

Interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to the Indian TV channel India Today, Moscow, April 19, 2022

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Question: Many today are asking the question: what is the reason for this **special military operation**? Why did President Vladimir Putin begin it exactly at the moment when, as we saw, the negotiations were taking place? What is the main reason? We heard America say that Russia was going to carry out this operation. **India**, like many other countries, did not suspect and did not think, but it happened.

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The real reason is the complacency of many countries after the end of World War II, when our Western colleagues under the leadership of the **United States** called themselves winners and, in violation of their promises to the Soviet and Russian leadership, began to push **NATO** eastward. They kept telling us not to worry, this is a defense alliance, not a threat to Russian security. But the alliance was defensive when NATO and the Warsaw Pact existed. As you remember, then there was the Berlin Wall (both physical and geopolitical). It was quite obvious where the "defense line" of this "defense alliance" was.

When the "enemy" disappeared, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union collapsed, they decided that they would move this "line of defense" to the east. They did this five times without explaining who they were going to "defend" against. In the meantime, in the process, they have been accumulating advanced strike capabilities and using the former Soviet republics, Ukraine in particular, as a springboard against Russian interests.

Back in 2003, when the next presidential elections were held in **Ukraine**, the West quite brazenly demanded that Ukrainians decide with whom they are: with Europe or with Russia. Then they began to push Ukraine towards an Association Agreement with the **European Union**. It provided for zero tariffs on exports and imports between the EU and Ukraine. At that time, we had agreements on a free trade zone with all CIS countries, including Ukraine. We told our Ukrainian friends that we have zero export tariffs with them, but there is protection from the European Union, because by that time we had been negotiating to join the WTO for 18 years. We were forced to take protective measures and impose protective duties on certain sectors of the Russian economy: agriculture, insurance, banking, and so on. We then said that if Ukraine has zero tariffs for the EU and we have with Kyiv too, then we will not be protected from duty-free import of European goods.

In 2013, the Ukrainian president understood this problem and asked the EU to postpone the signing of the Association Agreement. We suggested that the three of us - the EU, Ukraine and Russia - sit down and discuss how to move forward. The European Union then very arrogantly said that it was none of our business. They supposedly "do not stick their nose" into Russia's trade with China and other countries, and everything will be as they want. The President of Ukraine decided to postpone the signing of the Agreement, and the next morning, demonstrations began on the Maidan in Kyiv, resulting in bloodshed.

In February 2014, the European Union helped broker a deal between the Ukrainian president and the opposition. The next morning, the signatories, namely the representatives of the EU (**Poland**, **France** and **Germany**), were ignored by the opposition, which carried out a coup d'état. They declared that they were creating a "government of victors", they would cancel the special status of the Russian language, they threatened to expel ethnic Russians from **Crimea**, sent armed groups to storm the Supreme Council of Crimea. That is how the war started. The Crimeans said they don't want anything to do with such a Ukrainian government. As I said, they were under the threat of violence from armed groups. In the east of Ukraine, people also said that they did not support the coup d'état, and asked to be

left alone. They never attacked other regions of Ukraine. The putschists attacked them, calling them terrorists. The Ukrainian government called these people terrorists for eight long years.

We were able to stop this bloodshed. In February 2015, the Minsk agreements were signed, which provided for giving the regions of eastern Ukraine a special status: language, the right to have local police, special economic relations with adjacent Russian regions. In general, the same as what the EU agreed with Northern Kosovo and [Serbia](#). In both cases, the European Union failed to meet the obligations guaranteed by the signatures of EU members. For eight long years, the governments and presidents of Ukraine have repeatedly said that they are not going to implement the Minsk agreements, that they will go to plan "B". They continued to shell the territories of the self-proclaimed republics. We wanted the Europeans, the US and Ukraine to admit that they are ignoring the document that was approved [by the United Nations Security Council](#).

People don't want to turn their eyes back to history because they don't want to take into account events that don't color them. But these specific events are connected with the actions of the United States and the "collective West", with their desire to dominate the whole world and demonstrate to everyone that there will be no multipolarity, but a unipolar world.

They can operate anywhere: in [Iraq](#), [Syria](#), [Libya](#), Yugoslavia. These countries are tens of thousands of kilometers away from the United States. When there are "threats" to their security, they can do whatever they want. For example, raze cities to the ground, as they did in Mosul (Iraq), in Raqqa (Syria). Russia warned its colleagues that right on our borders they were creating a foothold against us, pumping weapons into Ukraine, ignoring the legislation of this country, which completely banned the Russian language, incited the practice of neo-Nazi ideology. Nationalist battalions were formed, which were active against their own territory, which declared independence, which was promised a special status within Ukraine.

All this is due to the fact that Ukraine has become a springboard for NATO, for its expansion. They said that Ukraine will become part of NATO, no one can stop Ukraine if it has such a desire. Then President V.A. Zelensky said that he was thinking of having nuclear weapons. In November 2021, President Vladimir Putin invited the United States and NATO to sit down at the negotiating table, cool off a little and discuss what we can do with legal security guarantees without further expansion of the alliance to the east. They refused. At this time, the Ukrainian army [significantly increased the shelling of the republics](#) in violation of all ceasefire regimes. We had no other choice but to recognize them, to sign an agreement on mutual assistance. And in response to their request to send our military units as part of a special military operation to protect their lives.

Question: You presented arguments both historical and contemporary. President Vladimir Putin said that you were fighting not against the citizens of Ukraine, but against the Ukrainian regime. We know that the phrase "not in my house, not at my door" is often used in international politics. America often says this, as do other countries. Should an entire nation be punished for wanting a government to pursue an independent foreign policy?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I don't think it has anything to do with "independence". Since 2013 (or maybe even earlier), hundreds of British, European and American military advisers have been openly present in the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, in the SBU, literally in charge of everything.

As for civilians. Immediately after the start of the military operation in response to the request of Donetsk and Luhansk in full compliance with [Article 51 of the UN Charter](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the only goals of the operation are the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. These are two closely related problems of this country. We only target military infrastructure. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian army and the "national battalions", using neo-Nazi stripes, the swastika (the symbol is of ancient Indian origin, but was distorted and used by the Waffen-SS), continue to hide behind civilians as human shields. They have heavy weapons in the city centers, near hospitals, kindergartens, schools. There are plenty of testimonies of people who lived in these places on the Internet. They asked the army not to do it.

Unfortunately, no one in the West pays attention to the facts that we provide. Instead, they fabricate such dramatizations as happened a few weeks ago in the settlement of Bucha, from where Russian troops left on March 30 of this year. For three days the city was again under the leadership of the Ukrainian administration. The mayor of Bucha, A.P. Fedoruk, publicly said that they had returned to normal life. Only on the fourth day they began to show photographs of dozens of corpses lying on the street. The same streets were shown a few days before - everything was fine there. A couple of weeks later, in the city of Kramatorsk, which was under the control of the Ukrainian side, people were asked to come to the railway station and hit there with a Tochka-U rocket. It was unequivocally proven that this missile was fired by the Ukrainian army. That is why the next day in the West this video was no longer shown. The nature of this provocation was clear to everyone. The New York Times is now saying they have evidence that the Ukrainian army used cluster munitions.

Speaking in general about the civilian population and international humanitarian law and its norms, I can assure you that our army is acting against military infrastructure, and not against civilians.

Question: You said that Russian forces strike only at military infrastructure, or even those located in civilian regions. However, the Russian military did not "stand on ceremony" when taking cities. There were casualties and bloodshed among the civilian population, whether it was a suburb of Kyiv, Mariupol, Volnovakha, which were completely wiped off the face of the earth. Does the Russians bear any responsibility for the bloodshed?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: It is always terrible when military operations bring destruction to civilians and civilian infrastructure, residential areas. They killed ethnic Russians, citizens of Ukraine in the east of the country for eight years. No TV channels from Africa, Asia, Europe, USA paid any attention to it. At the same time, Russian journalists worked on the line of demarcation from the proclaimed republics, around the clock demonstrated the atrocities committed by the armed forces of Ukraine and the national battalions. During all these years, not a single foreign journalist has bothered to come and work on the line of contact from the other side, to see what is really happening there.

OSCE statistics show that damage to civilians and infrastructure in the self-proclaimed republics was five times higher than on the side controlled by the Ukrainian government. This is not to say that damage or civilian casualties to civilian infrastructure can be ignored.

I want to emphasize that all the "shouts" began to be heard only when the Russians decided to protect ethnic Russians who were citizens of Ukraine and faced discrimination. There were no "screams" when the Syrian Raqqa was razed to the ground, and hundreds of corpses lay uncleaned for several weeks. Americans have never had any qualms about achieving their military goals, be it in [Afghanistan](#) , Iraq, Syria.

It's always a tragedy when people die. However, it is impossible to tolerate a situation where our Western colleagues claim that they can do whatever they please. We cannot but prevent them from banning the Russian language in education, in the media, closing all Russian-speaking channels, including Ukrainian ones, persecuting the opposition (which supports dialogue with Russia), refusing to grant special status to regions of Ukraine where a large number of Russian-speakers live population.

Question: Returning to the question of war crimes, genocide, and the use of chemical weapons by Russian troops. Let's talk about video evidence. You say there were no bodies. What can you say about the bodies that were later found in the cellars? Tell me, will there be any investigation? Why do you say that this did not happen?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We are conducting an investigation into the atrocities committed by neo-Nazi battalions and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. A special commission was created by a Russian public organization. She, in particular, investigated fakes orchestrated by the White Helmets in Syria and elsewhere. Let's fight for the truth, no matter what.

We know that the USA, Great Britain and other Western countries have an interesting habit: they "throw" stories into the information field when they think that they will ideologically "play" in their favor. Then, when facts come up that question those news stories, they simply lose interest in them.

For example, 2007, London, the poisoning of A. Litvinenko. A colossal explosion of indignation, an investigation begins. A few weeks pass, and it is made "public". This is conditional, because in the UK it means that everything is classified. Now we cannot get the facts about what actually happened to A. Litvinenko.

In 2014, a Malaysian Boeing MH17 was shot down over Ukraine. We wanted to be part of the investigation. However, this did not happen. But Ukraine, which did not close the sky over its territory during the conflict, was invited to the investigation team. We are not. Malaysia, the owner of the aircraft, was called in five months later, after the Australians, the Dutch and the Malaysians agreed among themselves that whatever was accepted by this group should be taken by consensus. This means that Ukraine, which did not close the airspace over its territory, had the right to veto this investigation. So the truth is not found here either.

In 2018, the Skripals were "poisoned" in Salisbury. People just disappeared. The only proof that has been made public is T. May's words about "highly likes". London insisted on the expulsion of Russian diplomats by most European countries. I asked my colleagues if the British provided any evidence other than the words "highly like"? They answered me: "Promised." Checked a year later, it turned out that no evidence was provided.

Let's take 2020. Our opposition blogger A. Navalny was "poisoned". Germany's request to allow him to go to a Berlin hospital was immediately responded to. He was transferred to Berlin 24 hours later and after that we received no clarification as to who was flying with him, where they got the bottle, which was a key element in this investigation. When the Germans were asked if they could show the formula of the substance found in his blood, we were told it was a "military secret." Now we insist on the truth about A. Litvinenko, the Malaysian Boeing, Salisbury, A. Navalny.

Staged stories in Ukraine these days are all of the same nature.

Question: You are talking about the atrocities of the national battalions. It's monstrous. There must be an investigation. If they are neo-Nazis, then in no case should they be included in the armed forces of any country. This is absolutely correct.

But if you look at your own military. We see only the denial of claims. Will there be an investigation into your armed forces if they have committed a crime? Will they be held accountable?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We have legislation in accordance with which the military cannot take any actions prohibited by international humanitarian law. Violations are recorded and investigated.

By Azov. It's interesting that you noted this. "Azov" in the US in 2015 was included in the list of groups not to be supported. Congress was forbidden to provide any kind of support to this battalion. Since then, everyone has forgotten about it. In fact, the Americans, of course, remember everything. And now we decided to support them with money. In Japan, the government has passed a special decree that no longer considers Azov a neo-Nazi group. Tokyo even apologized for qualifying him this way some time ago.

When President V. A. Zelensky was asked about Azov (there were journalists who were worried about this), he replied that there are Azov, and there are many more such "groups" that are part of the armed forces of Ukraine. The media began to ask questions about "Azov" only after the start of a special military operation. For a long eight years, no one "struck a finger" and was not worried about what kind of forces were being nurtured in Ukraine. It is a continuation or revival of what was raging in Europe in the 1930s.

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

Foreign Minister Lavrov: He says a lot. It depends on what he drinks and smokes.

Question: Do you think it is President Zelensky's strategic mistake to provoke Russia when there were no clear guarantees from NATO and the EU that they would support Ukraine?

Sergey Lavrov: President Vladimir Zelensky came to power with a promise of peace. He said that he would achieve peace on the basis of the Minsk agreements. A few months later, he announced that he could not implement the Minsk agreements because it was impossible. Vladimir Zelensky never said that this was due to the military situation on the ground. According to him, it is unthinkable for Ukraine to give a special status to any part of their territory.

However, it is conceivable that Ukraine was created as a single territory, where the west never celebrate May 9 - Victory Day, and on the other hand, the eastern territories would never praise those heroes who are revered in the west (those who collaborated with A. Hitler). This is a complex combination of regions. Against this background, to assert that Ukraine can only be a unitary state, that no special status will be granted to any part of it, even if the UN Security Council requires it, is short-sighted. If he, in accordance with his election promises, sought to implement the Minsk agreements, then the crisis would have been resolved long ago.

Question: Do you think the West betrayed Vladimir Zelensky?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: No. I think they used it against Russia. They did everything to strengthen him in his desire to ignore the Minsk agreements. The West is a broad concept. We're talking about the US and the UK. The other part of the West, including the EU, is currently only obedient servants.

Question: Will Russia use tactical nuclear weapons?

Sergey Lavrov: Ask President Vladimir Zelensky. After all, he was talking about it. I think intelligence gave him some information. To be honest, I can't comment on what was said by a not quite adequate person.

Question: As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, is the possibility of using nuclear weapons being considered?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: In 1987 the Soviet Union and the United States (M.S. Gorbachev and R. Reagan) decided that they bear a special responsibility for world peace. They signed a declaration saying that a nuclear war could not be won. Therefore, it should never be started.

Tensions grew after the Donald Trump administration came to power in the United States. We said: why don't we try to give a positive, political signal to the whole world and repeat what MS Gorbachev and R. Reagan declared? For four years, the Trump Administration has refused to do so.

Five days after the inauguration of President George Biden, this proposal was again addressed to the American side. J. Biden agreed to extend START III without any preconditions. In June 2021, President George Biden met with President Vladimir Putin in Geneva. This declaration was signed on our initiative. Russia and the US have declared that there should be no nuclear war. It's just unthinkable. Then we began to promote the adoption of the same obligations within the framework of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. This was done at the initiative of Russia, not the US, France or the UK. In January of this year. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council at the level of heads of state and government adopted a statement that we initiated and supported all these years.

Question: That is, there is no talk of using nuclear weapons?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The Russian-American statement and the statement of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council were adopted at Russia's insistence.

Question: Let's get back to the Donbass region: the DNR, the LNR. For Russia now there is no question of the independence of these republics. What happens if negotiations between Russia and Ukraine succeed? Will there be an additional agreement? Will Russia leave Sumy, Kharkov, Kherson, Nikolaev, Zaporozhye?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I thought you were a journalist and you were a spy. For obvious reasons, I will not discuss the military operation.

We recognize the DPR and LPR within the borders of these regions as part of the former Ukrainian SSR. When the Minsk agreements were signed, these regions were divided (each republic is approximately in half). At the moment, the people's militia of the DPR and LPR is fighting to return the lost territories.

The fact is that when the referendum was held in 2014, the issue concerned all the territories of these former regions. However, after that, the leaders of the coup d'état launched a war, which they called the "anti-terrorist operation." They tore off a significant part of each of these regions. Yes, we recognize the LPR and DPR within their borders proclaimed as a result of the referendum.

Question: Does this apply to Mariupol and Volnovakha, which is part of the Donetsk region?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Yes.

Question: If the two sides come to an agreement, recognize this (although President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky said that this will not happen), will the struggle for Donbass continue to the end? Where are the red lines?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I cannot seriously discuss what President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky is saying. He constantly changes his point of view in diametrically opposite directions.

President Volodymyr Zelensky initiated negotiations. She was accepted. At a certain point, we were disappointed, because the Ukrainian side constantly changed its point of view, they arrived late for negotiations or left earlier. March 29 this year meeting in Istanbul. The Ukrainian side brought there a document stating that they would not become members of any military alliance and would adhere to a neutral status. In response, we requested security guarantees from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and a number of other countries. All this was initiated by the leaders of the delegations. It was noted that these security guarantees would not apply to Crimea and territories in eastern Ukraine.

It was not our wording, but that of the Ukrainian side. Now President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky says he is not ready for this. In other words, they began to move away from these positions. However, there is a paper signed by the head of the Ukrainian delegation. Before we can seriously discuss what President Volodymyr Zelensky is saying today or tomorrow, we need to understand whether this person and his team can be trusted.

Question: Was an agreement reached in Istanbul on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kiev?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We have changed the configuration of our military presence. This was announced immediately after the meeting in Istanbul, as we believed that they had submitted for consideration what could form the basis of an agreement. As a gesture of goodwill, they changed the configuration in the Chernihiv and Kiev regions.

However, this was not appreciated. Instead, a staging took place immediately in the settlement of Bucha. This plot was "played out" in the same way as with the Skripals in Salisbury, the Malaysian Boeing, A. Navalny, A. Litvinenko. It was "played out", but immediately disappeared from the agenda when we presented concrete facts that they cannot dispute.

Question: Russia has appointed its mayors in Berdyansk and Melitopol. It was stated that they were going to call a referendum that they would not remain part of Ukraine. It's true? Is that what your plan is?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Isn't this the highest manifestation of democracy – a referendum? People speak up for what they want.

Question: Does this mean that you will draw a land and water border across the territory of the Sumy and Kharkov regions? If you look at Zaporozhye and Nikolaev...

Foreign Minister Lavrov: In these regions, people have suffered for eight long years. Neo-Nazis forbade them to speak Russian, they were not allowed to keep the memory of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War, to hold parades and any events dedicated to the memory of their grandparents, parents, fallen heroes of the Great Patriotic War.

Now these people have expelled the neo-Nazis. Now they want to decide for themselves who will lead everything - their mayor, their legislative assembly. I think that in many ways this is a manifestation of democracy after so many years of suppression.

Question: Has Ukraine lost more land than it acquired through negotiations in the Donbass?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: This decision of those who led Ukraine sabotaged the implementation of the Minsk agreements, despite the decision of the UN Security Council. We are not going to change the regime in Ukraine. We talked about this many times. We want Ukrainians to decide for themselves how they want to live on. The main thing is not to repeat the fate of the Minsk agreements. Then they declared that they did not want to have anything to do with the people who carried out the coup d'etat, who forbid Russian culture, language and everything that is dear to people. Then the European Union promised them and deceived them.

We want people to have the freedom to choose what to do in Ukraine.

Question: Russia is under the largest number of sanctions in the world. How long can you endure?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I don't think we are discussing in the context of "how long we can endure". To endure means to endure difficulties and hope that sooner or later everything will end.

Russia has been under sanctions for a long time: first there was the Jackson-Vanik amendment (then it was canceled), the Magnitsky Act, we were "punished" for the free expression of the will of the Crimeans and supporting those who advocated the Minsk agreements, which the Ukrainian government did not want to implement .

We have come to an unequivocal conclusion: we cannot rely on Western colleagues in any area of life that is of strategic importance: food security (we provide it ourselves after 2014), defense and other strategic areas where advanced technologies are being developed, high-tech industries that will determine the future of humanity. We didn't have time to become self-sufficient in all these areas, but in most cases we solved this problem. We are open to cooperation with all countries that do not use illegal, unilateral measures in violation of the UN Charter .

India is just among those countries with whom we cooperate on a bilateral basis and in many international organizations. This month I came to New Delhi.

Question: India is under tremendous pressure to cut all ties with Russia, in particular in the energy sector. But she didn't give up. Will this somehow affect military-technical cooperation in the purchase of critical defense systems such as the S-400 and other weapons? Are there talks with India on this?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: India is our good old friend. We have long called our cooperation a strategic partnership. Approximately 20 years ago, Indian friends proposed to characterize it as a highly privileged strategic partnership. This is a unique description of bilateral relations between Russia and India.

Long before it became a "hot" topic, we supported Prime Minister Modi's "Make in India" concept. They began to replace trade with the localization of the production of products needed by India on its territory. For a long time, they supported the use of national currencies in mutual payments between the governments of the two countries.

We also support a financial messaging system similar to SWIFT. In addition, you have your own system, we have ours. We use them more and more: we have Mir, you have UPay. They are harmonized, supported by each other. This is a small amount of the total percentage of trade, but it is gradually increasing. As far as defense is concerned, we can provide India with whatever she wants. The volume of technology transfer in the field of defense cooperation is, in fact, unprecedented compared to all other partners of India.

Question: We have seen the US also talk about the S-400, but perhaps cooperation will become more difficult in the future?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: You know, when the Americans say that they stand for “democracy all over the world,” they mean one specific thing: they decide for themselves who will be called a democracy, who deserves to be treated kindly by Washington. You just need to look at the list of those who were invited to the “summit of democracies”. It will become clear that this is not about real democracy, but about something else. Now Americans around the world are making it their number one task for their ambassadors to go to the Foreign Ministry every day, to the governments of the states in which they are accredited, and to convince countries to stop talking to Russia and join the sanctions against Russia.

Long before this crisis, I was talking to Americans and Europeans. At all conferences, they constantly talk about democracy and introduce the wording "rule of law" and "democracy". I asked them: what about the supplement? Beyond the national level, we want democracy and the rule of law in the international arena. They don't like it. They are trying to gather everyone in this anti-Russian camp, including India, [China](#) , [Turkey](#) , [Egypt](#) - countries with their own thousand-year history of civilization, culture. They are not even ashamed to publicly tell you what to do. Something is wrong not only with their manners (however, this has always been true), but also with their mentality.

US Secretary of State E. Blinken says that the US has not yet decided whether to impose sanctions against India for the purchase of the S-400. It's being said publicly: they haven't decided what's good for you yet. Deputy Secretary of State W. Sherman says they must help India understand what is important for its security.

Question: It seems to me that your colleague answered quite harshly how India will conduct its foreign policy.

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I have great respect for S. Jaishankar. He is an experienced diplomat, a true patriot of his country. When he says that he will make a decision based on what India considers necessary for its development and security, this commands respect. Not many countries can say that.

Question: You mentioned China. For us, the Chinese factor is very important. Russia has a unique relationship in terms of ties with China and with India. Recently, during one of his visits, the US Deputy National Security Adviser said that if India continues its ties with Russia, there will be consequences. He stated that if China again commits a similar incident, then no one will come to India's rescue. This statement is, of course, strange. China is still in Indian territory. And they never came to "help". What will Russia say?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We believe that any conflict should be resolved on the basis of direct negotiations between the two sides. So it was in Ukraine. The two sides: the “separatists” (for us, they are self-proclaimed republics) on the one hand and the government of Ukraine, which came to power as a result of a coup, on the other, agreed, and this document was approved by the UN Security Council. Another thing is that the government, at the instigation of the West, could not fulfill its obligations. We believe that this principle should be applied everywhere.

We welcome the resumption of contacts between the military of India and China, negotiations at the political level, including by foreign ministers. We hope this situation will be resolved. We cannot use such threats, which are completely normal for the Americans - if not in the way they say, then there will be consequences. This is their favorite statement. We want to promote formats where India, Russia and China will participate together.

It all started in 1996-1997, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, E.M.Primakov, proposed the creation of a "troika" of the RIC (Russia, India, China). We continue to meet. The last meeting was in November 2021. This was the eighteenth ministerial meeting. Political scientists from our countries also meet. It may not be a very public format, but it is very useful. We are promoting this idea within the SCO to welcome the full membership of India and Pakistan in this organization. It also creates additional prerequisites for India and China to be together, in the company of their neighbors, to create an atmosphere of trust.

Question: Europe intends to cut off gas supplies from Russia. In the summer, their policy can get worse. Are you striving to de-ideologize the world energy market through payments in rubles? How do you propose to move on if they stop taking deliveries?

S.V. Lavrov: There will be no changes for the European states that purchase our gas. The reason for our decision is obvious and understandable. They "froze" Russian assets in euros, yen, pounds sterling for more than 300 billion dollars. Basically, this money was kept in Western banks after we received payments from Western countries for gas supplies. In other words, they paid us and stole our own money because it is a currency linked to the Western banking system. What we offered them: they will not pay directly to PJSC Gazprom, to its bank accounts abroad, but will pay through a bank (Gazprombank is an independent company). They will pay the same amount that they have to pay under existing contracts, but they will transfer the money to a special account in this bank. There will also be a parallel account in rubles. So, they will pay in euros, and within Gazprombank this money will be transferred to ruble accounts. PJSC Gazprom will receive rubles from this account.

Question: So you have absolutely nothing to lose on the money that Russia should receive from Europe? So you don't lose anything?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Yes, exactly. Now they will not be able to keep this money in their banks, money that they not only owe us, but that they have already paid us. I don't think it's against the contracts. They will still pay in euros or dollars (whatever the currency of the contract), but we will have guarantees that this theft will not happen again.

Question: Let us return to the intensification of military efforts in eastern Ukraine. As for the Moskva cruiser, which was sunk, was this one of the factors intensifying hostilities?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The special military operation in eastern Ukraine is aimed, as it was announced from the very beginning, at the complete liberation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. She will continue. The next phase of the operation is now beginning. This will be an important moment. What happened to the cruiser is a question for the Russian Ministry of Defense. They explained what happened. I have nothing to add to this.