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Interview to NBC

60-76 minutes





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Interview to NBC correspondent Keir Simmons.

Keir Simmons: Mr President, it's been a long time since you sat down with an American television network. Almost three years, I think. Thank you for your time. There's a lot to discuss. I hope we have time to get to all of the issues.

But I want to begin with some news from the US just today.

In the US it's reported that Russia is preparing, perhaps within months, to supply Iran with an advanced satellite system, enabling Tehran to track military targets. Is that true? (COMPLETE MISTRANSLATION TWICE – ABOUT HACKING AND GIVING IRAN TECHNOLOGY FOR ITS NUCLEAR PROGRAM)

Vladimir Putin: Would you mind repeating the question again, that we are preparing to hack what kind of facilities?

Keir Simmons: No. It's in the report today that Russia is preparing to give or to offer to Iran a satellite technology which will enable Iran to target military, to make military targets. (*Laughter.*)

Vladimir Putin: No. We don't have that kind of programmes with Iran. No, it's just nonsense all over again, yet again. We have cooperation plans with Iran, including military and technical cooperation. And all of this fits the framework of the decisions that were agreed upon in our programme, in regard to Iran's nuclear programme in the context of UN decisions together with our partners in the preparation of the JCPOA whereby some point sanctions, including in the area of military and technical cooperation, should be lifted from Iran. We have certain

programmes which concern conventional weapons, if it gets that far. However, we haven't even gone to that stage yet. We don't even have any kind of real cooperation in the conventional weapons area. So if anybody is inventing something regarding modern space-based technology, this is just plain fiction. This is just fake news. At the very least, I don't know anything about this kind of thing. Those who are speaking about it probably know more about it. It's just nonsense, garbage.

Keir Simmons: So, presumably you'd agree that giving Iran satellite technology that might enable it to target US servicemen and women in places like Iraq or to share that information with Hezbollah or the Houthis in Yemen so they could target Israel and Saudi Arabia, that giving Iran that kind of satellite technology would be dangerous?

Vladimir Putin: Look, why are we talking about problems that don't exist? There is no subject for discussion. Somebody has invented something, has made something up. Maybe this is just a bogus story so as to limit any kind of military and technical cooperation with Iran. I will say once again this is just some fake information that I have no knowledge about. For the first time I'm hearing about this information from you. We don't have this kind of intentions. And I'm not even sure that Iran is even able to accommodate this kind of technology. This is a separate subject, a very high-tech subject.

We don't rule out cooperation with many world nations in space. But probably everybody knows very well our position in terms that we are categorically against space militarisation all together. We believe that space should be free from any and all kinds of weapons located in near-Earth orbits. We don't have this kind

of plans or any plans, especially concerning the transfer of technology of the level that you have just described.

Keir Simmons: Ok. Let's move on to your summit with President Biden.

The context for the summit is that he's meeting with the G7, a group that you used to belong to, with NATO, with European leaders. President Biden has defined his first trip to Europe as quote, "about rallying the world's democracies." He views you as a leader of autocrats, who is determined to undermine the liberal democratic order. Is that true?

Vladimir Putin: Well, I don't know. Somebody presents it from a certain perspective. Somebody looks at the development of this situation and at yours truly in a different manner. All of this is being offered to the public in a way that is found to be expedient for the ruling circles of a certain country.

The fact that President Biden has been meeting up with his allies, there is nothing unusual about it. There's nothing unusual about a G7 meeting. We know what G7 is. I have been there on numerous occasions. I know what the values are in that forum. When people get together and discuss something, it's always good. It's better than not to get together and not to discuss. Because even in the context of the G7 there are matters that require ongoing attention and consideration because there are differences, strange as it may seem. There may be differences in assessments of international events on the international arena and among them. And very well then, let's get together and discuss it.

As far as NATO, I have said on many occasions, "This is a Cold

War relic.“ It's something that was born in the Cold War era. I'm not sure why it still continues to exist.

There was a time and there was some talk that this organisation would be transformed. Now it has been kind of forgotten. We presume that it is a military organisation. It is an ally of the United States. Every once in a while, it makes sense to meet up with your allies, although I can have an idea of how the discussion goes on there. Clearly everything is decided by consensus. However, there is just one opinion that is correct. Whereas the other opinions are not quite that right, putting it in careful terms. Well, there we go. Allies are getting together. What's so unusual about it? I don't see anything unusual about it. As a matter of fact it's a sign of respect to the US allies before a summit between the US and Russian presidents. Probably it is being presented as desire to find out their opinion on the key issues of the current agenda, including those issues that President Biden and I will discuss. However, I'm inclined to think that despite all of these niceties, the United States, as far as their relationship with Russia, will be promoting what they consider important and necessary for themselves, above all for themselves, in their economic and military interests. However, to hear what their allies have to say about – it probably never hurts. This is working procedure.

Keir Simmons: So let's talk about your meeting with President Biden, the summit that will happen after those meetings. President Biden asked you to meet with him. He didn't make any preconditions. Were you surprised?

Vladimir Putin: No. We have a bilateral relationship that has deteriorated to what is the lowest point in recent years. However, there are matters that need a certain amount of comparing notes

and identification and determination of mutual positions, so that matters that are of mutual interest can be dealt with in an efficient and effective way in the interests of both the United States and Russia. So, there is nothing unusual about it. In fact, despite this seemingly harsh rhetoric, we expected those suggestions because the US domestic political agenda made it impossible for us to restore the relationship at an acceptable level. This meeting should have taken place at some point. So, President Biden launched this initiative. Prior to that, as you know, he had supported the extension of the START treaty, which of course was bound to meet with support from our side. We believe that this treaty in the area of containment of strategic offensive weapons has been worked through and thoroughly, and meets our interests, and meets the US interests. So this offer could be expected.

Keir Simmons: Will you go into the summit agreeing to begin more arms control talks immediately after the summit? Because as you mentioned, President Biden has extended New START by five years. Washington would like that to be the beginning, not the end of that conversation.

Vladimir Putin: We know what matters and what problems Americans want to discuss with us, we understand these questions, matters and problems. We're prepared for this joint work. We have certain if not differences than different understandings of what pace – at what pace and in what directions we need to be moving. We know what constitutes priorities for the US side. And this is, generally speaking, a process that needs to be advanced at the professional level along the lines of the Foreign Ministry and Defence Ministry on the Russian side, the Pentagon and State Department of the US side. We are

prepared for this work.

We've heard signals that the US side would like to see these negotiations resumed at the expert level of professionals. We will see if the conditions for this have been created following the summit. Of course, we are not saying no. We are ready to do this work.

Keir Simmons: President Biden wants predictability and stability. Is that what you want?

Vladimir Putin: Well, this is the most important thing. This is the most important value, if you will, in international affairs.

Keir Simmons: Sorry to interrupt you. But he would say that you have caused a lot of instability and unpredictability.

Vladimir Putin: Well, he says one thing. I say another thing. But maybe at some point in certain ways our rhetoric varies and is different. But if you ask my opinion now, I am telling you what it is. The most important value in international affairs is predictability and stability. And I believe that on the part of our US partners, this is something that we haven't seen in recent years. What kind of stability and predictability could there be if we remember the 2011 events in Libya where the country was essentially taken apart, broken down? What kind of stability and predictability was there?

There has been talk of a continued presence of troops in Afghanistan. And then all of a sudden, boom!, the troops are being withdrawn from Afghanistan. Is this predictability and stability again?

Now the Middle East events. Is this predictability and stability, what

all of this will lead to? Or in Syria? What is stable and predictable about this?

I've asked my US counterparts, "You want Assad to leave? Who will replace him? What will happen when he's replaced with somebody?" The answer is odd. The answer is, "I don't know." Well, if you don't know what will happen next, why change what there is? It could be a second Libya or another Afghanistan. Do we want this? No. Let us sit down together, talk, look for compromise solutions that are acceptable for all the parties. That is how stability is achieved. It cannot be achieved by imposing one particular point of view, the "correct" point of view, whereby all the other ones are incorrect. That's not how stability is achieved.

Keir Simmons: Let's get to some other issues. I want to just talk a little bit more about your relationship with President Biden. This will not be the Helsinki summit. President Biden is not President Trump. You once described President Trump as a bright person, talented. How would you describe President Biden?

Vladimir Putin: Well, even now, I believe that former US President Mr Trump is an extraordinary individual, a talented individual, otherwise he would not have become US President. He is a colourful individual. You may like him or not. And he didn't come from the US establishment. He had not been part of big time politics before, and some like it, some don't like it but that is a fact. President Biden, of course, is radically different from Mr Trump because President Biden is a career man. He has spent virtually his entire adulthood in politics. He has been doing it for a great deal of years and I have already said that and that is an obvious fact. Just think of the number of years he spent in the Senate,

and how many years he was involved in the matters of international politics and disarmament, virtually at the expert level. That's a different kind of person, and it is my great hope that yes, there are some advantages, some disadvantages, but there will not be any knee-jerk reactions on behalf of the sitting US President, that we will be able to comply with certain rules of engagement, certain rules of communications and will be able to find points of contact and common points.

Keir Simmons: Well, President Biden said one time when you met, you were inches away from each other, close to each other. And he said to you, "I'm looking into your eyes, and I can't see a soul." And you said, "We understand each other." Do you remember that exchange?

Vladimir Putin: As far as soul, I'm not sure. One has to think about what soul is. But I do not remember this particular part of our conversations, to be honest with you. I do not remember. We all, when we meet, when we get together, when we talk, when we work and strive and achieve some solutions, we all proceed from the interests of our nations and our states. And this is fundamental and is the bedrock of all our actions and intentions. And this is the driving force and the motive for organising meetings of this kind. And as far as soul goes, that's something for the church.

Keir Simmons: Yeah. You are a religious man. President Biden is saying he told you to your face, "You don't have a soul."
(Laughter.)

Vladimir Putin: I do not remember this. "Something is wrong with my memory."

Keir Simmons: He says it was about 10 years ago when he was

vice president.

Vladimir Putin: Well, he probably has good memory. I do not rule this out, but I don't remember this. In personal encounters, people try to act appropriately. I do not remember any inappropriate elements of behavior on the part of my counterparts. I don't think that anything like that has happened. Perhaps he did say something, but I do not remember.

Keir Simmons: Would you have felt that was an inappropriate thing to say?

Vladimir Putin: Well, that depends on the context. It depends on what form they're said in. One can say this in different ways. It can be presented in different ways. But generally, people meet up in order to establish a relationship and create an environment and conditions for joint work, with a view to achieving some kind of positive results. If one is going to have a fight with somebody else why bother and have a meeting? One's better off looking into budget and social policies domestically. We have many issues that we have to resolve. What's the point then? It's just a waste of time. Of course, one can present this for domestic political consumption, which I believe is what has been done in the US in the last two years, where the US-Russia relationship was sacrificed for the sake of a fierce political strife inside the US.

We can see that. We know it very well. We have been accused of all kinds of things: election interference, cyberattacks and so on and so forth. And not once, not one time did they bother to produce any kind of evidence or proof. Just unfounded accusations. I'm surprised that we have not yet been accused of provoking the Black Lives Matter movement. That would have

been a good line of attack. But we didn't do that.

Keir Simmons: What do you think of the Black Lives Matter movement?

Vladimir Putin: I think that, of course, this movement was used by one of the political forces domestically in the course of election campaigns. But there are some grounds for it. Let's remember Colin Powell who was Secretary of State, was in charge of the Pentagon. He even wrote in his book that even he as a high-ranking official had felt some kind of injustice towards himself his entire life as someone with a dark complexion.

Even from the Soviet days, we in Russia, we have always treated with understanding the fight of African Americans for their rights. And there are certain roots to it. And there is a certain foundation for this. But no matter how noble the goals that somebody is driven by, if it reaches certain extremes, if it spills over into... if it acquires elements of extremism, we cannot approve this. We cannot welcome it. So our attitude to this is very simple. We support African Americans' fight for their rights, but we are against any types and kinds of extremism, which unfortunately sometimes, regrettably, we witness these days.

Keir Simmons: You mention cyberattacks and deny any involvement by Russia. But Mr President, there is now a weight of evidence, a long list of alleged state-sponsored cyberattacks. Let me give you five.

There's a lot, but it makes a point. The US intelligence community says Russia interfered with the 2016 election. Election security officials said Russia tried to interfere with the 2020 election. Cybersecurity researchers said government hackers targeted

COVID vaccine researchers, hacking for COVID vaccines.

In April, the Treasury Department said the SolarWinds attack was the world's worst, including nine federal agencies. And just before your summit, Microsoft says it has discovered another attack with targets including organisations that have criticised you, Mr Putin.

Mr President, are you waging a cyber war against America?

Vladimir Putin: Dear Keir, you have said that there is a weight of evidence of cyberattacks by Russia. And then you went on to list those official US agencies that have stated as much. Is that what you did?

Keir Simmons: Well, I'm giving you information about who said it so you can answer.

Vladimir Putin: Right. You are conveying information to me as to who said that. But where is evidence that this was indeed done? I will tell you that this person has said that, that person has said this. But where is the evidence? Where is proof? When there are charges without evidence, I can tell you that you can take your complaint to the International League of Sexual Reform (SIC).

This is a conversation that has no subject. Put something on the table so that we can look and respond. But there isn't anything like that.

One of the latest attacks, as far as I know, was against the pipeline system in the US. Right, yes. So what?

Keir Simmons: But this is... but you mention...

Vladimir Putin: Just a moment. As far as I know, the shareholders of this company even made a decision to pay the ransom. They paid off the cyber gangsters. If you have listed an entire set of US

special services (powerful, global, respectable), after all they can find whoever the ransom was paid. And once they do that, they will realise that Russia has nothing to do with it.

Then there's the cyberattack against a meat processing plant. Next time they will say there was an attack against some Easter eggs. It's becoming farcical, like an ongoing farcical thing, never-ending farcical thing. You said "plenty of evidence," but you haven't cited any proof. But again, this is an empty conversation, a pointless conversation. What exactly are we talking about? There's no proof.

Keir Simmons: You've moved on to this question of ransomware and criminals. Russian-speaking criminals is the allegation, are targeting the American way of life: food, gas, water, hospitals, transport. Why would you let Russian-speaking criminals disrupt your diplomacy? Wouldn't you want to know who's responsible?

Vladimir Putin: You know, the simplest thing to do would be for us to sit down calmly and agree on joint work in cyberspace. We did suggest that to Obama's administration...

Keir Simmons: In September.

Vladimir Putin: In October. We started in September, and during his last year in office. In October at first they didn't say anything. Then in November, they came back to us and said that, yes, it was interesting. Then the election was lost.

We restated this proposal to Mr Trump's administration. The response was that it is interesting, but it didn't come to the point of actual negotiations.

There are grounds to believe that we can build an effort in this area with the new administration, that the domestic political

situation in the US will not prevent this from happening. But we have proposed to do this work together. Let's agree on the principles of mutual work. Let's find out what we can do together. Let's agree on how we will structure counterefforts against the process that is gathering momentum. We here in the Russian Federation have cybercrimes that have increased many times over in the last few years. We are trying to respond to it. We are looking for cyber criminals. If we find them, we punish them.

We are willing to engage with international participants, including the United States. You are the ones who have refused to engage in joint work. What can we do? We cannot build this work, we cannot structure this work unilaterally.

Keir Simmons: Well, I'm not the government, Mr Putin. I'm just a journalist asking you questions.

Vladimir Putin: I understand that.

Keir Simmons: But if you clearly want to negotiate, you must have something to negotiate with. You don't ask for a truce unless you're fighting in a war.

Vladimir Putin: You know, as far as the war, NATO, and I'd like to draw your attention to that, has officially stated that it considers cyberspace a battlefield, an area of military action, and it conducts exercises in that battlefield.

Keir Simmons: And you are involved in that field.

Vladimir Putin: No.

Keir Simmons: Russia is fighting on that battlefield. Correct?

Vladimir Putin: No, no, that is not correct.

Keir Simmons: Really?

Vladimir Putin: That is not current. Really. If we wanted to do that... NATO said that it considers cyberspace an area of combat. And it prepares and even conducts exercises. What stops us from doing that? If you do that, we will do the same thing. But we don't want that, just like we don't want space militarised, in the same manner we don't want cyberspace militarised. And we have suggested on many occasions, agreeing on mutual work in the cybersecurity area in this area. But your government refuses to.

Keir Simmons: It isn't, I mean. I saw your proposal from September, from just in September. Isn't what you're proposing? That if you can come to an agreement over hacking and election interference, then you'll call off the hacking and the election interference if America agrees not to comment on your elections and your political opponents?

Vladimir Putin: What we count on is that nobody should interfere in domestic internal affairs of other countries, neither the US in ours nor we in the USA's political processes or any other nations. All nations of the world should be given an opportunity to develop calmly. Even if there are crisis situations they have to be resolved by the people domestically, without any influence or interference from the outside.

I don't think that this call by the US administration, today's administration is worth anything. It appears to me that the US government will still continue to interfere in the political processes in other countries. I don't think that this process can be stopped, because it has gained a lot of momentum. However, as far as joint

work in cyberspace for the prevention of some unacceptable actions on the part of cyber criminals, that is definitely something that can be agreed upon. And it is our great hope that we will be able to establish this process with our US partners.

Keir Simmons: If you were in America, what would you fear might happen next? The lights being switched off the way they were in western Ukraine in 2015?

Vladimir Putin: You mean if I were in America, what I would be afraid of? Is that the question?

Keir Simmons: What should Americans worry about? What might happen next if there's no agreement on cyber?

Vladimir Putin: You know, this is just like space militarisation. This is a very dangerous area. At some point, in order to achieve something in the nuclear area in terms of confrontation in the area of nuclear weapons, the USSR and the United States did agree to contain this particular arms race. But cyberspace is a very sensitive area. As of today, a great deal of human endeavours rely upon digital technologies, including the functioning of government. And of course interference in those processes can cause a lot of damage and a lot of losses. And everybody understands that. And I am repeating for the third time: Let's sit down together and agree on joint work on how to achieve security in this area. That is all. What's bad about it? I don't even understand.

I'm not asking you. I'm not trying to put you on the spot. But for me as an ordinary citizen, it would not be clear and understandable, why is it that your government refuses to do it? Accusations keep coming, including up to interference, involvement in a cyberattack against some kind of a meat processing plant. But our proposal

to start negotiations in this area are being turned down. This is some kind of nonsense, but that's exactly what's been happening.

I repeat one more time. It is my hope that we will be able to start engaging in positive work in this area.

In terms of what's to be afraid of, why is it that we suggest agreeing on something? Because what people can be afraid of in America, are worried about in America, the very same thing can be a danger to us. The US is a high-tech country. NATO has declared cyberspace an area of combat. That means they are planning something. They are preparing something. So obviously this cannot but worry us.

Keir Simmons: Do you fear that American intelligence is deep inside Russian systems and has the ability to do you a lot of damage in cyber?

Vladimir Putin: I'm not afraid, but I bear in mind that it is a possibility.

Keir Simmons: Let me ask you about human rights, an issue that President Biden will raise. Mr President, he'll raise the issue of Alexei Navalny, targeted for assassination, now in a Russian jail. Mr President, why are you so threatened by opposition?

Vladimir Putin: Who says that I feel threatened by opposition or we are threatened by opposition? Who told you that I'm scared by opposition? It's just funny.

Keir Simmons: Well, a Russian court has just... Excuse me, I'm sorry. A Russian court has just outlawed organisations connected to Mr Navalny. Literally every non-systemic opposition figure is facing criminal charges. In journalism Meduza and VTimes have

been hit with "foreign agent" labels and face collapse. Mr President, it's as if dissent is simply not tolerated in Russia anymore.

Vladimir Putin: You are presenting it as dissent and intolerance towards dissent in Russia. We view it completely differently. You have mentioned the law on foreign agents, but that's not something that we invented. That law was passed back in the 1930s in the United States. And that law is much harsher than ours, and it is directed and intended, among other things, at preventing interference in the domestic political affairs of the United States.

Keir Simmons: But Mr President...

Vladimir Putin: And on the whole, I believe that it is justified.

Keir Simmons: Look, I'm just going to...

Vladimir Putin: Do you want me to keep answering?

Keir Simmons: In America, we call what you're doing now "whataboutism." "What about this? What about that?" It's a way of not answering the question. Let me ask you a direct question.

Vladimir Putin: Let me answer. You've asked me a question. You are not liking my answer, so you're interrupting me. This is inappropriate. So there we go. In the United States, this law was adopted a long time ago. It's working, and sanctions under that law are much harsher than here, up to imprisonment.

Keir Simmons: There you go, still talking about the United States.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, yes. Again you are not letting me... But I will revert to us. I will go back to us. Don't worry. I will not just be focused on US problems. I will revert and go back, and comment

on what's happening here.

Keir Simmons: Mr President, I thought your belief was that nations shouldn't intervene in other countries' domestic affairs, shouldn't comment on other countries' politics. But there you are, doing it again.

Vladimir Putin: No. If you muster patience and let me finish saying what I mean to say, everything will be clear to you. But you are not liking my answer. You don't want my answer to be heard by your audience. That is the problem. You are shutting me down. Is that free expression? Is that free expression American way?

Keir Simmons: Please, answer.

Vladimir Putin: Here we go. The US adopted this law. We passed this law very recently in order to protect our society against outside interference. When in some of the states, a foreign observer comes to a polling station, the prosecutor says, "Come a few feet closer, and you'll go to jail." Is that normal? Is that democracy in the modern world? But that is an actual practice in some of the states. We don't have anything like that.

When I talk about these laws, about non-interference or attempts at interference, what do I mean as applied to Russia? Many entities of the so-called "civil society" – the reason I say "so-called civil society" is because many of those entities are funded from abroad. Specific relevant action programs are prepared. Their core members are trained abroad. And when our official authorities see that, in order to prevent this kind of interference in our domestic affairs, we make relevant decisions and adopt relevant laws. And they are more lenient than yours.

We have a saying: "Don't be mad at the mirror if you are ugly." It

has nothing to do with you personally. But if somebody blames us for something, what I say is, "Why don't you look at yourselves?" You will see yourselves in the mirror, not us. There is nothing unusual about it.

As far as political activities and the political system, it is evolving. We have 44 registered parties. Well, 34, I think. And 32 are about to participate in various electoral processes across the country in September.

Keir Simmons: Those are the registered.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, yes.

Keir Simmons: We only have a limited amount of time, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: There is also non-systemic opposition. You have said that some people have been detained. Some people are in prison. Yes, that is all true. You mentioned certain names.

Keir Simmons: Those are the ones that are being...

Vladimir Putin: Yes, yes. I will talk about it. Yes. I will not leave any of your questions unattended.

Keir Simmons: Alexei Navalny is his name.

Can I just ask you a direct question? Did you order Alexei Navalny's assassination?

Vladimir Putin: Of course not. We don't have this kind of habit, of assassinating anybody. That's one.

Number two is I want to ask you: Did you order the assassination of the woman who walked into the Congress and who was shot and killed by a policeman? Do you know that 450 individuals were

arrested after entering the Congress? And they didn't go there to steal a laptop. They came with political demands. 450 people...

Keir Simmons: You're talking about the Capitol riot.

Vladimir Putin: ...have been detained. They're facing a jail time, between 15 and 25 years. And they came to the Congress with political demands. Isn't that persecution for political opinions? Some have been accused of plotting to topple, to take over government power. Some are accused of robbery. They didn't go there to rob.

The people who you have mentioned, yes, they were convicted for violating their status, having been previously convicted, given convent, given suspended sentences which were essentially warning to not violate the Russian laws. And they completely ignored the requirements of the law. The court went on and passed and turned the conviction into real jail time. Thousands and thousands of people ignore requirements of the law – and they have nothing to do with political activities – in Russia every year and they go to jail. If somebody is actually using political activities as a shield to deal with their issues, including achieve their commercial goals, then it's something that they have to be held responsible for.

Keir Simmons: There you go again, Mr President. "What about America?" when I've asked you about Russia. Let me ask. You mentioned Congress. Let me ask you another direct question that you can answer. And it's an allegation that has been made, an accusation that has been made again and again now in the United States. The late John McCain in Congress called you a killer. When President Trump was asked, was told that you are

a killer, he didn't deny it. When President Biden was asked whether he believes you are a killer, he said, "I do." Mr President, are you a killer?

Vladimir Putin: Look, over my tenure, I've gotten used to attacks from all kinds of angles and from all kinds of areas under all kinds of pretexts and reasons and of different calibre and fierceness. And none of it surprises me. People with whom I work and with whom we argue, we are not bride and groom. We don't swear everlasting love and friendship. We are partners. And in some areas, we are rivals or competitors.

As far as harsh rhetoric, I think that this is an expression of overall US culture. Of course, in Hollywood, because we mentioned Hollywood at the beginning of our conversation, there are some deep things in Hollywood macho which can be treated as cinematographic art but more often than not it's macho behavior that is part of US-political culture where it's considered normal.

By the way, not here. It is not considered normal here. If this rhetoric is followed by a suggestion to meet and discuss bilateral issues and matters of international policies, I see it as desire to engage in joint work. If this desire is serious, we're prepared to support it.

Keir Simmons: I don't think I heard you answer the question, the direct question, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: I did answer. I will add, if you let me. I have heard dozens of such accusations, especially during the period of some grave events during our counterterrorism efforts in North Caucasus. And when it happens, I'm always guided by the interests of the Russian people and Russian state.

And sentiments in terms of who calls somebody what, what kind of labels, this is not something I worry about in the least.

Keir Simmons: Let me give you some names. Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead. Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned by polonium. Sergei Magnitsky, allegedly beaten and died in prison. Boris Nemtsov, shot moments from the Kremlin, moments from here. Mikhail Lesin died of blunt trauma in Washington, DC. Are all of these a coincidence, Mr President?
(Laughter.)

Vladimir Putin: Look, you know, I don't want to come across as being rude, but this looks like some kind of indigestion, except that it's verbal indigestion. You mentioned many individuals who indeed suffered and perished at different points in time for various reasons at the hand of different individuals.

You mentioned Lesin. Lesin used to work in my administration. I liked him very much. He died, he perished or died in the United States. I'm not sure if he perished or died. We should ask you how exactly he perished. I regret to this day that he is not with us. In my opinion, he's a very decent person.

As far as the others, we found some of the criminals who committed those crimes. Some are in prison, and we are prepared to continue to work in this mode and along this avenue, identifying everybody who violate the law and by their actions cause damage, including to the image of the Russian Federation.

However, just piling everything together is meaningless, inappropriate and baseless. If one sees it as a line of attack, then very well. Let me listen to it one more time. But I'd like to repeat that I have heard it many times. But this doesn't baffle me. I know

which direction to move in to secure the interests of the Russian state.

Keir Simmons: Let's move on to Belarus and Ukraine, two issues that will certainly come up in your summit with President Biden. Did you have prior knowledge that a commercial airliner would be forced to land in Belarus and that a journalist would be arrested?

Vladimir Putin: No, I did not know about this. I didn't know about any airliner. I didn't know about the people who were detained there subsequently. I found out about it from the media. I didn't know, I didn't have a clue about any detainees. I don't know. It is of no interest to us.

Keir Simmons: You appear to have approved of it judging by your meeting with President Lukashenko soon afterwards.

Vladimir Putin: Not that I approve of it. Not that I condemn it. But, well, it happened. I said recently in one of the conversations with a European colleague, the version of Mr Lukashenko who told me about it was that information had been given to them that there was an explosive device on board the plane. They informed...

Keir Simmons: And you believe that?

Vladimir Putin: ...the pilot without forcing the pilot to land. And the pilot made a decision to land in Minsk. That is all. Why should I not believe him? Ask the pilot. It's the simplest thing. Ask the chief pilot. Ask the commander of the aircraft. Did you ask him if was he forced to land? Because I have not heard or seen an interview with the commander of the aircraft that landed in Minsk. Why not ask him? Why not ask him if he was forced to land? Why don't you ask him? It's actually even odd. Everybody accuses Lukashenko, but the pilot hasn't been asked.

You know, I cannot but recall another similar situation where the plane of the President of Bolivia was forced to land in Vienna, the order of the US administration.

Air Force One, a presidential plane, was forced to land.

The President was taken out of the aircraft. They searched the plane. And you don't even recall that. Do you think it was normal, that was good, but what Lukashenko did was bad?

Look, let us speak the same language and let us use the same concepts. If, well, Lukashenko is a gangster, how about the situation with the Bolivian President? Was it good? In Bolivia, they viewed it as humiliation of the whole country. But everybody kept mum not to aggravate the situation. Nobody is recalling that. By the way, this is not the only situation...

Keir Simmons: You're recalling it.

Vladimir Putin: This is not the only situation of this kind.

Keir Simmons: With respect, you're...

Vladimir Putin: If it's him, you gave him an example to follow.

Keir Simmons: ...recalling it, but it is a completely different example, Mr President. We are talking about (*Laughter.*) a commercial flight. Shouldn't people be able to take a commercial flight across Europe without fear of being shot down like in the case of MH-17 or forced down so that a dictator can arrest a journalist?

Vladimir Putin: Yes. Look, I will tell you one more time. What President Lukashenko told me, I don't have any reason not to believe him. For the third time, I'm telling you: Ask the pilot. Why don't you ask the pilot: Was he...

Keir Simmons: But you...

Vladimir Putin: ...being scared? Was he being threatened? Was he being forced? The fact that information appeared that there was a bomb on the plane, that individuals, people who had nothing to do, who were passengers, who had nothing to do with politics or any kind of domestic conflicts, that they could perceive it negatively, could be worried about it, of course that's a bad thing. There is nothing good about this. And obviously, we condemn everything that has to do with this, and international terrorism, and the use of aircraft. Of course, we are against this. And you've told me that the landing of the aircraft of the President of Bolivia is a completely different matter.

Yes, it is different except that it is ten times worse than what was done, if anything was done in Belarus. But you just won't acknowledge it. You are ignoring it, and you want millions of people around the world to either not notice it or forget about it tomorrow. You won't get away with it. It won't happen.

Keir Simmons: In the case of neighbouring Ukraine earlier this year, the European Union said you had more than 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border. Was that an attempt to get Washington's attention?

Vladimir Putin: Look, first, Ukraine itself constantly – and I think is still doing that – kept bringing personnel and military equipment to the conflict area in the southeast of Ukraine, Donbass. That's one. Two is that we conducted exercises in our territory and not just in the south of the Russian Federation but also in the Far East and in the north, in the Arctic.

Simultaneously, military exercises were being held in different

parts of the Russian Federation. At the same time, the US was conducting military exercises in Alaska. Do you know anything about it? Probably not. But I'll tell you that I do know. And that is in direct proximity to our borders. But that's in your territory, on your land. We didn't even pay attention to it.

What is happening now? Now, at our southern borders, there is a war game, Defender Europe, 40,000 personnel, 15,000 units of military equipment. Part of them have been airlifted from the US continent directly to our borders. Did we airlift any of our military technology to the US borders? No, we did not.

Keir Simmons: Many of those...

Vladimir Putin: Why are you worried then?

Keir Simmons: But many of those exercises are a response to your actions, Mr President. Do you worry that your opposition to NATO has actually strengthened it? For six years, NATO has spent more on defence.

Vladimir Putin: Some defence. During the USSR era, Gorbachev, who is still, thank God, with us, got a promise, a verbal promise that there would be no NATO expansion to the east. Where is that...

Keir Simmons: Where is that...

Vladimir Putin: ...promise? Two ways of expansion.

Keir Simmons: Where is that written down? Where is that promise written down?

Vladimir Putin: Right, right. Well done. Correct. You've got a point. Got you good. Well, congratulations. Of course, everything should be sealed and written on paper. But what was the point

of expanding NATO to the east and bringing this infrastructure to our borders, and all of this before saying that we are the ones who have been acting aggressively?

Why? On what basis? Did Russia after the USSR collapsed present any threat to the US or European countries? We voluntarily withdrew our troops from Eastern Europe. Leaving them just on empty land. Our people there, military personnel for decades lived there in what was not normal conditions, including their children.

We went to tremendous expenses. And what did we get in response? We got in response infrastructure next to our borders. And now, you are saying that we are threatening somebody. We're conducting war games on a regular basis, including sometimes surprise military exercises. Why should it worry the NATO partners? I just don't understand that.

Keir Simmons: Will you commit now not to send any further Russian troops into Ukrainian sovereign territory?

Vladimir Putin: Look, did we say that we were planning to send our armed formations anywhere? We were conducting war games in our territory. How can this not be clear? I'm saying it again because I want your audience to hear it, your listeners to hear it both on the screens of their televisions and on the internet.

We conducted military exercises in our territory. Imagine if we sent our troops into direct proximity to your borders. What would have been your response? We didn't do that. We did it in our territory. You conducted war games in Alaska. God bless you. But you had crossed an ocean, brought thousands of personnel, thousands of units of military equipment close to our borders, and yet you

believe that we are acting aggressively and somehow you're not acting aggressively. Just look at that. The pot calling the kettle black.

Keir Simmons: Moving on, the Biden administration has said that at your summit they will bring up the case of two US prisoners in Russia, Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed. They are two former Marines. Trevor Reed is suffering from COVID in prison. Why don't you release them ahead of the summit? Wouldn't that show goodwill?

Vladimir Putin: I know that we have certain US citizens who are in prison, have been convicted, found guilty. But if one considers the number of Russian Federation citizens who are in US prisons, then these numbers don't even compare. They cannot be compared. The United States has made a habit in the last few years of catching Russian Federation citizens in third countries and take them to back to the US in violation of all international legal norms and put them in prison.

Keir Simmons: It's just that there's a limited amount of time, Mr President. Unless we can have more time, I'd be very happy to have to keep going for another 30 minutes.

Vladimir Putin: I determine the time here, so don't worry about time. Your guy, the Marine, he's just a drunk and a troublemaker. As they say here, he got himself shitfaced and started a fight. Among other things, he hit a cop. It's nothing. It's just a common crime. There is nothing to it.

As far as possible negotiations on the subject, sure it can be talked about. Obviously we'll raise the matter of our citizens who are in prison in the US. Yes, it can be a specific conversation. Sure.

We're happy to do it although it doesn't seem that the US administration has raised that matter. But we're prepared to do that.

Our pilot Yaroshenko has been in prison in the US for a good, I don't know how many years, 15, maybe 20 years. And there also the problem seems to be a common crime. We could and should talk about it. We haven't been talking about this, but we could. If the US side is prepared to discuss it, so are we.

Keir Simmons: So his family will find that incredibly distressing to hear you talk about him that way. It does sound though as if you would consider some kind of a prisoner swap.

Vladimir Putin: There is nothing offensive about it. He got drunk on vodka and started a fight. He fought a cop. There is nothing offensive about it. These things happen in life. There is nothing horrible about it. It happens to our men as well. Somebody gulps down some vodka and starts a fight. So you violate the law, you go to prison. What would have happened if he'd fought a cop, if he'd hit a cop in your country? He would have been shot dead on that spot, and that's the end of it. Isn't that the case?

Keir Simmons: And on the prisoner swap question, is that something that you would consider? Are you looking to negotiate? You're meeting with the President.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, of course. Even better would be a discussion of the possibility of entering into an agreement on extradition of individuals who are in prison. This is standard international practice. We have such agreements with several countries. We're prepared to enter into such an agreement with the United States.

Keir Simmons: Just to be clear so we hear it from you, which

Russian prisoners in the US would you be hoping to bring back to Russia by name?

Vladimir Putin: Well, we have a whole list. I just mentioned a pilot, a pilot named Yaroshenko who was taken to the US from a third country and was given a lengthy sentence. He has major health issues, but the prison administration is not paying attention to this. You have mentioned that your citizen has coronavirus, but nobody's paying attention to the health issues of our citizen.

We're prepared to discuss these issues. Moreover, it makes sense, as you correctly said, and I completely agree with you, there are matters of humanitarian nature. And why not discuss them as long as they pertain to the health and life of specific individuals and of their families? Of course. Sure thing.

Keir Simmons: Just quickly before I move on, on the subject of prisons, again with Alexei Navalny, will you commit that you will personally ensure that Alexei Navalny will leave prison alive?

Vladimir Putin: Look, such decisions in this country are not made by the President. They're made by the court whether or not to set somebody free. As far as the health, all individuals who are in prison, that is something that the administration of the specific prison or penitentiary establishment is responsible for.

And there are medical facilities in penitentiaries that are perhaps not in the best condition. And they are the ones whose responsibility it is. And I hope that they do it properly. But to be honest, I have not visited such places for a long time.

I visited one in St Petersburg some time ago and that was a very grave impression that was made on me by the medical facilities in a prison. But since then, I hope, some things have been done

to improve the situation. And I proceed from the premise that the person that you have mentioned, the same kind of measures will apply to that person, not in any way worse than to anybody else who happens to be in prison.

Keir Simmons: His name is Alexei Navalny. People will note that you weren't prepared to say...

Vladimir Putin: Oh, I don't care.

Keir Simmons: ...that he would leave prison alive.

Vladimir Putin: Please, listen to me carefully. His name can be anything. He's one of the individuals who are in prison. For me, he is one of the citizens of the Russian Federation who has been found guilty by a court of law and is in prison. There are many citizens like that.

By the way, our so-called prison population, the people who are in prison, has in the last few years been reduced by almost 50%, which I consider a big victory for us and a major sign of our legal system becoming more humane.

He will not be treated any worse than anybody else. Nobody should be given any kind of special treatment. It would be wrong. Everybody should be in an equal situation. This is called the most favoured nation treatment. Not worse than anybody else. And the person that you have mentioned, that applies to him as well.

Keir Simmons: Appreciate the extra time, Mr President. The team has been in quarantine for almost two weeks, so this interview is very important to us.

I want to ask you about China. China is working on its fourth

aircraft carrier. It has two. Russia has one, and it's not in service at the moment. China refused to take part in arms control talks last year. You complain so much about NATO to your west. Why do you never complain about China's militarisation to your east?

Vladimir Putin: The first thing I want to say is that over the last few years, the last few decades, we have developed a strategic partnership relationship between Russia and China that previously had not been achieved in the history of our nations, a high level of trust and cooperation in all areas: in politics, in the economy, in the area of technology, in the area of military and technical cooperation. We do not believe that China is a threat to us. That's one. China is a friendly nation. It has not declared us an enemy, as the United States has done.

Keir Simmons: China hasn't...

Vladimir Putin: Don't you know anything about this? That's number one.

Number two is that China is a huge, powerful country, 1.5 billion. In terms of purchasing power parity, the Chinese economy has exceeded that of the United States. And in terms of trade for the previous year, last year, China has tied Europe for the first place, whereas the US has dropped to the second position. Do you know about this?

China has been developing. And I understand that what's beginning is a certain kind of confrontation with China. Everybody understands it. We can see it. Why hide from and be scared of these issues? However, we're not alarmed by it, including, among other things, by the fact that our defence sufficiency, which is how we describe it, is at a very high level, including because

of this. But the most important thing is the nature and level of our relationship with China.

You said China will have four aircraft carriers. How many does the United States have?

Keir Simmons: A lot more.

Vladimir Putin: There you go. That's my point. Why would we worry about the Chinese aircraft carriers? On top of everything else, we have a hugely vast border with China, but it's a land border. It's a land border. What? Do you think the Chinese aircraft carriers will cross our land border? This is just a meaningless conversation.

Keir Simmons: But you also have a Pacific coast.

Vladimir Putin: You are right, that there will be four of them. It is correct that there will be four of them. Right.

Coast? Well, the coast is huge. But the bulk of the border between us and China is a land border. And, yes you're right that there will be four of them because one needs to be in maintenance, one needs to be on combat duty, one needs to be in repairs. There is nothing excessive here for China.

That is why what you said, that China won't engage in negotiations on arms control, it refuses to negotiate reductions in nuclear offensive weapons. You should ask the Chinese about it, whether it's good or bad. It's for them to decide. But their arguments are simple and understandable: in terms of the amount of ammunition and warheads and delivery vehicles, the United States and Russia are far, far ahead of China. And the Chinese justly say, "Why would we make reductions if we are already far behind what you

have? Or do you want us to freeze our level of nuclear deterrence? Why should we freeze? Why we, a country with a 1.5 billion population, cannot at least set the goal of achieving your levels?" These are all debatable issues that require thorough consideration. But making us responsible for China's position is just comical.

Keir Simmons: What do you think of China's treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang?

Vladimir Putin: You know, I have met certain Uyghurs. It's always possible to find individuals who criticise the central authorities. I have met Uyghurs on my trips to China, and I assure you at the very least what I heard with my own ears, that on the whole they welcome the policies of the Chinese authorities in this area. They believe that China has done a great deal for people who live in this part of the country from the perspective of the economy, raising the cultural level, and so on and so forth. So why should I offer assessments looking at the situation from outside?

Keir Simmons: You know there are many Uyghurs who do not say that and that America has accused China of genocide. The Secretary of State has accused China of genocide against the Uyghurs. There is the accusation of a million Uyghurs in so-called concentration camps. Is that your message to the Muslim communities in the former Soviet Union? You don't think anything wrong is happening there?

Vladimir Putin: As far as the Muslim community in Russia, I need to give a message to it through policies of the Russian authorities vis-à-vis Muslims in the Russian Federation. That is how I need to give my message to the Muslim community in the Russian

Federation. We're an observer in the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

About 10% of our population, probably a little more, are Muslims. They are citizens of the Russian Federation who do not have any other fatherland. They're making a colossal contribution to the development of our country. And that pertains to both clerics and ordinary citizens.

Why should I speak to and build a relationship with this part of our population by reference to the situation in China without understanding thoroughly what is happening there? I think that you're better off asking about all these problems the foreign minister of the People's Republic of China or the US State Department.

Keir Simmons: It's just a question of whether you are prepared to criticise China. China, for example, abstained on Crimea at the Security Council. China's biggest banks have not contravened American sanctions against Russia. Do you think you get 100% support from China?

Vladimir Putin: You know, we are neighbouring countries. One does not choose one's neighbours. We are pleased with the level, as I said, – unprecedentedly high level of our relationship as it has evolved over the last few decades, and we cherish it, just like our Chinese friends cherish it, which we can see. Why are you trying to drag us into some kind of matters that you evaluate as you see it fit for building your relationship with China? I will tell you completely... Can I speak...?

Keir Simmons: Please, yeah.

Vladimir Putin: Can I be completely honest? We can see

attempts at destroying the relationship between Russia and China. We can see that those attempts are being made in practical policies. And your questions, too, have to do with it.

I have set forth my position for you. I believe that this is sufficient, and I'm confident that the Chinese leadership being aware of the totality of these matters, including the part of their population who are Uyghurs, will find the necessary solution to make sure that the situation remains stable and benefits the entire multi-million-strong Chinese people, including its Uyghur part.

Keir Simmons: You understand, of course, I'm just trying to question you about Russia's position in relation to China and the United States. Let me ask you in a different way. Are you splitting off from the US space programme and moving forward with China?

Vladimir Putin: No, why? We are prepared to work with the US in space. And I think recently the head of NASA said that he could not imagine development of space programmes without its partnership with Russia. We welcome this statement and we value it.

Keir Simmons: I'll just explain. Because the head of the Russian space agency has threatened leaving the international space programme in 2025 and specifically talked about sanctions in relation to that threat.

Vladimir Putin: Well, honestly, I don't think that Mr Rogozin, that is the name of the head of Roscosmos, has threatened anyone in this regard. I've known him for many years, and I know that he is a supporter of expanding the relationship with the US in this area, in space.

Recently, the head of NASA spoke in the same vein.

And I personally fully support this. And we have been working with great pleasure all of these years, and we're prepared to continue to work.

For technical reasons though, and that's a different matter, is that the International Space Station is coming to an end of its service life. And maybe in this regard, Roscosmos does not have plans to continue their work. However based on what I heard from our US partners, they, too, are looking at future cooperation in this particular segment in their certain way. But on the whole, the cooperation between our two countries in space is a great example of a situation where, despite any kind of problems in political relationships in recent years, it's an area where we have been able to maintain and preserve the partnership and both parties cherish it. I think you just misunderstood what the head of the Russian space programme said.

We are interested in continuing to work with the US in this direction, and we will continue to do so if our US partners don't refuse to do that. It doesn't mean that we need to work exclusively with the US. We have been working and will continue to work with China, which applies to all kinds of programmes, including exploring deep space. And I think there is nothing but positive information here. Frankly, I don't see any contradictions here. I don't think any mutual exclusivity here.

Keir Simmons: Let me ask you one more way just to understand the relationship between China, Russia and America. If the People's Liberation Army made a move on Taiwan how would Russia respond to that?

Vladimir Putin: What? Are you aware of China's plans to militarily solve the Taiwan problem? I don't know anything about it.

As we frequently say, politics do not require the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood is inappropriate in politics. There is no "could be" and "would be" in politics.

I cannot comment on anything that is not a current reality of the modern world. Please, bear with me. Don't be angry with me. But I think this is a question about nothing. This is not happening. Has China stated that it intends to solve the Taiwan problem militarily? It hasn't happened. For many years, China has been developing its relationship with Taiwan. There are different assessments. China has its own assessment. The US has a different assessment. Taiwan may have its different assessment of the situation. But fortunately, it hasn't come to a military clash.

Keir Simmons: I'm being told to wrap up. But if I could just ask you a couple more questions.

Vladimir Putin: Sure, please. Go ahead.

Keir Simmons: Our own Andrea Mitchell saw just this month the last border crossing into Syria where supplies literally keep people alive. You're threatening to close that crossing in July at the Security Council. Why would you do that, knowing that it will cause the death of refugees?

Vladimir Putin: Look, unfortunately, there are a great deal of tragedies there already. And all our actions in their totality need to be geared at stabilising the situation and bringing it into a normal course. And with support of Russia, Syria has been able, the Syrian authorities have been able to bring back under their control over 90% of the Syrian territory.

What needs to be set up now is just humanitarian assistance to people, irrespective of any kind of political context. But our partners in the West, in the West in general, both the US and Europeans have been saying that they're not going to give help to Assad. What does Assad have to do with it? Help out people who need that assistance. Just the most basic things. They won't even lift restrictions on supplies of medications and medical equipment even in the context of the coronavirus infection. But that is just inhumane. And this kind of cruel attitude to people cannot be explained in any way.

As far as the border crossings, there is the Idlib area where combatants are still robbing people, killing people, raping people. There is nothing's happening. There is the Al-Tanf Zone, which by the way is controlled by US military.

Recently there we caught a group of gangsters, bandits who came, who had come from there. And they directly said that they had specific goals as far as Russian military facilities. As far as border crossings, our position is such that assistance needs to be given just as it should be done in the entire world, as it is provided for in the provisions of international humanitarian law. Assistance should be given through the central government. It shouldn't be discriminated against. And if there are grounds to believe that the central government of Syria will plunder something, well, set up observers on the part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent oversee everything.

I don't think that anybody in the Syrian government is interested in stealing some part of this humanitarian assistance. It just needs to be done through the central government. And in this sense, we support President Assad because a different mode of behavior

would be undermining the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic. And that's all.

As far as the Idlib zone, the Turkish troops there effectively control the border between Turkey and Syria, and convoys cross the border without any restrictions on their numbers in both directions.

Keir Simmons: Mr President, you extended the Constitution so that you could be President of Russia until 2036. Do you worry that the longer you are in power and without any sign of someone to replace you, the more instability there may be when you finally do choose to leave office?

Vladimir Putin: What will collapse overnight? If we look at the situation in which Russia was in the year 2000, where it was balancing on the brink of preserving its territorial integrity and sovereignty, the number of individuals below the poverty line was colossal. It was catastrophic.

The GDP level had dropped below anything that's acceptable. Our FX and gold reserves were \$12 billion, whereas our foreign debt was \$120 billion, if we count it in dollars.

Now, there are many other problems. The situation is completely different. Of course, somebody will come and replace me at some point. Is all of this going to collapse? We've been fighting international terrorism. We have nipped it in the bud. Is it supposed to come back to life? I don't think so. Another matter is that on the political scene, different people can emerge with different points of view. Great. Very good.

You know, I have linked my entire life, my entire fate to the fate of my country to such an extent that there isn't a more meaningful

goal in my life than the strengthening of Russia. If anybody else, and if I see that person, even if that person is critical of some areas of what I have been doing, if I can see that this is an individual who has constructive views, that he or she is committed to this country and is prepared to sacrifice his entire life to this country, nor just some years, no matter his personal attitude to me, I will make sure, I will do everything to make sure that such people will get support.

It is a natural biological process. At some point, someday, we will all be replaced. You will be replaced at where you are. I will be replaced at where I am. But I am confident that the fundamental pillar of the Russian economy and statehood and its political system will be such that Russia will be firmly standing on its feet and look into the future confidently.

Keir Simmons: And would you look from that person for some kind of protection the same way that you offered to Boris Yeltsin when you took over?

Vladimir Putin: I am not even thinking about that. These are third-tier issues. The most important thing, the single most important thing is the fate of the country and the fate of its people.

Keir Simmons: Very good. Thank you very much for your time, Mr President. We've gone over, and I really appreciate it. It was a really interesting conversation, so thank you.