Vladimir Putin answered Russian journalists' questions

The President answered Russian journalists' questions following the BRICS summit in Brasilia.

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President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Good evening, colleagues, or is it good afternoon?

I would like to begin by thanking our hosts, including the President of Brazil and all our colleagues, who worked hard, persistently and, I believe, effectively throughout the year and have held the BRICS summit at a very high level.

As you know, we have signed a final document, which has been coordinated with all the sides. I believe that it is a very substantive and well-structured document, which includes a number of tough statements, which we see as a matter of principle.

We will carry on our efforts at the rate achieved in Brazil and in the areas which Brazil itself considers to be of priority significance. We are grateful to our hosts, and I would like to congratulate them on the success of this event.

Question: I have a question about BRICS. It is believed that the role of BRICS is not clear in the context of the increasing global polarisation, and that people think about BRICS only when its leaders come together for their summits. On the other hand, the Western media write that BRICS is not merely an economic but a geopolitical alliance.

Do you think that BRICS can play a big part in international affairs and increase its influence on international developments, or it is not what BRICS should do? What

interesting initiatives will we see during Russia's presidency of the group?

Vladimir Putin: I do not agree that people think about BRICS only during its summits.

As I said, our Brazilian colleagues were preparing for the summit throughout the preceding year. They have held a great number of events and coordinated the sides' positions on the key development issues.

You surely remember what we say about BRICS, that it has become a factor of stability not only in politics but also in the global economy, because it stands for open markets, against any kind of protectionism, etc. You can read about this in our final document. I believe that BRICS is playing a stabilising role in this sense.

As for increasing its influence, we are not pushing it or trying to turn the group into a closed alliance. However, the role of BRICS will definitely increase in the context of global changes.

Colleagues, I invite you to take a look at the economy. Just look at the figures. This year BRICS has surpassed the G7 in terms of GDP PPP by 12 percent, I believe. And next year we will have \$50 trillion more than the G7 countries.

Is there anyone who does not see this? It is a very real and substantial factor of international affairs, and it will continue to grow.

Question: Mr President, continuing on the topic of BRICS and Russia's presidency next year, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Russia may actually host a summit of this association in an extended format with the participation of CIS countries and major regional actors. What do you think about the significance of such a format for top-level officials and the value of this meeting here in Russia?

Vladimir Putin: As concerns its value, we can rightfully regard Russia as one of the founders of this organisation. Everything started here, in St Petersburg, when we suggested having a trilateral meeting between the President of Russia (yours truly at the time), Prime Minister of India and the President of China. This is how 'RIC' came about. It was later joined by Brazil and South Africa, thus making it a 'BRICS' that was also ultimately formed in Russia. Therefore, we take this organisation very seriously. I have just expressed my opinion about it.

As for inviting other countries, outreach is a common practice. We plan to invite both regional economic organisations – primarily, the EAEU (the Eurasian Economic Union) – and the CIS. Remember that some of the BRICS countries are also involved in the EAEU; therefore, it will be an absolutely natural meeting of the partners in another organisation, if not BRICS. The discussion will be open to all the parties and every issue to be discussed will be of interest to everybody invited to the event.

On top of that, we believe it is important that – as, I think, I already mentioned this at the meeting with our partners and yesterday at the meeting with the business community – it was Russia that initiated adopting the BRICS Development Strategy until 2025. Considering the rapidly changing situation in the world, we think it is time to update this economic development strategy, which will also be one of our proposals.

Go ahead, please.

Question: Your agenda also includes a meeting with the President of Brazil. However, we could not help but notice the current Brazilian leadership's lack of interest in developing relations with Russia. Our political dialogue is slowing down; there are hardly any new projects in trade and the economy while the old ones have lost momentum. Is it possible to change this situation, especially considering that Brazil is clearly seeking closer relations with the United States? Do our two countries have a common ground for advancing our relations?

Vladimir Putin: I do not think that there is any lack of interest in each other right now, be it from Brazil towards Russia or the other way around. We have not picked up on it. Yes, as you know, there is a new leader in the country, a new president who has been in office for only a year. This job takes time to get some perspective and set your priorities. This is the first point.

Second, under BRICS, we have never committed to working exclusively with each other. BRICS is not a self-contained closed organisation. Each of the countries has its full sovereignty and independently determines its development priorities and partners. Needless to say, the United States as a global power and a power located in the Americas is obviously an interesting partner for Brazil. This is completely natural.

As concerns our relations, they are developing and doing so rather successfully, in my opinion. Russia continues to remain an attractive partner for Brazil when it comes to agriculture and especially the supplies of Brazilian meat to our market. On our part, we also offer a variety of goods, including fertilisers that Brazil needs for its agriculture, at competitive prices and of very high quality. There are other areas of mutual interest as well.

Speaking about our contacts, right now we are expecting a visit by the first Brazilian Minister of Citizenship, who is, based on Russian standards, the head of government. We will discuss many interesting issues, including Brazil's development plans. If our Brazilian partners are looking, they will be able to find interesting partners in Russia for investing in infrastructure and other promising projects.

Question: You had a meeting with the Chinese leader on the sidelines of the summit. Could you please tell us how it went? What were the main topics, and did you discuss trade wars? What does Mr Xi Jinping think about the possibility of concluding a tripartite agreement with Russia and the United States to ban medium and short-range missiles? And in general, did you discuss arms control issues at the summit?

Vladimir Putin: I will start with the last question about Mr Xi Jinping's attitude toward concluding any agreements: that is something you should ask him, naturally. I know his position, as we have discussed this, but I repeat again: the right way to go about this would be to contact him directly.

We know the position of the People's Republic of China on this matter from the Chinese Foreign Ministry representative. They believe that at this stage, that country's nuclear missile potential is far behind that of Russia or the United States, the two leading nuclear powers in the world in this sense. This is why the Chinese leadership believes time has not yet come for China to take part in these negotiations.

Now, this is what I think. First of all, this is true – Russia and the US are the largest nuclear missile powers in the world. Secondly, if we include China – then why only China? Let us

also invite France and the UK, as well as several other countries not actually officially recognised as nuclear powers, while everyone in the world knows, and they don't hide it, that they are. After all, it is impossible to imagine a situation where some countries will reduce their potentials, while others will increase them uncontrollably. This is a difficult question; it is not only about our Chinese friends' stance, but of a broader nature.

As for the issues that we discussed, it was the entire scope of our bilateral relations, primarily trade and economic matters. You know that we even slightly exceeded our previous targets, or rather accelerated our plans, reaching \$100 billion in trade earlier than planned: we recorded \$108 billion last year.

Our next target is \$200 billion, and it is an absolutely realistic figure. We are working on this, not as some abstract number, but in pragmatic terms: our respective departments are now preparing a joint action plan to determine how soon we can reach \$200 billion in mutual trade.

And of course, we have large joint projects that we are working on in fields such as space exploration, nuclear energy, the aircraft industry and others. We have a good outlook in high-tech industries.

Everything is going according to plan, and we are keeping it under control.

Question: You held talks with Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi. Could you tell us if you discussed supplies of Russian arms and military equipment – specifically, the S-400 missile systems? Did Prime Minister Modi ask you to expedite the supplies? And overall, what do you think of the military-technical cooperation between Russia and India?

Vladimir Putin: Our military-technical cooperation with India is at a very high level and I think that it is a very important aspect of our relations. However, our dialogue recently has been increasingly focused on cooperation in civilian areas. There is much that needs to be done and we think that the potential of this cooperation is not fully realised yet.

Our trade with India is worth \$11 billion. This is not enough for economies like Russia and India, especially since India under Mr Modi is demonstrating very fast economic growth. They are succeeding in many areas and making very important, though not so

simple at a first glance, decisions that are necessary for the economy.

Developing rapidly, India is a very promising partner for us, especially because we have absolutely no issues that would sour our relations. It has always been like this by tradition and remains the same. I hope our bilateral relations will be as friendly in the future.

As concerns the S-400 supplies, everything is going according to plan. My Indian colleague did not ask for the supplies to be expedited. Everything is normal.

India has 1.350 billion people and maybe even more. It is a sovereign state that values its sovereignty. We see that, despite any external pressure, India stands by its obligations – just like Russia. We will develop our cooperation further, including in the areas that are considered high-tech arms.

Please, go ahead.

Question: I have a question on this region. Protests are currently unfolding in a number of Latin American countries, sometimes resulting in actual pogroms. While things seem to be calming down in Peru and Ecuador, the situation is escalating in Chile and even more so in Bolivia. Unlike the Middle East, the causes of the "Latin American Spring" differ from one country to another. In your opinion, what underpins the chaos in Latin America?

Vladimir Putin: Let me express my personal view on this matter. In my opinion, there are different reasons for every country. Of course, socioeconomic problems are always at the core, such as various shortcomings or problems that were not resolved quickly enough. At the same time, as we have been pointing out all along, there are also elements of outside interference, but they always emerge whenever there are challenges on the domestic front. Nevertheless, let me reiterate that every country is particular in its own way.

Watching all the developments in Bolivia, to take one example, here is what I think: imagine a situation of a total power vacuum, and all the authorities give up their mandates. Second Deputy Speaker of the Senate... The Constitutional Court had to pass a special resolution, but the opposition did not agree. There are virtually no authorities, it is a power vacuum. This is quite reminiscent of Libya, although there was no direct foreign interference, but the country is on the brink of chaos. It goes without saying that this is an alarming signal.

Things change very quickly here in Latin America. Let us hope that common sense and commitment to the interests of the country's population, as well as a sense of responsibility for the people prevail at the end of the day over personal, group, political or party ambitions, bringing calm to these countries.

By the way, it is for this reason that we firmly oppose any direct interference in countries like Venezuela. Yes, there are problems, but Venezuelans themselves must decide on the future of their country through dialogue between various political groups.

Question: Let's continue with Latin America. Did you discuss the situation in Bolivia and Venezuela with your BRICS partners? Did the BRICS member countries chart a joint approach to the crisis in these countries? And how does Russia plan to implement its regional policy in view of the fact that it established friendly and productive relations with Bolivia under Evo Morales?

Vladimir Putin: We hope that, no matter who comes to power in Bolivia, they will remain interested in expanding relations with Russia. In turn, we are ready to cooperate with the authorities that will receive a legitimate mandate from their country's people.

Speaking of Venezuela, our position is well known. To be honest, this probably answers your question completely.

Go ahead, please.

Question: The APEC summit was cancelled because of mass protests and civil unrest in Chile, where you could have met with Donald Trump. When and where will you be able to meet with the President of the United States? Also, given his positive reaction to your invitation to attend the events on May 9, will full-format talks be possible in Moscow? Or you will meet somewhere else before that?

Vladimir Putin: We are not planning any meetings so far.

As for the May 9, 2020 celebrations in Moscow, if the President of the United States decides and is able to come [considering the election campaign in the United States], I believe that a visit for the celebrations of the end of World War II would become a positive and right step for the leader of a country that made a substantial contribution to fighting Nazism. But this is not up to us to decide. If the President of the United States arrives, then, of course, I will meet with him in Moscow, and we will talk.

Full-format talks do not depend on the grandeur of the occasion when the meeting takes place. The success of the talks depends on sincerity and a desire to discuss key matters of bilateral relations. We are ready for this. If the United States also proves to be ready, then good talks are possible in this sense and in this case.

Please.

Question: Syria has not been mentioned by my colleagues so far. This is my question. On the one hand, the counter-terrorist operation carried out by Russia in the region seems to have yielded some positive results. However, some think otherwise.

Vladimir Putin: Why do you say "seems to have yielded"? There are tangible results.

Question: Still, Donald Trump likes to say that it was the US who defeated the jihadists there. He recently repeated this once again.

Your Turkish colleague, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, made a surprise statement before departing for the United States where he had talks with Donald Trump. He said that neither the US, nor Russia succeeded in defeating the terrorists. It is quite possible though that he was referring to the Kurdish fighters. We know Turkey's attitude towards the Kurds. That being said, do you think there is any reason for Mr Erdogan to be dissatisfied? In this context, I would like to ask whether all the objectives we had for our counter-terrorist operation in Syria were fulfilled? If not, what needs to be done there still?

Vladimir Putin: First of all, regarding the contribution made by the United States to combatting terrorism in Syria, the US did have a role in these efforts. This has to be recognised and said outright. President Trump also made his own contribution. At the same time, before Russia came to Syria and became actively involved there, the socalled international coalition had been failing to make any headway for several years. However, the United States did contribute to the combined counter-terrorist efforts as part of the operation carried out when Mr Trump became president. Still, I believe that any impartial observer would understand the role Russia played in terms of warfare intensity and the outcome.

Once Russia became proactive in supporting the legitimate government in Damascus, almost 90 percent of the country's territory was freed from terrorists. These territories were not just liberated, but placed under the control of the legitimate Syrian government. This was our objective and we fulfilled it.

As for Russia's interests, they lay first of all in protecting Russia from being infiltrated by a large number of highly trained fighters with military experience. In this sense, we cannot say that we have solved one hundred percent of our tasks, but overall, yes, we have fulfilled the task we had set when launching the operation in Syria.

Now we are receiving more information from Syria, after Syrian border guards were stationed along the Syrian-Turkish border, for example, who is in the camps. We know that there are hundreds of fighters from Russia and several thousand from CIS countries. How many have been eradicated? At least that many, if not more.

So yes, it is a common problem; all countries are threatened with infiltration by Syrian fighters who leave Syria for other countries. This is also true for European countries. We know tragic cases when fighters with military experience received in Syria attacked some European countries. This is also dangerous for the US. Everyone is in danger, and this is why we must join our efforts. I hope that we will work together constructively.

By the way, we share elements of work on countering terrorism in Syria with many countries, including the United States. However, we still have many tasks in the Idlib area, because a lot of fighters are located there who cross into other countries, including Libya. We – everyone who are still working on the Syrian problem – still have questions regarding the east bank of the Euphrates, where fighters and foreign presence, including the US presence, can still be found. I have said many times that we do not consider it legitimate, because these military groups are not stationed there at the invitation of the Syrian government or under the UN Security Council resolution, so it is illegal.

There is also the At Tanf zone with the US soldiers and a large number of fighters, who in fact have taken the civilians there hostage. They cannot leave: people want to go but they are not allowed to, and people's conditions there are horrible. They get away as soon as they manage to escape. Anything can happen there.

So yes, in general many tasks have been fulfilled, but not all. I very much hope that during the political process in Geneva on amending or adopting a new Syrian Constitution we will be able to de-escalate, to establish relations between the government and the opposition one way or another, and find cardinal common solutions that will de-escalate the tensions in general and completely restore the territorial integrity of Syria.

Now to President Erdogan's position. We are in close contact. I know that he is concerned about certain organisations, but during our last telephone conversation we agreed that, considering our level of cooperation there, Turkey will promptly share its concerns with its Russian colleagues about the developments in the zone that raise the most apprehension. And if we really find any violations there, we will be ready to respond quickly.

Question: If you would allow me, I have a question on Ukraine. Not so long ago, Nursultan Nazarbayev said that he was ready to help arrange a meeting for you with Vladimir Zelensky. At the same time, we are aware that Kremlin believes that there is no need to hold a meeting just for the sake of it. However, since there is a new administration in Ukraine, maybe having a meeting and talking to each other could be worth it?

And a follow-up question on the disengagement in Donbass. It finally happened, not without complications, but it did happen. How do you expect the settlement process to unfold moving forward? Could a Normandy Format meeting be held in the near future, maybe before the end of the year? If we keep on dreaming, could it be possible for you to have a face-to-face meeting with Zelensky before a Normandy Format summit?

Vladimir Putin: Let me start with the question on Mr Nazarbayev's initiative. He is a respected person, and I have very close, friendly relations with him. He is a weathered politician. Incidentally, he once lived in Ukraine for many years, knows this country very well, and has great sympathy for it, never missing an opportunity to show off this attitude in public. For this reason, I am not at all surprised. However, he always proceeded from the premise that Ukraine should not seek its fortunes overseas. "Over the ocean the calf costs half, but it is dear to ship it here" – you know how the Russian saying goes? This means to say that instead of seeking fortunes overseas, you have to turn to your neighbours. This is the right way to do things.

As a matter of fact, a meeting before the Normandy Format meeting is not on the agenda, since we agreed to meet in the Normandy Format. So if we are to meet anyway, why should we bother to organise meetings without any proper preparations? I do not think anyone is interested in this, neither I nor President Zelensky. After all, we have to produce results. Otherwise, we are in contact, the two of us, talking to each other by phone. So the contact is there, but we have to come up with solutions.

As a matter of principle, the Normandy Format and a meeting in this format are possible. After all, there is no mechanism other than the Normandy Format. It is for this reason that we, and when I say we, I mean Russia, i.e., my colleagues and I, the Foreign Ministry and the relevant agencies, we are for maintaining this format. Let me reiterate that this is all we have.

We welcome the disengagement of forces in these two critical areas; this is good. We welcome the actions of both the Ukrainian authorities and the self-proclaimed republics.

On the other hand, there are some ambiguous reports. For example, I believe it was the Ukrainian Foreign Minister who said that Ukraine could abandon the Minsk Agreements altogether. But why? What will we discuss in the Normandy format then? I do not see what else we can discuss in this format. This is the first thing.

Secondly, we have seen official statements saying that other military units, including police and the National Guard of Ukraine, could be deployed in the area from which troops and heavy weaponry have pulled out. If this happens, the Lugansk and Donetsk selfdefence forces will act likewise. Do we need this now that these areas have been vacated? I do not think so.

And last but not least, I would like to draw your attention and the attention of all the colleagues present here to the key matter. The Ukrainian leaders have announced that a different law on the special status of Donbass could be adopted. What kind of law will this be? It is a subject of paramount importance. If this new law is not coordinated with Lugansk and Donetsk, the process will be deadlocked overnight.

The Steinmeier Formula, which does not have any special content, is only an instrument for adopting and implementing the law on special status after the local elections. It is merely a formula, which, by the way, does not fully comply with the Minsk Agreements. But we accepted it; it was a compromise on our part, because we wanted to see at least some progress. Why would we need this formula without a law on special status if the formula was created to ensure its implementation?

One more thing: the law on the special status of Donbass will expire on December 31. If it is not extended...

Actually, our European colleagues raised this question and openly asked Ukraine to adopt a permanent law, not a law that would expire in a year, or two or three years. Poroshenko accepted their reasoning. He said that they should and would do so. But he never did.

The law expires on December 31. What next? What will we discuss in the Normandy format? It is a fundamental question.

Overall, they are not sitting on their hands. The sides' forces have been disengaged in two areas. But, you see, we need disengagement all along the contact line, so that at least the guns are silent and people do not die. This must definitely be done, and the sooner the better.

Next question.

Question: Natural gas contracts between Gazprom and Naftogaz, signed in 2009, expire at the end of 2019. Is there a threat that transit through Ukrainian will stop, considering that there is only a month and a half before the end of the year?

The contract with Belarus also expires on December 31. How are the talks advancing regarding the price of gas along this track?

Vladimir Putin: Regarding negotiations with Ukraine and whether there is a threat that

transit will come to an end, we have said time and again that we are ready to work with Ukraine on shipping our gas to Europe through Ukraine, as well as on gas supplies to Ukraine itself at lower prices than what Ukraine pays for the same Russian gas obtained through the would-be reverse gas flow from Europe.

I would like it to be clear for everyone: reverse gas deliveries are unfeasible. It is not possible for natural gas to flow in one direction within one half of the pipeline, and in another direction in the second half. There is absolutely no way to achieve this. We know how they do it technology-wise. Once the gas is supplied, it is channelled through a looping pipe they built for this purpose in order to pump it back to Ukraine. Ukraine can also directly pump out gas as it transits through its territory...

How does the pipeline work? It was built in the Soviet times as a transit pipeline with its branches reaching across Ukraine. They count some volumes as delivered, and then adjust the calculations, as if the supplies came from Europe.

This is total nonsense, and we understand this all too well. However, we do not make a fuss about it so as not to escalate tensions. We have already said that we are ready to cut the price of direct supplies by 20 or even 25 percent.

There was a time when Mr Medvedchuk and Mr Boiko met with the Russian Prime Minister. Mr Medvedev asked them at the time: "Why do you care? You are not government members [in Ukraine] and will hardly enter the cabinet." I believe that they answered this question in a very mature manner. They said: "What matters for us is that Ukraine and the Ukrainian consumers receive cheaper gas. It must cost 25 percent less. If we can do this, or at least launch this process, this will make us happy." I believe this political stance to be mature and in the interests of the people of Ukraine.

What do we see today? What is actually happening? Once again, Naftogaz filed yet another lawsuit claiming over 6 billion. This is complete nonsense. All they do is make things worse. What for? We said that we were ready to reach any agreement with support from the European Commission.

Ukraine wants the contract to be governed by Ukrainian law? Fine, we are ready. Ukraine wants the contract to be governed by European law, and undertakes to abide by it? We are

ready, go ahead. We have said so at the European Commission, and this is what I told my colleagues in France and Germany. If Ukraine succeeds in implementing European law on time, it is fine with us. In Europe, this is a matter of separating generating and transit companies. If they are able to do it within the remaining period of time, fine. They assume obligations to Europe, not us, so let them do this, we are ready.

Some things are simply beyond our reach. For this reason, there is a risk that transit will stop, considering the circumstances that I have mentioned.

Negotiations with Belarus are advancing as planned. I hope that we will settle these matters before the end of the year.

Question: I have a question about IT. Lately we have had many draft laws that regulate this sphere. In particular, restrictions were introduced on foreign ownership of significant information resources and pre-installation of the Russian software. What do you think about these draft laws? Can they have a negative impact on the Russian market? How do you regard the law restricting foreigner ownership of such resources?

Vladimir Putin: I fully understand, and we have discussed this many times with my colleagues in the Government, that we must find a balance between our security interests and the development of the market.

The IT market is organised in such a way that we are interested in attracting and preserving foreign investment and foreign technologies. We are interested in creating the best conditions for the development of this economic sector in Russia, which is very important for us in general.

I believe that, considering everything – the decision has not yet been approved by the Government although it has the draft law, but I know that discussion is still underway, the Government will be able to find a flexible tool to regulate this market without harming our foreign partners while ensuring the country's security.

We understand that this is also a very important sphere for the interests of society as a whole and the people. But let us prevent the situation when our foreign partners find themselves at a disadvantage in an uncompetitive environment. For example, we have just discussed a South African company that operates successfully on the Russian market. Why should we restrict its work? However, we cannot choose one company and say that we like this one but not that one. We all understand that there are nuances of this difficult process.

Let me repeat this: I hope that we will find a balance between all these elements, and the Government will offer a good tool for regulation.

Question: Mr President, you signed the law criminalising disrespect for the authorities in March.

Vladimir Putin: In March?

Question: Yes, in March I think, March 18, if my memory serves me right.

Many Russians then expressed concern that officials would use it for dishonest purposes. Actually, recently there was a case where an orphan tore the Russian Constitution on video protesting that he had not been granted a flat he was entitled to for six years. Fortunately, that case ended well, and after a public outcry he received a flat. How would you assess the effect of this law after six months?

Vladimir Putin: I think you just assessed the practice of its enforcement – it is not over the top.

I think that every state – not only Russia, and by the way, other countries assign far more severe punishments for desecrating national symbols – but in fact every civilised state protects itself from disrespect for national symbols. This, in fact, is the purpose of this law – not to shut off all criticism of the government by the people. There should be criticism, it needs to continue as an effective tool to improve the functioning of the government. The authorities are interested in this.

Yes, right, [Dmitry Peskov, presidential press secretary] decided to correct me. In 2020, the BRICS GDP will be not \$50 trillion above the G7; it would be 50 trillion rubles. If I said something different, excuse me, please. This is exactly what I meant – 50 trillion rubles, which is still more than G7.

The last one, please.

Question: Mr President, do you think there is a need for further cooperation with OPEC countries in cutting oil production?

Vladimir Putin: Yes. There is.

We have a very constructive dialogue with OPEC. We understand the reason for their tough stance, including our friends in Saudi Arabia, it is Aramco's IPO plans. Everyone understands this, it is an open secret, but it doesn't matter. They have their own current interests, and we should respect this – we are doing just that.

As for the outlook for cooperation, it will not boil down to restraining our production or reducing it. We have other fields for cooperation, too. But the system of relations that has developed between Russia and OPEC, as well as non-OPEC countries, appears to be an effective tool of maintaining the balance on the global energy market that everyone needs – the consumers of energy resources as well as producers thereof.

We take it that we can achieve this balance by joint efforts, not to the detriment of anyone, but, on the contrary, to everyone's benefit, considering that stability in the global energy markets is good for both consumers and producers, and wider, for the global economy, because it creates conditions for stable international supplies at affordable prices.

Thank you very much. All the best.

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