

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with India Today television channel, Moscow, April 19, 2022



https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1810023/

Question: The big question that most are asking is the reason for this operation, the reason for President Putin to take the country to war at a time when we have seen negotiations and talks taking place. What was the reason? We know that America said that Russia was going to carry out operations. New Delhi certainly was not aware of it. Many countries said that it is not something that is going to happen, but it did happen.

Sergey Lavrov: The real reason is the complacency of most countries of the world after the end of World War II, when our Western colleagues, led by the United States, declared themselves winners and in violation of the promises to the Soviet and Russian

leadership started moving NATO eastward. They kept saying: “Don’t worry, this is a defensive alliance, it is not a threat to Russian security.” It was a defensive alliance when there were NATO and the Warsaw Treaty, and there was the Berlin Wall, as you remember, both physical and geopolitical. It was very clear what was the “line of defence” for this “defensive alliance.”

When the opponent disappeared, both the Warsaw Treaty disappeared and the Soviet Union disappeared, they decided that they will move the “line of defence eastward.” They did this five times without explaining against whom they are going to defend themselves, but in the process building up their advanced assault capacities and choosing the former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine, as the springboard against the Russian interests.

As early as 2003, for example, when they had a presidential election in Ukraine, the West was publicly and blatantly demanding Ukrainians: you must choose, are you with Russia or with Europe? Then, of course, they started pulling Ukraine into the European Union Association Agreement. The agreement provided for zero tariffs for Ukrainian goods in Europe, and European goods in Ukraine. We had a free trade area agreement with Ukraine in the context of the Commonwealth of Independent States. So, we told our Ukrainian neighbours: guys, we have zero tariffs with you, but we have protection with the European Union, because we negotiated WTO entry for 18 years. For some time, we did manage to protect some sectors of the Russian economy – agriculture, insurance, banking, and some others – with considerable tariffs. We told them: if you have zero [tariffs] with Europe and zero [tariffs] with us, we are not protected against European goods, which was part of the deal when we entered the WTO.

Then in 2013, when the Ukrainian President understood the problem, he asked the European Union to postpone the signature of the Association Agreement. We suggested that the three of us – Russia, Ukraine, and the EU – could sit together and discuss how to proceed. The European Union in a very arrogant way said that this is none of your business, we do not put our nose in your trade with China or other countries, so this is going to happen. Then the President of Ukraine decided to postpone this ceremony. The next morning, the demonstrators were on Maidan in Kiev.

In February 2014, the European Union helped negotiate a deal between the President and the opposition. Next morning, the signatures of the European Union representatives – France, Germany and Poland – were absolutely ignored by the opposition, who staged a coup and declared that they are creating a “government of the winners,” that they will cancel the special status of the Russian language. They threatened to throw ethnic Russians out of Crimea, they sent armed groups to storm the Crimean parliament. That is how the war started. The Crimeans said: “We don’t want to have anything [to do] with you, leave us alone.” As I said, there was a threat from armed groups. The eastern areas of Ukraine said: “Guys, we do not support your coup, leave us alone.” They never attacked the rest of Ukraine. The putschists attacked them, having called them terrorists. They called them terrorists for eight long years.

We managed to stop this bloodshed in February 2015 – the so-called Minsk Agreements were signed, providing Eastern Ukraine with some special status, language, the right to have some local police, special economic relations with the adjacent Russian regions. It was basically the same as [the agreement] the European Union negotiated for the north of Kosovo where Serbs live. In both cases, the European Union failed totally to deliver on what was

guaranteed by the signatures of its members. For eight long years, the respective governments of Ukraine and Presidents of Ukraine were saying, blatantly and publicly, that they were not going to implement the Minsk agreements, that they will move to Plan B. They continued to shell the territories of these [self-] proclaimed republics during all these years. We warned the Europeans, the Americans, and Ukraine that they are ignoring something which was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council. To no avail.

People do not want to go back into this history because they prefer to take events on their immediate merit, but these particular events are rooted in the desire of the United States and what we call the collective West, to rule, to dominate the world and just show everybody that there would be no multipolarity. It would be only unipolarity.

And that they can declare Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yugoslavia, located tens of thousands of miles from the United States, threats to their security, and can do whatever they please there, levelling cities, like they did with Mosul in Iraq, and Raqqa in Syria. Russia has been warning all its colleagues that just on our borders you have been creating a springboard against us: you have been pumping arms into Ukraine, you have been totally ignoring the legislation of Ukraine, which prohibited, completely prohibited the Russian language, you have been encouraging neo-Nazi ideologies and practices. The neo-Nazi battalions were very much active against the territories which proclaimed themselves independent and who were promised special status. It's inside Ukraine.

It was all linked with Ukraine becoming NATO's springboard, and NATO expansion. They were saying that Ukraine will be in NATO. Nobody can stop Ukraine if it so wishes. Then President Zelensky said that he might think about coming back to possess nuclear

weapons. In November last year, my President suggested to the United States and to NATO to sit down, to cool off, and to discuss how we can agree on security guarantees without NATO's further eastward expansion. They refused. In the process, the Ukrainian army radically intensified the shelling of those republics in violation of all the ceasefire agreements. We didn't have any other choice but to recognise them, to sign mutual assistance treaties with them, and, in response to their request, to send our troops as part of special operation to protect their lives.

Question: You provided the basics: the history, as well as the present context. But you also said, President Putin himself said, that this is not targeting civilians or the citizens, people of Ukraine. It is to do with the administration. We know that in international foreign policy parlance it is used quite often: not in my backyard. America says it all the time, and many other countries say it. But should an entire people, and entire population be punished for an administration wanting to carry out independent foreign policy?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think it's about any independence. Since 2013, and maybe even earlier, hundreds and hundreds of US, UK, and other Western security and military experts have been openly sitting in the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence and the Ukrainian security apparatus. They basically were running the place.

As for the civilians, immediately when this special operation started in response to the request from Donetsk and Lugansk in full compliance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, when it was announced by President Putin, he said that the sole purpose of this operation is to demilitarise and denazify Ukrainians – these two problems of the country are intimately linked. We have been targeting only military infrastructure. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian army and the so-called nationalist battalions, which are using Nazi

insignia, swastikas, which was borrowed from Indian history, but twisted the wrong way, and insignia of Waffen-SS battalions, these people were using and continue to use civilians as human shields. They were placing heavy weapons in the middle of towns and cities, next to schools, next to kindergartens, to hospitals. The internet is full of the testimonies of the people who were living in these places, and who were asking these people not to do this.

Unfortunately, nobody in the West actually pays attention to the facts, which we have been providing. Instead, they are staging some fake situations, like a couple of weeks ago with the place called Bucha. The Russian troops left on March 30, I think, and for three days the city was back in the hands of the Ukrainian administration. The mayor of Bucha Anatoly Fedoruk was publicly saying that the city is back to normal life. Only on the fourth day, they started showing images of dozens of corpses lying in the street, which was only a few days before shown as being back to normal. Then a few days later in the city of Kramatorsk, which was fully in the Ukrainian hands, they summoned people to the railway station, and attacked them with a Tochka-U missile. It was proven beyond any doubt that the missile was fired by the Ukrainian army. That's why the next morning it was out of the news in the West because everybody understood the obvious nature of this provocation. Now, The New York Times says that they have the proof that cluster bombs were used by the Ukrainian army.

Speaking of civilians and the rules of international humanitarian law, I can once again assure you that our army operates against the military infrastructure and not against civilians.

Question: Mr Lavrov, you said that Russian forces have only targeted military facilities. Even if there were military facilities or tanks that have been placed in civilian areas, Russian forces did not show

restraint in taking them down. Hence, there are civilians who have been killed. There has been bloodshed, whether it is the outskirts of Kiev, primarily Mariupol, Volnovakha – absolutely raised to the ground. Some responsibility has to be taken by the Russians also on the bloodshed?

Sergey Lavrov: It is always terrible when military activities bring damage to the civilians and to the civilian sector, to civilian infrastructure. As I said, when people have been killing ethnic Russians, citizens of Ukraine, in the east for eight years, no TV representatives, be it Asian, be it African, be it Latin American, be it European, be it the United States, paid any attention to this. The Russian journalists have been working on the contact line, on the side of the republics, round the clock, showing the atrocities committed by the Ukrainian neo-Nazis and Ukrainian armed forces. And during all those years not a single foreign journalist cared to come to the other part of this line of contact to see what was going on there.

The statistics available from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe indicate that the damage afflicted on the civilians and the civilian infrastructure on the side of the republics, the [self-] proclaimed republics, was five times more and bigger than the same figure for the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government.

This is not to say that we can just ignore the victims and the damage to the civilian infrastructure, but once again I want to emphasise a very important thing. This outcry started only when the Russians decided to protect Russians who are citizens of Ukraine and who were absolutely discriminated. There was no outcry when the city of Raqqa, for example, in Syria was levelled with dozens and hundreds of corpses lying there unattended for weeks and weeks.

The American military never had any scruples about achieving their military goals, be it in Syria, be it in Iraq, be it in Afghanistan, for that matter.

This is a tragedy, when people die. But we cannot tolerate the situation when our Western colleagues say that they can do anything they want. They can encourage the government in Kiev to be as Russophobic as it takes. They would not tell them to stop prohibiting the Russian language in education, in media, stop banning all Russian speaking channels, including Ukrainian channels, they would not tell them not to prosecute the opposition, who favours dialogue with Russia, and to stop violating the commitments to give special status to the territories where the Russian speaking population dominates.

Question: You made a very important point because India Today has travelled to Donetsk and we have been putting out these reports. It is very important because it is important to understand the plight of Russian descent and Russian speaking people in Ukraine. There is no taking away from that. We will talk about Donbass. But coming to the allegations against Russia of genocide, of war crimes, and on the fact that chemical weapons have been used by Russian forces, what do you have to say to the visuals? You said that there were no bodies. There were bodies in the basements that have been found much later that would have been found anyway much later. Will there be no investigation that will be carried out? Why just say that it did not happen?

Sergey Lavrov: We are investigating the atrocities of the neo-Nazi battalions of Ukraine and of Ukrainian armed forces. There is a special commission created by the Russian chamber – there is a public organisation which is very experienced. They have been discovering the fakes staged by the so-called White Helmets in

Syria, in many other cases. We will not cease our efforts to establish the truth.

We are used to the fact that the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries have a very interesting habit: they just throw in news when they believe this news will work ideologically for their benefit, and then, when it comes to the facts, and when more facts are discovered, putting a big question mark on their assertions, they just lose interest.

2007, London. Poisoning of Mr Litvinenko. Huge outcry. The investigation begins, and after a few weeks a public inquiry is announced, which in the UK means that it is secret. Until now, we cannot get the facts about what had happened to Mr Litvinenko.

2014, Malaysian Airlines Boeing. Shot down over Ukraine. We presented a huge amount of facts. We requested that we be part of the investigation – no way. Ukrainians who did not close their skies during the conflict were invited to this investigation group, Russia was not. Malaysia, as the owner of the plane, was invited only five months later after the Australians, the Dutch. They and the Malaysians agreed among themselves that anything coming out of this room must be subject to consensus, meaning that Ukraine, which did not close the skies, had a veto power on this investigation. We could not get the truth on this one as well.

2019, Salisbury poisoning. The people disappeared. The only proof which was made public is “highly likely,” as Theresa May said. The Brits insisted on the expulsion of Russian diplomats by most of the European countries. When I asked my friends, did they provide proof beyond the public statements about “highly likely” it was Russia, they said “no, but they promised to.” I checked one year later, whether this was done, it was not done. And so on, and so forth.

2020. Our opposition blogger Mr Navalny was poisoned. We asked the Germans. We immediately responded to the German request to let him go to the Berlin hospital. Twenty-four hours after the request he was flown to Berlin. We don't have any confirmation who was flying with him, where did they get the bottle which is the key element in this investigation. When we asked the Germans to show us the formula which they discovered in his blood, they said this is a military secret.

It is us who until now insist on the truth about Litvinenko, about the Skripals, about Malaysian Boeing, and about Navalny. The stories that they stage in Ukraine these days are of the same nature.

Question: Going back to the investigations, you are saying that that Azov battalion is absolutely shameful, yes, they should be investigated. They are neo-Nazis, and they should not have been incorporated or integrated into any military regime in any country. But if you introspect and look at your own people as well, is there any instance of denying and rejecting claims? Will there be investigations against your own people if they have done wrong? Will they be held accountable?

Sergey Lavrov: We have a law that prohibits the military to do anything which is not allowed under international humanitarian law. Any violations are registered and investigated.

On Azov, it is interesting that you mentioned it. Azov was listed in the United States in 2014 or 2015 as a group that cannot be supported, that cannot legitimately operate, and it was prohibited by Congress to provide any assistance to this battalion. Everybody forgot about this or rather they certainly remember what this group is about, and they decided to put their money on this group.

In Japan, as you know, they passed a special decree by the government that Azov is no longer a neo-Nazi group, and the Japanese government apologises for listing Azov as such. And of course when President Zelensky in his camouflage was asked about Azov by some journalists, who felt that something was wrong with these neo-Nazi trends, Zelensky said quietly: Azov, they are what they are, we have many groups like this. They are part of our army.

You, I mean the media, started asking questions about Azov only when the military operation was launched. For eight long years, nobody lifted a finger, nobody bothered about what was being groomed in Ukraine, as a continuation, or rather a resurrection, of what was boiling in Europe in 1930s.

Question: President Zelensky said that Russia plans to use tactical nuclear weapons.

Sergey Lavrov: He says many things. Depends on what he drinks and what he smokes. He says many things.

Question: Do you think it was a strategic miscalculation by President Zelensky to take on Russia when there was no certain assurance from NATO and the European Union that they would actually back Ukraine?

Sergey Lavrov: President Zelensky came to power with the promise of peace. He said that he will reach peace on the basis of the Minsk Agreements. A few months later, he said he cannot implement the Minsk Agreements because the Minsk Agreements are “unimplementable.”

Question: It was the Russian forces, the DPR.

Sergey Lavrov: No, he never said that it was because of the military situation on the ground. He said that it is unthinkable for Ukraine to give special status to any part of his territory. But it was very “thinkable,” if I may say so, when Ukraine was created, to put together the territories which now (those in the west) never celebrate Victory Day, May 9, and the eastern territories, which would never celebrate the heroes honoured in the west: those who collaborated with Hitler. With this difficult composition of territories, to say that Ukraine can only be a unitary state, and that it would not give special status to these people even if the Security Council demands so, I believe that this was not very far-sighted.

Had he cooperated as he promised to his electorate when he was elected, had he cooperated in implementing the Minsk Agreements, the crisis would have been over long ago.

Question: Did the West betray Zelensky?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I think the West played Zelensky against Russia and did everything to strengthen the desire to ignore the Minsk Agreements.

The “West” is a broad notion. It’s the United States and the Brits. The rest of the West, including the European Union, is just an obedient servant.

Question: Tactical nuclear weapons. Will Russia ever use them?

Sergey Lavrov: Ask Mr Zelensky. We never mentioned this. He mentioned this. So, his intelligence must have provided him some news. I cannot comment something which a not very adequate person pronounces.

Question: As a P5 member, as a nuclear power, will nuclear be an option at all, on the table at all?

Sergey Lavrov: When the Soviet Union and the United States in 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan, decided that they have special responsibility for peace on this planet, they signed the solemn declaration that there could be no winners in a nuclear war, and therefore a nuclear war must never be launched.

After the Trump administration came to office, we have been telling them, because tensions were aggravated: “Why don’t we try to send a positive political message to the entire universe and to reiterate what Gorbachev and Reagan pronounced?” During all the four years of the administration, they refused to do so.

But we were really encouraged when President Biden was inaugurated. Five days after his inauguration, we repeated this offer, he first agreed to extend the [New] START treaty without any preconditions. In June 2021, when they met with President Putin in Geneva, they issued this declaration. This declaration was issued on our initiative. After the Americans and the Russians said that there must be no nuclear war, that they won’t think about it, we started to promote the same commitment in the context of the P5. Not the United States, not UK, not France – Russia. Eventually, earlier this year, in January this year, the P5, at the level of presidents and heads of government, issued the statement which we initiated and which we were pushing through for all these years.

Question: So nuclear is off the table?

Sergey Lavrov: This statement, both the Russian-American statement, and the P5 summit statement, were issued on the strong insistence of the Russian Federation.

Question: Coming back to the Donbass region, DPR, LPR. The independence of these republics is non-negotiable for Russia when you talk to Ukraine. What happens if the negotiations succeed between Ukraine and Russia and should there be a settlement, will Russia withdraw from other areas: Sumy, Kharkov, Zaporozhye, Kherson, Nikolayev?

Sergey Lavrov: I thought you are a journalist, but you can be a spy. I am not discussing the military operation, for obvious reasons it is never the case.

On the territorial situation, we recognise DPR and LPR within the administrative boundaries of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Minsk agreements were signed when these two territories were split roughly half and half. Now the militias of these republics are fighting to get their territory back.

When they had a referendum in 2014, it was held on the entire territories of the former regions. But then the coup leaders started the war, which they called an anti-terrorist operation, and they took a considerable chunk of both regions. So, yes, we recognise LPR and DPR within their declared territories as a result of the referendum.

Question: Which in fact includes Mariupol and Volnovakha, as part of Donetsk.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes.

Question: My question is, if there is a settlement between the two sides, and they recognise, which President Zelensky said he would not, he said that they are going to fight for Donbass to the very end, so where are the red lines?

Sergey Lavrov: I cannot intelligently discuss what President Zelensky says because he always changes his mind diametrically.

He was the initiator of the negotiations, which we accepted. At some point we were disappointed because they were changing their mind every time, coming late, leaving early, but then in Istanbul, about one month ago, it was on March 29, they brought a paper, saying that we are not going to be a member of any military alliance, that they will be neutral. In return, they asked for security guarantees, preferably P5, maybe some others, and it was written and initialled by the head of the heads of delegations. The security guarantees they were asking for would not cover Crimea and the territories in the east of Ukraine.

It was not our language, it was their language. Now President Zelensky says “no way.” They started backtracking even earlier. But this is a paper with the signature of the head of the Ukrainian delegation. So, before we can intelligently discuss what he says one day or another, we need to have clarity about the credibility of this person and about his team.

Question: Was there any understanding in Istanbul on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kiev, as well?

Sergey Lavrov: We changed the configuration of our presence. This was announced immediately after Istanbul that since we believed that they brought something which could serve as a basis [of an agreement], we made a goodwill gesture, and we changed the configuration in the Kiev and Chernigov areas.

This was not appreciated at all. Instead, this Bucha thing was immediately staged and played, like Skripals were played in Salisbury, like the Malaysian Boeing, like Navalny, played, but

immediately put aside when the hard facts were presented which they cannot challenge.

Question: There are mayors who have been appointed now by Russia in Berdyansk and Melitopol, and they are saying that they will hold a referendum, that they are not going to go back. Is that the plan?

Sergey Lavrov: That's the outmost democracy, right? A referendum – people saying what they want.

Question: Which means that you are securing your land boundary in Sumy and Kharkov, but also the waters, if you look at Zaporozhye, Nikolayev.

Sergey Lavrov: People have been suffering in all these places for eight long years, when neo-Nazis were prohibiting them to speak their own language, prohibiting them to commemorate the heroes of World War II, of the Great Patriotic War, prohibiting to have parades and to have any events to commemorate the fallen, the parents, the grandparents of these people.

Now when they have thrown away these neo-Nazis, and say that now we will decide who will be running the place – this is our mayor, this is our legislature, I believe that this is a manifestation of democracy after so many years of oppression.

Question: It seems that Ukraine has lost more land than it would have gained by negotiating on Donbass.

Sergey Lavrov: It's the decision of those who have been running Ukraine, of those who have been sabotaging the Minsk agreements, in spite of the UN Security Council decision. We are not up for regime change in Ukraine. We have said this repeatedly. We want the

Ukrainians themselves to decide how they want to live further in a way, which would not repeat the Minsk agreements, when they did decide that they did not want to do anything with the coup leaders, who immediately said that they are against anything Russian: culture, language, everything what these people cherish. Then they were promised something by the European Union and cheated.

We want the people to be free. To decide how they want to live in Ukraine.

Question: Russia is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world. How long can you sustain?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think we are thinking in the context of sustaining. Sustaining means, you know, you sustain, you take some hardships, and hope that, sooner or later, this would be over.

Russia has been under sanctions all along – Jackson–Vanik, then it was repealed, but Magnitsky Act was introduced, then we were punished for the free vote of the Crimeans, we were punished for supporting those who were in favour of keeping the Minsk agreements, but the Ukrainian government did not want them to get what they promised, and so on and so forth.

So, now we have come to a very straightforward conclusion. We cannot rely on our Western colleagues in any part of our life, which has strategic significance, be it food security, which we managed to ensure ourselves after 2014, be it, of course, defence, and be it some strategic sectors where high-tech is developing and indicating the future of the mankind. We did not have time to achieve self-sufficiency in all these areas, but in most cases, we resolved this issue. Of course, we are open to cooperation with all other countries

who do not use illegal, illegitimate unilateral measures in violation of the UN Charter.

India is among those. We cooperate bilaterally. I visited a couple of months ago, and we cooperate in many international organisations.

Question: Speaking of India, India is under immense pressure to sever ties, to cut down imports of energy, of fuel, but India has stood its ground. In terms of reliability, is there a concern that India should have with regards to the kind of defence cooperation both countries have? Could there be delays in deliveries of critical weapons systems that India is buying from Russia, such as the S-400s? What is the conversation you have been having with New Delhi on this ground?

Sergey Lavrov: India is our very old friend. We called our relationship a long time ago a strategic partnership. Then, about 20 years ago, the Indian friends said: why don't we call it a "privileged strategic partnership?" Sometime later, they said that this was not enough. Let's call it "especially privileged strategic partnership." This is a unique description of the bilateral relations between India and Russia.

With India, long before all this became such a hot potato, we supported Prime Minister Narendra Modi's concept "Make in India" and we started substituting simple trade with local production, shifting production of the goods needed by India on your territory. It was for quite a number of years already that we have been promoting the use of our national currencies in settlements between the governments of the two countries.

We promoted national information systems, transmission systems, like SWIFT. You have your own, we have our own. They are being

used more and more. Payment cards: we have MIR, you have RuPay. They are mutually supportive. It is not, you know, a huge percentage, of the overall volume of trade, but it is steadily growing. On defence, we can provide anything India wants. Technology transfers in the context of defence cooperation are absolutely unprecedented for any of India's outside partners.

Question: We have got away with a waiver from the United States for the S-400s, but future collaborations, could they become difficult?

Sergey Lavrov: You know, when the Americans say that they are in favour of democracy all over the world, they mean only a very specific thing – that it is up to them to decide who is democracy, and who deserves to have some good attitude on behalf of Washington. When they convened this summit of democracies, you only need to look through the list of invitees, to understand that it is not about real democracies, it is about something else. The Americans now run all over the world, their ambassadors have priority number one to go to the foreign ministry, to the government of the country where they serve and say: “You must stop talking to Russia, you must join sanctions against Russia.”

Well, long before this crisis, I have been talking to the Americans, to the Europeans, I told them: when you say democracy, democracy, and at the conferences you always want this language on rule of law and democracy, I asked them about adding that apart from the national level, we want democracy and the rule of law internationally. They don't like it. When they push everybody in this anti-Russian camp, when they go to India, when they go to China, to Turkey, to Egypt, countries with their own thousands years of history of civilization, of culture, and when they are not even ashamed to publicly tell you what to do, I believe something is wrong not only

with manners, which always has been the case, but something is wrong with the mentality.

When Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, says publicly: “We, the United States, has not yet decided whether to introduce sanctions against India for the S-400s,” they have not decided what is good for you. His under-secretary Wendy Sherman later said: “We must help India understand what is important for its security.” How about that?

Question: I suppose your counterpart gave them a befitting reply on how to conduct one’s foreign policy?

Sergey Lavrov: Absolutely. I respect Subrahmanyam Jaishankar very much. He is a seasoned diplomat, and he is a real patriot of his country. He said that we will be taking the decisions on the basis of what India believes it needs for its development, for its security. It’s respectful. Not too many countries can say something like this.

Question: You mentioned China. For us, the China factor is very important. Russia has a unique relationship when it comes to ties with China and ties with India. You mentioned the United States of America, so again, I am going to go back to the US. Recently, in one of the visits, deputy national security advisor said that should India continue ties with Russia, there will be consequences. If, he said, there is another incident at the LAC, then the US will not come to India’s rescue. The statement is flawed, because there are two points. One is that he said “should there be another incident,” not recognising that the Chinese are still on Indian soil. Secondly, he said that they will not come to India’s rescue, but they did not come in the first place. But where does Russia stand?

Sergey Lavrov: We stand in favour of resolving any conflicts on the basis of arrangements negotiated directly between the parties, like, just like it was in Ukraine, when the two parties, the rebels, as they are called, the separatists, as they are called, for us they are self-proclaimed republics, on the one side, and the government, which came to power as a result of the coup, on the other side had a deal, negotiated and endorsed by the Security Council. It is another matter that the government, with the instigation of the West, failed to deliver, but the method is the one which we believe should be applied everywhere.

After those incidents on the border, we welcomed the resumption of the discussions between the military of India and China, the discussions between the politicians, at the level of the foreign ministers, and we hope that this would be resolved. We cannot use those threats, which are absolutely normal for the Americans, who say “or else, there would be consequences.” It is their favourite statement.

What we would like to do, as Russia, we would like to promote the formats where India, Russia, and China participate together. It started in 1996-1997, when Russia’s Foreign Minister at that time, Yevgeny Primakov, suggested the RIC format – the troika formed by Russia, India, and China. It happened, and we continue to convene in this format. I think, last November there was probably the 20th ministerial meeting. Not only foreign ministers, but also ministers of economy, ministers of trade, political scientists meet, which may not be very much publicised, but it is a very useful format.

We were very much in favour, even we were the leading force in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to promote this, of the full membership of India, together with Pakistan, in this organisation.

This is another premise for China and India to be together in the company of their neighbours, and to build more confidence.

Question: Finally, before I let you go, sir, Europe is looking to halt gas from Russia. Come summer, policies might get harsher. But you are looking for the dedollarisation of the global energy market by dealing in roubles. How do you propose to do that, should they start halting?

Sergey Lavrov: There will be no change for the Europeans and other countries who buy our gas. The reason for this decision was very simple and obvious. When they froze the Russian assets in dollars, euro, yens, and the pound sterling for the amount of more than 300 billion euros or dollars, those were mostly the money kept in Western banks after we received payments from them, from the Western countries, for our gas deliveries.

In other words, they paid us, and they stole the money from us because those were the currencies which are linked to the Western banking system. So what we told them to do: they would not be paying directly to Gazprom's accounts abroad, but they would be paying to a bank called Gazprombank. It is an independent entity. They would be paying the same amount which they have to pay under the existing contracts, but they will pay these amounts to a special account which they have to open with this bank. There would be a parallel account in roubles. So they pay euros, and then inside this bank these euros are transferred to the rouble account, and from this account Gazprom receives roubles.

Question: So you are not running losses at all on the money Russia is to receive from Europe? There is no money that has been stopped?

Sergey Lavrov: Exactly. As of now, they would not be able to keep the money in their banks, the money that they not even owe us, but which they paid to us already. I believe this is something which does not contradict contracts. They would still be paying in euros or dollars or whatever was the currency of the contract, but we will have insurance that this robbery would not happen again.

Question: Finally, sir, before I let you go, I have to go back to that question on eastern Ukraine. Intensification of war efforts now in eastern Ukraine – is the trigger the flagship warship Moskva that sunk. What really happened there? Is that one of the triggers now why we see more intensification against Ukraine?

Sergey Lavrov: No, this operation in the east of Ukraine is aimed, as was announced from the very beginning, to fully liberate the Donetsk and Lugansk republics. This operation will continue. Another stage of this operation is beginning. I am sure that this will be a very important moment of this entire special operation.

Question: What happened to the warship?

Sergey Lavrov: It is for the Ministry of Defence. They explained what happened and I cannot add anything to this.

Question: On that note, many thanks for joining us here on India Today. It was indeed a pleasure, sir.

Sergey Lavrov: Thank you very much.

Question: That was the Foreign Minister of Russia speaking exclusively to India Today.