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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2021, Moscow, January 14, 2022



Good morning, colleagues,

Happy New Year to all of you, no matter what calendar you are using, except for some of our eastern colleagues. We have a month of celebrations ahead of us, since China will be celebrating the New Year under its calendar soon.

We had no time to spare after the holidays and got down to work right away, and even sacrificed some of our days off work. The situation around the world leaves us little time for rest and leisure. I will not go into too much detail assessing

it. You heard President Vladimir Putin's detailed policy-setting statements at the expanded meetings of the foreign and defence ministries' collegiums, as well as at his annual news conference on December 23, 2021.

The situation has not improved. Everyone understands that. Conflict potential is building up, and our Western colleagues have largely shaped this trend. Their policy consists of undermining the architecture of international relations based on the UN Charter, as well as replacing international law with their own "rules" and imposing them on others to build a new world order. All kinds of international formats have been emerging on matters which have long been on the agenda of universal UN agencies. This creates an overlap. These are narrow formats of like-minded countries who are cast as trail-blazers dictating "much-needed" new approaches to all others. Those refusing to join these initiatives are labelled as reactionary countries seeking to impose a revisionist agenda in international affairs. However, it is the West that currently promotes a revisionist agenda. It is the West that seeks to revise the UN Charter. Russia and other nations who are our allies and strategic partners have been standing up for the UN Charter, its principles, purposes and structure to defend them from revisionist aspirations.

The most notorious project of this kind was the Summit for Democracy on December 9-10, 2021. The way Washington prepared this meeting, held it and announced its "outcomes" is a telling example of the policy line adopted by our American colleagues to bring ideology back into international relations (while we got rid of ideology in international affairs not that long ago) and draw new dividing lines.

The United States and NATO openly declared their goal of containing the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. Attempts to artificially expand NATO and draw Ukraine into it continue unabated. Not long ago, we heard interesting statements from the leaders of NATO and the United States that the Alliance will welcome the accession of Nordic countries that are not NATO members into its ranks. Attempts to entice new members to join NATO and expand it go on unabated, even though this organisation became irrelevant with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation.

In December 2021, we sent two documents to the United States and NATO countries, and we also made them public: a draft treaty between Russia and the United States on security guarantees and a Russia-NATO agreement on security measures. It is a package proposal aimed at precluding absolutely any further

eastward movement of NATO and the deployment of threatening weapon systems near Russian borders. On January 10, talks were held between American experts and ours in Geneva. On January 12, we had a meeting with NATO countries in Brussels. We clearly outlined [our requirements] and provided detailed arguments on the need to focus on stopping the expansion of one block of countries at the expense of the interests of other states on the European continent. I think that you monitored the coverage of these events and have also read interviews with representatives of the Russian defence and foreign ministries.

I would like to point out that we need legally binding guarantees. Our Western partners never honoured the political commitments they made in the 1990s, not to mention their verbal promises. It appears that they are not going to do this now either. We clearly explained why this approach is counterproductive and why a lopsided interpretation of the political promises on NATO's non-expansion and indivisible security is unacceptable. We are waiting for our colleagues to provide their answers in writing, just as we did with our proposals. We will continue working to prepare for any eventuality.

We are convinced that mutually acceptable solutions can be found when there is good will and readiness for compromise. I would like to remind you that in early 2021 the New START Treaty was extended for five years without any preconditions, just as the Russian Federation had proposed. We appreciate that it was one of the first steps made by the Biden administration after it had assumed office. During their meeting in Geneva on June 16, 2021, President of Russia Vladimir Putin and US President Joseph Biden agreed on the need to hold a dialogue on all issues of strategic stability and the weapon systems that have a bearing on it. There was an important statement confirming the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. I am delighted to say that on January 3 the leaders of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council adopted a relevant joint statement on the inadmissibility of a nuclear war and on the nuclear-weapon states' pledge to do everything in their power to prevent it. This move will help to prepare a summit of the five nuclear states proposed by President Putin. We are waiting for the parties to coordinate the organisational matters and the agenda of the summit. We hope that it will be held in person as soon as the epidemiological circumstances allow.

We are working in the Western vector and are active in other areas of Russian foreign policy. In 2021, integration cooperation was developing within the EAEU,

and the integration process within the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was being strengthened. This helped to promote President Vladimir Putin's initiative to form the Greater Eurasian Partnership.

In this context, we were developing relations with partners in the Asian continent. We celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between Russia and China. We were promoting the specially privileged strategic partnership with India, and with the majority of partners in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR), as well as with states of Africa and Latin America. In the APR, we were focusing on active ties with member states of ASEAN in the context of forming the Greater Eurasian Partnership. We made the most of opportunities for constructive dialogue as provided by such associations as the G20, BRICS, and the SCO.

We were involved in the work to help settle various conflicts (Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya), the Iranian nuclear programme, the Palestinian-Israeli affairs, the situation on the Korean Peninsula and other hotspots. In this context, I would like to note the mission performed by the CSTO peacekeeping forces (the residual matters are being addressed). Following a request from President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the peacekeepers helped to remove a clear terrorist threat that sprung up in the territory of Kazakhstan not without outside influence.

We were focusing on providing diplomatic support to the effort to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences. The Sputnik V vaccine was registered in 71 countries. In our contacts with foreign partners, we continue to explain the obvious practical importance of President Vladimir Putin's initiative on the reciprocal recognition of national vaccine certificates, which he put forward at the G20 summit on October 30-31, 2021. Agreements of this kind have been reached with a number of countries.

In 2022, we will continue to work in all these areas. We will defend the central role of the United Nations and the need for a strict regard for international law as it is enshrined in the universally coordinated and accepted documents, this without attempts to break it up into separate articles and interpret them in order to please just one group of countries.

We will fight terrorism and cybercrime. Important decisions on this score have been made over the past year at the UN and in other formats. We will support and promote the Russian World's consolidation as a multi-ethnic and multi-

religious movement. The 7th World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad took place in October 2021. Further joint plans were outlined.

We will continue to keep matters such as freedom of expression and equal access to information under special review. In this regard, we will continue to insist that our Western colleagues do not shirk their obligations and fulfill them as they should.

We will continue to communicate with the media, if you are interested. We are ready for it.

Question: You have already spoken about the outcome of the talks concerning Russian proposals on security guarantees in Brussels and Geneva. We are now waiting for formal answers, from the United States next week, and from NATO, within a week. At the same time, we can see that our partners are critical and sometimes overtly negative about the provisions that are important to us. What actions will Russia take if the US and NATO reject the proposals?

Sergey Lavrov: We are waiting for a written response. We have reason to believe that our partners have realised the need to do this quickly, with specificity, and in writing. We won't wait forever. There are plans to drag out this process. Frankly, everyone knows that reaching an agreement depends on the United States. Whatever they are telling us about the need to consult with their allies and involve all OSCE members in the talks, those are excuses and attempts to drag out the process.

When Russia and NATO were establishing relations, when they signed the Founding Act and reached a decision to establish the Russia-NATO Council – Moscow and the North Atlantic Alliance reached some political agreements in the process, which had to do with how we would behave in terms of the configuration of armed forces and weapons going forward – no one had to be consulted. It never occurred to anyone. Neither with the OSCE, nor with the European Union, which now gets bitter whenever it feels left out (as conveyed by Josep Borrell). This is a whole new topic for discussion.

We want to see their position on paper, to get a specific comment on each of our points in both documents – which of them are acceptable, which aren't and why. If something needs to be added, they could formulate amendments.

You have mentioned something that tops the headlines across the media – the Western reaction has consisted primarily of a categorical rejection of ending NATO's open door policy. But Russia is not bound by any agreements within

NATO. We, the Americans, Europeans, NATO members, and neutral states, are firmly bound by agreements and political commitments within the OSCE framework. In this context, OSCE provides us with a legal framework solely because in the 1990s, an agreement was reached to the effect that undermining indivisible European security and strengthening one's own security at the expense of others is unacceptable. Those documents (in particular, the Charter for European Security signed at the highest level in 1999 in Istanbul) contain three components. Everyone shared them and signed off on them.

The first of them, which the West loves talking about now, is the right to freely choose how to ensure one's own security, including treaties of alliance. After all, these documents say that each state has the right to be neutral. This should not be forgotten, either. Then follows a paragraph that is an inalienable part of this compromise, notably, the agreement binding each state to respect the rights of other countries and not to bolster its own security at the expense of the security of others. There is a special stipulation that no single state, group of countries or organisation can be primarily responsible for the maintenance of peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region and cannot view any part of it as a sphere of its influence.

Pocketing the first part of this inseparable package (the right of each state to choose alliances), our US and NATO colleagues then try to cross out all the rest, without which the first part is invalid. We are not bound by this norm (respect for the right to choose alliances) if it is applied in flagrant violation of the other parts of this inseparable package. We have explained this in sufficient detail. Now we are awaiting responses in writing, after which this issue will move to the fore if it becomes clear that it makes sense to resume the talks.

We will insist that our partners clarify how they view their commitments, especially those adopted at top level. If our proposals are rejected, we will evaluate the situation and report to President of Russia Vladimir Putin. He said at the annual news conference that we will make decisions with due account of all factors, primarily in the interests of reliably ensuring our security. I am not going to engage in any of the guesswork that our partners attempt. I consider it counterproductive. It is important for us to receive a detailed response or counterproposals on the issues raised in our documents. These issues are key to preventing negative developments in our common region – in Europe. The response of our colleagues will show us how serious they are.

The chief US negotiator in Geneva, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy

Sherman, said in an interview that it was more about evaluating positions rather than talks. This is telling. We arrived at these talks with the positions that we formulated in writing a month before the meeting in Geneva. During this month, the Americans failed to study our proposals in order to arrive at a specific position. They limited themselves to questions and verbal explanations. We are past that stage.

Question: Is Russia considering an opportunity to expand its political and military-strategic presence in some countries?

Sergey Lavrov: We have ramified military and military-technical ties with our partners and allies. We maintain a presence in different areas of the world. This issue concerns bilateral relations. We will proceed from the interests of global stability when discussing further steps in this area with our allies at bilateral talks.

Question: The issues of Ukraine's "non-admission" to NATO and NATO's activity in Eastern Europe have been on the agenda for many years now. Russia has repeatedly raised these issues. Nonetheless, Russian officials called these issues urgent, insisting that they must be resolved now without any delay. Why has it become so paramount now, in November-December 2021? What happened?

Sergey Lavrov: It's been an accumulation. I am referring to the period after the 1990s when our Western friends carelessly threw out all their promises not to expand NATO, not to move military infrastructure eastward, not to deploy substantial military forces on the territory of the new members. During the five waves of expansion, NATO has come right to our borders. When we formalised our relations with NATO in 1997, Poland was the only candidate for accession. Look at how the situation has changed since then. Moreover, all these territories are being actively militarised. Our proposals are aimed at reducing military confrontations and de-escalating general tensions in Europe, whereas the West is doing the opposite. NATO is building up its ground troops and aviation on the territories directly adjacent to Ukraine. Exercises in the Black Sea have grown in scale and frequency many times over in recent time. There are many other problems as well. We have heard blustering statements of late to the effect that if Russia does not obey Western demands on what to do with its own troops on its own territory (which is an absurd demand in its own right) the West will intensify the activities of NATO's rapid reaction and special operation forces around our borders in the next two or three months.

Replying to your question, I will say that much has changed. The real

configuration of weapons, military hardware and troops in Europe has changed. We are faced with unacceptable demands to return our troops to their barracks on our own territory, while the Americans, Canadians and Brits have permanently deployed their troops in the guise of rotation in the Baltic states and other countries in the North of Europe. Bases are being set up in the Black Sea. The Brits are building bases in Ukraine, in the Sea of Azov area. We are categorically opposed. This approach is unacceptable. The timeframe that was chosen is the period when the West went too far, let's be honest. In violations of all its commitments and contrary to common sense, it went for aggravation. The West denounces the use of violence against civilians and human rights abuses. But if bloody coups are staged by people who swear fealty to the West, it simply welcomes them with open arms. This is what happened during the coup in Ukraine when many people were killed, some by provocateurs. The US approved the coup (I will put it mildly) which was later perceived by the Europeans as a *fait accompli*. This case is well-known. Nobody is going to investigate the crimes of Maidan. Nobody is going to look into the crime committed in Odessa on May 2, 2014 when people were burned alive while those who committed this crime posed for photos. This is the support of the new government. Nothing is changing. Look at Poroshenko, Zelensky, all these Right Sector and Azov militants that were considered extremists in America only recently. Now the situation has changed. The same happened in Georgia in 2008 when Saakashvili issued his order. Later, the EU special mission studied these events and officially reported that it was he who had started the war. Yet, Georgia remains an American friend. In the Western interpretation, friends can do whatever they like, as you know.

Our patience has been exhausted. We are very patient. You know what they say about how long Russians take to harness their horses? We harness them slowly but then it's time to ride. Now we are waiting for the coachman over there to give specific answers to our proposals.

Question: The United States has made it clear that it is not going to provide you with security guarantees regarding Ukraine or other countries not ever joining NATO. Russia acknowledged the fact that it was unable to discuss issues that concern it during the talks. The Russian side mentioned that if this fails to be achieved, there will be a "military" response. Could you elaborate on what this "military" response may look like? What are you going to do? Is it going to be an invasion? What do you mean by "military" response?

Sergey Lavrov: I can't add anything to what President Vladimir Putin said after his news conference during a follow-up Q&A session with journalists. He was asked bluntly what the response might be if Russia's proposal regarding security guarantees were to be rejected. He said the responses could vary widely. It depends on the recommendations that the Russian military make to the President. So, there's no point in speculating. Only our Western colleagues, primarily the Americans, tend to grab the "sanctions stick" without waiting for the developments to fully unfold. For several years now, the US State Department has had the Office of Economic Sanctions Policy and Implementation. This diplomatic agency operates an entire office dedicated exclusively to punishing those who see things differently than the United States. Occasionally, they punish preventively even those who did nothing at all, just to discourage even the thought of doing something unacceptable for the United States. We are for resolving issues on the basis of mutual respect and a balance of interests.

Russia's position presented to the Americans and NATO is based solely on a balance of interests. These documents are aimed at ensuring security in Europe as a whole and in each country, including the Russian Federation. The position of the United States and its allies is that they want to secure dominance in Europe and create military footholds around the Russian Federation and irritants for us along our borders.

Once again, I would like to mention the Charter for European Security which was adopted in Istanbul in 1999. Everything that the West is declaring and doing is a flagrant violation of the obligations that they assumed back then. Another time when we made such an attempt (this is to answer the previous question from our colleague about why we waited until now – we have not been waiting until now). Back in 2009, we submitted a draft European Security Treaty for the consideration of our Western colleagues. We were misunderstood and rather rudely. We were told that this would never be on the table. We cited the documents, including the Charter for European Security and other documents, which spell out the need to observe the indivisibility of security principle. We made clear that we want to translate the political commitments that we all assumed into a legally binding form. Their answer said it all: legally binding security guarantees can only be granted to Alliance members. This philosophy goes back on everything that has been done by the OSCE since the end of the Cold War, including the principle I cited that no Euro-Atlantic alliance has the right to dictate its will to everyone else. You

represent media from a NATO country. Your Alliance engages in this and, apparently, enjoys it. We don't see how this can be enjoyable either for ourselves or for anyone else. But we know how to ensure our security under any circumstances. I assure you, we will not endlessly wait for certain changes or promises to be made. We are aware that the West is betting on a scenario where the Americans can relieve themselves of the main responsibility for resolving these issues during the talks with us. First, they will try to water it down in the Russia-NATO Council with the help of their own (I'll use a more polite term) "comrades-in-arms." As for the OSCE, it is impossible to conduct any talks there in principle. If an organisation wants to host negotiations, it has to become an organisation to begin with, and this one doesn't even have a charter. We have been proposing to begin talks on such a charter for 15 years now in order for the OSCE to become a legal and internationally accepted statutory subject. We are told (primarily by the Americans) that the beauty of the OSCE lies in this "flexibility." Matters of hard security have never been and will never be dealt with in a flexible environment. We clearly see these designs to reduce everything to abstract discussions. We will be waiting and, as we made it clear to the Americans, we will be expecting an adult response from them.

Question: Does Russia respect the sovereignty of Finland and Sweden and our right to independently make decisions on our security policy, including on joining NATO?

Sergey Lavrov: Russia fully respects the sovereignty of both Finland and Sweden. We believe that the policy of neutrality pursued by these countries is one of the most important contributions to the common European architecture and to ensuring stability on the European continent.

It's those who are trying, by hook or by crook, to get these two countries to join NATO that don't seem to respect their sovereignty. This has been made into an issue for a long time, it is nothing new. Now, at the stage where proposals have been advanced to consolidate the status quo ante of 1997, when we were promised many things that have since been violated by the West, they are really trying hard to stir up the public in Finland and Sweden, and pressing Stockholm and Helsinki, directly from the mouth of Jens Stoltenberg, to start the NATO accession procedure, promising it will be quick and painless. Of course, it is up to the people of Finland and Sweden to decide. We always discuss these things with our neighbours when we hold talks on international affairs. We can see that the

governments of Finland and Sweden understand all aspects of this matter. We have reason to believe that the neutral states' contribution to European security will not diminish.

Question: On January 10, The New York Times reported that head of EU diplomacy Josep Borrell had sent a letter to foreign ministers of the member countries stating that it was necessary to come up with their own European proposals on security and also spoke in favour of having a separate direct dialogue with you personally.

Did you receive anything like that from Josep Borrell? Is Russia ready to negotiate security issues with the EU separately from the United States and NATO? What can you say about the statement that Josep Borrell made over the past two days following the security talks between Russia, the United States and NATO? Do you think that the EU is more amenable to talks on security issues than the United States and NATO?

Sergey Lavrov: With regard to Mr Borrell's most recent comments on the topic of security guarantees in the context of the talks between us and the Americans and the Russia-NATO Council meeting, yes, we had a sense that the EU feels disadvantaged. It says so out loud and calls everyone to take its contribution into account in order to prevent any agreements behind the back of the EU.

I don't know, and not because we don't want it. We regret that the European Union itself destroyed, more than 7 years ago, all the mechanisms for discussing the practical aspects of security. We turned to the United States and NATO. With NATO, the Russia-NATO Council remains at least on paper; no one has destroyed the Founding Act of 1997, either. With the EU, all channels of communication have been plugged up by our European colleagues. So, this question should go to Mr Borrell and the EU members. Speaking about the possibility of holding a separate dialogue with the EU independently from the United States and NATO, one should ask the United States and NATO whether they will allow the EU to take any independent action. We are interested in an independent European Union. We are closely watching the developments unfolding in this association. They are mixed. We see how the EU is concerned that its interests may be ignored. They have been openly acknowledging it since Afghanistan, after the saga with Australian submarines, and after the creation of the so-called AUKUS.

Some EU members are increasingly sending signals about the need to form a strategic autonomy in security matters. At the same time, there is a formidable

lobby in the EU which opposes any attempts to “move away” from NATO in security matters and insists that the Alliance is the key to security, including for the European Union. These matters must be sorted out by these two entities. By and large, we are not overly concerned about who will conduct the talks if the United States leads the process, since it largely sets security policy in Europe and other parts of the world where NATO is actively “staking out” a role, contrary to its original purpose. The United States was able to reinstate its dominant role in Europe through NATO. It is actively pursuing a policy of harmonising any action related to military matters between NATO and the EU. There are special agreements on military mobility, where EU countries that are not NATO members must make their respective territories and transport infrastructure available to NATO forces. This is a serious process. Sweden, Finland and Austria periodically, or even regularly, participate in NATO exercises, including exercises with scenarios that are far from harmless.

I spoke with Mr Borrell on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Stockholm on December 2, 2021 and we confirmed that we were not avoiding seeing each other. I reminded him that the ball is in the court of the European Union. We did not sever ties. I talked with Mr Borrell last year and I stand ready to talk more. It all depends on whether he will be allowed to resume dialogue with the Russian Federation and how constructive the issues that they may raise will be.

Question: President of Russia Vladimir Putin said at an emergency videoconference of the CSTO heads of state that the CSTO mechanism has been fully engaged. Does the precedent in Kazakhstan mean a higher probability of using the CSTO peacekeeping forces in case of similar threats in other countries of the organisation? What did the President of Russia mean when he said that the decision-making process for the use of joint forces should be improved? How will forces be consolidated to deal with terrorist sleeper cells?

Sergey Lavrov: It is important that the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, appealed to his allies in full compliance with the Collective Security Treaty, with the CSTO Charter. The situation has demonstrated that the efforts made in recent years to build up peacekeeping capacity have been effective and have proved useful. As a popular saying goes, if you want peace, prepare for war. Thank God, war has not actually broken out. The CSTO peacekeeping forces proved what they are capable of to the world. The West watched with amazement how rapidly the units sent by all CSTO countries to help allied Kazakhstan at the

request of its President were deployed. The operation was accurately assessed by all, I have no doubt about it. I really do hope this experience will never have to be used, but we must keep our powder dry. God forbid something like this happens. We are making every effort to prevent this, and that includes relevant CSTO bodies. We must be ready, because we can see continued encroachments from the outside to derail the situation in Central Asia and other CSTO countries. These encroachments have become much more persistent, risky, and dangerous after the Americans fled Afghanistan along with the rest of NATO, leaving that country in its current state, when its statehood still needs to be restored.

The actions that I mentioned include dealing with so-called sleeper cells. This isn't a job for the armed forces; it should be done by the special services and intelligence agencies. The CSTO has such services; they operate under the auspices of the national security councils. This all certainly will be taken more seriously. The need for this work will continue to grow.

Question: I represent the Mir Interstate Television and Radio Company. Our office in Almaty was looted nine days ago, even though our company was established by Nursultan Nazarbayev, and our constituent documents were signed by the then Foreign Minister and the incumbent President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Our equipment has been destroyed, and the looters even took away our central heating units. Nevertheless, our colleagues continue working and doing live broadcasts. As they say, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Why did they need to smash up the national branch of an interstate radio and television company? Do you expect the West to adopt new sanctions after the use of CSTO peacekeepers? Why did the OSCE keep silent when the militants ran wild, even going as far as to destroy editorial offices, and only started commenting on the developments after law and order have been restored in Kazakhstan? It shouldn't have done this.

Sergey Lavrov: We have already commented on this situation. We have made official submissions to the OSCE, first of all to the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. This conduct is shameful for an organisation that claims to be a beacon [of media freedom]. The West describes the OSCE as the gold standard, but its actions have once again shown that it is not a gold but a double standard. What has been done is unacceptable. As you have pointed out accurately, they kept silent as the violence unfolded and journalists feared for their lives and were physically attacked. After the CSTO helped Kazakhstan defuse tensions and

normalise the situation, and when the arrests of the organisers and perpetrators of pogroms, arson and other violent actions began, they started calling on Kazakhstan to live in peace and to avoid violence.

In this sense, the OSCE Secretariat is acting much like the NATO Secretariat. During the Maidan riots in Ukraine in late 2013, the then NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made numerous public appeals to President Viktor Yanukovich not to use military force. But immediately after the coup d'état he sang a different tune. He called on the putschists who used armed force and other unconstitutional methods to seize power to apply force proportionately. In other words, the “pro-Russia president” (which is not a correct way to put it) and those who refused to hug the West cannot use force, but the putschists who pledged to be loyal to the West can.

The OSCE must do something to change people's view of it as an instrument of promoting Western interests. The format of the OSCE Secretariat, as we have told all OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office, Secretaries General, is discriminatory toward Russia and other CSTO countries. We will try to change this. The OSCE must be a platform for equal dialogue based on a balance of interests and on consensus. Although these principles are set out in the organisation's founding documents, the West has been working hard to privatise the OSCE Secretariat and all the other institutions. This is the problem that must be addressed, instead of trying to drown our security guarantee initiatives in the current amorphous organisation.

As for potential new sanctions after the use of CSTO peacekeepers, there is nothing I can say on this score. We are not waiting for anything. We simply deal with practical issues. But you can expect anything from our Western colleagues. Washington is threatening us with sanctions now: the Congress has prepared sanctions, some of which suit the White House and others don't. This is their mentality: they call for preparing a package of sanctions should Russia “invade” Ukraine. They are not alone in this. Some people say that sanctions must be applied even if Russia does not invade Ukraine but refuses to pull its troops, which are deployed on its own territory, back from the border with Ukraine. You can expect them to do anything. I assure you that we are ready for any turn of events. As for the economy, our illusions, if we had any, have melted away completely during the past seven years. This issue has been raised at the recent Gaidar Forum. Even our prominent liberal economists have seen that we can only rely on ourselves. All

systems of economic ties that depend on Western-controlled structures are a risk. But we are consistently and rapidly eliminating such risks, primarily in high-tech spheres.

Question: Polls conducted in Ukraine on joining NATO, even if this is unlikely, show that the more pressure Russia exerts on that country, the more people in Ukraine say that they want to join NATO. Do you also see this connection?

Sergey Lavrov: This touches on what we were talking about before. Germany believes that Ukraine must be supported across the board. What Ukraine wants, it gets. And don't you want to know what Russia wants? Is Russia less important to Europe than Ukraine? This is the same either-or logic: either please Ukraine or we don't know what to do. Our logic is as follows: we want everyone to feel safe and nobody to feel slighted. This is approximately how the situation took shape after Germany's reunification. At that time, we were promised that NATO's military infrastructure would not be moved to the east of the Oder even by an inch. As you know, these promises were made. We also wanted this. Ukraine wants to join NATO, and we wanted NATO not to move. But Ukraine simply wants this, whereas we received these promises from presidents, esteemed officials, and still got nothing.

We hope Germany remembers the position our country took when it wanted to unite. Speaking at the international security conference in Munich in 2015, I answered a question about Crimea. I told my partners in the discussion that they should remember how our country supported the reunification of Germans. I said Germans should understand that Russians living in Crimea (they form the majority of its population) also have the right to unite with their Motherland, all the more so when militants with neo-Nazi and "out of Crimea" slogans were set on these Russians. At that time, one of your Bundestag deputies laughed loudly for the whole hall to hear, trying to show as best he could that these two issues could not be compared. I don't think that is true. I hope Germans have not forgotten about the position of our country at a time when your Western allies had many doubts about the need to unite Germany. But life goes on.

Speaking about Crimea and the Ukrainian government that you want to bring into NATO, don't forget that in the first days of the coup in Kiev, when the signatures of Germany, France and Poland on the agreements between Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition were ignored, nobody even wanted to hear what the

EU thought about this despite all the exhortations, all the reassurances. Finally, the EU agreed with this. After this, the putschists began declaring immediately that the Russians in Crimea would never speak and think in Ukrainian and would never glorify “the heroes” of World War II, notably Nazi accomplices Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevich. It was at that time that people in Crimea revolted against this, repelled an armed attack on the Supreme Soviet of Crimea and announced a referendum. When we discuss the Donbass issue in the Normandy format with our German friends, we explain that it is Kiev that must implement the Minsk agreements (this is what is written in them). Until recently, we were told to leave it alone for the time being. They said: Let’s simply implement the agreements. How is it possible to implement them if this requirement is not addressed to the party that must do it? We keep saying that all of Ukraine’s current problems in relations with Russia and with its own citizens started with this unconstitutional coup d’etat. Our Western colleagues, including Germans, said at first that everything started with the annexation of Crimea. When we explain to them the epistemology of this conflict, they don’t know what to say. They announced recently that we consider it a coup whereas they call it a “democratic process.” This is a shame. It is in such conditions that we have to conduct serious talks.

President Vladimir Zelensky represents the Ukraine that you want to bring into NATO. At one time, as Prime Minister of Ukraine, Arseny Yatsenyuk called “subhuman” the people protesting against neo-Nazis in Donbass. Speaking about the same people recently, President Zelensky called them “species.” He said if they consider themselves Russian, want to speak Russian and to promote Russian culture, they should hit the road back to Russia. Apparently, he wants to get rid of those that are adamantly opposed to Ukraine being drawn into NATO, understanding what risks and threats it creates for Ukraine. There are many things to discuss at this point. In the current situation, it is necessary not to choose whom to support. We all must unite and decide as adults what should be done to fulfil the incantation of our Western colleagues about indivisible security and their commitment not to enhance anyone’s security at the expense of others.

Question: What did Moscow really want when it launched a dialogue on security guarantees? Russia was obviously aware of what the West's response would be like. You yourself mentioned that earlier. So why do it? Rumours in Ukraine have it that Moscow deliberately asked for something big in order to get some concession, maybe not in public. If this is not the case, what arguments does

Russia have for the collective West to change its mind? Could it be Cuba or something else?

Sergey Lavrov: We did not have any game in mind and did not try to follow a scenario like someone in Ukraine, as you said, mentioned, in other words, “ask for more in order to get at least something.” This well-known ploy is used in everyday life and in politics.

We have a much more serious approach. We are strongly against NATO right on our borders, and all the more so given the policy that is, unfortunately, being pursued by Ukraine (both former and current leaders). Moreover, this is really a red line, and they are aware of it. Even if Ukraine remains outside NATO, bilateral agreements with the Americans, the British, and other Western countries are always possible, and they are creating military facilities there and bases on the Sea of Azov, something we also find unacceptable. Deploying attack weapons that pose a threat to the Russian Federation on our neighbours' territories, in this case Ukraine, is another red line. The EU has rushed there as well. We talked about the European Union and Ukraine. They are now actively promoting their plans to send a military training mission to Ukraine; that is, they also want to contribute to the training of, in fact, anti-Russia units. More and more troops are being concentrated on the line of contact, including, as I understand it, their most combat-ready units – the “volunteer battalions” – which the West used to consider extremists, but does not any more. Ukraine is moving its military across its territory, and has amassed an unprecedentedly large number of troops near the line of contact. But the West is not concerned about this. Instead, it is concerned about what Russia is doing on its own territory. But Russia has never, not once, anywhere, either publicly or behind closed doors, threatened the Ukrainian people whereas Mr Zelensky and his associates are doing so directly. I gave the example of Zelensky asking the Russians to get out of Ukraine. This is a direct threat. What if he seriously decides to use the Ukrainian armed forces that have amassed there to drive the Russians out? After all, Plan B is being discussed in Kiev. Mr Kuleba consulted even with the Croats about their Operation Storm, when 200,000 Serbs ended up outside their homeland and became refugees. I would suggest that when they assess who is moving troops on their territory and where, our Western colleagues look at what goals the Ukrainian radicals, led by their president, are declaring, in fact, with regard to Russians and Russian speakers.

Question: My questions are also indirectly related to Ukraine. Greece is

trying to provide lukewarm support for NATO's general decisions, but at the same time restore and develop its traditional relations with Russia. Clearly, this is not easy for small countries such as Greece. But lately we have seen the Kremlin and the Russian media mention a new US base in the town of Alexandroupolis in northern Greece that is part of moving military equipment to Ukraine. How critical is this for Russia? Was this issue discussed with Greece?

It has been three years since world Orthodoxy experienced its first geopolitical schism in history. The situation is getting worse. This schism is expanding. Perhaps, diplomacy could help the churches not to further destroy this common tradition and history and look for compromise and find them eventually instead?

Sergey Lavrov: You mentioned Greece's "lukewarm" support for NATO. We have long-standing relations and historical roots with our Greek colleagues, the Greek people and Greece as a country. We remember Ioannis Kapodistrias, who became the first ruler of modern Greece after serving in the Russian Empire on the foreign policy front. I recently met with Nikos Dendias. We discussed everything including our bilateral ties, the prospects for developing trade, economic, investment, cultural and people-to-people relations. These relations are extensive across all areas, including security. We touched on the topic of new steps that have been taken in US-Greek relations to upgrade the status of the port of Alexandroupolis for the purposes of the US Navy. We read about how the Americans plan to use it.

The Minsk agreements include a direct ban on the presence of foreign military personnel or foreign armed soldiers in Ukraine. There is no ban on arms supplies to Ukraine. But foreign military personnel are there, and in large quantities. Not thousands (as some mistakenly claim sometimes), but there are several hundred American, British and other military advisors there. There is no formal ban on weapons.

Returning to the plans that the current Ukrainian government is hatching, we realise perfectly well that everything the West is doing in terms of "shoveling" weapons to this government creates an additional temptation for it to use forcible methods to resolve the issues in eastern Ukraine. This is completely unacceptable to us for obvious reasons. Speaking of instructors, when we point this out, the West is always telling us that these are just instructors who do not participate in hostilities. I clearly remember TV footage from the war in Georgia in August 2008,

when instructors clad in US Army officer uniforms (both Caucasian and African American) showed how to load anti-tank and other weapons. I don't want this to happen again in Ukraine, because it will really be the crossing of all possible red lines. There would be a direct clash between Ukraine's ethnic Russian citizens and the NATO military. I understand that Greece is a member of NATO and an EU member. But we also see that Greece does not want to follow the path of tougher anti-Russia sanctions. The republic does not really enjoy what is happening now between the West and the Russian Federation. We trust our Greek friends that they will use their wisdom to make choices that answer their convictions.

As to the Orthodox Church, it is a very serious problem. You are wondering whether diplomacy can help in some way. Diplomacy, in principle, should not interfere in church affairs. The state should not interfere in church affairs. But there are always situations when life becomes more complex. The United States is directly involved in the ongoing crisis in Orthodoxy. It had formed a special mechanism, a special representative for freedom of religion, who, in fact, did not engage in promoting freedom, but instead worked with and financed Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople so he could pursue a policy of divide, including in Ukraine, and the creation of a schismatic non-canonical Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which caused major differences in the Orthodox world. Unfortunately, the Greek Orthodox churches (Church of Greece, Church of Cyprus and others) are under tremendous pressure, including, as far as I understand, from the Greek government. We have discussed this privately, but there are facts in the public domain. If we reach an agreement with the governments and the diplomats of the countries on the territories of which canonical Orthodox churches are located not to interfere with the lives they live in accordance with their laws and canons, I think this would be the best contribution of diplomacy and other state entities to ensuring religious freedom.

Question: Recently there were clashes at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. Azerbaijan used artillery and drones. Do you think this is related to Armenia and Russia's assistance in Kazakhstan, given the very nervous reaction by Baku and Ankara to the CSTO's assistance in Kazakhstan?

Sergey Lavrov: I did not see any nervous reaction from officials either in Baku or Ankara. In Ankara, there was a confusing, to put it mildly, statement by Ihsan Sener, an adviser to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who decried Kazakhstan for inviting the CSTO [peacekeepers]. We asked our Turkish

colleagues for an explanation. The officials gave no negative comments, nor did we hear any such comments from officials in Azerbaijan.

We are calling to start, at the earliest opportunity, delimiting the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This has nothing to do with the Karabakh region and the settlement issues. This is purely a bilateral issue, which we have been urging to get started on for about a year now including establishing a delimitation and demarcation commission for this purpose. We suggest Russia be used as technical consultants, given that the Russian General Staff and other organisations have maps showing the different stages in building the USSR, and changes in administrative districts and borders between union republics.

Yesterday, I discussed this issue with my Armenian colleague. There are relevant proposals from both parties. To set up a commission, they need to agree on terms and conditions. The terms are being discussed now to overcome any disagreement. Our position is simple: the parties need to sit at the negotiating table, which can be provided by an officially established commission, and resolve the issues that so far remain outstanding.

Question: Azerbaijan has many times noted the importance of border delimitation and demarcation. It was agreed in Sochi to establish a bilateral commission on the delimitation of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border and that Russia will help the sides in this process. However, we have not seen any action from Armenia on this issue. Can you comment on this?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already commented on this. It is true that an agreement in principle was reached in Sochi, and during our communications with the press, hope was expressed that the commission would be established by the end of 2021. Complications are a part of life. The progress we made was not enough to establish it. Yesterday I talked with my Armenian colleagues who made new proposals. We are sending them to Baku. We will see how we can get the commission up and running as soon as possible. Let me stress once again that the differences we have are about what we have to do for it to start working. This will be difficult. We saw that this topic was being discussed and that the best real way to create such a commission would be to include priority matters in its agenda.

Question: In 2014, President of China Xi Jinping visited the Winter Olympics in Sochi. During a recent videoconference with him, President Vladimir Putin said that he would attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Games in Beijing and would have a personal meeting with his old friend for the first time in

two years. What does Russia expect from this visit?

Sergey Lavrov: It is true that we are preparing for an official Russia-China summit. President Putin will visit Beijing on February 4, 2022, the opening day of the Winter Olympics, at the invitation of President Xi Jinping. They will have full-scale talks at the top level on the same day. As is traditional for communication between our leaders, they will cover the entire range of bilateral relations. Russia and China have a rich bilateral agenda and a unique architecture of bilateral relations. We do not have this with any other country, considering the annual summits, the meetings between our heads of government and the meetings of five commissions held at the deputy prime minister level, which are held to prepare the meetings of our heads of government. This mechanism has proved to be extremely effective. It is used to prepare thoroughly considered decisions, which can be implemented, and which really help us build up our cooperation. The growth of our trade reached a record high last year; it was very substantial indeed.

The agenda for cooperation includes foreign policy issues in the context of growing tensions around the world, which we discuss in great detail. Russia and China are working hand in hand and with other like-minded countries, upholding the standards of international law, protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, finding political solutions to crises, and preventing interference in the internal affairs of states. We advocate these principles when discussing specific situations in the Security Council and other UN bodies, and in this context we resist any attempt to replace international law with “rules” that are invented in the West, which insists that world order must be based on these “rules.” Russia and China have been denounced as revisionist powers, although nothing could be further from the truth. It is the West that is revising the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and other universal norms of international law. We worked with our Chinese friends and a large group of other countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia to create the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations in New York. The group has met twice, and we are now discussing the possibility of holding a meeting at the ministerial level. It is an effective format in light of the attacks on the UN Charter.

Regarding international issues, Russia and China have a common view on approaches to existing crisis situations, such as Iran's nuclear deal and the necessity to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which the Trump administration withdrew. We also discuss Afghanistan. We are closely cooperating

at the SCO, the agenda of which is currently focused on Afghanistan and Central Asia. We are also working together to promote trans-Eurasian connectivity. President Vladimir Putin has highlighted the Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative. It correlates to the activities of the Eurasian Economic Union, which has, in turn, signed a trade and economic cooperation agreement with China and is implementing it. In this context, integration processes are proceeding in the post-Soviet space in line with the practical efforts to implement China's Belt and Road Initiative. We are also working together with ASEAN to maintain its central role in all elements of international Asia-Pacific architecture. We are aware of the risks of the Indo-Pacific Strategies promoted by the United States and other Western countries, which are openly aimed at creating dividing lines, undermining ASEAN's central role and inciting confrontation in the region, including through a military component, at a time when we need talks and inclusive discussions that consider the concerns of all parties, which can help us find decisions based on consensus.

This is only a small part of the agenda in the comprehensive Russia-China partnership and strategic interaction. I am sure that these issues will be addressed during the preparations for President Putin's visit to Beijing and during the visit itself. I have agreed with my colleague and friend, Foreign Minister Wang Yi to meet before our leaders' talks to have a detailed discussion on the entire international agenda.

Question: Turkey and Russia's efforts continue to ensure stability in the South Caucasus; the 3+3 South Caucasus Cooperation Platform has been launched for this purpose. But Georgia has not joined the platform yet. Will Russia do anything to promote Georgia's inclusion in this format? Representatives of Turkey and Armenia are meeting in Moscow today to discuss bilateral relations. How do you assess these efforts?

Sergey Lavrov: We certainly support these efforts and are actively involved. They contribute to the normalisation of the situation in the South Caucasus and help create the right conditions for the remaining political problems to be resolved more expeditiously and productively, through the development of economic and other cooperation between the three countries in the region and their three large neighbours: Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Russia enthusiastically supported the idea of negotiating in the 3+3 format when it was first proposed by President Ilham Aliyev, and later by President Recep

Tayyip Erdogan. We immediately acknowledged the unifying potential in this initiative. From the first days of discussing it and preparing for the meeting in Moscow, we supported our Georgian neighbours being involved in this process, believing that the more opportunities for communication, the better we can deal with the remaining problems. We are talking with our Georgian colleagues as part of the Geneva International Discussions to address the consequences of the August 2008 aggression by Georgia, and as part of an unofficial bilateral channel Moscow and Tbilisi created quite some time ago. The 3+3 processes are much more significant, because the platform addresses the future of the entire region.

After last year's hostilities, and with the Russian President's assistance, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan signed agreements to end hostile actions, develop trade and economic ties, and unblock all transport routes in this region. This opens up an entire range of opportunities that Turkey, Russia, Iran and Georgia are interested in. I would think they should be interested in joining this format without preconditions. We can agree that we will limit the items to be discussed in the 3+3 format to those of interest to all participants. Since we do not have diplomatic relations with Georgia (there is a Russian Federation Interests Section in Tbilisi, but diplomatic relations were broken off by Georgia), we have fewer opportunities to explain to them the benefits of this format. We asked our Turkish and Azerbaijani friends (Armenia can also help) to explain to their Georgian neighbours the potential benefits of joining, for them as well as for all of us. Joining the format will not bind them in any way in terms of their political approaches.

Turkey and Armenia have appointed special representatives. Russia has helped them reach this agreement. We are happy to host the first meeting in Moscow. Our role is to help the parties establish a direct dialogue. I hope it will be a success.

Question: Last year you travelled to China and South Korea, but unfortunately did not visit Japan. Is Russia starting to forget about Japan? How do you find the current Russian-Japanese relations? Will there be a meeting this year? When Prime Minister Fumio Kishida served as Foreign Minister, he met with you many times. It is said that you drank sake and vodka. Do you expect to be able to work with Fumio Kishida's cabinet? Which new priority policy areas with Japan can you single out? What place does Japan have in Russia's foreign policy?

Sergey Lavrov: It is true that we had a visit planned for the end of 2021.

However, due to the changes that had taken place in Japan, it was agreed (mutually) to postpone this visit a bit so that the new Japanese government could determine its course both on international matters and on the Russian Federation.

We have very warm feelings for Japan and the Japanese. They are our neighbours. We have a complicated shared history. In recent decades, we have managed to create an atmosphere where it is possible to address persistent and acute issues in a friendly manner. We hope these issues and the work being done to resolve them will not prevent us from moving forward in the areas where our interests coincide objectively, where Russia and Japan could strengthen their competitive advantages on global markets by joining their efforts. There are only small barriers in the way of promoting this kind of thinking. There is a group of politicians and businesspeople in Japan who believe that first it is necessary to settle the territorial issue, and then manna will fall from heaven in the form of “huge” Japanese investments flowing into the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, we believe that imposing this artificial condition of settling the peace treaty problem on our relations does not serve the interests of Russia and especially Japan. We inherited the peace treaty problem, as President Vladimir Putin has many times said to his Japanese colleagues. He reaffirmed that Russia is interested in settling it, above all based on the agreements reached in December 2016 with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. They agreed to encourage this work based on the 1956 Declaration, which says that a peace treaty must be signed first, and only then may all other issues be addressed. We believe that this treaty cannot include just one phrase that the war is over, because it will be signed not in 1945 but in the 21st century. It should actually show today's comprehensive ties and open up prospects for our development.

We would like to avoid any possible lack of agreement and understanding with Japan regardless what is happening in our relations, so that there would be no artificial barriers to investment cooperation. We know that pressure is being put on Japan to restrain its enthusiasm for investing in Russia. Japan is being pressured into joining the sanctions. And Japan is joining the sanctions. Not all of them, but many. There is also pressure regarding military security issues. We are concerned that Japan has long been an ally of the United States. There is the treaty of 1960, according to which the Americans have a very broad freedom to maneuver and act on the territory of Japan. Now that the United States has declared us almost enemies in its doctrines, or at least adversaries, as well as a main threat along with

China, Japan's alliance with such a country is not in the best interest of creating an atmosphere to advance our relations.

There is one more aspect that is also reflected in our treaty in addition to trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural ties and their prospects and the issues of military security in this region. It was rumoured that Washington plans to deploy land-based missiles in Japan. These are the same medium- and shorter-range missiles that are banned by the treaty the US quit. There are many things there which are crucial for us to understand because if it is true, this move will create a threat to the Russian Federation.

There are many questions on international affairs. We are seeing that the positions that Japan adopts at the UN and other international organisations are identical to those of Washington, NATO members and other Western countries. If we want to be close partners, we must determine to what extent we can overcome our serious differences on the international agenda.

When we really develop a "qualitatively new" partnership in all of these areas, I am convinced it will be much easier for us to resolve all problems, including those linked with the peace treaty than it is now, in an atmosphere prone to confrontation. Japanese officials are continuously making demarches when Russian officials or military visit the southern Kuril Islands that by the results of World War II are an inalienable part of the Russian Federation, which is confirmed by the 1956 Soviet-Japanese declaration. This position is also an impediment for us for the time being. Japan categorically refuses to recognise the results of the World War II in this respect. This is an enormous agenda, both positive and problematic, which requires additional efforts. This is exactly why we want our dialogue to become more practical, specific, and open. We would like it to promote the Russia-Japan partnership without making its prospects hostage of your relations with your closest ally.

A visit will definitely take place. We are now discussing plans and I think we will find the right dates in the next two or three months.

Question: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken maintains that everything that President Vladimir Putin has done in the past couple of years has only hastened what he, in his own words, has tried to prevent. What facts and events compel the US Secretary of State to make such far-reaching conclusions? What could you say about this on behalf of Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a figure of speech. Anglo-Saxons like to say things

that sound good but are enigmatic. I don't quite understand what is meant in this case. During all his years in power, especially in the last few years, President of Russia Vladimir Putin has focused on strengthening Russian sovereignty. We are seeing the attacks the West is making on the sovereignty of Russia and many other countries that pursue a more or less independent policy. These are hybrid attacks, as they say nowadays, in all areas, direct military deterrence (we have already discussed Russia-NATO relations), aggressive information campaigns, the use of soft power mechanisms for improper purposes, and NGOs that are directly financed by the state, to name a few. Such concepts may work in some countries but Russia finds them completely unacceptable. Our experience of the 1990s prompted the West to make such statements. This is what the West decided at that time: "Okay, they have already reached the targets that they did not set for themselves. These are targets that we Americans have set for them and have helped reach them, including through a physical presence in the Russian Government and its relevant structures." Some people decided that Russia was in the West's pocket already and would not assert its interests anymore. Probably it hurt them to find out that this was not the case.

I have spoken with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken several times. He is an experienced man who is competent and able to listen. Much of what is said in public now is linked with the artificial fuelling of tensions, with a desire to create such an atmosphere around the Russian Federation, in part, as more background for the talks that started in Geneva and continued in Brussels and that, I hope, we will manage to resume. However, this will depend on the detailed written response the US provides to our proposals.

Question: Clearly, our relations with the West are at their lowest in recent years, but at the same time things look good in the East. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Moscow next week. This visit will take place at a time where the situation at the talks on the nuclear programme in Vienna remains unclear, because of US sanctions, among other things, the developments in the Gulf and the overall situation in the Middle East. Where is Russia's initiative for security in the Gulf area, and why isn't it taking off, if I may put it that way? How can it contribute to resolving important regional issues, for example, in Yemen, which is the biggest humanitarian disaster today? We see NATO expanding to the East, but are there any plans to expand the CSTO, including, for example, with the involvement of Iran or other countries that can strengthen the counterbalance to the policies of the West

and the North?

Sergey Lavrov: I'd take a more optimistic position on the Iranian nuclear programme. There is real progress there. Iran and the United States are willing to recognise specific concerns and to understand how these concerns can be addressed in the overall package. This can only be a package solution, just like the Iranian deal itself. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was a package solution. Very experienced negotiators are working in Vienna now. They have dug deep into the details of this negotiation and they are making good progress. We hope that an agreement will be reached. For this, it is important that the Iranian side is as realistic as possible and cooperates with the IAEA, and that the Western participants in this negotiation process do not try to create psychological tension by periodically planting criticism of Iran and making demands on it in the media. Quiet diplomacy is needed here and, to reiterate, it works. Thankfully, we managed to get past the situation when the West was making conditions on the resumption of the Iranian nuclear programme regarding the imposition of restrictions on Iran's missile programme (which was not included in the JCPOA) and its "behaviour" in the region. We were totally against this. It would be unfair if this approach prevailed. It was about the JCPOA, which was approved by the UN Security Council in the language in which it was signed. It was about restoring it in full, as it was agreed, without exceptions or additions after the Trump administration withdrew from this agreement. As a result, we managed to agree on this particular approach.

With regard to the missile programme and behaviour in the region, our position is that all the countries of the region, and even countries outside the region, have a lot of competing claims. Iran has claims against its Arab neighbours, and Arab neighbours have claims against Iran. The West, the United States and the European countries also have questions about what Iran is doing. Each of these countries has a stake outside its borders and has real influence on events in Syria, Libya, Djibouti, and Yemen. You cited an example that speaks volumes. We urged the participants not to go beyond the confines of restoring the JCPOA while working on it. We said that we recognise, and Iran recognises, that there are other problems that concern the countries of the region and their non-regional counterparts in a broader sense. Let's discuss these issues at security conferences in the Gulf and beyond. The scope should probably be wider. Yemen and Iraq are interconnected as well. A conference that would bring Iranians and Arabs together

where Iran would not be the subject of discussion, and where each side would lay their concerns on the table. Missiles that not only Iran possesses. The Arabs are also developing missile production. Concerns about Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and many other hot spots which, one way or another, cause differences between other countries. This is our concept. You asked why it didn't take off. But it never crashed, either. We held another technical conference last autumn with the involvement of political scientists and specialists from the potential member countries. Now the process of completing work on the restoration of the JCPOA is underway. The pandemic isn't helpful. This conference remains among our priorities. We have an understanding that this initiative cannot be ignored. Our Chinese colleagues have similar proposals for the Gulf countries. The Iranians came forward with their Hormuz initiative. But our concept is broader, because it is about going beyond the group of littoral Gulf countries and involving participants from the group of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the League of Arab States, and the EU. Regarding the expansion of the CSTO, everything is written down in the CSTO Charter. Anyone wishing to join should make a request. In the last 18 months, the heads of state signed the Protocol, which amends the Charter and, in addition to the full members of the Organisation, partner and observer institutions are being created. We have sent this information to the relevant countries. At least, there is interest in establishing contacts with the CSTO. We will keep you informed about progress.

Question: Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is to visit Russia. What do you think is the importance of this visit for further strengthening relations between our two countries?

Sergey Lavrov: This visit is very important. It is time we resume top-level contacts with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which are traditionally close and regular and have also fallen victim to the coronavirus pandemic. The two leaders spoke by phone. Face-to-face communication is much more effective than talks without seeing each other. It is necessary to revisit all issues on our agenda, given the changes in the Iranian government and understand if and in what areas we have ensured continuity. There are plenty of bilateral economic issues on the agenda. However, the abundance of joint projects requires that more attention is given to details. The government is working. The relevant intergovernmental commission led by the two energy ministers is expected to provide input. Of course, there are issues related to international politics, including the JCPOA and, generally, the

situation in the Persian Gulf, something we just talked about in detail, as well as to our joint efforts at the UN and other international organisations, in particular, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and other institutions. At these forums, Iran has joined the team of nations who support the principles of international law and universal agreements, instead of those coordinated by someone in a narrow circle. Tehran believes the UN must play a central role and it and is a member of the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations. We are cooperating closely on some regional issues – for example, on Syria. We are parties to the Astana Format as along with Turkey, our neighbour. I believe it is a very good example of coming together, while sticking to positions that do not coincide in full, in a pragmatic move to create a platform where our three countries can help the Syrians launch a political process, the way it happened in 2018. It was the Astana group of three countries, which, at the Congress of the Syrian People in Sochi, helped formulate the document that served as a framework for negotiations. These three countries urged the negotiators from the UN to take further action, since they – to put it politely – had been marking time for about a year, without doing anything. The Astana process has provided incentives for the talks, which, although not without hitches, are taking place in Geneva now.

Question: Recently, new social movements, such as new ethics, have gained traction in the West. We witnessed respectable scientists and culture figures becoming victims of the cancel culture only because their ideas and views allegedly did not fit into the new ethics mould. In the United States, this process overlapped with an already painful chasm between the Democrats and the Republicans. What do you think about these trends? You worked as Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York for 10 years. Has the United States changed beyond recognition since then?

Sergey Lavrov: New ethics? So, there was old ethics? When I lived there, old ethics dominated, whatever that means. There were no such social aggravations. I believe God created man. We, as followers of various branches of Christianity, share the same values that exist in other world religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and so on. This thousand-year legacy of our ancestors of different faiths reflects in a concentrated form the accumulated wisdom of humanity. The fact that they are now trying to not just question it, but to destroy it, is dangerous. UNESCO and other cultural agencies must strictly follow their charters that are steeped in traditional classical ethics.

Question: How do you see the future of Russia-India relations? What are the results of President Putin's visit to India? Will the RIC (Russia-India-China) summit be held amid the tensions on the Indian-Chinese border?

Sergey Lavrov: In December 2021, President Vladimir Putin visited New Delhi. The coronavirus pandemic very much hinders direct dialogue. In this case, all the necessary conditions were met. President Putin and Prime Minister Modi were able to hold productive talks. We highly value our relationship. It is no coincidence that they are called a specially privileged strategic partnership. We will develop it to the fullest.

There is a Russia-India-China (RIC) troika, the forerunner of BRICS, which has become a household name. Little is said about RIC now, but it is a very effective entity. The foreign ministers have met almost 20 times over the time of its existence. There are sectoral meetings of ministers, deputy ministers and experts in trade, economic and cultural cooperation. Russia, India and China participate in BRICS and the SCO. Starting from January 1, 2022, the three countries will be members of the UN Security Council for the next two years. We see the interest of our Indian and Chinese friends in preserving and expanding this format.

There is a direct dialogue between India and China on many issues, including security. There is a Declaration on Strategic Partnership between India and China. If RIC can be useful for improving the atmosphere of trust, we will strongly support it. In addition to the political aspect, all three countries constitute a single geographical area. The troika engages in promising economic and investment plans.

Question: You have covered the Middle East, and the problems in Syria and Iraq. In early December 2021, Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov visited Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Erbil. We talked about the political situation in Iraq and settlement in Syria. How do you see the future of the Syrian settlement and the status of the Kurds? Chair of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council Ilham Ahmed visited Moscow in November 2021.

Parliamentary elections have been held in Iraq. So far, only the leaders of the parliament have been appointed, and the cabinet is being formed. How do you see the role of the Kurds in this process and in achieving stability in Iraq and the rest of the region?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a sensitive, multifaceted and complex issue. It has

proved its complexity in recent history. We are interested in developing close relations with Iraq. We have a long history of friendship. We enjoy good economic contacts. Our companies operate in Iraq, and we are grateful for the favourable conditions created for them. The more stable Iraq is, the more confidence we have in the continued development of bilateral ties. We want our Iraqi friends to live in peace. This is good for people-to-people exchanges, including business, cultural and defence ties, which are quite extensive.

In Syria, the Kurdish problem is one of the obstacles to holding meaningful talks. There are Kurds on the Constitutional Committee, but they do not represent all Kurdish entities. Some of those who were left out of the constitutional process look to the United States, others to their Turkish neighbours. When President Trump announced the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the Syrian Democratic Forces immediately asked us to help them establish a dialogue with Damascus. As soon as the US changed its mind, their interest vanished. This is life, probably. For Kurdish politicians, the horizon should be more distant. They need to see perspectives. It is absolutely certain that it won't be the Americans who will determine the future of Syria. Just like all other countries of the world, they continue to reaffirm their commitment to Syria's territorial integrity. But in fact, they support the separatist movement on the eastern bank of the Euphrates.

Our contacts, including with Ms Ahmed and her colleagues, are aimed at making it clear to them that they need to start a serious dialogue with Damascus about the conditions under which Kurds will reside in the Syrian state. The Syrian government shows restraint in this regard. They have not forgotten that the Kurds have earlier been against the government. That's what diplomacy is for: to overcome the past and to build relationships for the future. The experience of Iraq, Erbil, and the Kurdish Autonomous Region is valuable. Two years ago, I was in Erbil and Baghdad and supported the efforts to establish contacts. The Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have them. It is necessary that the Iraqi Kurds more actively pass on their experience to their Syrian brothers and sisters.

With regard to the situation in Iraq after the elections, it is up to the people of that country to decide on it. There is an aspect of the issue that we have already touched on today which is security in the Gulf and beyond. We are witnessing the Americans trying to make not only Syria, but also Iraq an arena for the fight against Iran and its interests.

There are interesting parallels. There are foreign troops stationed in Iraq.

When, at the request of President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the CSTO sent its peacekeeping forces there, early on, Washington wanted to Kazakhstan to explain why it had invited the CSTO forces, stressing that Russia must leave as soon as Kazakhstan says thank you to it. Kazakhstan has said so now and Russia and the CSTO are now leaving. When will the Americans leave Iraq? Not only had they not been invited, but the parliament of that country resolved that it was time for them to go home. As the saying goes, everyone is equal except the one who is more equal than all others. This goes to show our Western colleagues' behaviour and manners.

We hope that the elections and further political stabilisation will help achieve settlement in the region, and countries outside the region will confront Iraq and its neighbours with a choice of who to cooperate with. This is to revisit the issue of freedom of choosing alliances. When Washington says not to buy weapons from Russia, not to communicate with Iran or any other country, this is a direct encroachment on the freedom to choose not only alliances, but simply partnerships.

Question: In 2021, Russia made new steps to further consolidate and promote cooperation with the global Russian world. The Constitution now sets forth a new status for Russian compatriots, the State Duma has a new commission on this matter, and the 7th World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad has been held. What is the Foreign Ministry doing in today's challenging environment to protect the rights and interests of Russian compatriots living abroad?

Sergey Lavrov: This work takes on new dimensions every year. With the approval of constitutional amendments, this goal has been enshrined in the Constitution. The Foreign Minister chairs the Government Commission on Compatriots Living Abroad, which has been working for more than ten years now, and has been quite useful in terms of promoting contacts with the vast Russian world in all its ethnic and religious diversity.

National and regional committees operate in most countries where our compatriots live. We also maintain close contacts with the World Coordinating Council (WCC) of Russian Compatriots Living Abroad. In 2021, some 1,200 youth, sports, patriotic and human rights events took place.

The Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad has been established with the Foreign Ministry as its founder. It operates about 50 legal assistance centres in more than 30 countries by offering legal services to those who find themselves in a difficult situation. We also stand up

for the rights of our compatriots as citizens of the countries where they choose to live, and will expand these efforts. We often raise matters related to our compatriots within the United Nations, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, including in terms of protecting language and education rights. The Baltic states and Ukraine are egregiously violating these rights, ignoring the conventions signed by their governments.

There is also the State Programme to Assist Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Living Abroad, which became part of our state policy quite recently. At first, there were some challenges and not everything ran as smoothly as it was supposed to, but things have improved since then. In the first nine months of 2021, more than 60,000 of our compatriots resettled in Russia, up one third compared to the previous reporting period. We are doing everything to make sure that the regions where our compatriots choose to settle show as much care as possible in helping these people build their lives in their homeland.

A commission within the United Russia party for international cooperation and supporting compatriots living abroad has been established at the proposal of President Vladimir Putin. I was instructed to become its chair. We have held the first meeting. Working within this Commission, we intend to transcend the boundaries of the ruling party, which is the leading political force in the country, and reach out to other parliamentary groups. We have already reached an agreement to this effect. This will benefit our cause, since our entire nation and the state care about the Russian world, its future and the way people live and work abroad, as well as how they are treated there. One of our primary objectives is to make it easier for them to come to work in Russia. Other agencies have been receptive to our efforts, and we are working on the corresponding agreements.

The 7th World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad was a success, gathering more than 400 delegates from over 100 countries. We could see that being able to talk to each other and with Russian government officials meant a lot for these people. Unfortunately, in some countries, primarily the United States, our compatriots are facing persecution. The same applies to Russian nationals traveling abroad. The US government has taken unacceptable actions against the WCC and forced it to stop working there. Threatened with criminal charges, some of its senior executives were forced to return to Russia. This has become the norm in the United States.

Against this challenging backdrop, we aspire to preserve and further enhance

our cooperation. I would like to thank all our compatriots for their contribution to preserving the memory of our fathers and grandfathers, their heroic deeds, and the Great Patriotic War. We cannot but rejoice at the fact that more than 100 countries marked Victory Day by holding the Immortal Regiment marches and the Candle of Memory vigil. People planted Gardens of Memory around the world. This reinforces our bond with the history of our great homeland and its people. Whenever our compatriots come up with new ideas on further streamlining these efforts, we are grateful for receiving their contributions and will do everything to make sure that their proposals materialise.

Question: I would like to express our deepest gratitude for helping to repatriate our compatriots from Kazakhstan. The matter concerns human lives, children and grandchildren. In other words, the Russian Foreign Ministry has done more than the public can see. Thank you very much. And now, my question: Do you think you have done everything you can to support our compatriots, or will there be any other pleasant surprises regarding our compatriots living abroad?

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding your kind words about the repatriation of our compatriots from Kazakhstan, we have only organised the process. The technical side was the responsibility of the Russian Defence Ministry. We coordinated our work with it, just as we did in many other cases when such assistance was needed.

As for your second question, there is no limit to perfection, so we will gladly accept your suggestions. We have our own vision of the matter. We analyse developments based on the assessments provided by the committees of compatriots, our embassies and Russian Culture Centres. We would welcome any additional assistance from those in whose interests we are doing this.

Question: When speaking about our Western partners late last year, you mentioned “political Kama Sutra.” Early this year you suddenly started talking about their impotence. What happened between these two statements?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think anything has changed. I mentioned impotence with regard to the EU. We began this news conference with the EU, and we are finishing it with the EU as well. I spoke about the EU's ability to honour agreements and to do the things we agreed to do. I provided examples. Some time ago, the UN General Assembly empowered the EU to mediate between Belgrade and Pristina. In 2013, a document was coordinated on the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. It gave the Serbs living in the north of Kosovo major rights of autonomy on cultural, humanitarian, language and

educational matters, as well as in the area of special ties with Serbia. This is similar to the set of rights that has been approved for the Donetsk and Lugansk republics in the Minsk Package of Measures. In both cases, the EU was involved in the coordination of these documents: the whole of the EU in the former case and as represented by Germany and France in the Normandy format in the latter case. In both cases, one of the sides is not honouring the documents approved by both sides. It is Pristina in the case of Kosovo and the Kiev regime in the case of the Minsk agreements.

There has been zero response to our numerous calls to the EU to ensure the implementation of the agreements in the adoption of which it has invested efforts, talent and hard work. Regarding the Minsk agreements, they say that Russia must implement the five principles formulated by the then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, according to which EU-Russia relations will normalise when Russia fulfils the Minsk agreements. This is political schizophrenia, because the Minsk agreements are not about Russia, they are about Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk. Kiev officials regularly say at various levels that they will not speak with the republics. When we point this out to Germany and France, the French say that there is nothing in the Minsk agreements that would oblige Kiev to talk with these people.

As for media outlets, when three television channels were banned in Kiev, we took the matter to our French colleagues. They said that they are all for the freedom of speech, but these channels have been banned in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation. This is indictive. We want the EU to play an independent role. Here is one more example involving Ukraine. The EU acted as the guarantor of the February 2014 agreement between Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition. But the very next day the opposition tossed away the agreement. Brussels kept silent, and now some people describe that revolt as a “democratic process.”

We would like to have normal relations with the EU. We did not destroy them. The EU must decide if it is ready to restore them. We won't be found wanting if all parties act on the basis of mutual respect and try to find a balance of interests, which is what we always call for.

Question: I would like to go back to the outcome of Russia's bilateral talks with the West on security guarantees. You have said that Russia is waiting for its Western colleagues to put forward their proposals and set them down on paper. What if, for example, the Western proposals include reciprocal reductions of

weapons and deployments, but no guarantees regarding NATO's non-expansion? Is Russia ready to consider such proposals? What will Russia do, specifically? Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko has mentioned military-technical measures. What exactly did he mean by that? What are these measures and when will they be taken?

Sergey Lavrov: Military-technical measures refer to the deployment of military assets. When we take any decisions on steps involving military equipment, we always know what we are talking about and what we are preparing to do. Russia holds regular military exercises on its territory. We had exercises in the western part of the country, and now there is a snap exercise underway along Russia's eastern borders. This is our affair, and our decisions. When military assets are concentrated along the Russian borders with the Americans sending tens of thousands of their military personnel, and the UK dispatching hundreds, thousands of weapons, we must understand what they are doing in the Baltic countries, in Poland or other countries, because some of these weapons can effectively target the territory of the Russian Federation. I would not look for any hidden agenda here. We always respond to security threats the Russian Federation faces.

Let's wait for their proposals. They promised to provide them in about a week. We warned our partners, primarily the Americans, that this is a package rather than a menu where they can randomly pick the items they desire, just like the package on the freedom to choose alliances, as we discussed today. You cannot treat this aspect outside of the formula approved at the highest level on indivisible security and the unacceptable nature of strengthening one's security at the expense of other countries' security. This is what is already happening, to an extent. Our colleagues started talking about discussing confidence-building measures, arms reduction, being transparent, sharing information on exercises and observing them. First, when this was relevant, NATO ignored our proposal. About three years ago, Russia's General Staff proposed agreeing on holding exercises farther away from the Russia-NATO line of contact by respecting a certain distance. Second, we proposed setting the closest distance of approach for Russia's and NATO's combat aircraft and ships. They simply ignored all this. By the same token, they ignored President Vladimir Putin's initiative to introduce a mutual moratorium on the deployment of intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles with verification mechanisms.

Today, following the Geneva meetings, they are ready to discuss all these

three issues, including holding exercises farther away from the line of contact, taking additional measures, avoiding unintentional incidents, and on intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles. It turns out that when they ignored us in the past it was because they didn't take us seriously. If they start moving in this direction now, thank goodness. This will only make us happy. However, they must understand that guaranteeing that NATO stop its eastward expansion is key to all this. All the rest will be part of a general deal but this is what the agreement must be like. The Americans point to NATO saying that the United States would be happy to discuss the matters we raise, but Washington has to take its allies into account. I do not think that this is an honest take on this issue. They claim to be unable to make the decision without their allies. By and large, all Washington needs NATO for is to affirm its leadership in the Western world and ensure that they all toe its policy line and fulfil its designs. The AUKUS story is a telling example of the way the United States treats the interests of its allies. You know how France responded to the underhand dealings of the Anglo-Saxons.

Or take Nord Stream 2. Germany is also a US ally. How are Germany's interests taken into consideration? With moans and groans. Germany has to beg the United States not to impose sanctions.

The Americans dismantled the INF Treaty without consulting their allies. It was only after it happened that the US allies started singing along saying that the United States was right, while Russia had to do something. The same goes for the Open Skies Treaty – no one consulted anyone. For this reason, I do not see any convincing arguments to claim that the United States cannot play the leading role in these processes.

Question: How would you describe the results and essence of the Union State of Russia and Belarus in the new architecture of international relations?

Sergey Lavrov: This space is only taking shape. The Union State of Russia and Belarus is at the stage of accelerated development. Last year, we gave a powerful momentum to this process by signing 28 Union programmes, which are being implemented in the form of directly applicable documents. These framework agreements are being translated into practice. The Union State will progress towards closer coordination in internal economic matters and harmonisation of the relevant customs, tax and other mechanisms. We have the Union Parliament, which will be used increasingly often in keeping with these processes.

As for our defence, the recent events have added an additional argument (if

anyone needed one) in favour of strengthening our defence capability. We have a common stand and views on this objective.

There are also our cultural ties and the harmonisation of the rights of our citizens. This project has been completed by 90 percent. We need to extend this process to the remaining spheres, where there are some shortcomings so far. Ideally, we must create absolutely identical conditions for travel, hotel accommodation, healthcare services and much more of what people need every day. In accordance with the 28 programmes I just mentioned, the conditions of doing business will be coordinated and ultimately, fully harmonised.

We are closely coordinating our actions and take the same stand on international affairs. Every two years, we adopt coordinated action programmes. The last time we adopted it at a joint meeting of our foreign ministry collegiums. We hold joint ministry collegium meetings and exchange ministerial visits every year. I have positive expectations of the further strengthening of the Union State as per our presidents' decision and the union programmes signed by our governments on their instructions.

Question: At the height of the crisis in Kazakhstan, some experts suggested that Russia and Belarus could invite Kazakhstan to join the Union State (the West is alarmed by this possibility). What do you think about these ideas, which are a matter of concern for Western experts? Can the Union State be expanded?

Sergey Lavrov: We don't usually invite anyone anywhere. There is an approved procedure, according to which we consider any applications constructively. It is our Western colleagues who like to issue invitations. They are urging everyone to join NATO. This is not the way we operate. We are polite people.

Question: When was the demand of security guarantees formulated? Why did it happen now? Such demands were not advanced during the Soviet period.

Sergey Lavrov: It has always been done. A demand for security guarantees was put forth after the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1990s in the form of political commitments adopted at the top level. Our Western colleagues abused or disregarded these political commitments. When we asked the security guarantees to be transformed from a political commitment into a legally binding obligation in 2009 and proposed signing a relevant document, we were told that this is not their concern and that binding security guarantees are only given to NATO members. During the past seminal 30 years, we have developed an understanding of how we

should act. Nothing will come of promises and political incantations. As the President of Russia has said, we have submitted certain documents, insisting that our main concern regarding NATO's non-expansion be legally formalised. I hope to receive a response that will include more than mere deliberations that this does not suit the West. We will see what they put on paper. After that, we will decide how sincere our Western colleagues were not in the 1990s but in their current relations with Russia.



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