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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to participants' questions at the federal educational marathon "Knowledge. First", Moscow, November 6, 2023

Good afternoon,

Thank you for inviting me to your event this time again. This is a valuable format which, I hope, helps young people better understand foreign policy. It also helps us gain an insight into the aspirations and sentiments of the younger generation. I can tell you that we take many of them into consideration as we shape our foreign policy.

I'm not going to take your time discussing the current developments in international politics. Indeed, it has entered a new phase and is undergoing tectonic shifts that are driven by the ongoing formation of a multipolar international order. Clearly, its outline remains blurred; however, it is equally clear that the new global architecture will not be ruled by a single hegemon, but will be genuinely democratic and fair.

The polycentricity or multipolarity that is taking shape right before our eyes is truly inclusive in its nature. New global decision-making centres are emerging and strengthening their positions in Eurasia, the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. That includes countries such as Russia, China, and India and associations like BRICS and the SCO. All of them demonstrate their independence, prioritise their own interests and state sovereignty, and refuse to live under anyone's diktat, not just in words but in deeds. On the contrary, they strive to rely on their own traditions, culture, and way of life and advocate the democratisation of relations between countries and a fairer distribution of global goods among all members of the international community.

President Putin recently said China was the top economy in terms of purchasing power parity, and the BRICS countries' combined GDP (using the same benchmark) exceeds that of the G7. In 2022, despite sanctions and gloomy

predictions, Russia has overtaken Germany to become the world's fifth largest economy. The numbers speak for themselves.

The polarity shows itself not only in the economy, but in multilateral diplomacy as well. A prime example of that is BRICS, where countries representing different civilisations, religions, and macro-regions effectively collaborate on mutually beneficial terms across a wide range of fields from politics and security to the economy, finance, culture, and sports. Such cooperation relies on equality, mutual respect, and a balance of interests.

It's not surprising to see many countries seeking to establish ties with BRICS. The most recent summit in South Africa in August witnessed a historic expansion. Starting from January 1, 2024, BRICS will grow to include six more countries: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Similar processes are underway within the SCO. There too, there is no place for mentorship, leaders or followers, or disciples and teachers. The SCO is also expanding, with many nations showing an interest in joining this association.

Today, BRICS and the SCO are the key pillars of the emerging multipolar international order. Clearly, the collective West led by the United States is trying to reverse these objective developments. They are accustomed to solving their own issues at the expense of others and exploiting foreign resources, or, as President Vladimir Putin said, "collecting hegemon's rent." In defiance of objective processes, they continue to harbour the hope of ruling the world and dictating to other nations how to go about their relations with other countries and rudely interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states. In fact, they are trying to strip the global majority of the right to follow its own paths of development.

The methods employed by the United States and its satellites are widely known and include the attempts to sow chaos in various regions of the world, to create strife between countries and peoples, and to exacerbate interethnic and interreligious differences. We can see how the Anglo-Saxons are pushing the Middle East to the brink of a big war. This approach shows itself in other regions, including Ukraine.

The examples abound, but the outcome remains the same. It's about losing statehood or letting it weaken, as was the case with Iraq and Libya, and as they tried to do in Syria. In fact, even in Ukraine, statehood remains a very much debatable issue. Other outcomes of such policies include a surge in terrorism and extremism, shattered human lives, broken families, and multi-million refugee

flows.

Attempts to weaken Russia in order to deprive us of geopolitical identity and toss us to the margins of global politics continue. The deceptive nature of such hopes is obvious to everyone.

Containment policies are also being pursued with regard to China, Iran, and any country capable of competing with the West in various areas. We have no doubt that this destructive policy aimed at reviving Western dominance is doomed.

Multipolarity has become a reality. Many Western politicians, albeit reluctantly, acknowledge this. Clearly, this will not happen overnight but will be a historically long process. Importantly, the new polycentric architecture should be stable and reflect the aspirations of the global community. President Putin addressed this in detail during the Valdai Discussion Club meeting.

I would like to make it clear that this does not mean starting from scratch and erasing everything created by our predecessors. The foundation for building a new world is in place, and it is strong. It is the UN Charter. Most importantly, we must do our best to prevent the devaluation of its principles and, with like-minded countries, ensure adherence to these principles in their entirety and interconnectedness. Without a doubt, we are in favour of adapting the UN itself to today's geopolitical realities. Life is moving forward and this fully applies to reforming the Security Council by addressing the underrepresentation of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

In addition to bringing the UN back to its founding principles as agreed upon by its founders, other multilateral associations, primarily BRICS and the SCO that I mentioned earlier, as well as the Union State of Russia and Belarus, the CSTO, the EAEU, the CIS, ASEAN, the African Union, CELAC, LAS, and the GCC should play their roles in promoting emerging multipolarity.

We see positive developments in Eurasia that are designed to harmonise the potential of various regional initiatives, including the EAEU and China's Belt and Road initiative. All of this helps shape the Greater Eurasian Partnership, as predicted by President Putin back in 2015. We see this partnership as a format that is open to every association and country on our shared continent, without exception.

International isolation, which some said was in store for us, is not reality. We engage with the Global Majority countries, which make up 85 percent of the

world's population. People in these countries (the vast majority of them) see Russia as a good friend and a reliable partner, who has repeatedly proved its reliability and has done a lot to build country-to-country relations based on internationally recognised norms of international law.

These norms are built around the UN Charter principle of the sovereign equality of all states, both large and small. We remain open to a pragmatic dialogue with the Western countries, provided they are willing (in practice, not just in word) to consider our interests and interact on the basis of mutual benefit and respect. Sooner or later, they will realise the futility of their anti-Russia course. This question is not for us but for the current generation of leaders, primarily European, who have clearly lost their strategic vision and blindly follow destructive US policies.

Let's move on to the interactive dialogue which is a more productive format.

Question: What are Russia's current objectives as a centre of the emerging multipolar world?

Sergey Lavrov: The objectives were outlined by President Vladimir Putin. I briefly went over them earlier today. They are simple and seek to make the world fair. There's no need to invent anything. It's about the sovereign equality of states, as laid down in the UN Charter, and the implementation of all agreements and Security Council resolutions. This is also part of international law.

The West approaches the principles in the UN Charter selectively. In the case of Crimea, where an open referendum took place and which was attended by hundreds of foreign observers, the West did not recognise the result saying that the Crimea issue should be resolved based on respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity. In the case of Kosovo the territorial integrity principle was ignored. There was no referendum there, and all they did was declare the independence of this Serbian region, saying that the principle of the peoples' right to self-determination was the main rationale for this decision.

Both these principles – the right of peoples to self-determination and respect for territorial integrity – are enshrined in the UN Charter. Since the application of these two key postulates give rise to differences, the General Assembly, in 1970, adopted a special declaration, which cleared this up. It was adopted by consensus. The document is called the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the UN Charter. It unambiguously points out that everyone must respect the

sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states whose governments respect the principle of self-determination and represent the entire population living within the borders of a territory in question.

There is no need to convince anyone that the Kiev regime, which was established after the bloody coup in February 2014, did not represent the interests of either the residents of Crimea or the people of eastern Ukraine. When they seized power, the first thing they did was declare the goal of repealing the Ukrainian laws that guaranteed the Russian language its rights. This sparked an immediate reaction from the people in Crimea and Donbass. Such examples abound.

We are talking about the importance of using the UN Charter not as their heart tells them (especially the West's heart, if there is any left to talk about), but in its entirety and interconnectedness.

Question: Russia is a self-sufficient state, but it never refuses to cooperate with other countries. How does it see the line and make agreements and talk without giving up its sovereignty?

Sergey Lavrov: We manage to do that. One can say in all certainty that it was over the past ten years that we have developed the ability to build relations with other states while retaining our sovereignty and not threatening our security, the prospects for Russia's socio-economic development, or the growing wellbeing of our citizens. This happened after the West started imposing its unprecedented sanctions on us. There had always been sanctions, but they became especially acerbated and all-encompassing after the West provoked the coup in Ukraine in its desire to bring in a government with openly neo-Nazi sentiments, which was supposed to eliminate everything Russian and create a direct threat to our country in Ukraine.

Before that, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation, we were open to cooperation, first with the West, as we considered it our closest neighbour (China is also a neighbour but the majority of our population lives in the country's European part), the source of technology and the progressive forms of the development of society and international relations. This was a huge disappointment later.

We stood against the West's attempts to bring direct harm to our interests when NATO, despite their promises, five times moved its borders closer to Russia and planned to create military bases in Ukraine, including on the coast of the Sea of

Azov. It was then that the West showed its true colours by discarding its agreements, trampling the principles on which it built and convinced others to build globalization when it spoke about honest competition, equal use of the principles of a market economy, that is, all the pillars the West built globalisation on, proving that this is the optimal way for the development of all humankind. All these principles were destroyed by the West in an instant.

We were suspicious at earlier stages, but these events made us understand that we could only rely on ourselves and the partners who proved their negotiability and who would never abandon our agreements to serve their own selfish interests.

Naturally, we are not sinking into autarchy. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasised that. We do not embrace self-isolation, but we cannot rely on partners who can deceive us anytime when it comes to the key sectors that define our defence capacity and economic development. This has also been expressed repeatedly. Everything you are witnessing now in the work of the Russian Government and the decisions made by President Vladimir Putin related to our development, all of what you see now at the amazing exhibition Russia EXPO shows that we are progressively moving in this direction.

We are keeping the door open to our partners. We have many of them who show their reliability and who do not try to use economic and other relations in their selfish interests.

We are also keeping the door open for the West. But if and when it comes to its senses and sobers up, we will see what they have to offer. Depending on this, we will decide whether we want to accept their proposals and whether they meet our interests, sovereign development or if they are once again a trap for Russia's development prospects.

Question: Now, Russia is protecting its compatriots and preserving history, culture and art. How does this strengthen the sovereignty of the Russian Federation?

Sergey Lavrov: It is not just a question of strengthening sovereignty, although this is an important part of the topic raised.

The sovereignty of a state like Russia, with its centuries-long history, huge contribution to the development of humanity, culture and art, is also seen in foreign countries. This is the extent of our influence, our impact on world development and the preservation of history, an integral part of which is Russian culture and art.

The overwhelming majority of our compatriots work truly in frontline

conditions. The attacks on their organisations in the United States, Canada and Western Europe are unprecedented. They are stripped of their rights, forbidden to meet and discuss how they, as citizens of foreign countries, but with Russian roots, want to organise their cultural and everyday life so as not to lose their traditions.

Attacks on Orthodoxy have reached unimaginable proportions. I am not talking about the provocation launched with American assistance by the Patriarch of Constantinople with the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the destruction of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Look at what our onetime Bulgarian “brothers” are doing now even though we consider the Bulgarian people to be a fraternal people. The fact that it has now accepted such rulers is an abnormality that must be corrected in historical terms.

On November 1-2, we held the World Thematic Conference of Compatriots Living Abroad, where they reaffirmed their determination to preserve, protect and promote our culture and achievements in literature, music and art. This is their moral strength. They openly and honestly affirm their right to have access to the heritage of their historical homeland. This, too, is a significant part of our sovereignty.

Question: What event predetermined the creation of Russia as a great state in the international arena?

Sergey Lavrov: On November 4, we marked National Unity Day. Russian President Vladimir Putin said many things on this occasion, as he has during the celebration of other commemorative dates, especially holy Victory Day.

The people's militia of Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky in 1612 – this was a turning point for the creation of a state of global significance. Before that there were principalities with feuds and periods of the Tatar-Mongol yoke. But it was in 1612 that our nation was formed as a united nation, where, regardless of social hierarchy, it rose up to fight the Polish invaders. This was a great victory that laid the foundation for many others that strengthened our state and made it so influential and attractive to many countries and peoples.

Question: What difficulties have you encountered in negotiations with representatives of European states this year? Are there many changes compared to the past?

Sergey Lavrov: There were no difficulties because there were no negotiations. We do not seek them. The European states, the United States and Canada have cut off all ties with us.

The only subject discussed one way or another is on issues related to the functioning of our diplomatic missions. They face extreme obstacles in their normal work, from bank transfers to ensuring the security of our territories in accordance with the obligations of these countries. If they give us difficulties, then we also create technical difficulties for the functioning of their embassies. Not because we are malicious, but there is a protocol in diplomacy – reciprocity. This is not our choice, but we cannot talk to them in any other way. They only understand this kind of force and reciprocal and tough measures.

Regarding substantive issues, the Americans periodically raise the question of resuming negotiations on strategic stability. Recently they sent us a document in which they outlined their (long-known to us) calls for the need to resume contacts on strategic stability. They say that we have a responsibility as nuclear powers. We have always been ready for such contacts, which resulted in the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START).

We were forced to suspend it in the sense that we will not fulfil the procedures stipulated in this treaty, although we will maintain the quantitative limits established in it. These procedures basically consist of periodic meetings of the Bilateral Verification Commission and inspections of each other's strategic nuclear facilities. How can we let the Americans into our nuclear facilities (they have been pushing for this for a long time) if they are supplying the Ukrainians with long-range weapons? This has already been used in attempts to attack our strategic nuclear bases. We have little doubt that to prepare these attacks, the Americans not only provided the armaments but also helped with information to try to hit the relevant targets.

The preamble to New Start says that we are not competitors anymore but rely on mutual trust, and we should have a balance of interests and indivisible security. The Americans trampled over all of this, they destroyed it and threw it in the garbage. They say things went wrong with Ukraine, but it is necessary to consider the continuation of the procedures provided by the treaty. This will not happen. This is the only substantial issue that we have been approached on recently.

The European Union has not made any such attempt. We all know well that Brussels adopted a special circular letter that prohibits all EU diplomats in Russia from inviting Russian representatives to events and going to our receptions (even though we have long stopped inviting anyone because Russian diplomats are also not given this honour). It even says that European diplomats in other countries must

notify the authorities of their countries to avoid seating Russians near Europeans at official receptions. This is an illness; it's hard to say what it's called. But it is not normal, that's for sure.

Diplomacy was created to allow people to communicate even in the most difficult times and avoid situations of mutual misunderstanding due to lack of communication and questions. But this is their choice.

We have been paying most of our attention to and working with the countries of the Global Majority that are open to cooperation with us. We have redistributed personnel inside the ministry and abroad (embassies, consulates general). In a way, it is easy to deal with the Europeans now. They are not bothering us.

Question: What is trust in the external world based on? How does Russia show its trust?

Sergey Lavrov: Trust in diplomacy and in politics is being built the same way as in everyday life. If you are promised something and the promise is fulfilled, you will trust the person. If there are agreements and they are implemented, your trust grows. If you are fooled once... to me, once is enough. But some people are more tolerant to various manifestations of human nature. They are ready to be deceived once, twice and three times. But even they finally come to understand that it is pointless to continue working with these people.

To a certain extent, this was the way we built relations with the West after Mikhail Gorbachev, and then Boris Yeltsin, were promised that NATO would not expand eastwards, that we would be friends and build a space of security and economic cooperation from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, where everyone would be equal. But they deceived us so many times.

I think our patience was very strong, but at some point it finally ran out. Once a liar always a liar. We have been lied to one time too many.

Question: 2023 was declared the Year of the Teacher. Dmitry Peskov said that President of Russia Vladimir Putin is his mentor. Maria Zakharova said yesterday that you are her mentor. Who would you say was your mentor as a diplomat?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a natural process. When young people start work, they always have mentors.

My first mentor, Alexey Nesterenko, headed the department of International Economic Relations at the Foreign Ministry where I received a job before my assignment to Sri Lanka. He is an outstanding Russian diplomat. In Sri Lanka, I

worked under the authority of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Rafik Nishanov. He also taught me a lot.

I matured professionally for the most part when working as Russia's Permanent Representative in New York. Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov taught me many things, even after he left the ministry and the Government and started doing academic work. We communicated regularly. He gave a lot to my generation of diplomats.

I am glad we have instituted the Primakov Medal. It is a rare departmental award. I am particularly pleased to talk about – and I'd like to thank the Moscow authorities and President of Russia Vladimir Putin for their support – an important event in 2019 – we unveiled a monument to Yevgeny Primakov in the square in front of our ministry.

Working with the President of Russia gives one a lot of experience. This should not be underrated, all the more so considering I have worked with Vladimir Putin for a long time. I continue seeing how actively and creatively he reacts to complicated situations, sometimes finding solutions that would not always occur to you.

Question: I have a question related to our generation. We were all born and grew up in a relatively open world where we had cultural and technological ties with other countries and international contacts. Now Russia is seeing a trend towards renouncing Western culture to a certain extent. Thus, the celebration of Halloween was banned or considered objectionable in many Moscow schools. Is it sensible to cancel Western culture in Russia, and what consequences might this produce?

Sergey Lavrov: I'd leave this question to the discretion of every community in a school or university.

When I studied in MGIMO, we held our own holidays, our own skits and had fun. Sometimes, we were joking or goofing around but we were all young.

I don't see anything destructive in various traditions from the West. The main point is to not allow them to dominate our history, our holidays and traditions of holding momentous events.

I don't see anything too terrible in Halloween except for some scenes in Western movies where bloody crimes are committed under the cover of Halloween tradition. I hope this is not a threat to us.

Question: Do you think NATO is weaker or stronger with Russia around?

What does the future hold for this organisation?

Sergey Lavrov: As a matter of fact, NATO is a relic of the past. The organisation should have stopped existing after the rationale for creating it disappeared. I mean the existence of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The North Atlantic alliance was created with the sole purpose of countering Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. The Warsaw Pact emerged as a response to that.

Before that (these documents are readily available), Joseph Stalin proposed joining efforts to build European security. Back then, this proposal was ignored. The same happened when the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union disappeared. There was a chance to build European security around the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which included all European countries plus the United States and Canada. But they chose to preserve NATO.

We keep reminding our Western colleagues that they have committed to specific obligations, such as commitments at the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul and the 2010 summit in Astana, where the principles of indivisible security, including the commitment of all countries not to enhance their security at the expense of the security of others, were reaffirmed. There was a particularly important principle that no country, group of countries, or an organisation would seek domination in the Euro-Atlantic area. This principle was agreed on by all and signed by presidents and prime ministers. Regardless of the mantras approved at the top level, NATO members heard us asking them why they weren't fulfilling these functions. Our suggestion was that if we were unable to establish equal relations based on political statements, we should give these political statements a legally binding force. We suggested this first in 2009 and on later occasions as well. Their answer was straightforward: legal security guarantees can only be provided within NATO. This was a deliberate policy aimed at pulling countries into NATO that felt uncomfortable in the context of Russia-West relations that gradually started to tense up.

What does the future hold for NATO? Until recently, they boasted that they were not an aggressive bloc but an exclusively defensive alliance that used force solely for defending their member countries' territories. Two years ago, that all changed overnight at the summit in Madrid and this summer at the summit in Vilnius. It was declared that NATO had a global responsibility for security on the entire planet, and that security in the Euro-Atlantic region was inseparable from security in the Indo-Pacific region. Elements of the bloc's military infrastructure are

making their way into the Asian-Pacific region. Military bloc alliances are being formed there with the goal of advancing NATO components in that part of the world.

In Soviet times we used to say (we had a satirical magazine titled “Krokodil” back then, and now there's a Telegram channel of the same name where you see the caricatures. It's interesting how history repeats itself) that NATO was an aggressive bloc. They claimed they were not an aggressive bloc but just defending their territory. No one is talking about that anymore, and they are extending their “tentacles” (as we said back then) all over the world. It's sad. But I believe they will slog their guts out doing this. You can't impose your hegemony so blatantly and persistently any longer; times have changed.

Question: What should today's Russian diplomat be like?

Sergey Lavrov: Diplomacy is one of the oldest professions because everything needs to be negotiated. The art of negotiation is what diplomacy is all about.

A diplomat should be a well-rounded erudite fluent in as many foreign languages as possible. They should have a deep knowledge of their country's history, the history of its establishment and the wars that unfolded in the process of building the state and developing national patriotism.

I've known a few people who said, “Why does a diplomat need to know the history of France, the United States, etc.? You don't need that.” This is not true at all. You cannot work in France, the United States, China, India, Africa, or Latin America without knowing the history of your own country. First, it always shows in your work. Your expertise is good for your credibility, and your counterparts can feel it instantly. I could talk about this at length. The more knowledgeable and well-read you are the better.

People's skills are another crucial quality. A vast number of pivotal decisions have become possible because people in positions of trust from opposing sides who discussed a particular situation had good personal relationships. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, personal relationships between Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy (the brother of President John F. Kennedy) significantly helped avert undesirable consequences.

If you are a diplomat/political scientist or are studying to become one, you should study everything. Everything you learn will pay off eventually.

Question: Can you provide some valuable tips for those who are embarking

on their professional career?

Sergey Lavrov: In my answer to the previous response, I tried to offer guidance for those who want to pursue a diplomatic career. However, this is by no means the only profession that our Motherland needs.

The most important thing is what you want for yourself deep down. I'm convinced there are no fields that are useless or devoid of promise.

Ideally, a profession of choice should become a lifelong pursuit. Sometimes, after graduating from a university, people realise they would like to follow a different career. There is every opportunity to do so.

Most importantly, people should love what they do. This will always be a contribution to the strengthening of our beloved country.



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