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## Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's interview with Interfax News Agency, December 18, 2021

**Question:** Are our proposals to the United States and NATO regarding security guarantees an ultimatum to the West, the last attempt to reach out to them or a final warning to make them stop?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We do not speak in the language of ultimatums with anyone. We have a responsible attitude towards our own security and the security of others. The point is not that we have issued an ultimatum, not at all, but that the seriousness of our warning must not be underestimated.

The security situation in Europe, the Euro-Atlantic region and Eurasia has indeed greatly deteriorated recently. This has happened because of a series of concerted actions by the United States and its NATO allies, which, generally speaking, can be described as an attempt to undermine Russia's security and to create a hostile environment around us. We cannot accept this.

Ukraine is in the focus of this policy. Ukraine's decisions are not independent but are subject to change in the situation. When the West provides unconditional and unqualified support to Ukraine, certain quarters in Kiev play up to the worst Western objectives and formulas. And the possibility of Ukraine eventually joining NATO, which some Ukrainian officials keep talking about, is categorically unacceptable to us. We will do our best to prevent this.

We reject the very presentation of the issue. We can discuss all the pros and cons, but we unequivocally demand that NATO withdraw the decision adopted at its Bucharest summit in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia become NATO members. That decision should be called off and revised, which will be seen as a small, not comprehensive, but small step in the right direction. The West does not appear ready to do this. This is why our comprehensive, all-encompassing proposals raise

a number of outstanding issues, primarily for the United States but also for its allies, which should be settled urgently. We are monitoring their reaction, which is not encouraging so far. We are ready for talks on this basis, but so far we can only see that our proposals have been rejected under far-fetched pretexts.

The statement adopted by the North Atlantic Council on December 16 is vivid proof of this. Ninety percent of the text consists of time-worn ultimatums to Russia. We are not issuing any ultimatums to anyone, and we will not allow others to do this towards us. The statement goes on to say that what Russia demands, what it is demanding, is not an outstretched hand but a harsh demand, which allegedly has nothing to do with NATO. The alliance is free to decide which countries can join it, and NATO's relationship with Ukraine is a matter only for Ukraine and the 30 NATO Allies.

No, this is much more a matter concerning Russia, as I am stating clearly now. The time of diplomatic parlance is over. We have to explain things at the elementary level, to spell them out. The potential NATO membership of Ukraine is above all a matter of concern for the Russian Federation.

**Question:** Have we set any deadlines for an answer? Do we have a Plan B, shall we say, in case the answer is no?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We have not set any deadlines. We proposed meeting and talking right now without dragging things out, without delay. Instead of talking to you here, I was actually ready to be in Geneva today for talks with Ms Karen Donfried, US Assistant Secretary of State, or with any negotiators Washington would assign for this purpose. The Americans were told that our interdepartmental delegation at these negotiations would be headed by a supervising deputy minister; they are aware of this. We are waiting for their response. We can be any place they name, at any time, starting tomorrow. Just a few hours to pack and we have it all ready. We have a clear approach, which we have worked on for quite some time, so there are no technical, political or organisational obstacles for starting such negotiations as soon as possible.

As for Plan B, we continue to expect the other side to show a serious approach. We understand they need time to read all this, discuss it and wrap their minds around it. As I understand it, certain discussions on this took place on December 16, at NATO and in the European Union. This is all clear. But by and large, if they confirmed their readiness to meet urgently and negotiate on the basis of our documents – our documents provide a framework for a certain negotiation

process – this would be a good answer. True, we cannot be sure – we know this from the experience of many negotiations – that we will immediately reach an agreement in just a few days. Not at all; these are serious matters, but the process needs to start now. It cannot be delayed, given the situation in all its complexity and the totality of problematic aspects.

**Question:** You said that understandably it would be impossible to come to an agreement right away. Does this mean that we are ready to compromise to reach an agreement?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** This matter has been repeatedly discussed, including over the last few days, in contacts with US representatives and via other channels. We cannot understand the basics of the US position, when they say that we should, for example, with regard to the Minsk Package of Measures, do this or that. We have been urging them to put down on paper what they mean, for several months now. But they are not doing this. I don't know whether they are unable or unwilling. They publish the same statements, sufficiently straightforward and tough statements, over and over again. If we go by what is written in these statements, it would certainly be impossible to come to terms. But any talks imply a search for compromise. The problem is not that there is no will to reach an agreement on our part but that we do not see this kind of will on the other side.

We are saying that there are no far-fetched things in the draft agreement with the United States or in the draft agreement on security guarantees with NATO, and, of course, we are saying this absolutely sincerely, firmly and confidently. This is the Russian Federation's position on issues affecting our fundamental security interests, a position that is free of rhetoric and expressed in the language of a treaty. No more, no less, and it should be treated as such.

Therefore, when we say we need security guarantees, we naturally are proceeding from the assumption that the reply will be such as will make it possible to say: we have made headway in dealing with this package of key issues in such a manner as to see a substantial improvement in the security situation for us, to see a dramatic change for the better; we are no longer concerned about what may take place in the future in connection with the uninterrupted activities involving the buildup of military exercises, creation of infrastructure, redeployment of forces, reconnaissance flights, development of territories, and so on, practically in the entire Western sector, particularly in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea in recent time.

The situation here could be stabilised through documents of this kind and their conclusion. It could be made better. Without them, however, the situation will remain extremely difficult and tense. No one should underestimate Moscow's resolve to defend its national security interests. No one should treat lightly our statements regarding the dangerous nature of current developments.

**Question:** Is this about mutual guarantees? Are we also ready to give them these guarantees?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** Are you suggesting we draft them for NATO? I am not sure at all that they need them. In terms of its approach to security, NATO has long settled on declaring the indivisibility of security for its own members. NATO officials have been saying for quite a while now that they are doing what is necessary to protect themselves against external challenges and threats – real or imagined. That said, they claim they are dealing with their security themselves.

We also plan our security ourselves. But the problem and the difference is that we are suggesting coming to terms on this issue. We would certainly not draft NATO's position, trying to guess what its members would like to receive in return for meeting us halfway. That's funny. We will not do this, it would be methodologically wrong. So far, the other side is not even indicating a willingness to start talks. We will have to wait and see. If they come up with a real position, it would lead to a real negotiating process that, I hope will start soon and take place behind closed doors.

**Question:** What about guarantees of non-aggression against Ukraine or other actions regarding this country?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** They want us to take actions in our own territory. Naturally, we are rejecting this demand in both its essence and form. This demand is unacceptable and inappropriate. They are not asking for additional security guarantees in this context. We provided guarantees when the Budapest memorandum was signed in 1994.

I would like to emphasise that, with complicity from their Western patrons, our Ukrainian colleagues are turning this memorandum upside down. The Budapest Memorandum guarantees the security of Ukraine as a non-nuclear state in the context of the NPT. Guarantees have been ensured and provided from this viewpoint. However, the Budapest Memorandum document does not mention a word about government coups in Ukraine or subsequent actions. To be clear, we must note that this memorandum does not say anything about the possibility that

part of the Ukrainian population living in Ukraine at that time decides whether they should continue living there or return to the Russian Federation.

The Budapest Memorandum is not about that. It sets out security guarantees for Ukraine as a non-nuclear state, and nothing more. The Foreign Ministry has said this many times, and this situation provides us yet another opportunity to emphasise this point.

**Question:** But if we consider a worst case scenario, which apparently is still on the table, if the Americans refuse to provide security guarantees, that would give us a free hand, among other things, regarding President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko's proposal on deploying our nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. Is this so?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We take all our obligations very seriously, under all the treaties to which Russia is a party. We have obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. However, please note that for many years we have been raising the issue with NATO members that the practice of deploying US nuclear weapons on the territory of NATO member states that the NPT deems as non-nuclear – not just deploying, but also holding training sessions involving those countries' crews and equipment on how to use nuclear weapons – that that practice, in our opinion, grossly contravenes the treaty. They tell us no, it does not run counter to the treaty. They tell us, years ago, back when the NPT was under discussion, the Soviet delegation agreed with the Western interpretation. Well, they did not. We have searched the archives, and our approach was there. Back then, we – Moscow, the Soviet Union – expressed our approach, and it was reflected in the records of the talks. Still, for the sake of signing the Treaty, the matter was just left as it was, each with their own opinion. Well, here we are now – just like 50 years ago, each sticking to their position. I am not drawing any parallels with Belarus, just reminding you of the various attitudes to the other side's claims in such matters.

**Question:** You mentioned the Cuban Missile Crisis. That involved nuclear weapons as well, didn't it?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** The Cuban Missile Crisis was the most difficult moment in the entire history of the Cold War, when the world was really teetering on the brink of a nuclear conflict. With so much done since that time with regard to arms control and not only that, with the progress made in comprehending the concepts and doctrines of the use of nuclear weapons, it is simply impossible to discard this

experience and rewind back to 1962.

But we are concerned about the ease with which our NATO opponents treat matters like deploying nuclear weapons, using nuclear weapons in different situations, where things become increasingly uncertain and blurred, where the threshold is lower, including due to capacity – that is, thinking logically, what they are doing makes it easier to go about using nuclear weapons, including on the battlefield. This is noticeable, and it raises our concerns, not just objections. We urge them to choose a different path. For example, one that we tried with the Biden administration, issuing a joint statement on the unacceptability of a nuclear war.

But there are escalation risks; there is the risk of an incident, which cannot be ignored. These risks cannot be taken lightly, they need to be addressed, and we call for this, too. Instead, we have to read a lot of moralising statements by our opponents. These lectures cannot change our position, I would say; if anything, they are strengthening it. On the other hand, they reveal the other side's unwillingness, primarily that of the United States, to address real security threats in a serious manner.

**Question:** Reportedly, the United States is trying to persuade the EU to synchronise tough financial and economic measures against Russia. Do we have the tools to respond to these measures, and will the sanctions affect our position during the talks on security guarantees?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We run into this all the time. Clearly, we are used to it and have adapted to it. I don't want to make fun of what's happening, because these are all not very good developments. The Western community's programmed and differently formatted policy actions on Russia simply strike the eye. One gets the impression that the people who participate in these discussions are overwhelmed by the idea of collective responsibility for what is going on. That is, no one can or is willing to offer an alternative, and things are unfolding arbitrarily. We have to reckon with this and, in all appearance, this will continue into the future, because those who hope for a possibility for Russia to review the demands that the West puts forward as a condition for taking steps on the sanctions track are naive. I am not even saying there is almost no such thing as lifting the sanctions that were imposed earlier. But that's okay; this is a separate major topic, which is also revealing. But I am on to something else here. Routine statements coming from the West about its willingness to develop constructive relations with Russia and maintain a constructive dialogue with us if Russia does what the West insists on are

worthless. This is expressed in different ways; in the most terse and concise form it is expressed like it's up to Russia, while we, the West, stand ready; it's Russia's choice.

Yes, all right, we re-read it, which made our eyes even sorer, and that's all there is to it. That is all we got from it.

**Question:** Still, will the sanctions affect the talks on security guarantees?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We suggest reaching an agreement on the aspects of the situation in the sphere of tough security that are currently causing the greatest concern. But this is all a product of NATO's constant and steady eastward expansion, which has recently been accompanied and supplemented by the military and the military-technical development of the neighbouring countries that are not formal NATO members. In addition, this goes hand-in-hand with intensified and openly provocative actions designed to see our reaction, whether it will be tough, or whether we will be willing to adjust our approach to a certain extent. That is, if I did not engage in diplomacy, I would refer to it as teetering on the brink of war. I would not want to touch on this in my assessments and reasoning. We do not want this, and we do not need a conflict. We want to reach an agreement on a sound basis. We want to move these multi-pronged activities which are, to a large extent if not entirely, anti-Russia, harmful and pre-planned, where all the roles have been assigned, to move them away from ourselves in order to get certain guarantees for normal coexistence in this space and in this area.

So, sanctions or other tracks in our activities do not fit into this logic in any way. This is an independent, separate group of questions that we have created in a form that is fairly direct and clear for our opponents, thus showing, among other things, that this is no joking matter, but, instead, needs to be dealt with right now, starting tomorrow.

**Question:** What about the “sanctions from hell” which the Western countries are threatening to impose against us? Aren't they a threat to our security?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** I would like to share one observation with you in this connection. Not long ago – a year or two ago, it seemed to us that some issues like the one you mentioned now were discussed in the West if not with some trepidation but at least with the understanding that they concern fundamental, serious things. Now the Bucharest Nine comes into play. This is the most anti-Russia wing in NATO and the EU, with which the White House conducted special consultations, apparently explaining its own interpretations of our proposals – I don't know, this is

just my supposition. Now the situation has changed. They are imposing on others its internal NATO and internal EU narrative that Dostoyevsky, whose 200th birthday we just observed, would have described as “anything goes,” absolutely anything. These people are simply removing the limits of what is possible and acceptable in discussing various issues. But they ignore the fact that following the same logic as NATO, we will take care of our security ourselves and will sooner or later start pushing the limits of what is acceptable for us. We have already expressed our opinion in a slightly different way and will continue speaking out. So, this is a serious issue.

**Question:** But if, say, they reject our proposal, will that untie our hands?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We will use the appropriate methods and approaches we need to ensure our security. We do not want a conflict and we would like to come to terms on a reasonable foundation. Any diplomatic action, any initiative or any proposal is a test of negotiability for those who are being addressed. Before we come to any conclusion on what to do next we must make certain the answer is negative. It could be a flat “no,” or emotional to some extent, or neutral. It could be anything. I do not want to anticipate it but I hope the answer will be at least relatively constructive so we can start our dialogue and talks. It is unclear what will happen, but let's wait and see. Later there will be many options in different areas. However, talking about them now is counterproductive because we are trying to focus on our own proposals.

**Question:** So, there will be separate talks on security guarantees, not as part of the dialogue on strategic stability?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We suggest a separate negotiating track on security guarantees – bilaterally with the US – that would include interdepartmental delegations.

As for a strategic stability dialogue, two rounds are over and we are preparing for a third one. We are working on our position, hoping the other side will specify potential decisions. That said, it is clear we will have to talk and discuss security guarantees, all the more so since one of the two working groups is called “potential and actions that could have a strategic effect.” NATO's actions are having a strategic effect and it's negative for us. Something needs to be done in this respect. They should stop or we need to stop them. I hope we will discuss this through a separate channel but we will also work on this in the format of strategic stability dialogue. I mean with the United States, I don't mean NATO.



**Question:** Do the Americans continue to insist on China's involvement in our dialogue on strategic stability or do they want to discuss these issues via a separate US-China channel?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** I have read reports that influential experts, including retirees and analysts, have published several articles on the Chinese factor, and this certainly creates a certain background and context. However, this question did not come up during our meetings, discussions or in conversations with the Americans this year after the June meeting between the presidents. As I see it, the United States has certain channels for discussing arms control with Beijing, and there is a five-sided format as well – the nuclear Five that holds useful meetings. This work is intensive now, on the eve of the NPT review conference. I hope there will be results that we can announce at the conference or in that context. China is very active there. In other words, there is no lack of venues. As for our dialogue on strategic stability with the US, the China factor only appears at US initiative. However, our position remains the same: we respect China's position and consider it its sovereign choice, as is the case with Britain and France. We are very interested in their participation in this process. A sovereign choice is based on the national interests of these states and these interests may coincide with different arms control formats. We will not coerce anyone to do anything. We urge Britain and France to show a responsible attitude towards the situation. Just as with NATO, we cannot ignore the opportunities that the US allies have in different areas, and we will deal with this, too.

**Question:** Should we expect consultations on visa issues be held before the year is out?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** We do not have any consultations scheduled for what remains of this year. These matters continue to be discussed by the embassies. I want to confirm what has been said on several occasions, our Ambassador Anatoly Antonov mentioned this, and we mentioned this here as well: there is some progress on matters of secondary importance. Some categories of travelers, such as guests of embassy employees, can obtain visas more easily. Making travel arrangements for the specialists who are temporarily posted for various assignments, including building maintenance, has somewhat improved. Even though the room for improvement is vast and a good deal of work remains to be done, we managed to fix certain things of secondary importance, but there are no signs of us getting any closer on issues that matter most.

If the Americans don't stop and continue to demand that our employees leave the country before January 30, we will respond in kind, and later the same number of their diplomatic mission employees will have to leave our country as well. The most severe personnel shortages, both here and there, will ensue. I'm not sure why the United States would want this. From time immemorial, embassies and consulates have worked to maintain normal bilateral relations and to facilitate dialogue. Unfortunately, visas have become a problem in our relations.

We never relent in urging the Americans to try to get this off the ground, but so far to no avail. It is not very clear how to interpret their approach, and why it is so uncompromising and does not take into account obvious needs, including those of the United States. Do they really think that we will be willing to unilaterally meet them halfway when our people are not able to rotate or simply travel to the United States, and have to apply for visas in third countries, while Washington gets what it needs? This runs counter to the logic behind diplomatic relations, not to mention the state of relations between Moscow and Washington. They cannot count on anything like this. This is one aspect of the matter.

The other aspect is that sometimes it appears that our colleagues have at some point underestimated our resolve to respond asymmetrically to their endless anti-Russia moves. When, in April, Russia was on the receiving end, again, of a whole series of completely groundless illegal sanctions, it was, in my opinion, a balanced and reasonable decision to respond by introducing a ban on hiring local personnel. Since then, they have been tying their destructive moves, such as failure to make available the required number of consular officers, which lead to non-issuance of visas or other enormous difficulties, and much more, to this decision. And they have also ratcheted up the pressure on our embassy.

But we do not even propose figuring out who started it and who is responsible for what, even though the situation here is absolutely indisputable, when back under the Obama administration we waited for many months, without responding even to the initial expulsion of a large number of our employees. But now, right now, let's not waste the time figuring out who did what, why and when. We just need to put the most problematic demands on hold and say: while this is not happening, let's try to use the time to find solutions. Had this happened, I don't think any Foreign Ministry employees who engage in relations with the United States would be here, because I would have been sitting in Geneva for the security guarantee talks, while my colleagues would have left, the next day, for Helsinki or

Vienna in order to work on removing these visa irritants. Our wives would have forgiven us even if we hadn't been able to make it back in time for the New Year.

**Question:** That is, there will be no consultations on visas before the year is out?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** No.

**Question:** We are saying that we are demanding or will demand that the United States compensate us for seizing our diplomatic property and denying us access there. Is a legal claim for compensation already being drafted? Has it been presented to the Americans? And if so, what is the approximate amount of damages?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** The issue of diplomatic property is not being addressed. No progress has been made due to the US stance. We put a very fine point on this with the Americans at all levels, to reiterate, literally at all levels, including the highest level with no effect, at least, not the effect that we need. At this point, we would like to especially emphasise the need for our maintenance teams to at least tour the grounds in order to inspect the premises, to take stock and assess damage and see what is still there and what is gone. We are in the dark about this, we are not allowed there. And then we will see what we can do with regard to the steps that you mentioned.

**Question:** Towards the end of Donald Trump's presidency, we were saying that our relations had hit the bottom. Now, almost a year after Joe Biden has been in office, have we pushed off the bottom? Second, you told us in your interview last year that you were not expecting anything good in our relations with America, and that we should move to a two-track approach in our relations with the United States consisting of total deterrence, including military deterrence, and selective dialogue. Are we carrying out this policy now?

**Sergey Ryabkov:** With regard to whether we have reached the bottom, I think that thankfully we didn't break through the bottom and, in some respects, we are still moving forward and everything is not hopeless. However, in some areas the potential for deterioration is clear. We must deal with it before things collapse even more. Our proposals regarding security guarantees are a signal that there are many reasons for alarm in the western direction in general, from the point of view of military-political aspects of security. This needs to be addressed. Another area where we do not see much reason for being particularly optimistic are things related to bilateral irritants, such as visas, etc. The path forward here is obvious,

though. There's not even need for any talks. All you need to do is just make a political decision and have people get together and write down on paper a sequence of steps on either side which shouldn't take more than several days. It is a very simple thing to do. The reluctance on the American side to do this clearly shows their lack of political will to improve relations. So, we have made some progress on some tracks and we will keep moving down that positive path, as best we can, being mindful of the risks.

I believe that the two-track approach is the only possible way to deal with the Americans at this point. But this is my subjective opinion. Our policy does not reproduce in the least what, for many decades, has been practiced and, moreover, officially declared by the West with regard to Moscow as the capital of the Soviet Union and then the capital of the Russian Federation.

The two-track approach was first stated in the report by Pierre Harmel, former Prime Minister and former Foreign Minister of Belgium, in the 1967 NATO report. And they have been sticking to it since then. You can call something by different names, but that doesn't change what it is. Is the Higgs boson a particle or a field? Both.

I am not getting caught up in my own words about the two-track approach. I know one thing. We need to achieve, what the Biden administration's top officials famously refer to as "stable and predictable relationship" with Moscow. What we need is a stable and predictable relationship with Washington. We can get there by demonstrating our serious approaches and intentions in a variety of areas, while remaining open to dialogue. The other side often has a problem, and it appears that it will arise again following our proposals, which is that they are good at showing firmness bordering on rudeness, but they are rather unprepared for dialogue. So, just like the communicating vessels, we will also be balancing. You can call it a two-track approach or whatever you like. Our foreign policy is presidential policy, and we carry out the decisions that are made by the leader of our state.



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