

A Russian Diplomat's Take on the World

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On Jan. 26, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held an important year-in-review press conference before an audience of about 150 journalists, including the BBC correspondent Steve Rosenberg and many other well-known representatives of mainstream Western media. The purpose of this annual event is to look back at issues faced by his Ministry over the past year and to give his appraisal of results achieved.

Lavrov's opening remarks were concise, lasting perhaps 15 minutes, and the remaining two hours were turned over to the floor for questions. As the microphone was passed to journalists from many different countries, the discussion covered a great variety of subjects, including the likelihood of a new "re-set" with the United States, the negotiations over re-convening the Syrian peace talks in Geneva, British Prime Minister David Cameron's comments on the findings of a U.K. public inquest into the Litvinenko murder, the possibilities for reestablishing diplomatic relations with Georgia, and prospects for resolving conflicting claims over the Southern Kurile islands so as to conclude a peace treaty with Japan.

To the best of my knowledge, not a single report of the event has yet appeared on major online American, French, British and German newspaper portals or television channels. This was not for lack of substance or newsworthy sound bites, including Lavrov's headline comment that he agreed with Western leaders who said there would be "no business as usual" between Russia and the West.

As part of his opening comments, Lavrov said, "Our Western colleagues sometimes declare with passion that there can no longer be 'business as usual with Russia.' I am convinced that this is so and here we agree: there will be no more 'business as usual' when they tried to bind us with agreements which take into account above all the interests of either the European Union or the United States and they wanted to persuade us that this will do no harm to our interests. That history is over and done with. A new stage of history is dawning which can develop only on the basis of equal rights and all other principles of international law."

Regarding a similar news blackout that followed another major Russian press briefing, the sharp-tongued Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova commented, what are all these

accredited Western reporters doing in Moscow if nothing gets published abroad? Do they have some other occupation?

In keeping with custom, the Russian Foreign Ministry posted the entire video recording of Lavrov's press conference on youtube.com and posted transcripts in Russian and English on the www.mid.ru site. The Russian version takes up 26 tightly spaced printed pages. This is what I have used, since I prefer to go to the source and do my own translations when I have the option. The English version probably takes 40 pages, given the normal expansion from Russian to English in the translation process.

What I noted first in the television broadcast on Russia's Pervy Kanal and then in the transcript was both how well prepared Lavrov was to deal with a plethora of issues and how he gave detailed answers that went on for many minutes without making reference to any notes.

Secondly, it was obvious he spoke more "freely," using fewer diplomatic euphemisms than I have ever seen before. I conclude that he was given a nod by his boss, President Vladimir Putin, not to hold back, to speak with perfect clarity. Given his experience as one of the longest-serving foreign ministers among the major powers and his innate intellect, Lavrov delivered what sounds at times like dictation for essays in proper written Russian.

For these reasons, I have decided to divide my treatment of the press conference into two parts. One will be Lavrov in his own words. And the other will be my conclusions about the international environment in the coming year given Russia's basic positions, particularly the possible lifting of sanctions on Russia by the United States and the European Union and how the next U.S. administration can best prepare for relations with Russia, assuming there is no dramatic change in the thinking of American elites.

From the press briefing, I have extracted several big chunks of text that characterize the overarching views on international relations of Lavrov and the Kremlin, applying their Realpolitik prism and focused primarily on U.S.-Russian relations. This is essential if we are not to lose sight of the forest for the trees.

In questions and answers dealing with all countries but one, we hear about separate issues in various locations around the world holding interest mainly for discrete national audiences with their private concerns. With respect to one country, the U.S., Russia's bilateral relations transcend the minister's in-basket of contingencies.

Indeed, the whole Russian foreign policy really is about relations with the U.S. as expressed in the first two of the three passages in quotation marks below. The third passage, on sanctions, would seem to be more about relations with the E.U. I selected it because the issue of lifting sanctions will surely be a key foreign policy issue facing Russia in the first six months of this year, and behind it all looms the U.S. position on the question.

Question: Is a "re-set" possible in this final year of Barack Obama's administration?

Lavrov: “The question should not be addressed to us. Our inter-state ties sank very low despite the excellent personal relations between former U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Putin. When U.S. President Barack Obama came to the White House and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a ‘re-set,’ this reflected the fact that Americans themselves finally saw the abnormality of the situation wherein Russia and the USA were not cooperating to solve those problems which could not be decided without them...

“We gave a rather constructive response to the ‘re-set.’ We said that we appreciate the decision of the new Administration to correct the errors of its predecessors. We achieved quite a lot: the New START Treaty, the entry of Russia into the WTO, an array of new agreements on various conflict situations. But somehow this quickly began to drop back to zero. Now everyone, including our American colleagues, is telling us: ‘Just fulfill the Minsk accords on Ukraine and immediately everything will return to normal. We will immediately cancel the sanctions and tempting prospects of cooperation will open up between Russia and the United States over much more pleasant issues, not just in the management of crises; right away a constructive partnership program will take shape.’

“We are open for cooperation with everyone on an equal, mutually advantageous basis. We, of course, do not want anyone to build their policy based on the assumption that Russia and not Ukraine must fulfill the Minsk accords. It is written there who must fulfill them. I hope that this is well known to the USA. At least, my latest contacts with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the contacts of Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland with Assistant to the Russian President Surkov indicate that the USA can sort out the essence of the Minsk accords. Grosso modo, everyone understands everything. ...

“I have just mentioned that people have begun to promise a new ‘re-set.’ If we fulfill the Minsk accords, then immediately everything will become fine, with splendid and tempting prospects.

“But the cooling off of relations with the Administration of U.S. President Barack Obama and the end of the period associated with ‘re-set’ began long before the Ukraine. Let’s remember how this occurred. First, when we finally got the consent of our Western partners to terms of our joining the WTO which were acceptable to Russia, the Americans understood that it was not in their interests to keep the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Otherwise they would be deprived of those privileges and advantages which are linked to our participation in the WTO. They began to prepare for the removal of this amendment.

“But Americans would not be Americans if they simply abolished it and said ‘Enough, let’s now cooperate normally.’ They dreamed up the ‘Magnitsky Act,’ although I am certain that what happened to Magnitsky was not set up. I very much hope that the truth will become known to everyone. It is disgusting how a provocation and speculation were built up around the death of a man. Nonetheless, this was done and you know who lobbied for this ‘Magnitsky Act,’ which immediately replaced the Jackson-Vanik amendment.”

[The Magnitsky Act was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 2012 with the goal of punishing Russian officials believed responsible for the death of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in prison in 2009 amid accusations and counter-accusations of fraud.]

“This all began when there was still no Ukraine [crisis], although they now try to lay the blame on violations of OSCE principles. Everything that is going on between the West and Russia is explained by the fact that Russia did not fulfill its obligations, did not respect the world order which was put together in Europe after the Helsinki Act [of 1975], etc. These are all attempts to justify and find an excuse for continuing the policy of containment. But this policy never ended.

“After the ‘Magnitsky Act’ [in 2012], there was the completely inappropriate, overblown reaction to what happened to Edward Snowden, who found himself in Russia against our wishes [in 2013]. We did not know about this. He did not have a passport – his document was canceled while he was in flight. He could not go anywhere from Russia because of decisions taken in Washington. We could not help but give him the possibility to remain in Russia so as to stay safe, knowing which articles of the law they were threatening him with. The Americans made no secret about this. This was done simply as an elementary protection of a person’s right to life.

“U.S. President Barack Obama then canceled his visit to Russia. They made a huge scandal. Dozens of telephone calls came in from the FBI, from the CIA, the State Department. There were direct contacts with the President. They told us that if we do not give up Snowden, then relations will be broken off. The USA canceled the visit. It did not take place but U.S. President Obama came for the G-20 Summit in St. Petersburg, where we, by the way, did something useful – we reached agreement on the principles of the removal of Syria’s chemical weapons.

“Ukraine was just a pretext. The Ukrainian crisis is linked not so much with justified concern over an alleged violation by Russia of the Helsinki principles (although everything began with Kosovo, with the [1999] bombing of Yugoslavia, etc). This was an expression of irritation that the coup d’etat did not lead to the results that were expected by those who supported it.

“I will tell you honestly that we don’t hold a grudge. We have no such traditions in relations between states. We understand that life is tougher than any ideal, romantic scheme like ‘re-set’ or similar. We also understand that this is a world in which there are harsh clashes of interests that come down to us from the age of the West’s total domination and it is in the midst of a long transition period to a more durable system in which there will not be one or even two dominant poles – there will be several. The transition period is long and painful. Old habits die slowly. We all understand this.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.
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“We understand that the USA is interested in having fewer competitors even with regards to those comparable to it in size, influence, military power, economy. We see this in the relations between the USA and China, in how the USA works with the European Union, trying to create a ring around it via the Transatlantic Partnership, and to the east of Russia, to create a Trans-Pacific Partnership which will not include Russia and China. Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about this in detail when he analyzed the processes at work in the world economy and politics. We understand all of this.

“Surely every age brings with it new tendencies, frames of mind in one or another of the elites, especially in major countries which see in their own fashion the ways to fight for their interests.

It would be very bad and ruinous for all of us if these processes moved outside the framework of generally accepted norms of international law.

“Then, simply put, everything would be topsy-turvy, and we would be drawn into a world of anarchy and chaos – something like what is going on in the Near East, perhaps without bloodshed. Each would act as he reckons necessary and nothing good would come out of this. It is very important to observe some kind of general rules of play.

“To answer your question, I would like for the USA to have a ‘re-set’ with the whole world, so that the ‘re-set’ was general, so that we could gather together and reconfirm our commitment to the UN Charter, to the principles embodied in it, including non-interference in internal affairs, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right of peoples to self-determination, the right of peoples to choose their own future without interference from outside.”

Question: At the Munich Security Conference in 2007 President Putin said to the West “you need us more than we need you.” Is that still Russia’s position?

Lavrov: “Ideally we both need one another to face the challenges and threats. But, the reality is different. The West comes to us much more often for help than we come to the West.”

(Lavrov said that in response to Western sanctions, Russia was striving to be self-sufficient and promoting import substitution, but not trying to cut itself off from the world and ready for cooperation based on equality.)

“We must do everything to ensure we do not depend on the whim of one or another group of countries, above all from our Western partners” – as happened when the West took offense at Russia for supporting ethnic Russians in Ukraine who did not recognize the 2014 coup d’etat.

“I have cited Dmitry Yarosh [leader of the radical nationalists, the Right Sector] that they wanted to destroy Russian speakers in Ukraine or deprive them of their rights. We want to insure ourselves against such situations. ...

“I note that it’s not we who are running to our European colleagues and saying ‘Let’s do something to remove the sanctions.’ Not at all. We are focused on not depending on such zigzags in Western policy, not depending on Europe’s saluting the USA. But in our bilateral contacts our European colleagues, when they come to us or meet us in international forums, say: ‘Let’s think of something. Help us carry out the Minsk accords, otherwise these sanctions will do a lot of damage. We want to turn the page.’

“It turns out that in this situation we are needed more by them than they are needed by us. Including for fulfillment of the Minsk accords. ... Yes, we have influence in Donbass [the ethnic Russian section of eastern Ukraine] and we support them. Surely, without our help and humanitarian deliveries Donbass would be in a pitiful state. But one also has to exert influence in Kiev. We need the West to influence the Kiev authorities, but so far this is not happening.

“Or look at the question of the Iranian nuclear program. At the decisive stages of these negotiations we were literally bombarded with requests when it was necessary to solve the questions of exporting enriched uranium in exchange for natural uranium, which was the key condition for achieving agreements; when it was necessary to resolve the question about who will convert the enrichment sites at Fordu into research for production of medical isotopes, etc.

“They came with requests to us, requests which carry a significant financial burden, or at least which do not bring any material benefit. But we fulfilled our part of the work. Now everyone is calling us and our Chinese colleagues about the North Korean problem: ‘help us do something to make North Korea observe its obligations.’ Or take the case of Syria....

“I can’t think of any requests we made to our Western colleagues recently. We don’t believe it is proper to make requests. After you sign agreements following negotiations, you now have to execute obligations, not to make requests for favors.”

Question on whether sanctions will end early.

Lavrov: “I’d say that among a large number of our partners there is the awareness that they cannot go on this way any longer, that this is harmful to them. Our justification for speaking about some possible positive changes comes down to the following: our Western partners more and more often begin to understand that they have fallen into a trap of their own making when they said that they will lift the sanctions after Russia fulfills the Minsk accords. They have now understood that, very likely, this was a ‘slip of the tongue.’

“But in Kiev this was heard very often and was interpreted as an indulgence allowing them not to carry out the Minsk accords. Their failure to perform not only means that Kiev does not have to undertake any actions and fulfill its obligations. It also means that the West will have to keep the sanctions in place against Russia. It was necessary to prove all of this to some gentlemen who are in Kiev fanning radical attitudes. ...

“The West understands the hopelessness of the present situation, when everyone pretends that Russia must fulfill the Minsk accords but Ukraine can do nothing – not change its constitution, not give a special status to the Donbass, not put through an amnesty, not organize elections in consultation with Donbass. Everyone understands that no one will resolve these things for Ukraine.

“Everyone understands that this is abnormal, something pathological which emerged in turning the Ukrainian crisis, which arose as a result of an absolutely illegal, anti-constitutional coup d’etat, into a measuring stick for all relations between Russia and the West. This is absolutely abnormal, an unhealthy situation, artificially fanned from countries that are far removed from Europe. Europe no longer wants to be held hostage to this situation. For me, this is obvious.”

General Conclusions

In presenting these three long excerpts from Lavrov's Jan. 26 press conference, my intention was to give readers a feel for Lavrov's method of argumentation and his somber tone in what was delivered without notes and in response to questions from journalists in the audience.

In his prepared opening remarks, Lavrov had already set out some of the key points in the overall approach to international affairs from Russia's analytical tool of realism and national interest. The number one issue facing Russia and the world from his perspective is to arrive at a new system of managing international affairs. Russia's relations with the West are part and parcel of this broader challenge.

This wished-for new system would be one built on full equality of relations between states, respect for their interests and non-interference in internal affairs. Lavrov was repeating Vladimir Putin's call upon nations to re-dedicate themselves to the principles of the United Nations Charter that Putin issued in New York in September 2015 at the 70th anniversary gathering of the General Assembly. The new system of global governance will come about as a result of reforms to the basic international institutions whereby political and economic power is reallocated in ways that reflect changes in relative economic and military power of nations from the days when these institutions were established.

By itself, there is nothing particular new in this vision. It has been in the public domain for years and guided calls for readjusting the voting powers within the International Monetary Fund. The novel element, which will be shocking to many in Washington, was Sergey Lavrov's clear and repeated identification of the United States as the power frustrating the renewal of world governance by stubbornly defending its hegemonic control of institutions and seeking to consolidate still further its control over its allies in Europe and Asia at the expense of their national interests and in furtherance of its own interests.

Hence, Lavrov's mention of the TPP and TIPP projects. Hence, his repeated mention of forces from afar, meaning the U.S., that have imposed European sanctions on Russia against the wishes of separate E.U. member states.

At one point, in responding to a journalist from Japan, Lavrov completely abandoned veiled language. He said Russia favored in principle giving a permanent seat on the UN Security Council to Japan, but would do so only when it was clear Japan will contribute its own national views to deliberations, broadening the perspectives on the table, and not merely provide the United States with an additional voting member under its control.

It is interesting that Lavrov explicitly denied that Russia feels "offended," or as I have written using an alternative translation, "holds a grudge" over how it has been treated by the United States in the downward spiral of relations from the high point of the 2009 "re-set" to today's nadir.

The context for this remark is the ever-present denunciations in mainstream Western media of Vladimir Putin's speeches on foreign affairs. Putin's observations on how things went awry since the end of the Cold War are regularly categorized as "diatribes" and "revisionist," by which is meant aggressive, threatening and possibly irrational.

Lavrov said Russia acknowledges it is a tough world out there and competition is harsh. That is the true sense of his headline remark that there can be no return to “business as usual” or the idealistic notions underlying the “re-set” even when the current sanctions against Russia are lifted.

Russia is nonetheless open for business on equal and mutually advantageous terms where and when possible. In this regard, Lavrov is in complete agreement with American experts like Angela Stent at Georgetown University who advise the incoming U.S. administration in 2017 against planning some new “re-set.” They come to that common conclusion from diametrically opposed premises over who is responsible for the new reality.

Lavrov speaks of our being in a long and painful transition period from a world dominated by the West, which in turn is dominated by one power, the United States, to a multipolar world with a number of key participants in global governance. But that does not exclude amelioration and he appears to share the view now spreading in Western media, that U.S. and European sanctions will be lifted in the near future.

One recent example of this expectation that generates euphoria in Western business circles appeared in Bloomberg online the day before Lavrov’s news conference: “Russian Entente Nears as Allies Hint at End of Ukraine Sanctions.”

The important message, which Sergey Lavrov delivered on Jan. 26, is that Russia has not and will not mend its ways. He told us Russia did not beg for relief from sanctions and is not trading its support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria in return for relief over Ukraine.

We may be sure that the United States and the European Union will present the lifting of sanctions as a trade-off. But the reality will be a retreat from a policy that is unsustainable because it harms Western interests far more than Russian interests. This was the sense of Lavrov’s insistence that the West needs Russia more than Russia needs the West.

The present, ongoing economic harm to European farmers and other select sectors of the economy from Russia’s tit-for-tat embargo is obvious. The harm to U.S. interests is more subtle.

It was recently highlighted in an article published in Foreign Affairs magazine by a research fellow of the Cato Institute entitled “Not-So Smart Sanctions.” There we read that the Washington establishment is finally worried over the creation by Russia and China of alternative global financial institutions to those based in Washington.

The BRICS Bank, the Asia Infrastructure Development Bank, the introduction of bank clearing centers competing with SWIFT: all are intended to end, once and for all, America’s possibilities for inflicting crippling economic pain on those falling into its latest list of enemies as was done to punish the Kremlin over annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbass.

Lavrov spoke repeatedly about defending “national interests” as the guiding principle of foreign relations. In this connection, the shadow of Hans Morgenthau, a founder and major theorist of

America's Realist School, may be said to have shared the podium with him. But Lavrov and the Russians have taken to a new level the principles set out in *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau's famous textbook which generations of American college students once studied in their Government 101 courses.

Lavrov's Russia is calling upon nations to shed their chains, to stop pushing their national interests to one side while listening to instructions from Washington. Nations should compete and jostle for influence in a free market of ideas and influences, while playing by generally recognized rules.

If the rules are followed, the international environment will not collapse into chaos notwithstanding sharp contradictions between nations.