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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions at a meeting with students in the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, July 1, 2022

Friends,

It's good to be back at the university. I appreciate talking with students in Moscow and other capitals that I visit. Belarus is special because we are building the Union State. We are a tightly knit group of brothers and sisters. I want to know how you live, what your interests are and what questions you have. For us, this is more than small talk, it's a professional necessity. We want to do things that are seen positively by the people of Russia and its closest allies. The tips that I hope to hear from you today will be of practical value.

We go back a long way. This year, we mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations and the 250th anniversary of the reunification of our peoples. A dedicated series of events is planned in Polotsk in September. Another anniversary – 210 years of victory in the Patriotic War of 1812 – is coming in December, and we have planned events to mark it.

We are aware of the fact that 2022 was declared Historical Memory Year in Belarus and we welcome it. Looking back in history and learning lessons from it helps address the pressing problems at hand.

A week ago, June 22, we marked a tragic date, the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. We call it the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow. Belarus marks it as the Day of National Remembrance of the Victims of the Great Patriotic War and the Genocide of the Belarusian People. Throughout the war, shoulder to shoulder, our peoples, our great ancestors fought off the Nazi's attacks and saved Europe. Today, we laid wreaths at the Memory Stele installed in memory of the students and faculty of your university who died on the fronts in the Great Patriotic War.

This historical lesson is important to remember not only for us to preserve the sacred memory of those who stopped Nazism, but also not to allow this ideology of hatred to rear its ugly head. We have been witnessing such attempts more and more often in the Baltic States in the past several years and in Ukraine, a country that is close to us. The need for preventive action in the international arena is clear. In this regard, I would like to note that scholars and law enforcement agencies in Russia and Belarus are working together to compile a record of the crimes committed by Nazi killing squads and their henchmen. A theme-based conference devoted to this work was held in Minsk on June 14-15 with the participation of parliamentarians from our countries. Many chapters of that war remain unknown.

An open exchange of information and sharing our approaches to international politics are a hallmark of allied ties between Moscow and Minsk. Our presidents are setting the tone for these relations. The presidents of Russia and Belarus met again [in St Petersburg on June 25](#). Much of what they discussed was broadcast on television. I'm sure you are aware of what they talked about. Coordinating our approaches is particularly important today with the tectonic shifts, without exaggeration, taking place around the world.

The current problems are not rooted in the West's concern over developments in Ukraine. The West has much more ambitious schemes. They reflect the realisation that its 500-year era of dominance in world affairs has not only approaching the end but that it is being relegated to the past. The world is becoming multi-polar in nature. New centres of economic growth, financial might and political influence are loudly asserting themselves and occupying increasingly sustainable and leading positions in world affairs, primarily, the economy. The West's current actions reveal its all-out desire to prevent this objective historical process from taking place and to maintain its dominance at any cost. You can see how they go to any length, from illegal interference in the domestic affairs of others to the use of armed force. They finish this drive with economic sanctions that they impose on our countries, among others.

The West has never proved that it can keep its word. When the Warsaw Treaty and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, do you remember the solemn assurances (as President Vladimir Putin and President Alexander Lukashenko have repeatedly mentioned) that were given to Soviet and later Russian leaders that NATO would not expand eastward? They proved to be a lie. Then the Russia-NATO Founding Act was signed at the end of the 1990s via a certain compromise; Moscow took a step towards concession. There was no longer talk of NATO's non-expansion eastward. It was said that significant combat forces would not be permanently deployed on the territories of any new alliance members (thus, expansion was considered a certainty). Over the past few years, NATO has thrown out this commitment as well. The latest resolution at the Madrid summit provides for an enormous increase in armed forces, weapons and military infrastructure on the eastern flank of this military-political bloc.

The alliance fully ignored one other commitment – to ensure the indivisibility of security. This formula was first approved at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999 and renewed in 2010 (not that long ago) at the OSCE summit in the capital of Kazakhstan. It granted every country the right to choose a way of ensuring its security but affirmed that no state had the right to enhance its own security at the expense of the security of any other state in our common space.

The next element of this formula stated that not a single country, organisation or alliance had the right to claim a dominant role in Europe. But this is exactly what NATO is doing. First, it ignored the security interests of both our countries. Second, it declared NATO the pinnacle of political creativity and the world's greatest alliance for centuries, functioning for the benefit of all countries and peoples.

Recently, a White House official said yet again that neither Russia nor anyone else, for that matter, should be apprehensive of NATO because it is only a defensive organisation. This is ridiculous. Adults should be ashamed to say nonsense like this. At the time of the Warsaw Treaty, it was clear who NATO was defending itself against. The same was true for the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, which defended itself against NATO. A distinct line was drawn between these two military and political blocs. Neither the Warsaw Treaty nor the Soviet Union exist any longer, but eastwards expansion by NATO has already occurred five times. If throughout this recent period, they, as they believe and say, were a defensive organisation, who were they defending themselves against? If you advance, expand into new territories, deploy your armed forces and military infrastructure there, this is not defence, it's the opposite.

Now they say NATO needs to acquire a global dimension in terms of responsibility for world security. They even thought up a term, the Indo-Pacific Region, for this purpose to try to “hook” India. Now, they claim, NATO has to be responsible for security in this part of the world, as well. In other words – they are not even bothering to hide this – NATO's next line of defence will go through the South China Sea because China was referred to as the primary, systemic and long-term challenge in the final documents approved at the recent NATO summit in Madrid.

The doctrinal documents of the CSTO, the CIS and the EAEU have never expressed any objective to contain anyone, nor have they ever referred to anyone as a threat. We are only engaged in constructive cooperation and creative work in any institution established on the territory of the former Soviet Union. They, for their part, try incessantly to look for an external enemy. This can largely be ascribed to the need to justify NATO's existence, which was lost, as many politicians and analysts in the West admit, with the demise of the Warsaw Treaty and the Soviet Union.

At that time, there was a unique chance to build a common space for security and economic cooperation, as the French leaders said, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This was quite possible. Russia and the European Union were engaged in a close dialogue: summits were held twice a year and the Russian Government met with the members of the European Commission every year. Twenty industry-specific dialogues were maintained within each of the four common spaces that were identified as areas for developing practical cooperation based on four relevant roadmaps.

The visa-waiver dialogue almost succeeded, but the transition to a visa-free regime never occurred. Do you know why? This happened long before the events in Ukraine, I mean the coup of February 2014 – two years prior to these events. As we all but reached an agreement with the EU on the transition to a visa-free regime for the majority of our citizens, including students, the EU quite unexpectedly “applied the brakes” and suspended the process. Later, we received a confidential – nobody said this in public – explanation. It turned out that during the internal discussion of this intergovernmental agreement with Russia, the Baltic countries said that they had no objections, as far as the legal aspects of the matter or the provision of guarantees against abuse were concerned, but politically they claimed they had no right to grant visa-free travel to Russian nationals before granting it to the nationals of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. This is all we need to say about the propriety of our neighbours. They are guided not by the interests of the people of their countries and those countries with which they are allegedly cooperating – far from it – but rather by geopolitical considerations. That is a bare fact.

When the Baltic states were being admitted to the EU and NATO (I clearly remember the period), all more or less honest experts and political scientists in the West admitted that those states were not mature enough to meet the EU membership requirements since they had a lot to be done (conduct reforms and the like), yet they must be admitted promptly for geopolitical reasons. We asked our partners in Brussels back then, without going public, why all the hurry. We stressed that it was just exploration of a newly emerged geopolitical space in terms of ideology, spreading influence, and expansion. We were told that those countries must be admitted as soon as possible because they “had suffered” when they were part of the Soviet Union, and for that reason they had phobias and feared for their security whereas if they joined NATO and the EU, the people in the Baltic would allegedly take comfort straight away. You see how comfortable they are. Rather than playing nice as young people should when accepted in a grown-up company, they dictate their ultimatums, openly trade on EU “solidarity” principles, and force Europe to adopt a Russophobic position. Europe’s powerhouses also have such sentiments but the intensity and acrimony of Russophobia and the exasperation are set by the “young Europeans” (the Baltic states, Poland and other nations whose governments, regrettably, begin to forget Russia’s role in the history of their people).

For a long time, our approach was to seek agreements and look for compromises; we always, in any situation emerging in the European space, called for consensus, to ensure a balance of interests between Russia and the West. That’s how the “Ukraine saga” began. In 2013, as the Association Agreement with the EU was being worked out, it appeared the draft document contained a clause on reducing tariffs on most goods to zero which was at odds with the reality in the context of the CIS free trade zone.

There were zero tariffs on most goods, including in trade between Russia and Ukraine. We had rather serious protective measures against the EU, which took long 17 years to negotiate when we were in talks on joining the WTO. We had protected large sectors of our economy – insurance, banking, agriculture and a number of other industries which had protective tariffs for a fairly long period. If Ukraine reduced its trade tariffs with the European Union, whereas we had practically no tariffs with Ukraine, our protection of all goods against the EU would become meaningless. We said so honestly in the summer of 2013. President Vladimir Putin suggested to the European Commission that the three of us should sit down and find a solution so that both Ukraine's aspiration for liberalising trade with the EU remained intact, and our interests were not affected. These are obvious matters.

In September 2013, the Head of the European Commission, Portuguese diplomat Jose Manuel Barroso, told us arrogantly that they were not meddling in our trade with China, and so we should not be meddling in their affairs with Ukraine. Then President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich realised there would be problems if he cancelled the trade tariffs with the EU, that we would have to protect ourselves from the goods that would be coming to us through Ukraine. At the Eastern Partnership summit in late November 2013, he asked his partners to delay the signing so that he could talk to the experts to find out what to do in this situation. As a result, the EU members threw a tantrum and organised the Maidan protests together with the Americans. These protests started in December 2013 and lasted into February 2014. Then the EU, represented by France, Germany and Poland, was actively helping to establish a dialogue between members of the Maidan movement that were funded, encouraged and inspired by the West. You remember how Victoria Nuland – she has now returned to the Department of State – was giving out cookies and went all-out in a bid to inspire these people “to continue the struggle.” Blood had already been spilled by that time. In February 2014, an agreement between Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition was signed. The first item in the document provided for the formation of a national unity government and the holding of early elections in five or six months. On the following morning, the opposition trampled underfoot the paper that was signed by the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland. All three countries, as well as the rest of the EU, kept quiet and actually swallowed this humiliation. Instead of a national unity government, the putschists proclaimed the government of the winners. In other words, they defeated some of the people in their own country. The first announcement they made was about their intention to cancel the regional status of the Russian language. Then the leaders of the Right Sector (terrorist organization) declared that Russians must get out of Crimea. They sent what they called “friendship trains” with armed criminals to attack the Supreme Council. This is when it all started. The West prefers to ignore all this.

Westerners are now fond of cancelling everything. Cancel culture dominates their philosophy and practical actions. But when you talk to them about how this happened and why neither France, Germany, nor Poland, nor anyone else had cut the putschists to size and made them fulfil the agreements signed and guaranteed by the Europeans, they say that this is how it was, but still, we had allegedly “annexed” Crimea. We asked them why they deleted all the previous events that I just described in brief. They do not want to hear about it and they remove any “objectionable” events in any historical conversation. Now they are saying that we “invaded” Ukraine on February 24 of this year. But the coup (that I mentioned) had been staged before. All regimes that subsequently existed and exist in Ukraine resulted from this state coup. They remain permeated with its Russophobic and neo-Nazi ideology.

During all these years, dozens of decisions were made to cancel the Russian language first in secondary schools, and then in universities and the media. Later, even Ukrainian media were shut down for broadcasting in Russian or occupying positions disliked by Petr Poroshenko and Vladimir Zelensky. All this happened. Likewise, adopted laws glorified Bandera, Shukhevich and other criminals, Nazis who killed civilians (Poles and Jews) and also promoted the theory of “the great Ukies.” All this is being ignored just as the Minsk Agreements, which made it possible to stop the conflict in February 2015, or actually the war against Donbass unleashed by the regime that had come to power. Residents of Donbass refused to obey these illegal rulers. The efforts to settle this situation lasted for practically a year. The Minsk Agreements were signed. Kiev refused to fulfil them for the next seven years. At first, it silently abstained from fulfilling what it had signed itself and what had been later unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council. Then the regime started saying that the Minsk Agreements did not suit them, that they needed to be clarified. During all this time, they continued bombing Donbass in violation of numerous ceasefire agreements.

Former president Petr Poroshenko said recently that they had signed the agreements with the only purpose of biding their time and getting weapons from the West. They never had any intention of implementing them. He stated that honestly and frankly. They are putting on a show. Vladimir Zelensky used to act in the KVN comedy contest and headed the Kvartal 95 team. Mr Poroshenko was off the stage but he played a role in politics exactly the same way, putting on performances, including the signing of the Minsk Agreements, a crucial step supported by the entire international community. It appears he did not want anything of it. They say that Zelensky is different. Petr Poroshenko also came to power under the slogan of bringing peace in Donbass, as much as Vladimir Zelensky did. Both of them promptly revealed their real identities.

I have already mentioned February 2014, when the coup leaders declared that there was no place for Russians in Crimea because a Russian would not think and speak Ukrainian and would not honour the Ukrainian heroes – Bandera, Shukhevich and their ilk. When we drew the attention of our Western partners to these facts, they replied that those were fringe elements and we should not equate the entire Ukrainian people with such persons.

Vladimir Zelensky is not a fringe element, is he? He was elected by the overwhelming majority of votes. In September 2021, Vladimir Zelensky gave a TV interview, you can also find it in social networks. When asked about his attitude to the people in Donbass, DPR and LPR, he first said there are people and there are “species.” Seven years earlier the then prime minister Arseny Yatsenyuk called them “non-humans.” Non-humans and species – the sense the two politicians meant is clear. Further on in the interview, Vladimir Zelensky publicly and deliberately said in front of the camera that if someone thinks of themselves as Russian, let them get off to Russia. Recently in yet another interview for CNN he was asked about the nationalist battalions such as Aidar and Azov as their actions betray their ultra-radical and neo-Nazi views and practices, He replied they had many such battalions. “They are what they are.” Remarkably, CNN cut out this phrase from the interview. They felt embarrassed for the person they praise and show the way they used to show Greta Thunberg on all screens. I don't want to go deeper into all these facts. You are well aware of them.

I want to say the following. The West wants to “stop” history. When the Soviet Union disappeared, Francis Fukuyama said it was the end of history. The liberal and neoliberal world order will remain in the entire planet from now on for good. It didn't work out that way.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown that countries with this kind of a relaxed organisation are not as good at coping with this kind of real threats as the countries that they themselves refer to as autocracies or dictatorships. We are talking about countries with a well-organised central government that is responsible and capable, and is able to respond with maximum efficiency (in terms of ensuring the interests and security of their citizens) to natural or other disasters.

Over the past 20 to 30 years, China, India, Brazil, the Republic of South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Argentina, Mexico, and the list goes on, have made great strides in economic development and gained more influence on international trade and finance and on the way economic activities are organised on our planet. With economic weight comes political clout. This has to be reckoned with.

It is no coincidence that the G20 was created in 1999 because they realised that the G7, which had previously run the show in global finance and the economy, was no longer in a position to do so. The G20 is made up of 10 countries, including the G7 members and its closest allies from Asia. The other 10 countries are BRICS members and their like-minded partners from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Indonesia). The G20 was quite effective, because the West has de facto admitted that it can no longer go it alone and needs to reach out to other nations. Unfortunately, this experience (rather positive) did not teach the West that a similar approach should be used in international politics as well. The Westerners are clinging to the remaining levers, such as the role of the dollar and the euro and a whole range of supply chains that they are now trying to disrupt in order to hurt Russia, Belarus and other countries that are under sanctions for not wanting to obediently comply with the will of the West.

At the same time, we want everyone to be aware of the fact that looking through the lens of its own understanding of its security, the West, the Americans, in particular, will stop at nothing if they have even a slightest suspicion of a threat to their security. In 1999, they said Yugoslavia posed a threat to the Americans from across the Atlantic Ocean (10,000 km) and bombed that country. In 2003, they said that Iraq threatened the vital interests of the United States. Why? What interests? Later it transpired that they made up a story about Iraq harbouring weapons of mass destruction. It turned out later that there were none. Washington's ally, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, said no WMDs had been discovered in Iraq. They “made a mistake,” which can happen to anyone. Almost a million civilians were killed in Iraq. The country was destroyed and is now being put back together piece by piece. Libya simply does not exist. The same scenario unfolded there. They didn't like “dictator” Muammar Gaddafi, under whom the people lived a dream life with almost free petrol, free education and free education abroad, too. They turned the country into a hotbed of terrorism and a grey zone through which refugees are going north and weapons and drugs are going south. These are all made-up threats 10,000 km away from the United States.

In the case of the ongoing developments in Ukraine, for many years, at least since 2013, we have been knocking on the “Western” door and saying: let's not bring things to a crisis. This is not happening somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, but right on our borders. They were creating a regime cut out specifically to contain Russia. They invested in it, flooded it with weapons, built military bases and, as we eventually found out, created biological laboratories to conduct experiments with dangerous pathogens. In fact, it was a biological weapon. It is no coincidence that speaking in the Senate during hearings after our armed forces said they had discovered biological laboratories and corresponding documents Victoria Nuland made a Freudian slip saying it was important to make sure that the Russians don't get access to what this lab was doing. Laboratories like this one abound throughout the post-Soviet space. In conjunction with our Belarusian friends, we are now working to create a mechanism within the CSTO that will ensure transparency in terms of any kind of biological activity within the borders of our countries. It was not an easy task, but in the end we made it happen.

We remain open to talks, but with the West slamming shut all the doors, imposing sanctions on us and kicking out our diplomats there can be no question about any initiative coming from us. If they come to their senses and come to us with a proposal (sensible people are already saying that this will end some day and we will need to think about rebuilding or building a new European security architecture), let them come to us and we'll see what they have to say. But we will not take their word for anything. We have put our trust in them many times before and they brazenly deceived us each and every time.

In any case, we will do our best to make sure we do not depend on the West in the critical sectors such as the economy or defence. President Vladimir Putin made this clear. The Government has been instructed accordingly. Our ministries and agencies engage in this work. We remain open to a dialogue, but we will not take anyone's word for anything from now on. As it turned out, their promises are worthless. The speed and the landslide nature that Russophobia has acquired in recent months show how deep it was running. The "smiles" that the West has been giving us since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the invitations to establish cooperation and strategic partnership were skin-deep. This mask has always been hiding the desire to contain Russia and, as they have been saying recently, to divide it into several parts.

We have partners to cooperate with if the West presses on with its current policies. The overwhelming majority of the countries around the world share our approaches, although not all of them have the courage to publicly admit that and uphold them. You can vote at the UN General Assembly as you see fit and make all kinds of statements at other multilateral venues. What matters is the practical outcome which shows that 75 percent of the population of the UN member states refused to join the illegal sanctions. We have BRICS, and more countries are becoming interested in this group. Countries are getting in line (in a good sense) to join this group that is an epitome of new diplomacy. No one is imposing anything on anyone, everyone is always looking for compromise solutions and meeting each other halfway and ensuring a balance of interests. There is also the SCO, where Belarus is an observer and which it wants to join as a full member, which we vigorously support. The CIS, the CSTO and the EAEU have been created within the space of the former Soviet Union. President Putin proposed to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership so that all organisations and countries located on our large continent, without exception, could build relations based not on some externally imposed schemes, but in a way that would allow for harmonising these processes. The EAEU, the SCO and ASEAN have established productive contacts to identify promising areas of interaction.

No one puts on the table a concept that needs to be implemented. This is how the Americans do things: they recently proposed their Indo-Pacific economic “framework” – either you join it or you aren’t one of us. It’s different here. We want to search for the correct paths in life. This, in fact, is what a person does in his daily life. You always try to understand your family, your relatives and friends, and try to find compromises. This is not appeasement; it’s conventional wisdom. It’s the kind of compromise that will in no way jeopardize the vital interests of the individual, the state, or the people.

Question: In recent years, it has become common to refer to the classics of political, philosophical and sociological thought to assess an event, with George Orwell and Francis Fukuyama being quoted the most often. Unfortunately, few consider Pitirim Sorokin’s study of social and cultural dynamics or Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Both works point to a possible change in the global political system. Do you believe the world order can change? Which political projects can you envisage as being the most popular in the 21st and 22nd centuries?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already touched on this topic in part. As for Spengler's Decline of Europe, I consider this term foresightful. Unfortunately, the European Union is not an independent player. People started talking about a multipolar world a long time ago. Yevgeny Primakov, as Foreign Minister in 1996-1997, coined that term and promoted cooperation between Russia, India and China. Later the RIC Three set the stage for the emergence of the BRICS Five. We assumed back then that the EU would be one of the influential poles of a multipolar world. That did not happen.

Europe has been talking of the need to ensure the European Union's strategic autonomy. French President Emmanuel Macron is the only one who is still talking about this. The rest are okay with the Americans being in charge. All the decisions taken in the EU are largely imposed by Washington, let alone in NATO, which is a purely American organisation. The EU has become an appendage of American policy in Europe. The EU has been the first to suffer from the anti-Russia sanctions imposed by the West. The Americans are smarter than that. They planned their decisions on imposing sanctions in a way to mostly avoid damage to their own economy, although they still faced soaring fuel and food prices.

Yes, I would call this the decline of Europe. European civilisation, culture, art, and literature are closest to Russia's. We have always mutually enriched each other. It is sad that Europeanism now means a ban on reading Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov at educational institutions across major European countries. This is sad.

As for the new international order, I've had the chance to speak about there being no need to invent anything. The lessons learned by the international community from World War II are embodied in the UN Charter. It contains all that humanity needs to avoid new catastrophes. One of the most important guarantees is the veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The Americans proposed this when writing the UN Charter. Essentially, that means, as was explained and emphasised at the time, that no action should be taken if one of the great powers objected or believed that action could affect its interests. That's where it came from. This is not a privilege, but a tool for crisis prevention. The UN Security Council includes five permanent members – the United States, two European countries (not representing the EU, since they carefully protect the national capacity of their membership), China and the Russian Federation. Not the whole world, but the West, China, and Russia – the three key global players, as they are now called. The UN Security Council will need to be expanded. The process has been going on for more than a decade, with some proposing to add permanent members, and others, non-permanent members. Developing countries are drastically underrepresented, and this is a fact.

Six of the 15 members of the UN Security Council represent the West. This proportion isn't right. When we talk about reforming the UN Security Council, we stress the need to focus on increasing the representation of developing countries. We supported India and Brazil. In conjunction with these countries, we will certainly support ensuring Africa's interests.

As regards principles, one of the most important pillars of the UN Charter states that the UN relies on respect for the sovereign equality of states. If you test that principle against what the West is doing, you will see that it is being grossly trampled on when their ambassadors and emissaries reach around the world demanding (not persuading, but demanding) that other countries, large or small, join anti-Russia sanctions and other escapades. This is disrespectful not only for those on whom you force your demands, but also for yourself. If you think you are right, just spell out your approach, and we will present ours. Let people choose. They're not small children. When ultimatums are given to countries such as India, Egypt, Turkey – that's insolence beyond reason.

We don't need to invent anything. We just need to make sure that the UN Charter does not remain on paper, but is embodied in practical actions.

Even before the pandemic, which interfered with the plan, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed convening a summit of the permanent members of the UN Security Council to discuss – frankly and without mutual complaints – how to operate while ensuring that the world is equal and fair and that the UN Charter is implemented. This proposal remains on the table. I hope that when the West comes to its senses, we will be able to return to it.

Question: Based on what international politics may be like going forward, is there any point in creating coalitions of countries that do not play by Western rules? Or does pursuing independent policies and interacting solely on the basis of treaties make more sense?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't see a contradiction here. Does it make sense to create a coalition of countries that do not want to play by Western rules? This is exactly what developing relations with sensible countries capable of negotiations means. I have mentioned the West's inability to negotiate on many occasions, and there are many examples to back this up. The vast majority of the countries want to cooperate with us and have economic, humanitarian, and cultural interests in this cooperation. Our policy, which is aimed at upholding our independence by way of reaching agreements, and which represents a balance of interests rather than ignoring international treaties, strikes a chord with many nations. We will never accept anything that others might try to impose on us. Few countries out there can make such a claim. Not everyone necessarily agrees with how we are upholding our independence. But being independent and always responding to mutually respectful and equal initiatives, and never being at the end of someone's leash are the hallmarks of our people, as well as the Belarusian people. This stance enjoys the respect of the vast majority of countries around the world.

Question: No matter how the international situation might play out eventually, one might assume that relations between Europe and Asia will need to be rebuilt. Building an Iron Curtain and ignoring each other will not benefit anyone and will be bad for international relations. How do we find common ground between states? How long might it take?

Sergey Lavrov: It's pointless to speculate on that. I want to emphasise that even in the most critical historical periods we never broke off relations with the West.

Let's revisit our recent history. In 2008, Mikhail Saakashvili issued an order to bomb the peaceful city of Tskhinval, the positions of peacekeepers, including Russians. The Five-Day War began. Immediately after Saakashvili issued that order, we proposed that the Russia-NATO Council be convened. This happened just months after it was noted at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would join NATO. In plain Russian, Saakashvili had his head blown off. He decided he could get away with anything. Several weeks before these events, US emissaries came to see him in Georgia. We demanded that the Russia-NATO Council be convened (it still existed then). US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice personally stated that they would not talk with the Russians. When the council was created, though, everyone extolled it as a body that should operate without interruption and be convened in times of crisis. So much for creating such a "body."

By the same token, in recent years, after the coup and the collapse of the Minsk Agreements, the Russia-NATO Council was blocked, primarily by the Americans.

Speaking about new formats, they often say that the Russian eagle has two heads, one looking to the east and the other to the west. Russia began a pivot to the East while turning away from the West. We are not the ones who turned away; it was they who turned away and are building an Iron Curtain. They don't really have an idea of how it will end.

According to the laws of physics, if some place is empty, you have to apply more effort in another place. Furthermore, we have multiple promising projects with China, India and Asian countries, namely, South Asia and Southeast Asia, not only in energy, but also in such high-tech industries such as space exploration, nuclear energy, and many more. We have a saying that you can't force your love on someone. We refuse to chase after them while trying to convince them to come to their senses. Let them come to their senses on their own and decide what they want out of life: to be minions in a "game" run by Washington, which is using Ukraine as a tool, or to rely on their interests and enjoy good prices for gas, electricity, and food and think about their people rather than about how to please their overseas handlers.



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