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Unofficial translation from Russian

Transcript of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov's Interview to Russian Media on a Number of Pressing International Problems, June 2, 2006

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Question: Are there many differences of opinion among the six nations?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: There is a discussion going on to find a compromise. The positions must somehow be reduced to a common denominator.

Question: The impression is that Russia has detached itself, has given the Europeans a possibility to sort things out themselves, so that Russia can later see as an onlooker what will eventually happen there.

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Russia has never questioned it that the European trio is a leading player in this entire setup. More than two years ago the trio initiated a negotiation process with Iran. We backed up this initiative. When the talks - even before the coming to power of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - were developing ever more concretely, we offered our input: the setting up of a joint venture on Russian soil, as the main controversy was over a striving to ensure that uranium was not enriched on Iranian soil, and that Iran would have a guaranteed fuel supply for Bushehr. But the Bushehr matter had been settled long ago. So we were in the support group from the outset. It began to expand. China joined in. Then a year ago the US expressed readiness to also be helpful with the negotiation. We actively welcomed that. We actively sought together with the Europeans, incidentally, to get the Americans to abandon their detached-observer stance. What has happened in the last few days, including Washington's decision in principle to participate in direct talks with Iran as part of the group of states is, I would say, a US switchover from a position "on the roadside" to active participation in the talks. We welcomed it while noting that, of course, attempts should be avoided to impede advance to a negotiated result by way of parallel threats or through placing on the talks agenda questions that have no bearing on Iran's nuclear program. So that what was yesterday agreed upon signifies that now all six nations are ready as a group of like-minded actors - where a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear program is concerned - to negotiate collectively with Iran. I would say a quality upgrading of the participation of Russia, the US and China in the process has occurred in this regard.

Question: Will the previous Russia's offer still remain valid? Or will there be any amendments, or will it radically change?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: It cannot radically change. For, it objectively meets the tasks set: to supply the needs of Iran and at the same time so do that they are realized without suspicions that Iran is pursuing a non-civilian program. Our offer, accordingly, stays on the table. Yesterday all reaffirmed it.

Question: It is in the package or is this a separate offer?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: It's in the package.

Question: You already know the reaction of Iran to yesterday's talks?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Not yet. The proposals have not yet been delivered to Iran. This will occur when we have agreed on a time limit acceptable to the Iranian leaders. Then it will take them some time to study these proposals.

Question: And if Iran should refuse?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We won't be guessing right now, because all this guesswork pours oil on the fire of various emotional discussions and gives an excuse to those who would like to thwart everything, gives a possibility to them to speculate. We have all agreed that now all efforts will be focused on a negotiation process which must begin. It will be started by way of the delivery to Iran of the specific proposals. After Iran's study of them we will count on its constructive response.

Question: How much time is Iran given to examine the proposal?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Enough. I was surprised to hear the mention yesterday via television channels, as they told about my brief interview after the talks, that Iran had been given seven days. This is not so at all. The period is much longer. There is no ultimatum-like deadline, as is customary to say, no, but I think that the time limit is several weeks.

Question: Are direct US talks with Iran possible?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: They will be direct, yes. The US will sit down with Iran at one table.

Question: Six persons, tete a tete?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: These are different things. A tete a tete is not at issue. What we were talking about is direct talks with Iran of all six nations.

Question: And on security guarantees was something concretely discussed already?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The matter was discussed and will continue to be discussed. This is all the subject of negotiations.

Question: You knew in advance of the US principled decision to join the talks, or the Americans had not warned anybody?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: It's hard for me to judge what prompted the decision to announce that precisely now. Analyzing the situation as a whole in all its aspects, it becomes clear that this problem has to be tackled. To remain at the position of exclusively unilateral demands does not work. This is a victory of common sense.

Question: What can you say about the lengthy talks US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had had with the European trio before your arrival in Vienna?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I cannot intrude into the private contacts of my counterparts. I had also held conversations of many hours before this in Istanbul and Ankara.

Question: Is it true that on the Chinese side Minister for Foreign Affairs Li Zhaoxing was not there?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The entire meeting had so been arranged that no wonder that at the level of Ministers not everybody was able to come. It is important that there was the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister and concurrently the Chairman of the International Committee under party auspices. A figure that matches the level of yesterday's meeting.

Question: Does this imply that China did not expect an agreement to be reached at this meeting?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I told you that the meeting was organized quickly. Since the coordination of the approaches at the level of Deputy Ministers and Political Directors that had continued for weeks after the meeting in New York was now actually over, and everybody wanted to formalize this agreement at the level of Ministers as soon as possible, it is not surprising that the schedule of the Chinese Foreign Minister did not coincide. For me, by the way, it would also have been convenient to hold this meeting today. Mr. Li Zhaoxing was also ready to meet on June 2. But the French colleague had problems. So that generally acceptable compromises had to be found in this case.

Question: The telephone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President George W. Bush had somehow influenced this meeting, or such details are not to be discussed?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We discussed general matters connected with the situation surrounding the nuclear program of Iran. By the moment the conversation took place it had already been clear that the approaches had drawn closer together and that an agreement was in the offing.

We clearly agreed that now all efforts would be concentrated on launching the negotiation process. Yesterday British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett read out a statement on our behalf. If Iran accepts the proposal, the entire work in the UN Security Council is to be frozen. There is a draft resolution there that remains on the table. Simply it was not being worked on after the agreement in New York to prepare the ground for talks. If Iran should refuse, the cosponsors of the draft have a full right to return to discussing the draft resolution in the Security Council, but there is no talk in it about any sanctions.

Question: Was the phrase "use of military force" employed during the talks?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Nobody employed it. Moreover, I can expressly say that all the accords of yesterday's meeting rule out the use of military force for all contingencies.

Question: Even if Iran should refuse?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: For all contingencies. Interpret that for yourselves. I did not say about the American position, I said about the agreement reached at yesterday's meeting with the participation of the Americans.

Question: Regarding South Ossetia. The statement that was voiced on behalf of the spokesman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Mikhail Kamynin, about the equality of the sovereignties of Georgia and South Ossetia...

Foreign Minister Lavrov: "Equality of sovereignties" - that's not our usage.

Question: Does Russia fear that the situation around South Ossetia may influence separatist movements in Russia?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The Foreign Ministry spokesman did not say anything that would not reflect the facts. They are such that, indeed, we recognize the territorial integrity of Georgia. But in the conditions when a significant part of the territory of Georgia is internationally recognized conflict zones - both South Ossetia and Abkhazia - the Georgian authorities and Tbilisi really cannot control these territories. The classical definition of the notion Sovereignty is an ability to control a territory. This is international law. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to return to the table of negotiations, which are being stalled in every way, even sabotaged by the Georgian side. There are many examples when, in the framework of the negotiation process, scheduled timetables have been breached. By the way, there is also now the proposal to urgently convene the Joint Control Commission on South Ossetia, literally one of these days. But the Georgian side has refused. This means it prefers to use this situation for positioning itself again unilaterally, and not resolve this problem through a normal dialogue at one table. Not so long ago an agreement was reached with enormous difficulty, which we had sought a full six months, that within the framework of the Joint Control Commission a direct conversation would start between the South Ossetians and the Georgians with the backing of its other members, including OSCE, for the purpose of a common, joint plan of settlement. Now the latest events are simply undermining this arrangement. The same also holds for other things. Many examples, including two - the one that with respect to Abkhazia as well as South Ossetia there is the proposal to adopt a document in which the sides would clearly undertake to tackle problems only by peaceful means, guaranteeing the nonuse of military methods. In neither situation such statements can be adopted because the Georgian side, shall we say, is not ready for that. I hope that such readiness will come.

As to the mention of the right to self-determination, and this is also a part of international law, it is realized through an expression of the people's will. By the way, the Russian leadership, speaking of the Chechen Republic, was not scared of submitting the question to a referendum. So that the expression of the people's will in the Chechen Republic has already taken place.

Question: And if in this connection a right to the self-determination of the peoples of Russia

should begin to be spoken about, how would you respond?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: My response would be, the expression of their will has occurred. The peoples of Russia voted for their Constitution.

Question: Does this mean that our statement on South Ossetia cannot incite separatist movements in Russia?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We are not spurring any tendencies. We state an objective given that the territorial integrity of Georgia cannot be ensured in full measure so long as the conflicts remain unsettled. Their settlement is being sabotaged by the Georgian side. The examples I have cited to you - the refusal to sign documents on a purely peaceful settlement, together with the facts of the purchases by Georgia of attack weapons and ammunition in quantities enormous for normal security purposes of that country - cannot but lead us to suspect that, indeed, a force-based option of the solution of this problem is being contemplated.

Question: How will Russia respond to a force-based solution of the problem?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We shall be seeking with all our strength to prevent such an option.

Question: But you do regard such a contingency, don't you? You are preparing for this?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We see the facts and are doing everything to ensure that such plans, if somebody has them, are not realized.

Question: Will the question of visas be raised?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: That was never an issue. It is ludicrous to demand that peacekeepers obtain visas for serving in accordance with international mandates on the territory of a conflict zone not controlled by the visa issuing authorities. There was never anything of the kind. When for the first time at the end of last year the Georgian side raised this question, I had no doubt that this was yet another instance of striving to create some negative charge in questions of the peacekeeping operations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in this case - South Ossetia. We then explained to the Georgians that this was impossible, that we would rotate our contingent in full accordance with the agreements of the early 90s, when this peacekeeping operation was set up. The agreements envisage a notification of the Joint Control Commission about rotation and its conduct once in six months. We in the last case observed this fully. Both in the middle of April and at the beginning of May the appropriate notices were forwarded to the Control Commission. The rotation is occurring, and will be completed. The Georgian side, as we have already referred to this more than once, in its turn violates these rules. There were quite a few instances when the rotation was conducted without notifying the Special Control Commission and much more often than once in six months. This again suggested that somebody would like to "break in" as many soldiers as possible in a zone of potential hostilities.

Question: What is going to be discussed at the G8 Foreign Ministers meeting at the end of June?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The entire political agenda. Iran, Iraq, Middle East settlement, Syria, Lebanon, nonproliferation, terrorism, drug traffic, Afghanistan and, of course, Kosovo and the West Balkans as a whole. Each country is free to raise any questions.

Question: Can a decision be adopted on Kosovo in the coming months?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The G8 is not concerned with this as a body which conducts or accompanies the negotiations. This is the responsibility of the Contact Group, and the G8 traditionally speaks out on this theme while not playing in it, I repeat, the role of chief negotiator.

Question: Will there be any joint statements on the Middle East or Iran within the framework of the meeting?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Yes, of course. There will be a political document which will reflect all of these themes.

Question: It will be general on all the problems?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: This, in principle, is of no significance. You make take a general document, there will be different subheadings there, you can cut the pieces with scissors and show them.

Question: Do you expect that the Americans will raise the question of democracy?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: They are already raising it.

Question: And in the G8-related events?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: This question is not on the agenda.

Question: But they have the right to raise it, don't they?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Of course. We, too. Everybody has the right: the French, the Japanese, the Canadians, the Italians. All are equal.

Question: Will you come to an agreement on the WTO in the near future?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I don't know. This depends, first of all, on the American negotiators. They well know our positions, the red lines which we simply won't be able to cross if we treat responsibly the future of the Russian economy and industry. Everything has been explained many times over, including on such a theme as financial services. On more than one occasion, we have already cited evidences concerning the fact that the financial organizations of Western countries, including the US, that are already working in the Russian market, the market of banking and insurance services, are fully satisfied, in the first place, with their current position, and of course, the proposals which Russia has made as a solution to this problem as part of the talks with the US on the WTO suit them to a hilt. Why then do those for whom the US negotiators so much care consider our conditions absolutely acceptable while the carers themselves are saying this is not enough? This is an artificial

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