

# Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions following a meeting of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, April 24, 2018

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The meeting of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs has come to a close. We focused our attention on preparations for the upcoming SCO summit meeting, which will be held in Qingdao, China, on June 9 and 10. It will be the first SCO summit meeting that will be attended by the leaders of eight member states following the accession of Pakistan and India. They received the status of full members at last year's summit in Astana, and the summit in Qingdao will be the first SCO summit they will attend as full members.

We pointed out that the SCO expansion and the involvement of our Indian and Pakistani colleagues in our joint efforts are proceeding very well. Much is yet to be done, but we see that our new colleagues are adjusting to new rules quite well.

The agenda for the Qingdao summit was another issue we discussed. We have approved in principle the key documents of the upcoming summit, primarily the SCO declaration, which will cover the main spheres of our practical cooperation and key international issues. The draft declaration highlights the SCO's international efforts to promote respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of others and a peaceful settlement of crises and conflicts. All of this is especially important in light of the attempts by the US and its allies to hinder the development of a polycentric democratic world order. The latest example of this is the aggressive action taken against the Syrian Arab Republic. The communique we have adopted at today's meeting of the SCO foreign ministers offers our assessment of that action.

We also discussed new measures the SCO could take against new challenges and threats. We have prepared an action programme against terrorism, separatism and extremism for 2019-2021, to be approved by the heads of state in Qingdao. The drafting of the SCO anti-drug strategy has reached the final stage. Today we have spoken out in support of revitalising the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, which is working very well as it is.

Our discussions on combatting extremism and drug trafficking focused on the situation in Afghanistan and around it. All of us are concerned about the strengthening of extremists, primarily from the so-called Islamic State, who enter Afghanistan via Iraq and Syria and are becoming entrenched in Afghanistan's northern provinces, which border on our allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This certainly means that we must redouble our efforts to preclude the proliferation of conflicts from Afghanistan and to promote a political settlement of the Afghan crisis.

We expressed our support for the results of the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan, which was held in the capital of Uzbekistan in late March. All those who participated in that conference supported the launch of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban movement while preventing ISIS from recruiting Taliban members.

We reaffirmed our resolve to promote an active involvement of all Afghanistan's neighbours in these efforts. We advocated this policy during the Moscow format meetings. The SCO is a convenient natural platform for promoting a settlement in Afghanistan, because Afghanistan and all its neighbours have either full membership or observer status in this organisation. In light of this, the participants in our discussions today welcomed the resumption of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. Its previous meeting was held in Moscow last autumn, and its next meeting is scheduled to be held in Beijing in mid-May.

At this stage, we are paying special attention to our economic cooperation. We plan to sign a cooperation agreement of the EAEU and its member states with the People's Republic of China soon as part of the concept for promoting the alignment of Eurasian economic integration with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Broadly speaking, we are considering a Greater Eurasia project, about which President of Russia Vladimir Putin spoke at the ASEAN-Russia summit in 2016.

The SCO is expanding and strengthening its international ties. The SCO Secretariat has signed documents on the development of a working relationship with the UN, ASEAN, the CSTO and the CIS. We are planning to sign a memorandum on cooperation with UNESCO soon and a roadmap on strengthening the SCO-ASEAN partnership.

The main results of our meeting today have been formulated as an information statement, which is being circulated, as far as I know.

**Question:** Does the SCO play a role in containing the West economically and politically? Is it possible that cooperation between the SCO member states will expand or transit to the military level?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We do not contain anyone; our role is to uphold the principles of international law in the political, military-political and economic areas. As I have said, these principles include unconditional respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, non-interference in their affairs and the focus on the exclusively peaceful settlement of any disputes and conflicts.

The SCO countries also maintain military cooperation. As you know, the meeting of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which I attended, was accompanied by a meeting of the SCO Council of Defence Ministers, in which Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu participated. Our military colleagues, working in close coordination with us and under the guidance of their national leaders, highlighted the need to enhance the SCO's and its member states' readiness to repel terrorist, extremist and other threats to the territorial integrity, sovereignty and legitimate interests of their countries. Everything necessary is being done to make these preparations as effective as possible. I am sure that additional efforts will be taken towards this end.

**Question:** Did you discuss the coordination of the SCO countries' efforts for the post-war restoration of Syria? It has been proposed to co-finance Syria's reconstruction through the BRICS New Development Bank.

**Sergey Lavrov:** I have no information about the BRICS New Development Bank considering such projects. We do know, though, that the Syrian delegation at the recent Yalta International Economic Forum presented the country's restoration requirements in terms of foreign assistance and possible involvement. However, as far as I know, conditions are not available yet for a practical discussion of these tasks. First we need to complete our anti-terrorist efforts in support of the Syrian government on Syrian territory, first of all addressing humanitarian problems and rebuilding the key infrastructure facilities.

As for the economic reconstruction, it will take time. I am sure that all of us must act in the interests of the Syrian people and with full respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. I am saying this now because several countries have openly adopted a policy of Syria's disintegration. The United States assured us, as I said more than once, that its only goal in Syria was to drive terrorists out and defeat ISIS. Contrary to such statements, including those made by US President Donald Trump, the US is becoming established on the eastern bank of the Euphrates and is not planning to leave the area, where it is creating local governments. By the way, the French president is encouraging the US to do so. He has said recently that the US must keep troops in Syria and that the US-led coalition must remain there as long as necessary to create an order that will suit Western countries. This clearly amounts to interference in internal affairs in violation of all the norms of international law and propriety. I hope very much that talks with our French colleagues will help us find a form of interaction on the Syrian settlement that will be in keeping with all the rules and norms of international law and the UN Charter.

As you know, the presidents of Russia and France had a telephone conversation yesterday, during which President Putin put forth our positions and reaffirmed our readiness to coordinate our positions with our French partners. We are open to cooperation.

As for the restoration of Syria, we are alarmed by the Western statements on denying assistance to government-controlled regions. The litmus test will be the conference on support and assistance to Syria, which will be held in Brussels this week. We want to see what position the conference organisers and participants, primarily the EU and other Western countries, will assume on the restoration of Syria and its economy.

**Question:** Toronto hosted a G7 foreign ministers' summit, which again announced that new anti-Russia sanctions were possible and established a special group to investigate Russia's behaviour. What is your comment?

**Sergey Lavrov:** In all evidence, they have no serious problems left on the agenda, which they could address among themselves. The main issues that affect and are of importance for international economic life and the international community as a whole are discussed in other formats. Political issues and military-political issues are discussed at the UN Security Council and the UN at large. Economic issues, of course, cannot be decided outside the G20, which involves, along with the G7, all the BRICS countries and many of our friends.

As far as the results of the foreign ministers' meeting in Toronto are concerned, its anti-Russian underpinnings are clear. Regrettably, this anti-Russian and very slippery line has been followed even by those G7 countries which assure us that they do not share the attempts to isolate Russia.

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We will uphold our positions and wait patiently for our partners to realise that these actions are an absolute dead end and lack any prospects.