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Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference | The White House

28-35 minutes

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THE PRESIDENT: It's been a long day for you all. (Laughs.) I know it was easy getting into the — the pre-meeting. There was no problem getting through those doors, was it — was there?

Anyway, hello, everyone. Well, I've just finished the — the last meeting of this week's long trip, the U.S.-Russian Summit.

And I know there were a lot of hype around this meeting, but it's pretty straightforward to me — the meeting. One, there is no substitute, as those of you who have covered me for a while know, for a face-to-face dialogue between leaders. None. And President Putin and I had a — share a unique responsibility to manage the relationship between two powerful and proud countries — a relationship that has to be stable and predictable. And it should be able to — we should be able to cooperate where it's in our mutual interests.

And where we have differences, I wanted President Putin to understand why I say what I say and why I do what I do, and how we'll respond to specific kinds of actions that harm America's interests.

Now, I told President Putin my agenda is not against Russia or anyone else; it's for the American people: fighting COVID-19; rebuilding our economy; reestablishing our relationships around the world with our allies and friends; and protecting our people. That's my responsibility as President.

I also told him that no President of the United States could keep faith with the American people if they did not speak out to defend our democratic values, to stand up for the universal rights and fundamental freedoms that all men and women have, in our view. That's just part of the DNA of our country.

So, human rights is going to always be on the table, I told him. It's not about just going after Russia when they violate human rights; it's about who we are. How could I be the President of the United States of America and not speak out against the violation of human rights?

I told him that, unlike other countries, including Russia, we're uniquely a product of an idea. You've heard me say this before, again and again, but I'm going to keep saying it. What's that idea? We don't derive our rights from the government; we possess them because we're born — period. And we yield them to a government.

And so, at the forum, I pointed out to him that that's why we're going to raise our concerns about cases like Aleksey Navalny. I made it clear to President Putin that we'll continue to raise issues of fundamental human rights because that's what we are, that's who we are. The idea is: "We hold these truths self-evident that all men and women..." We haven't lived up to it completely, but we've always widened the arc of commitment and included more

and more people.

And I raised the case of two wrongfully imprisoned American citizens: Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed.

I also raised the ability of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty to operate, and the importance of a free press and freedom of speech.

I made it clear that we will not tolerate attempts to violate our democratic sovereignty or destabilize our democratic elections, and we would respond.

The bottom line is, I told President Putin that we need to have some basic rules of the road that we can all abide by.

I also said there are areas where there's a mutual interest for us to cooperate, for our people — Russian and American people — but also for the benefit of the world and the security of the world. One of those areas is strategic stability.

You asked me many times what was I going to discuss with Putin. Before I came, I told you I only negotiate with the individual. And now I can tell you what I was intending to do all along, and that is to discuss and raise the issue of strategic stability and try to set up a mechanism whereby we dealt with it.

We discussed in detail the next steps our countries need to take on arms control measures — the steps we need to take to reduce the risk of unintended conflict.

And I'm pleased that he agreed today to launch a bilateral strategic stability dialogue — diplomatic speak for saying, get our military experts and our — our diplomats together to work on a mechanism that can lead to control of new and dangerous and

sophisticated weapons that are coming on the scene now that reduce the times of response, that raise the prospects of accidental war. And we went into some detail of what those weapons systems were.

Another area we spent a great deal of time on was cyber and cybersecurity. I talked about the proposition that certain critical infrastructure should be off limits to attack — period — by cyber or any other means. I gave them a list, if I'm not mistaken — I don't have it in front of me — 16 specific entities; 16 defined as critical infrastructure under U.S. policy, from the energy sector to our water systems.

Of course, the principle is one thing. It has to be backed up by practice. Responsible countries need to take action against criminals who conduct ransomware activities on their territory.

So we agreed to task experts in both our — both our countries to work on specific understandings about what's off limits and to follow up on specific cases that originate in other countries — either of our countries.

There is a long list of other issues we spent time on, from the urgent need to preserve and reopen the humanitarian corridors in Syria so that we can get food — just simple food and basic necessities to people who are starving to death; how to build it and how it is in the interest of both Russia and the United States to ensure that Iran — Iran — does not acquire nuclear weapons. We agreed to work together there because it's as much interest — Russia's interest as ours. And to how we can ensure the Arctic remains a region of cooperation rather than conflict.

I caught part of President's — Putin's press conference, and he

talked about the need for us to be able to have some kind of modus operandi where we dealt with making sure the Arctic was, in fact, a free zone.

And to how we can each contribute to the shared effort of preventing a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan. It's very much in — in the interest of Russia not to have a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan.

There are also areas that are more challenging. I communicated the United States' unwavering commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

We agreed to pursue diplomacy related to the Minsk Agreement. And I shared our concerns about Belarus. He didn't disagree with what happened; he just has a different perspective of what to do about it.

But I know you have a lot of questions, so let me close with this: It was important to meet in person so there can be no mistake about or misrepresentations about what I wanted to communicate.

I did what I came to do: Number one, identify areas of practical work our two countries can do to advance our mutual interests and also benefit the world.

Two, communicate directly — directly — that the United States will respond to actions that impair our vital interests or those of our allies.

And three, to clearly lay out our country's priorities and our values so he heard it straight from me.

And I must tell you, the tone of the entire meetings — I guess it was a total of four hours — was — was good, positive. There

wasn't any — any strident action taken. Where we disagreed — I disagreed, stated where it was. Where he disagreed, he stated. But it was not done in a hyperbolic atmosphere. That is too much of what's been going on.

Over this last week, I believe — I hope — the United States has shown the world that we are back, standing with our Allies. We rallied our fellow democracies to make concert — concerted commitments to take on the biggest challenges our world faces.

And now we've established a clear basis on how we intend to deal with Russia and the U.S.-Russia relationship.

There's more work ahead. I'm not suggesting that any of this is done, but we've gotten a lot of business done on this trip.

And before I take your questions, I want to say one last thing. Folks, look, this is about — this about how we move from here. This is — I listened to, again, a significant portion of what President Putin's press conference was, and as he pointed out, this is about practical, straightforward, no-nonsense decisions that we have to make or not make.

We'll find out within the next six months to a year whether or not we actually have a strategic dialogue that matters. We'll find out whether we work to deal with everything from release of people in Russian prisons or not. We'll find out whether we have a cybersecurity arrangement that begins to bring some order.

Because, look, the countries that most are likely to be damaged — failure to do that — are the major countries. For example, when I talked about the pipeline that cyber hit for \$5 million — that ransomware hit in the United States, I looked at him and I said, "Well, how would you feel if ransomware took on the pipelines from

your oil fields?” He said it would matter.

This is not about just our self-interest; it’s about a mutual self-interest.

I’ll take your questions. And as usual, folks, they gave me a list of the people I’m going to call on.

So, Jonathan, Associated Press.

Q Thank you, sir. U.S. intelligence has said that Russia tried to interfere in the last two presidential elections, and that Russia groups are behind hacks like SolarWinds and some of the ransomware attacks you just mentioned. Putin, in his news conference just now, accepted no responsibility for any misbehavior. Your predecessor opted not to demand that Putin stop these disruptions. So what is something concrete, sir, that you achieved today to prevent that from happening again? And what were the consequences you threatened?

THE PRESIDENT: Whether I stopped it from happening again — he knows I will take action, like we did when — this last time out. What happened was: We, in fact, made it clear that we were not going to continue to allow this to go on. The end result was we ended up withdrawing — they went withdrawing ambassadors, and we closed down some of their facilities in the United States, et cetera. And he knows there are consequences.

Now, look, one of the consequences that I know — I don’t know; I shouldn’t say this; it’s unfair of me — I suspect you may all think doesn’t matter, but I’m confident it matters to him — confident it matter to him and other world leaders of big nations: his credibility worldwide shrinks.

Let's get this straight: How would it be if the United States were viewed by the rest of the world as interfering with the elections directly of other countries, and everybody knew it? What would it be like if we engaged in activities that he is engaged in? It diminishes the standing of a country that is desperately trying to make sure it maintains its standing as a major world power.

And so it's not just what I do; it's what the actions that other countries take — in this case, Russia — that are contrary to international norms. It's the price they pay. They are not — they are not able to dictate what happens in the world. There are other nations of significant consequence — i.e. the United States of America being one of them.

Q Mr. President, just a quick follow on the same theme of consequences. You said, just now, that you spoke to him a lot about human rights. What did you say would happen if opposition leader Aleksey Navalny dies?

THE PRESIDENT: I made it clear to him that I believe the consequences of that would be devastating for Russia.

I'll go back to the same point: What do you think happens when he's saying, "It's not about hurting Navalny," this — you know, all the stuff he says to rationalize the treatment of Navalny — and then he dies in prison?

I pointed out to him that it matters a great deal when a country, in fact — and they asked me why I thought that it was important to continue to have problems with the President of Syria. I said, "Because he's in violation of an international norm. It's called a Chemical Weapons Treaty. Can't be trusted."

It's about trust. It's about their ability to influence other nations in

a positive way.

Look, would you like to trade our economy for Russia's economy? Would you like to trade? And, by the way, we talked about trade. I don't have any problem with doing business with Russia, as long as they do it based upon international norms. It's in our interest to see the Russian people do well economically. I don't have a problem with that.

But if they do not act according to international norms, then guess what? That will not — that only won't it happen with us, it will not happen with other nations. And he kind of talked about that — didn't he, today? — about how the need to reach out to other countries to invest in Russia. They won't as long as they are convinced that, in fact, the violations —

For example, the American businessman who was in house arrest. And I pointed out, "You want to get American business to invest? Let him go. Change the dynamic." Because American businessmen, they're not — they're not ready to show up. They don't want to hang around in Moscow.

I mean, I — look, guys, I know we make foreign policy out to be this great, great skill that somehow is, sort of, like a secret code. Pract- — all foreign policy is, is a logical extension of personal relationships. It's the way human nature functions.

And understand, when you run a country that does not abide by international norms, and yet you need those international norms to be somehow managed so that you can participate in the benefits that flow from them, it hurts you. That's not a satisfying answer: "Biden said he'd invade Russia." You know, it is not — you know. By the way, that was a joke. That's not true.

But my generic point is, it is — it is more complicated than that.

David Sanger. I thought I saw David. There he is.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. In the run-up to this discussion, there's been a lot of talk about the two countries spilling down into a Cold War. And I'm wondering if there was anything that you emerged from in the discussion that made you think that he —

THE PRESIDENT: With your permission, I'm going to take my coat off. The sun is hot.

Q — anything that would make you think that Mr. Putin has decided to move away from his fundamental role as a disrupter, particularly a disrupter of NATO and the United States?

And if I could also just follow up on your description of how you gave him a list of critical infrastructure in the United States. Did you lay out very clearly what it was that the penalty would be for interfering in that critical infrastructure? Did you leave that vague? Did he respond in any way to it?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me answer your first — well, I'll second question, first.

I pointed out to him that we have significant cyber capability. And he knows it. He doesn't know exactly what it is, but it's significant. And if, in fact, they violate these basic norms, we will respond with cyber. He knows.

Q In the cyber way.

THE PRESIDENT: In the cyber way.

Number two, I — I think that the last thing he wants now is a Cold War. Without quoting him — which I don't think is appropriate —

let me ask a rhetorical question: You got a multi-thousand-mile border with China. China is moving ahead, hellbent on election, as they say, seeking to be the most powerful economy in the world and the largest and the most powerful military in the world.

You're in a situation where your economy is struggling, you need to move it in a more aggressive way, in terms of growing it. And you — I don't think he's looking for a Cold War with the United States.

I don't think it's about a — as I said to him, I said, “Your generation and mine are about 10 years apart. This is not a ‘kumbaya’ moment, as you used to say back in the '60s in the United States, like, ‘Let's hug and love each other.’ But it's clearly not in anybody's interest — your country's or mine — for us to be in a situation where we're in a new Cold War.” And I truly believe he thinks that — he understands that.

But that does not mean he's ready to, quote, figuratively speaking, “lay down his arms,” and say, “Come on.” He still, I believe, is concerned about being, quote, “encircled.” He still is concerned that we, in fact, are looking to take him down, et cetera. He still has those concerns, but I don't think they are the driving force as to the kind of relationship he's looking for with the United States.

Jennifer. Jennifer Jacobs.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Is there a particular reason why the summit lasted only about three hours? We know you had maybe allotted four to five hours. Was there any reason it ran shorter?

Also, did — President Putin said that there were no threats or scare tactics issued. Do you agree with that assessment, that

there were no threats or scare tactics?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q And also, did you touch on Afghanistan and the safe withdrawal of troops?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Yes, yes, and yes. Let me go back to the first part.

The reason it didn't go longer is: When is the last time two heads of state have spent over two hours in direct conversation across a table, going into excruciating detail? You may know of a time; I don't. I can't think of one.

So we didn't need, as we got through, when we brought in the larger group — our defense, our intelligence, and our foreign — well, our — my foreign minister — wasn't the foreign minister — my Secretary of State was with me the whole time — our ambassador, et cetera. We brought everybody in. We had covered so much.

And so there was a summary done by him and by me of what we covered. Lavrov and Blinken talked about what we had covered. We raised things that required more amplification or made sure we didn't have any misunderstandings. And — and so it was — it was — kind of, after two hours there, we looked at each other like, “Okay, what next?”

What is going to happen next is we're going to be able to look back — look ahead in three to six months, and say, “Did the things we agreed to sit down and try to work out, did it work? Do we — are we closer to a major strategic stability talks and progress? Are we further along in terms of...” — and go down the line. That's

going to be the test.

I'm not sitting here saying because the President and I agreed that we would do these things, that all of a sudden, it's going to work. I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is I think there's a genuine prospect to significantly improve relations between our two countries without us giving up a single, solitary thing based on principle and/or values.

Q There were no threats issued?

THE PRESIDENT: No, no, no. No. There were no threats. There were — as a matter of fact, I heard he quoted my mom and quoted other people today. There was — it was very, as we say — which will shock you, coming from me — somewhat colloquial. And we talked about basic, basic, fundamental things. There was a — it was — and you know how I am: I explain things based on personal basis. “What happens if,” for example.

And so, there are no threats, just simple assertions made. And no “Well, if you do that, then we'll do this” — wasn't anything I said. It was just letting him know where I stood; what I thought we could accomplish together; and what, in fact — if it was — if there were violations of American sovereignty, what would we do.

Q Can you share what you asked him about Afghanistan? What was your particular request for Afghanistan and the U.S. troops?

THE PRESIDENT: No, he asked us about Afghanistan. He said that he hopes that we're able to maintain some peace and security, and I said, “That has a lot to do with you.” He indicated that he was prepared to, quote, “help” on Afghanistan — I won't go into detail now; and help on — on Iran; and help on — and, in return, we told him what we wanted to do relative to bringing some

stability and economic security or physical security to the people of Syria and Libya.

So, we had those discussions.

Yamiche.

Q Thanks so much, Mr. President. Did you — you say that you didn't issue any threats. Were there any ultimatums made when it comes to ransomware? And how will you measure success, especially when it comes to these working groups on Russian meddling and on cybersecurity?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's going to be real easy. They either — for example, on cybersecurity, are we going to work out where they take action against ransomware criminals on Russian territory? They didn't do it. I don't think they planned it, in this case. And they — are they going to act? We'll find out.

Will we commit — what can we commit to act in terms of anything affecting violating international norms that negatively affects Russia? What are we going to agree to do?

And so, I think we have real opportunities to — to move. And I think that one of the things that I noticed when we had the larger meeting is that people who are very, very well-informed started thinking, "You know, this could be a real problem." What happens if that ransomware outfit were sitting in Florida or Maine and took action, as I said, on their — their single lifeline to their economy: oil? That would be devastating. And they're like — you could see them kind of go, "Oh, we do that," but like, "Whoa."

So it's in — it's in everybody's interest that these things be acted on. We'll see, though, what happens from these groups we put

together.

Q Can I ask a quick follow-up question?

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughs.) The third one, yes. Go ahead.

Q Mr. President, when President Putin was questioned today about human rights, he said the reason why he's cracking down on opposition leaders is because he doesn't want something like January 6th to happen in Russia. And he also said he doesn't want to see groups formed like Black Lives Matter. What's your response to that, please?

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughs.) My response is kind of what I communicated — that I think that's a — that's a ridiculous comparison. It's one thing for literally criminals to break through cordon, go into the Capitol, kill a police officer, and be held unaccountable than it is for people objecting and marching on the Capitol and saying, "You are not allowing me to speak freely. You are not allowing me to do A, B, C, or D."

And so, they're very different criteria.

Steve. Steve Holland, Reuters.

Q President — sorry — President Putin said he was satisfied with the answer about your comment about him being a "killer." Could you give us your side on this? What did you tell him?

THE PRESIDENT: He's satisfied. Why would I bring it up again? (Laughs.)

Q And now that you've talked to him, do you believe you can trust him?

THE PRESIDENT: Look, this is not about trust; this is about self-

interest and verification of self-interest. That's what it's about. So, I — virtually almost — almost anyone that I would work out an agreement with that affected the American people's interests, I don't say, "Well, I trust you. No problem." Let's see what happens.

You know, as that old expression goes, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." We're going to know shortly.

Igor, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

Q Hello, Mr. President. Hello, Mr. President —

THE PRESIDENT: You want to go on the shade? You can't — can you see?

Q Thank you. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: All right.

Q Yeah. So, I think you know attacks in civil society and the free — free press continue inside Russia.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q For example, Radio Free Europe —

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q — Radio Liberty; Voice of America; Current Time TV channel, where I work, are branded foreign agents — and several other independent media. So, we are essentially being forced out in Russia 30 years after President Yeltsin invited us in.

My question is: After your talks with President Putin, how interested do you think he is in improving the media climate in Russia?

THE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't put it that way, in terms of improving the climate. I would, in fact, put it in terms of how much interest does he have in burnishing Russia's reputation that is not — is viewed as not being contrary to democratic principles and free speech.

That's a judgment I cannot make. I don't know. But it's not because I think he — he is interested in changing the nature of a closed society or closed government's actions relative to what he thinks is the right of government to do what it does; it's a very different approach.

And, you know, there's a couple of really good biogra- — I told him I read a couple — I read most everything he's written and the speeches he's made. And — and I've read a couple of very good biographies, which many of you have as well.

And I think I pointed out to him that Russia had an opportunity — that brief shining moment after Gorbachev and after things began to change drastically — to actually generate a democratic government. But what happened was it failed and there was a great, great race among Russian intellectuals to determine what form of government would they choose and how would they choose it.

And based on what I believe, Mr. Putin decided was that Russia has always been a major international power when it's been totally united as a Russian state, not based on ideology — whether it was going back to Tsar and Commissar, straight through to the — the revolution — the Russian Revolution, and to where they are today.

And I think that it's clear to me — and I've said it — that I think he decided that the way for Russia to be able to sustain itself as a

great — quote, “great power” is to in fact unite the Russian people on just the strength of the government — the government controls — not necessarily ideologically, but the government.

And I think that’s the — that’s the choice that was made. I think it — I — I’m not going to second guess whether it could have been fundamentally different. But I do think it does not lend itself to Russia maintaining itself as one of the great powers in the world.

Q Sir, one more question —

Q One more on COVID — on COVID-19, Mr. President —

Q Sir, could we ask you one more question, please, sir? Thank you, sir. Did military response ever come up in this conversation today? Did you — in terms of the red lines that you laid down, is military response an option for a ransomware attack?

And President Putin had called you, in his press conference, an “experienced person.” You famously told him he didn’t have a soul. Do you now have a deeper understanding of him after this meeting?

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Q Mr. President —

Q But on the military — military response, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: No, we didn’t talk about military response.

Q In the spirit, Mr. President, of you saying that there is no substitute for face-to-face dialogue, and also with what you said at NATO that the biggest problems right now are Russia and China — you’ve spoken many times about how you have spent perhaps more time with President Xi than any other world leader.

So is there going to become a time where you might call him, old friend to old friend, and ask him to open up China to the World Health Organization investigators who are trying to get to the bottom of COVID-19?

THE PRESIDENT: Let's get something straight. We know each other well; we're not old friends. It's just pure business.

Q So, I guess, my question would be that you've said that you were going to press China. You signed on to the G7 communiqué that said you — the G7 were calling on China to open up to let the investigators in. But China basically says they don't want to be interfered with anymore. So, what happens now?

THE PRESIDENT: The impact — the world's attitude toward China as it develops. China is trying very hard to project itself as a responsible and — and a very, very forthcoming nation; that they are trying very hard to talk about how they're taking and helping the world in terms of COVID-19 and vaccines. And they're trying very hard.

Look, certain things you don't have to explain to the people of the world. They see the results. Is China really actually trying to get to the bottom of this?

One thing we did discuss, as I told you, in the EU and at the G7 and with NATO: What we should be doing and what I'm going to make an effort to do is rally the world to work on what is going to be the physical mechanism available to detect, early on, the next pandemic and have a mechanism by which we can respond to it and respond to it early. It's going to happen. It's going to happen. And we need to do that.

Thank you.

Q Any progress on the detained Americans, sir?

Q What did Putin say about Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed?

Q Sir, what do you say to the families of the detained Americans?

Q President Biden, why are you so confident Russia —

THE PRESIDENT: The families of the detained Americans, I have hope for.

Q Say it again; we can't hear you.

THE PRESIDENT: I said the families of the detained Americans came up and we discussed it. We're going to follow through with that discussion. I am — I am not going to walk away on that issue.

Q Why are you so confident he'll change his behavior, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not confident he'll change his behavior. Where the hell — what do you do all the time? When did I say I was confident? I said —

Q You said in the next six months you'll be able to determine —

THE PRESIDENT: I said — what I said was — let's get it straight. I said: What will change their behavior is if the rest of world reacts to them and it diminishes their standing in the world. I'm not confident of anything; I'm just stating a fact.

Q But given his past behavior has not changed and, in that press conference, after sitting down with you for several hours, he denied any involvement in cyberattacks; he downplayed human rights abuses; he even refused to say Aleksey Navalny's name. So how does that account to a constructive meeting, as President

— President Putin framed it?

THE PRESIDENT: If you don't understand that, you're in the wrong business.

Thank you.

7:53 P.M. CEST