

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's explanations of world affairs

Introduction by Amarynth for the Saker Blog, 31 May 2022

This posting contains one recent interview and one recent address by Mr Lavrov. One is extensive and the second contains a few comments not included in the first. One is directed to an international audience (more specifically the Arab world) and the other to a domestic audience. Why should we look at these very carefully, and why do we post them on the Saker Blog? Mr Lavrov is arguably one of the best diplomats in the world today. In that role, he is a pleasure to read or listen to. But, that is not the main reason. He has a fine facility with language and explains exactly Russia's position and further, the world position in its process toward multipolarity and a new financial system in a pragmatic realpolitik style, undergirded by an encyclopedic knowledge of world affairs.

Sidebar: While Mr Lavrov is speaking to the Arab countries, his counterpart in China, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, is speaking to all of the smaller Pacific island countries (PICS). Comparing the welcome that these statesmen receive, it is beginning to clarify that the *other* geopolitical axis (which we roughly and in shorthand refer to as Zone B) of this war for the world is active and up and running. Mr Lavrov mentions the organizations. It is then worthwhile to mention that BRICS is expected to grow by at least two countries during the next general meeting. It is expected that Argentina will be next, which will then start including the new Latin American groupings such as Celac (The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) or ALBA-TCP. Thus we see a coalescence of countries around the principles of international law, the true principles in the UN Charter, and a world community built on cooperation and collective values, instead of one ruler of the world.

First up is an interview with RT Arabic, clearly for an international audience.

Second up is remarks to the Heads of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation, clearly a domestic audience.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with RT Arabic, Moscow, May 26, 2022

Question: Your recent visit to Algeria and Oman generated a lot of interest. What can you say about its results? Why did you decide to visit these states?

Sergey Lavrov: We communicate with all interested countries. As for this tour, it was planned long ago. The programme of my visits and their timeframe were coordinated some time ago.

In Algeria, I had good, lengthy talks with President of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra. We emphasised that for many years our relations were based on the Declaration on Strategic Partnership that was signed by our presidents in 2001. Since then we have intensively developed our strategic ties as partners in many areas. It is enough to mention our regular political dialogue, trade (it went up by several percent in 2021 to exceed \$3 billion despite the pandemic), the economy, joint investment, our work in the OPEC+ and the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, extensive military-technical ties and cultural and humanitarian exchanges.

We concluded (at the prompting of Algeria) that our relations are reaching a qualitatively new level. This should be reflected in a document that is already being drafted. We hope to

sign this document when President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune visits Russia at the invitation of President of Russia Vladimir Putin.

We appreciate that the countries of the Arab world are refusing to follow in the wake of the West and are objectively assessing the events in Ukraine and refusing to join the anti-Russia sanctions. They understand that the current situation was caused by the flat refusal of our Western colleagues to reach an accommodation on equal and indivisible security in our common region.

As for Oman, this was the first visit since its new Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said acceded to the throne. The Sultan received me with good grace and devoted much time to me. I was particularly grateful to his Majesty for this gesture (the protocol of the Sultanate of Oman does not envisage communication with ministers in this format). Our detailed talks showed that we have a good potential for developing trade and economic ties. We want to raise them to the level of our trust-based political dialogue. We have many opportunities in energy and ICT and interesting cultural projects. A half-year exhibition of Islamic Art in Russia ended in the National Museum of Oman last March. This museum and the Hermitage have been closely cooperating since 2015. Both museums display their own expositions on each other's territory.

These two planned visits to both countries at the planned time were useful, in my view.

Question: What about a top-level visit?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already said that during a telephone conversation with President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune, President of Russia Vladimir Putin invited him to visit the Russian Federation. Now we are preparing the documents required for this visit.

Question: And what about Oman?

Sergey Lavrov: No top-level visits are envisaged for Oman for the time being. We are planning to develop practical cooperation, make it more intensive and productive.

Question: Will there be additional agreements on military cooperation?

Sergey Lavrov: Our military-technical cooperation with many countries develops according to their wishes. We are always ready to examine ways to strengthen their defence capabilities. We consider them as we receive relevant requests.

Question: We are talking about Algeria, which also produces both gas and oil. The OPEC+ countries have shown firmness about the previously agreed positions within the organisation on the parameters of oil production and pricing on the oil market. Do you have confidence in the stability of your partners' position?

Sergey Lavrov: We have discussed our further cooperation not only within OPEC+ but also the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), where Russia and Algeria are also included. All OPEC+ and GECF members without exception publicly affirmed their commitment to the agreements reached in these formats and their intention to continue working in this direction in order to stabilise the energy market.

Question: Where will you visit next?

Sergey Lavrov: The next visit will take place very soon. On May 31 and June 1, based on my invitations, I plan to visit Bahrain first. Later, on June 1, Riyadh will host a regular meeting of the Russia-GCC Foreign Ministers Forum. This forum has been around for a long time. Due to the pandemic, there was a break in our meetings. Now our friends have

proposed resuming them. In addition to the Russia-GCC meeting, there will also be bilateral meetings with almost all members of this organisation.

Question: How do you find Arab countries' position on the Ukrainian crisis?

Sergey Lavrov: Just now, answering the previous question, I said that all Arab countries have a responsible position. This proves that they rely solely on their national interests and are not ready to sacrifice them for the sake of anyone's opportunistic geopolitical adventures. We have mutually respectful relations. We understand the vital interests of the Arab countries in connection with the threats to their security. They reciprocate our feelings and understand the threats to the security of the Russian Federation that the West has been creating right on our borders for decades, trying to use Ukraine to contain Russia and seriously harm us.

Question: Do you think these countries will continue to pursue this policy, despite the pressure from the West, particularly, from the Anglo-Saxon alliance?

Sergey Lavrov: The arrogance of the Anglo-Saxon alliance has no limits. We are offered evidence of that every day. Instead of delivering on their obligations under the UN Charter and honouring, as is written in this charter, the sovereign equality of states and abstaining from interfering in their domestic affairs, the West churns out ultimatums every day, issuing them through their ambassadors or envoys to each, without exception, capital not only in the Arab world but in other regions of the world as well, and, in so doing, blatantly blackmailing them, citing some subjective situations. The West is directly threatening their interlocutors, saying they will regret failing to join the sanctions against Russia and will be punished for this. It is blatant disrespect for sovereign countries. The reaction of Arab countries and almost all other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that we are seeing shows that these countries do not want to disregard their national dignity, running errands, in a servile manner, for their senior colleagues. This situation is yet another example of colonial thinking. The habits of our Western colleagues have not vanished. In their traditional style, the United States and Europe are still preaching the colonial customs they adhered to at a time when they could dictate to all others. It is wrong and regrettable, and flies in the face of the historical process, which objectively shows that a multipolar world is taking shape now. It has several centres of economic growth, financial power and political influence. Everyone understands now that China and India are fast-growing economies and influential countries, just like Brazil and other Latin American countries. The tapping of Africa's enormous potential of natural resources has been held back by the colonialists during the period of neo-colonialism as well, which is not over yet. That is why Africa is also making its voice heard. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Arab world is objectively one of the pillars or one of the centres of a multipolar world that is being shaped now.

Question: We are talking about good relations between Russia, China and India. Can these countries form an alliance against US hegemony?

Sergey Lavrov: We never form alliances against anyone and never make friends with someone against others. We have a ramified network of partner organisations established many years ago. I will mention the organisations established after the Soviet Union's disintegration. These are the CIS, the CSTO, the EAEU and the SCO on a broader geopolitical plane. The SCO has established and is developing close ties with the EAEU and as part of the linkage of Eurasian integration projects with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The EAEU and the PRC have signed an agreement. The linkage of these integration projects is embracing more and more territories. Thus, in addition to EAEU-SCO cooperation, these organisations have memorandums on cooperation with ASEAN. The Greater Eurasia project (or the Greater Eurasia Partnership) should embrace the whole of

Eurasia. President of Russia Vladimir Putin spoke about this at the Russia-ASEAN summit six years ago. It is based on the processes on the ground and has a Eurasian dimension.

Many countries of the Arab world are interested in establishing partner relations with the SCO that represents all other leading sub-regions of our enormous common continent. These are efforts to build constructive and positive (not antagonistic) alliances that are not aimed against anyone. They are gradually acquiring a global character, which is reflected in the development of the BRICS Five (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Our Saudi friends and Argentina are interested in it. Argentine Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero expressed his country's desire to become a full member of BRICS.

BRICS is preparing for a regular summit. It will create an outreach format in which a dozen developing nations will take part. These processes are underway. We know that our Western friends have many phobias and complexes of their own superiority and infallibility. But they are also paranoid. The West sees opposition and a threat to its domination in any process in which it does not take part and which it does not control. It is time to get rid of these manners and customs.

Question: What about the recent Russia-China military exercises? What do they show?

Sergey Lavrov: This is the continuation of our cooperation aimed at enhancing security in this region. They supplement regular military undertakings: drills and training sessions with counterterrorism aims, efforts to strengthen the security of our common borders within the SCO. Russia-China bilateral military cooperation already has a long history. This is not the first year that we are holding events in the zone of our common borders where our security interests directly overlap; we do it regularly. They show that both Russia and China have a responsible attitude to fulfilling these tasks.

Question: Despite the evidence cited by Russia, the development of biological weapons by the United States in Ukraine has not evoked any concern in the West. What should be done for the world to understand how dangerous this is? The Arab press writes about the historical importance of Russia's efforts to show how these laboratories operate.

Sergey Lavrov: This is a direct violation of the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological and Toxin Weapons. Enjoying support of all countries except the US, we have long been advocating the formation of a universal transparent verification mechanism within its framework that would allow all states to be sure that no participants of the Convention violate it. The United States has simply blocked this initiative since 2001 (for more than 20 years). Now it is clear why it occupies this position. During all these years, the Americans have been setting up their military bio laboratories all over the world. The Pentagon's unit – the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) – is in charge of these activities. In developing a network of such laboratories, the Pentagon is focusing on the post-Soviet space and Eurasia. Available information shows that these laboratories have been or are being established along the perimeter of the Russian Federation and closer to the PRC. We initially suspected that the experiments made in these laboratories were not entirely peaceful and innocent. When the Russian Armed Forces and the militias of Donetsk and Lugansk liberated Mariupol during the military operation, they discovered laboratories left by the Americans in a rush. The Americans tried to get rid of documents and samples but didn't destroy all of them. The samples of pathogens and the documents found there clearly pointed to the military character of these experiments. It is clear from the documents that there are several dozen such laboratories in Ukraine. We are pursuing two goals. First, we will convince the UN Security Council to take seriously the information we presented to it (you noted that the overwhelming majority of the developing nations do take it seriously). Second, we want this information to

lead to specific actions that must be taken under the Biological Weapons Convention. It requires that the United States explain what it was doing there. We held five special briefings in the UN Security Council, one of them quite recently. We will work to make the US take specific actions proceeding from its commitments under the Convention. We will also analyse additional information about the involvement of other countries in these experiments and military bio laboratories in Ukraine. According to some sources, these are Great Britain and Germany.

Question: If you don't mind my asking, where are other similar laboratories located in the vicinity of Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I don't mind. There are such laboratories in Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Central Asian countries. Russia and these countries have been analysing these problems both bilaterally and at the CSTO. We are signing (or have signed, or are preparing) memorandums on interaction in biological security with practically all CSTO and other CIS countries. These documents stipulate that the signatories will inform each other of how biological programmes develop in each country.

What is important is transparency, which makes it possible to ascertain that these programmes have no military dimension, since this is prohibited under the Convention. These memorandums imply that the parties will pay mutual visits and familiarise themselves with the activities conducted by these laboratories. In addition, it is stipulated that there should be no military representatives of any third party at the biological facilities in each of our countries.

Question: How are these countries motivated in having such laboratories? Will this bring them any material or political benefits?

Sergey Lavrov: The USSR pursued a large-scale biological programme. After the Soviet Union joined the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, this programme was stripped of its military aspects, but the scientific value of the biological research is retained. We all remember the state in which this country was in 1991, when the USSR ceased to exist. We faced the problem of preserving the Russian Federation's integrity. There were no state reserves to repay the national debt or even to purchase the basic necessities for the Russian population's everyday life. At that time, our Western partners "hopped to it," as we say, offering their services in all areas of life. They penetrated all spheres of the newly independent states, sending their advisers and advice-givers. Today we are experiencing the aftermath of those times. Major changes have occurred. There are no Soviet republics, which became independent overnight. They had no experience of independent international activity. But now all of this is a thing of the past. All the post-Soviet republics have consolidated their stand, asserting themselves as absolutely sovereign, independent states. They decide what partners to choose on their own. We have agreements with them to the effect that the commitments assumed within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and the Eurasian Economic Union should be fully respected by other countries interested in developing relations with all post-Soviet states. We discussed the problems that all of us encountered during the emergence of the new statehood. Various agencies exchange information about the risks involved in this sweeping cooperation with foreign countries in sensitive spheres. Biology is, of course, one of these spheres. There is awareness that we have a unified biological security space. The CSTO's purview includes security issues that

are directly related to public health and the environment. We will continue our constructive cooperation based on these statutes.

Question: Turkey and Italy have proposed a plan for organising talks between Russia and Kiev. Is Russia ready to continue the talks, which have not yielded any results lately?

Sergey Lavrov: We pointed out on numerous occasions that our Western colleagues want to use Vladimir Zelensky and all citizens of Ukraine to the last Ukrainian, which has become proverbial, to damage Russia as much as possible, to defeat it on the battlefield. This has been openly declared in Washington, Berlin, London and especially loudly in Warsaw. Poland has proposed that the Russian world must be destroyed like a “cancer” which is a deadly threat to the whole world. I would like to look at this world as it is represented by our Polish neighbours. For many years Russia has tried to explain why NATO’s eastward expansion and the drawing of Ukraine into the bloc are unacceptable to us. They listened to us but did not comprehend what we said.

When the coup was staged in 2014, the [Ukrainian] opposition trampled on the agreements reached despite the EU’s guarantees. The EU proved unable to force the putschists to respect the signatures of France, Germany and Poland. In 2015, the war in Donbass unleashed by the new Ukrainian authorities, who seized power in the coup, was stopped. The Minsk agreements were signed and guaranteed by France and Germany. All these years we called on Kiev to honour its commitments. Since the West had the decisive influence on it, we also worked with the Europeans and Americans, appealing to their conscience. Regrettably, they have no conscience.

Instead of forcing Kiev to implement the agreements, which should have been done through a direct dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk, the West tried to justify Zelensky and his team, even when they said publicly that they would never talk with “those people,” although this is stipulated in the UN Security Council resolution approving the Minsk agreements. They said that they would never implement the Minsk agreements or give a special status to these republics. At the same time, they adopted laws that prohibited the Russian language in education and media. Media outlets were shut down. The Russian language was even prohibited in everyday life. Only the Ukrainian language was allowed as the medium of interaction between people in Ukraine.

Moreover, Vladimir Zelensky stated that those who feel Russian must go to Russia. He said this in September 2021. We drew the attention of some Western countries, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the relevant UN bodies to these aggressively Russophobic and racist statements made in the spirit of the neo-Nazi policy which was gaining a foothold in the Ukrainian legislation. They did not react in any way. Some officials sometimes called for respect for international commitments. But Zelensky doesn’t give a damn about international commitments or the Constitution of Ukraine, which guarantees the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine. They showed no respect for the Constitution and international conventions and adopted a lot of anti-Russian laws.

As for Russia’s readiness for talks, we have already explained why we couldn’t sit on our hands any longer. What we found on the Ukrainian army positions during the special military operation proved that we were barely in time with starting it, because Ukraine’s Plan B was to be enacted on March 8. A huge group of the Ukrainian armed forces, which was deployed on the contact line with Donbass by mid-February, planned to attack and occupy these territories in flagrant violation of the Minsk agreements and the UN Security Council resolution.

I have no doubt that had they succeeded the West would have turned a blind eye to these violations, just as it pretended not to notice Kiev's disregard for all the agreements during the previous eight years.

When the Ukrainian authorities proposed negotiations several days after the operation began, we agreed immediately. We held several in-person rounds of talks in Belarus, trying to understand Ukraine's position and what it wants to achieve at the talks, because we had presented our approach. After several rounds were held in Belarus and online, the idea of meeting in Istanbul was put forth, and the Ukrainian delegation brought, for the first time, written proposals signed by the head of the delegation to the meeting we held on March 29. We analysed these proposals, reported our opinion to President Putin and told our Ukrainian colleagues that we were ready to proceed on that basis. Since they didn't present a complete agreement but only its individual provisions, we used them to quickly draft an agreement that was based on the Ukrainian proposals and turned it over to the Ukrainian delegation. The following day a flagrant provocation was staged in Bucha, where dead bodies were found in the streets three days after Russian troops had left the city, after three days of peaceful life. We were accused of killing those people. You remember what happened next.

The West adopted a new package of sanctions, as if it had been waiting for it to happen. The Ukrainians said that they had reviewed their position and would reformulate the principles underlying the agreement. Nevertheless, contacts between us continued. The latest draft agreement, which we submitted to Ukraine nearly a month ago, is gathering dust. If you ask who wants to hold and is ready for talks, Vladimir Zelensky said in an interview the other day (he does this almost every day) that he is ready for talks, but they must be held between himself and Vladimir Putin, because there is allegedly no use doing this at any other level. He said the talks should be held without any intermediaries and only after Ukraine resumed control of its territory as of February 23, 2022. Anyone can see that this is not serious. But it suits the West to keep up this unreasonable and unsubstantiated obstinacy. This is a fact.

The West has called for defeating Russia on the battlefield, which means that the war must continue and that increasingly more weapons must be provided to the Ukrainian nationalists, to the Ukrainian regime, including weapons that can hit targets in the Russian Federation. It is such weapons that Vladimir Zelensky demands publicly. We have issued most serious warnings to the West that it is, in fact, fighting a proxy war against the Russian Federation with the hands, bodies and brains of the Ukrainian neo-Nazis, which can become a major step towards an unacceptable escalation. I hope that the remaining reasonable forces in the West are aware of this.

As for Turkey and Italy, Turkey doesn't have a plan. At least nobody has presented it to us, although President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has noted on many occasions that Turkey is ready to provide a venue just as it did in Istanbul on March 29. In fact, it was a useful contact. For the first time the Ukrainians presented their vision of a peace agreement on paper in response to our numerous requests, which we accepted and translated into the legal language. I have told you what happened after that. President Erdogan stands for peace and is ready to do all he can to bring it about. But Vladimir Zelensky has said that he doesn't need intermediaries. That's his business. He is as fickle as the wind: first, he rallied the support of all the G7 countries, and now it appears that former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is creating an advisory group at Kiev's request that will provide proposals on security guarantees for Ukraine in the context of a peace settlement.

I would like to remind you that initially the Ukrainians' concept was to draft a comprehensive agreement which would include Ukraine's pledge not to join any blocs or have nuclear

weapons, as well as guarantees of its neutral status. It would also stipulate the guarantor countries' guarantees that will take into account the security interests of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and other countries in the region. As I have mentioned, Kiev is moving away from that concept. If Andreas Fogh Rasmussen has been recruited to formulate certain "guarantees" in a narrow circle of the Ukrainian regime's Western sponsors and to subsequently try to submit them to Russia, it is a path that leads nowhere.

Question: Is this a non-paper? Just an initiative of former [NATO] officials?

Sergey Lavrov: We are looking into this now. This has already been promoted as a breakthrough step. The same applies to the Italian initiative. Luigi Di Maio is quite active in the media landscape promoting the Italian four-point initiative. All we know about it is that it can bring the long-awaited peace, and not just suit both Russia and Ukraine, but launch something like a new Helsinki process, a new agreement on European security, and that it already enjoys the support of the G7 and the UN Secretary-General. I don't know whether this is true, or to whom he has shown it. No one has sent us anything. All we can go by is speculation, descriptions of this initiative as they appear in the media.

But what we have read (if it is true, of course) makes us regret that the sponsors of this initiative show so little understanding of what is happening or knowledge of the subject, the history of this matter. Allegedly, it says that Crimea and Donbass should be part of Ukraine, which should grant those regions broad autonomy. Serious politicians who want to achieve results, not just grandstand to impress their voters, cannot be proposing such things. Donbass could have returned to Ukraine a long time ago if the Ukrainian regimes (Petr Poroshenko, and then Vladimir Zelensky) had fulfilled the Minsk agreements and granted a special status to the people that refused to accept the coup. The package included the status of the Russian language. However, instead of granting that status, Ukraine banned the Russian language. Instead of unblocking economic ties, Poroshenko announced a transport embargo on those regions, making retirees travel many kilometres to receive their pension benefits.

This Italian initiative you asked me about – as reported by the media – also calls for launching a new Helsinki process, in addition to reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine, to ensure the safety of everyone and everything. Our colleagues in Rome came to their senses too late. The Helsinki process has given a number of important gains to the world, to our region, to the Euro-Atlantic region, including declarations signed at the highest political level, at the OSCE summits, in particular in Istanbul in 1999, in Astana in 2010 – declarations on indivisible security. Those documents said security can only be equal and indivisible. Further elaborating on this, they said all participating states have the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance, but no country can join any alliances or otherwise strengthen its security if it affects the security of any other state. The third component of this formula is that no country, no organisation in the OSCE area will claim to dominate security issues.

Anyone familiar with the situation in Europe understands that Western countries have been grossly violating the key components of that commitment by strengthening their security in violation of Russia's right to its own security. They claim that only NATO can call the tune in this region, and no one else. We have tried to make those beautiful political words become reality, to make them work rather than keep them on paper signed off by the presidents of the United States and European countries. We proposed making that political commitment legally binding. As far back as in 2009, we proposed an agreement to NATO countries. They said they wouldn't even discuss it because only NATO could provide legal security guarantees. When we asked about the OSCE's role, they said those were just political

promises and slogans. That showed how Western politicians treat the signatures of their presidents. But we did not stop there.

We made another attempt last year. In November 2021, President Vladimir Putin instructed his team to draft new documents to agree with the United States and NATO on the principles that would be approved by all at the highest level. We drafted those treaties and transferred them to Washington and Brussels in early December 2021. Several rounds of negotiations followed. I met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. We were told that we could discuss the arms control agenda, but NATO expansion was not our business or anybody's business, for that matter. When we again quoted their commitment not to strengthen their security at the expense of others, they dismissed that as immaterial. What mattered was NATO's so-called open door policy. We have warned them repeatedly – in 2009, then in 2013, 2014 (when a coup d'état occurred in Ukraine), and in 2015 (the Minsk agreements). All these years, we have been telling our Western colleagues that it will end badly because they continue to ignore our legitimate interests and rudely tell us no when we ask them to take us into consideration – not somewhere tens of thousands of kilometres away, but right on the borders of the Russian Federation. This arrogance, this air of being exceptional, this colonial mentality (I can do anything and you will do what I tell you) is not manifested only in their attitude to our interests.

Remember 1999, when the United States suddenly decided that Yugoslavia, lying 10,000 kilometres away from its coasts, posed a threat to its security? They bombed it to dust in a heartbeat. They used OSCE Mission leader William Walker from the United States to loudly declare that several dozen corpses discovered in the village of Racak were a crime against humanity. As it turned out later, these corpses were not civilians, but militants who were disguised as civilians and scattered around the place.

The same setup was used in Bucha near Kiev on April 3. It works regardless of whether the public finds it convincing or not. They didn't need to convince anyone. They bombed Yugoslavia, created an independent Kosovo violating every OSCE principle in the process and then said it would be like that from then on.

They said no after the referendum in Crimea. According to them, self-determination in Kosovo is a good thing, but self-determination in Crimea is not. This is being done as if nothing were wrong. No one is even blushing, although it's a shame for Western diplomacy which has lost its ability to provide elegant explanations for their grossly reckless moves.

In 2003, the United States decided that a threat was coming from another country located 10,000 kilometres away and produced a vial with what I think was tooth powder. Poor Colin Powell later lamented that he had been set up by the intelligence. Several years later, Tony Blair, too, said it was a mistake, but nothing could be done about it. Nothing can be done about it. They bombed the country killing under a million civilians. Until now, Iraq's integrity has not been restored. There are enough problems there, including terrorism, which did not exist there before. Indeed, Iraq and Libya were authoritarian regimes, but there were no terrorists, ongoing hostilities, or military provocations.

Libya is on that list, as well. In 2011, President Obama said that they would be "leading from behind" Europe. France, the most democratic nation in the Old World (freedom, equality, fraternity), led the NATO operation to destroy the regime. As a result, they destroyed the country. It is hard to put it back together now. Again, the French are trying to do so as they come up with initiatives, convene conferences and announce election dates. All in vain, because, before going in, they needed to think about what would become of Libya after the West ensured its "security" in that country.

I'm citing this example not to say: they can, but we can't. That would be simplifying matters. What I'm saying is that the Western countries believe that the entire world is part of their security, and they must rule the world.

As NATO was crawling up to Russia's borders, it told us not to be concerned about it, since NATO is a defensive alliance and does not threaten our country's security. First, this sounds like a diplomatic effrontery. We must decide for ourselves on our security interests, just like any other country. Second, NATO was a defensive alliance when there was someone to stand up to like the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. There was the Berlin Wall between Western and Eastern Europe. Everyone was clear about the line of defence. After the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, any lieutenant with basic training knew there was no longer any such thing as a defence line. All you need to do now is live a normal life based on shared values and a common European space.

We put our signature under multiple slogans including "from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean," "from Lisbon to Vladivostok," and "we are brothers and sisters now." However, they retained their military nature as they continued to move the "line of defence" closer to our borders. We have just had an in-depth discussion on the outcomes of this policy. In recent months, the NATO Secretary General and warmongering politicians like the British Foreign Secretary have been publicly stating that the alliance must have global responsibility. NATO must be in charge of security in the Pacific. This may mean that next time NATO's "defence line" will move to the South China Sea.

Not only NATO, but the EU leaders also decided to "play soldiers." Ursula von der Leyen, who is rivalling EU top diplomat Josep Borrell in terms of bellicosity, claimed that the EU must be in charge of security matters in the Indo-Pacific region. How are they going to accomplish this? They keep talking about an EU "army." No one will let them create this "army" as long as NATO exists.

To all appearances, no one is going to even reform NATO. They are going to turn this "defensive alliance" into a global alliance claiming global military dominance. This is a dangerous path that is definitely doomed to failure.

Question: To what extent are these developments affecting the Russian army's presence in Syria?

Sergey Lavrov: We are present in Syria at the request of the legitimate President of the Syrian Arab Republic and the legitimate government of that country. We are there in full compliance with the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and are addressing the tasks set by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We will stick to this policy and support the Syrian government in its efforts to fully restore Syria's territorial integrity. The armed forces of the countries that no one had invited to Syria are still deployed there. Until now, the US military, which has occupied a significant portion of the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, is openly building a quasi-state there and is directly encouraging separatism taking advantage of the sentiment of a portion of the Kurdish population of Iraq. Problems are arising between the various entities that unite the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. All of that intensifies tensions in this region. Of course, Turkey cannot stay on the sidelines.

We want to address these issues solely on the basis of respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are talking to the Kurds. We have channels which we use to communicate with all of them. We encourage them to take a closer look at recent developments where the United States promised something to someone and then failed to deliver. Starting a serious dialogue with Damascus and agreeing on arrangements of living in

a single state is a much more reliable approach even from these purely pragmatic considerations, not to mention international law.

Of course, Russia will continue to provide humanitarian aid. The United States is trying to keep the crisis situation unchanged and to encourage the sides to resume hostilities. The notorious Caesar Act is designed to strangle the Syrian economy. We see that a growing number of Arab countries are starting to understand the utter futility of this policy and are interested in resuming relations with Syria. Recently, the UAE restored its embassy's activities in full. A number of Arab countries have never withdrawn their embassies from Damascus. Preparations are underway for a summit of the League of Arab States, which I discussed with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The vast majority of the League members (as far as we can tell from our contacts) are in favour of a solution that will make it possible to resume Syria's full Arab League membership.

Refugees are another issue. The UN mediators are trying to get involved in this matter, but the United States and the compliant Europeans are doing their utmost to make the return of these people impossible. Remember when Syria held a conference in Damascus a couple of years ago to raise funds and make it possible for the refugees to return, the Americans went out of the way to keep everyone from attending this conference. Not everyone listened to them and about 20 countries, primarily Arab countries, as well as the People's Republic of China and other countries, took part in it.

The UN showed its weakness by refusing to participate in that conference and only sending its representative in Damascus to sit there as an observer. That decision hit the United Nations' reputation hard because its Resolution 2254 explicitly calls for the return of refugees. Both the UN Secretariat and the Secretary-General personally have an obligation to contribute to this directly. Until recently, the European Union held its own conferences on refugees (and they were not devoted to creating conditions for their return, but to raising money to pay the host countries). The purpose of those conferences was to make the current situation permanent and prevent any chance of positive developments in Syria. Yet, the Secretary-General did not just send representatives to them, but participated in these conferences as a co-chair. We have been pointing out that serious misinterpretation of his direct responsibilities.

As for the process that is taking place in Geneva, including the Constitutional Committee, its Drafting Commission – I keep in touch with Geir Pedersen, who represents the UN as a mediator in this process. He visited Russia not long ago. We also communicate through our mission in Geneva. There is an agreement that the next meeting of the Drafting Commission will begin at the end of May. I believe that President Bashar al-Assad's recent decision to grant amnesty to Syrians charged with terrorism-related crimes was an important positive step. As far as I understand, a lot of work has been done, and the amnesty was announced. It will be a good chance to see how it goes. Geir Pedersen as well as many of our Western colleagues said Bashar al-Assad should take some steps. Okay. Whatever prompted the Syrian president's decision, he did take a step. Let's reciprocate now. Let Geir Pedersen talk to the opposition and those who control it, and persuade them to show some constructive action in this regard.

Question: Is Russia keeping the same number of troops in Syria?

Sergey Lavrov: We have not had any requests from the Syrian government. If any such decisions are deemed expedient, they will be implemented. The numbers on the ground are determined by the specific objectives our force is tasked with there. It is clear that there are practically no military objectives left, but only ensuring stability and security. As for the

remaining military objectives that the Syrian army is working for, with our support – there is the terrorist threat in Idlib, and it has not gone anywhere. Our Turkish friends and neighbours are trying, as they are telling us, to fulfil what presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed on a few years ago. As we all see, things are going hard. This objective remains on the agenda. However, thanks to the actions by our contingent and the Syrian armed forces, we have not seen any provocations from Idlib lately targeting the Syrian army strongholds or our bases in Syria.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 38th meeting of the Foreign Ministry's Council of the Heads of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation, Moscow, May 27, 2022

Colleagues,

We are holding a regular meeting of the Foreign Ministry's Council of the Heads of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation. The meeting is taking place against the background of the special military operation in Ukraine, which is being conducted in connection with the tasks set by President of Russia Vladimir Putin, tasks involving the protection of civilians, the elimination of the Ukraine-posed security threats to the Russian Federation, and the denazification of this kindred country whose people have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of a regime which encourages extreme neo-Nazi sentiments and practices.

You see the United States and its satellites double, triple and quadruple their efforts to contain Russia with the use of a broad range of tools, from unilateral economic sanctions to utterly false propaganda in the global media space. Popular Russophobia has taken on an unprecedented scale in many Western countries, where, to our regret, it is nurtured by government circles.

Under these circumstances, it is of crucial importance that the foreign policy course approved by President Vladimir Putin is based on a broad national accord and supported by the key political forces of Russia and the leading public and entrepreneurial associations. We also feel daily the support from all Russian regions. This country is witnessing the consolidation of all healthy and patriotic forces. This is an important aspect of the present stage.

Colleagues,

At our last meeting, we discussed regions' cultural diplomacy. The recommendations that we approved have made it possible to give a new impetus to international cultural ties maintained by Russian regions and expand the geographical reach and range of partners (of Russia's republics, regions and territories). But the situation has changed since that time: the West has declared a total war on us and the entire Russian world. No one is concealing this any longer.

The cancel culture directed at Russia and all things Russian is reaching the apogee of absurdity. Russian greats, including Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Alexander Pushkin, are banned. Russian cultural figures and artists representing our culture today are persecuted.

It may safely be said that this situation is here to stay. We should be ready to accept the fact that it has revealed the West's true attitude to those fine-sounding slogans concerning human values and the need to create a united Europe, a "common European home" stretching from

the Atlantic to the Pacific, which were put forward 30 years ago after the end of the Cold War. Today we see the true worth of all these empty words.

Let us not become self-complacent. Under the current circumstances, we need a detailed analysis of the Foreign Ministry's effort to promote cooperation with civil society, including at the level of regions.

A sufficiently effective system of collaboration between the Foreign Ministry and non-profit organisations focusing on international issues has been established. For example, the recent assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy has clearly demonstrated the high expert potential of scientific diplomacy. Our joint work has made it possible to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the highly intricate and complex developments in the world.

That said, the presence of NGOs from regions at international venues is insignificant. However, the inclusion of certain regional NGOs in Russian delegations to the UN General Assembly has been a success. This experience shows that this partnership has a promise. We would like to make it regular and broad in nature.

I would like to highlight a number of priority areas concerning interaction with civil society institutions:

1. Mobilising Russian NGOs' capabilities to promote recovery and to provide humanitarian aid to residents of the DPR and the LPR, as well as the liberated Ukrainian territories.
2. Engaging public diplomacy channels for outreach activities with constructive international partners, including stepping up efforts to debunk fakes about the special military operation and promoting our views in social media and the blogosphere.
3. Using NGO resources, in particular, regional associations of entrepreneurs and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, to minimise the consequences of unilateral sanctions, and to promote ties with the friendly countries, primarily, our allies and like-minded partners in the CSTO, the SCO, the CIS, the EAEU and BRICS.

On a separate note, regional consultative mechanisms with the participation of top executives from national cultural associations are working productively. Clearly, this helps maintain inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace and accord. I think broader use of this set of tools should be made in order to strengthen business ties with the expat communities' countries of origin, primarily in the CIS.

4. Working with our compatriots residing abroad is particularly important. They are at the forefront of dealing with the phenomenon known as Neanderthal Russophobia. Our foreign-based communities are facing unprecedented pressure and are being discriminated against on national and linguistic grounds. In spite of everything, our compatriots are holding their own and bravely defending their right not to sever contacts with the Motherland even in the most challenging times. The Immortal Regiment drive that took place in over 80 countries, including the United States and Europe, clearly showed it. Our duty is to continue to support our compatriots, and we count on the regions' proactive moves in this regard.

It is gratifying to know that many regions, in particular, Moscow, St Petersburg, Tatarstan, Crimea, the Altai Territory and the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi autonomous areas (the list goes on) are effectively working with the Russian expat communities and their coordinating bodies. The most recent examples include the Moscow Government holding, in conjunction with other regions, round table discussions on the topic "Interactions with compatriots abroad at the regional level." Such events took place in certain regions, in particular, Kaliningrad in late March, and Khabarovsk and Vladikavkaz in April. More such

meetings will be held this year. We strongly support these initiatives and will sponsor such events. We are ready to provide advice to our colleagues from non-governmental organisations on the corresponding issues. We will update them on the situation of their compatriots, including instances of their legal rights being violated.

5. The developments in Ukraine confirm the importance of continued efforts to counteract the falsification of history and glorification of Nazism. The absurd content of modern Ukrainian school textbooks is a case in point. However, the problem is not limited to Ukraine. The West does not stop trying to pit the peoples of the former Soviet Union against each other through a biased interpretation of historical facts.

The other day the German government approved plans for a World War II and the German Occupation of Europe documentation centre. At first glance, this concept raises serious questions regarding its historical truthfulness. The planned centre is structured not only to downplay the Soviet Union and the Soviet people's decisive role in defeating German Nazism, but also to play down the crimes committed by the Third Reich against the Soviet people. These themes are not indicated in the planned expositions. The plans also contain language that seeks to equate German criminals to liberators of Europe. This is yet another step within the policy adopted by modern Berlin which seeks to rewrite the history of World War II and to rehabilitate the Third Reich.

It is important to focus on preserving the common chapters of history, primarily, the Great Patriotic War, and to promote shared memories of the war and the fallen war hero search movement, as well as the ongoing CIS historians' dialogue on existing platforms.

Proper resources and staff are required in order to overcome these challenges, and the broad involvement of NGOs that should be issued targeted grants and subsidies to this end as well. Let's not forget about this, either.

Many Russian regions are addressing these issues adequately, including through the use of extrabudgetary sources. We are ready to support this work and supplement these initiatives with increased funding from the federal budget.

In conjunction with Rossotrudnichestvo and the Civic Chamber, we will continue to help the regions use public and people's diplomacy in the interest of promoting our foreign policy.