

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Argentinean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship Jorge Marcelo Faurie, Moscow, November 16, 2017

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~~Ladies and gentlemen,~~

We have completed talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship of Argentina Jorge Marcelo Faurie, who has come to Moscow for his first working visit after assuming office in June this year. We wish him success in this responsible position.

We discussed our relations in the context of the traditionally close ties between our nations, which established consular relations 150 years ago.

Our relations at this point have reached a level of comprehensive strategic partnership and continue to develop rapidly. Today we have noted that our interaction is growing dynamically in nearly all spheres and at various levels.

We have pointed out the importance of sustained efforts to strengthen our cooperation in defence, security, industry, transport, healthcare and culture. We have agreed to take further steps towards an effective implementation of our joint innovative projects in energy, including nuclear generation, the exploration and peaceful use of outer space, as well as the creation of logistic, port and railway infrastructure.

We emphasised that our effective Intergovernmental Commission, whose co-chairs met in Buenos Aires the other day, will hold in-depth discussions on all aspects of our economic and investment cooperation at its next meeting in February 2018. We are negotiating a number of important documents, including on military and technical cooperation, fisheries and mutual recognition of educational certificates. We have recently completed the ratification of three significant documents on cooperation in law enforcement. Our foreign ministries are working to implement a plan of consultations for 2016-2018. We also welcomed the exchange of diplomats for onsite training at the respective diplomatic academies of Russia and Argentina.

We hold similar or coinciding views on many international issues. We agree with our Argentinean friends on the need to respect the coordinating role of the UN and to address all global problems with due regard for the principles of the UN Charter, such as respect for sovereign equality of states, non-interference in their affairs and peaceful settlement of disputes. We will continue to coordinate our efforts at various multilateral venues, including the UN and the Geneva Conference on Disarmament. The 11th WTO Ministerial Conference will be held in Buenos Aires in December. We also confirmed Russia's support for the G20 agenda Argentina has prepared for 2018, within the framework of its G20 Presidency.

Regarding regional affairs, Russia is willing to promote cooperation with regional organisations such as CELAC and MERCOSUR. We pointed out the ongoing negotiations between the Eurasian Economic Commission and MERCOSUR to sign a memorandum on cooperation. Russia welcomes Argentina's energetic efforts to boost integration in Latin America and supports any steps that will strengthen cooperation in this vital part of the world.

We are satisfied with the results of our consultations. I am grateful to my colleague and give him the floor.

Question (addressed to Jorge Faurie): What is your opinion of Russia's position regarding the political settlement of the crisis in Venezuela?

Sergey Lavrov (adding after Jorge Faurie): I absolutely agree with what was said on the need to address these issues solely through dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. We share and completely support this approach, and we see no other way of resolving this situation.

We hope very much that, while promoting this approach, regional countries will also counter attempts of forces outside the region to hold back the opposition or force it to adopt irreconcilable positions. These attempts, no doubt, are intended to provoke an even deeper crisis and maybe even violence. We consider them to be absolutely irresponsible and unacceptable.

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Question: ~~The US-led international coalition has admitted that about 300 ISIS militants might have left Raqqa during the evacuation of local civilians. Is it possible to talk about collusion between the coalition and ISIS? How will this incident influence the Syrian Army's operation being conducted in eastern Syria with the support of the Russian Aerospace Force?~~

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding the US-led Western coalition's admission that about 300 ISIS terrorists might have left Raqqa during the evacuation of civilians from the city, I have heard that, as you know, the BBC, which is not a foreign agent in the United States, has circulated much more definite reports noting that many more terrorist militants, rather than 300, have indeed left the city.

I cannot talk about collusion. We are dealing in facts. We have no evidence of any possible collusion. But the real situation that has taken shape as a result of this exodus of militants who have escaped unharmed has already influenced the situation on the ground. This is absolutely so. Of course, this has hampered the operations of the Syrian Army, supported by the Russian Aerospace Force, to eliminate surviving ISIS militants, and it will take more time to achieve these tasks.

We need to find out whether this was collusion or not. We have sent the relevant inquiry to Washington DC, but this inquiry is formulated in the context of a broader problem that I have already mentioned. The problem is that the operation to destroy ISIS, which we have been repeatedly told is the only US goal, is nearing completion. We are hearing more and more statements by high-ranking officials, including senior Pentagon officials and the US special representative for countering ISIS, that the United States has no intention of leaving Syria after the defeat of the terrorists, but that it intends to stay there until it makes sure that the political process is proceeding in the right direction.

Even more intriguing is the way the United States justifies its presence there, which is illegitimate because it is not based on any UNSC resolution or an invitation of the legitimate government. A couple of days ago the US Secretary of Defence James Mattis declared that there are UNSC resolutions that allow Washington to have troops on the territory of the SAR. We immediately asked the US State Department what specific resolutions he had in mind. We got an incoherent answer, and the person who gave the answer clearly was aware of the absurdity of the claims about legitimate grounds for the presence of US troops in Syria.

We continue this dialogue, but I repeat, the questions about the ultimate goal of the US in Syria multiply, contrary to their assurances that their only aim there is to combat terrorism.

Question: The UN Security Council will discuss today the American draft resolution on extending the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism mission in Syria. What is Moscow's position on the draft? Will Russia back the resolution?

Sergey Lavrov: It was clear from the outset that the question of extending the OPCW-UN JIM would depend directly on the results of the investigation of the incidents involving the use of a chemical substance in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4. You know the background. Some countries, including the US, immediately accused the Syrian government of delivering the chemical weapon from a plane which took off from Shayrat airfield. An air strike targeted that airfield even before any attempts were made to investigate anything. Since then the OPCW and the Joint Investigative Mechanism mentioned have tried by hook or by crook to refuse to send experts to the place of the incident and to the airport from which the plane with the chemical munition allegedly took off. The answers to all our queries were not just evasive, a direct answer was studiously avoided. We were told that this was unsafe and that it was impossible to take samples.

Simultaneously it transpired that samples had been easily recovered by the French and the British or by those who collaborated with them, and were then analysed at French and English laboratories. We were

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~~notified about it after the fact and were told that there was no need to send anyone there because France and Britain could be trusted.~~ In this situation we had to send a query to Paris and London as to how exactly the samples were taken, how they were delivered to the corresponding labs and what kind of labs these were. To all these questions Paris replied that it was a secret, and London said it was a no brainer: the agent used was sarin, so no further questions and answers were required. In other words, these and many other principles were violated whereby such incidents have to be investigated and which are enshrined in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (CPCW).

The OPCW and JIM behaved not just unprofessionally. They are headed by professionals. We have no doubt about their competence and if this is the case then they behaved in a biased, politicised way and were clearly fulfilling an external order. This approach is unacceptable. Therefore the US resolution seeking to extend the JIM mandate is aimed at preventing any change – a not a single letter – in the actions the mechanism is taking in violation of the CPCW. The resolution is aimed at extending the mandate of the mechanism, welcoming and approving the methods it uses. Clearly, this is absolutely unacceptable. If we are being told that it is doing everything right, it is an insult to the intelligence of our experts. We have distributed all our detailed questions and analytical findings. They are in the public domain. I invite everyone who is willing to do so to take another look at them. Therefore the chances of the American resolution being passed are nil.

We take a constructive approach. We do not deny the importance of preserving the possibility of investigating any incidents in Syria and indeed in the neighbouring countries. These are very important and serious problems, but on the understanding that adjustments should be made to the actions of the JIM. As for exactly what adjustments, we set them forth in our draft resolution pending before the UN Security Council. I repeat, it is aimed at getting this mechanism to work impartially as the CPCW requires.

I have explained why we see no future for the American draft. If the Americans and their allies stop our draft, it would mean that they seek not to get at the truth as to who used chemical weapons and how, but to preserve the mechanism as a docile tool for manipulating public opinion and all the UN member states.