

Russia's view

Sergei Lavrov

The Russian Foreign Minister spoke candidly during a joint press conference with John Kerry, his US counterpart, following their landmark agreement in Geneva on Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, following the use of nerve gas during the ongoing war in the country. BBC Monitoring provided the English translation of Lavrov's extended remarks, which were broadcast by state-owned Russian news channel Rossiya 24 on 14 September 2013.

I won't be offering an interpretation of the documents that we have agreed here, they will be made public and each of you can study them. I would only point out that these documents represent a consensus, a compromise, and professionalism.

The objective that was set in the conversation between our presidents on Friday 5 September on the sidelines of the G20 summit in St Petersburg, the objective which later was officially announced just recently, last Monday 8 September, has been achieved. This objective consists in resolving the task of placing Syrian arsenals of chemical weapons under international control.

Today, in what I think was record-breaking time, we have Russian-US agreed proposals. I would like to stress that these are proposals which are yet to be legally formulated, and yet their significance cannot be overestimated.

We would like to give credit to all US partners, all US negotiators, especially John Kerry, for a constructive mood towards joint work, during which we have managed to, largely speaking, set aside irrelevant rhetoric and focus on professionally agreeing practical ways of resolving the problem of placing Syria's chemical arsenal under international control and further ways of destroying it.

Damascus's decision to join the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and Damascus's willingness to apply its commitments under this convention before this convention formally enters force for Syria in 30 days' time – this Convention will start to apply and Damascus will begin to implement its

commitments much earlier – became the starting-point in this work.

We have agreed on the joint steps that will be taken by our delegations to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in accordance with the procedures provided for in the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which allow specific problems to do with the destruction of chemical stockpiles to be solved promptly, without any delays and complications. We hope that the members of the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will support the Russian-American approaches and will take a decision on the basis proposed by us about action on Syria's chemical weapons.

We also agreed that we will have to secure support for the OPCW's activities from the UN Security Council, especially on issues that go beyond the competence of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons itself. Let me mention in particular the especially important subject of how to ensure that the inspectors work in safety. Our proposals note that the primary responsibility for security will be borne by the Syrian authorities but not only them. Other Syrian sides, that is to say the opposition, will also be responsible for the non-creation of threats to international personnel. And, of course, the international personnel themselves should be given appropriate powers. All this remains to be worked out in detail.

It is of fundamental importance that, as I have already said, all the Syrian sides without exception have a responsibility for not putting the international personnel at risk.

We also agreed that any violation of the procedures to be approved by the Executive Council of the OPCW on the Syrian arsenal of chemical weapons – as well as any evidence of the use of chemical weapons by anyone at all – will be considered in the UN Security Council, and if these facts are confirmed, the Security Council will adopt measures commensurate with the specific situation. We agreed on that, and this agreement builds on the decisions taken by the leaders of the G8 in June in Lough Erne. These decisions highlight our common position on the inadmissibility of the use of chemical weapons by anyone at all, and the need to report any such facts to the UN Security Council.

Naturally, no use of force is mentioned in these agreed approaches. Nor are any automatic sanctions mentioned. As I have already said, any violations must be convincingly and unambiguously proven in the UN Security Council.

We understand that the agreement that has been reached today is only the beginning of the road to a full resolution, a comprehensive resolution

of the task of putting under control and destroying the chemical weapons of the Syrian Arab Republic.

We, in submitting our proposals that I have mentioned, are ready together with our American colleagues for joint work, first and foremost within the framework of the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, where we, together with other members of this body, face the task of translating the agreement distributed today into clear, specific judicial language that avoids ambiguous interpretations.

The agreement – although it is preliminary and needs to be enshrined in universal mechanisms – nevertheless is an agreement on a very difficult issue. It was reached in the shortest possible time, and we are convinced this shows that, with goodwill, with clear directions from heads of state, with amicable work between ministries, Russia and the United States can achieve results in moving forward to settling key issues of modern times, including the threat of the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

The successful implementation of these agreements will have significance not only in terms of fulfilling the overall task of eliminating all chemical weapons stocks, but will also make it possible to avoid a military scenario, which would be, without exaggeration, catastrophic for this region, and indeed for the whole of international relations.

In this regard, John Kerry and I clearly confirmed our commitment to a peaceful settlement of the crisis in Syria. We held a meeting with [UN-Arab League envoy for Syria] Lakhdar Brahimi, during which we discussed how we could after all get the ball rolling a little more quickly. We hope that the opposition, just as the Syrian government has already done, will also clearly, without any reservations, announce its agreement to take part in the conference entitled Geneva 2, without preconditions, with only one aim – to fully and comprehensively fulfil the 30 June 2012 Geneva communiqué. We discussed – and you have probably already read the report from New York – the approximate date for calling this conference. Our colleagues from the UN Secretariat mention October; Russia was ready to hold such a conference in September or earlier. But the main thing, I repeat, is to make sure that all Syrian sides are represented at the conference, not under some kind of special conditions, but on the basis of fulfilling last year's Geneva communiqué, according to which the Syrians themselves must determine their future.

Let me also mention this point: the support of many countries of the world for our approaches. John [Kerry] thanked representatives of France and Britain. We are ready to work with them in the UN Security Council. Today I would like to thank the BRICS countries [Brazil, Russia, India,

China, South Africa] and the countries of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization, and many other countries for their principled support for the approach to settling the problem of chemical weapons in Syria exclusively by peaceful means. I hope that our meeting today will allow us to start working so these expectations are not dashed.

In conclusion, I will say that the resolution of the problem of chemical weapons in Syria will be a large step towards achieving the long-standing task of creating in the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. In compliance with a resolution of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, Russia and the United States, together with Great Britain, are co-sponsors entrusted, together with the UN, with the task of convening the relevant conference. It was supposed to take place last year. Unfortunately, things are stalling. We shall firmly and consistently seek the implementation of what was agreed. In 2010 it was decided, by a consensus, that this conference should be convened in 2012. The year 2012 passed, 2013 is nearly over too, and we consider this state of affairs to be inadmissible. We expect that all those who have an influence on the parties whose participation in such a zone, and in a conference to set it up, will use their influence on the relevant states so that this most important task, which – among other things – has enormous significance for the global non-proliferation regime, will be resolved.

(Question in English about when the first inspection might be expected to take place and whether force might still be used under Chapter 7. Lavrov is asked to answer in English but says he is sure the translator will do an excellent job and answers in Russian.)

... As for your question to John Kerry, before he touches on it, let me once again urge you to read carefully what we have agreed and what we will be guided by in our work at the (UN) Security Council. We have agreed at the (UN) Security Council to back those decisions that will be taken by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, to draw up an action plan additionally to back these activities to reflect the specifics of the Security Council's remit, primarily in the sphere of security, and we have also agreed that we shall expect the requirements the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will formulate based on the appropriate convention, to be complied with in full. And if these requirements are not complied with, or if anyone uses chemical weapons, the Security Council will take action under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Of course this does not mean that every violation reported to the

Security Council will be taken on trust. It will be investigated. We will strive for authenticity. The fact is that there are so many lies and fabrications to do with these reports worldwide today that we need to be extremely cautious. Not until we are totally convinced that a violation has taken place will we, the Russian Federation, be ready to adopt a new Security Council resolution in which action against the violators will have to be commensurate with the seriousness of the violation committed. It is pointless today to speculate on this subject further.

(Question, in Russian) ... Have you come to an understanding about how many chemical weapons Syria in fact has, that is, what volumes, or in some third country, and who is going to pay for that?

All of these questions are set out in the documents that you will receive very soon. And they contain our experts' approximate assessments. But the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will make the final decision on these and practically all other issues.

The documents contain our joint vision of volumes, deadlines and procedures. However, I repeat that this will still need to be submitted to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the final parameters must be agreed there within the framework of a decision by the Executive Council ... You probably heard that there were countries that were willing to pay for war. I am sure that, if not these, then other countries can be found that will be willing to pay to solve this problem peacefully.

... As for the meeting with [former UN Secretary-General and former UN-Arab League envoy for Syria] Kofi Annan – as I understand, John [Kerry] has also met him. Kofi Annan has no official position, official office, but he is a super-respectable politician. He is a member of the so-called Club of Wise Men. He takes part in the Foundation in Support of the UN set up by Ted Turner. Recently, a delegation from this foundation, including Kofi and his wife Nan, was in Moscow and we met them. It is clear that after he stepped down as representative for Syria and these powers were handed over to L. Brahimi, Kofi Annan as a political animal, so to speak, cannot simply forget about this, all the more so as he, as a person, cares very much that there are fewer wars in the world and more stability. This really worries him personally.

When he met me, he asked me to tell him how we saw the situation, how we managed to agree with John [Kerry]. This happened yesterday evening (13 September), but it was clear then that we were steering towards an

agreement, about which we have told you and which is still to be transformed into concrete legal-binding documents in The Hague and then New York.

I said openly that we are very concerned by attempts to undermine any efforts that are aimed at calming the situation and removing certain aspects of the Syrian crisis, including efforts that John and I are making today. I also told him that in the heat of our talks, in the very crucial moment of the talks, we had suddenly seen on television reports that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had told some women, in a women's club, that the report by inspectors who were investigating the incident in Al-Ghuthah on 21 August would be presented on Monday (16 September) and that he could not reveal the contents of the report but it would definitely say that chemical weapons had been used.

And then immediately there was a video in which Ban Ki-moon said: Yes, (Syrian President) Bashar al-Assad has repeatedly committed crimes against humanity. Then it turned out that it had been cut, that these two sentences – that the report would contain confirmation of the use of chemical weapons, and about crimes against humanity – are not connected; that he [Ban Ki-moon] was talking about assessments passed by the independent commission on Syria which had been set up here in Geneva and which mentioned in their reports crimes against humanity. However, respectable television channels showed everything together: that there would be a report confirming the use of chemical weapons and that Bashar al-Assad has repeatedly committed crimes against humanity. If this is not a silly accident which happened because of access to the UN internal television network, because the meeting was held behind closed doors, if this is not a misunderstanding, this is a conscious attempt to undermine our meeting with John Kerry in Geneva. The attempt failed, thank God.

In any case, the use of – or the alleged use of – chemical weapons must be established honestly and carefully based on facts. So all those who say that on 21 August weapons were used by the regime (Syrian government forces) should, probably after all, wait for the conclusions of the report (of UN chemical weapons inspectors). They will establish whether the weapons were used or not. But the conclusions will be examined together with all other evidence which abounds now on who, how and why might – might, I am not asserting anything – have organized what happened on 21 August.

If we pay so much attention to strengthening the role of the Security Council, let's respect the Security Council. Let's not pre-empt what it will decide and its conclusions after the experts' report and the corps of

evidence which abounds about the events on 21 August and those preceding them.

Incidentally, I told Kofi Annan, and he supported me, it is necessary that the group of inspectors headed by [Ake] Sellstrom must, as soon as possible after presenting this part of their report, return to finish investigating the other cases (of alleged chemical weapons use) in its mandate.

I am also very much concerned, and I also told Kofi Annan about this, that there are reasons to suspect that attempts are being made to doctor the report which will be presented on Monday (16 September), and give it a certain bias, in comparison with what the inspectors wrote. We are glad that, finally, the UN secretary-general has decided that Sellstrom will be personally present at Security Council meetings, so that if the members of the Security Council have questions they can ask him. I am sorry I take so long talking about this but Kofi Annan was really interested in many things and I shared with him at least part of our concerns.

As for the questions to John Kerry, I want to support what he said. As I have already said in my introductory remarks, agreements like the one achieved today, on a most complex matter – albeit this agreement has not yet become a law, has not yet been approved by the relevant bodies – but it is a Russian-US initiative (changes tack). False modesty aside, when we act together, we, as a rule, are capable of mobilizing the support of an overwhelming majority of, if not all, members of the international community. This in itself shows how important it is for us to rise above things that some are trying to turn into almost the key ones, trying to turn into an obstacle to developing our relations; some petty, obscure grievances or artificially created concerns. I can tell you that the two presidents, at the meeting in Los Cabos last year and at meetings on the sidelines of other international events, constantly stress the focus on developing co-operation, both bilateral and in the international arena. Indeed, as John said, we have disagreements, including on Syria. That is to say, we have a common goal – to achieve a peaceful resolution, and for Syria to remain a united, secular state, where all minorities and ethnic and religious groups are safe, with their rights protected. But we disagree on methods. Although here, as regards the issue of Syrian chemical weapons, we have found a common path. And this is how we should proceed on all the other issues too.

Incidentally, a General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency opens in Vienna on Monday (16 September), where a very important Russian-US agreement on co-operation in peaceful nuclear

research will be signed. It has a great practical application. We have several more agreements ready, including one on co-operation in combating drugs. We have already set up a hotline between our security councils on issues of cyber security and international information security. Ahead of the expected visit by President Obama, we prepared statements by the presidents on economic co-operation tasks and on the overall long-term plan for developing Russian-US relations. Although the visit did not take place, I am convinced that the right things that the negotiators had put into those papers will not go to waste and when an opportunity presents itself, during the presidents' next meeting – I hope it may be in Russia – we shall sign those and many other documents that we should be able to agree on.

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