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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions during a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2023, Moscow, January 18, 2024

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to welcome you at our annual event. Every year, we come together right after the New Year and Christmas break. I would like to offer those of you who celebrate these holidays my greetings and wish you a Happy New Year 2024. We all want to make it a better year in every respect, as President Vladimir Putin explained in quite some detail.

We have a clear vision for our domestic development plans. The Government of the Russian Federation is hard at work. President Vladimir Putin held a series of meetings with Government members over the past few days to discuss various ways to promote sustained economic progress in today's environment, considering the aggressive and unlawful policies of the United States and its satellites. The goal is clear. It is to eliminate our dependence on any manufacturing, supply and logistics chains, financial and banking systems whenever our Western colleagues exercise too much control over them in one way or another. Previous and future decisions articulate this policy without any ambiguity.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, we have also defined our priorities for the foreseeable future. In March 2023, President Vladimir Putin approved a totally new and updated Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. It responds to the present-day reality in international affairs. The West has demonstrated its total inability to make deals and has proven to be an unreliable partner in all undertakings. The Global Majority can no longer tolerate this selfish approach and wants to prioritise its own national interests and the interests of every single country in its development efforts while strictly abiding by the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, starting with respecting the sovereign equality of states. Since the Charter was adopted in 1945, there has not been a single foreign policy initiative by the West on the international stage which took into account or respected the principle proclaiming the equal rights

of nations large and small, as the Charter reads, without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

On the foreign policy front, we have a clear objective to develop our relations with those who are ready to work with us on an equal, mutually beneficial and mutually respectful footing by engaging in a frank dialogue and talks for finding a balance of interests instead of taking decisions that serve someone's selfish agenda only, which is what happens with discussions involving the US-led West in an overwhelming majority of cases.

The past year showed that there is no acceptance of the manners traditional to the Western hegemon, manners based squarely on its vested interests and disregard for the opinion of all others. Yes, 500 years of ruling the world and having no serious rivals almost for this entire period (with the exception, perhaps, of the Soviet period) seems to have made it addicted to being hegemon. But life never stops. New centres of economic growth, financial might and political influence have emerged and gained strength, significantly outpacing the United States and other Western countries in terms of development.

I am sure you know how we assess the development of Russia's relations with the People's Republic of China. This is the fastest growing economy along with India's. Our relations with China are at the highest level in their entire centuries-long history. We particularly appreciate the fact that President Xi Jinping paid his first post-reelection state visit to Moscow in March 2023. In turn, President Vladimir Putin visited China in October 2023 to attend the Third Belt and Road International Forum.

The specially privileged strategic partnership with India has been making headway as well. We have established regular top-level dialogue and contacts between corresponding agencies through the foreign ministries.

Considering our immediate environs, it certainly includes the Middle East countries, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Accordingly, we are interested in expanding not only bilateral relations, but also ties with regional organisations that include many of our partners. I am referring to the Gulf Cooperation Council, the League of Arab States, ASEAN, the African Union, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and others.

We are working to take our partnership with Africa to a truly strategic level. This was confirmed at the second Russia-Africa Summit held in St Petersburg in July 2023.

An important milestone in the development of our relations with Latin America was the Russia - Latin America International Parliamentary Conference

held in Moscow in autumn 2023. We consider Africa, Latin America and Asian countries as emerging independent centres in a multipolar world.

We were active on the UN platform in 2023. The Group of Friends in Defence of the United Nations Charter has been successfully operating there since it was established several years ago. The group has adopted joint statements on fundamental issues of global development. This group catalyses and stimulates the General Assembly's work, promoting joint initiatives, including Russian ones. We support the ideas of our partners in this new entity.

I will note another important milestone – the adoption of a resolution on combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It was adopted at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly by an overwhelming majority of the vote, despite the chicanery of the West. However, I have to point out that for the second time in a row, Germany, Italy and Japan voted against that resolution – the Axis countries that publicly repented for the crimes committed during the Second World War after their defeat, and assured everyone that it would not happen again. These states have been voting against the resolution demanding that Nazism never be revived for the past two years, which provokes serious contemplation and makes us wonder where these ideological processes are leading, not only in these states but also in the West as a whole.

We constructively worked in other formats as well. I should specifically note our closest allies, the Union State of Russia and Belarus and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation through which we promoted stability in all dimensions, including military, biological and general security against new threats and challenges such as terrorism, drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime. The Eurasian Economic Union adopted important decisions for deepening Eurasian integration and coupling these processes with projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, ASEAN and all the other associations and countries on our common enormous Eurasian continent.

This year, Russia presides in the CIS. We plan to continue the useful projects launched in 2023. As one such project, we will pay special attention to the International Russian Language Organisation founded at the CIS summit in Bishkek last autumn. All the CIS members approved this initiative proposed by Kazakhstan. The organisation is open to any country wishing to join. We know that the Russian language is popular across all continents and we hope there will be many interested participants.

I mentioned the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as an umbrella project. Along with the Eurasian Economic Union, in the context of cooperation with ASEAN and other sub-regional bodies, this organisation objectively and organically helps us form the Greater Eurasian Partnership. President Vladimir Putin spoke about this at the very first Russia-ASEAN summit. The outlines of this partnership are already visible.

In the current conditions, it is important to have an economic partnership that meets the interests of all the countries on the continent we share. It was God's will that we use the objective competitive advantages of sharing the same space that, as it happens, has been a driver of growth for the global economy for a very long time. And it will maintain this role for many years ahead. In addition to mutually beneficial economic projects, it is important to ensure, regardless of other factors, military and political security in Eurasia. We will support the idea that the countries on the continent should deal with this task without attempts by countries from other regions to intervene in these processes with their own rules. We are convinced that the Eurasian countries are capable of handling these tasks independently.

I have listed several regional entities, but there is also a supra-regional global association called BRICS which epitomises the diversity of the multipolar world. The decision adopted during the summit in South Africa last year to expand the number of BRICS members came as a particularly important step to strengthen the position of BRICS. Russia, which assumed the BRICS chairmanship on January 1, will pay special attention to ensuring that newcomers seamlessly join in the common work and contribute to the strengthening of positive trends not only within the association, but also in the international arena in the interests of the Global Majority. Since over 20 (even closer to 30) countries are interested in establishing close ties with BRICS, we see a bright future for this association with global representation.

We have continued to prioritise the protection of the legitimate interests and rights of Russian citizens abroad. You are well aware of how they are discriminated against in the countries of the collective West. Unlike your Western colleagues who are increasingly trying to hide the truth about journalists' working conditions in the countries with "established democracies" (pardon the expression), many of you write about this. But in addition to the everyday problems faced by our citizens in the United States, Europe, and other countries, natural and man-made emergencies didn't go anywhere.

Recently, we have been providing broad-based assistance to evacuate Russians and citizens of CIS countries and some other countries from Gaza and,

several months before that, from Sudan riven by internal conflict.

In terms of public diplomacy, I would like to single out the milestone of creating in March 2023 of the International Russophile Movement, which is an informal association of people living on different continents with spiritual and cultural affinity for Russia. The founding meeting of this movement was successfully held and its first full-fledged congress will be held in the first half of this year.

We will continue to promote the ideals of truth and justice in international affairs. We will do our utmost to make international relations more democratic. In this sense, our Ministry strongly supports United Russia's initiative to hold in Moscow an international inter-party forum of supporters of combating the modern practices of neo-colonialism. It is a popular theme given that the neocolonialist nature of Western policy is present in a big way in the current policies pursued by the United States and its allies. Its thrust remains the same – to use the resources of other countries to their benefit and to live off of others. The upcoming forum promises to be an engaging and important event.

Russia will host a number of major international cultural events, including the World Youth Festival, which is fast approaching, the Games of the Future which is a mix of physical sports and cybersports, and the sports games of the BRICS countries. Both games will be held in Kazan (the Games of the Future in February, and the BRICS Games in the summer of 2024.)

The Intervision international song contest is being prepared. Many countries of the Global Majority showed interest in it. We will do our best to make sure that our guests who will come to these and numerous other events fully experience Russian hospitality as in 2018, when we hosted the finals of the FIFA World Cup.

In closing, I would like to reiterate our openness to communicating with media representatives in a variety of formats. I hope the Ministry representatives present here cannot be accused of ducking the media. Other senior ministerial officials, heads of departments, and our employees (especially when they travel as part of a delegation to international events) are simply under obligation to share information about our work and to make our work clear and transparent. This is what we strive to achieve.

Question: If elections take place in Ukraine this year, can a person willing to talk to Russia come to power there? Kiev signed a security agreement with London and may sign similar agreements with other G7 countries. How important is it for Russia in the context of the future settlement of the conflict? Does it mean that Ukraine won't have a neutral status?

Sergey Lavrov: Frankly, we are not too concerned over the details in the discussion of Ukraine's political affairs. The issue of elections surfaced. We heard that the West strongly advised Vladimir Zelensky to hold these elections, apparently in the hope that the election campaign and the voting itself will make it possible to bring him into line with Western interests, because he is getting harder and harder to control.

Zelensky announced in public that he would not hold any elections because of the ongoing war. This reminds one of another staged performance and reflects exclusively the desire of this man and his well-known underlings to hold on to power as much as possible. This is the desire I see.

The West would like to have more flexibility. Apparently, they have already understood that the much-publicised blitzkrieg with the ultimate goal of inflicting a "strategic defeat" on Russia is a mere illusion. There has been a fundamental shift, primarily in Western minds. They realised their mistake. It is hard to admit it. Now they are looking for some external signals that would allow them to still support Ukraine while pushing Kiev to become more accommodating and listen to its Western bosses. I find it hard to predict how successful they will be in that.

As for the second part of your question, this story is nothing new. Several months ago, there were "clashes" in the West over whether to admit Ukraine to NATO or the European Union. Not everyone was in favour of this and not everyone was happy. Everyone understood that this was yet another completely senseless, irresponsible and risky move for European security. The signing of bilateral agreements with individual Western countries was invented as a product requiring additional assembly. I heard about the contents of the document agreed upon by Zelensky and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. I did not see in its analysis any legally binding provisions unless we consider as such Ukraine's obligation to come to the defence of Great Britain in case of an attack. This sounds like a joke. But, on the other hand, we can regard it as a continuation of Studio Kvartal-95. Probably, now it will go by a different name.

We do not object to the agreements that other countries sign with Ukraine but this does not change our goal one iota. President Vladimir Putin confirmed this the other day. We will steadfastly pursue the goals of the special military operation and we will achieve them.

The West periodically sends us some signals and then cancels them. We take a philosophical attitude to them. President Vladimir Putin said many times that Russia does not refuse to negotiate. He said this as early as in 2022, when Boris Johnson and other Anglo-Saxons prohibited Kiev from signing an already

agreed-upon treaty to reach a settlement with the Russian Federation. This is a well-known episode. It took place in April 2022. Speaking in 2022 about this issue, President Putin said again that we do not reject talks. However, those who do should realise that the more they drag it out, the harder it will be to come to terms later. Now we see how this prediction is coming true. There is no hope at all that Russia will be “defeated.” This was said many times. Those who have not studied history (there are many of them in the West) and geography know little and may engage in flights of fancy. Or they may come up with another plot for the afore-mentioned Studio Kvartal-95. But it will have nothing to do with real life.

Question: I would like to wish you a happy New Year and victory on all fronts to the Russian people.

The United States is creating “international political and military coalitions” which are committing acts of aggression against Yemen and continue to support and encourage Israeli genocide against the Palestinian people, as well as military operations against Syria and Lebanon. What is Moscow’s stance on these issues?

Sergey Lavrov: We have made numerous public statements to present our views on the developments in the Middle East, not only in Gaza but also in the Palestinian territories as a whole and in Lebanon, Iraq and, of course, Yemen.

It is obvious that the United States, Britain and some of their other allies have trampled underfoot all the norms of international law, including the UN Security Council resolution, which only called for protecting commercial shipping. Nobody was given the right to bomb Yemen, just as nobody gave NATO the right to bomb Libya in 2011. A resolution adopted back then only established a no-fly zone over Libya, which meant that the Libyan Air Force aircraft must not fly over the country, and they did not. There was not even the most far-fetched pretext for using armed force there. But the country has been bombed to dust and turned into a black hole. Nobody has been able to reassemble the Libyan state to this day. A huge number of migrants flooded Europe, making it suffer. But the Americans and the British are not suffering. The terrorists whom the West used to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi moved towards central Africa.

We can see the same arbitrariness with regard to Yemen now. It is obvious to everyone. I would say that Washington’s justifications are pathetic.

The other day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in Davos that virtually every country in the Middle East wanted the United States and they wanted it leading. I cannot confidently say if the regional countries want this.

We should ask them. But one of these countries, Iraq, adopted a decision several years ago stating that the United States had been in the country, its military bases had been in the country for a long time, and that this should end, and the United States should go home. But the Americans refuse to leave.

Baghdad has recently made another statement on the Americans' reluctance to go home even though they have been encouraged to leave long ago. It is especially regrettable that Secretary of State Blinken also implied that only the United States can help negotiate peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. He said this. We are aware of such semi-secret contacts involving the United States, Israel and several Arab countries. But these contacts do not involve a direct dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Instead, they imply that the "big guys" will sit at a table somewhere to decide how the Palestinians should live and will present their decision to them. This cannot succeed. Only a direct dialogue, which must be relaunched, can bring about progress. It went on, with difficulties, but it continued with support from the quartet of international intermediaries. We have always said that the activities of the quartet – the United States, Russia, the UN and the EU – must also involve representatives from the Arab League. It is deeply regrettable that the Americans and the Europeans blocked that idea. And then the United States dissolved all such quartets and monopolised the entire mediation process.

In September 2023, US National Security Adviser Jack Sullivan said that the Middle East region was quieter today than it has been in the past few years. A month later, a [conflict](#) broke out in Gaza. This calls for collective efforts, which the United States seems to have lost the habit of. It has become addicted to dictating.

Next Tuesday, the UN Security Council will hold a special meeting on this issue. We plan to attend it, and I will personally travel to New York for this purpose. We will put forth our ideas aimed at resuming collective efforts and ending the attempts to decide everything single-handedly, and not only in the Middle East. The United States wants to promote its agenda throughout the world. We'll see what comes of it.

Ultimately, life itself will likely teach our Western colleagues a lesson. Regional countries must clearly show that it is their region, and the security of all states in the region is of crucial importance. While external recommendations will not be disregarded, the final decisions must be taken by the regional countries themselves.

The main focus of these efforts should be the establishment of a Palestinian state in strict compliance with the UN Security Council's decisions.

This state should be viable, as the decisions state, and live side by side with Israel and other regional countries in peace and security. Otherwise, we will continue to see outbreaks of violence like the current situation in Gaza. Without a state of their own, the Palestinian people will continue to feel disadvantaged and injured. One generation of young Palestinians after another will be aware of this injustice and will pass on this feeling to their children. This injustice must be put to an end through the establishment of a Palestinian state. I hope that the Israeli leadership will ultimately reach the same conclusion. Currently, very few people consider this solution acceptable to Israel, but this only means that efforts must continue to help them see the truth, which is that Israel's security cannot be guaranteed without the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Russia wants Israel and its people to live in security. Israel is our long-time partner. Our country was the first to recognise Israel's independence. About 2 million Israeli citizens also hold Russian passports and have come from Russia. Of course, we are concerned about this. We are ready to play an active role in bringing about a comprehensive settlement that will guarantee Israel's security while strictly complying with the UN resolution on the Palestinian issue.

Question: There were reports that last year the United States submitted written proposals to Russia regarding the initiation of arms control talks. At the time, the Foreign Ministry confirmed that it was working on an official response. Have you sent the reply?

What does the future hold in this regard? Are there any viable prospects for this to happen? Is it possible to resume the strategic stability dialogue with the United States? Would it be appropriate, useful or advisable considering the ongoing developments, in the context of the conflict with the West and Washington's hostile policies?

Sergey Lavrov: There has been much talk lately about the prospects for reviving our strategic dialogue with the United States. This topic comes up often in our conversations and interactions with the media.

Since we are all adults here, we cannot seriously discuss these prospects without taking into account the overall global security outlook and the strategic stability issue you have mentioned. Today, we are witnessing a lot of negative momentum in this regard, and the situation is getting worse. This is primarily attributable to the escalating confrontation accompanying what can be called without any exaggeration a seminal process as the world transitions from a unipolar to a multipolar order.

Having steered global processes for 500 years, the West is now fiercely resisting this change. This is what we can see today. Their objective is to prevent the world from becoming multipolar. By doing so, the West stands in the way of a natural and objective process of history and tries to preserve its waning global dominance. Moreover, the West has been making every effort to keep these objective trends at bay by pressuring those who reject their hegemonic aspirations and stand for the principles of equality as set forth in the UN Charter.

Instead, the West is striving to maintain its global leadership. This policy mainly comes from Washington, although it has been facing mounting challenges in the process. Russia poses one such obstacle, having demonstrated its resolve in thwarting any attempts to infringe upon its interests and the interests of a great nation as one of the world's civilisational centres. The firmer we became in affirming our commitment to preserving our identity and promoting our interests, the more hostility we faced from the United States. Washington opted for a reckless expansion of NATO, a bloc with a clear anti-Russia agenda, into the post-Soviet space, bringing about the conflict around Ukraine.

As you know, we refused to accept the fact that the Kiev regime was being used as a tool for creating direct security threats to us. Moreover, these threats are right at our doorstep rather than coming from somewhere overseas. We rejected a situation where the Kiev regime was used for attacking everything Russian head on, including language, education, culture, and people who have for centuries lived on lands they inherited from their ancestors and which have always remained Russian lands, part of the Russian world. There was an attempt to turn Kiev into a tool for erasing this history, eliminating the shared memory and severing all the bonds linking the Russian and Ukrainian nations. This posed a direct threat to our interests.

The United States responded to the action we took to defend our interests and our external contour by unleashing a total hybrid war. It sought to politically and economically strangle Russia – to call a spade a spade – and to inflict a strategic defeat on us on the battlefield, as I have already said. And they have openly declared these goals for everyone to hear.

We do not perceive any interest on the part of the United States or NATO in achieving a just settlement in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. They do not want to hear about our concerns, let alone engage in serious discussions to address our fundamental differences. On the contrary, the West is doing everything to escalate the Ukrainian crisis, which currently creates additional strategic risks.

Just recently, former United States Army Europe commanders Ben Hodges and Philip Breedlove publicly advised the Kiev regime to bomb Crimea until it becomes impossible for people to live there. These are retired generals. As for the current politicians, we know that the British have been pushing the same advice, recommendations and even plans in their contacts with the Kiev regime. As usual, life has not taught them anything. They used to talk about supporting Kiev “for as long as it takes,” but now they switched to “for as long as possible.” This caveat reflects a slight shift in their assessment. No problem, let them knock themselves out. It’s their funeral.

The situation in Afghanistan unfolded along similar lines. The United States stayed there for 20 years. Was this “as long as they needed” or “as long as it was possible?” What have they actually achieve there?

The same holds true for Iraq, Libya and any country targeted by the United States and its satellites in their reckless undertakings. Has it improved anything anywhere? It was done in the name of democracy, but has it really taken root anywhere?

Unfortunately, a similar fate awaits Ukraine. When you place your trust in your master while failing to understand that they prioritise their own interests over yours, you can hardly expect the interests of your people to be taken into consideration. Not only are efforts being made to encourage or incite stepping up the use of long-range artillery to target Crimea and make it unliveable, or to aim deeper into Russian territory, but also arms supplies demonstrate that the West has no desire to find a constructive solution that addresses Russia’s legitimate concerns.

This US-led destructive policy had a profound negative impact on Russia-US relations and has radically changed the security environment compared to the time when we signed the New START. Washington cast aside all the understandings and principles agreed by our countries for working together, including those related to arms control.

The New START’s preamble sets forth our commitment to the principle of indivisible security, which means that no one can strengthen its security at the expense of others. But preparations for the conflict in Ukraine and efforts to unleash it rendered this principle meaningless. The same preamble sets forth the commitment by Russia and the United States to forge their relationship based on mutual trust and cooperation. Is there any trust to speak of today? Everyone understands this perfectly well.

In real life, the United States opted to pursue military dominance long

ago, trying to gain a free hand by dismantling the entire arms control framework in a step-by-step process, including the Treaty Between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles, and the Treaty on Open Skies. The same happened to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and the New START since the United States made their implementation impossible.

Let me remind you that it was the United States who suspended our bilateral strategic dialogue by using an unfavourable military and political environment as a pretext. They cancelled a round of talks in the autumn of 2022 though we were ready to hold it.

They have recently become aware once again of the importance of nuclear arms control and started sending us signals, including the paper you mentioned, showing their readiness to resume dialogue on these matters. Interestingly, they suggested taking strategic stability talks out of the general military and political context. Every day brings further evidence that we are operating in a hostile environment, which is unacceptable. They denounce us at every corner and call us an aggressor, demanding that we retreat to the 1991 borders and leave the poor democratic Ukraine alone. They did recognise that they were doing all this, but while doing so, they suggested sitting down and focusing on a specific topic: strategic arms limitations and the strategic dialogue in general.

There was a time when they raised this topic just for the sake of resuming inspections and being able to visit our nuclear facilities. At the same time, they sent weapons to the Ukrainians, and these weapons targeted our military bases where strategic bombers are deployed. These people simply lack common decency. I am not even talking about treating national interests in a comprehensive manner or understanding what is possible in international talks and what is not. In this case, they failed to observe the most rudimentary decency. This did not come as a surprise to us.

This makes Russia their enemy and they cast us as an enemy, while showing readiness to discuss whether they can look at our strategic nuclear arsenals, as if it were a separate matter. We understand what they are after. They are trying to use the reciprocity motto in order to be able to control our nuclear arsenals and to minimise nuclear risks arising from their efforts to carry out a strong-arm policy towards us. More and more people in the West have been talking about a possible direct confrontation between nuclear powers. There are fewer and fewer constraining factors or deterrents. The Poles and the British

have been seriously discussing training NATO units to enter Ukraine and take over specific positions. We are hearing this from people who serve in official positions.

We believe that the ideas put forward by the United States are unacceptable. When discussing strategic stability, the Americans do not hide that they wanted to leave aside the means of non-nuclear military confrontation, i.e., the non-nuclear forces. Their goal is rather obvious. The collective West enjoys a substantial edge in this regard, quantity-wise, and wants to strengthen it.

Washington has been waging a hybrid war against Russia. In this context, we do not see any reason not only for taking additional joint measures on arms control or reducing strategic risks, but also for engaging in strategic stability talks with the United States in general.

We do not reject this idea altogether, just as we do not reject and have never rejected efforts to settle the existing differences by political and diplomatic means. However, before we move forward on these opportunities, we will be firm and unwavering in demanding that the West fully rejects its malicious policy of undermining Russia's security and our interests and stops openly neglecting our fundamental interests.

Any future strategic stability discussions would be predicated on the United States demonstrating its readiness to work on this matter considering all the essential strategic stability factors instead of singling out specific aspects according to Washington's preferences. The Americans have never been inclined to apply this comprehensive approach to strategic stability matters, and we have even fewer reasons to expect this to change in today's environment.

We will need to address major differences on security matters created by NATO's eastward expansion. Let me remind you that this is what we said back in December 2021. To be more precise, we have been talking about this for a long time now. In December 2021, we put forward specific proposals which could have averted the conflict we are witnessing today, sparing the European economy. In fact, the US has been proactive and quite effective in undermining the European economy. As you know, our proposals were rejected at that time.

As for your question on whether we informed the Americans, yes, we did. We set forth on paper what I have just told you in general terms, just as the Americans did when they sent us their written proposals. We responded to them in December 2023. We made it clear to Washington that we see no alternative to these assessments. We believe that everything is clear on this matter now.

Question: If you were asked to assess China-Russia relations in 2023 in one or a few words, what word or words would you use and why? What do you

expect from bilateral ties this year?

Sergey Lavrov: In my opening remarks, I already mentioned that Russian-Chinese relations, as our leaders have repeatedly stressed, are currently experiencing the best period in their history. A number of declarations adopted at the highest level have stated that these relations are stronger, more reliable and superior to the military alliance of the Cold War era.

In fact, this reflects the actual state of affairs. There is no aspect of human activity where our relations with China have not seen a rapid upswing.

For example, in economics, we significantly exceeded the \$200 billion target set last year. This trend will continue, facilitated by the progress in our relations. As the West undermined the very foundations of globalisation it once promoted and resorts to sanctions and other illegitimate measures, we are transitioning to mechanisms that will spur on our trade and investment cooperation but will be resistant to Western influence. Specifically, over 90 percent of mutual transactions are now conducted using national currencies. The same shift is underway with many other countries as well.

Apart from the summits between President of Russia Vladimir Putin and President of China Xi Jinping, mechanisms are in place for annual meetings between heads of government, prepared by five intergovernmental commissions co-chaired by deputy prime ministers. We do not have such extensive mechanisms of high-level cooperation with any other partner.

The structure of strategic bilateral cooperation and comprehensive partnership enables Russia and China not only to coordinate mutually beneficial projects, but also to provide ongoing support for the work towards their implementation.

When it comes to culture, humanitarian and educational cooperation, Russia and China hold annual events. In my view, these relations have great potential and will continue to expand in accordance with the guidelines set in March 2023, during Xi Jinping's first visit to Russia since his re-election as President of China, and in October 2023, as part of President Vladimir Putin's visit as the main guest of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

A number of events have already been agreed for this year, and will offer further opportunities for dialogue at the highest and high levels on Russian-Chinese partnership and cooperation across the board.

There are many words that can be used to describe our cooperation in the most positive terms. I do not want to choose just one, two, or three words right now – with the exception, perhaps, of the word 'friendship.' "Russians and

Chinese are brothers forever,” as it was once said in the Soviet Union. Maybe it sounded a bit far-fetched back then. The relationship later deviated from its course. Today, however, our citizens (more and more of them) visit China as tourists or for business purposes, participate in cultural and educational exchanges. They share their impressions, not at the level of ministries or other government agencies, but in the context of their contacts with Chinese citizens. Russians describe their mutual sympathy in superlative terms.

We are now vigorously promoting cross-border ties between the neighbouring regions of China and Russia. This also promotes positive trends.

Of course, there are economic and trade issues that need to be addressed. Everyone wants to negotiate more favourable terms. But Russian and Chinese interests can always be brought to a common denominator through negotiations. This serves as an example for other participants in global communication to resolve any issues.

Question: The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan recently exchanged strong-worded statements. The stumbling block is the problem of communication between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan. Baku is demanding that cargo and people proceed uninspected on this route, otherwise its border with Armenia will not be open in any other place. Yerevan does not accept this rhetoric. What is your comment? Could this exchange of strong statements affect the process of normalisation process between Baku and Yerevan?

Sergey Lavrov: In fact, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan addressed the issue of establishing a link between the main part of Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan in their recent public comments. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said that Armenia was strongly opposed to the Zangezur corridor.

The agreements between President of Russia Vladimir Putin, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan contained no mention of this road.

The November 9, 2020 statement, which ended the war, stated that all economic and transport ties in the region would be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia will guarantee the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to facilitate an unhindered movement of people, vehicles and cargo in both directions. The Border Service of the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB) will oversee the transport links. This is a quote from the trilateral document signed on November 9, 2020.

Mr Pashinyan said that he wanted the same terms for transit via Armenia as those to be used for transit from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan via Iranian

territory. Frankly, I did not see any logic in that. It is hardly appropriate to compare these two routes.

The members of the trilateral Working Group, established at the level of deputy prime ministers of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in 2021, agreed that after all connections and routes are reopened, the countries in whose territory there are such open routes will fully retain their sovereignty and jurisdiction over them.

The trilateral Working Group agreed in June 2023 to resume these communications, starting with rail transport. This was coordinated and discussed by President Vladimir Putin in Yerevan during his visit. There was a separate meeting with Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan on the sidelines of the CSTO summit. I vividly remember this being accepted quite positively. However, nothing came out of it later.

We are well aware that, unfortunately, these retreats from previous agreements happen quite often. I don't know what prevented these agreements on the principles for starting transport communications between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan from being finalised in writing. But we do know that the Western friends never miss an opportunity to offer "helpful" advice in the South Caucasus. Occasionally it is accepted by one or another participant in the process. Everyone is well aware that the West's counsels are always aimed at promoting its geopolitical objectives rather than finding an agreement between countries in the region, based on the balance of their interests.

I am confident that there is no alternative to restarting these communications. Their parameters are sealed by the trilateral agreement. The route passes through Armenia's sovereign territory and is supervised by the Border Service of the FSB of Russia. The same agreement stipulates the principles and procedures of border and customs control at the entrance to Armenia from Azerbaijan and the exit from Armenia to Azerbaijani Nakhichevan.

Question: Over the past few days, there have been numerous media reports claiming that Russia and Ukraine are allegedly preparing for direct talks. Moreover, Geneva has been named as a platform that both parties would agree to. Is this true? Is Moscow ready for this scenario?

Sergey Lavrov: Rumours are just rumours. Everybody understands that Ukraine is not the party to decide when to stop and to start serious discussions about realistic conditions for ending this conflict. That would require renouncing Nazi ideology, Nazi rhetoric, racism against everything Russian and backing out of joining NATO. These are not just improbable dreams but mandatory

conditions for preserving the Ukrainian people as an independent nation with its own identity rather than a people that performs somebody else's orders to disturb Russia.

Talking with the West is what is necessary. We already mentioned today that in April 2022, the West prohibited Ukraine from signing agreements. Similarly, the West is not interested in initiating any talks now. Most certainly, Washington is the party issuing commands.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in Davos that right now, he does not see the slightest prospect of talks on either settlement or long-term truce in Ukraine. They do not even want to talk about a settlement. Occasionally, in a Freudian slip, they mention a ceasefire in order to power up Ukraine with more weapons. They used the Minsk agreements in a similar manner.

Also in Davos, Vladimir Zelensky spoke extensively and emphatically about the Minsk agreements, though not as vividly as in Kvartal-95. He accused Russia and President Putin personally of "stealing" 13 years of peace. He directly stated that after 2014 (naturally, in their version of events, the "Moscow regime" started everything, because to them, there was no coup; it all started with the "annexation of Crimea" in their completely misinterpreted story), Germany and France worked so hard to negotiate an intermediate solution in the form of the Minsk agreements but Vladimir Putin allegedly "ruined" everything. It is striking how somebody can even say things like that.

It is a well-known fact that, first, the Minsk agreements were not an intermediate stage. The agreements were intended to finally resolve the problem and were approved by the UN Security Council. Second, as you know, Vladimir Putin did not ruin them. The former Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, and the former President of France, François Hollande, did not even attempt to make them work. Both admitted that they had signed the agreements only to buy time and prepare Ukraine for a war. These obvious facts have been repeatedly stated in public. They have been analysed, discussed and commented on by many politicians and journalists.

Vladimir Zelensky shamelessly lied to the global community from the podium of the World Economic Forum in Davos. What is there to talk about with a person like him, especially since his decree prohibiting talks with Russia is still in effect? Commenting on this issue, President Vladimir Putin said that first, they must repeal the decree and then we will see.

Question: In a recent interview, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev used aggressive rhetoric towards Yerevan. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan described it as a setback to the negotiating process, and Foreign

Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said that the dialogue had regressed. What do you think about the status of negotiations between Yerevan and Baku? What is Russia's position on this matter?

Have the issues plaguing Russia-Armenia relations been overcome? Is there any progress?

Sergey Lavrov: With regard to Armenian-Azerbaijani settlement, let's not hesitate to acknowledge the importance of the trilateral declarations signed in 2020-2022 by the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. I have just mentioned one of them.

Sadly, the opening of a route across the Syunik Region – a practical step that would be beneficial for Armenia – remains only on paper. With all due respect, I believe Yerevan is contributing to the problem. I am not sure whose advice they are following in this regard. As soon as the EU, France, Germany, and the United States realised that the Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani process is effective in unblocking the routes, delimiting the border and laying the groundwork for a peace treaty, they immediately started to interfere in these processes without invitation and to play the role of a spoiler.

In 2003, the Russian Federation played a mediating role in the Transnistrian settlement. Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Dmitry Kozak oversaw it at that time. He worked with Chisinau and Tiraspol to coordinate the language of a memorandum, which became known as the Kozak Memorandum. The parties initialled it, and the signing ceremony was scheduled to take place the next morning. But then-President of Moldova Vladimir Voronin called President Putin and said that the EU told them not to sign it, because it allegedly said something they did not want it to say. The agreement was between Tiraspol and Chisinau, not the EU. The Transnistrian issue could have been settled 20 years ago, just like the situation around Ukraine could have been resolved seven years ago had the Minsk agreements been acted upon. But the West did not let it happen.

I have reason to believe that the West does not want to see the agreements concluded between Yerevan and Baku with the mediation of Russia to take place. I have given an example with the road through the Syunik Region. Armenia is having difficulty opening the route as laid out in the Trilateral Statement. Yerevan is putting forward additional security requirements for the route. It does not want Russian border guards to be there, although this is written in the statement which bears Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's signature. He does not want to see non-aligned customs and border control. He wants Armenia to run it, which contradicts the agreement.

Delimitation is another issue of concern. We offered our services. The sides signed an agreement on creating a commission on delimitation, in which Russia was to participate as a consultant. We have not been invited. President of the European Council Charles Michel has already said that the EU would oversee the delimitation issues, although (if I am any good at geography) neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan have ever been part of any association within the borders of the EU and the EU is in no position to have the maps in question. The Russian Federation has them. This suits the parties, but not the EU or the United States who want to delimit the border from overseas. They claim they somehow got hold of the Soviet General Staff maps and they do not need Russian maps. It is unfortunate when adults play a game of “who’s boss” and who can score more points in the international arena. It is regrettable that the Western selfish aspirations are getting in the way of Armenia and Azerbaijan’s core interests.

We have never done anything to initiate the cooling of Russia-Armenia relations. We remember that many of Armenia’s current officials, while they were still in opposition, called for withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union during various political processes and election campaigns. When Nikol Pashinyan assumed office, we did not even consider distancing ourselves from Yerevan. Everything in the economy, energy, the social sphere, military and political affairs remained as it was under his predecessors.

In 2022, at a CSTO meeting in Yerevan, which I attended in person, the ministers agreed on a document to send CSTO observers to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. However, Armenia’s top officials said they could not sign it. Almost simultaneously, an EU mission went there. That was the choice made by the Armenian leadership.

The EU mission showed much interest in the work of our border guards in Armenia. Their purpose was not to promote confidence-building measures but try to sniff out the lay of the land, gather information about Russia’s presence and objectives in the region. This is a well-known fact.

We discussed this with our Armenian friends. We have repeatedly made it clear that if the EU mission is closer to them, why not invite a CSTO mission as well? We know their answer. They say the CSTO “disappointed” Armenia, because it did not condemn Azerbaijan. However, if we go back to the early days of the conflict, we will see that at each turn both sides made many mistakes that held back the progress and we may get lost in who is right and who is wrong.

Either we start looking for the culprits and miss the existing opportunity to get help strengthening the borders, or we work with our Western colleagues.

Armenia openly expressed disappointment with the CSTO, as well as Russia, but not the West. This is the choice of the Armenian leadership.

Our society, political observers and the media have their opinions on this matter which they freely express. For some of them, the Armenian government has even declared several Russian citizens *persona non grata*, which is an unusual move considering our allied relations.

There was an incident related to the International Criminal Court. We made a friendly suggestion regarding the signing of the ICC statute. We showed how to achieve the goal that is declared as the main one for joining the ICC without taking this controversial step. We remain in contact and open to dialogue. The West publicly states that Russia must be expelled from the South Caucasus. We have not heard Yerevan object to that.

We proposed putting more efforts in expanding the cooperation mechanism between the three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and their three large neighbours (Russia, Türkiye and Iran). Several meetings have been held with Armenia's participation. Over time, this format will hold the most promise, as it is not dependent on the global geopolitical situation. It is free from the geopolitical game of preserving hegemony, which Washington and its colleagues from Brussels engage in.

To reiterate, we have warm feelings for the Armenian people. We are certain that history will put everything in its place. But we are unable to solve all these issues alone. I do not want to resort to clichés, but it truly takes two to tango. Armenia will need a more vigorous approach to overcome its challenges.

Question: Russian officials have repeatedly highlighted Moscow's efforts, in particular those by President Vladimir Putin, to normalise the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev recently said it was Vladimir Putin, not French President Emmanuel Macron, who helped restore peace in the South Caucasus. Does this increase the likelihood of an agreement between Baku and Yerevan being signed on a Russian platform? Will Moscow take steps to neutralise the actions of the West?

The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed hope that Afghanistan would break out of international isolation after Kazakhstan removed the Taliban from its register of prohibited organisations. Does Afghanistan have a chance to end its diplomatic isolation? Can a similar process begin with regard to Yemen, including the recognition of the Houthis who have *de facto* controlled the capital and most of the territory for years?

Sergey Lavrov: You said President of Russia Vladimir Putin, not French President Emmanuel Macron, played a role in the reconciliation between Baku

and Yerevan. The respective agreement was signed by the leaders of three countries – Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. I have not seen Emmanuel Macron's signature on them. The same holds true for other trilateral agreements – Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani.

Under those agreements, mechanisms began to be put in place to unblock transport links, demarcate the border and conclude a peace treaty. At that point, Europeans and Americans became active and tried to intervene in the process. An interesting fact: the documents signed in November 2020 and later designated the region of Nagorno-Karabakh as the zone of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. There was an understanding between the three leaders that status negotiations needed to continue to reach a final agreement on this issue.

Imagine our surprise when, in the autumn of 2022, at the European Political Community conference in Prague (an event that included Armenia and Azerbaijan, while neither Russia nor Ukraine was invited), Emmanuel Macron and Charles Michel proposed a meeting between Yerevan and Baku. Subsequently, they approved a document stating that Azerbaijan and Armenia recognised each other's territorial integrity in full accordance with the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration. It read that all borders between the newly independent states coincided with the administrative division of the Soviet Union. That put Karabakh within the boundary of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

We had had no idea such an announcement was being prepared. When it was made, we predictably assumed (and informed Yerevan and Baku) that the Karabakh status issue had been “closed” personally by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Emmanuel Macron was there. I would rather stop fantasising as to who played a role. But it is a fact that our Western colleagues want a peace treaty to be signed only on their territory. It is also a fact that Azerbaijan is ready to sign it on Russian territory, where the efforts to end the conflict and build a system of interaction to resolve all issues began. I do not know how ready Yerevan is for this, although relevant signals have been sent to the Armenian capital for a long time.

Afghanistan, de facto, has a government that is in control. True, there are pockets of tension and protest there, but in general, the Taliban control the government. The Russian Embassy is probably the only one that has never stopped working in Kabul. We have regular contacts with the Taliban, including on issues that need to be resolved in order for them to become a fully recognised government. Primarily, they need to make good on their own promises, mainly,

to create an inclusive government, which will include not only ethnic Pashtuns but also political groups. They may be ethnic Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Hazaras, but politically, they are Taliban. In this regard, there is still opposition there: former President Hamid Karzai and former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah are still there. We strongly recommend that the Taliban invite other forces into the governing body.

The second point that needs to be addressed has to do with the National Resistance Front still active in the north of the country. The new government absolutely needs to build bridges with them. The process is not easy. Afghanistan has never been easy for anyone.

We are present there. We did not lose touch with the situation for a second. We are in contact with the de facto leadership. This helps us to work, including to promote external formats that can develop recommendations for the Afghans: the Moscow format, and the Quartet (Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran). I hope that the recent “exchange of pleasantries” between Pakistan and Iran will not complicate their work.

As for Kazakhstan's move, Astana emphasised that the decision to remove the Taliban from the terrorist register does not mean diplomatic recognition. It's all relative. Even the UN Security Council has an exception with regard to Taliban leaders who are on terrorist lists for peaceful settlement talks and contacts. I would rather not go too deep into this. What matters is the realities on the ground, and they are that the Taliban now control most activities in Afghanistan.

You mentioned Yemen. After many years, contacts with the Houthis began at Saudi Arabia's initiative. They began to produce results. It is difficult for me to say how realistic it is to resume negotiations or when this may happen. The priority now is to stop the aggression against Yemen. The more the Americans and the British bomb Yemen, the less willing the Houthis are to talk. This is our Anglo-Saxon colleagues' usual style. They first trouble waters everywhere and then see how they can play combinations that will advance London and Washington's selfish interests, while watching from across the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean.

Question: This year marks the 80th anniversary of lifting the siege of Leningrad, one of the most tragic periods of World War II. Russia has always tried hard to help and assist everyone affected by the siege, without exception. The Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspaper recently published statistics noting that over 50,000 people, including those living in the EU, had received benefits prior to the anniversary.

Germany applies double standards regarding the payment of individual compensation. The Federal Republic of Germany reimburses Jewish siege survivors alone (who, doubtless, have every right to receive benefits) for dubious reasons. For many years, Berlin has refused to pay all other siege survivors, including the city's defenders and residents. Can you comment on this?

Sergey Lavrov: We have been addressing this issue for many years. We considered it unfair when Berlin started paying only Jewish siege survivors, and we drew the attention of our German colleagues to this fact.

The incumbent President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier served as Foreign Minister at that time. We repeatedly discussed this issue with him. I explained to him that people had suffered, died and helped each other, regardless of their ethnicity. There were Russians, Tatars and Jews and multiple other ethnic groups. He replied that they were paying the Jews under the Holocaust act obliging them to reimburse Holocaust victims, and that all others who died in Leningrad were not victims of the Holocaust.

The absurdity of framing the issue this way is obvious. I tried to explain to him that the siege was a unique event of World War II and the Great Patriotic War. There was no difference between those who tried to survive, who ate cats, cooked shoes and buried people. We wanted to shame the Germans, but we failed. They replied that they were doing this because the Holocaust act made such payments obligatory. They were afraid that they would receive numerous appeals if they paid those not listed among Holocaust victims. I suggested that they draft a separate bill on Leningrad siege survivors, so that everything would be crystal-clear. 'No' was the answer.

Berlin eventually suggested establishing a house of siege veterans and a Russian-German cultural centre in St Petersburg where various activists would be able to meet and talk. I replied that it would be good and useful for advancing relations between our civil societies, but that this did not resolve the issue of siege survivors. Even if they were content with visiting these agencies, an overwhelming majority of siege veterans also live abroad, primarily in the three Baltic states and elsewhere, rather than just St Petersburg. We had them in mind when raising this issue with the German side. However, we have been unable to make any headway.

We even tried to encourage public organisations to speak with Germans via their own channels. We contacted the European Jewish Congress and Israel. We explicitly pointed out that it would be in Israel's interests to display solidarity with those who tried to survive in the same unbearable conditions

together with the Jews. However, they are not interested in raising this issue either.

Additionally, we found out that, for some unimaginable reason, the German state reimburses veterans of the Spanish Blue Division (that fought together with the Wehrmacht during World War II and that took part in carrying on the siege of Leningrad), while Soviet siege survivors whom they caused suffering are denied the same.

The ruling German elite's historical amnesia has been getting worse for a long time. German authorities modify exhibitions at memorial complexes dedicated to the final days of World War II, as well as those established by German, Soviet and Russian experts, in order to eliminate the Soviet-Russian contribution to these events. This also concerns memorial complexes at former concentration camp sites and the famous German-Russian Museum Berlin Karlshorst where the unconditional surrender document was signed.

We are witnessing the degradation of post-war German society's foundations that created a German identity commanding worldwide respect. It is alarming to note the instincts that are starting to surface.

Question: It has been reported that Germany is the third party in South Africa's legal case accusing Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians. The German government has said on this score: "In view of Germany's history and the crime against humanity of the Shoah [Holocaust], the Federal Government sees itself as particularly committed to the Convention against Genocide" and that it therefore "decisively and expressly rejects the accusation of genocide brought against Israel before the International Court of Justice." Germany is acting as Israel's lawyer rather than a neutral third party. Namibia, which was a victim of genocide in the early 20th century, which the UN condemned in 1985, has criticised Germany in this connection.

The Soviet Union and its people suffered the most from the attempts to implement the Third Reich's atrocious Generalplan Ost (Plan East), which provided for eliminating or resettling 31 million people. We can see how Nazism is increasingly justified in today's Berlin. Your German colleague, Annalena Baerbock, has said recently that her grandmother's husband took part in the "defence of Koenigsberg." Chancellor Olaf Scholz believes that Germany stands on the "right" side of history today.

Russia is the legal successor of the Soviet Union. Our multiethnic people suffered the heaviest casualties and did more than other countries to liberate Europe, including Germany, from Nazism. What will Russia do to counter these European "trends"?

Sergey Lavrov: It is a reflection of the deterioration of the values that were created after WWII and must be closely guarded in Western society. They argue that it is a generational change, and people no longer remember the horrors of the war. But this does not mean that the governments of Western or any other countries can shirk their responsibility never to forget, let alone allow the revival of the ideologemes that paved the way to the Second World War. We are concerned about the current developments in Germany.

Germany provided a strange explanation for its decision to act as a third party in South Africa's lawsuit initiated against Israel in the ICJ. It is really strange. It said that Germany was involved and even organised the Nazi genocide of Jews and would therefore protect those who stand accused of genocide. I don't see the logic here.

It is a matter of principle for us to ensure Israel's security in the context of a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East. But there are double and even triple standards. When Yair Lapid was Israel's prime minister, he said about our special military operation that the indiscriminate use of weapons and the suffering of civilians were unacceptable and constituted a war crime.

Several months later, the new Israeli government said in response to criticism of its indiscriminate use of heavy weaponry and the unprecedented number of civilian casualties, especially children, that it is "the tragedy of war." That is what they said. The number of civilian casualties in the two years since the start of the special military operation is smaller than in the three and a half months of the Israel-Hamas war. Yet it is a war crime in one case and the tragedy of war in the other case. So, which is it?

There are the laws of war which must be respected. There is international humanitarian law codified in conventions. The Russian army is conducting the special military operation in strict compliance with these rules and norms. We direct precision strikes at objects of the Ukrainian armed forces and related infrastructure and other targets. It is an established fact that Ukrainians deploy their armed forces in civilian facilities and their air defence systems in residential districts. They are doing this all the time. Well, this is their "method" of blackmailing civilians and turning them into human shields, which is absolutely prohibited by international humanitarian law. The laws of war must be respected.

I have already said that retired US generals and acting British politicians are instructing Ukrainians to hit Crimea as hard as possible. If you can't succeed on the battlefield, try to throw Russians off balance by wiping Crimea off the map and making life unbearable there.

American officials were periodically asked how they felt about the long-range weapons they supplied being used against civilian targets. John Sullivan and John Kirby, who represent the US National Security Council, said it was up to the Ukrainians to decide which targets to strike. That was a green light. So, Ukrainians are doing whatever they want. But of course, they are being guided by instructors, who are primarily Anglo-Saxons. We know that. When John Sullivan was asked about the operation in the Gaza Strip – if it did not make them too uneasy that their weapons were used in operations causing suffering to tens of thousands of people, killing thousands and wounding even more – they replied that they supplied weapons to Israel with a proviso that they must be used in accordance with the laws of war, which means not harming innocent civilians. In our case, no such reservations are made. Judging by official statements, Kiev has not been required to comply with international humanitarian law. This is a double standard.

Back to Germany and other countries where Nazism is starting to rear its head. You mentioned the fact that the inscription on a memorial in Dresden was erased. Even though it did not actually mention the victims who suffered from the Anglo-American bombardment of Dresden – the US or Britain were not mentioned at all – the Germans still thought it wise to avoid reminding their new bosses (Washington, and now London) even indirectly of the time when the Anglo-Saxons inhumanely destroyed the city.

Japan is showing a similar mentality. Another Axis power that fought against the Allies, Japan is not mentioning who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in history books. Moreover, the corresponding chapter in schoolbooks has a double title, “The Nuclear Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The USSR enters the war” – without a line break. This visually prods children to certain conclusions.

In the same vein, when the Japanese propose draft resolutions at the UN General Assembly condemning Hiroshima and Nagasaki and commemorating the victims, they never mention that the United States dropped the bombs. It sounds like some bombs were dropped by some unknown entity.

I remember President of Russia Vladimir Putin attended the unveiling of a monument in Jerusalem commemorating the survivors of the siege of Leningrad. French President Emmanuel Macron was also present. It was Holocaust Remembrance Day, marked on the day of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops. The Americans were represented by Vice President Mike Pence. It was a “terrific” performance, which is something they’re good at. With the pathos of their American language, he began his speech by saying that, for many months

and years, people were tortured, killed, and burned in furnaces in that terrible concentration camp, but on January 27, 1945, soldiers came and opened the gates. Just soldiers – not Soviet soldiers. But given it was an American saying this, many people who were not too sophisticated assumed he meant American soldiers, of course. This is not an isolated example. How can it be addressed? Only with the truth. By proactively explaining, reaching out to the people in a variety of formats. The Forum Against Modern Neo-Colonialist Practices will be held. I believe that the public could organise a similar forum to combat the revival of Nazism. We are ready to help with this.

This largely applies to what is happening with respect to Ukraine. Maxim Grigoriev and his associates are exposing the true nature of the Kiev regime. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron say they must support Ukraine “until victory” because Ukraine is fighting and dying for their European democratic values. Do you have no shame? Read Ukraine’s recent laws that ban the Russian language, education, and everything Russian, and those that encourage the ideology and practices of Nazism. Battalions with swastikas and SS division patches are marching through Ukraine. These are the European values now, if we are to believe the European politicians’ statements. We need to fight this through official diplomacy, through people’s and parliamentary diplomacy and, I very much hope, through the press.

Question: Let’s talk about the elections. You’ve been in the office for many, many years, you are very close to President Putin. Do you have a feeling that he is concerned that the special military operation in Ukraine could affect the outcome of the presidential elections?

In a few days we will be remembering, the world will commemorate the Holocaust, the Shoah, and the exact day when Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz, while many children and elderly are still held captive in Gaza just for being Jews. How is Russia contributing to their liberation? What is Russia’s relationship with Hamas, which many in the world consider a terrorist organisation?

Sergey Lavrov: You know, the special military operation has had an extremely positive effect on life in the country. It has consolidated society and has helped cleanse it of those who did not feel any association with things Russian, with Russia’s history and culture. Some of them have left the country, while others remained here and started thinking. But the overwhelming majority of our society has become consolidated like never before.

We had a brilliant satirist, Mikhail Zhvanetsky. Regrettably, he is no longer with us. Here is one of his brilliant sketches from the 1970s, a monologue about the Soviet people. Mikhail Zhvanetsky said that our people need a big war to become really consolidated. He seemed to say this jokingly, but there's a grain of truth in every joke.

The zeal with which the West has declared its hybrid war on us, the arrogance with which they rejected all our warnings and proposals on coordinating the foundations of security based on previously approved principles, without NATO enlargement – all of that was discarded! They implied that it was none of our business, that we must not interfere in relations between Ukraine and NATO.

Ex-president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Klaus has recently said that the war began in 2008 when NATO announced that Ukraine and Georgia would be admitted to the alliance. President Putin and I attended that summit in Bucharest. I remember that President Putin asked Angela Merkel and our French colleagues why they did it. They replied that they had been asked by the Americans and the British. The same parties are calling the tune in Europe now. It's a shame. It is said in "continental Europe," including France, that the EU would fight for "strategic autonomy." I can assure you that nobody will let you have it.

The people of Russia have become more consolidated than ever. Of course, we see the positive influence of what's happening with the special military operation, the heroism, dedication and selflessness of our troops on the frontline and their families, who are supporting them and our army, and who are working on the home front in the name of our victory.

Look how our industries, not only defence but also civilian ones, have improved despite the sanctions. There are very many factors related to the West's hybrid, all-round aggression against Russia that have helped us understand how we must live. The illusion, which lingered since the 1990s, that the West has opened its embrace for us, and that democracy will unite us, has disappeared. The West is not to be trusted. The only thing it still wants is to live off others and to be – or see itself as – smarter than everyone else. In short, the effect has been extremely positive.

As for your second question, I have already commented on the January 27 remembrance day. I have said that the West is trying to belittle or even erase from history the Red Army's role in the liberation of Europe and Jews and in the rescue of the Holocaust survivors.

As for the Gaza Strip, we immediately denounced the October 7, 2023

terrorist attack on Israel. We have no double standards with regard to terrorists. The West has. It is actively using ISIS cells in Syria for sabotage and attacks against the Syrian armed forces. When it was decided to topple President of Libya Muammar Gaddafi, the United States actively cooperated with and paid the same groups that later headed south to Central Africa, to the Sahara-Sahel region, and still terrorise the local population. They are well aware that Al-Qaeda came into being after the Americans invaded Afghanistan, ISIS – after Iraq, and Jabhat al-Nusra, now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – after the West declared war on Syria. It is common knowledge that the West cooperates with these groups.

The attack on civilians, on festival participants in Gaza, was unacceptable. Horrible footage. This was a cruel and vile assault. We denounced it right away, proceeding from the premise that Israel, as they say themselves, is the only Middle East democracy and will respond as (theoretically) befits a democracy. However, it is hard to conclude what means of warfare are acceptable for use by democracies, given the examples set by the US and UK.

I will say frankly that the statements made by the Israeli defence minister, commander-in-chief of the army, and a number of other ministers revealed a sentiment to the effect that the Palestinians were not humans but animals. Arseny Yatsenyuk [former Ukrainian Prime Minister after the 2014 coup] said approximately the same, claiming that only “subhumans” lived in Donbas. Vladimir Zelensky also called them “creatures,” not people, while all the other Yermaks, Kulebas, and Podolyaks declared that the “Russkies” should be exterminated physically. It’s a macabre analogy. I know that there are far-right extremists in the Israeli Government, who, however, do not express the view of the entire Netanyahu Government, let alone the Israeli people. But this claim was not rejected in the West, by all those “democracies.” Neither was the assertion that there are no civilians in Gaza, where everyone is an extremist from age three. This was also on record, and no one reacted.

When we said that violence should be stopped and a Palestinian state must be created, with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who condemned the October 7, 2023 terrorist attacks, adding that they did not take place “in a vacuum,” the Israeli Ambassador to the UN retorted that the United Nations and the Secretary-General were accomplices of the terrorists and that he should be fired.

In fact, young people and children in Gaza are born in a situation where a Palestinian state promised by the UN General Assembly more than 70 years ago has not been created and the chances for its creation are increasingly shaky and

slim. This policy is encouraged by the United States which has monopolised all Middle East initiatives. And now US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated in Davos that his country would remain in charge, claiming that this is what the entire region allegedly wants.

I remember having numerous candid, human discussions with Israeli foreign ministers, including Avril Liberman and Tzipi Livni, on the Palestinian state. I told them that in our estimate, the lack of progress on creating a Palestinian state was the sole, most significant factor feeding extremism on the "Arab street." They were skeptical, saying that I was "simplifying things," that the reality went deeper, and that Islamic fundamentalism was the real cause. But experience proves the opposite. The longer there is a stalemate on creating a Palestinian state, the more difficult it will be to ensure security of Israel and Arab countries. This is exactly what we are observing today. US President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Blinken and the Europeans are now talking about the need to start making movement towards creating a Palestinian state. They understand that it is hard to calm the waters unless they do something of this sort. But "starting to make movement" is already insufficient. We should brace up and actually start creating it. It is necessary to compel the Palestinians and the Israelis to come to the negotiating table.

The Israelis have no right to believe that they have a free hand now just because they suffered so much during WWII. Yes, the Holocaust is a horrible crime. But there was also the genocide of all the people of the Soviet Union, who suffered a great deal too. They were killed in various concentration camps, and in Leningrad, alongside Jews. According to this logic, we have a free hand now as well. This won't do, if we want to preserve international law.

Back to Ukraine, I have mentioned its horrible Russophobic, racist and neo-Nazi laws, which go against all European values. Europe has not commented on them. It is only saying that Ukraine is protecting "European values" in its war against Russia. Europeans have commented on the law on national minorities but only with the purpose of lifting all restrictions on EU languages and leaving discrimination against the Russian language alone. I have talked with those of my colleagues whose national languages are used in Ukraine and who did their best to lift the restrictions of the law on national minorities from them. They told me that they would join hands with us, but they have not done anything. They don't care about the Russian language. Maybe they even want the Russian language to be discriminated against, so that the area of its use can be gradually narrowed. This is what Europeans are like.

Why is this happening? Because Kiev has a free hand. This total license is

evident in everything it is doing. There are things which the Americans don't like. They try to reproach Kiev behind closed doors, but overall, Kiev's license is absolute. I have mentioned the proposal to start talks on Ukraine's accession to the EU. Serbia has been waiting for several decades, and Türkiye has been standing in line for about 40 years. But this one in Kiev has been allowed to cut the line because he is a real Nazi. Nobody will say so openly, but if you look at the essence you will see that this is exactly how it is. He is even allowed to imprison Americans and torture them to death, and nobody will utter a word. Maria Zakharova has commented on this many times. He can do anything.

Look how animated they become when their citizens are arrested, but this time they haven't uttered a word or lifted a finger. Draw your own conclusions. Total license is a path to disaster. It has already happened in the minds of the current Ukrainian leaders, and they are leading the country along the same path.

Maria Zakharova: Speaking about the Italian media's focus on the fight against neo-Nazism, I believe that they will report on the neo-Nazi displays in the centre of Rome soon. I haven't seen any such reports in the Italian media yet, but I hope to see them.

Question: During the Cold War, Soviet diplomacy had to tackle many challenging issues. We can say that we are now witnessing its second iteration. NATO is holding large-scale exercises, including on the border with Belarus, and views its manoeuvring as a key element in demonstrating to Moscow its readiness for war.

How will Russia and Belarus contain NATO aggression? What will the Russian and Belarusian diplomats do? Are there any effective ways for alleviating this conflict by diplomatic means?

Sergey Lavrov: God forbid. But if a suicidal logic prevails in the West, I can assure you that the people of Russia and Belarus will stand shoulder to shoulder to assert their independence and interests. There is no doubt about that, and we have all the means at our disposal for doing that.

As for diplomacy, I have already commented on the situation with Russia-US relations when I talked about the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. I do not see any opening for diplomacy here. We respond whenever they come to us. However, depending on what they have to offer, we decide whether it suits our interests.

Let me share an example from a major European, non-English speaking country with you. Our ambassador was summoned to the foreign ministry there to be told that our relations with that country were at an all-time low and could hardly be expected to improve. In the meantime, Russia has strengthened its

positions in Africa, including the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, while their standing there was eroding. They basically offered to get together and discuss ways for us to do something together on this matter. I am not kidding you. This is the height of cynicism. Their message was that you are still our enemy and we will keep lambasting you in the public space in every possible way, while you help us improve our standing in Africa in one way or another. We will never engage in talks on these terms.

The same goes for the Americans. I have already mentioned their proposal to discuss ways for them to hold mutual inspections with us under the New START, arguing that the situation is even worse on all other matters and can hardly get any worse. So how about this, they said: we will keep criticising each other and giving each other a hard time. Still, they wanted to come to terms on inspecting Russian nuclear facilities. What do the Americans expect? I have always believed that diplomatic agencies employ competent smart people, but this is not always the case.

Since I expected to get a question along these lines, I brought along the guidelines we received from our fellow diplomats from European Union countries. They offer instructions on dealing with Russian diplomats. Every capital where the European Union has a mission and where there is a Russian embassy received this guide. And diplomats are expected to strictly abide by its provisions. It says that European diplomats must avoid any bilateral contacts with Russian representatives and refrain from attending any events organised by Russia. This provision also applies to receptions held on the occasion of November 4, February 10 (Diplomatic Worker Day), February 23, May 9 – which is noteworthy in the context of fighting Nazism, since they do not allow their diplomats to celebrate victory in World War II, as well as June 12, which is Russia Day. EU diplomats shall not invite Russian diplomats to attend any events or receptions held by the EU's governing bodies or missions, or the EU foreign ministries. European diplomats may attend events held by third countries in the presence of Russians – thank God – and are generously allowed to pose for group photos for the organiser. At the same time, they are expected to refrain from having any direct contact with Russia's representatives. The guide advises EU diplomats to inform the host about the need to avoid any instances with the European and Russian delegations appearing side by side in group photos or during official gatherings. This is to answer your question on what we think about the prospects for talks. We cannot even take a photo together. Indeed, they have been paying a lot of attention to photos by trying to present the Ukraine meeting in Davos as a success story by arguing that there were more people on

the group photo compared to the previous meeting. This is the only criteria the Western diplomats use for assessing their efforts.

Question: How do European sanctions affect the Eurasian Economic Union's development?

Russia and Belarus signed the Union State Treaty. Last year, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev asked whether Kazakhstan could join it and what this required. President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko did not have any objections in this regard. Are there any ideas about expanding the Union State beyond Russia and Belarus to include other countries of the former Soviet Union?

Sergey Lavrov: Let me start with the measures we take within the Eurasian Economic Union in today's environment. It would not make much sense for me to offer you a detailed account of what we have been hearing at the meetings chaired by President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. We are doing everything to be self-reliant in the sectors which matter the most to our state, which include security, economics and social affairs, without depending on those who demonstrated their total inability to make and honour deals and proved to be unreliable partners – those who can betray you on the economic front just as they do in politics or in everyday life.

As for the Union State of Russia and Belarus, it serves as the Eurasian Economic Union's major driver, setting the pace in many sectors involving the Eurasian Economic Union.

I have not heard anything about Kazakhstan expressing its interest in joining the Union State.

Question: What is your opinion regarding Argentina's refusal to join BRICS?

What is to be done to boost our relations with Latin America this year, apart from the fact that you visited Latin America in 2023? What efforts are being made to strengthen relations with other countries in the region, besides Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua? You have already mentioned parliamentary conferences. Is there any other format to boost our relations with Latin America?

Sergey Lavrov: As regards Argentina's statement, this is a sovereign decision by a country invited to join BRICS. The invitation was made under the previous government and the president. Upon receiving it, then-president Alberto Fernandez said the final decision would be made by the next president following the elections, and everyone was aware of this. They made the decision. This is not a refusal to join but an explanation as to why they are not ready to do so now. This is how we see it. I believe as President Javier Milei

'gets comfortable' and gets into the swing of things, they will be able to finally arrive at a more informed position.

BRICS is becoming increasingly popular. The association has received some 30 applications to establish some sort of relationship with it. At this stage, we will focus on ensuring the smoothest possible conditions for new members to engage in the joint work so we can all make progress together.

We have generally positive relations with most Latin American states. We are building these connections regardless of left or right governments. We are ready to work with everyone willing to benefit from cooperating on a mutual basis of balanced interests – and those are the vast majority.

Last year, along with the countries you have mentioned, I also visited Brazil, and I will make a visit to this country again. The G20 foreign ministers' meeting will take place there in late February. In connection with this trip, we are also planning to tour a number of other Latin American countries.

Russia has established contacts with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States as well. Traditionally, annual ministerial meetings were held between the Russian foreign minister and foreign ministers of the three (or four) leading countries of CELAC, a schedule that was hindered by the pandemic. We are making efforts to restore this tradition.

I fully agree with you on the Latin America - Russia format fully deserving to develop not solely on the parliamentary front, but embrace executive authorities as well. We are working to this end.

Question: Do you think a change will occur in Washington's policy towards Russia following the US presidential election?

Sergey Lavrov: This question should rather be addressed to those to be elected by the American people provided the election is going to be fair.

Question: This year our newspaper marks its 120th anniversary. You mark 20 years in office of the foreign minister. I have a question about Serbia. What will become of Kosovo, including in a political sense? What does the future hold for the Western Balkans?

A month and a half ago you were in Skopje where US Secretary of State Blinken and other Western foreign ministers acted disrespectfully toward you. You were ready to talk about peace and ways to stave off escalation. What is your role now? Are you ready to talk? I hear you communicated with them.

Our newspaper, Belgrade, has a suggestion that may help you talk with these people and bring about peace. We suggest that you and US Secretary of

State Blinken come to Belgrade and start talking.

Sergey Lavrov: About Kosovo. Whenever President Putin or I meet with the Serbian leadership, we make it clear that we support and will support the position adopted by the Serbian people and leadership. We see the way Serbs are being mistreated.

Speaking about the Kosovo issue, an agreement was reached between Pristina and Belgrade in 2013 on establishing the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo with EU mediation. It spelled out everything, including their rights, the way they run their affairs, exercise law enforcement functions, their language, education, schools, and churches. More than 10 years have passed since then and nothing has changed. The implementation of this agreement, which the EU portrayed as its greatest diplomatic achievement, has been at an impasse for a long time now. The EU can do nothing. The only thing they have managed to accomplish is to rewrite the agreement on the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo to please “Prime Minister” Albin Kurti and Pristina. They are rewriting it to make sure that the Serbs have no rights whatsoever in northern Kosovo. They want to give them token rights, while the Albanians have the real power. The EU should be ashamed of itself, because they were on top of the world in 2013 when they claimed that the issue of Kosovo had been solved. Nothing even close to that was achieved.

Now, just like with any other issue, when it comes to implementing agreements, they dial things back in favour of the side that they find closer to their interests at a given moment. The Kosovo Albanians are closer to them, because they have sworn allegiance to them and want to join NATO. They are willing to join everything there is, and they will faithfully follow EU instructions. The only problem is that the Albanian issue in the Balkans may flare up as a result.

I am not sure to this day where the term “Western Balkans” comes from. Why western? There is no such thing as Eastern Balkans.

The Albanian factor is a serious matter. You mentioned Macedonia. To this day, the speaker of the Macedonian parliament sits at a desk with an Albanian flag on top of it. The Macedonian flag is somewhere there as well, but the Albanian one is right next to it. But that is a separate issue.

With regard to Skopje and the OSCE ministerial meeting, I am not sure they ignored me like you said. I think they just fled. They left before I arrived.

I don't see any issues with regard to communication. A year and a half ago, at the G20 meeting in Indonesia, I represented President Putin at his behest. Halfway into the meeting, US Secretary of State Blinken, through his assistant,

suggested that we have a talk outside. I agreed and went out to join him. He and I stood out there for about ten minutes. I listened to what he had to say, and then gave him my answer. I heard nothing new but same old exhortations to the effect that it's time to put an end to it in Ukraine. Nothing new there.

The problem is that each time they initiate a meeting our Western colleagues don't say anything during diplomatic contacts that would be different from what they say publicly.

With regard to using your venue for a meeting, frankly, I don't see the point of having one. It won't be engaging and will include nothing but slogans. I can picture it knowing what Mr Blinken usually talks about. A serious conversation should not take place in public. They are absolutely unprepared to have one either politically, or in terms of substance.

Question: Fyodor Dostoevsky famously said that "being only then begins to be when it is threatened with non-being." During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis when the Americans targeted our B-59 submarine with deep-water bombs, its commander thought that war had broken out and made preparations to shoot a nuclear torpedo at a group of US naval vessels. He didn't go through with his decision by pure chance.

In this regard, doesn't the fact that the West turned down our security proposal of December 15, 2021 mean that we are headed for a Cuban Missile Crisis 2.0?

Sergey Lavrov: This issue has been widely explored recently in various talk shows and political science debates. It is one of the most intense topics of discussion. Our leading international analysts are speaking out on this subject and writing treatises on what we should do in order to avert a slide into a nuclear war. For this to happen, the other side needs to regain an elementary sense of fear, because they supposedly do not feel any now.

I see several players here. If all Western decision-makers could speak for themselves, the situation would be different. However, they are all trained by the Americans and (to a very large extent) the British to obey.

I gave examples when London literally goaded Zelensky to bomb any targets in any part of Russia. Just the other day former commanders of the US European Command Ben Hodges and Philip Breedlove said that everything that makes life possible in Crimea should be destroyed to make sure Russian Navy has no place there. It would be interesting to get inside these people's heads to see whether they are making provocative statements or just want to see us falter? No one is telling them to stop.

Everyone keeps saying that Vladimir Putin is threatening the world with

the nuclear bomb, even though he never said that, as opposed to the Europeans and Americans. The Germans said on several occasions that Vladimir Putin should be aware of the fact that they, NATO, have nuclear weapons as well. The former British Prime Minister once said she wouldn't hesitate to press the nuclear button. No one should fear us. Many people are aware of that. Winston Churchill coined a maxim about the Russian bear and how to behave around it.



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