

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy's media outlet

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Question: Good afternoon Mr Lavrov. I have several questions for you, primarily on the Asian direction of Russia's foreign policy. Can you evaluate it? What else can be done to make it a priority direction? It sometimes seems that despite Asia's importance, the Western aspects of our foreign policy are considered with more attention and passion.

Sergey Lavrov: Passion is an attribute that is not applicable in diplomacy. Diplomacy is inherently based on calculations, on carefully calculated moves that allow you to act more efficiently in upholding national interests.

As for the Asian vector, it is definitely part of our foreign policy, and we have no need for passion when dealing with it. Russia is a Eurasian power with the bulk of its territory located in Asia. Moreover, our Asian territory is not as developed as the European part. There are historical reasons for this. This did not happen because we underestimated Asia, but because our economic, technological and innovation efforts were focused on Europe and the United States at a time when we were creating the new structural pillars for our economy. Asia has become a driver of global economic growth and a source of technology, innovation and knowledge-based economy only recently. The Asia Pacific countries, including the United States, account for 60 per cent of global GDP. These countries also account for half of global trade. The centre of global development is shifting for objective reasons. It is impossible to imagine that any one region or any one part of the world can generate all the economic and technological processes in the world.

Dialectically, the world is becoming multipolar. You can see this in the rise of new centres of economic growth and financial strength, which also bring political influence. This is fully in line with our philosophy, according to which we must take this objective trend into account in our work. Now that new economic opportunities have appeared in the East, which coincided with the adoption of fundamental government decisions on the accelerated development of East Siberia and the Russian Far East, we must use the opportunities available in Asia as effectively as we can. Also, the objective economic aspect, which I mentioned in connection with the eastward shift of the global economic growth centre, has been complemented by a political factor: Europe is curtailing relations with Russia, at US prompting. Many European countries are doing this with their eyes wide open, saying that in this case politics ("punishing" Russia) must take precedence over the economy. This is contrary to what the West did before.

There are many organisations in the East where Russia is a member and where it has not encountered any discrimination. These are the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

forum and its annual summit meetings, the East Asia Summit (EAS), which is a relatively young but influential organisation that has been working to coordinate economic, geopolitical and military-political issues in the region. There are many ASEAN-oriented organisations that have the format of dialogue partnership, where Russia is one of the partners alongside the United States, China, India and the European Union. ASEAN annually holds regional security forums. There is the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was created at the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan, and several other organisations, such as Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). There are many such organisations, which we consider very useful. However, we need to streamline or rearrange them. Europe has the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Latin America has Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and Africa has the African Union (AU). But the Asian nations don't have such an umbrella organisation, and maybe we should not try to create it artificially.

I believe that history itself will take us to a point where we will harmonise these processes. I hope we will do this because we will become aware of the need for openness in a world that is being rocked by two opposing trends: openness and revival of bloc psychology when closed military-political blocs are created.

There are a number of three-member organisations in Asia comprised of the United States and its allies. The United States is now working on the Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership, a closed organisation of initial member countries, which other countries will be able to join only after the privileged founding countries set the rules. It is a fact that those who advance initiatives are often guided by the logic of inequality.

For our part, we advocate openness. Some six years ago, we proposed launching a dialogue without any conditions within the East Asia Summit forum in order to develop non-bloc approaches based on inclusiveness, equal security and equal economic opportunities. It is significant that all EAS participants, including our American partners, supported this initiative. We have held five rounds of this dialogue, including in Indonesia, Brunei, Cambodia and China. This process is taking time, of course, but hurrying to formalise things is not appropriate in Asia. We must respect traditions, including within ASEAN.

The combination of these factors, the development of Russia's eastern regions, the economic growth in Asia and Asia Pacific, and Europe's political bias have created the current situation, which gives us an opportunity to narrow the development gap between different parts of Russia.

Question: You have said that Asia has become a driver of global development and a new global economic centre. What does Eurasia mean to us? What are its prospects?

Sergey Lavrov: I remember from my school years that Eurasia is a continent that includes Europe, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and many other countries. In addition to its geographical name, Eurasia has acquired a new meaning in terms of integration processes.

We have created the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It was a result of many years of hard work to preserve the newly independent states' positive economic heritage of the Soviet Union, including independence, certain relative advantages, the division of labour and many other elements. We also have the Customs Union (CU). The EAEU has become an attractive organisation. It has five member states and many of our neighbours are seriously consider joining it. In addition to the current and potential members, other countries are interested in coordinating free trade areas with the EAEU. We have signed the first free trade agreement with Vietnam. Several other ASEAN economies, including Singapore, are interested in signing such agreements. During the ASEAN-Russia Summit in Sochi in May this year, the participants discussed the idea of launching consultations on a free trade area between Russia and ASEAN as a whole. A score of other countries, including in Latin America and Asia, are interested is holding talks on trade liberalisation with the EAEU. We have signed memorandums on such consultations with 12 of them and are preparing such memorandums with another five countries.

We understand that the EAEU is a huge market (180 million people) and a powerful economic bloc rich in natural resources, a very interesting and attractive labour market and educated workforce. The EAEU is important for all of us. But we also understand that it would be wrong to try to develop in isolation from all the other countries of Eurasia. This is why the founding countries of the EAEU kept in mind the need to remain open to cooperation with other structures, considering that the EAEU countries are also members of other organisations in the region.

A relevant example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). As you know, China has complemented plans for Eurasian economic integration with the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative aimed at developing not just economic and investment ties but above all transport and logistic infrastructure. This directly concerns our interests and the interests of other EAEU and SCO countries. The logic of these initiatives is directly opposite to the policy of competition, even though competition is unavoidable. Regarding these projects – the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Silk Road Economic Belt – from the viewpoint of confrontation and an opportunity to attain unilateral gains would not benefit us. Our logic and the policy outlined by President Vladimir Putin are focused on looking for mutually beneficial compromises and mutually acceptable approaches.

President Putin has put forth the Greater Eurasia concept, which can be implemented through dialogue between all interested parties. The EAEU and China are already discussing the possibility of signing an economic cooperation agreement. The presidents of Russia and China have initiated a process of aligning Eurasian economic integration with China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Moreover, we consider it important to say already at this stage, when it is unclear what forms this process could take, that we are willing to increase the number of participants in these consultations and talks. President Putin has suggested that we consider ways to develop a comprehensive trade, investment, transport and logistic partnership between the EAEU, SCO (including potential members such as India, Pakistan and Iran) and ASEAN nations.

Getting back to your question, Eurasia includes not only Asia but also Europe. Shared destiny, geology and geography have put them on the same plane in the modern world. Although our relationship with the EU is not very good now, we are not going to hold a grudge. We believe that it is best to act based on long-term interests and disregard current scandals. There is no doubt that strategically-wise the EU and other European countries and the states located in the Asian part of the huge Eurasian continent should build more bridges and work harder to develop cooperation. Russia is conveniently located geopolitically and geo-economically to facilitate these processes. The Greater Eurasia project does not contradict but rather fits very well the concept of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, which Charles de Gaulle advanced decades ago. President Putin has rephrased it as “common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.” This remains a topical issue. It is absurd when the political situation in the West, including domestic policies, is allowed to hinder our progress towards this strategic and mutually beneficial objective. I hope that the Western leaders will eventually see that, although election campaigns every four or five years may be important, trying to bolster one’s popularity by spurring Russophobia is a dead-end path.

Question: Is developing a personal relationship with your partners important for you? Do you think it is better to address many issues informally, in an atmosphere of mutual trust? If so, what kind of partner is US Secretary of State John Kerry as an individual?

Sergey Lavrov: I believe that diplomacy is the oldest profession in the world, no matter what people may say about other professions. Diplomacy by definition concerns relations between people. Even in the primitive communal system people had to coordinate their actions, to decide who would hunt the mammoth, who would light the fire in the cave and who would protect the women. This is true. Diplomacy is not very different from ordinary relations between friends or people who dislike each other. Sometimes people have to communicate and settle problems with those who they see as their adversaries. This is also true about relations between countries. Everything depends on whether you are ready to listen to others. You do not have to agree with them, but after you have heard what they had to say you can plan your actions to achieve your own goals more effectively. This is the simplest description of my profession. Of course, when you talk with someone who you hear and who listens to you, especially when it happens without cameras flashing or, better still, without journalists and without a large group of people looking at you, it is much simpler to understand each other and to find pragmatic solutions based on a balance of interests. And formulating these solutions for an easy presentation to the public depends on your diplomatic skills.

Of course, we also have traditions. When state leaders and foreign ministers meet, they will sit at a big table with state flags, with ministers or advisers sitting next to the head of state, and department heads sitting next to foreign ministers. This system is important because it keeps official protocols, so that no one forgets what they talked about later. However, real agreements are in most cases reached after these meetings, when delegation leaders and one or two of their aides put their heads together to discuss the issues without looking over their

shoulders at journalists or thinking about how their words can be interpreted and what speculation this could lead to.

I believe that the public dimension is a basic part of diplomacy, but a combination of the public dimension and confidentiality produces the best results. This fully concerns my relations with Mr John Kerry, whom I have known for a long time, since back when he was a Senator and didn't think he would be appointed Secretary of State. He was fighting for the presidency then, not the position of the State Department chief. We met in various situations, including very informal ones. Sometimes political leaders, diplomats and members of parliament quietly meet on a lake or somewhere else for a day or two, eating shashliks, talking and getting to know each other better. Honestly, I never had any problems understanding Mr Kerry. We don't always agree, but we respect the position the other party has to uphold. By the way, this helps us come to terms. It is not surprising that I have talked with the US Secretary of State about 40 times since January this year, according to my aides. It is an unprecedented number; I don't remember any other case like this. Not that we wanted to break a record, but it is a fact that no other foreign ministers, and not just Russian and US ministers, have talked so often with each other before. Mr Kerry has visited Russia twice this year and four times since May 2015. And every time we manage to make some progress on the issues under discussion. In short, personal ties are very important. Mr Kerry is not the only colleague with whom I have this kind of relationship. No slight intended, but I have similar relations with many people, including the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Hungary and many other countries. Of course, we have very close relations with our colleagues from Egypt and many Gulf countries. Personal ties help us better understand the serious contradictions that may exist between us, for example on Syria.

Question: There has been a lot of discussion recently about whether this is another cold war or a cold peace. The rhetoric we hear is at times over the top. If this is another cold war, the agreements, whatever they may be, can be disregarded. And if this is a cold peace, the agreements may have a better chance. Or am I wrong? How would you describe the current relationship?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, this is not a cold war; this is something different. On the one hand, the situation is more complicated than during a cold war, but on the other hand, it is more understandable. It is more complicated because the world is no longer bipolar and there is no "discipline of the rod." Attempts are being made to maintain discipline, but this is very difficult to do. More countries are coming to see that despite the importance of globalisation and universal values, blocs and solidarity within the organisations that were created during the Cold War, there is also such a thing as national interests.

The current developments in the EU are a case in point. I say this without any hint of gloating, because these developments were provoked by the fact that the principles of solidarity and mutual responsibility have taken the form of bureaucracy, which is not just exercising the functions that were delegated to it by the member states, but is also pulling at the blanket that has been keeping these member states warm and cosy. Bureaucracy in the Soviet Union

dominated the union republics. But the EU has gone further than that, further even than NATO, where discussions are more democratic, despite a Russophobic minority that is shamelessly speculating on the principle of consensus and bloc solidarity. The EU bureaucracy is trying to prohibit the member states from taking independent decisions on issues that have not been delegated to Brussels. There are many examples. I hope they will see that they have gone too far and retrace their steps, because we don't want to see the EU torn apart by contradictions. We want it to be a reliable partner, guided in its actions by the economic interests of its member states and not by some geopolitical considerations that have nothing to do with common sense and the economy.

Our EU colleagues have said that they are willing to resume the energy dialogue, as if it is Russia alone who needs this. They have graciously given consent to discuss the Nord Stream-2 and other possible routes on the condition that we maintain our transit routes via Ukraine. Why? Let us discuss which solution is more profitable and more reliable economically, considering our past experience with this transit route and many other developments.

As for the current period in our relations, it should be said that we have been given many empty promises, starting with the verbal promise not to expand NATO and not to move its infrastructure eastward, all the way to a promise not to deploy military infrastructure in the former East Germany. Unfortunately, we did not insist on formalising these oral promises in a political or legal document. We accepted these promises at face value. In our euphoria, we believed that our ideological differences had been laid to rest. Far from it. There will always be national interests, and they do not necessarily coincide. It is another matter that we cannot recognise the interests that NATO is upholding at the US prompting as legitimate from the viewpoint of every country's national interests, because we see clear attempts to demonise Russia. We can be criticised for some things, just as any other country. We used to have dialogue mechanisms with the United States and the EU, which we used to air our concerns over developments in the United States, Russia or Europe. Although imperfect, these mechanisms allowed us to maintain an equitable dialogue and to discuss, if not settle, many issues in a normal, decent way.

These dialogues, just like many other forums, were suspended. With varying degrees of passion, NATO countries – at least many of them – pass judgment on Russia and its government. I believe they do so primarily to keep the North Atlantic Alliance alive. They attempted to prove their worth in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, after NATO was done with its “work” there, the situation in that country worsened many times over – the drug threat has multiplied and the terrorist threat has remained intact with ISIS emerging to join the Taliban as another terrorist group. Afghanistan was used as a stage for collective efforts. This does not work any longer, because no one can be lured to Afghanistan now. A limited NATO mission, mostly American troops, will stay there. They need a new pretext to save the alliance.

Furthermore, to strengthen the role and influence of the United States with regard to the European countries, they have come up with a threat allegedly coming from Russia, taking advantage of the coup in Ukraine, which received the immediate and staunch support of the

West, in spite of all their principles. The double standards are there for everyone to see. None of our Western partners ever considered saying about Ukraine what they are now saying about the attempted coup in Turkey, that is that coups are unacceptable. And that is despite the fact that there were no commitments with regard to Turkey, such as those signed by France, Germany and Poland on February 20, 2014, whereby these countries agreed to support the agreement between Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition. The next morning it was a shambles. They washed their hands saying something to the effect of “that’s just how it worked out, sorry.” When we tried to shame them, saying that the deal was guaranteed by them, they retreated into the shadow, hid in the bushes, and showed some signs of embarrassment. The Americans asked us to support this agreement. When we did so, and the agreement was trampled on the next morning, they bashfully went silent, too. What I’m saying is that there were obligations undertaken by the EU. There were signatures in place. This is nothing short of double dealing. The fact that the things have taken such a turn clearly shows that the West had a stake in this coup. They say they were not involved in it, and that the people simply revolted, but we know that this is not quite true. The Western countries were involved in that coup, and then allowed those who came to power after the coup on February 21 to use the army against Donbass and other regions in eastern Ukraine, which did not support that illegitimate coup. This is a blunt fact. We have documents which show that even during the crisis NATO demanded that Viktor Yanukovich refrain from using the army against the people. However, shortly after the coup, when the so-called anti-terrorist operation was announced, they called on the new Ukrainian authorities to use force proportionately as they restore constitutional order. I don’t need to tell you what this kind of conduct is called.

Currently, the United States strives to maintain discipline and its influence in Europe. It was seriously concerned by Germany and France initiating a discussion, several years ago, about the need for the EU to have its own military organisation so that the European Union can be more involved in providing its own security. After the events in Ukraine were quite shamelessly used to build up their military presence in Europe, the Americans quadrupled (to a total of almost \$4 billion) spending on these purposes, especially in Eastern Europe. The second consideration, perhaps, is that upgrading weapons and helping the military-industrial complex make some money wouldn’t be such a bad idea, either. I am not even sure what you call such a condition. After Saakashvili’s reckless act in August 2008, when we urged to convene the Russia-NATO Council to review the situation, then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice categorically refused to do so, and, at her insistence, the council’s activities were suspended. Later, this step was recognised as a mistake. Our NATO colleagues said that the council should remain operative “rain or shine,” especially during a “storm.” A “storm” broke out in Ukraine, and they responded by shutting down the Russia-NATO Council. Now, they are trying to get it back on track.

In June, a meeting was held where our military, alongside our representative in NATO, made a number of proposals designed to build confidence. First, we supported Finnish President Niyniste’s initiative to develop a security mechanism for Russian and NATO military aircraft. Second, we presented a number of joint activities, including an analysis of the military situation in Europe, not just in terms of avoiding incidents, but also reviewing the current

situation and determining ways to ensure the interests of each state. We invited our NATO colleagues to attend military exercises in the Caucasus, the international Army-2016 forum, and the Army Games. We heard nothing from NATO. One would think that the Russia-NATO Council was convened only to discuss Ukraine for the umpteenth time. This means that the alliance has become a kind of ideology-driven organisation, whose members are trying to prove their worth to each other and seek out anti-Russian arguments. Far from everyone is involved in this. There are people in NATO who realise that this leads nowhere, and that it is necessary to return to normal, respectful relations, because acting like your logic and approach alone must be adopted by the rest of the world is a case of colonial thinking. Unfortunately, certain politicians do this, especially in countries which cannot come to grips with the fact that their empire is gone. It's important to practice humility and be objective when it comes to assessing your role in the modern world.

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