

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions following a meeting of Turkish ambassadors and permanent representatives at international organisations, Ankara, August 14, 2018

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Esteemed Mr Minister, my dear friend,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank our Turkish friends for the opportunity to speak before the ambassadors and permanent representatives of Turkey abroad. This is a clear example of a high level of mutual trust. Our relations are on an upward trajectory. The presidents of the two countries are always spurring on the common efforts to expand relations across the board. They personally coordinate the joint work of all the departments and agencies, including foreign ministries. Trade is steadily growing. Last year, it grew by over 40 percent. Major projects, including the Turkish Stream and the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Station by Russian specialists are being implemented successfully. We are also celebrating our rich cultural ties. Next year will be a Russia-Turkey cross-year of culture and tourism. In this connection, we are pleased to note the increased tourism from our country to Turkey's wonderful resorts. Last year again, we came in first in terms of the number of recreational visits by Russians to Turkey which stood at 5 million people. This year will likely set a new record, as President Erdogan recently mentioned.

Russia and Turkey are pursuing independent foreign policies. We greatly appreciate our partners' refusal to join the anti-Russian sanctions.

In my remarks before the Turkish ambassadors and permanent representatives, I shared Russia's vision of the key global development trends, outlined our fundamental approaches to the main challenges of our time and answered numerous questions from our colleagues. Our conversation was a professional one. Such an exchange of opinions is absolutely needed today, when the situation in the world remains alarming. Without exaggeration, we are at a turning point in world history. This is a stage of transition from bipolar and unipolar models and schemes to the construction of a polycentric world order, which is objectively taking place. We discussed this extensively today. Of course, these objective trends are clearly being opposed. Sanctions, threats, blackmail and diktat are being used. Given these circumstances, we can see that some of our Western partners have lost the culture of diplomacy, but I hope that objective reality will ensure that reason ultimately prevails, and that we will return to the foundations laid down in the UN Charter, which provides for collective work to address global challenges while respecting the sovereign equality of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. Our interest in resolving numerous problems rests on precisely these principles. This can be seen in Syria, where we are now discussing ? through different channels ? ways to overcome the resistance of the remaining terrorist groups, the return to peaceful life of the armed opposition, which rejects terrorist methods, and full implementation of the agreements on de-escalation zones, including the de-escalation zone in Idlib. From similar positions of searching for common approaches and peaceful solutions, we reviewed other situations today, including in the Middle East region, Northern Africa, Libya, Yemen, the situation in the Balkans, the Ukraine settlement, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and more.

Today we confirmed the choice of our countries to deepen the strategic partnership in foreign affairs. I think that we will discuss specific aspects of our interaction in more detail during the working breakfast.

Once again, I want to thank our hosts, and Mr Cavusoglu personally, for inviting us and being excellent hosts.

Question: Do Moscow and Ankara have any agreements on Idlib province, considering that Damascus wants to return it under its control, while Ankara is opposed?

Sergey Lavrov: With regard to Idlib, I would like to note the following in addition to what I have already said in my opening remarks. Like all other de-escalation zones, the Idlib de-escalation zone was created on certain terms. An agreement that the ceasefire does not apply to terrorists and that the armed groups that do not want to associate with terrorists should distance themselves from them territorially so that the "irreconcilable" ones, primarily Jabhat al-Nusra, could be destroyed, was one of the prerequisites. This agreement remains valid with regard to Idlib. The situation there is more complicated than in other areas. It was the most difficult one from the start, including due to Jabhat al-Nusra's domination. It has several tens of thousands of militants, including by UN estimates. When Turkey's observation posts were deployed in Idlib zone, the situation calmed down, but recently we have seen quite aggressive actions, primarily, by Jabhat al-Nusra, such as shelling of the Syrian troops' positions, daily drone attacks at the Russian Khmeimim air base and many other provocative actions. The Syrian army has every right to suppress such actions. There can be no question about "Russia allowing the Syrian army" anything. The Syrian army is on its own land and is fighting for its independence from terrorists in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, while we, in full compliance with international law, support it in these actions. The key to the Syria crisis is the chronic inability, beginning with the Obama administration, to separate truly patriotic groups of armed oppositionists from Nusra terrorists who show no willingness to negotiate and who should be the legitimate target of everyone who is fighting extremism and terrorism in Syria. Today, we will discuss this with the Minister. This is also what our military are saying as part of the mechanisms created under the Astana format.

Question: What does Moscow think about the United States tightening its sanctions on Russia, Iran and Turkey? How much will this affect the crises in the region, especially the coordination of the Syrian dossier and Russia's desire to find a solution to the refugee problem?

Sergey Lavrov: As a matter of fact, you've listed the countries participating in the Astana format. Of course, we will not see any direct reference to the Syria crisis in the statements made by the United States when it announces sanctions against our countries, but we can see the objective desire of the West, primarily, the United States, to not only prevent the Astana process from achieving specific results but to also portray it as not quite successful. These attempts have been made before. Perhaps, they will continue. I believe the fact that Russia, Turkey and Iran, which do not always agree on various aspects of the Syrian crisis, were able to show enough wisdom and willingness to address specific problems, has brought about a drastic change in the situation in Syria. The so-called Islamic State has been practically destroyed, and there remain only its isolated and scattered offshoots. Jabhat al-Nusra is our main focus, as we have already mentioned.

I don't think the United States imposed sanctions to disrupt the Astana troika, but, in general, the position of the West on the situation with refugees is either quite surprising, or, in most cases, makes us feel we should tread cautiously. There was, however, a very useful effort with the participation of Russia and France to deliver humanitarian aid to East Ghouta. But we are now talking about much more ambitious tasks. Vast areas in Syria have been liberated from terrorists. They are free from hostilities. It's time to restore the infrastructure and all critical systems there, so that refugees from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Europe could return to their homes, including from Iraq. This process is already underway. We believe that it should be encouraged in every possible way. Given that, it was surprising to hear a statement, if it was correctly worded, by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi that, in his opinion, the return of refugees to Syria is premature now, because it is still a dangerous place to live. If such a statement really was made, this is a case of a lack of awareness, if not something more grave.

Returning to the question about our opinion of the policy of tightening the sanctions, we regard it as an illegitimate and illegal policy dictated mostly by a desire to dominate every sphere, and call the shots in global affairs without having to agree with anyone, with the aim of securing advantages on global markets and unilateral preferences for its businesses, even by resorting to protectionism, sanctions and unfair competition, including punishing its own allies, as you may be aware. This policy cannot form a foundation for a normal dialogue. I believe it cannot last long.

Question: European countries recently condemned US sanctions on Turkey and Iran. What does Russia think about these sanctions? Is it possible to use national currency in international trade?

Sergey Lavrov: I already said the sanctions are illegal and undermine every principle of global trade and the principles upheld by UN resolutions, according to which unilateral measures of economic coercion are illegitimate.

With regard to how to overcome these illegal barriers and restrictions, indeed, the use of national currencies in mutual trade has for several years been one of the tasks that the presidents of Russia and Turkey have been working on in our relations with Iran. Similar processes have already taken place not only with regard to Turkey and Iran, but also China, with which we are talking and are already settling in our respective national currencies in mutual trade.

I'm confident that such a gross abuse of the role of the US dollar as a world reserve currency will undermine that role. To be on the safe side, more and more countries, even the ones that are not affected by US sanctions, will gradually stop using the dollar and rely on more dependable partners with whom they can agree on using their currency.

Question: The United States said it was willing to discuss compliance of the new Russian arms with the New START Treaty. In this regard, it is interesting to know Moscow's position and to understand whether the issue is about purely technical variables or is it the beginning of a discussion about the possible withdrawal of Washington from the treaty?

Sergey Lavrov: It's hard for me to tell what the issue is about. What will happen in Washington in the coming days and even hours is anyone's guess. I heard many experts and representatives of the US Administration say that they are interested in renewing the New START Treaty. Of course, as President Putin said, we need to begin talks now if we want to do so.

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As far I understand, New START was recently mentioned in Congress when the Pentagon budget was approved. The law is not about the US willingness to discuss these issues with us, but about the US
Administration's instruction to figure out what the issue is about and ask us certain questions. I can only remind everyone once again that, in Helsinki, during the meeting between President Putin and President Trump and my meeting with Secretary of State Pompeo, we reiterated our willingness to resume a full-fledged dialogue on all issues of strategic stability. If the United States wants to professionally ask us specific questions, this is the platform where it needs to be done.