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Interview with Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov on Pressing International Problems, Published in the Newspaper Vremya Novostei on March 13, 2006

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Question: Sergey Viktorovich, while visiting the US a few days ago, you gave George Bush a set of chessmen. Was that a hint that the US President should do a bit of studying with respect to moves, particularly as regards Iran? Now there's one move, but what next?..

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I thought you would ask if it was a hint that there are exchanges in chess. But you put a different question. Anyway, no, there was no such hint. And even if we had wanted to do so, then that would not have been required; for George Bush himself, speaking of how to act towards Iran, said that it was necessary to show caution and, before making the first move, one ought to think out all the subsequent moves completely. But that's also Russian policy a full 100 percent!

It was gratifying to hear this view of the US President, which coincides with ours. We talked about how a world community line on Iran should be built if we wanted to act jointly. Particularly since up to this point our Western partners had not agreed with this logic, suggesting instead throwing this question into the UN Security Council, adopting something there, and then we'll see.

Question: It turns out that the international community has no strategy regarding Iran?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: None. And that's what we have been talking about over the recent period. I stress that we have understanding how to act in the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency - Ed.).

But now how to act outside of the IAEA - we have no such understanding. This is a professional organization which has a sufficiently advanced activity in Iran. It has already accumulated a huge file, entirely professional, within whose framework the specialists are to conclude whether there is or there is not a threat to the (nuclear weapons - Ed.) nonproliferation regime arising from how the nuclear program is evolving in Iran. This is the main question. We want to get an answer to it. We do not agree with those who, it seems to us, in their actions are trying to exploit the situation around Iran to solve political tasks in their dealings with the regime which is currently in Teheran. So that there is the file in the IAEA, there is the accumulated knowledge, there is the understanding as to what remains to

be further clarified. These questions are utterly concrete, they have been conveyed to Iran. Iran does not refuse to work on these questions, so in this regard it is all more or less clear. As for a strategy of action in the Security Council, where the exhortations are to refer the substance of the entire work on Iran, there is no such strategy.

An understanding as to how to act there is just only beginning to emerge. The European trio (France, Britain, Germany - Ed.) has so far proposed that consultations should be held this week with the participation of Russia, the United States and China to discuss this very same strategy. We consider that such consultations would be useful, and it would be very important that IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei take part in them.

Question: The consultations will be held in Vienna or in New York?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I think it would be more logical in Vienna. Our Western partners understand that without the IAEA this problem all the same can't be solved. But there is some dichotomy observable among them. They are saying: let us start working in the Security Council as well as continuing to work in the IAEA. It is not understandable to us so far how this can tactically be written into the very same strategy which we have not yet discussed. Therefore, we will explicitly proceed from the priority of agreeing upon a strategic line.

Question: And do we have questions on the Iranian nuclear file? Regarding Iran's facilities in Isfahan, Lavizan and Natanz? Or is it that Americans alone have these questions? Or does Russia have them as well?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Of course, we do. On all the facilities that are listed in the IAEA Director General's report, and those you mentioned are among them, just as a number of others. All these facilities are the subject of our close attention, and we want to preserve the possibility to see and know what is occurring at each facilities. This possibility is achievable by the continuation of the IAEA work in Iran.

Because IAEA inspectors are carrying out monitoring there on a regular basis. Iran, unfortunately, has taken a number of abrupt steps, in particular, withdrawing from voluntary compliance with the procedures envisaged by the additional protocol to the IAEA safeguards agreement. Legally it has not breached anything, because the treaty was signed by Iran, but not ratified, yet politically we consider this move erroneous (Iran signed the Additional Protocol to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons in November 2003 - Ed). We are calling on Iran not merely to come back to observance of the additional protocol, but also to ratify it, to make this commitment legally confirmed for Iran.

Question: If we have questions to Iran, then it turns out that we suspect that the Iranians are making a nuclear weapon? Can it be said thus?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We are not certain about what Iran did in the years when it was not revealing the content of its nuclear program. The components that in this nuclear program have now been detected have a direct significance for the creation of a full nuclear fuel cycle. They include uranium enrichment and heavy water reactors and plutonium technologies. All of this is not illegal.

And all of this can be used for the production of fuel for nuclear power plants. But all of this together also allows for making warhead-grade uranium. There are no facts showing that such a switchover has taken place or is being planned. But neither is there any certainty that such facts are absent. And the IAEA has the mandate to clarify all the aspects of the nuclear activity of Iran. The report which ElBaradei presented at the last meeting of the Board of Governors says that so far there is no possibility to say in a guaranteed way that the military aspect is absent. But neither are there any grounds to say that it is present.

That is why we insist that the IAEA should professionally continue working. But sometimes our Western partners suggest acting according to the following logic: now that there is no clarity, let us step up pressure and impose sanctions as quickly as possible.

Question: Understandably, get into the fray, and then we'll see. Sergey Viktorovich, if we return to chess, then you yourself suggested the idea of exchange to me...

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Simply when you started talking about this, I suspected that you bore this in mind.

Question: But that's the very rumor now being afoot: Russia supposedly will exchange the problem of Iran for the Americans' consent to our entry into the WTO...

Foreign Minister Lavrov: You know, we will never exchange what is rightfully ours for anything. The WTO is, to use contemporary parlance, a "purely concrete small debt" of the Americans. Just as the Jackson-Vanik amendment (Russia has been seeking to get this commerce act amendment lifted, which was introduced by the US way back in 1974 and restricts trade ties with Moscow - Ed.). The situation is now becoming indecent where the restrictions imposed by the Jackson-Vanik amendment continue to be in effect in the historical conditions when the causes themselves for the introduction of these restrictions have long since been removed.

For Ukraine everything was settled almost instantly. It is hard, of course, to get rid of the thought that this is due to upcoming elections in Ukraine (on March 26 - Ed.). Well, and then what to exchange for the WTO, especially Iran?! We don't even have the thought! Our partners have to solve WTO problems on the basis of the rules that exist for the admission of new members and which we are ready to fulfill and even overfulfill. But they are demanding of us what is called "WTO plus," although each time the Americans insist on things which, it would seem, we have already settled in principle. Say, that very same opening of direct branches of foreign banks in Russia. By the way, all the conditions proposed by us have suited American bankers for a long time now, which, in particular, Citibank executives and those of other leading US bank corporations told us about. Everything suits the bankers, yet the administration wants more. Although the administration, one would think, should be caring for its own bankers.

This is making one cautious and I, on the Russian president's instruction, told George Bush about that. And he in my presence gave the instruction that this situation be sorted out, and that every ten days he be informed how matters stood. But we cannot fail to see the underlying political reason in the position of the American negotiators. I beg your pardon, you now mentioned Iran...

Question: Well yes, concerning exchange...

Foreign Minister Lavrov: And what kind of exchange can there be any talk about, really? That we join the WTO and then allow the Americans to bomb Iran - is it so?

Question: It turns out to be so.

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Now certainly not. Exchanges are possible when there are objective reciprocal interests. And when you exchange with your partners a thing that does you no harm. That is you give away something or agree with something that does not run counter to your interests. And an escalation of the situation around Iran does run counter to our interests in the most direct way. This is quite near our region, our borders, and we consider any military action inadmissible. We're having no exchanges on Iran. On Iran we're exchanging views as to what to do next. We are working out a strategy which would not permit exploding the situation and which would not isolate Iran and would not drive it into a corner. For he who is driven into a corner does not act quite rationally. And if the IAEA ceases working in Iran, then we will have no possibility to understand what is happening there.

That's exactly what we want to avoid. Simultaneously we want that Iran should cease taking ill-considered steps in relations with the IAEA. This concerns the additional protocol and it concerns a resumption of the moratorium on all enrichment work for the period of the clarification of the questions about the nuclear program. So here we have two absolutely self-valuable questions in this regard. And each of them affects our national interests.

Question: On Monday we will hold talks with the head of the Syrian MFA, Walid Muallem. On what issue is he coming?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: He previously visited Moscow as deputy minister, and we also met in New York. This is a normal practice. When in countries with which we maintain regular and close relations a new foreign minister is appointed, we invite him. The more so as I was in Syria, and now it is our Syrian colleagues' turn. Undoubtedly, we shall discuss Syrian cooperation with the UN Security Council as well as with the international commission led by Serge Brammertz, which is investigating the murder of Rafik Hariri. (The former Lebanese prime minister was killed in Beirut in February 2004 - Ed.) But we shall also discuss the full range of Russian-Syrian relations.

Question: Is the threat of sanctions against Syria now past?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We so far see no reason to even talk about this. The investigation is under way, Syria is cooperating. We shall encourage it to cooperate fully. And in the future too we see no reason for sanctions. In Washington, when my American interlocutors touched on the theme of Syria and Lebanon, I wondered if there were, according to their observation, any shifts as regards the past accusations of Syrian territory being used for the transfer of militants to Iraq. And my US interlocutors said that positive shifts did exist. We shall encourage the Syrian leadership to continue paying more attention to the inadmissibility of its territory being used by those who want to engage in iniquitous doings in neighbor countries.

