

Good afternoon,

We are holding a traditional meeting today, a big news conference devoted to our performance in 2015. We are prepared to answer your questions about current events over the course of the past year.

The year 2015 was complicated. Most likely, it will be remembered for further intensification of the global rivalry for influencing ongoing processes of change and the emergence of a new international system.

In this regard, there were two conflicting approaches. On one hand, there were attempts to slow down the objective trend toward forming a more equitable polycentric international system, to maintain dominance in global affairs and to impose one's will on others. On the other hand, we witnessed a greater desire to channel this rivalry to a more civilised course and to prioritise the joint efforts against common challenges.

The global economy remained unstable in almost all countries, including Russia. President Putin and the Russian Government have covered this issue extensively. However, amid global economic turmoil, we saw attempts to secure one country's own interests at the expense of the others, to create members-only economic and trade alliances, and split up the global economic space. In other words, we saw elements of de-globalisation.

Intensive media campaigns continued unabated. You're probably more aware of them more than most people. In a number of cases, genuine information wars broke out, seeking to prevent the spread of alternative information or opinions on ongoing processes. Sometimes drastic measures were applied, such as imposing outright bans on journalism as an occupation. You are also aware of this.

Numerous serious conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Ukraine continued and even got worse. Many African countries remain destabilised. All this created what can be referred to as a "crisis landscape." All of that was further aggravated by the risks of interfaith tensions and deepening inter-civilisational rifts, which are extremely dangerous for our entire civilisation.

These events were unfolding amid an unprecedented surge in the threat of terrorism. ISIS, which declared itself a state, and other extremist groups established their control over large swaths of land in Syria and Iraq, and sought, and in many cases succeeded, to gain a foothold in other countries, in particular, Libya, Afghanistan, and some sub-Saharan countries. We witnessed terrible, inhuman terrorist attacks against the citizens of Russia, countries of Europe, Middle East, Africa, the United States and Asia, some of which forced large masses of people to leave their homes for other countries, including the European Union. As you may be aware, the terrorists openly declare their plans to establish a "caliphate" from Portugal to Pakistan. This is a real threat not only to regional, but also global security.

In these circumstances, Russia sought to be active, both as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as one of the world's largest states pursuing an active foreign policy. We acted not only in order to uphold our national interests, but also while being cognizant of our responsibility for the unfolding international situation.

Our efforts focused on promoting President Putin's initiative to form a broad-based anti-terrorist coalition in accordance with international law and under the aegis of the UN. In response to Syrian government's

request, Russia's Aerospace Forces helped to turn around the situation in that country by reducing the territory controlled by terrorists. In doing so, we were able to get a much clearer picture of what was happening there. It became clear who was actually fighting the terrorists, and who was acting as their accomplices and in fact using them to promote their selfish interests.

Our active participation in fighting terrorists contributed to the adoption of a number of important UN Security Council resolutions aimed at preventing the financing of terrorism and ending the phenomenon of terrorists recruited from abroad, namely, resolutions 2199 and 2253. We are pushing to make sure they are complied with in good faith and, no less importantly, we are seeking to have honest, detailed reports by the UN Secretariat about who is honouring their obligations and how they are being honoured as prescribed under these important documents.

Clearly, defeating terrorism exclusively by military means is impossible. We must combine military actions and political processes to settle the conflicts, also adopting measures aimed at preventing the use of economic infrastructure seized by terrorists, as ISIS did in Iraq and Syria, where it supplied contraband oil and other commodities to Turkey for further sale. It is also important to think about the economic recovery of the countries in question after the terrorist threat has been dealt with, as well as to counter extremist ideology.

In September, when Russia chaired the UN Security Council, we held a special meeting at the foreign minister level for a comprehensive analysis of all of the threats and measures that must be taken to overcome them in the Middle East and North Africa. This was an interesting discussion. I think we need to continue this discussion in the UN Security Council to determine how to respond in a strategic and comprehensive manner rather than inconsistently.

At one time we facilitated the holding of the 2012 meeting in Geneva and the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012. Last year we were similarly very active in contributing to the creation of the International Syria Support Group and the launching of the so-called Vienna process as endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 that must be strictly observed. I'm sure you'll ask me about the details of the process, and I will be ready to comment on it in more detail.

President Vladimir Putin has said more than once that it is possible to find solutions to the most complicated issues only when we rely on international law and respect the diversity of cultures and civilisations and the right of nations to decide their own destinies.

We proceed from the premise that in general, in the 21st century, multilateral cooperation can only be based on genuine equality, mutual consideration for each other's interests and joint efforts for common goals. These principles form the foundation for the performance of integration associations in the post-Soviet space, including the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The same principles underlie such promising formats as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that held their summits in Ufa last July.

Importantly, in developing integration processes in the post-Soviet space we do not set them against other integration efforts, as Russian leaders have repeatedly stated on the record. We are ready to work on harmonizing integration processes and building bridges, in particular, between Europe, Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific Region (APR). Last year the EAEU and Vietnam signed an important agreement on a free

trade area and many states (there are dozens of them) are interested in signing similar agreements. An agreement in principle was reached on integrating EAEU activities with China's project of the Silk Road Economic Belt, which provides very broad opportunities for pooling efforts.

Apart from steadily developing our strategic partnership and all-round cooperation with the People's Republic of China, we have been consolidating a strategic partnership with India, Vietnam and other Asia-Pacific countries and taking an active role in the efforts of APR multilateral mechanisms.

More prospects for cooperation are opened by President Vladimir Putin's initiative to start, in cooperation with our EAEU partners, consultations with the SCO members and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the possibility of establishing a potential economic partnership. This issue will be on the agenda of the Russia-ASEAN summit to be held in Sochi in May to mark the 20th anniversary of our relations.

We are building our cooperation with Latin American, Caribbean and African countries, as well as with their associations and regional organisations. I'd like to mention, in particular, our traditional and close ties with the African Union, the Arab League (AL), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

Guided by the principles of a balance of interests, supremacy of international law and the central role of the UN, Russian diplomacy facilitated the success of collective efforts to implement many very important tasks on the international agenda.

Among last year's achievements, I would like to mention the elimination of the Syrian chemical arms potential and the agreement to settle the Iranian nuclear programme issue. The provisions of the resolutions on sanctions by the UN Security Council and the IAEA Board of Governors as regards Iran were lifted several days ago, thereby leading to the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that will provide the guarantees for the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme carried out in full conformity with the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the IAEA rules on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This is a large step towards the complete normalisation of the situation as regards Iran. We actively support this step, as well as any efforts to remove artificial obstacles in the way of international communication and the participation of any state in world affairs.

I think that the Minsk Agreements of February 12, 2015 were last year's spectacular achievement. During the entire subsequent period, we persistently worked to achieve a conflict settlement in Ukraine, based on implementing precisely those commitments that are contained in the Package of Measures. As you may know, not all of the agreements have been implemented; I'd even say far from all of them, and above all those related to Kiev's commitments to establish a direct dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk in order to address the political aspects of the Ukrainian crisis. For that reason, it was decided to continue this work in 2016. But the goals remain unchanged, and all of them have been unequivocally included in the Minsk documents. We will urge their meticulous implementation in keeping with the additional agreements and efforts that have been undertaken, specifically, within the framework of the Normandy Four leaders' meetings. Generally, we will still be committed to a comprehensive and exclusively peaceful solution to the internal Ukrainian crisis and will continue helping the Ukrainians restore national harmony and return to the path of normal, sustained development.

Along with a buildup of costs resulting from some of our partners' confrontational policies and with the

expansion of problems in world affairs, our consistent course, I think, facilitated last year the heightened understanding by all parties to international intercourse that there is no alternative to broad-based cooperation in searching for a way out of crises. But it is not a fast or simple process. There are still inertia-driven attempts to contain Russia, even though this policy should have long been consigned to the archives of history, to derive unilateral advantages, and even to punish us for our independent foreign policy.

Of course, we take this into account in our actions and will do so in the future. This is not our choice. We are ready for the closest and most constructive cooperation with our Western partners, including Europe and the United States, and are open to a progressive development of cooperation with them. But solely and exclusively on an equitable and mutually beneficial basis, with parties refraining from interference in each other's internal affairs and respecting each side's fundamental interests.

Our Western colleagues sometimes say testily that there will be no "business as usual" with Russia. I am certain that this is the case, and we agree with them on this point: indeed, there'll be no "business as usual" when they attempted to impose on us agreements that heeded primarily the interests of either the EU or the US, and sought to persuade us that this would not harm our interests. This story is over. A story is beginning that can only develop on the basis of equality and all other principles of international law.

So far, however, we note the continuation of a highly unconstructive and dangerous policy with regard to Russia, as I said, including the strengthening of NATO's military potential in the vicinity of our borders and the creation of European and Asian segments of the US global missile defence system, an effort joined by European and South-East Asian countries. We regard these actions as destabilising and short-sighted. Attempts to rethink this situation do occur, but their results, regrettably, are unimpressive. For example, a year ago the OSCE established a Wise Men's Group that presumably should have coordinated recommendations on how to revive the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act and return to the principles of equal and indivisible security. Regrettably, nothing came out of that. The Western experts were toeing their governments' official "contain Russia" line, for which reason the Russian expert had to distance himself from that document. Nothing good resulted from what was on the whole a sound idea. Nevertheless, we hope that the OSCE is not an entirely lost organisation. It is operating actively in Ukraine, it's got a second wind, and it has chances to conform to its original intended purpose. We hope that the search for truly collective, equitable approaches to putting into practice the ideals of European security will come under way after all.

Our foreign policy diplomatic activities prioritise the promotion of Russia's international humanitarian presence and support for Russian compatriots, who reside abroad or are there for tourist or other purposes. We are focusing on dialogue with NGOs, academics, Russian business community and civil society as a whole, as well as on interaction with the media. I saw statistics yesterday: We (the Russian Foreign Ministry) are still second in terms of media activity and openness. This means there is something to work on. I hope that today's news conference will help us move forward in what concerns media openness.

I am ready to answer your questions.

Question: Stratfor, an American strategic centre, has published its 2015 annual report and forecasts for 2016. The experts believe that 2016 will be difficult for most countries. What are the main challenges for Russia and the world in 2016?

Sergey Lavrov: Speaking in general terms, creating a fair democratic international system is our major challenge.

We cannot do that alone, it's an objective process. There are new centres of economic growth and financial and political influence. The international system must adapt to what is really going on in the world. This implies reforming institutions, the ones that deal with the international financial and monetary system, international economy and the ones that deal with global politics. I'm referring to the UN and its Security Council. The most important thing is not to simply reflect objective processes in the structure of particular international organisations, but to conduct world affairs according to the new situation, which means developing solutions, which will be supported by all the key countries.

Good examples include resolving the Iranian nuclear programme issue, chemical disarmament in Syria, establishing the International Syria Support Group, for which we have fought very long and hard, as a number of states directly involved in the Syrian conflict refused to sit down and talk with some countries, such as Iran, solely for ideological reasons. It's a great achievement that, in conjunction with the United States (I give credit to Secretary Kerry and his position), we managed to insist on forming a truly representative group.

We need to approach other situations the same way. If we ensure inclusion in all processes, where all involved parties are not isolated, but are invited to the negotiating table, this will reflect the trends of the modern world and the need to take into account the new realities in the world, global politics and economy.

Perhaps this is the key to any conflict, to any situation that will have to be resolved whether in Ukraine, Syria, conflicts in Africa, the relationship between the Palestinians and Israelis, which should not be forgotten. This principle is absolutely necessary in confronting the main challenge today, that is fighting terrorism. When attempts are made to condition the collective nature of this fight on irrelevant things (e.g., "you agree to a regime change in Syria, then we will start fighting terrorism in earnest, collectively, and coordinate our actions"), I think it's a big mistake for politicians who assume such a position.

Another aspect, which is a challenge for world politics, is the negotiability of our partners, anyone who signs any agreement. In many cases, this is a problem. We have repeatedly seen such a stumbling block in our efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis, when they refused to comply with the Geneva communiqué only because the text failed to incorporate the requirement for Bashar al-Assad's resignation, and the threat of sanctions if al-Assad does not leave. As a result, more than a year later, our proposal still passed, and this document was approved by the UN Security Council. A long time after that, we could not resume talks, although we agreed on it, because, as I've said, someone would refuse to sit and talk with someone else.

Such whims in modern politics are not to be tolerated and are dangerous. There are major generic challenges for us as we work on establishing a new international system that will be based on the UN Charter and be essentially replenished resting on the same principles of the Charter, which, incidentally, is a very flexible instrument; there's no need to change it. If we can provide this consistency in the work of all the key players in the Group of 20 as it applies to the global economy and the world financial and monetary systems, as well as in the UN Security Council, the International Syria Support Group, in the groups that deal with conflicts in Yemen, Afghanistan, the Palestinian-Israeli settlement, and various parts of Africa, then it will certainly help us move forward.

Question: In the past three years, the relations with Canada have been fairly cool. Do you think the relations may improve with the new government in power in Canada? Do you see any signs of that?

Sergey Lavrov: We are interested in good relations with all countries. When we say that we are ready and open to cooperation with the West, including Europe and North America, we, of course, have Canada in mind as well. We have a good and long-standing relationship with that country. Canada is an influential and respected member in international relations. We are facing largely common challenges and common interests with regard to the development of the Arctic and cooperation in the northern latitudes, good experience of practical cooperation in a number of areas: economy, trade, and the northern latitudes. There have been ups and downs in our relations, but in the end, common sense invariably prevailed. We saw some down periods during the Stephen Harper government.

I believe that the last two years were generally a period of lost opportunities in relations with Canada, as the previous government suddenly adopted a sharp Russophobic policy, rolled back bilateral ties, imposed sanctions against Russian individuals and legal entities, and suspended the cooperation of intergovernmental commission on trade and economic issues.

Naturally, we had to retaliate. You are aware of the well-known executive order by President Putin to restrict imports of food. No one has benefitted from it. We were surprised by the total lack of any pragmatism in the impulsive actions taken by the previous government, which took the course, as you can understand, of blindly following the demands of rabid representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, simply ignoring their own national interests.

The fact that in October 2015 the elections were won by the Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau certainly is an important event, especially for Canadians. Based on the comments on foreign policy provided by Trudeau and his colleagues, we can expect that there will be opportunities to set our bilateral relations straight. They were completely artificially and pointlessly complicated. Again, the election rhetoric and the rhetoric of the new government following the elections indicate that they are ready to resume a dialogue on international issues and restore bilateral cooperation.

In November, President Putin spoke with Prime Minister of Canada Trudeau on the sidelines of the Group of 20 meeting. Both sides expressed a willingness and an interest in normalising relations. We believe that practical steps should now be taken by our Canadian partners who have volunteered and stated their intention to correct the mistakes of their predecessors. We'll wait. We're always ready for any positive changes.

Question: I would like to ask a question about Russian-German relations, which have, unfortunately, shown some noticeable cracks in recent years. Do you think these relations have gone into a deadlock, or in crisis? What do you expect your German partners to do to improve them? It's no secret that, mentioning Germany, we often mean the European Union, and speaking about relations between Russia and Germany, we actually mean the relationship between Russia and the European Union, considering Germany the driving force of Europe. I ask this question shortly before the visit of one of the leading German politicians, Horst Seehofer, to Russia, who will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in a few days.

Sergey Lavrov: I would not say that Russian-German relations are in crisis, even less so in a deadlock. There is very intensive high-level dialogue between Russian President Vladimir Putin and German

Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as at the level of foreign ministers and other ministers. I admit that the activities of certain mechanisms that help us move forward have been somewhat complicated, but not halted, thanks mainly to the stance taken by German businesses, which actively continued their efforts to strengthen their contacts with Russian partners. I have heard that a few dozen, or maybe a few hundred German companies have suspended their activities in Russia, but still they number in the thousands. Over the past two years, I met with the key players of German business at least two times, maybe three – once in Moscow, then in Munich, where Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel and I conducted a joint dialogue with German and Russian business leaders. I can see how pragmatic and sensible German entrepreneurs are about the situation.

If we remain pragmatic and think about our national interests, which do not violate any international obligations, a positive result is always reachable. One example is the recent start of the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline project – a purely economic, commercial enterprise, likely to benefit Germany, Europe and Russia. The fact that the project was subjected to loads of ideological criticism and that the participants are being discouraged from cooperating with Russia as this would harm Ukraine (though we all know why Russia needed to ensure that it does not depend on transit via Ukraine in the first place) is nothing but an attempt to strain and complicate our relations by applying external pressure, by appealing to some kind of Atlantic or EU “solidarity.” I would like Germany, and Europe for that matter, or any other country, to make their decisions based on considerations other than what some visiting foreign official told them to do, on a clear understanding of their national interests.

We can see how much effort it takes these days to work out a common EU policy on migration as well as on a number of other issues. We can see how important Germany's role as the lead nation, the locomotive of the European Union, is, as Germany strives to take into account all the EU members' interests. Doing this is becoming harder and harder. We are not interested in seeing the EU weakened or split. We are interested in a united and strong European Union, a partner to work with comfortably on economic issues and other matters. But we cannot ignore what is happening. We can see and appreciate Germany's efforts to ensure that the EU's aggressive minority keeps a lower profile on a range of issues, some related to Russia, and some to the EU's internal structure, that they temper their appetites and ambitions and follow general rules adopted by consensus just like in any other regular peer organisation such as the EU. We wish Germany success in dealing with the enormous problems caused by migrants. I hope these issues do not get swept under the rug, repeating the situation when a Russian girl's disappearance in Germany was hushed up for a long time for some reason. Now, at least, we are communicating with her lawyer, who is working with her family and with the Russian Embassy. It is clear that Lisa did not exactly decide voluntarily to disappear for 30 hours. Truth and justice must prevail here.

I truly hope that these migration problems will not lead to attempts to “gloss over” reality for political motives – that would be just wrong. Problems need to be laid out honestly and admitted to the voters, open and clear solutions need to be proposed.

We are genuinely interested in seeing this difficult period pass without significant losses, in seeing Germany find solutions to the migration problem, both within the country and in the EU, as well as for other problems the EU will need to consider in the near future, including how the UK referendum might affect the union's future, or the referendum in the Netherlands on the Association Agreement with Ukraine. These are serious challenges for the European Union. Those who are interested in the EU remaining an integral and effective whole – the only way it can be a comfortable partner for Russia and others to deal with – must encourage the EU to find appropriate solutions based on consensus and

solidarity, but not at the expense of third countries, based on a balance of national interests of the EU members, and not on positions of “Trojan horses”.

Question: Yesterday, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura announced the date when the intra-Syrian talks are expected to begin, while keeping everyone in suspense as to the composition of the opposition delegation. Could you shed some light on this issue, as well as comment on publications claiming that Russia and the United States have reached a compromise on this issue? Does this mean that Russia could sit at the same table with groups like the Army of Islam or Ahrar ash-Sham? What concessions could Washington agree to in this case?

Sergey Lavrov: Neither Russia, nor the United States had a mandate to form the opposition delegation. This mandate has been handed to the UN, represented by its Secretary-General and his Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura. UNSC Resolution 2254 clearly states that it is the latter's task to send out invitations to the members of the Syrian opposition, taking note of the participants in the meetings in Cairo, Moscow and other locations, most recently in Riyadh. Mr de Mistura has been in contact with countries that are in the International Syria Support Group, including Russia. We have shared with him our perspective, which is absolutely clear and obvious, as we believe that all those who attended meetings of the Syrian opposition in various capitals and cities should be invited. However, he faced a serious challenge, as some countries represented in the International Syria Support Group insist that only those who were present in Riyadh in December 2015 are worthy to represent the Syrian opposition, leaving everyone else out in the cold. This is clearly a serious violation of Resolution 2254, while Russia, the United States and the UN, who as you know co-chair the International Syria Support Group, all support this approach. I dismiss any claims or allegations that Staffan de Mistura has given in to this outright blackmail. He confirmed, including during yesterday's news conference in Geneva, that a broad range of groups will be present at the talks. The resolution stipulates that the political process is meant to be inclusive, which implies bringing together the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition.

One of the members of the International Syria Support Group recently voiced misgivings over whether or not the Syrian Kurds, i.e. the Democratic Union Party, should be invited. I assume that if this party is left out of the negotiation process, it won't yield the results that we all aspire to — a definitive political settlement in Syria. The Syrian Kurds account for 15 percent of the population and are spread across a vast and very important part of the country. Do you know what reason was given so as not to invite them? We were told: “Why should we invite them if they are not fighting Bashar al-Assad?” Fighting Assad has never been mentioned as a criterion for taking part in the negotiations. After all, the talks are expected to focus on reaching a ceasefire, confirming the commitment to and enhancing efficiency in fighting terrorism, as well as promoting political reforms in Syria. How can political reforms be discussed in a country, while ignoring the leading Kurdish party, quite a powerful force active in countering terrorism on the ground, including ISIS. By the way, political reforms, rather than efforts against terrorism, top the agenda of those behind this lopsided approach to the Syrian settlement.

It would be a serious mistake if the representatives of the Kurdish party did not get invited. Let me reiterate that Russia does not intend to impose any kind of veto. This right goes to Mr de Mistura. He should be aware of his responsibility and refrain from hiding behind Russia or the United States, or follow those who, unlike Russia, are trying to introduce the veto mechanism into the International Syria Support Group. We expect the UN Secretary-General and his Special Envoy to grasp their responsibility and understand that it would be inadmissible, as I see it, to play into the hands of a single member of the International Syria Support Group that decided to leave the Kurds out of the negotiation process.

Question: The Kurds have been fighting against the “Islamic State” and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq for over 18 months, and many countries assisted them in this struggle. How did Russia help the Kurds combat ISIS? Does Russia intend to step up its support? What is the role of the Kurds in Russia's strategy?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, we attach great importance to the Kurdish people who have historically lived across a number of countries in the region, including Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey. Today, Kurds are quite good at fighting ISIS. We support efforts by the Syrian and Iraqi governments to combat terrorism and have been doing so long before the so-called US-led coalition was formed in August 2014. The emergence of the terrorist threat was factored into our arms shipments to Syria and Iraq almost from the outset. Seeing that in Iraq government troops and the Kurdish militia are fighting the ISIS, we took into account the needs of the Kurds when supplying weapons to the central government of Baghdad. We fully respect Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity and are aware of the interactions between Baghdad and Erbil, the Arabs and Kurds and the Sunni and Shia in Iraq. We are also aware of the proposals that have surfaced recently to disintegrate Iraq. Similar views have been expressed on Syria and Afghanistan. We know all too well who is behind this, including neighbouring countries that have long developed an idiosyncratic attitude towards the Kurds. These are dangerous trends that Russia opposes. All the assistance that has been or is delivered, including to the Kurds, is channelled through the central government.

That said, we know that a number of countries, primarily in the West, are providing direct assistance to the Kurds. As far as I know, Baghdad does not object to such initiatives. Specifically, the Kurds are receiving supplies directly from Germany. Salih Muslim's Democratic Union Party (Syrian Kurds) is an ally of the United States, and is thus able to receive deliveries directly from the United States, while US instructors help the Kurds enhance their combat efficiency. So, the proposal not to invite this group to the intra-Syrian talks means leaving out a party that actually fights ISIS and is a US ally, whose fighters are supported by Washington. In this situation, primarily, this is a matter of concern for all of us, as this would not just be unfair but also harmful and counterproductive. Second, this is a matter of concern for the United States, as, as I've already mentioned, it views this group as the most efficient and closest ally in fighting terrorism. I hope Washington will not leave it at that.

Question: Pyongyang's statements regarding a successful hydrogen bomb test have alarmed countries in the region and across the world. The dangers of a growing nuclear threat on the Korean Peninsula have again come to the fore. Can the North Korean nuclear issue be resolved in the future based on the positive example of Iran? What challenges do the respective sides need to overcome first and foremost?

Sergey Lavrov: I believe it is possible to resolve the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula, which is how we describe it. The objective is not to deprive North Korea of nuclear weapons, but to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula, so that neither North Korea nor South Korea have nuclear weapons there, and so that the United States will not deploy there elements of its nuclear arsenal.

We made a statement to this effect after North Korea held another nuclear test in violation of the relevant UN Security Council resolution. We are in consultations on this issue with the United States, with our Chinese friends and with representatives of South Korea and Japan. We are not sure that it was a hydrogen bomb test, as this would render ineffective the UN Security Council resolutions that introduced strict limitations on the delivery of any nuclear weapons materials to North Korea, and that additional materials and technology that make such a test possible have found their way into North Korea. If it is

proved that it was just another nuclear test, like the two or three previous tests, this would mean that our restrictions are effective.

I'm not going to speak about the overall unacceptability of the proliferation of nuclear technology here. As I said, we should focus on establishing whether or not the UN Security Council decisions on preventing the further development of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme are effective. We are actively discussing this issue during our contacts with our colleagues, including China. Politics-wise, the only possible action is to resume the six-nation talks. Several attempts to do this have been made in the past three years, but the Western countries of the six-nation group, primarily the United States, Japan and South Korea, rejected the proposed flexible approaches and demanded unconditionally that North Korea abandon its nuclear programme before they commence talking with it. It was probably the simplest solution that would have suited all sides, but it is also an unrealistic solution.

Russia and China believe that the six-nation talks should be resumed. South Korea proposed that we first meet in the six-minus-one format, without North Korea. I don't think that this is a good idea, as it would amount to yet another attempt to keep someone isolated. Nothing good came of the attempts by the so-called international community, namely our Western partners, to keep Iran in isolation, as Iran only accelerated the implementation of its nuclear programme. Since 2004, when this issue had a relatively simple solution, as Iran only had two dozen centrifuges, our Western partners stubbornly insisted that they would talk with Iran only after it stopped the operation of its centrifuges. As a result, when the talks resumed, Iran had thousands of these centrifuges and all of this because they tried to isolate Iran instead of talking with it. We must not repeat this mistake on the Korean Peninsula.

Question: Russia closed its border with Norway on Friday because of the refugees whom Norway attempted to send back to Russia. Bilateral talks are now underway on this issue. Can this issue be resolved so that Russia will accept the refugees whom, in principle, it agreed to accept?

Sergey Lavrov: I know the reasons for this problem. I don't know the details, but essentially the issue concerns people who came to Russia in search of jobs or to visit their relatives. They didn't write in their visa applications that they intended to transit to Norway. In other words, they lied about the real reason for entering Russia. We don't want to let these people back into Russia because they broke our laws.

We have agreed with the Norwegian authorities that we'll take a pause to find a formula for settling this issue in the interests of both Russia and Norway. Russia and Norway have a readmission agreement, and our Federal Migration Service is discussing with its Norwegian colleagues the possibility of drafting a supplement to this agreement as soon as possible to resolve the practical issues that arise as a result of these unscrupulous people.

Question: What lies in store for Russian-Bulgarian trade and economic relations? Is it possible to balance bilateral trade in mechanical engineering, the food sector, agriculture and shipbuilding? There has been a negative fallout from the South Stream project and earlier still, from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Bulgaria and the Soviet Union cooperated in all of the above sectors. Can Russian universities admit more Bulgarian students at their state-subsidised departments; for otherwise the generations born in the 1990s and 2000s won't know their history? Bulgarians are alarmed by the increasing deployment of NATO weapons in their country, including Abrams tanks. But, why buy a gun if you don't intend to use it to kill?

Sergey Lavrov: I think you've confused the words of the saying: it wasn't exactly 'why' and it wasn't a 'gun' but something else entirely. Your question is somewhat emotional. I understand and mostly share your emotions. I believe that Russian and Bulgarian histories, cultures, mentalities and peoples are so closely tied together that of course, it is a shame that, to put it mildly, some politicians are willing to ruin and sacrifice all this for their own momentary election related ambitions that are also often imposed from outside.

Russia has never initiated a decrease in trade, economic or any other cooperation with Bulgaria. Never. This is true for the Burgas–Alexandroupoli pipeline, the project Bulgaria left unilaterally back in 2013. This is true for the Belene nuclear power station and South Stream. Prime Minister Borissov admitted himself that it was the EU – particularly, Brussels, that blocked South Stream. And I would like you to understand the difference between the EU and Brussels. There is the European Commission that consists of commissioners, an institution that, like any bureaucratic institution, wants to recreate and affirm itself. We often see how member countries are beginning to express more discontent with the steps taken by the European Commission without securing the approval of these countries. This was what happened, by the way, in September 2014, when the first major package of sanctions was imposed. The European Commission did this while bypassing the agreements between the heads of state and government. Many EU leaders sent angry letters to Brussels. I don't know if it helps but the bureaucracy problem has been increasingly discussed. This includes a discussion about how Germany feels as part of the EU.

We couldn't wait for the wind of change in Brussels with regards to South Stream and started looking for an alternative because Europe needs Russian gas. The transit line via Ukraine is not reliable and you get a daily proof of that. Our Ukrainian neighbours issue new statements every day. Today they wish to increase the transit price ten times even though it is fixed in the contract. Tomorrow it's something else. Therefore, we need a direct path for Russian gas to reach the EU. Everybody agrees with this. We came up with Nord Stream 2 although it could still be South Stream if the European Commission was less interested in geopolitical games and more in doing its work honestly and securing the EU's energy supply.

You brought up the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance but that was a different story in a different time. Today projects, of course, must be mutually beneficial, sustainable, market-oriented, with state support only provided in the forms acceptable in global economic relations. There is an opportunity to provide this support, including through the International Investment Bank, which is still there and comprises resources of our countries and other Eastern European states.

Speaking of education, I guess we should be looking to bring our systems together and participate in Bologna Process. Major Russian universities are joining the Bologna Process. At the same time, we are expanding the number of available government scholarships. There are also many students who come to study here and pay for it. This also indicates that our education has a good reputation and is popular in the world. These are not only countries that have traditionally sent their students to Russia and the Soviet Union, not only developing and Eastern European countries, but western countries as well.

We are ready to provide more scholarships to Bulgaria if there is interest and if Bulgaria thinks independently in this aspect of our relations.

Speaking of Russia taking actions so that Bulgaria remembers our past, I think it is the Bulgarian past too. And Bulgarians must make sure they do not forget their history. They should not forget who helped them

get rid of the Ottomans and helped in other very difficult situations. I believe there are politicians and public figures in Bulgaria (when I was in Sofia some time ago I met with the public and saw these people), people who wouldn't allow this history to be rewritten like it is done by certain figures in other countries, including brotherly Ukraine.

Finally, you mentioned NATO and the disposition of its military infrastructure near our border, including in Bulgaria. This is a matter of concern for us too. I saw the statistics and know that the Pentagon requested some 4 billion dollars for European operations in the 2017 fiscal year (the budget will be presented to Congress next month) instead of the current 790 million, which is almost four times higher. The money will be spent on the forward-based storage of equipment, machinery and a regular rotation of US troops. US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter confirmed this in his speech in Davos.

Bulgaria is a NATO member. Therefore, you must follow the rules of course. But don't forget that their decisions require consensus to be enforced. Some of my counterparts, official representatives of their countries, are very concerned with NATO's image as an enemy again. If you count their votes it will be an impressive group. However, for some reason, when they go to meetings in Brussels and vote, I see them acting under the treaty's discipline instead of their national interests.

President Putin recently identified who is in charge of treaty discipline. The problem is not that these are NATO ideas and attempts to impose their will on everybody (Europe is a NATO member). The problem is that NATO decisions are decisions of the United States while Europe just salutes and follows orders.

Question: Another emotionally charged question. How will Russian diplomacy exonerate the "Russian world" concept? After all, you've showed the entire world that it is not the "Russian world" but the "Russian war" and "Russian death." Amid the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, how can Russia's neighbours possibly feel secure if Russia violates all agreements and obligations if it wants to?

Sergey Lavrov: If you're referring to the Budapest memorandum, we have not violated it. It contains only one obligation – i.e. not to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine. No one has made any threats to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine. A threat came from other opposite direction. Yulia Timoshenko said the "quilted jackets" [pro-Russian forces] in Donbass should be punished with a nuclear bomb.

Regarding the "Russian world," I cannot agree that the "Russian world" is just some Russian invention. The "Russian world" exists. It is not a project, but an objective reality, just as there is the objective reality of the "Ukrainian world" in Canada and other countries, and just as there is the reality of the Armenian diaspora. The fact is that until recently – for various objective and subjective reasons – we were unable or lacked funding to establish stable contact and communication channels with these people to see how we can help them, above all to ensure that they are able to use their language, have mass media available in their native language, so that they can get together and hold various events to help preserve their culture and identity, ensuring their rights as citizens of the state where they live – rights that would not be infringed upon and be based on generally recognised norms of international law. This also fully applies to Russian people who lived and still live in Ukraine. These Russian people had hope. President after president was elected in Ukraine, promising to make Russian an official state language. That did not happen. The best Viktor Yanukovich could do was to accede (although not completely) to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which, however, did not prioritise Russian but ensured it, as well as other minority languages of which there are plenty in Ukraine, corresponding rights in minority concentrated regions.

We adhere to all our obligations assumed in the Council of Europe and UN, including the principle of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and noninterference in the internal affairs of states, including the UN Declaration of 1970 on principles of international law. It states that each government that is treated in keeping with the principle of respect for the territorial integrity is obligated in the framework of this territorial integrity to ensure the self-determination of the peoples living in this country, including with regard to their linguistic, cultural and other rights. The government should ensure its territorial integrity without the use of force.

Now, if, on the backdrop of these obligations, which apply to Ukraine, Russia and all others, we look at what has happened between the start of November 2013 and February 2014, it becomes clear who has violated which obligations and who has encroached upon what is known as the “Russian world.” I can cite Dmitry Yarosh (I’m not really thrilled to do so). The remarks he made long before the Crimea referendum are known to everyone. In late February, he said a Russian will never understand a Ukrainian, will never speak Ukrainian, will never think like a Ukrainian and will never glorify Stepan Bandera or Roman Shukhevich, and this is why there is no place for Russians in Crimea and they should simply be kicked out. I believe he used even stronger language. Then Yarosh organised “friendship trains,” as you remember, with young armed thugs to forcibly enter Crimea and organised a “fifth column” that seized Ukraine’s Supreme Council and so on. When then regional leaders in Donbass, who were legitimately elected in accordance with Ukrainian laws and regulations, began to oppose the coup politically and morally, and when Kiev began to send its agents to replace them – commanders and commissars, when those commissars were rejected and when people began to elect mayors – the Ukrainian leadership, which had come to power as a result of a putsch, began to use the army and aviation against its own people. Remember how Lugansk was bombed? I’m not even talking about Odessa. This will never be investigated. The Council of Europe has already drawn a conclusion, suggesting that the Ukrainian authorities will never allow the truth to be known. Incidentally, during the Maidan [revolution], NATO, the Americans and the UN secretary-general urged us to influence Yanukovich and persuade him not to use the army against his own people. He did not use the army against his own people. However, when the army was used in the so-called antiterrorist operation, with the air force and heavy weapons, against those who opposed the putsch and protested against it – by the way, nonviolently – to all our questions as to whether or not those citizens should also be advised not to use the army, we were told, on behalf of NATO: “You know, they’re defending their state.”

So this situation is understandable to all normal, impartial people, including journalists – who defended which world, who ensured the coexistence of the Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Romanian “worlds” in one state and who re-carved electoral districts during recent elections so there is not a single Hungarian in parliament even though Budapest and the Hungarian community in Ukraine begged for an electoral district to be formed to enable them to have one representative in Verkhovna Rada. So all this talk about the “Russian world” – as well as about all other “worlds” – is a multidimensional story that needs looking into.

The most important point I’d like to make in conclusion, in response to your question, is that there are quite a few of those who try to analyse what is going on through the prism of the “Russian world” in an absolutely skewed interpretation – namely, as Russia’s obsession with the protection of Russians all over the world, including by force of arms, which is the main threat. This premise underlies the decisions that are now gleefully made by NATO, much to the joy of the military and industrial complex. As I said, US spending to move NATO borders closer to Russia alone will amount to not \$700 million but \$4 billion. This is the rationale.

It turns out that everyone is allowed to take care of its citizens, but only Russia – the moment it starts doing so – ends up in the category of aggressors and troublemakers, who violate all rules and laws of international communication. This is a red herring. Regarding the issue as to who has fulfilled what, I've already cited the example of the Budapest memorandum, which has not been violated, as we continue to act in accordance with it, but unlike the United States and UK, we do not undertake to support coups in Ukraine.

Speaking about the implementation of UN documents, I have already described to you broadly the declaration that defines the criteria for respecting the territorial integrity of these or other states under various governments.

As for more practical documents, I'd like to note that the text of the Minsk Agreements suggests that they must be primarily implemented by the Kiev authorities. You may read the agreements and see for yourself what they require again.

I believe it is necessary to seek the implementation of what the sides agreed upon. Replying to the question about the main challenges of the past year, I have already said that one of the most serious issues is to ensure our partners' negotiability.

Question: What could you say about the recent statement by Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk on the referendum on the new Constitution? What are the chances of Ukraine timely amending the Constitution's provisions on decentralisation as the Minsk Agreements require?

Sergey Lavrov: I find it difficult to comment on this because the Minsk Agreements were approved and signed by Ukrainian President Pyotr Poroshenko, who assumed responsibility for their implementation. The course of this implementation is another matter. I've said this more than once. The Ukrainian authorities are trying to observe the Minsk Agreements but not by consistently and honestly carrying them out. Instead they are playing up to radicals who are trying either to question them or misinterpret them in bad faith.

I'm not a big expert on Ukraine's Fundamental Law. The Ukrainian Constitution was amended many times and its current version, as Venice Commission experts observed, is fairly complicated and it is unclear what norms should eventually be valid. The president is responsible for Ukraine's foreign policy and nobody argues this for the time being. Ukraine's President Pyotr Poroshenko has declared there will be no Minsk-3. Let me recall that a certain Roman Bessmertnykh spoke about a Minsk-3 in the Contact Group. He said Minsk-2 has already collapsed. A couple of days later President Poroshenko had to correct him by saying there is only Minsk-2 and there will be no Minsk-3. After this Bessmertnykh declared what he thought of Minsk-2, getting back to his duties, that is, representing Ukraine in the Contact Group and being responsible for the fulfilment of the Minsk Agreements. Later on we actually heard a statement by Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk who said that a nationwide referendum was the only option. Verkhovna Rada Speaker Vasily Groisman has already said that this should not be done. However, we proceed from the premise that the president is in charge of Ukraine's foreign policy. Prime Minister Yatsenyuk has already said an awful lot. Just a year ago, that is, in our time, he was trying to scare Europe by saying that an attack on Germany and France will follow what is referred to as "aggression in Ukraine." This is fairly strange because he was a good minister (for some time Yatsenyuk was Ukraine's foreign minister). He seemed to me a sensible person who listened to arguments and took adequate steps. Maybe he changed because of bad outside influence. This is all I can say.

Question: Did Russia offer Bashar al-Assad to resign? Was political asylum discussed?

Sergey Lavrov: These questions have already been answered. In both cases the answer is “no.” I read allegations that were spread with reference to Igor Sergun, the late chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of Russia's General Staff. Ostensibly, he made an express visit to Damascus to offer Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave. This is not true. Such a conversation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was unnecessary. Bashar al-Assad was in Moscow, spoke to President Vladimir Putin and what they came to terms on is public knowledge. We reaffirmed on the record and President Vladimir Putin repeatedly said this, that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad agreed to the talks with members of the opposition, including the armed opposition and to the formation on the ground of a broader anti-terrorist front from the units of the Syrian army and the opposition, which will be ready to fight ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and the like. It was also agreed in Moscow that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will be ready to consider the political reforms that were eventually enshrined in the decisions of the Vienna Group and UN Security Council Resolution 2254 as part of the political process, to take part in which he will send a delegation. Nobody asked for political asylum and nobody offered anything like it.

Question: Mr Lavrov, you've already mentioned UN Security Council resolutions 2199 and 2253, which prohibit the funding of terrorist activities. However, as we see Turkey and especially Saudi Arabia are violating these resolutions and thwarting political processes in Syria. Now the so-called “Syrian opposition” that gathered in Riyadh threatens to boycott the Geneva talks on January 29. Even if these talks take place and some agreements are adopted, what are the guarantees that these resolutions and agreements will be implemented?

Sergey Lavrov: We are also concerned over the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions; not only these but also many others are very often buried in oblivion. However, as regards the anti-terrorist resolutions on Syria, we are fully determined to prevent any games and are closely monitoring the activities of the UN Secretariat that should prepare information and subsequently a report on how these resolutions are carried out by various countries. This is particularly important with respect to UN Security Council Resolution 2199 on the exchange of information and the coordination of actions on curbing the activities and arresting terrorist commandos. This is a problem for Russia, Europe, our neighbours in Central Asia and the Caucasus where ISIS recruits its bandits who operate in Syria and Iraq, doing their dirty business and returning home. This is a problem for everyone, including Europeans and Americans. Characters from Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia appeared in Syria.

If we want to undermine the funding of terrorists, the second vital document is UN Security Council Resolution 2253, which prohibits trade in illegal oil, and the purchasing of artefacts or anything at all from ISIS and the like, including oil from deposits that the terrorists seized on the territory of Syria and Iraq. These terrorists also appeared in oil-bearing areas in Libya, close to Sirt.

Speaking about other countries, ISIS's influence is spreading like metastases in Afghanistan. The recent US decision to allow Americans servicemen to pursue terrorists is a de facto recognition of the fact that ISIS is taking deeper root there and is increasingly gaining influence, which it is taking away from the Taliban.

UN Security Council Resolution 2253 requires that the secretary-general prepare regular reports on its implementation. We are following the preparation of the first report. I'd like to use this news conference to send a signal to our colleagues in the UN Secretariat: according to our information (so far unofficial

but we'd like to double-check), the report contains practically no information on the smuggling of oil from Syria to Turkey. Nothing at all. This is outrageous. The media have quoted more than enough facts in this regard and they should be reflected in this report. We will insist on this. We won't allow anyone to drag it all out and bury it in oblivion.

Question: In 2007, speaking at the Munich international security conference, President Vladimir Putin said: "You need us more than we need you." This year, as far as I know, you will represent Russia at the conference. Will there be any changes in this formulation?

Sergey Lavrov: If you work in Moscow, you must have heard the news that the Russian delegation will be led by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. I will also be in Munich and speak at one of the so-called panel discussions. I'm sure that Mr Medvedev will put forward our position and it will also be presented by other Russian participants.

If you're interested specifically in whether or not we still believe that the West needs us more than we need the West, here is what I will tell you. Ideally, we should need each other, support each other and work together to eliminate all common threats. In reality, however, the West turns to us far more often than we turn to the West.

For example, take the sanctions that have been introduced. We do not even mention them. We simply start drawing our own conclusions regarding the extent to which our Western partners are reliable and faithful to their obligations and how far they are prepared to follow generally accepted approaches, namely that only the UN Security Council is authorised to apply enforcement measures. As we answer these questions in the negative, we develop import-substitution programmes and implement structural reform – call this whatever you like. President Putin made this point in many of his speeches, including his remarks in Stavropol yesterday. The idea is that our economy should be self-sufficient, not isolated from the rest of the world, but just the contrary, open to cooperation with all those who are willing to cooperate on the basis of equality, not dictate. However, economic self-sufficiency presupposes technological development and investment in human capital. We should do everything we can not to depend on the whims of a particular group of countries, above all, our Western partners (this happened after they felt "offended" because we supported the Russian people in Ukraine who did not accept the coup). I cited Dmitry Yarosh. They wanted either to eliminate them or deprive them of their rights in Ukraine. We want to be insured against such situations.

However, returning to the logic of your question, I'd like to point out that we are not chasing our European colleagues, saying: "Let's do something to get the sanctions lifted." No. We've focused on making ourselves independent of such zigzags in Western policy, of Europe saying, "Yes, sir," to the United States. However, in bilateral contacts, when they come here or when they meet us at international forums, our European colleagues say: "Let's think of something. Help implement these Minsk agreements, as we're sustaining serious losses as a result of these sanctions and we want this page to be turned as soon as possible." It turns out that, in this case, they need us more than we need them, among other things, to implement the Minsk agreements. The Minsk agreements concern the Ukrainian government and Donbass. Yes, we have influence on Donbass and we support it. Perhaps without our aid and humanitarian supplies, Donbass would have been in a deplorable state. However, it is also essential to influence the Kiev authorities. We need the West with regard to influencing the Kiev authorities, but this is not happening yet.

Or take the situation regarding Iran's nuclear programme. In the final stage of these negotiations, we were literally bombarded by requests when it was necessary to resolve the issue of evacuating enriched uranium in exchange for natural uranium, which was a key condition for reaching the relevant agreements, when it was necessary to decide who will convert the enrichment facility at Fordow for research purposes, to produce medical isotopes and so on. We received requests that carried, among other things, considerable financial implications, at least ones that bring us no financial benefit whatsoever. Nevertheless, we've done our part of the deal. Now, everyone is calling us and our Chinese colleagues with regard to the North Korean issue: "Help us do something to get North Korea to observe its obligations."

Or take, for example, the recent developments regarding Syria. US Secretary of State John Kerry (I value our relations) constantly encounters difficulties with US partners in the region, including Turkey and other countries neighboring Syria, and every time he asks us to help find some compromise, some solution. This was also the case at the meeting of the Syria Support Group.

Right now, I'm unable to recall the requests that we recently addressed to our Western colleagues. We believe that it is not quite correct to make requests. We believe that if talks result in the signing of a document it is not a matter of request but obligations that need to be fulfilled.

I don't want to sound immodest – I simply gave you some facts and you are free to draw your own conclusions.

Question: Mr Lavrov, lately, the media has been filled with rumours that there is "a Lavrov document" or "a Lavrov proposal" on the table regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. What is this and does it exist?

Sergey Lavrov: There was no and there is no "Lavrov document" or any other such document. There are a number of documents (four or five or maybe six) that were drafted by the co-chairs at different stages of Nagorno-Karabakh talks as a first step in formulating the basic principles for resolving the conflict and then, based on these principles, drafting a peace agreement that would be legally binding, not political. The co-chairs have submitted different versions of this document (it evolved from 2007 until 2010–2011) with the OSCE secretary general in Europe. They are now in the organisation's files. These are the only papers that can be called documents, considering that none of these official documents have led to a practical resolution of all components of the Nagorno-Karabakh situation while the work is proceeding according to the "nothing is agreed on until everything is agreed on" principle.

As you know, ever since 2010, when Dmitry Medvedev was president, Russia has worked to find solutions to issues on which the parties have yet to reach agreement. This has helped make some progress. There was a prolonged hiatus, after the Kazan summit, in 2011, when contrary to our expectations we could not approve a document regarding the fundamental principles. When Vladimir Putin was reelected as president he met with the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders. In keeping with the instructions from the three presidents, we sought to resume the efforts in search of a solution. We are now looking for these solutions on a conceptual level, in the process of discussions.

I've had several meetings with my Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts. We discuss all of this with the US and French co-chairs. There are no documents except for those that were left with the OSCE. Everything else is the search and brainstorming process.

Question: What is the outlook for Russian-Georgian ties this year? What can be achieved at this point considering that there are insurmountable differences between Russia and Georgia? Moscow has recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and these countries have opened embassies in Moscow. If there is no chance for a full-scale resumption of diplomatic ties between Moscow and Tbilisi, are there any other prospects and formats? How realistic is the lifting of visa requirements with Georgia? Talks are underway between Tbilisi and Gazprom on gas transit. The monetisation of this transit to Armenia is a controversial issue. If no agreement is achieved, will this issue have political implications? How can Russia distribute gas to Armenia in this case?

Sergey Lavrov: We believe in normal, good neighbourly relations with Georgia. We act on the assumption that the Georgian people must not pay for the rupture of ties with their Russian neighbours. Georgians and Russians are interested in these ties. It is unfair to have to pay for the criminal mistakes of former Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili. We were not the ones to break off diplomatic relations. We acted fully in keeping with the standards of international law, including those that are stipulated in the declaration on the principles of relations between states that I mentioned earlier, whereby territorial integrity and respect for the territorial integrity of states imply that this state ensures the rights of all of its people and the unacceptability of using force to compel these people to remain within the state in question. All of these principles were grossly violated by President Saakashvili. I will not go into the history of the issue. After the attack on South Ossetia, on his own citizens and on the Russian peacekeepers, Mr Saakashvili was defeated by Russia and the self-defence forces. Having lost hope in deciding their fate (there were a lot of options during these years, including federation and confederation) through negotiations, South Ossetia and Abkhazia declared independence. We had no other option, no way out but to recognised their independence to ensure the security and survival of the South Ossetian and Abkhaz people. This is not a matter of debate but, to reiterate, this was the result of Mr Saakashvili's criminal policy. He is notorious for such provocations, which, as we understand it, are organised on his own initiative, but quite often also on his express orders.

We are pleased with the fact that the Geneva discussions are ongoing. First of all, we are concerned with security issues to prevent such recurrences in the future. There are some ideas that enable all parties to the Geneva talks to subscribe to a document that will guarantee against such recurrences in the region. Naturally, we are interested in the Geneva discussions on humanitarian issues, including the repatriation of refugees and displaced persons. The humanitarian efforts are stalled by Georgia's ongoing moves to submit to the UN General Assembly a [draft] resolution on the problem of refugees and displaced person unilaterally.

We are willing to discuss this at the UN but with the participation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as they are in fact the target of the demands in the resolution that Georgia is promoting at the UN. They [Abkhazia and South Ossetia] are absent, because they are not allowed: our US colleagues deny them visas even though representatives of unrecognised Kosovo not only receive visas but are granted most favoured treatment on UN territory. How's that for double standards?

In addition to the Geneva discussions, we have bilateral ties with Georgia, which are now emerging from a state of deep freeze. Contact was established between the veterinary and plant disease oversight services and, to our mutual satisfaction, the trade in drinks and foodstuffs has resumed.

You were correct in saying that there are ongoing talks with Gazprom. I don't think they should be expected to fail. I believe this is a pragmatic process that is in everyone's interests. Armenia will also

benefit from this. So I leave everything there to the discretion of the two countries' companies and relevant ministries. I'm sure that they will find a solution.

We do all we can to facilitate humanitarian ties even when, after the breakoff of diplomatic relations with Georgia, we had to introduce visas and tighten visa requirements, largely because the terrorist threat coming from the Pankisi Gorge still exists. Incidentally, even now there are reports that ISIS is using this hard-to-access territory for training, recreation and replenishment of supplies. Normalisation of our ties is reflected in the recent easing of visa requirements, whereby business, work, study and humanitarian visas are issued regardless of the circumstances. Even a private visa does not require an invitation from family members. A friend can invite you and you will receive a visa. We are willing in the future to lift the visa requirement. It would be a little strange to discuss this at a time when we have no diplomatic relations, but, to reiterate, we did not break them off.

I will say that recently we also managed to resolve a number of issues based on reciprocity. They concerned the registration of property rights on Georgia's diplomatic mission here and Russia's in Tbilisi. This was a useful move as well. We have the Grigory Karasin/Zurab Abashidze format that allows us to discuss any issue. They know each other well and have trustworthy relations that allow them to discuss anything. Incidentally, I'm open to contact with my Georgian counterpart. I'm sure other contact is possible as well. When asked about this, Russian President Vladimir Putin did not rule out any opportunities at all, if the occasion arises.

Question: I'd like to ask a question about relations between Russia and Japan. Recently Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that Tokyo wants to build relations with Russia and resolve various problems facing the world. What opportunities and perspectives do you see in this area?

Serious differences on the territorial issue persist. Japan believes that the signing of the peace treaty is tantamount to resolving this territorial issue. Russia believes that this issue is closed.

Sergey Lavrov: We're interested in close and friendly relations with Japan. This is our important neighbor with whom we have a diverse system of trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural ties, as well as many plans. Japanese companies operate in our market, mastering the processing of hydro carbons. They are also involved in auto manufacturing and other high-tech industries. We want these projects to multiply in the interests of our two countries and peoples.

There is an agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that the peace treaty issue should by all means be on the list of questions that must be resolved. We do not consider the peace treaty to be synonymous with resolving the territorial issue. The treaty is a step that must be made for bilateral relations to be normal, not only de facto but also de jure. Let me recall that the only document that was signed and ratified by the two countries in 1956 was the so-called Declaration that gives priority to the signing of the peace treaty in no uncertain terms, regardless of how the agreement on the islands will and may be reached in its final version. It reads: the peace treaty followed by the transfer, rather than the return, by the Soviet Union to Japan of the two southern islands as a goodwill gesture.

Let me repeat that this Declaration primarily proceeded from the main thesis: it recorded the recognition of the results of World War II by the Soviet Union and Japan. Without the confirmation of this position and recognition of the results of World War II, as they are recorded in the UN Charter, it is practically

impossible for us to move forward. Our Japanese colleagues are aware of this. Fulfilling the instructions of President Putin and the Japanese Prime Minister, we held a special discussion on the historical aspects of the peace treaty issue as part of our talks on the peace treaty last year. We must come to some common conclusion concerning these historical aspects. After all, we are not asking for something exorbitant. We want only one thing from Japan – to say that it is committed to the UN Charter like all other countries that signed and ratified it, in all of its clauses, including Article 107 that says that the results of WWII are not subject to revision. I don't think that these demands are too much. Japan has ratified this document.

Nevertheless, we are open to discussions and will continue with them. Yet another round will take place at the deputy foreign minister level as early as February. We'll discuss the issues raised by Japan. We are not dodging any issues. I'd like to repeat that the historical aspect, first of all, the results of World War II are a part of the discussion that cannot be obviated, forgotten or set aside. We'll continue bumping into this problem and our Japanese colleagues are aware of this.

The Russian president and the Japanese prime minister (Mr Abe's predecessors and he himself) have repeatedly observed that to resolve the peace treaty issue, both sides need to substantially upgrade their cooperation across the board – in the trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural spheres and in world affairs.

I've already spoken about the trade and economic areas. Incidentally, Japanese business is ahead of politics. Some Japanese politicians say that if the peace treaty is concluded and the territorial issue resolved, Japanese business will become hugely involved in the Russian economy but it will play it safe if it doesn't happen. We don't feel that Japanese business is trying to play it safe. Maybe, attempts are being made to keep it in check. Probably, much more can be done in trade, economic and investment cooperation. For the most part, business is not waiting for any political stamp but is actively working. We support this. I'm convinced that the closer our cooperation is, the easier it will be to discuss and resolve any issues.

We've repeatedly proposed to the Japanese government to support Japanese business investment on these islands. We suggested creating some additional special conditions, a free trade zone. There are many options for cooperation on these islands without waiting for the full and final settlement of the peace treaty issue. In many respects it reflects the form rather than the content because essentially we maintain peace and cooperation. In other words, we don't feel the effects of the absence of the peace treaty. We are not a hostile state, although the absence of the peace treaty could be interpreted as if we still are. This is not so. Nonetheless, it goes without saying that signing the peace treaty would be a good thing.

Our humanitarian ties are making great progress. Every year Japan holds Russian culture festivals and Speaker of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly Sergey Naryshkin attends the openings. He will do so in 2016. Our people are looking forward to the arrival of Japanese performers.

To fulfil the agreement of our leaders and develop bilateral relations on an entirely new level across the board, including international activities, we would like to cooperate more closely in foreign policy affairs and see a more independent Japan, all the more so since it hopes to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We understand this desire. We'd like those countries that are striving to receive permanent membership in the UN Security Council to bring added value and an additional element of balance in their positions. When a country takes the same position as the United States, it doesn't contribute much to the political process or adjust the balance in the drafting of decisions. In principle, we

would like to see every country (President Putin spoke about this in detail as regards the European Union) to be independent in the world arena and be guided by its own national interests. This is not isolation, nor self-isolation but compliance with international law when making decisions for your country that reflect the interests of your own nation and that are free from pressure that is being exerted on you to make you forget a bit about your own advantage for the sake of pleasing someone else. I hope that we will come to this one day, albeit the modern global diplomatic structure took shape at a time when the historical West dominated the world for centuries. It is very difficult to set these habits aside, but I hope this change is not far off.

Question: This is Barack Obama's last year in office. What are the chances for a reset in Russian-US relations in 2016?

Sergey Lavrov: This question should not be addressed to us. Our bilateral ties had plunged extremely low against the backdrop of wonderful personal relations between former US President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin. When Barack Obama became President and after former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested a reset in our relations, this reflected the fact that the US side itself had realised an abnormal situation when Russia and the United States are not jointly addressing problems that cannot be solved without them. That time period was considered abnormal. We responded very constructively to a reset in our relations. We said that we praised the new administration's decision to correct the mistakes of their predecessors. We achieved numerous positive results, including the New START Treaty, Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation and a number of agreements on various conflict situations. But, for some reason, all this began to disintegrate rather quickly. Currently, everyone, including our US colleagues, is telling us that the Minsk Agreements on Ukraine should be fulfilled, and that everything would normalise immediately. They are saying that sanctions would be lifted overnight, that lucrative prospects for Russia-US cooperation on much more pleasant issues (and not just the resolution of crises) would immediately open up, and that a constructive partnership programme would evolve in no time at all.

We are open for equitable and mutually beneficial cooperation with everyone. Of course, we don't want anyone to build their policies on the assumption that Russia, rather than Ukraine, should honour the Minsk Agreements. The documents state expressly as to who should fulfil them. I hope the United States knows this well. In any event, our latest contacts with US Secretary of State John Kerry, as well as contacts between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Presidential Aide Vladislav Surkov, show that the US side knows all about the essence of the Minsk Agreements. In effect, everyone understands everything. Kiev perceives the decision to extend the Western sanctions as the West's consent to Kiev's non-compliance with the Minsk Agreements. This fully confirms the developments in the Ukrainian corridors of power. So, why should they fulfil these agreements when the West agrees that Kiev doesn't necessarily have to do it?

I've just mentioned an example implying that they' have already started promising another reset in relations with Russia. We need to fulfil the Minsk Agreements, and everything will immediately become cheerful, beautiful, promising and lucrative.

Russia's relations with the Obama Administration began to cool off long before the events in Ukraine, and the same can be said about the end of the period associated with a reset in our bilateral relations. Let's recall how it all happened. First, after we, at long last, secured the consent of our Western partners for acceptable terms regarding Russia's accession to the WTO, the US side realised that the preservation of

the Jackson-Vanik Amendment did not meet their interests because they would lose their privileges and benefits linked with Russia's WTO membership. They moved to abolish this amendment. But the Americans would not be themselves if they simply abolished the amendment and said that, from now on, our cooperation will return to a normal track. They invented the Magnitsky Act, although I'm sure that we have not seen the end of the Magnitsky case. I hope very much that everyone will learn the truth. It's appalling that a provocation was staged, and that they took advantage of the man's death. Nevertheless, this was done, and you know who had lobbied this act. The Magnitsky Act immediately replaced the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. This happened at a time when there was no crisis in Ukraine, although they are now trying to accuse us of violating OSCE principles. Everything that is happening between the West and Russia is explained by the fact that Russia has allegedly failed to honour its obligations, and that it doesn't respect the European order, which evolved after the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, etc. All these attempts aim to justify the containment policy and to find a pretext for continuing this policy. In fact, this policy never ended.

After the Magnitsky Act, we witnessed an absolutely exaggerated response to the Edward Snowden story. Snowden showed up in Russia against our will. We didn't know about this, but his passport was cancelled while he was still in mid-air. He was unable to leave Russia because of the decisions made in Washington. We had no choice but to allow him to stay in Russia for safety reasons, considering the fact that the US side did not conceal the criminal charges brought up against him. We did this just to uphold his right to life.

President Obama called off his visit to Russia, an all-out scandal flared up, the FBI, the CIA and the Department of State made dozens of telephone calls, and the two presidents maintained direct contacts. They told us that our relations would be undermined, unless we let Snowden go. Although the US side called off the visit, President Obama attended the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg. By the way, we accomplished an important task there and agreed on the principles of chemical disarmament in Syria.

Ukraine was another pretext. The righteous indignation over the alleged violation of the Helsinki principles by Russia is not the only thing linked with the Ukrainian crisis (although everything began with Kosovo, air strikes against Yugoslavia, etc.). This reflected the irritation of those who backed the coup as it didn't produce the desired results. To be honest, we are not feeling offended. We don't have such traditions in relations with other states. We understand that life is tougher than any idealistic romantic schemes, such as resetting relations and such things. We also realise that this world (with its brutal clashes of interests) which is emerging from the age of the West's total domination and still has a long way to go towards a more stable system that would have several centres of power, rather than one or even two. This is a long and painful transitional period, and old habits die hard. We understand all this. We understand that the United States wants to have as few rivals as possible, even among countries that compare with it in terms of size, influence, military might and the economy. This is manifested in US-Chinese relations, in how the United States deals with the European Union, striving to make it part of the Transatlantic Partnership, while establishing the Trans-Pacific Partnership in Russia's eastern regions that would not include Russia and China. President Vladimir Putin has discussed this in detail when he gave his analysis of global economic and political processes. We understand all this. Every age brings new trends and attitudes among various elites, especially in large countries which have their own perspective on fighting for their own interests. It would be detrimental for all of us if these processes transcended the boundaries of generally recognised norms of international law. This would cause a huge mess, to put it simply, and we would be plunged into a world of anarchy and chaos. That world would resemble the present-day Middle East, though perhaps without the bloodshed. Everyone would do what he wants, and

nothing good would come of it. It's very important to abide by some common rules of the game. To answer your question, I would like the United States to reset its relations with the entire world, to initiate an all-out reset in relations, so that all of us would gather and reaffirm our commitment to the UN Charter and its principles, including non-interference in domestic affairs, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination, the right of peoples to choose their own future without foreign interference.

We have already mentioned an example when the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to establish diplomatic relations in the mid-1930s. The US side insisted that this ceremony be formalised by an exchange of official letters between each nation's foreign ministers. At the demand of the US side, these letters stipulated a mutual pledge not to interfere in the domestic affairs of partners, not to undermine their political and economic systems. This is what the United States demanded from the USSR in the 1930s. These letters were exchanged at the time and are currently posted on the Foreign Ministry website.

Some time ago, we suggested to the United States that we reaffirm these principles in our relations, but the US side shied away from this discussion. I repeat, this reset would be quite timely.

Question: Could you describe the relationship between the UK and Russia in the wake of a public inquiry that found that serving FSB officers were involved in his poisoning?

Sergey Lavrov: As a journalist, you should formulate your questions more carefully. You've asked, if I understood your English correctly, about relations between Russia and Britain in light of the conclusions of the inquiry that has established the FSB's involvement in the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko.

I'd say that you went even further than Sir Robert Owen, a retired High Court judge, who, when reading his conclusions, has not made a single statement that was not accompanied by the words "possible," "probable" or "it appears that." I believe the media should at least accurately quote your legal representatives.

Sir Robert Owen's statement was full of "possibles" and "probables." He even said that there was open evidence that established a strong circumstantial case (against the Russian State). I consider this to be unprecedented in the legal practice, at least in a case that was allegedly investigated without bias or prejudice. Very serious accusations have been made against top Russian leaders without any evidence whatsoever. The report's conclusions are based on the testimony of selected witnesses such as Mr Alex Goldfarb, who even is mistrusted by many Britons, or on secret evidence that was both provided and received by completely unidentified individuals.

The inquest that was opened by a coroner in 2011 was based exclusively on facts rather than speculation. Russia's Investigative Committee provided assistance in that inquest. It went on until 2014, when the inquest was suspended along with a procedure that had been based on facts and in which the Russian Investigative Committee could participate in full, openly and in all parts of the inquest without exception. But this is probably the reason why that inquest was stopped and a so-called public inquiry began. In this case, the word "public" is ambiguous, because, if I'm not wrong, some key elements of a case may be kept secret in a public inquiry. And this is exactly what happened. The conclusions of Sir Robert Owen run counter to so many facts that it's strange that serious media outlets, as well as politicians, quote him. But politicians are politicians. We've heard what Prime Minister David Cameron and other cabinet members have said on this issue. We especially enjoyed it when Mr Cameron said: "What happened was

absolutely appalling and this report confirms what we've always believed.”

This is like what our American colleagues said about the Malaysian Boeing's crash over Ukraine. They said they would wait for the Dutch Safety Board's final report although they knew who did it anyway. The logic is definitely the same in the Boeing crash and in the Litvinenko case. Why were the results of Litvinenko's autopsy classified? Why were the requests filed by Litvinenko's former wife, his brother and father for his exhumation and a second autopsy disregarded? Why didn't they honour this request? We have similar questions regarding the Malaysian Boeing investigation. The British law and the Dutch board have no answers to them. At the same time, it's a fact, which the investigation has not overturned, that Andrei Lugovoi brought his son to the meeting with Litvinenko during which Lugovoi allegedly poisoned Litvinenko. There is no explanation why a man would subject his children to such danger. There is also ample testimony on the air by people from Boris Berezovsky's team, who are speaking about very interesting facts, which the investigation has completely disregarded. To say nothing of the causes of the death of Boris Berezovsky and bar owner David West, which we are unlikely to ever know, and many other mysteries. I'd say in this situation that if a smart lawyer took up this case and analysed all the facts and all the statements that have been made by British leaders, we would have a very strong case for filing a libel suit. There is sufficient material for this.

You've asked me about the future of Russian-British relations. We would like the British authorities to objectively investigate the increasing number of deaths of Russian citizens, which are not recalled 10 years after the fact but are simply forgotten several months later, and about which we don't receive any information at all.

The only thing I agree with is the UK Foreign Office statement that the Litvinenko case “would further complicate bilateral relations.” But it's not the Litvinenko case, but the song and dance around it that will seriously complicate our relations, and there is nothing “possible,” “probable” or “likely” about this.

Question: You've said that ISIS fighters have their training facilities in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge and are able to recuperate there. This takes place not far from Russia's borders, right near Chechnya. What is Chechnya's role in this? And what is the role of the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov? What can be done in this respect? I take your words very seriously. If what you've said is true, this is a very serious situation.

You also mention a certain Dmitry Yarosh quite frequently. Does he have a role in the Ukrainian government? He has never been part of the executive, he's a nobody. In this case, should statements on Russia-Ukraine relations coming from politicians that get a mere 2 percent during presidential elections be taken seriously? Could you explain why Dmitry Yarosh should serve as a point of reference for gauging Russia's relations with Ukraine?

On March 28, the UN adopted a resolution saying that Russia annexed Crimea. Are you ready to hold discussions with Ukraine regarding the return of Crimea?

Sergey Lavrov: Don't worry. I'll answer all the questions you've asked. Regarding the Pankisi Gorge, there is information that ISIS is setting up its cells not only in Afghanistan and some Central Asian countries, but also in the Pankisi Gorge. There have been actual cases when terrorists were detained, and according to the investigation that was carried out, these people were linked to ISIS. Operations of this kind are top secret during preparation and implementation, but once they are carried out, they are reported

to the public. Television networks and other media regularly report on initiatives of this kind. We all face this calamity. ISIS has established its cells in many European countries. In fact, ISIS fighters were behind the recent terrorist attacks, including in Paris. ISIS also claimed responsibility for the terrorist attacks on the west coast of the United States. This means that all resources should be used in this respect without waiting for someone to say: "Let's get rid of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and after that we can agree on combining our efforts to fight ISIS." We have already seen double standards of this kind.

The US-led coalition, of which Spain is a member, includes a number of countries whose track record in terms of relations with ISIS is anything but clean. When I referred to the Pankisi Gorge, I said that ISIS fighters are reportedly present there, trying to get through all the cracks and gaps. No one will be safe unless we fight them together.

So far, we have been quite efficient in sealing ourselves off from this threat, and cutting short any incursions into the Russian territory. I hope that all the proposals for cooperation we've made are not ignored, and the US-led coalition, which includes Spain, will do what it must to identify those in its ranks who are not entirely sincere in their commitment to fight ISIS and other terrorists.

As for Dmitry Yarosh and the assertion you've made on his being a "fringe politician," whose actions and words are to be dismissed, this is not exactly the case. Dmitry Yarosh and his Right Sector party were one of the main, if not the main, force behind the Maidan movement, and I'm not talking here about the peaceful protest on the Kiev's Independence (Maidan) Square, but about violent protests aimed at inciting violence, shedding blood and using it as a pretext for regime change. If you look up news articles for November 2013 – March 2014 published by media outlets represented at this news conference, you will see that Dmitry Yarosh was not a marginal figure in Ukraine, quite the contrary. It was he who was behind the initiative to send the so-called "friendship trains" to Crimea. He was popular and the media often reported his statements. Moreover, he is now a member of the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and is not a solitary politician. Only recently new information emerged about the true nature of Oleg Tyahnybok's Freedom Party. He was a member of the opposition coalition, and in this capacity was among the signatories of a document (along with Arseny Yatsenyuk and Vitaly Klichko) with Viktor Yanukovich, a document co-signed by our European partners: Germany, France and Poland. At the time, Oleg Tyahnybok was already known as a leader of the party that has wreaked havoc in Europe after its election to the Ukrainian parliament in December 2012. The EU adopted a special resolution demanding that Ukrainians oust this neo-Nazi political force from the parliament, just like in 2000, when the EU wanted to ban Jorg Haider from politics. They succeeded in Austria, but not in Ukraine.

Moreover, despite the fact that the EU said in December 2012 that Freedom is a neo-Nazi party and should be treated as a pariah, the EU supported the agreements involving Oleg Tyahnybok. The French Foreign Ministry even said that the Freedom Party can be situated in the political spectrum slightly to the right of mainstream parties, although its constituent documents contain direct quotes from Hitler regarding a new order in Europe and stipulate that Ukrainian nationalists who pledged allegiance to Hitler in June–July 1941 adhere to this vision. This shows who are those fringe forces in Ukraine that, as you think, have no influence in Ukrainian politics.

With respect to Crimea, we don't have to return anything. Russia does not discuss returning Crimea with anyone. Crimea is part of the Russian Federation in full compliance with the will expressed by the people of Crimea in its entirety, including those who were deprived of any rights under the Ukrainian rule, and who obtained these rights, including the status of a state language, after Crimea's reunification with

Russia following a referendum the results of which you all know. Of course, you may choose to follow along the lines professed by our Ukrainian colleagues who say that “this year we’ll take Donbas, and next year we’ll recover Crimea.” It would be better if they focus on implementing the Minsk Agreements, which stipulate mandatory decentralisation for Donbas, while keeping it within Ukraine. It seems that the Verkhovna Rada has so far been unable to implement the agreements reached by Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko.

When it comes to Crimea, it is always better to go there and see how things are first hand instead of being guided by some third party statements. Many journalists, including from Spain, France, Italy, the Czech Republic, as well as members of the European Parliament, have already done it. I have recently met with a group of French MPs on their way back from Crimea. It is always better to see things with your own eyes. In that case readers may be more interested in following how various media outlets cover the developments in Russia’s Republic of Crimea.

Question: Mr Lavrov, how do you see the current status of Russian-Chinese relations? What are the prospects for this year?

On February 8 China celebrates New Year. It’s a very important holiday for China. What would you say to the Chinese people?

Sergey Lavrov: We regularly assess Russian-Chinese relations since we have many contacts. Every year, there are several top-level meetings, meetings between the heads of government during special visits and various events, whether it’s the UN General Assembly, the G20, SCO, BRICS or other formats. Last year was no exception. President Xi Jinping visited Russia on May 9 for the 70th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Later, President Vladimir Putin visited China on September 3 for the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in the Pacific Ocean and China’s Victory in the Liberation War. And there were several other contacts.

Our relations are currently the best they’ve been in the entire history of our countries and peoples. We have a strategic partnership, diverse cooperation based on the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. From the very first days as President of Russia, Vladimir Putin considered it a priority to maintain deep and diverse relations with our powerful neighbour. We don’t have such an extensive network of contacts with any other partner. These include summits, meetings between prime ministers, four commissions responsible for various issues, such as investment, trade and the economy, energy and cultural cooperation, and chaired by deputy prime ministers, as well as various working groups. All this work is consistent and bringing impressive results.

Apparently, the current economic crisis is affecting the value of trade with China but not the actual amounts which are growing. We have many plans, which, besides energy and hydrocarbon-related projects, involve high technology. These include nuclear energy, space exploration, breakthrough projects in aircraft engineering and many others.

Let me also note that international cooperation between Russia and China is a very close partnership. It is perhaps one of the key factors that help us ensure stability in international affairs despite the recent turmoil. Our cooperation is based on strict compliance with international law, respect for the UN’s core role, the unacceptability of interference in domestic affairs. We are cooperating on all international issues

including the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear programme, the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula, and anti-missile defence.

Our cooperation helps strengthen the authority of institutions like BRICS, the SCO and the G20. The latter, in particular, is our format to jointly support a reform of the international monetary and financial system to make it more just. Just like international political relations, the current monetary and financial system must become more democratic and reflect the increased weight of the BRICS countries, to start with. The first step in this reform was recently made thanks to cooperation between Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. The five-year process of increasing the quotas and votes of our countries is complete, and now the BRICS countries basically have the opportunity to veto IMF resolutions. This is a very important achievement.

Regarding cultural contacts between our nations, we have a good tradition of holding special events with our Chinese friends. In the middle of the last decade, we held the Year of Russia in China and the Year of China in Russia. Later, there were years of national languages, tourism and friendly youth exchanges. The latter just finished a few months ago. Soon, we'll launch the Year of Russian Media in China and the Year of Chinese Media in Russia, another major programme. I believe many of you will find a place in the events programme.

Congratulations to you and your Chinese friends on the upcoming Chinese New Year. As always, I will send a special message to my colleague and friend, Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi.

Question: You've painted a grim enough picture of our relations with the West. As I see it, this primarily concerns the sanctions. A number of prominent Western politicians have expressed an optimistic view that the sanctions could be lifted within a few months. What are their grounds for making these forecasts? We've heard statements by Boris Gryzlov, Russia's plenipotentiary representative to the Contact Group on Ukraine, that certain breakthrough solutions are quite possible.

The case in point is that the West may add a "Litvinenko list" to the "Magnitsky List"; there may be new arrests of state property towards payments supposedly owed to YUKOS, hanging over our head like the sword of Damocles. Can you speak to the likelihood of a turning point in relations with the West in 2016? Please indicate some kind of a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Sergey Lavrov: I didn't paint a grim picture. If you got this impression as I was describing our Western partners' position, the blame is not ours. I've just tried to honestly describe what I see as I interact with them. Our approach is very simple: from time to time we reaffirm our openness to cooperation with everyone on an equitable and honest basis – on the basis of negotiability. Some Western partners say that Russia must be isolated. The other day, a Polish colleague on his own initiative first sent his deputy to us in order to signal that they, our Polish neighbours, were ready to restore the mechanisms of cooperation, but then suddenly declared that if the Russians had requested this, they were ready. Even though it was completely the other way around! And he added right away, so as not to create the impression that the new Polish government was caving in, that Russia was the enemy of NATO and the EU and that they would proceed from this assumption in their relations with the Russian Federation.

It's not us who are painting a grim picture. We see bright prospects towards which we'd like to proceed along with everyone, including our European and US colleagues. Prospects of progress towards a world where parties respect each other and each other's interests on a reciprocal basis and where all parties

equitably take part in solving different problems, where they do not hinder each other's development on the sly, do not scheme, do not create artificial obstacles, nor force others to act against their will, imposing an agenda that does not proceed from the country's own interests. The future, as I see it, is sufficiently bright, even though a shadow is being thrown on it by some of our partners.

In follow up to your question, let me say that an increasing number of these partners have come to realise that they can't go on living like this and that they are being their own worst enemy. The following example gives us reason to talk about the likelihood of positive changes. Our Western partners are increasingly aware that they've fallen into a trap they set for themselves by saying that they will lift sanctions after Russia complies with the Minsk Agreements. They must have realised that this was probably a slip of the tongue, but Kiev heard this and in no time at all interpreted it unequivocally as an indulgence permitting them not to implement the Minsk Agreements. Their non-implementation, aside from the fact that Kiev won't have to take any action or undertake its commitments, means that the West will be obliged to keep up the sanctions against Russia – which needed to be proved to certain gentlemen, who continue to fan radical sentiments in Kiev today.

The fact that the West has fallen into its own trap is beginning to penetrate its conscience. There is just one way out of this predicament – to make Kiev perform what it has subscribed to. The Russian Federation's plenipotentiary representative to the Contact Group for the settlement in Ukraine, Boris Gryzlov, with whom I talked after the Contact Group's meeting, felt a certain mood change displayed by OSCE mediators heading the working groups as coordinators and involved in the Contact Group's proceedings. I felt the same mood in the course of foreign ministerial contacts in the Normandy format. As you may know, the presidents of Russia, France and Ukraine and the German Chancellor also held a teleconference on December 30. In the near future (perhaps even on February 8 – which is the Chinese New Year – the exact date hasn't been set yet), a ministerial meeting is planned. The West understands that the current situation lacks prospects for success. I mean, when everyone pretends that Russia must implement the Minsk Agreements, while Ukraine sits back and does nothing – not changing the Constitution, not granting Donbass special status, or amnesty, not organising elections in consultation with Donbass. Everyone knows that no one except Ukraine will solve these problems. Everyone knows that this is an anomaly, a pathological quirk that became manifest in the Ukraine crisis (which is the result of an absolutely illegal and unconstitutional coup d'état), that has turned it into a measuring stick for all relations between Russia and the West. Everyone knows that this is an absolutely abnormal and unhealthy situation that has been artificially blown out of proportion by countries more remote than Europe, and that Europe no longer wants to be held hostage to this situation. For me, it's an obvious thing.

Question: We know from our own experience that the Russian Foreign Ministry holds second place in terms of direct contact with the media. For the first time ever our large regional newspapers can direct their questions to the Foreign Minister, although we have been cooperating for a long time. Despite the souring of relations between Russia and Poland, ties between common Russians and Poles, in particular between people in the Kaliningrad Region and in the border regions of Poland, have remained rather close, largely thanks to their system of cross-border cooperation. Can this citizen diplomacy help improve relations between countries' governments, and what role can the media play in this?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course it can. This is a rhetorical question, for it's obvious that ties between people must not be affected under any circumstances. We don't want ties between people to be damaged under any circumstances, not even when interstate relations crack or become tense for any reason.

The so-called small cross-border movement between Russia's Kaliningrad Region and the comparable Polish regions is a major common achievement. I'd like to remind you that this was accomplished thanks to the persistent efforts of my colleague, Radoslaw Sikorski, the then foreign minister of Poland, who personally did much to force the Brussels bureaucracy, which, as we spoke about earlier today, did not always promote the development of positive trends, to make an exception for the Schengen regime provisions and to include a larger part of Poland into the visa-free area, a concession that would have been impossible had they mechanically complied with the Schengen norms. I believe it was one of the greatest contributions that Mr Sikorski has made in cooperation with us to develop ties between people. The more the media write about this and about how comfortable people feel in this situation, the better.

This cross-border movement includes a large economic element – Poles and Russians look for cheaper goods that they can buy, such as petrol, for future resale at home. So what? This is life, and we should just regulate this just as border guards and customs authorities are doing. But the majority of people travel because they want to interact with one another. They have established ties with people across the border. We welcome this and hope that you will write and speak about this more often.

Question: Russia consistently advocated for the complete implementation of the agreements on Iran's nuclear file, which also provided for the partial lifting of sanctions on energy exports. Many of our critics claimed that Russia was helping saw off the branch on which it was sitting. We now see that oil prices have plunged to a record low, and at a time when Iran is returning to the market. You mentioned financial losses in one of your answers. Did we have to risk our economic and national interests for this diplomatic victory?

It has been recently said on TV in the United States that they were willing to tolerate civilian casualties during the destruction of a vital ISIS target – the terrorists' financial centre. Could Russia act likewise in Syria, tolerating civilian casualties during the destruction of an important target?

Sergey Lavrov: We've spoken about this many times, primarily during the daily Defence Ministry briefings during which we regularly remind you how targets are selected by our Aerospace Forces. We check and recheck these targets many times to establish that there are no civilians in the area where our aircraft will be working.

As for international law, the Geneva Conventions and Protocols preclude the use of military force against military targets with civilians. If what you've said about US plans is true, this amounts to a violation of international humanitarian law, although I'm not sure that the United States is signatory to these international agreements. The US has not signed many universal human rights documents, for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. There are many complaints about the lack of a US commitment to the universal standards of human rights and humanitarian laws.

Of course, anything can happen in war. The Russian Defence Ministry reports absolutely openly and in detail about our actions in Syria. Not a single allegation that we bombed the wrong targets or that our bombs killed dozens of civilians has been corroborated.

Yesterday I talked with US Secretary of State John Kerry, who said again that we should make a certain gesture to help launch the talks in Geneva, because the Syrian opposition conference in Riyadh said they

wouldn't attend any other meetings because they are being bombed for no reason at all. I told Mr Kerry that we had offered Washington, as the leader of the US-led coalition, many times since September 30, when we announced our decision to use our Aerospace Forces against terrorists in Syria at the request of the Syrian Government, the opportunity to develop coordination between our militaries., President Vladimir Putin has spoken about this many times as well. When it is claimed that we bomb the wrong targets, we ask what targets should we bomb, but they refuse to tell us. Alright, tell us, then, what targets we should not bomb. But they don't tell us that either. And ultimately they continue to claim that we are bombing the wrong targets. Frankly, I'm at a loss. This is not serious talk between serious grownup people.

Yesterday we reaffirmed that our Defence Ministry proposals on daily coordination remain in force. If our partners really want to more effectively fight terrorists, we must develop this coordination rather than simply comply with basic procedures for preventing possible air accidents..

As for Iran and the economic benefits, I spoke on these issues some time ago in reply to a media question. Suppose an oil producing country, or better still, several countries were isolated under current conditions, or a conflict prevented them from developing their oil production and export industries, or a disaster happened there, or sanctions were imposed on them banning their oil exports. In this case the market would resurge and oil prices would rise. Life would improve for a few days or months, and everyone would sigh with relief. But if we want to live in a just world, should we plan our development based on the infringement of others' rights, on sanctions or bombing raids? Living under such scenarios would, first, make your own development hostage to events that don't depend on you, and second, it would amount to creating hothouse conditions or at least to choosing easy solutions to your current problems, whereas we need deep, strategic solutions, about which President Putin has spoken and which are long overdue in our economy.

It would be better, more honest and, in the long run, more effective to plan a development strategy that will take into account all factors of a normally developing world, without expecting that someone will be punished or that a more favourable market situation will await you. We must proceed from what we say – that all countries stand for the free development of international relations and free and comprehensive development of all states without any restrictions. This would be a hundred per cent better for my country, at least in the long term.

Question: According to the UN, some 40,000 people are starving in the city of Madaya besieged by the Syrian government forces, and people are dying of hunger. I'm well aware of the fact that there are also cities besieged by the armed opposition. Moscow maintains good contracts with Damascus. Can it do anything to convince Damascus to lift the siege or at least provide humanitarian access?

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding the city of Madaya, it is true that an agreement was reached as part of a package deal, under which the Syrian Government was expected to allow a humanitarian convoy into Madaya, and fighters were to do the same with respect to two other communities. UN brokered this deal. In the end of the day, the Syrian Government provided access despite the fact that the fighters decided at the last moment not to do the same. This was done without any reciprocity whatsoever.

At this stage, in the run-up to the Geneva talks, Madaya has become an obsession. If humanitarian access to Madaya is provided, the talks will be off to a good start, if not, the opposition may refuse to participate. We raised this issue with our UN colleagues, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for

Human Rights, which drafted reports saying that Madaya was among the few, if not the only, matter of concern. We told them that they should be honest, act as UN officials, not executors of somebody's orders, and refrain from speculating on human suffering. Two hundred thousand people are unable to receive any kind of humanitarian aid or just normal food or medicine. I'm talking about the people trapped in Deir ez-Zor. Reports by our UN colleagues fail to mention this city, and we have pointed out this omission to them. This city is surrounded by fighters from ISIS and other terrorist groups. Nobody is trying to speak with them, as if these two hundred thousand people don't exist. It is there that the Syrian cargo planes parachute Russian relief consignments.

I fully agree with you that the humanitarian dimension is always very important, emotionally charged and is perceived as such. Russia assumes that negotiations should begin without any preconditions even if some want to have it the other way round. Humanitarian issues should take centre stage during negotiations between the Government and the opposition. We will use every opportunity to promote local truces until a full-fledged ceasefire is announced. By the way, just like the United States, Russia wants a ceasefire. However, some Gulf nations are saying that they will be willing to order a ceasefire to those who heed their advice only if they feel that the political process is underway and Bashar al-Assad's resignation is on the horizon. So it is up to you to draw conclusions on who is concerned about civilian suffering, and who is seeking regime change in Syria at any cost, even by exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Moscow, January 26, 2016