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Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's interview with the Interfax news agency, December 23, 2020

24-30 minutes

Question: The change in US administrations is again taking place against the background of poor Russian-US relations. More restrictions were introduced at the last moment. That said, the future US administration is already threatening us with cyber-strikes, and accusing us of cyberattacks against vital US departments. Some experts and analysts even fear that we are on the brink of a cyberwar. What do you think about the current situation after these accusations? Is there a real threat of a cyberwar and can it be avoided? Are we sending any signals to the new administration about the need to start a practical discussion on rules of the game that can help us avoid such threats in our relations?

Sergey Ryabkov: First, I would like to say that the announced decision of the US Department of Commerce on a large group of Russian companies and organisations amounts to a toughening of US export control laws, or to be more precise, its application with respect to Russian businesses. As a matter of fact, this is not a big change for us because the range of goods mentioned in the US decision is hardly accessible in normal trade and industrial activity,

such as purchases, cooperation and so on. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of our organisations and companies listed in this act have long been under sanctions. In other words, the presumption of refusal to supply has long been introduced with regard to our companies and structures.

We certainly heard the political signal. This is an attempt by the outgoing administration to slam the door louder in the interests of those who want to continue fueling tensions in relations with Russia and let them know that Washington is not going to tone down its anti-Russia campaign under the current administration. However, by and large, this is just rhetoric, politics, and geopolitics. I believe the material aspect is much less important than all this rhetorical talk. So, we will treat it as such although the next US president will be left with a difficult legacy and it will take him much time to figure it out. All the more so since I am not sure that those who are likely to be responsible for Russia policy after January 20 are motivated to strengthen a sound foundation. I am referring not to normalisation of relations but just a sound foundation, that is, channels of dialogue or at least attempts to find a common denominator in different situations.

We are going from bad to worse. This has been typical of the past four years and for now we do not have the impression that this trend has outlived itself and is being replaced with something different, more sensible and less one-dimensional in its implications. This is the first point.

The second point I would like to make is that we are definitely interested in a gradual improvement of our relations. That said, we are also realists and we understand that it will be very difficult to get out of the host of problems that our relations have

accumulated as a result of Washington's reckless actions over many years. If Washington displays a willingness to try and clear the road in some segments at any period of its thinking process, we will not be found wanting. We are ready for this. However, we will not beg them to deal with this, either. We do not need relations with the US any more than Washington needs relations with Moscow. They should be clear on that. We are not searching for any solution on our part.

We simply suggest moving forward together. If we do not see a response, everything will remain as it is, with the risk of further deterioration. This is a fairly alarming and potentially dangerous moment because the irresponsibility of the policy-making circles in the US is striking. They ignore simple logic and the obvious inability to get the desired result by exerting pressure on us. Yet they continue pushing their line. The question is when this line will crack and break down and what will happen as a result.

We will not make any unilateral concessions. This is completely out of the question. After all, the ball is in the US's court and Washington should decide what to do about our bilateral relations, when, and how to do it. We have not initiated any contact with Biden's transition team. We are not going to do this. When they develop an interest, they can go ahead, our addresses are well-known. The Foreign Ministry has not moved anywhere and those in Washington know well what to do and how to do it if they feel motivated. So, they are welcome. If they are not interested, everything will remain the same as it is now.

Question: Can we say that there is a vacuum in our contacts and relations with the United States? Do any contacts exist at all?

Sergey Ryabkov: Only through the embassies – the Russian Embassy in Washington and the US Embassy in Moscow. Also, a message of congratulations from Russian President Vladimir Putin was sent to US President-elect Joe Biden.

Question: Are we concerned about threats to respond to alleged Russian cyberattacks not only with sanctions, but also with cyber-strikes? Is there a risk of cyberwar? Washington is claiming “something more serious than sanctions” from the Joe Biden administration.

Sergey Ryabkov: Every day we record malicious activity on servers located outside of the Russian Federation, and American sources of various types of attacks are usually in the foreground. We do not go public with this, do not present it as some kind of sensation. The Americans have found a new pretext to attack Russia. All sorts of pretexts were there before, and they will likely continue to appear in the form of unconfirmed accusations, and not even clearly formulated accusations, against Russia from those in authority. It is simply assumed that Russia is behind this. But there is no real subject for discussion there. If you do this professionally, then you should follow the proposals of Russian President Vladimir Putin of September 25, which set out a programme of how to work through this, if we are talking about something serious. Since the United States is not ready for this, and is not even inclined to discuss it, then we assume they have a different political attitude, and no matter what we do, no matter what refutations we offer, no matter what rhetorical techniques we use to refute it, the situation will not change. Therefore, I do not see a subject for discussion on this topic.

We are much more concerned that at one time some officials in

Washington began to use the situation regarding so-called malicious activity in cyberspace in the context of their nuclear policy. The relevant implications are extremely dangerous; this is one of the manifestations of Washington's willingness to move towards lowering the nuclear threshold. I would like to once again warn our American colleagues against such a light-weight approach to their doctrinal understanding of what nuclear weapons are and whether using them is generally acceptable. But Washington's inclination to believe that only they are right, that alternative opinions should be excluded, and those who hold other views on what is happening, have other interpretations, should be subjected to pressure, this bias dominates US foreign policy in various ways, and I expect that it will remain after the inauguration of the next American president. This increases the risks to international security, complicates normal interstate communication and, of course, does not add to the prospects for resuming Russian-American relations.

Question: And yet, the United States has had most of our proposals for a long time now. What are we expecting from the new Biden administration, since Moscow knows the people on his team? What will we focus on primarily in our relations?

Sergey Ryabkov: We are definitely not expecting anything good to come from them. It is not logical to expect good things from people who have built their careers on Russophobia and mudslinging. However, if at some point, they decide they need to have a concrete discussion with us, and stop just throwing accusations at us, but discuss something substantive, we are always open to such a discussion. If their relations with Russia continue to be driven by ideology and they continue to approach

Russia as a strategic rival, adversary, enemy, call it what you want, then we will reciprocate.

In my opinion, Russia should switch to a double-track approach. The first track includes total containment of the United States in all areas, since the US policy is deeply hostile towards Russia and is at odds with our fundamental interests. The second track should include a selective dialogue, that is, getting the United States involved in matters that are of interest to us, not just to them. Perhaps after switching to this approach, there could be grounds for gradual normalisation of relations between us.

Question: Do they need us?

Sergey Ryabkov: I don't really care.

Question: They are closing their consulates general. This is a sign that they continue to lose interest in us, isn't it?

Sergey Ryabkov: That may well be the case. Most importantly, this shouldn't concern us at all and shouldn't become a topic of our internal discussion. Of course, it's regrettable that obtaining consular services will require more effort from those who may need them. However, it is not us, not Russia, that is to blame for the fact that people living the Far Eastern Federal District, for example, will have to go to Moscow to apply for a visa at the consular section of the US Embassy.

We cannot rule out the possibility that this may have been done by the Americans on purpose. Many logical moves and sequences of arguments to support certain decisions within the US system as it is today are not clear to me, and I will not speculate on that. I know for sure that there was no interest in normalising relations with

Russia during the Trump administration. There was a group of functionaries and politicians who had a very strong influence on our relations. They firmly believe that Russia is an enemy and that only pressuring us can work in our relations. This is a fallacious approach, and our current relations prove that. Third, the overall level of expertise and approach to foreign policy issues has significantly decreased in Washington in recent years. Accordingly, the risk of miscalculation and mistakes has increased, and the Americans have made many of them, including in relations with Russia.

Question: Will we respond to the tightening of export controls? The United States, for example, has toughened restrictions with regard to two of our space companies. Can we, for example, just stop supplying rocket engines or something else to them, or will we leave this without a response?

Sergey Ryabkov: They are not going to buy rocket engines. They have stocked up on these engines for a period that is quite comfortable for them. They are not hiding the fact that they are going to sever all cooperation with us for two reasons. First, they want to eliminate “dependence” on us in which, for objective reasons, they found themselves in some areas of cooperation, such as space exploration. However, this is not dependence, but mutually beneficial cooperation, in my opinion.

Second, it is simply an ideology-driven approach to the idea that Russia should be cut off from revenue sources and barred from all markets, starting with their own. This is their policy, you see? When we tell them that it looks improper, they simply don't understand what we are talking about. What does improper mean? If we are the opponents, then you should be sitting in your trench,

and we will, accordingly, do what we can to make things worse and harder for you. This is what the US policy towards Russia is all about. This is clear. We just need to understand this and not harbour any illusions about who we are dealing with on the other side. This situation will remain unchanged under the next administration.

I do believe this situation will last a long time. We are witnessing a certain historical moment of truth, when the masks have been thrown off and there is no longer any reason to sugarcoat certain things that have become obvious lately. This is what is called the naked truth of life, and it must be seen as it is, in all its diversity.

Question: Do you plan to curtail cooperation ties in all areas?

Sergey Ryabkov: The United States is determined to not only deprive us of the opportunity to normally interact with it in many areas, but to thwart our effort to establish good interaction with the rest of the world. This is one of the key angles of Washington's policy towards Russia.

Question: In the near future, the main intrigue for the Biden administration is the fate of the START treaty. Given the statements that Moscow has made at different levels and given the fact that you mentioned that we have not established contact with the future administration yet, it appears that there are only 15 days – two weeks – left to take the decision to extend this treaty after it expires on January 20. If the Biden administration decides to extend the treaty, will 15 days be enough? Are there any mechanisms for achieving this [within this timeframe]?

Sergey Ryabkov: In my opinion, it would be impossible to ratify an extension agreement in this amount of time; it's the same as

completing an international treaty ratification procedure. I do not want to talk about other options, which are probably being discussed now, but to begin a discussion like this, it is necessary to understand what the next US administration might be prepared to do. We, so to say, have received no signals from the other side, except the information reported by the media and the statements made during the election campaign by the Biden team.

Meanwhile, on December 20, it has been one year since Russia forwarded an official note to the United States with a proposal to extend the treaty for another five-year term without preconditions. There was no reply and we do not expect to receive one in the next month. We will not bring up this issue again because further discussion tends to create the false impression that we are more concerned about the situation than the other side.

The START treaty was the result of joint efforts. This is one of the few documents agreed on by Russia and the United States which, as professionals engaged in this acknowledge, has not become obsolete and can ultimately continue to meet the interests of both Russia and the United States. If the Americans are not prepared to extend the signed version of this document, it means their current view of the treaty is dominated by interests and approaches that have nothing in common with the objective to firmly ensure military security. This means that a lot of attendant factors are involved. In all likelihood, this is true. The question whether anything will change after the inauguration of the next US president remains open.

One important point is that we are not going to convince or beg anyone for something because this is a balanced document that does not give Russia any unilateral benefits. Quite the contrary, I

would like to tell you that during the discussion of the treaty and its ratification at one time, by the Federal Assembly, some aspects of the document raised questions to the executive authorities, to the authors of this document who coordinated it.

In much the same way, questions – not necessarily the same ones – were raised in Washington. This indicates that the document provides for a correct and robust balance of interests, I want to emphasise the word – balance. We are no more interested in keeping this agreement in force than the United States. If the United States discards it, we will accept it as fact. By and large, the question for Washington is what it plans to do and how, while there still exist technical options for formalising an extension of the treaty. They would tend to run into more difficulties due to a lack of time, but it's not a hopeless matter.

Question: President of Russia Vladimir Putin said at a news conference that there is already an arms race. This attracted public attention because before we had always said that we were not going to get involved in any arms race and would do everything to avoid it. So, if START is not extended, does it mean there will be some uncontrolled arms race? In general, is this treaty capable of stopping or restraining this arms race or not? Or is a broader treaty required for this?

Sergey Ryabkov: We have always said, and this position remains unchanged, that we will not allow anyone to drag us into an expensive arms race. We have noted that we have done serious groundwork and already have types of weapons, some of which are on combat duty and others will soon be completed. These weapons will guarantee our security for the foreseeable future.

The Russian President has already made a clear-cut statement on this issue proceeding from a premise that he formulated himself: if the US had not withdrawn from the ABM Treaty, nothing like this would have happened and from 2002 to 2020 Russia would not have developed arms systems and types that other countries, including the US, still do not have. He gave his assessment in this context.

But I would like to warn everyone against a simplistic view of this process. Sometimes we hear that from now on these cycles will continue on end, and that the US has much more powerful resources for winning this race. This is not going to happen. First, there is a notion of the lessons of the past; second, asymmetry is becoming more apparent, in part, in the maintenance of strategic stability. There once existed a logic according to which one warhead must be countered with the same warhead by the other side, that there must be numerical parity and parity in arms systems and that everything must be equalised in this way. But this logic is probably from another era at this point.

Now nonlinear responses are a possibility, and this is why we are saying that a host of factors will have to be considered in further efforts to develop a new equation for strategic stability. This is a complicated process that requires time, and meticulous analysis. For now, there is no experience in comparing not only quantitative but also qualitative potential and defining what eventually brings about an equilibrium that makes it possible to come to terms on arms control under these new conditions. We are calling for this.

Since this is a difficult and time-consuming process, it seems appropriate, in creating the optimal time framework, to have a valid START treaty to prevent an arms buildup at least in the areas that

are limited by this treaty and as regards the systems that are not qualified as super-advanced but sooner represent the backbone of nuclear deterrence as we see it today. It would be perfectly sensible to avoid such a buildup at least in these areas. Before we invent something new, before we invent the petrol engine, let's use the steam engine. This is basically the logic. Why destroy everything we have in anticipation of creating something new in the future?

Question: If the New START Treaty expires on February 5, will Russia be able to provide guarantees to the international community that it will not build up its nuclear arsenal? So there will be no international transparency mechanisms then? We will be in a black box, the Americans will be in a black box, and the world will be in the dark about what's going on in the nuclear sphere?

Sergey Ryabkov: Let's start by saying that there are national technical control means which, by and large, provide a fairly realistic picture of developments in this sphere. The important, multilayered and complex verification system that is laid down in the New START Treaty, including inspections, tours, etc., does not preclude the use of national technical controls. It rather complements them. Also, we can always sit down and discuss things. In fact, in the absence of the INF Treaty, we propose agreeing on verifying counter-moratoriums on non-deployment.

Speaking at the expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, the President mentioned these moratoriums. Driven exclusively by ideological considerations, the United States and its NATO allies are unable to see our proposals as an open door that we both can walk through. If they were really concerned about European security and the security of the Asian regions, what would stop

them from saying: “Okay, Russians, we don’t trust you, but let’s try to agree on ways to verify the absence of such systems in these regions. Let’s at least discuss this.” Instead, they are saying “You have already created this system, and you must destroy it, but in fact, it’s a mobile system and we don’t really need to discuss anything, as you can easily take it from one place to another.” It is as if ballistic bombs that are stored in four US NATO allies in Europe and designed for use by warplanes are nuclear bombs buried somewhere on a farm that cannot be moved to another location. It just amazes me. This just goes to show their unwillingness to deal seriously with important matters.

We are willing to discuss any arrangements in the sphere of arms control under one condition: there must be no ultimatums or unilateral demands. There must be a sound balance and a businesslike approach, by and large. The same goes for the New START Treaty. If the New START Treaty will no longer be there after February 5, a new situation will arise. The sky will not fall. This does not mean that everything will change on February 6, and we will be running to bomb shelters to the sound of blaring siren, no. However, we will then need to look for another reference point in order to reach separate agreements on individual segments in different configurations. It’s complicated. This can be probably done, but why look for workarounds if we can avoid these difficulties.

Question: Still, can we provide guarantees to the international community that we will not build more weapons than we need?

Sergey Ryabkov: Yes, this is the key. In our defence policy, including the strategic sphere, we will be guided solely by the goal of guaranteeing our security. We shouldn’t do more than we need,

but we must have confidence that no one, not a single potential adversary, can encroach on our security.

Question: Are we ready to persuade the Iranians that there's no need for any preconditions for the US returning to the JCPOA? To what extent can Iran's claims for possible financial compensation from the United States be seen as legitimate in this case? In turn, the IAEA Director General said that additional protocols would be required if we want to properly restart this agreement.

Sergey Ryabkov: I haven't heard about any preconditions on the part of Iran. I know for sure that Iran has officially declared its willingness to return to full compliance with the JCPOA as soon as possible, but for now, as you may be aware, Iran's non-compliance with the JCPOA requirements concerns only the obligation it has assumed of its own accord, which is to return to the JCPOA as soon as the United States does so. I suspect that the United States will insist on the reverse order and will want Iran to be first.

I'm not even talking about additional requirements that may turn up. I'm talking about a situation where both sides – Washington and Tehran – operate on the premise that it is better to keep the JCPOA in its original form. By the way, we are also in favour of this approach. Given this, the right thing to do would be to develop in advance a plan, a schedule, a roadmap outlining the sequence of steps, so as not to end up in a situation of endless dispute over who should take the first step, blink first, etc. We just spoke in favour of this.

At some point, the phased-in approach and reciprocity as the principles underlying the JCPOA were proposed by Russia, namely, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and formed the basis of

this arrangement. It can be pictured as a phased-in approach and reciprocity with the opposite sign, as if returning to compliance. This is a natural political and mathematical approach, it just suggests itself, and there's nothing unusual about it. We are supportive of it. However, if you start building on top of the existing deal, the situation might worsen dramatically. That's why we believe that putting forward ideas like JCPOA+ is wrong and untimely.

The Iranians are also saying that their interest is, first, to benefit economically from participating in this deal, which they couldn't do, especially after the Trump administration left the JCPOA in May 2018. But other aspects of this vast array of questions, which our Western colleagues are talking about, cause rejection in Tehran, as far as I can understand. I admit that Iran's approach makes sense: various aspects of the matters that we are discussing and which are unrelated to the JCPOA have their own formats, where they should be discussed. We proposed a security concept for the Persian Gulf and platforms to discuss it. The Chinese came up with a proposal of their own, and the Iranians put forward a security initiative for the Strait of Hormuz. At some point, there was a corresponding dialogue under the auspices of the European External Action Service with the participation of Iran and other countries. This can be organised if desired, but restoring the JCPOA in its original form should be our primary goal. What we need is a certain algorithm which may well be agreed upon provided, of course, that the next US administration is interested in it rather than be taken captive by the policy of maximum sanctions pressure in the form that has been practiced by the Trump administration for quite a while now.