

## **Interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Published in the Journal Latinskaya Amerika, No. 2, 2009**

**Question:** What position do the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean Basin (LACB) currently occupy in the list of Russia's foreign policy priorities?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** The role of this region in world politics and economics is increasing with each passing year. Three Latin American states – Brazil, Mexico and Argentina – are among the world's twenty major economies. Of the five developing countries engaged in dialogue with the G8 under the Heiligendamm Process\*, two – Brazil and Mexico – represent LACB. Russia also cooperates with Brazil, along with China and India, in the BRIC format. By and large the region's countries are ever more confidently upholding their independent role in international affairs. This serves as one of the factors contributing to the formation of a polycentric world system.

Pursuant to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President Dmitry Medvedev, promoting political, economic, trade and cultural cooperation with Latin American states is among the international activity priorities of our country. Russia's line on strengthening the many-sided partnership with the LACB countries bears a long-term strategic character. It is based on pragmatism and a desire to materialize in mutually advantageous projects and other concrete undertakings the reciprocal attraction and sympathy existing between our countries and peoples. We are pleased with the mighty positive dynamics that the development of ties with the states of that region has acquired in recent years.

We are united by the similarity of views on key international problems. We act with our Latin American partners as natural allies on such issues as the necessity of ensuring the supremacy of international law; the reinforcement of multilateral mechanisms for solving international problems and of a central UN role; and a search for collective answers to the challenges of contemporaneity. Our views practically coincide as to reform of the world financial architecture and the importance of respecting the world's cultural and civilizational diversity and preventing civilizational motivated schisms.

During the August 2008 events in the Caucasus, the voice of Latin America resonated strongly among statements in support of the action taken by Russia, and Nicaragua recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

We are developing constructive relations with all existing Latin American regional political associations, including the Rio Group, the Organization of American States, and the Latin American Integration System, where Russia has observer status. We take into account the gradual strengthening of such entities as the South American Common Market, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, the Andean and Caribbean Communities, and the Central American Integration System. A reflection

of the process of the consolidation of unifying tendencies in South America was the creation of the Union of South American Nations.

Latin America is currently not only a supplier of raw materials and agrarian sector and light industry products, but also a promising partner in investment cooperation, energy, the space and nuclear industries and the military technology sphere. Russian companies show a growing interest in the Latin American market – including standard bearers of Russian business: Rusal, Lukoil, Gazprom, Russian Railways and others. Russian trade with the region's countries has grown tenfold since 1992, reaching a record mark of 15 billion dollars last year.

The presence in many states of the continent of a diaspora of our compatriots contributes to the development of Russian-Latin American cultural exchanges and humanitarian cooperation. By various estimates, their total number reaches 200-300 thousand. Gratifying is the atmosphere of benevolence and keen interest that distinguished the holding in autumn 2008 of the Days of Russia in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Cuba, Paraguay and Chile.

**Question:** How is the “burst-like” character of the reinvigoration of Russian-Latin American ties in 2008 to be explained? What are your forecasts for the year 2009?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** I don't think the definition chosen by you correctly reflects the gist of the matter. Since 2000 Russia's president has visited the region five times and minister of foreign affairs nine times. There have been regular meetings at the level of chairmen of governments, and contacts with Latin American leaders in the course of different international forums. More than 150 joint documents, encompassing the most diverse spheres of our engagement, have been signed over the last eight years.

We intend to continue increasing cooperation with the states of Latin America in all areas. New summit and high-level meetings are being prepared. In the current year we are planning to host the presidents of a number of Latin American countries in Moscow. There will continue intensive engagement between heads of foreign affairs agencies. It is remarkable that two new Russian embassies have been opened in the region over the recent period – in Guatemala and Paraguay.

**Question:** How do you evaluate the experience of our country's relationships with the states of the southern part of the Western Hemisphere amassed over the previous decades? What is useful from this experience and is being used at present?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** The talk in this case is normally about periods significantly longer than decades. Diplomatic relations with Brazil, for example, were established in 1828, with Uruguay in 1857, with Argentina in 1885, with Mexico in 1890. Of course, there have been ups and downs over the past years, both in political engagement and in economic and trade cooperation. But as a result we have even in complicated conditions learned to construct bilateral relations with the Latin Americans, guiding ourselves by the national interests of each other. An invaluable

interaction experience has been amassed, based on which we have been able to secure the acceleration of this process achieved in recent years, which is also designated as our “return” to Latin America.

**Question:** Who are more active in mutual contacts – we or the Latin Americans?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** Promoting cooperation with any country of the world is a “two-way street.” Otherwise, it is hard to expect any positive results. Russia and Latin American states show a stable reciprocal interest in fostering closer political, economic, commercial, scientific and cultural ties. This manifests itself in the intensification of high-level contacts. In 2008 President Dmitry Medvedev traveled to Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba, and the Russian Foreign Minister also to Colombia and Ecuador. The heads and senior officials of Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua and other countries of the region visited Moscow.

**Question:** The visit to Moscow of the head of the Cuban state, Raul Castro, has just ended. How do you assess its results and generally our relations with Cuba at this stage?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** I would expressly assess both the results of the visit and our relations in general with a plus sign. It was perhaps the most action-packed visit not only among the meetings at this level with our Cuban colleagues, but also among many other international contacts of Russian leaders. The number of agreements that was signed right on the eve of and during the visit exceeded 30. And they are all not merely declarative documents, but practical accords which will be implemented in the most diverse fields of economic, commercial, investment, cultural and generally humanitarian cooperation and of cooperation in education, personnel training, health care and medicine. All these are things in which we and the Cuban colleagues are interested alike.

Surely, in conditions of the world financial crisis one has to think about how to finance our interaction, but the resources were found, and they are not just allocated for Cuba but will be actively employed in the foreign trade turnover of our enterprises: I mean both the work load and jobs. All this will secure Russian interests and, of course, will work to the benefit of the Cuban economy. And, undoubtedly, foreign policy issues were discussed during the visit. Here our positions on all international affairs practically coincide. It is particularly important that Cuba currently heads the Non-Aligned Movement. This, incidentally, manifests the growing international prestige of Cuba. And the positions which Cuba and the RF advance in the UN are shared by the overwhelming majority of states. So whichever area of interstate relations you take, practically everywhere substantial progress is achieved in our ties with Cuba. And I am convinced that this tendency will only gain momentum.

**Question:** An upsurge is currently being observed in our ties with the Latin American regimes attributable to the so called Left Turn. And how do matters stand in relations with other governments?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** In developing relations with the countries of Latin America, we are not guided by ideological approaches, but by considerations of mutual advantage and pragmatism. Of course, we also take into account the reciprocal interest in strengthening cooperation with our country.

Dividing Latin American leaders into “left-wing” and “right-wing” is highly provisional, and not infrequently this is being used for unseemly purposes, to exert purposeful political influence through the formation of some or other cliches in the global information space.

At the same time one cannot fail to see that new political forces have in recent years come to power in most Latin American countries on a wave of popular disillusionment with the ability of traditional elites to secure a real improvement of life on the basis of neoconservative recipes. The interest they show in diversifying the external ties of their states objectively contributes to the development of Russian-Latin American relations.

**Question:** Some media are presenting Russia’s turn to Latin America as supposedly a return to the Cold War between East and West. What do you think about this?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** These assertions do not correspond to reality. The Latin American direction is a separate vector of Russian foreign policy, which is defined in its July Concept as multivector. The development of our relations with the continent’s countries is not directed against anyone. Our partners understand this both in the US and in leading West European states, who have repeatedly, publicly and in contacts with us emphasized that an intensified engagement between Russia and the countries of Latin America are not seen by them as a threat to their interests. By the way, Russian-American deputy foreign minister level consultations on Latin America were held in Moscow recently that reaffirmed this mindset – no one is going to “divide” anyone here. In general, speculations on the theme of a struggle for spheres of influence, in our view, are based on the perceptions and terms of the past era and do not reflect the realities of the contemporary globalizing world.

**Question:** What are your most vivid personal impressions of your trips to Latin America?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** This is a vast continent, rich among other things in natural resources; very different countries, climates, and customs. The sizes of territories differ, as do the economic development levels of the states situated there. At the same time, it seemed to me that in Latin America amid the entire diversity of cultures and traditions a certain commonality is also visible which has evidently allowed Latin Americans to find a common language at international forums and to deal with problems that arise between them on their own, without attracting extra-regional forces, ever more often in recent years. In principle such Latin American solidarity corresponds to the present-day tendencies for deepening of regional integration processes, which manifest themselves on other continents as well. The region is now going through a profound transformation encompassing all aspects of life. And most

important – they there are well disposed towards Russia, towards our culture and all things Russian, which creates favorable conditions for the development of mutually privileged relations.

**Question:** Maybe you want to add something?

**Foreign Minister Lavrov:** I would like to wish the Latinskaya Amerika editorial staff, contributors and readers on the eve of its fortieth anniversary new creative successes in the work of strengthening friendship and understanding between the peoples of Russia and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean Basin. Yours is a good, useful journal.

**Note:**

\* The Heiligendamm Process envisages talks between the leaders of the five most important emerging economies and the Group of Eight. The name derives from the German seaside resort where in June 2007 the G8 summit was held, in which the leaders of Brazil, India, China, Mexico and South Africa took part for the first time.