel us to doubt its efforts to promote a strong democratic project. After all, it still holds a position as a player under a big boss.

Vladimir Putin had a conversation with Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel via videoconference on March 30 of this year. Without Vladimir Zelensky, by the way. This is the Normandy format minus Ukraine, which resulted in a bitter response from Kiev.

They discussed a broad range of issues. Meanwhile, you have said more than once that our relations with the EU are frozen or absent altogether. Do you mean that we stay in contact or that contact is possible with individual EU members but not with the EU as a whole?

Sergey Lavrov: This is exactly the case, and this was also mentioned during the March 30 talks, and during Vladimir Putin's conversation with President of the European Council Charles Michel. We are surprised that this assessment offends the EU. This is simply an objective fact.

It took years to develop relations between Moscow and the EU. By the time the state coup in Ukraine took place these relations included: summits twice a year; annual meetings of all members of the Russian Government with all members of the European Commission; about 17 sectoral dialogues on different issues, from energy to human rights; and four common spaces based on Russia-EU summit resolutions, each of which had its own roadmap.

We were holding talks on visa-free travel. It is indicative that the EU broke them off back in 2013, long before the crisis in Ukraine. As some of our colleagues told us, when it came to a decision on signing the proposed agreement, the aggressive Russophobic minority adamantly opposed it: Russia cannot receive visa-free

travel status with the EU before Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova do. This is the entire background. What the EU did after that, braking all channels of systematic dialogue was a burst of emotion. They took it out on us because the putschists insulted the West by throwing out the document signed by Yanukovich and the opposition the day before, this despite the fact that Germany, France and Poland had endorsed this document. The first actions of the new authorities were to remove the Russian language from daily life and to expel Russians from Crimea. When Russian-speakers and Russians in Ukraine opposed this and asked to be left alone, a so-called “anti-terrorist operation” was launched against them.

In effect, the EU imposed sanctions on us and broke off all communication channels because we raised our voice in defence of Russian citizens and ethnic Russians in Ukraine, Donbass and Crimea. We try to discuss issues with them when they start making claims against us. They probably understand this; I hope they are still seasoned politicians. But if they understand this but don't want to consider it in their practical policy, it means that they are being charged with Russophobia or cannot do anything about the aggressive Russophobic minority in the EU.

Dimitri Simes: I believe when we talk about the EU, it's important to look at what the EU is and to what extent it has changed compared to what it used to be and what it was supposed to be when it was founded. The EU was primarily designed as an organisation for economic cooperation.

No political component was even envisioned at the start. It was about the EU contributing to European economic integration. The possibility was even mentioned of Russia playing some associated

role in that process. But then they said the EU should also have some common values. At first, the idea was that those common values were the cement of the EU itself. Then a new idea emerged in Warsaw that it would be nice for those European values (since they are actually universal) to spread to other regions, as well as for Russia to respect them, or even to obey them. When I look at the EU's approach to Ukraine, the conflict in Donbass and the demands to return Crimea to Kiev, it seems to me that the EU is becoming a missionary organisation. When you deal with crusaders, trying to reckon with them or appealing to their logic and conscience is probably useless. Do you not think that the EU has journeyed to a place where there are limited opportunities for partnership and great potential for confrontation? Or am I being too pessimistic?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I agree with you, absolutely. This is a missionary style – lecturing others while projecting superiority. It is important to see this tendency, as it has repeatedly brought Europe to trouble.

This is actually the case. Established as the Coal and Steel Community, then the European Economic Community – if you look at the EU now, look at their values, they are already attacking their own members like Poland and Hungary, just because these countries have somewhat different cultural and religious traditions. You said it originated in Poland. I actually forget who started this...

Dimitri Simes: I first heard it from Polish delegates at a conference.

Sergey Lavrov: Now Poland itself is facing the consequences of its ideas, only not outside the EU, but within the organisation.

When anyone tries to impose any values on Russia, related, as they believe, to democracy and human rights, we have this very specific response: all universal values are contained in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that everyone signed. Any values invented now, which they try to impose on us or other countries, are not universal. They have not been agreed upon by the entire international community. Even inside the EU, look at those street protests! A couple of years ago, they had protests in France in defence of the traditional family, the concepts of “mother,” “father,” and “children.” This lies deep. Playing with traditional values is dangerous.

As to the EU once inviting Russia as an associate member, we never agreed to sign an association document. Now the same is being done with regard to the Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Ukraine, and Moldova. As for Russia's relations with the EU, which Brussels destroyed, only one thing remained – the basic document on the terms of trade and investment. It was indeed the subject of negotiation between the Brussels Commission and the Russian Federation. This is a document that remains valid. We cooperate with individual countries, but not with the EU, because those were the terms agreed upon, and their practical implementation is going through bilateral channels. The only thing the EU is doing in this respect now is imposing sanctions and banning its members from fulfilling some parts of this agreement because they want to “punish Russia.” That's it, there are no other ties.

We are being told that we are deliberately derailing our relations (although the facts are simply outrageous), trying to shift our ties with Europe to bilateral channels, wanting to “split up” the

European Union. We don't want to split anyone up. We always say that we are interested in a strong and independent European Union. But if the EU chooses a non-independent position in the international arena, as we just discussed, this is their right. We cannot do anything about it. We have always supported its independence and unity. But in the current situation, where Brussels broke off all relations, when certain European countries reach out to us (we have not tried to lure anyone) with proposals to talk, to visit any of the sides and discuss some promising projects in bilateral relations, how can we refuse our partners? It is quite unfair (even a shame) to try to present such meetings as part of a strategy to split up the EU. They have enough problems of their own that split them up.

Dimitri Simes: This is a philosophical issue in Russia's relations with the EU. When the EU has imposed anti-China sanctions, China made a tough response. This was an unpleasant surprise for the EU and caused indignation. Meanwhile, Brussels does not expect such a response from Russia in the firm belief that Russia has no economic levers to oppose the EU. To my knowledge, Russia has not imposed any serious sanctions on the EU.

This is an interesting situation. Russia supplies Europe with 33 percent of its gas. The figures for oil are about the same. I think during all this time Russia has proved convincingly that it won't use energy for political leverage in Europe. Understandably, Russia has been interested in this, especially when it comes to the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. It seems to me that certain people in Europe have forgotten that if Russia does not do something, it doesn't mean that it cannot do it, or won't be compelled to do it if the EU's pressure on Russia crosses a line.

Do you think this is possible in theory? Or does Russia completely rule out such actions?

Sergey Lavrov: You are saying (metaphorically) that they either have not read (which is most likely) or have forgotten the epic about Ilya Muromets who slept on the stove while nobody paid attention? This is not a threat. We will never use energy supplies or our oil and gas routes in Europe to this end. This is a position of principle regardless of anything else.

Dimitri Simes: Even if you are disconnected from SWIFT and everything else?

Sergey Lavrov: We will not do that. This is a position of principle for President of Russia Vladimir Putin. We will not create a situation where we force EU citizens “freeze.” We will never do this. We have nothing in common with Kiev that shut down water supplies to Crimea and takes delight in it. This is a disgraceful position in the world arena. Frequently accusing us of using energy as an instrument of influence, as a weapon, the West keeps silence on what Kiev is doing with water supplies to Crimea. I believe the provision of basic needs on which the daily life of common citizens depends, should never be an object of sanctions.

Dimitri Simes: In this case, what do you mean by referring to “the phenomenon” of Ilya Muromets?

Sergey Lavrov: It is possible to respond in different ways. We have always warned that we will be ready to respond. We will respond to any malicious actions against us but not necessarily in a symmetric manner. By the way, speaking about the impact of the sanctions on civilians, look what is taking place in Syria under the Caesar Act. My colleagues in Europe and, incidentally, in the

region, whisper that they are horrified by the way this act has eliminated any opportunity to do business with Syria. The goal is clear – to stifle the Syrians to make them revolt and overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

Now a few words about our and China's responses to the European sanctions. After all, China also avoided suspending economic activity. It simply imposed sanctions on a number of individuals and companies that held certain anti-China positions. We are doing basically the same.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: As we know, Ilya Muromets did not shut down oil and gas supplies. He used other methods that were often symmetrical. I think we also have a solid set of instruments.

Don't we exaggerate the importance of the EU in the modern world? It has an identity and there are European values. I know this since I have dealt with European MPs and experts for many years.

However, I have the impression that there are two main values: the first one is the euro and the second is LGBT and 60 more letters that describe this notion linked with sexual identity, their presence, absence, or mix.

The EU is undergoing a crisis – Brexit. Britain has left the EU. The economic crisis is very bad. Probably, in Europe it is worse than elsewhere. The economy has dropped by up to 10 percent in many countries. The vaccine-related crisis has shown that Europe cannot counter the virus and adopt a common policy. These problems are emerging at all levels. It cannot draft a common economic policy, migration rules, and so on. Maybe, we are really paying too much attention to Europe? Maybe we can act without

looking back at this “falling” structure?

Sergey Lavrov: But where are we paying too much attention to Europe? We have a very simple position that President of Russia Vladimir Putin has set forth many times: we do not feel hurt. As we know, hurt people get the short end of the stick, or as we say in Russia, hurt people are made to carry water, something we are short of in Crimea. We will always be willing to revive our relations, practically to raise them from the ashes, but to do this we must know what the EU is interested in. We will not knock on a locked door. They are well aware of our proposals, just as the Americans know our proposals on strategic stability, cyber security and many other things. We have said to all of them: “Our friends and colleagues, we are ready for this. We understand that you will have some reciprocal ideas but we have not yet heard them. As soon as you are ready, let’s sit down and discuss them, seeking a balance of interests.” Meanwhile, now we are being accused of neglecting policy on the EU, so I don’t think we are courting this alliance or exaggerating its importance. It determines its place in the world itself. We have already talked about this today.

As for European values, we have many ongoing debates. Some people need European price tags more than European values. They want to travel there for shopping, recreation, buy some property and return home. As I said, our common values lie in our history, the mutual influence of our cultures, literature, art and music. They are great.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: As for modern European culture and art, have they really...

Sergey Lavrov: I am referring to our historical roots.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Because I think today's Europe is pretty empty in terms of culture.

Sergey Lavrov: There are some funny songs; we can listen to them in the car sometimes.

Dimitri Simes: Speaking of relations with the United States, I would like to ask you a personal question because you lived and worked there for a long time when you were Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Of course, you have also been dealing with the US as the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. I lived in the US for almost 50 years.

Sergey Lavrov: Why past tense?

Dimitri Simes: I am now in Moscow. When I look at the United States today, I have the impression that it is undergoing a cultural revolution. I think that if many people in the Joseph Biden administration or the Democrats in Congress are told this, they would not feel offended in any way. They will say that a cultural revolution is long overdue, that it is finally necessary to eradicate racism, give equal and not-so-equal prevailing opportunities to sexual orientation minorities because they were also discriminated against and to develop a true democracy that requires that all those who want to vote can vote. In practice, this means that millions of people will have an opportunity to vote without necessarily being US citizens at all. This is why the Democrats emphatically oppose a ban on voting on Sundays. As you know, there was never any voting in the US on Sundays. Sunday is called God's day. The Democrats wanted Sunday elections so that buses could go to Afro-American churches and take people to the polling stations.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Why take them by bus? They can vote by mail.

Dimitri Simes: Both options are available.

Sergey Lavrov: Why not put a ballot box right in a church?

Dimitri Simes: Exactly. Do you believe the United States is, in many respects, evolving into a different country and that this is not necessarily an irreversible process, though a momentous one? Also, would you agree that this process is not a purely American internal matter because it goes hand in hand with the emergence of a new revolutionary ideology that requires that American values spread around the world and that these American models should not be resisted as they are now in Russia and China? Can this lead to an existential conflict?

Sergey Lavrov: We will talk about this but, first, let me finish what I was saying about European culture. Here is, in my view, a telling illustration of the state of European culture today. If we talk about revolutions, including a cultural revolution, the Eurovision contest speaks volumes. What they are doing now to the Belarusians is repulsive. This is sheer censorship that goes like this: since we – nobody knows who exactly, some anonymous individuals – fancy that we heard some innuendoes in your song, we will not allow you to take part in the contest unless you have another song. But then the same fate befalls another Belarusian song. What does this have in common with art, culture or democracy?

As for a cultural revolution in the United States, I do feel that processes which deserve to be described like this are unfolding there. Everyone probably wants to eradicate racism and, as for us, we have never had any doubt regarding this. We were trailblazers

behind the movement to secure equal rights for all people, regardless of the colour of their skin. However, we should beware that we do not slip into another extreme, the one we have observed during the Black Lives Matter events, and into aggression against white people, white US citizens.

The other day we marked an international day designated to increase awareness of this issue and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, speaking at a General Assembly meeting, said that the previous year had been a year of the most serious and numerous manifestations of white supremacy. I have asked to be given the full text of his speech, as I want to understand what specifically he had in mind. If this is about having a sense of a trend you talked about and the willingness to follow this trend, it is lamentable. This is still the United Nations Organisation and not a venue for promoting US concepts, some US trends.

As for why they need this, yes, they want to spread this to the rest of the world. They have a huge potential to achieve this goal. Hollywood has also started to change its rules, so that everything reflects the diversity of contemporary society, which is also a form of censorship, art control and the way of imposing some artificial restrictions and requirements on others. I have seen black actors perform in Shakespeare's comedies. The only thing I do not know is when a white actor will play Othello. You see, this is nothing less than absurdity. Political correctness reduced to absurdity will lead to no good.

The other tool is social networks and internet platforms, as well as servers located in the United States. The US flatly refuses to discuss ways of either making internet governance more democratic or establishing common rules regulating social

networks for the sake of avoiding the recurrence of the situation with TikTok and other social networks we encountered during the recent events in Russia, including the spread of abominable information, like personal abuse, pedophilia and many other things. We have already approached TikTok and other social networks about the need to establish elementary rules of respect and propriety but the Americans are unwilling to make these types of rules universal.

In Anchorage, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken lectured the Chinese on human rights, ethnic minorities and democracy in China. Indeed, Mr Blinken said they [in the US] also had to address certain issues in this field but they would do it on their own. During talks with the Americans – the same goes for the Europeans – as soon as you start offering to discuss ways of democratising international relations or the supremacy of law on an international scale, they invariably get away from the subject. They want to replace international law with their own rules, which have nothing in common with the supremacy of law globally, on a universal scale. I already talked about large-scale rallies in France in defence of traditional family values. It appears that to secure the rights of one group of people, the rights of another group have to be infringed upon. That is, promoting these values around the world is not an end in itself, but rather a tool for ensuring their dominance.

Dimitri Simes: Richard Nixon once told Nikita Khrushchev that there would be no true harmony or true partnership between the Soviet Union and America unless the Soviet Union stops spreading its ideology. And that was a big problem in the Brezhnev era, I must say, because they discussed a détente while at the

same time supporting a continued international class struggle. As I see it, Leonid Brezhnev was doing it without much conviction. But now, things have turned the other way around. Now the collective West is eager to proliferate its ideology and values. And they seem to be doing so with far greater conviction and perseverance than the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev ever tried. Does this pose a risk of collision?

Sergey Lavrov: Under Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union saw no threat to its existence. One can argue whether that stance was far-sighted enough, but that is how it was. Today's West senses a threat to its dominance. It is a fact. So all those wiggling moves, including the invention of some 'rules' – as in the rules-based international order, something the West has come up with to replace the UN Charter – they reflect precisely this tendency.

I agree that we have swapped positions, or rather the Soviet Union and the modern West have. I don't think this will offend anyone since this is not a big secret. I spoke with Rex Tillerson when he was US Secretary of State. He is a thoughtful and experienced politician and diplomat. It was good to work with him. We disagreed on most things, but we always wanted to continue the dialogue to bring our positions just a little bit closer at least. When he first told me they were concerned about Russia's interference in some elections, I said they had not proved anything to us yet, and all we heard was accusations. When they began to accuse us of interfering in their elections, we repeatedly proposed using the special channel we had for exchanging information about threats to information networks and organisations. They refused. We had repeatedly offered dialogue even before that, when Barack Obama was president, from October 2016 until Donald Trump's

inauguration in January 2017. They always refused.

I pointed out to Tillerson that they had in fact directly stipulated in legislation that the US State Department should spend \$20 million a year to support Russian civil society and promote democracy. That was not even a suspicion on our part as they did it openly (for example, the Ukraine Support Act). There was nothing to prove – they just announced that they would interfere. He told me that was totally different. I asked him why, and he said because we promoted authoritarianism, and they spread democracy. That was it.

Dimitri Simes: And he said it with sincere conviction, didn't he?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Mr Lavrov, naturally, this policy leads to a drastic polarisation. The polarisation of international relations is a dangerous thing. We remember the early 19th century, and the early 20th century. It always ended in wars. The Americans, losing their global dominance, will create (they have already announced this) a new 'alliance of democracies.' I mean create American and pro-American alliances, compelling everyone else to make their choice. This polarisation will increase. What will this mean for the world and for the alliances where Russia is a member? I mean BRICS (which I think they will try to split up), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). How far can this go? How dangerous is it?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a deliberate policy and an extension of the agenda we are talking about – about the United States promoting democracy and spreading benefit. The Americans and Europe are

very active (but the Americans are especially active) in Central Asia. They are trying to create their own formats such as C5+1. Russia is also part of a 5+1 format in Central Asia, in addition to the SCO, CIS, EAEU and CSTO – one that involves the foreign ministers of five Central Asian countries and your humble servant. That format is useful. True, the volume of economic ties that the US and the EU are now building with Central Asia is still incomparable with our economic interpenetration, but they are pursuing an unambiguous goal to weaken our ties with our allies and strategic partners in every possible way.

The numerous initiatives around the Afghan reconciliation and around the Indo-Pacific region envision Central Asia's reorientation from its current vector to the South – to help rebuild Afghanistan and at the same time weaken its ties with the Russian Federation.

I could talk for a long time about the Indo-Pacific region and the Indo-Pacific concept. That multi-layered initiative is aimed at hindering China's Belt and Road Initiative and limiting the Chinese influence in the region, creating constant irritants for that country. There have been some slips about creating an 'Asian NATO.' Although in the US interpretation the Indo-Pacific region is described as 'free and open,' the chances that positions will be worked out through an equal or open process there are slim. It is already obvious that it isn't 'open'. China has not been invited; rather, that country is declared a target for containment. We have not been invited either, which means the attitude to Russia is similar. I would say those are long-term trends. We are talking about this frankly with our neighbours and closest allies. I am confident that they understand all these threats. None of them even considers the possibility of anyone telling them who to talk or

not talk to. It is their sovereign right to choose their partners.

The term 'multi-vector' has become semi-abusive, but we are not giving up the multi-vector approach. We are open to cooperation and friendship with everyone who is ready for relations based on equality, mutual respect, compromise and balance of interests. That our Western colleagues are clearly abusing this approach, especially in post-Soviet countries, is an obvious fact.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Is it possible to avoid the actual military scenario in these circumstances? Isn't it time to create an alliance of free countries given the role reversal that has taken place in the modern world? An alliance, perhaps, of genuine democracies that will oppose the ongoing all-out attack?

Sergey Lavrov: We will not get involved in this kind of political engineering. Russia is committed to the United Nations. When France and Germany put forward the effective multilateralism concept, we asked them what it meant. There was silence followed by joint articles written by the foreign ministers of France and Germany stating that the European Union is an example of effective multilateralism, and everyone needs to adapt to the European processes. Our question why the readily available and universal UN multilateral platform is not a good option remained unanswered. However, the answer is there, and we mentioned it more than once today. They are making up the rules that the international order is supposed to be based on.

Dimitri Simes: Mr Minister, we have taken up much of your time and we appreciate it. But we cannot let you go without asking you one more personal question. What is it like to be Russia's Foreign Minister in this rapidly changing world?

You have worked in several completely different eras. When you were Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, it was a period of Russia's "romantic infatuation" with the United States, though perhaps not quite on the terms that were beneficial for Russia. In the early 21st century, Russia was in search of partnerships. Well, then we got what we are witnessing now. How do you, a person who, in many ways, is the architect of this era, a witness and a participant of this process, find your work in this very complex role?

Sergey Lavrov: To put it short, I never get bored. That is if we are talking about the different eras in my career. We all lived in these eras, and we have seen these transitions. You asked me earlier whether the United States has changed. It has. A lot.

Dimitri Simes: Have you changed?

Sergey Lavrov: Probably. It's not for me to say. A person perceives the environment as a constantly evolving process. People grow up, get smarter or dumber, but they have no way of seeing it.

Dimitri Simes: Do you think we have all become disappointed in many ways, but we have grown, too, as a result of these experiences, and, of course, in the first place, a person holding such positions as yours?

Sergey Lavrov: This is true, of course. How can this not influence the formation of a person? The personality never stops to evolve. It is something that lasts until the end of our lives. Those revolutionary developments had a strong influence on me. I believe the 9/11 attacks were the turning point in the American life. I was in Manhattan, in New York, at the time, and I felt that odour. I

was having a hard time trying to make a phone call, because the phones went dead. Since then, New York has become a different city. This free city, living its own life around the clock and enjoying it, became wary and started looking over its shoulder to see if there was someone around who could hurt it.

This suspicion then spread deeply into American society. There were probably serious reasons for that. I have to commend the US intelligence services, because since then, apart from the Boston Marathon, which we had warned them about, there have been no other terrorist attacks. However, wariness and aloofness can still be felt. Perhaps, there are people who want to take advantage of this in order to do things that you just mentioned. If 11 million Americans become eligible to vote, welcome to the one-party system, Back in the USSR.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Mr Lavrov, thank you very much for the interview. Now that we are within the historic walls of the Foreign Ministry's Mansion on Spiridonovka, a place where history and great diplomacy were made, including the diplomacy of the great powers, I would like to wish us all the return of diplomacy. If it comes back, as President Vladimir Putin is conveying to President Joe Biden, in the form of a live-stream dialogue, then The Great Game will be at your service and at the service of the two presidents.

Sergey Lavrov: Thank you. President Biden has already said that diplomacy has returned to US foreign policy. Your dream has come true.