

Lavrov Denies Rethinking Syria's Future

By [The Moscow Times](#)

December 09, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Sunday that Russia was not holding any talks on the future of Syrian President Bashar Assad, dismissing speculation that it is preparing for its ally's potential exit from power.

The United States and its NATO allies have pressed for Assad's departure as part of efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria, but Russia and China have blocked action against the Syrian leader at the UN Security Council.

Lavrov held surprise talks on Syria with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and international mediator Lakhdar Brahimi on Thursday, but Lavrov dismissed suggestions that this meant Moscow had changed its stance.

"We are not holding any talks on the fate of Assad," he said during a meeting Sunday, Itar-Tass reported. "All attempts to present the situation differently are rather shady, even for the diplomacy of those countries that are known for striving to distort facts in their own favor."

He said the priority was to end the fighting in Syria, not to discuss the fate of one man. “Our position on Syria is well-known,” he said. Reiterating the line that Russian officials have used repeatedly, he said: “Moscow does not stick to Assad or to some other figure on the Syrian political scene.”

Clinton said Friday that the United States and Russia were committed to trying again to get Assad’s regime and the rebel opposition to talk about a political transition in Syria, setting aside a year and a half of U.S.-Russian disagreements that have paralyzed the international community.

Clinton stressed, however, that the U.S. would insist once again that Assad’s departure be a key part of that transition, a position not shared by the Russians.

Clinton called Thursday’s discussions “constructive” while adding that much work remained, and she suggested that neither side had shifted its fundamental position.

“We reviewed the very dangerous developments inside Syria,” Clinton said. “And both Minister Lavrov and I committed to supporting a new push by Brahimi and his team to work with all the stakeholders in Syria to begin a political transition.”

“It was an important meeting, but just the beginning,” she added. “I don’t think anyone believes there was some great breakthrough. No one should have any illusions about how hard this remains, but all of us with any influence on the process, with any influence on the regime or the opposition, need to be engaged.”

Neither Assad nor any opposition group has agreed to a cease-fire and talks. Both sides believe they can resolve the conflict militarily. Even if the U.S. and Russia reach a broader agreement on a path forward, bringing most of the world with them, it is unclear whether that would have any effect on the fighting in Syria.

The 40-minute meeting with Lavrov and Brahimi immediately seemed to ease some of the tensions between the U.S. and Russia over how best to address Syria’s bloody, 21-month-old civil war.

Throughout much of the conflict, the former Cold War foes have argued bitterly. The U.S. has criticized Russia for shielding its closest Arab ally. Moscow has accused Washington of meddling by demanding Assad’s downfall.

Clinton said nothing suggesting that either government had changed its position.

But with rebels fighting government forces on the outskirts of Syria’s capital and Western governments warning about the possibility of chemical weapons deployment by the Assad regime, Clinton emphasized the importance of taking another shot at a peaceful transition deal.

(Reuters, AP)

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