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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, January 13, 2022



Vyacheslav Nikonov: We are not in the usual studio in Ostankino but in the Foreign Ministry's historic mansion on Spiridonovka Street. This is where the Limited Test Ban Treaty banning nuclear weapon tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water was signed and the first G8 summit took place in 1996.

We are discussing the problems of 2022, which had a most unusual beginning. Everyone expected the year to get off to a rapid start, but not quite in the way it happened. Sergey Lavrov, one of the most influential politicians and diplomats in our country and the world, is at the centre of these events. Dimitri Simes joins us live from Washington.

Now all attention is focused on the European security talks that your deputies conducted in Geneva and Brussels and today in Vienna. Judging by everything, our Western partners have not grasped the imperative character of the Russian proposals expressed in a draft treaty on security with the United States and an agreement with the NATO countries. They are used to talking on their own terms, not as equals. What could you say about these talks? Are they a success or a failure? Are they going better or worse, or about as you expected? What will come next?

Sergey Lavrov: This building hosted another important event in world history. In the autumn of 1943, the foreign ministers of the USSR, Great Britain and the US signed here a declaration that mentioned for the first time after the victory over Nazism the need to establish a global organisation. The term "UN" was not yet used at that time. This is symbolic. Today, we are discussing a situation that is largely the result of Western attempts to call into doubt the universal legitimacy of the UN. The West is replacing international law with its own rules that all others have to follow.

The talks underscore the serious confrontation occurring in the world arena: the West is trying to assert its dominance and to do all it can to achieve what it considers necessary to advance its own interests. This attitude was on full display at the talks. I can confirm that they were businesslike. The West laid out its tough, sometimes arrogant, unyielding and uncompromising position in a generally calm tone, in a businesslike manner. This gives us hope that there will be time to digest the talks held in Washington.

The Russian position was expressed no less forcefully. The arguments were on our side. Like the principle of indivisible security. During the talks, the United States and its NATO allies insisted that our main demand for legal guarantees that NATO will not expand eastward was unrealistic. They argued that NATO has its own procedures: only its member countries decide whom to accept and whom to reject, if a country applies. But instead of the NATO procedures, we returned them again and again to the agreements that were drafted within the framework of the entire Euro-Atlantic community and the OSCE. Indeed, they interpret the indivisibility of security as the freedom of every country to choose its allies. However, the same sentence reads, without any dots or commas, that this freedom is granted with an understanding that in this context the Participating States "will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States." Not a

single country or a group of countries has the right to claim dominant positions in the Euro-Atlantic Region. All these ideas were harmonised in a package and ultimately reaffirmed with the adoption of the Charter for European Security at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999. The West is open to whatever ideas benefit it. We believe that the freedom to choose alliances is an integral part of the unacceptable moves that will undermine the security of Russia and any other state.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: But still, did the talks go as expected, better or worse?

Sergey Lavrov: As expected. I think we know the US negotiators pretty well by now. We have met with them many times for different reasons, including the talks on Iran's nuclear programme and the New START Treaty. We understood basically what the conversation would be like. For us, it was very important to follow a direct instruction of President of Russia Vladimir Putin. He said we should be as tough as possible on all issues of European security. This applies not only to Russia's unilateral demand not to interfere with it and not to do anything that makes us displeased but also to the principles aimed at ensuring the security of all without encroaching on anyone's interests and without harming the security of any state.

Dimitri Simes: You did not and could not expect the United States and NATO to agree to negotiate a ban on the accession of Eastern European countries, primarily Ukraine and Georgia, to NATO. You rightly said that the result was predictable. Listening to your dialogue with officials from the US Administration and US Congress, one begins to realise that Russia's response is not predictable. It was proposed to continue the talks on medium-range missiles (at least that is what the State Department and the White House are saying), on the possible limitation of military exercises and on better informing them about military exercises. With regard to NATO infrastructure advancing to Eastern Europe, I understand, Russia received a firm no. Everyone is wondering how Russia will respond. Continue talks, withdraw or other actions, such as weapons or military action?

Sergey Lavrov: The position outlined by President Vladimir Putin includes legal guarantees against NATO expanding to the East, legal guarantees against deploying offensive weapons in neighbouring territories that pose a threat to Russia's security, and a principled plan for returning the European security architecture to how it was configured in 1997, when the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation was signed and used as a basis to create the Russia-NATO Council later. These are

the three key requirements. The remaining proposals depend on how we do on these three initiatives.

Indeed, NATO members and the Americans flatly rejected our right to seek the non-expansion of NATO. I have already provided arguments showing that our positions rely not on NATO documents (we have nothing to do with them, just as they have nothing to do with us), but on documents adopted at the highest level at the OSCE, including the 1999 Istanbul summit, where the freedom to choose alliances is directly related to the need to ensure the indivisibility of security, so that no one takes measures in their own interests at the expense of the security of any other state.

Speaking of the OSCE, in 1975, after the Helsinki Final Act was signed, US President Gerald Ford said that: "History will judge this Conference not by what we say here today, but by what we do tomorrow – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep." We were made such promises with regard to the non-expansion of NATO. Former US Secretary of State James Baker told General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990 that NATO's military jurisdiction would not move an inch east of the Oder. Later, Prime Minister of Great Britain John Major spoke with Soviet Defence Minister Dmitry Yazov. To a direct question by Minister Yazov, whether we should be concerned about Poland and Hungary's requests to join NATO being approved, John Major said there were no such plans and this matter was not being discussed.

For those who are claiming that no one promised anything to anyone, this situation was described in the memoirs of the British Ambassador to Russia at the turn of the 1990s Rodric Braithwaite which were published in 2002. Surprisingly, no one mentioned them. The book says that all that did happen, and promises were made to Mikhail Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders by people who were in a hurry back then and mainly focused on addressing other more important issues. By making such promises, they allegedly did not mean to mislead anyone. A wonderfully English explanation of the deception that took place back then.

We hope that the recent promises made in Geneva and Brussels will be kept. The United States and NATO promised to put their proposals down on paper. We have repeatedly made it clear to them that we need to have an article-by-article response to our documents. Should they have an issue with any provision, they should clarify why and set it down on paper. If they find a particular provision suitable with one exception, they should put this exception in writing as well. If

they want to exclude or add something, they should do so in writing as well. We provided our thoughts in writing a month ago. Washington and Brussels had enough time to do as requested. Both of them promised to respond in writing.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: A month has passed and so far, there has been no response. Some people even said that not all members of the American delegation had had enough time to read our proposals. Clearly, the West is trying, as was expected, to play games with existing proposals, drown them in empty talk, retreat to realm of principles and avoid specifics. How much longer do we have to wait to receive counterproposals? How long can the talks last? How long do the negotiations have to last so we can make the practical decisions discussed by Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Sergey Lavrov: Talks with the United States began only three days ago and talks with NATO were held yesterday. The Americans promised us to try – we said they need to really try their best – and give us their counterproposals next week. On behalf of his organisation, Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg also promised to respond in writing. I believe we will receive it within a week. Following that Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu and I will report to Russian President Vladimir Putin because we are acting on his direct instructions – this was his initiative. Next, we will think how to respond to what our Western partners might come up with, meaning their counterproposals.

Dimitri Simes: If I understood you correctly, you consider it possible and expedient to continue the talks. You believe that the ball is now in Washington's and Brussels' court and expect them to send Russia their counterproposals in writing. I don't quite understand the following: The White House clearly describes what will be done as regards Russia if it does not accept the US and NATO proposals. Specific lists of sanctions are quoted. Today, the Senate will vote on one of them. Most likely, it won't pass because the White House objects to it. But there is another list that has a chance of passing. It reflects not just the position of Democrats in the Senate but also the view of the White House. What will Moscow do if the Russian proposals are ignored for the umpteenth time, however courteously?

Sergey Lavrov: We will never act like the United States. In the past few years, sanctions have become the main foreign policy tool for it. The culture of diplomacy and compromise is all but lost. The US line in the international arena is dictated by the awareness of its own exceptionalism. This is not even denied. US

presidents (including Barack Obama) used the term “exceptionalism.” This is probably good for encouraging the younger generation to have respect for their own history but is absolutely unacceptable in world politics.

Why did we submit our proposals? We want to return to negotiated problem-solving. As President of Russia Vladimir Putin said, we were “fooled,” consistently deceived since the early 1990s. Now they are asking us what we will give them if we want to do something in our own interests. We have already given them everything. Hoping for some understanding in the West, we did not respond forcefully to the crudest violations of the agreements on NATO’s eastward non-expansion and many other promises, including those in writing. I am referring to the non-deployment of considerable military forces on the territory of new members on a permanent basis. But all this became “overgrown with moss” long ago. Threats and sanctions are so arrogant that every person can understand that. The US Congress has adopted such absurd decisions more than once. I don’t rule out anything. We will respond. During his recent telephone conversation with US President Joe Biden, President Vladimir Putin said that if they followed down this path, it would destroy our relations. We do not want to scare anyone. We will make decisions based on each specific situation that takes shape due to various moves by the US and its Western allies.

You mentioned intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. As one of the proposals made to us verbally for now as an example of areas where we could hold further talks, the Americans and representatives of NATO countries mentioned reducing risks, discussion of confidence building measures, including in outer space and cyberspace, as well as arms control, including an agreement on limiting intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. This is a revealing moment. Over two years ago, after the Americans destroyed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, we sent an initiative of President of Russia Vladimir Putin practically to all OSCE countries. He invited them to join a unilateral moratorium that we imposed on the deployment of land-based intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. It was conditioned on the non-deployment of the same missiles of US make. We suggested a joint moratorium. As soon as we announced it, the Americans and Europeans, the NATO members called us sneaky. They said we had already deployed Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad Region and now want to deprive them of such an opportunity. When he put forward this initiative two years ago, President of Russia Vladimir Putin suggested reconciling verification measures that

were later explained by the Defence Ministry. We wanted to invite them to visit Kaliningrad, look at the Iskander systems deployed there and see for themselves (as we suggested to them many times) that they did not fall under the restrictions of the INF Treaty. In return, we wanted to visit US missile defence bases in Romania and Poland to look at MK-41 launchers. Lockheed Martin produced them and promoted them on its website as dual purpose: for missile defence and launching offensive cruise missiles. This is what was suggested. NATO representatives said that this did not suit them. President of France Emmanuel Macron was the only one willing to discuss this but not one on one with Russia. The ever suspicious NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, again said that this was an underhanded proposal. Nobody mentioned that the initiative involved verification from the very start.

Now this is one of the specific results that we asked them to put in writing. They said themselves that they are ready to discuss a new regime on intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. There are nuances: they are ready to renounce nuclear missiles of this range and will think what to do about their non-nuclear versions. However, there is no difference – both a nuclear and non-nuclear missile will be detected and perceived as a direct threat to the Russian Federation. It is necessary to talk about this. They pulled out one element of our proposals – the initiative not to deploy offensive weapons near the Russian borders. This is a useful suggestion but it will hardly be important in isolation from our main demand of NATO's eastward non-expansion.

We will continue waiting but not for a long time. President of Russia Vladimir Putin made it clear at the extended meeting of the Foreign Ministry Collegium and in subsequent statements. A response must be quick. We know that NATO representatives want to drag out this entire process. We hear that the Americans and their main allies are reaching an agreement on making the OSCE the main venue. I must say in this context that we have not made any initiatives at the OSCE. We addressed our proposals primarily to the main player, the United States. We then sent them to NATO with which we have the Founding Act. We signed relevant agreements with the alliance. Neither the EU nor the OSCE took part in any Russia-NATO talks. They did not send any information officially. Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is getting emotional and not very politely expressing his discontent that the EU has found itself marginalised. He thinks that Russia is allegedly ignoring the EU. But he marginalised himself on the European security issues. I believe that all attempts to

create a new approach, strategic autonomy and a “compass” are in the interests of Europe. We met the initiatives of France with understanding. Nobody will allow the European Union to do anything. The United States has already done all it could for its obedient support group in NATO and the EU to present the alliance as a bulwark of security, including for the EU. Nonetheless, we submitted the documents to the Americans and NATO.

I want to make it clear. We have not initiated talks in the OSCE. Discussions on European security have been going on there for many years. There is a special forum – a Structured Dialogue that was suggested by the Germans several years ago. All this muddling along has to do with Ukraine. Whenever European security is on the agenda (special sessions take place every month if not more often), our Western friends are talking in unison about Ukraine. Everything comes down to Ukraine. We noticed this at the talks in Geneva and Brussels as well. What is taking place in Vienna now is a session planned long ago, at which Poland will present its priorities as the OSCE Chair. No more than that. This is a routine process. All participants will comment on the Polish priorities and explain their attitude to them. Our representative will mention the initiatives we are discussing now. But the main format is Russia-US and Russia-NATO somewhat.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: That was one of the main questions everyone was asking: what does the OSCE have to do with it? You made clear it was not our initiative, but a routine ploy designed to delay the process. Let's return to our potential responses and sanctions. I'm sure the Western side raised the following question during the talks in Geneva and Vienna: if you say no to our proposals, then what? Are our diplomats authorised to clarify or to spell out what we mean by a military-technical response?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already said that we will not act like the Americans, who are saying we must withdraw troops from some part of our sovereign territory, or they will impose sanctions on us. This is an unseemly thing to do.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: With the support of the US Administration, a bill by Robert Menendez has been introduced whereby sanctions will be imposed in the event of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. They include personal sanctions against several persons, including the President, the Foreign Minister and other individuals, as well as against the Russia's major systemically important banks. Are pre-announced sanctions something that is part of the normal course of diplomacy and even more so against the backdrop of the talks on European security?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a nervous breakdown of sorts. In the endless assertion of their own greatness, these people have reached a psychological state that is difficult to comprehend. I am amazed to read these initiatives drafted by grown-up people and serious politicians. This is not their first year in Congress.

These steps do not reflect well on them. There are proposals to impose sanctions regardless of whether there is an “attack” on Ukraine or not, but simply because we are not withdrawing troops from our territory. At the same time, the US delegation in Geneva is insisting on withdrawal as the key to everything else. In response to our follow-up questions, they said they would not move their armed forces or military equipment in Europe further away from our borders. That says it all, if you ask me. This is arrogance of the highest order. Speaking about our prospective response, I will say again that we will never “wield a stick” or say during the talks that we will “hit” them if they do not act in a certain manner. We will respond to the actual developments as they unfold. The Americans are foaming at the mouth, and along with Jens Stoltenberg they are blustering about how there can be no agreement or commitment with regard to the non-expansion of NATO, because we are talking about the freedom to choose alliances. Look at what the United States and the West are doing with regard to non-NATO members. For example, the European Parliament recently adopted a resolution demanding that the Union State of Russia and Belarus be stopped in its tracks. I’m serious, there is such a document. The Americans are trying to prohibit multiple countries from engaging in defence cooperation with us. They are threatening Turkey, India, Indonesia, and Egypt with sanctions only because they openly conclude commercial agreements with us. Nord Stream 2 is not even about the freedom to choose alliances, but simply freedom to engage in regular business on international markets. It turns out Germany is not free to pursue its own economic interests. This is where these double standards show most clearly.

Dimitri Simes: They say that Russia should start de-escalating near its border with Ukraine. Is Russia willing to de-escalate? Have any promises been made by NATO in this regard?

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding the freedom to choose alliances, which you mentioned and made clear that you understand that this is NATO's position. We cannot be guided by NATO's position. We rely on the agreements signed at the highest level by all OSCE countries, including all NATO countries. The Alliance is now showing a total inability to negotiate. This is not the first time our Western

partners find themselves in a situation like that. Take the Minsk agreements, which are not being implemented, or the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo in 2013, which was reached through the mediation of the EU. The EU has demonstrated its ability to help reach solutions to the challenging Kosovo situation, but the Kosovo leaders in Pristina have said they would not comply, even though everything had been signed. Since then, the EU has been experiencing recurring episodes of impotence. We remind them of this from time to time. The creation of such a community could seriously help defuse tensions in this Serbian region. The Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo envisaged providing autonomous rights to the Serbs, which is strongly reminiscent of what is spelled out in the Minsk agreements for the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics. The EU played a decisive role in both cases. In the case of Belgrade and Pristina, it acted as a mediator; and in the case of the Minsk agreements, Germany and France acted on behalf of the EU. Both these agreements concern the rights of the Slavs, especially the Orthodox Christian Slavs. In either case, the EU does not want to lift a finger to make sure that the party that blocks the implementation of these agreements fulfils its obligations.

Let's not forget what Antony Blinken said about Kazakhstan. He publicly demanded the Republic to explain why it had invited the CSTO peacekeepers. How are we supposed to take it? Does this mean that Montenegro can join NATO, while Kazakhstan, which has joined the CSTO 30 years ago, cannot enjoy the same rights? This is the Secretary of State of a major state who is saying such things.

With regard to movements on our territory, they are not only talking about the roads that the Americans recommend that we use, not only about "withdrawing" troops from the border with Ukraine (as they put it), but already about the troops "returning" to their barracks. Wendy Sherman said exactly that, and did so publicly during a press conference. I don't think I have to explain that these demands are absolutely unacceptable. We will not discuss them.

Vyacheslav Nikonov: Do you see any link between what happened in Kazakhstan and the launch of the European strategic stability talks? What is your assessment of Russia's actions and the logic behind CSTO actions? Has sending our peacekeepers to Kazakhstan strengthened our hand or not?

Sergey Lavrov: Conspiracy theories are not in short supply. Some of these conspiracy theorists speculate that the West orchestrated all these developments to undermine our positions ahead of the talks in Geneva and Brussels. Others accuse

us of provoking them to “invade” Kazakhstan and take it “under control.” These are all deceitful allegations made in bad faith. The reasons behind all this are quite clear to us. We are discussing them with our colleagues in Kazakhstan, as well as other CSTO countries. The authorities in Kazakhstan are carrying out a thorough, full-fledged investigation. I am certain that they will make the results public once it is completed. This has nothing to do with Moscow’s “underhand dealings” or any other conspiracy theories. This is Kazakhstan’s affair, and Nur-Sultan is working hard on this matter.

As for Russia’s actions, there was a direct request from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, our ally, based on the obligations all CSTO members assumed when they signed the Collective Security Treaty and later the CSTO Charter. It is obvious to anyone that everything was impeccable from both the technical and logistical perspectives, as well as in terms of performance – the CSTO deployed its peacekeeping forces to protect critical facilities. The President of Kazakhstan said that these forces fulfilled their core mission and announced our agreement to start withdrawing the peacekeepers to the contributing countries. This too demonstrates that the troops were swift and effective in delivering on their mission. The looting, burning buildings, beheadings of police officers and the way these rioters and terrorists treated journalists presented a horrible scene. It is part of my professional duty to monitor the Western response, including of the OSCE with its aspirations to play one of the leading roles in European security, and for me this was an even more disturbing experience. The OSCE was inadequate in its response to the developments in Kazakhstan, and ended up issuing calls to respect the rights of journalists, human rights, etc. What a disgrace. In situations like this, you have to begin by directly pointing at the causes of what had happened. An investigation is underway, and once it is completed the international community must be informed of its outcomes.

Dimitri Simes: Let us turn to the talks with Washington and Brussels considering the latest developments. Are you still optimistic? Or you are just doing what has to be done? As Wendy Sherman said, maybe Russia understands that reaching an agreement would be impossible, but decided to try it to be able to do what it wants in Ukraine afterwards. Do you have any hope that these talks will succeed?

Sergey Lavrov: We always focus on specific tasks. “The hopes the young mind nourish,” but we are mature men here. The reality is harsh, and we have to act

on it, and the reality is that we have been promised a written response. We will wait for it and then determine what to do next.

As for optimism, there is a saying that goes like this: "Who's a pessimist? A pessimist is a well-informed optimist."



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