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Lavrov Slams U.S. Backing of Libyan Rebels

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday criticized the United States and other countries that have recognized the rebel National Transitional Council as Libya's legitimate government, saying they were taking sides in the civil war.

Setting Russia apart from the West, Lavrov said nations that recognized the rebels were pursuing a "policy of isolation" he suggested could undermine efforts to end the five-month war.

"Those who declare such recognition stand fully on the side of one political force in a civil war," Lavrov said.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the recognition at a meeting in Turkey on Friday of an international contact group on Libya, which is seeking a political solution that would remove Moammar Gadhafi from power.

The major diplomatic step could unblock billions of dollars in frozen Libyan funds.

Russia, which in the past has warned the contact group not to try to eclipse the authority of the UN Security Council, was invited to the meeting for the first time along with China, but both decided not to get involved. President Dmitry Medvedev has said Gadhafi must go but has criticized the Western bombing campaign.

Lavrov suggested that recognizing the rebel council as Libya's sole legitimate government would not help.

"Supporters of such a decision are supporters of a policy of isolation, in this case the isolation of those forces that represent Tripoli," Lavrov said, adding that Moscow is in contact with both Tripoli and the rebels.

"We ... reject isolation as a method of solving problems and support inclusion," Lavrov said.

He said the sides should "show responsibility for the fate of the people and the country and sit at the negotiating table" for a "focused, very concrete dialogue about the conditions under which transitional structures could be formed."

Those structures would prepare for reforms, legislative changes and "free and democratic elections," he said.

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