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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions at a meeting with MGIMO students, teachers and professors on the start of the new academic year, Moscow, September 1, 2022

Esteemed Mr Torkunov,

Friends,

I would like to congratulate all of you on Knowledge Day. This day is not just the routine beginning of the academic year but also a day of important events. Schoolchildren and students are coming back from vacation. They meet and share experiences and stories. Sometimes they talk about developments in the country. After a period of leisure, such conversations are always interesting. I remember well when Mr Torkunov and I were students together -- how upon returning from construction teams we spoke excitedly about what happened while we were developing remote Siberia with a pick or spending our vacation at a student summer camp.

The events all people are discussing today upon returning from vacation have to do with what is happening around Ukraine, and, frankly, with the hybrid war that the collective West has launched against our country shamelessly, openly, crudely, and aggressively.

The Westerners realised that all their plans to turn Ukraine into “anti-Russia” and organise a bridgehead for deterring Russia on its territory have failed. They understood that our patience is not limitless and that for many years, since President Vladimir Putin's speech in Munich in 2007 we warned them that it is unacceptable to expand NATO eastward, ignore the assurances and promises given to the leaders of the USSR and later Russia, completely neglect our lawful security interests and refuse to fulfil their commitment not to enhance NATO's security at the expense Russia's security.

For a long time we warned them against conniving with neo-Nazism in Ukraine and urged them not to permit encroachments on the Russian language. Instead of curbing these illegal trends that contradict all conventions, the West tacitly supported this. As a result, Ukraine has now legally banned the use of Russian in education, mass media and culture.

We warned that it was unacceptable to agree with the coup of 2014 and support the regime that started bombing the Russian population on its own territory under Russophobic slogans. In February 2015, the parties signed the Minsk agreements that paved the way for coming to terms and resolving the problems I mentioned. However, neither Pyotr Poroshenko, nor Vladimir Zelensky (now they are open about this) were going to fulfil any agreements despite the fact that they were approved by the UN Security Council. The West was either silent or quietly cheered them on for annoying Russia so well, creating an anti-Russia right on our borders.

Finally, they understand that all these years our appeals were not just empty persuasion and requests but reflected the vital interests of our country. You can see that now they are hysterical and are trying to make up for their own inadequacy with unprecedented aggression and malice. Frankly, they are reluctant to conduct affairs on this planet on the foundation of equality, mutual respect and observance of the principles of international law and the UN Charter that enshrines the principle of the sovereign equality of states. What is happening has nothing to do with the interests of the Ukrainian people. The West does not want to allow Russia to remain an independent force in the world arena. We went through worse periods in our history when our “partners”, as we call them ironically, developed a desire to weaken Russia in response to its growing role and place in the world. I am convinced that this time they will not succeed either – nobody has yet.

Our conclusions relate specifically to the international architecture as viewed in the Western “neighbourhood”, which has openly committed itself to rejecting international law and imposing its own rules. The Westerners say bluntly that the world order must be based on their “rules”, one of which is the isolation of Russia. They will not succeed in isolating us – they have already realised that. There have already been admissions in European capitals that the sanctions are not working and are more harmful to their authors: inflation, rising prices, especially for energy. The population, the middle class, suffers first and foremost, but the Russophobic obsession is evident even in such circumstances.

I read a statement by German Minister for Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock of August 31, that German citizens are already suffering, but they will have to put up with it because Germany will support Ukraine no matter what. It is a breathtaking admission, perfectly in tune with the calls for early elections in several European countries. The Western elite is guided by the logic of yesterday and promotes a unipolar world contrary to the objective trends of historical development that dictate the recognition of the emergence and real, growing power of new centres of economic development, financial power and political influence. These centres have a sense of dignity, seek to defend their legitimate interests, respect the traditions of their centuries-old, millennia-old civilisations and do not want to be “painted with the same brush” of liberal values.

The European Union, on the other hand, is pondering how it should be and whether individual countries have the right to develop as they see fit, taking into account their history and traditions. The Brussels “centre” and the capitals, which try to unify “everything and everyone”, tell such countries that they should not have this right and threaten them with punishment. German Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck recently stated that national interests in Europe must be ended. This is emblematic.

Countries in Eurasia, Latin America and Africa are seeing all this and they are not at all happy with this option. They are starting to better understand the rules which the West is trying to impose on everyone. They want to return to original approaches, that is, to the sovereign equality of nations, on which the UN Charter is based and which implies respect for the civilisational diversity of today's world, and to ethnic and religious diversity. We are not alone, although attempts are being made to isolate us. These attempts are doomed to failure. Eighty percent of countries have not joined Western sanctions, despite the brazen pressure on them, blackmail and threats, including personal warnings issued to particular politicians.

We continue to actively cooperate at the UN and in its Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations. The number of its members is increasing, having reached 20. We are working in institutions established on the territory of the former Soviet Union – the CSTO, the EAEU and the CIS – and, in the Eurasian context, in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a new promising association; globally, it is BRICS, which, like the SCO, is attracting an increasing number of countries seeking partner or observer status. Requests for full membership in these institutions have become more frequent. The future belongs to these new associations and to the work in these and other formats designed to overcome the discriminatory approaches the West is taking in the context of the financial and economic architecture. An ever increasing number of countries are taking practical measures to reduce their dependence on the international monetary and financial system, which the West has built and brought under its control, and are seeking to reduce their dependence on the dollar, Western technology and logistics chains controlled by the West. These countries are creating their own mechanisms that will not be subjected to any type of dictate or misuse. This group of countries does not want democracy to be just an empty word or a tool used by the West as a slogan to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign countries, imposing its own perspective on how a particular nation should organise its life. More countries are craving for democracy on the international arena when all are equal and have respect for one another. The West flatly refuses to discuss the issue of democratising international relations, forcing, instead, its own concept of a “rule-based order,” or an order based on Western rules.

In this situation, Russian foreign policy objectives remain the same: taking reliable measures to ensure national security for Russia, creating as favourable conditions as possible for the country's socioeconomic development and improving people's wellbeing. In the current circumstances, efforts to strengthen the Russian Federation's sovereignty are becoming particularly important. We need to stand up for our basic interests in the international arena, and for the honour and dignity of our people and our compatriots living abroad.

There are many debates on patriotism now. Their participants discuss what it means and how it should be demonstrated in the current conditions. I believe in any era patriotism means your ability to know your country, love it and live by its interests. I am convinced that the more students and schoolchildren are interested in the great events in our history, which determine Russia's further advance, the more patriotism we will see. I am referring not to jingoism but to the patriotism that people develop naturally while studying the historical annals of their country.

I know there are foreign students in the hall. I salute you. I would like to emphasise that some countries are trying to isolate us or compel us to self-isolate. I have already explained why there will be no isolation. We are not going to isolate ourselves, either. In the meantime, the West will shut itself, spend days and nights discussing whom to issue a Schengen visa and how many times to ask at a border checkpoint whom a traveler supports (the Reds or the Whites) and to whom Crimea belongs. They are already going to ask this question three times. This is ridiculous. For all intents and purposes, such people are pitiful.

We won't isolate ourselves. We haven't discussed this yet but I believe that we should not respond in kind to the Schengen walls that they are trying to erect. We don't need to punish collectively citizens of the European countries. Yes, we have some "favourites" that have already been included on our sanctions lists. Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg said recently that the West couldn't sue 140 million people in court. The minister said these words when Europe's mainstream was focused on punishing all citizens of the Russian Federation (incidentally, our population is a bit bigger). I think we shouldn't follow the same road and respond to one stupidity with another. At the same time, nobody has renounced the principle of reciprocity that must be targeted consistently against those that are organising and carrying out such anti-Russia sanctions.

There are many foreign students in MGIMO and other universities. They have a wonderful opportunity to become acquainted with the Russian Federation. It is also important for our citizens to learn about their country and its limitless history. It is always possible to find something new. This is even more interesting for foreigners – the better you know us, the stronger the prospects for the world to follow the right path – to search for accord and a balance of interests rather than make all others to obey the commands of the suzerain.

We stand for equality and friendship in the broadest sense of this word. We want you to know better our life and us. This will facilitate the development of relations between our countries. I am convinced that many people in Europe will interpret my words as a desire to recruit someone. I am sure all normal people -- and they are in the majority -- understand perfectly well what we are talking about.

Happy holiday to you once again.

Question: The Ukrainian Armed Forces have been unrelenting in staging provocations, shelling the Zaporozhye NPP, which places the world on the brink of a nuclear disaster. Against this backdrop, Russian diplomats have been fighting misinformation coming from the West, which has been accusing our country of shelling the NPP. The IAEA will visit the nuclear power plant soon, but the Ukrainian Armed Forces have not stopped shelling the facility. Today, they tried to send a landing group to Energodar. What does Russia expect from the IAEA's visit to the Zaporozhye NPP? Can we expect it to be objective in its mission?

Sergey Lavrov: Objective treatment is exactly what we expect from it, although it is clear that everyone else who is involved in this visit in one way or another, including preparing it or trying to stand in its way, do not want the IAEA mission to produce impartial conclusions.

Let me remind you that when the Russian Armed Forces took this territory under their control, the IAEA approached us with what was quite a natural request. Under the relevant international documents, this agency has the mandate to carry out regular safety inspections at nuclear power stations, and the Zaporozhye NPP is one of them. As true professionals and without seeking to make a political issue out of their work, the IAEA experts said: since the Russian Armed Forces currently control the station, they would like to agree on a regular mandatory inspection in due form. In the course of May 2022, we agreed on all the necessary details, and everything was ready by June 3, 2022. We offered the IAEA specialists to pick a date and invited them to come to the station, but the next day, we learned that the UN Secretariat, through its Department of Safety and Security, prohibited the Agency from visiting the station. They used other words to say this, but it was the position of the UN Secretariat that derailed the visit. We advised them to settle this matter between them, since we have done our part of the job. Then there was a pause. In July 2022, the Ukrainians launched an intensive campaign to shell the Zaporozhye NPP. This is when we came forward and requested that the mission come to the station, calling on the UN Secretariat, which prevented this visit from taking place in June 2022, to recognise its responsibility. This is when this whole debate started. Vladimir Zelensky started claiming that it was not Ukraine that was shelling the facility, while also saying that if the mission was coordinated, Ukraine would not create any obstacles that would prevent it from safely carrying out its work. I believe the fact that he is able to guarantee safety and security at the NPP amounts to an admission of guilt.

This is how it all unfolded from that moment. There was a debate on the route the mission will use. Journalists asked the UN Secretariat why it is not allowing the mission to visit the plant. The UN Secretary-General's official representatives said that the IAEA is an independent body, so it was up to them to decide. We were somewhat confused by these words and asked for a clarification from Mr Rafael Grossi, telling him that according the UN Secretariat's representative it was up to the IAEA Director General to decide. But he told us that this was not the case. It is the Department that has the final say on this matter. I am not exaggerating – this is just a summary of the official correspondence.

At the end, we agreed on everything. Following up on his contacts with his Western colleagues, President Vladimir Putin said that security was paramount. If they want to come from the territory controlled by Ukraine, they can do so. We agreed on all the details. However, there was another surprise at the very last moment. Rafael Grossi called us to apologise for not being able to come as we had agreed, saying that he would come later because he had been urgently summoned to Kiev. This was not discussed in any way when we were coordinating the details on the mission's visit. We proceeded from the premise that Mr Grossi would visit Kiev once the mission completes its work, and would also meet with our representatives to sum up his observations, before reporting to the IAEA and the UN Security Council. These freewheeling Ukrainian tricks of "doing as I please" and "regardless of any understandings, I want Rafael Grossi to come visit me in Kiev" are reminiscent of Napoleon's tricks. How pathetic. It amounts to substituting serious efforts on nuclear safety with comedy club-style tricks, which is an absolutely irresponsible thing to do.

The mission is at the plant today. You were absolutely right when you said that our military reported on the landing of two sabotage groups. They were neutralised. I think that for the international community this is a heavy price to pay for learning the truth. However, it seems that this is the way Ukraine wants to achieve this, while showing what it is worth. I do hope that this will not bring about a disaster. We are doing everything for this station to operate safely and for the mission to carry out its plans. They said that they do not have the mandate to assign guilt, but we will show them the impacts from the Ukrainian shelling. We insisted that the mission includes ballistics experts. Hopefully, we will learn something from them. To be more precise, we know everything. I hope that the international community also gets this opportunity.

Question: Although European countries' actions are clearly damaging bilateral relations (such as the massive expulsions of our diplomats, the groundless sanctions, and cancellation of our common history), do you see any chances for their normalisation in the future? If so, how soon?

Sergey Lavrov: “How soon could we normalise” – this sums us up, really. We have drawn conclusions based on the long years after the Cold War. At that time, as we built relations with the West, we tried in every way to promote and apply the slogans the Western countries offered to us during the perestroika, and later, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist – universal values, a single economic and humanitarian space, a security space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, indivisible security, no country shall strengthen its security at the expense of others, no military alliance in Europe shall dominate. We tried to do everything honestly. We developed, put together and implemented an unprecedentedly extensive array of cooperation mechanisms with the European Union: biennial summits, annual meetings between the Russian Government and the European Commission members, four common spaces with four roadmaps adopted. They were implemented with a view to introducing common norms into our daily lives – mostly European norms. We had agreements in place on 20 industry-based dialogues – from human rights to the environment, business, technology, space – too many things to list.

We placed a major emphasis on the visa-free dialogue, which led to the signing of a visa facilitation agreement in 2007, at the first stage (the deal the European Union now wants to suspend or cancel). The dialogue continued with plans to transition to visa-free travel. Everything was ready by 2013, before the events in Ukraine that the West used as an excuse to disrupt all our channels of interaction. But in 2013, when it was all ready, the visa-free travel deal between Russia and the EU was blocked, for overtly political reasons, by a group of countries, including the Baltic states and Poland. The reasons they gave to the European Union during the discussions were as follows: yes, from a technical point of view, both biometric visas and readmission were provided. We have concluded readmission agreements with all EU countries in preparation for the visa-free deal. But for political reasons, the Baltic states did not want Russia to have visa-free travel before Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova received it. So much for values, equality, impartiality and things like that. Still, it took us a long time to learn the lesson. Every time our partners behaved improperly, we thought we needed to “talk” to them, and they would see reason, and we would move towards the “slogans” they had proposed and we approved. It never worked.

We have no illusions left. It's impossible to negotiate with the Europeans, or the Americans – that much is obvious. They cut off all the channels that I just mentioned, all forms of interaction. We can no longer rely on them, considering what they are doing, with the sanctions; we can no longer rely on them with regard to key technologies for our security, for food security, or for an accelerated development of our society.

We never cut all the ties, but we will only interact on a mutually beneficial basis. Right now, this is being done sparsely, with whatever resources remain. For future reference, this hysteria on the western flank must pass first. They're still a long way from that – although sensible voices are beginning to break through the Russophobic chorus. But when – or if – they come round (I hope it's when, I hope this will happen in the end), we will be ready to listen to what they have to offer. But our life and politics will not hang on a hope that things will get back to normal in a year, two, three or even four or five years, instead of fully engaging in creating alternative formats for solving our development problems; this would be an unpromising and illusory position. It all depends on our “partners” now. When they are ready, we will be ready to listen to them. At this point, there's nothing else I can say.

Question: Given today's highly turbulent and volatile international situation, what would you advise us, fledgling specialists in international affairs, to focus on? What languages and regions should become our mid-term priorities?

Sergey Lavrov: Today, we are “changing step on the move” because of the outrageous decisions to expel dozens of Russian diplomats, taken by our Western colleagues. At the same time, we are clearly aware of the fact that the amount of work in this area has shrunk by virtue of what I have just mentioned. On top of the West blocking all the tools and mechanisms virtually overnight, Russian diplomats are simply denied the possibility of any contacts. They have to request a meeting just to discuss matters related to the functioning of diplomatic missions. We have funding problems, since Western banks refuse to serve our diplomatic missions and cultural centres, as well as subsidiaries of Russian companies. As is only natural, we take identical measures here and refuse to serve the embassies of those countries. It is necessary to discuss at least some issues so that the diplomatic staff, who are duty bound to keep at least some communication lines open, could work under normal conditions. But they refuse to meet with us even to discuss these matters, saying that we should apply in writing and they will reply in writing as well. If this is their choice, the diplomats from their countries will operate in an identical environment. Otherwise we will be unable to encourage our interlocutors to engage in normal communication.

Nearly 200 Russian diplomats and a somewhat larger number of administrative and technical staff had to leave their host countries. We have reassigned about 90 percent of the diplomatic staff, who agreed to take jobs either at the Foreign Ministry headquarters, or at embassies in friendly countries. Objectively, there will be more work over there. If unfriendly countries curtailed the extent of our ties drastically, we will not knock on their doors. I have explained that we have drawn a fundamental conclusion that the West is unreliable as a partner. Today, therefore, we will promote cooperation with other countries at an accelerated rate, countries that have not joined the sanctions and are well aware of what is going on in the world. They do not want to be dependent on the West-centric system, including the financial and economic one, and wish to safeguard their own development. This will be achieved through building up ties, including ties with the Russian Federation. I am referring primarily to the CIS, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Now, the languages. As I understand, your university is planning to expand teaching of foreign languages. MGIMO is a recognised leader in this regard. We are interested in Chinese, Arabic, Bengali, Vietnamese, and Burmese languages. These are all countries demonstrating accelerated development rates. Let me also mention Indonesian, Malay, and Tagalog. Hebrew, along with Arabic... Despite certain hiccups in relations with the current government of Israel, we have a strategic interest in promoting ties with a country that plays host to nearly two million Russian compatriots. There is also a good foundation – economic, technological, cultural, and in healthcare. African languages – Swahili, Afrikaans, Amharic... CIS languages are also important. I heard that Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek were taught here. Turkmen is also important.

We are interested in a continued teaching of European languages. After all, these languages are spoken not only by politicians who have somewhat lost touch with reality and with the interests of their nations, but also by cultural figures, scientists, artists, and leaders of public organisations, with whom we are keen to maintain ties. The classical foursome – English, French, German, and Spanish – I am proceeding from the premise that we will not cancel the culture of these great civilisations. We will set the example of a respectful attitude to foreign traditions, unlike the “time-servers” who are now in power in some Western countries.

Question: Now that Finland and Sweden are set to join NATO, will the alliance be a greater security risk for Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: To be honest, this decision did not surprise us. As of late, Western political analysts, related print media and social media have published many materials showing that this process had been prepared covertly for a long time. This can be seen from the fact that Sweden and Finland have been involved in NATO military exercises as invited participants over the past few years. In our contacts with Helsinki and Stockholm, we tactfully asked them and inquired whether their regular involvement in military exercises indicated that they were gradually drifting away from their neutral status. All these exercises took place in line with the military mobility concept promoted by the European Union and NATO. In short, the concept implied that NATO military equipment should be able to access EU countries at all times, including those that are not NATO members, without any problems. As you know, this considerably expands NATO's capabilities, including its eastward expansion.

We watched their rapprochement with the alliance. However, we were somewhat surprised when Sweden and Finland announced they wanted to join NATO and to gain full membership. This is quite surprising, especially considering our trustful and benevolent multi-level relations with Finnish leadership in the past. These relations made it possible to frankly discuss any security concerns without reluctance. We maintained contact with the Finnish and Swedish military and discussed security matters. Our northern neighbours never talked about any insurmountable problems. That said, it appears that some behind-the-scenes work was conducted in order to prepare them for this drastic decision.

Yes, this will change the geopolitical situation, but there are various alternatives. For example, their membership might come down to incipient involvement in various events. This is one scenario. If military bases are established on the territories of these countries (they are now arguing that there are different kinds of bases, including “light versions” versus “real bases”), then we’ll have to see what military resources are deployed there. I am convinced that the Americans have the main say, whether they will want to establish additional capability to contain the Russian Federation. It is unlikely that anyone would listen to Finland or Sweden. We will decide to beef up our capabilities in northwestern Russia, depending on how things work out. In any event, the Russia-West line of contact will increase by over 1,000 kilometres. We also have to take into account statements made by Baltic activists like Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur who said that, now that Finland and Sweden are joining NATO, it is necessary to turn the Baltic Sea into a NATO “inland sea” and to prevent the Russian Federation from using it in any way. Two years ago, Emmanuel Macron described NATO as brain dead. I believe it’s possible to seek the advice of French doctors.

Question: Is it possible that Russia and China will form a military-political alliance to establish a new world order?

Sergey Lavrov: I often hear this question. Any Russia-China meeting at the highest level raises questions like “what does it mean?” or “where will it lead?” We have nothing to hide from the global community about developing cooperation with China. Moscow and Beijing cooperate in an open and transparent manner. Our relations have reached the highest quality in the entire history of ties between our countries. President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping have addressed this topic many times. The statement issued at the highest-level in 2021 said that Russia-China relations are entering a completely new level that will qualitatively outperform the conventional military alliances of the past era. You can come to your own conclusions. Our military cooperation is strong. We regularly conduct joint exercises for all branches of the military: naval forces, strategic aviation, counter-terrorist drills, land drills, both bilateral and as part of the SCO. Currently, Chinese military personnel are participating in the Vostok 2022 (East 2022) military exercises.

Russia and China are not developing this unprecedented and higher quality relationship against anybody. This has also been stated in documents approved at the highest level by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. We will promote a positive agenda focused on developing links on the Eurasian continent. We have the EAEU, and this union has a treaty on cooperation with China. We also have a treaty with China on using our bilateral contacts to promote Eurasian integration involving the EAEU, the SCO, ASEAN and the other countries in our common geopolitical space. This is what President Vladimir Putin meant when he described his vision of the Greater Eurasian Partnership.

As you know, China is promoting its project, the Belt and Road Initiative, and now, through specific harmonising mechanisms, it is being integrated into the multilateral framework in Eurasia I just mentioned. Our friendship is for the purpose of uniting, not for the purpose of countering anybody. Naturally, the Americans and NATO members claim this region to be their domain (as the NATO summit in Madrid concluded). It was declared that security in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions is indivisible and therefore NATO must take global responsibility. It was declared that the alliance will boost its military presence in the region, which includes surrounding China and our shores. In addition to the Anglo-Saxons, who have long been observed in the region with their naval ships, the French and Germans announced that they are sending fleets to “contain” China. This is where the danger is rooted.

The military alliance that declared that the defence of its members' territories was its objective, has long lost its original purpose. Initially, it was the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, which no longer exist. Then NATO "made up" Afghanistan from which they fled a year ago. Then Russia emerged as a threat that is supposed to consolidate the alliance. And even here, they knew that their achievements would be scarce. Now they decided to declare China the next long-term strategic threat along with Russia. These are the very rules that they want the world order to follow. According to these rules, in the global economy they will determine who will have access to the resources they control, such as dollars, euros, World Bank resources (where they have the majority and where the executive board pursues a Western policy) or International Monetary Fund resources. In security, globalisation means that NATO will dominate.

It looks like they are in agony. Their plans have no chance of being fulfilled. If the Americans and their satellites continue to insist on this approach to developing cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, they will once again paint themselves into a corner, and certain aggressive circles in the West might see a military conflict as the only way out. There are people there who understand this, but there are also many people who take it very lightly. The main thing is that Europe is fully subscribed to these plans of the United States, has lost its own will and is doing anything Washington tells it. Russia and China see these risks clearly. We will not be provoked, and we will promote an agenda that will certainly be far more attractive to the countries in the region than the confrontation imposed by the West.

Question: Given the growing economic and political potential of Eastern countries and the current geopolitical situation overall, the turn to the East has gained special importance for Russia. In this regard, what do you think about our country's priorities in the dialogue with such an important partner as India?

Sergey Lavrov: The term "turn to the East" is slightly misleading. We have never – during the Soviet times and especially after the Russian Federation emerged as an independent state – tried to do anything in the Eastern direction to the detriment of the Western direction. Our national coat of arms tells us to look both to the West and to the East, and to develop contacts both with Europe and Asia, including East Asia, South Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

When Europe cut off practically all cooperation channels except for certain economic ties, as per the laws of physics, the Eastern direction of cooperation (it had been growing for a long time in terms of absolute numbers) began to dominate in our country's foreign, economic, trade and other ties. India has always held a key place in our priorities. Let me remind you that our relationship with India is considered a specially privileged strategic partnership. Many years ago, we agreed to call it a strategic partnership. Then our Indian friends said that it was not enough since they had strategic partnerships with many countries, so let us call it a privileged strategic partnership. But that was not enough, either. At the proposal of our Indian friends, it now is called a specially privileged strategic partnership.

We have close cooperation with India in energy. Russian companies operate in India, and Indian companies work in Siberia and in the Far East. We also have close and trust-based military-technical cooperation, including the production of advanced weapons on the Indian territory. We have a far-flung network of contacts in the agricultural sector and as regards processes which we are jointly trying to develop as part of the so-called green transition. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant is one of the flagship projects of our strategic partnership. Substantive talks are being held on the preparation of the site for another nuclear power plant that will also have several power-generating units. The list is endless.

These relations are actively developing based on friendship that was built during India's fight for independence. The West says now that it should force the entire world to stop cooperating with Russia and to impose sanctions. It would be a different matter if they did it quietly, but this is their pet project, they are so proud of it that they make public statements to the effect that they demand that some countries introduce anti-Russian sanctions or they will be punished. From the point of view of common sense, let alone diplomacy, how can such arrogant public statements be made towards such countries as India, China, Turkey, Egypt or Indonesia? When these countries are threatened publicly, does nobody understand that these civilisations have their dignity and self-respect? It is insulting to hear such demands. Even if it was said privately, it would still have been an offence against good manners. When great states are being told that they must do something on orders from somebody across the ocean, I can only imagine what long-term harm it can deal to the relations with those who are trying to impose their will.

India does not want to join the sanctions. The Indian leaders, including my colleague, the Foreign Minister, have publicly rejected all attempts to involve them in the restrictions on purchasing Russian energy. They said clearly that they will act in line with their own interests. There has been a recent article of an Indian political scientist and economist that explains why India will not join the American sanctions. He says it is not only a matter of economic interests, but also the shared history of Russia and India, and the deep respect that India has for the role that Russia played in the fight for India's independence and in the development of its own economy. We are satisfied with the state of Russia-India relations. President of Russia Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi had a meeting in 2021. They will also have an opportunity to meet during the upcoming events. This month, the SCO summit will take place. My colleague Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and I will definitely meet soon, including at the UN General Assembly meeting.

Question: Moving from the land between the Indus and Ganges rivers to the banks of the Dniester, we can see that Ukraine and Moldova have stepped up their verbal attacks against Transnistria lately, with some to the east of it regularly threatening to seize ammunition depots or even take prisoners for carrying out prisoner swaps with Russia. Those to the west of Transnistria are increasing their military budgets while making their people pay more for almost everything. Against this backdrop, is there a way for Russia to guarantee Transnistria's security? How can Russia respond in case of an attack against the unrecognised Republic of Transnistria?

Sergey Lavrov: Let me say a few words about where Moldova is headed. As I said in the beginning of my remarks, we spent many years setting out our “red lines” for the West with utmost consistency and clarity. Everyone knows this. We pointed out that we refused to accept what was going on along our borders, not somewhere far away. There were attacks against the Russian language, Russian culture, Russian journalists, including killings. They moved NATO closer to our borders. Romania and Poland have joined NATO. In recent years, they set their sights on Moldova and Ukraine. We told the West that drawing our closest neighbours into their war games was unacceptable. We also drew the attention of the West to what has been going on in Ukraine for many years. We were told that there is no Russophobia there, no Nazism, but at the same time, Petr Poroshenko's Prime Minister, Arseny Yatsenyuk, referred to people in Donbass as sub-humans. Even Vladimir Zelensky called them “animal species” last year, when asked what he thought about people living in Donbass, even though the Minsk Agreements were still in force at the time. He said that there were people, and there were animal species, adding that if someone in Ukraine has a Russian identity, they better get the hell out of Ukraine and move to the Russian Federation for the sake of their children and grandchildren. This is what he said in September 2021. We pointed this out to the West, but there was no response, no sign that they viewed this as unacceptable. In this context, the question is what were you doing out there while ignoring our pleas regarding the direct threats to our security right along our borders? What kind of interests were you defending in Iraq or in Libya? Did anyone mistreat your compatriots or fellow citizens over there? Has anyone banned the English language, or French, or German? Nothing of this sort.

I am not saying that if they have done something, we can do as much. We are talking about apples and oranges here. We were unable to get them to respond to the concerns we had regarding threats along Russia's borders, while they were free to do what they liked without persuading anyone or explaining anything. It suddenly occurred to them that something was wrong with Iraq or with Libya. They destroyed two prosperous countries because they did not find the regimes, as they say, in Iraq and Libya to their liking. Their actions produced the opposite results. Maybe these countries will see democracy one day, but for now, there is only ruin and civil war there. Their future looks quite grim.

The West acts with the same impunity in a number of other processes and has sought to instil this sense of impunity on its client states that submitted themselves to the West and do everything it tells them to do. The West knows this and uses this in its interests.

Vladimir Zelensky has now turned into a prominent Russophobe, making inappropriate statements every day because of this all-permissiveness. This is not the first time this has happened within our space. For many years, Estonia and Latvia benefited from this all-permissiveness by openly refusing to deliver on their commitment to get rid of the non-citizen status. All our pleas with the EU and the OSCE were like talking to a brick wall, as the saying goes. They have been destroying Russian education, dismantling monuments, desecrating the tombs of those who liberated Europe, but every time, they got away with it. They feel this impunity because the West told them: "Go on, you can do as you please." Now they are trying to cast Moldova's current leadership as representing the same "ideals of democracy." Unfortunately, we see that senior government officials in Chisinau have been quite receptive to these advances by the Western countries. It is obvious that efforts to promote Russophobia are provocative by their very nature, just as it happened in Ukraine.

As for Transnistria, we have always called for resolving the issues regarding ethnic minorities in Moldova within the framework of agreements on a broad autonomy. Just like in Ukraine, in Donbass, we supported agreements on granting Transnistria special status. No one within the Ukrainian leadership wanted to discuss anything about the special status despite the fact that this was a requirement set forth by the UN Security Council. Today, the Moldovan authorities are trying to back out of the existing agreements on special autonomy. By the way, Gagauzia also benefits from autonomy within Moldova.

As for our interests, we have our peacekeepers there. There is military personnel guarding Europe's largest military depots in Cobasna. It must be clear to everyone that under international law any actions threatening the security of our service personnel will be treated as attacks against the Russia Federation. This was the case in South Ossetia when Mikheil Saakashvili attacked our peacekeepers.

Question: What, in your opinion, is the likelihood of the international sports community, including the UEFA, IOC, and others, allowing Russian athletes to compete internationally? What attempts are being made, along with the Ministry of Sport, to resolve this problem?

Sergey Lavrov: I think many heads of international sports federations (I am particularly disappointed by the position of IOC President Thomas Bach) have discredited the principles that underlie the sports movement, including the Olympic movement. The IOC president has made several statements over the past six months to the effect that they would address the issue of Russian and Belarusian athletes' participation in their events "later," depending on political developments. This is direct disregard for the principles laid out in the IOC Olympic Charter, which include the unacceptability of bringing political considerations or incidents into the development of sports movements and sports federations.

Look, in retrospect, at the world economy. It is dominated by the dollar, and even the euro is not able to compete with it across the board. The Americans are unwilling to change this system or create greater potential for other currencies to be used in world trade because objectively it will undermine the dollar's dominance. This means they don't want any competition. When sanctions are announced against the Russian Federation (read the West's statistics), 90 percent of the related hardships "fall" on Europe. Gasoline prices have surged in America. But they don't "see" anything as long as the cost of gasoline doesn't go higher. This is how they judge their rulers' efficiency. But in absolute figures, this is nothing compared with Europe. Moreover, when the Americans make Europe send its weapons to Ukraine, they know for certain that Europe will replenish its stocks by purchasing US-made weapons. This is also about rivalry. Rivalry on the currency markets, where the dollar must rule supreme, and rivalry in the arms markets. The European economy has been bled by gas prices much more seriously than oil and gas prices influence the US economy. This also serves to weaken their rivals. I could apply this to other areas of life, but we are talking about sports.

This is about a rivalry as much as it is a desire to "punish" the Russian Federation and Belarus. They want to do away with their rivals. Many athletes have declared (including Norwegian biathletes) that this is dishonest. They will lose interest in competing. Soon transgender people will be allowed in. It's unclear what team they belong. And to top it off, those Russians will be a nuisance.

Any normal person – and they are the majority in the West – knows that this is a worthless policy and something must be done about it. How will we get past this situation? In the first place, we must think about the athletes' interests. I believe that the measures, which have been promptly devised by the Ministry of Sport and the Russian Government as a whole, can resolve the problem at this stage. Among other things, I am referring to the National Sports and Athletic Competitions (Spartakiad) held at the highest level and crowned with many records. It has attracted a lot of attention from specialists abroad.

In football, a new format, the Russia Cup, has been created, which will make it possible to make up for our non-participation in European tournaments.

I think that this is the right path. We should look at our athletes more often and continue promoting sporting events with those who are ready to do this. We, in Russia, are thinking about the possibility of holding CIS, SCO, and BRICS Games. All of these are promising ideas.

There is the decent International Tennis Federation and the Professional Tennis Players Association, which have flatly refused to follow these principles and sanctions, with the only exception of the Wimbledon organisers. The British are a special category in the Western world.

This is bad, dishonest and even mean. Russian Paralympic athletes were not allowed to compete at the Olympic Games. So, we are again returning to the logic of collective punishment. Many Europeans say it is wrong to punish 140 million Russians. But the Russophobic minority led by the Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic insist that this is the right approach. After all, it is we who have elected Vladimir Putin, and this must be punished. The same logic is behind their intention to bar all athletes, including “clean” athletes, from competing honestly in sporting events.

This is part of the logic of unfair competition and the undermining of the principles I was talking about, which the West itself promoted as the foundation for economic and other ties: a free market, fair competition, and the presumption of innocence (also directly violated here). We will defend our position and respond to these outrages with specific actions.

Question: Could you tell us about your most memorable and funny moments from your student years?

Sergey Lavrov: Anything with “student” in it automatically gets rated 18+. Anatoly Torkunov and I will meet with our classmates later today. We’ll reminisce. There were a lot of fun things. We did comedy projects, wrote stand-up routines ourselves. We had fun travelling with student construction brigades; we wrote amateur songs and sang them sitting around a campfire. There were competitions between tents – which offered more fun.

Question: Further careers are a major concern for all MGIMO University graduates, especially women. Do you believe a woman can be Foreign Minister? Or the best she can do is head the Ministry’s Information Department?

Sergey Lavrov: This is 18+ again, if you put it like that. We are actively promoting women. Anatoly Torkunov will not let me lie – more and more women are enrolled in MGIMO bachelor’s and master’s degree programmes.

As for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after the Soviet period, when traditions were quite conservative, we now have no other criteria than the candidate’s knowledge and abilities at the Ministry. The number of women is also growing. They hold more and more significant positions. We have many deputy directors of departments who are women. There will also be directors of departments, members of the Collegium. As for the post of Foreign Minister, that decision is made by the President of Russia. Let’s leave that to his discretion.

Once again, I wish you all the best. We will welcome those who are considering employment at the Foreign Ministry, but MGIMO University provides an excellent education to work successfully in many other areas, including business, research, political science, journalism and much more. These opportunities are expanding every year.

On your behalf and on behalf of the Foreign Ministry, I would like to sincerely thank Mr Torkunov, as well as our colleagues from the Diplomatic Academy headed by Rector Alexander Yakovenko. They also supply the Ministry with new employees, as a second powerhouse for producing talent.

We will always be ready to support all the initiatives proposed by MGIMO University, our alma mater we are proud of, which holds a leading position not only in the Russian Federation, but also far beyond its borders.

Happy Knowledge Day!



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