

Vladimir Putin's news conference following BRICS Summit

September 5, 2017 10:00Xiamen

Vladimir Putin answered Russian journalists' questions following his visit to China to take part in the BRICS Summit.

Vladimir Putin summed up the results of the BRICS Summit and his talks with foreign leaders on the Summit's sidelines, and shared his perspective on pressing international issues.

* * *

Transcript of the news conference for Russian journalists

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Let us start with your questions, please.

Question: The BRICS Summit has just closed. As we all know, BRICS countries account for 31 percent of the global GDP.

Could you share your perspective on the future of this association in the follow-up to the discussions at the Summit? What are its main outcomes and what are Russia's priorities regarding BRICS?

Vladimir Putin: Let me remind you that BRICS emerged at Russia's initiative back in 2005 when we first brought to the same table representatives of the People's Republic of China, India and Russia. This is how three countries started working together, and later expanded to five countries.

There is no doubt that BRICS has great prospects. At its core is the convergence of interests in a number of areas, not some kind of ideological principles.

This primarily has to do with economic structure and our common commitment to make the global economy more fair and noble, so to speak.

Overall, we succeeded in coordinating our positions on a number of major, fundamental issues over the past years.

You may have noticed that BRICS countries regularly meet not only at specialised summits like the one here in the People's Republic of China, but also on the sidelines of various international events before the start of those events. For example, BRICS leaders regularly meet ahead of G20 meetings. Please note that the new Development Bank has been established and is already functioning. You must have also noted (I mentioned this at the expanded meeting and at the Business Council meeting) that Russia is already receiving funding for three projects.

One has to do with water purification systems in the Volga basin, another with the development of Russia's judicial system, primarily new buildings, facilities and the informatisation of the judicial system of Russia. There are other interesting projects, not as large perhaps, but still important for our country. These are just the first steps. The pool of reserve currencies is beginning to work. We promote contacts between business leaders. The Business Council grows more active, and Russian initiatives are gaining support among others. You may have heard about women's entrepreneurship as well. In my opinion, this is an important thing – the right thing. Almost all countries make efforts to support women's entrepreneurship.

There are other important, interesting and promising undertakings. I am confident that this association will work effectively in the future.

The Chinese Presidency has managed to preserve all that has been built up so far, including our joint work in Russia, in Ufa, and create new impulses.

This was a successful summit, including the involvement of the 'outreach' countries' leaders – those states that represent emerging markets from various regions of the world.

I would like to congratulate our Chinese friends on the absolute success of this major international event.

Question: Mr President, you have had an extensive bilateral agenda on the sidelines of the summit. You met with the President of Egypt, with many other leaders.

Can you please tell us more about the meetings? For example, have you discussed the restoration of air transportation with the President of Egypt? Have you accepted his invitation to visit Egypt and participate in the signing of the nuclear power plant contract?

Also, you have had two telephone conversations, with the Prime Minister of Japan and the President of South Korea. Can you please give us more details?

Vladimir Putin: If I talk in detail about all these meetings and telephone conversations, we will not have enough time. You have seen these bilateral meetings.

This visit began with a bilateral meeting with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China – basically, that was part of a separate working visit.

As for the BRICS countries, I had meetings with the Prime Minister of India and the President of South Africa. Those primarily dealt with bilateral relations. With each of these countries, we have an extensive agenda, including very diverse economic ties.

Regarding the countries invited to this year's BRICS summit within the outreach format, a meeting was held with Thailand's Prime Minister. This is a fast-growing economy and we are expanding our economic interaction with this country.

As you may know, we have doubled the purchase of natural rubber and increased the purchase of vegetables and fruit by 30–40 percent. We are interested in supplying our products, including high technology ones, to Thailand's markets. That is what we discussed.

As for Mexico, we have our interest there too, direct interests of our companies. Lukoil, for instance, is going to implement four projects in the Gulf of Mexico, three of them with French partners, and one on its own.

We are also doing well on the Mexican market selling the Superjet-100 aircraft. Speaking of Egypt, you know about our far-reaching historical ties and relations. The relations between Russia and Egypt are on the rise. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi extended an invitation to visit his country, and I will be happy to do so at the right time.

Speaking of air transportation services, we would like to resume flights to Egypt in full. But we agreed that the work of our relevant special services and transport agencies responsible for flight safety should continue, and we must be absolutely sure that the safety of our citizens is guaranteed.

We see that our Egyptian friends are doing their best to ensure this safety. Relevant agencies are interacting with each other and working out some issues. I expect us to solve this task shortly.

Regarding telephone conversations, both of them – with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the President of the Republic of Korea – were focused on North Korea's nuclear tests.

We have agreed to continue discussing this matter when we meet in person. Tomorrow, both the South Korean President and the Japanese Prime Minister will arrive in Vladivostok for the Eastern Economic Forum, and we will talk about this more.

Yes, please

Question: One of the top news stories these days is the US decision to shut down several Russian diplomatic facilities, which in essence amounts to another instance of seizing diplomatic property.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has used the words "seizure" and "searches". You have not said anything on this matter so far. Will you comment on it now? Will Russia respond to all this? If so, what response would it be?

Vladimir Putin: The thing is that we have agreed with our partners that Russia and the United States should have parity in terms of personnel or diplomats in their missions in each other's country. I believe there were 1,300 American diplomats working in Russia and 455 Russian diplomats in the United States. We have balanced the figure.

I would like you to take note of the fact that this figure, 455 Russian diplomats working in the United States, also includes (provisionally) the 155 Russians working at the United Nations. Strictly speaking, they are not diplomats accredited at the US Department of State but diplomats working at an international organisation.

When the United States wanted the UN to be headquartered in New York, it pledged to properly ensure its operation. So strictly speaking, the number of American diplomats in Moscow should be not 455 but 155 fewer, if we are talking about parity.

So, we reserve the right to take a new decision on the number of American diplomats in Moscow. We will not do this immediately but will see how things develop.

The Americans had the right to reduce the number of our diplomatic offices. It is another matter altogether that they have done this in way that was absolutely uncivil. This does not do reflect well on our American partners.

It is difficult to talk to people who confuse Austria and Australia. But there is nothing we can do about this; this is the level of political culture among part of the American establishment.

As for the American people, America is truly a great nation if the Americans can put up with so many politically uncivilised people.

Question: Mr President, you have already mentioned that you touched upon the issue of the DPRK when you spoke to the Prime Minister of Japan and the President of South Korea...

Vladimir Putin: Excuse me, but, with regard to the buildings and structures, this is unprecedented. As a graduate of the St Petersburg University law department, I, or any other lawyer for that matter, can tell you that property rights consist of three elements: the right to own, use, and dispose of such property.

The United States stripped Russia of the right to use our property, which is a clear violation of Russia's property rights. So, to begin with, I will ask our Foreign Ministry to file a lawsuit. We will see how effectively the much-lauded American judicial system works.

Question: Returning to the DPRK, what is your position? It looks like neither talks (the diplomatic process), nor threats, nor sanctions work. How can the DPRK situation be resolved?

Vladimir Putin: This is the simplest question today.

I discussed this with my colleagues in private, but I do not think there is any need to conceal anything here. I will repeat what I said in private and official conversations, and, in fact, what everyone should be aware of and anyone with common sense should understand.

Everyone remembers well what happened to Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Hussein abandoned the production of weapons of mass destruction. Nonetheless, under the pretext of searching for these weapons, Saddam Hussein himself and his family were killed during the well-known military operation.

Even children died back then. His grandson, I believe, was shot to death.

The country was destroyed, and Saddam Hussein was hanged. Listen, everyone is aware of it and everyone remembers it. North Koreans are also aware of it and remember it. Do you think that following the adoption of some sanctions, North Korea will abandon its course on creating weapons of mass destruction? Russia condemns these exercises on the part of North Korea. We believe they are provocative in nature. However, we cannot forget about what I just said about Iraq, and what happened later in Libya. Certainly, the North Koreans will not forget it.

Sanctions of any kind are useless and ineffective in this case. As I said to one of my colleagues yesterday, they will eat grass, but they will not abandon this programme unless they feel safe.

What can ensure security? The restoration of international law. We need to advance towards dialogue between all parties concerned. It is important for all participants in this process, including North Korea, not to have any thoughts about the threat of being destroyed; on the contrary, all sides to the conflict should cooperate.

In this environment, in this situation, whipping up military hysteria is absolutely pointless; it is a dead end. Besides, North Korea has not only medium-range

missiles and nuclear weapons, we know they have that, but they also have long-range artillery and multiple rocket launchers with a range of up to 60 kilometres. It is pointless to use missile defence systems against these weapons. There are no weapons in the world that can counteract long-range artillery or multiple rocket launchers. And they can be located in such a way that they are virtually impossible to find.

In this context, military hysteria will do no good, but may lead to a global, planet-wide disaster and enormous casualties.

Diplomacy is the only way to solve the North Korean nuclear problem.

Question: My question is also related to North Korea. The US has declared that it wants to toughen sanctions and urged Russia to join them. How can such statements be evaluated given the renowned sanctions law where Russia is put on the same list as North Korea and Iran?

Vladimir Putin: True, it does not make sense to put us on the list alongside North Korea and then ask us to help with sanctions against it. But it is being done by people who confuse Austria and Australia and then ask their President to persuade Russia to toughen sanctions.

But that is not the point, we are not going to pout, hold a grudge or laugh at anyone. Our position on this issue, as well as on all other issues, is based on principles.

The point is not that we have been put on the same list with North Korea, which is absolutely absurd. I already said why I think (and our Foreign Ministry spoke about that too) that sanctions have reached their limit and are completely ineffective.

There is also the humanitarian side to this issue. No matter which option we choose to influence North Korea, its leaders will not change their policy, whereas the suffering of millions could increase many times over.

Regarding Russia, there is nothing to say here. Absolutely nothing, because our trade is almost zero. I asked the Energy Minister, who told me that we only send them 40,000 tonnes of oil and petrochemicals per quarter.

As a reminder, Russia exports over 400 million tonnes of oil and petrochemicals to the global market, so 40,000 tonnes a quarter is as good as nothing.

Moreover, none of our large vertically integrated companies exports anything to North Korea. This is the first thing I wanted to say.

The second issue concerns the North Korean workforce. Indeed, we have some 30,000 North Korean workers in Russia. Is this a lot? No, this is perishably few. Should we leave these people without a means of subsistence? Besides, the Russian Far East needs more hands. Therefore, there is nothing to talk about. As the Foreign Ministry has said, the usefulness of sanctions has been exhausted.

Of course, we are willing to discuss details, but we need to consider them first. We will work on this. We are cooperating with all those involved in this process. Actually, Russia co-authored a relevant resolution, at least it became a co-author during the debates on this resolution, which has been adopted and came into force. We are complying with this resolution in full.

Question: I have a question about eastern Ukraine. Kiev has recently started promoting the idea of deploying UN peacekeepers there. Poroshenko speaks about this often, and there is even a plan according to which the idea should be

taken to the UN General Assembly, which opens soon, if Russia blocks it at the Security Council. What do you think about this idea? Is it practicable, would it help?

Vladimir Putin: This is impossible to do via the General Assembly, because UN peacekeepers cannot function other than pursuant to Security Council resolutions. But that is not the point.

You are saying that someone wants to push something through. In fact, I do not see anything wrong with that. I have already said many times that I support the idea of arming the OSCE mission, but the OSCE itself refuses to arm its field personnel, since it has neither the relevant people nor the experience of such work.

In this context, I believe that the presence of UN peacekeepers, not even peacekeepers, but those who provide security for the OSCE mission, is quite appropriate and I do not see anything wrong with that; on the contrary, I believe that this would help resolve the situation in southeastern Ukraine. Of course, we can talk only about ensuring the security of the OSCE staff. This is my first point. The second point is that, in this regard, these forces should be located on the demarcation line only and on no other territories.

Thirdly, this issue should be resolved only after disengaging the parties and removing the heavy equipment. This cannot be resolved without direct contact with representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic.

I believe that if all this is done, it would definitely benefit resolving the situation in southeastern Ukraine. We will consider this as instructions to the Foreign Ministry to submit a relevant resolution to the Security Council.

Question: Continuing the theme of Ukraine. Recently, more reports have been coming from Washington regarding discussions to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine. How serious do you think this is? If, indeed, such a decision is made, what consequences might it have?

Vladimir Putin: It is the sovereign decision of the United States whom to sell arms to or whom to supply them to free of charge. They decide what countries will be recipients of such aid. We are unable to influence this process in any way. However, there are general international rules and approaches: the supply of weapons to a conflict zone is not conducive to peace, but only aggravates the situation.

If this happens in this situation, the action, or the decision, will not change the situation fundamentally. It will not affect the situation in any way for that matter. But the number of victims could, of course, increase. I want to underscore this to make it clear for everyone: nothing will change. The number of victims may increase, which is unfortunate.

There is one more thing that those who have such ideas should pay attention to: the self-proclaimed republics have enough weapons, including those seized from the opposing side, nationalist battalions, and so on.

If American weapons start coming to the conflict zone, it is difficult to say how the proclaimed republics would react to it. They may dispatch their weapons to other conflict zones that are sensitive to those who create problems for them.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr President. The Syrian army, with the support of the Russian Air Force, has nearly succeeded in pushing ISIS militants out

of the city of Deir ez-Zor. Does the new stage on the Syrian map mean now that the ISIS threat in that country has passed and will not return and that the most difficult times for Syrians are over? And what should the Syrians do in the near future?

Vladimir Putin: As for terrorism in general, it is a complex global problem. It concerns not only Syria, but also many other countries in the region, and not only that region. The main problem in this regard is that the radical groups are reenergised constantly due to poverty and a low level of education, which are a breeding ground for radicalism and terrorism.

That is why we meet at events such as BRICS and G20 summits to address these global challenges by eliminating the root causes of the threat of growing terrorism and radicalism.

As for Syria and military operations, yes, the situation there has turned around for government troops. You know that the territory controlled by the government troops has increased several-fold in the past year and a half or two, and this process is gaining momentum.

Can we say that we have done away with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other terrorist groups forever? It is probably too early to say so, but it is obvious that the situation is changing drastically in Syria.

I hope that our partners will bring the operation in Iraq to an end. Deir ez-Zor is, in fact, a military rather than a political stronghold of the radical opposition – radical in the worst sense of the word, ISIS opposition.

Once the operation in Deir ez-Zor is completed, it will mean that the terrorists have been dealt a very serious defeat, and the government forces and Assad's government have gained undeniable advantages.

It will be necessary to take the next step in strengthening the ceasefire regime, strengthening the de-escalation zones and establishing a political process.

Alongside the political process, it will be necessary to restore the economy and the social sphere. That is an enormous job, and without the help of the international community, it will be difficult for the Syrian authorities to tackle these challenges.

By the way, we also spoke about this during the talks at this summit, on the sidelines and at bilateral meetings. Practically all my colleagues agree with this and are ready to contribute to improving the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Question: Over to Russia, if you please. You have not yet given an assessment of the situation concerning film director Serebrennikov...

Vladimir Putin: We have many directors; I cannot do it for each one.

Question: He is now under house arrest.

Public opinion has split: some say that everyone is equal in the eyes of the investigation; others, on the contrary, see this as pressure on culture and mention Mikhalkov, another director that receives government funding but faces no charges. In this regard, it would be interesting to know your opinion of the situation.

Vladimir Putin: Look, in culture, just like in other areas, the expenditure of public funds is constantly monitored by law enforcement agencies. As far as I remember, maybe things have already changed, the deputy director of the Hermitage museum is under investigation, and so is the Deputy Minister

of Culture. So what, now everyone needs to be released because they work in culture? This would seem strange.

Serebrennikov received state funding. This suggests he did not face any censorship, or pressure, anything, I mean, the government would have simply not given him money, and that would be that, if they wanted to limit his creativity. What does creative activity have to do with this anyway?

Yes, I know, attitudes differ to various people's work; Serebrennikov's work is no exception. This is simply a matter of taste: some like it, others do not. But if the government finances something, it means the attitude is at least neutral, and the funding helps the artist create, work, that is all.

The only thing the investigation wants to know is that budget funds are disposed of legitimately. This is a lot of money. If you look at the funding, it is some 300 million from the federal government, and around 700 million from the Moscow government over a period of two or three years, a total close to one billion. This is a lot of money.

And if we look at our other directors, our cultural workers, like Mikhalkov whom they mention, if the investigative bodies, the supervising bodies find that the recipient of funds is violating the existing legislation, they will face the same kind of investigation and prosecution.

As for Mikhalkov, there have not been any complaints yet, despite the fact that the monitoring agencies are working to track down all the funds received from the treasury by all cultural projects. There are regular inspections. If they spot anything to incriminate Mikhalkov, he will be inspected. So far, this is simply not the case though.

As for Serebrennikov, the authorities have no problems with him except one: compliance with the law in the use of government money. That is all. Even though he is under house arrest, this does not yet mean he is guilty.

Whether he is guilty or not only the court can decide. I hope that the investigative bodies will work quickly and finish their work as soon as possible. What will happen next – we will see.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr President. In May of this year, also in China, I asked you if the time was right to announce if you would run for President next year. You said "No" then. Four months have passed. Is the time right now to say "Yes"?

Vladimir Putin: Look, I have said this many times and I can say it again – what I will say now is very important.

As soon as an election campaign begins in Russia, everyone stops working. I have first-hand experience with this. Everyone starts thinking about what would happen after the elections, which jobs would go to whom, and so on.

People must do their job now, without relaxing attention to the job at hand even for a minute. Therefore, I am sure that those who plan to take part in the next presidential election in Russia will announce their decision within the time stipulated by the law.

Question: Since we are in China, I would like to ask about China's mega project, the new Silk Road, at least its railway component, because it has a motorway and marine components as well.

All countries, in Europe and even across the ocean, would like to join this project. It is unclear how the route will be laid, where the railway line will leave China,

and whether it will run across Russia, across Azerbaijan and Turkey, or across Belarus. Most importantly, it looks as if our Chinese partners are not eager to build the line across Russia.

Vladimir Putin: No, you are wrong. Both Russian and Chinese agencies and companies concerned, as well as partners from other countries, are analysing this matter.

You have said that the project also includes the motorway and marine components, which is true. Look, the road across Kazakhstan is almost finished. We need to accelerate our part of the work. Also, a road is being built from China.

As for railway routes, there are several options for China, and it can choose the route via Kazakhstan and then go southeast towards Iran, or possibly continue it across Russia.

As you know, China plans to contribute to the construction of a fast train line from Moscow to Kazan. We discussed the possibility of building a high-speed passenger and freight railway line across Russia during the Chinese President's previous visit to Russia.

If we implement this project, trains will be able to move along this route at some 200 kilometres per hour. Freight trains will be a bit slower, but cargos will be delivered from Asia, or more precisely China, to, say, Germany within three of four days.

These projects are very interesting and promising, but we need to work on them some more. There is nothing in this that should be kept secret from the general public, but we do need additional expert analysis and feasibility studies.

As you may know, we are actively discussing the possibility of cooperation on the Northern Sea Route. This is fully in keeping with our common programmes; there are no contradictions whatsoever. We are also considering and implementing several other routes, for example, the North-South route. The Prime Minister of India and I have announced that the first container loads from Mumbai have reached St Petersburg via Iran and Azerbaijan, and returned. We test all options in practice. We are working on them on a daily basis. We will see which is more effective during the preliminary trial runs and will choose the best options.

Question: I would like to follow-up on the question on relations with the US, by way of clarification, whether you have grown disappointed with Donald Trump since his election as US President, and since you talked with him. The relations have been spiralling, as our side is saying.

Also, do you take into account, as the Foreign Ministry spokesperson has recently pointed out, that not all US heads of state stay the full term they were elected to be in office for? In your analysis have you considered the possibility of Trump being impeached, and what is your approach to relations with the US? Can I ask one question that has to do with domestic affairs as well but is also related to foreign policy? The situation concerning the conflict in Myanmar has given rise to a debate between the federal government and Ramzan Kadyrov who said that if he is not satisfied with Russia's position on Myanmar, he would be against Russia.

In your opinion, does a senior official have the right to express a position at odds with the federal government on foreign policy matters, or should this senior official leave?

Vladimir Putin: I will start with the last question.

Regarding Myanmar, I think that after our bilateral meeting with the President of Egypt the press service was supposed to issue a statement on Russia's shared position with Egypt on the ongoing developments there. We oppose any kind of violence and call on the government of that country to take the situation under its control.

As for the opinion expressed by citizens of Russia on Russian foreign policy, any person has the right to his or her personal opinion regardless of the position he or she holds.

This applies to the heads of regions as well. Let me assure you that this should not be viewed as a rebellion of any kind by the Chechen leadership. Everything is fine, no need to worry.

Now, about the President of the United States. I think that it would be inappropriate for us to discuss how the situation in the US could play out on the domestic front. This is none of our business, and something the United States has to deal with on its own.

As for whether I am disappointed or not, your question is very naïve. After all, he is not my bride, and I am not his bride or fiancé. We hold public offices, and each country has its own interests. Trump is guided in his activities by his country's national interests, and I am guided by my country's interests.

I do hope that we will be able, as the current President of the United States said, to find compromises in resolving bilateral and international issues so that they can be settled in the interests of the American and Russian people, and in the interests of many other countries, taking into account the special responsibility for international security that lies on our two countries.

Question: Excuse me, I have yet another question about the presidential election. It is not about your candidacy but about other potential candidates. It is rumoured that there might be a female candidate.

Vladimir Putin: Never heard about this.

Question: Some say it could be Ksenia Sobchak.

Vladimir Putin: Good luck to her.

Question: It is a fact that her father has done a great deal for you and that you are grateful to him for what he did. What would you say if Ksenia ran for president? Or do you think that there are better female candidates, such as [Elvira] Nabiullina or [Tatyana] Golikova?

Vladimir Putin: It is not for me to decide who would be a better President for the Russian people. The choice is ultimately made through elections. But the law allows anyone to stand for office if done in accordance with and within the framework of the law. Ksenia Sobchak is no exception to this rule.

I have always respected her father, and I still respect him. I believe that he was an outstanding figure in modern Russian history. This is no exaggeration. I am being completely honest about this. He was also a perfectly decent person who played a big role in my life.

But such personal considerations carry no weight when it comes to presidential elections. Everything will depend on Ksenia's platform, if she decides to run,

and on how she will organise her election campaign. Her success or defeat will depend on this.

As for her plans to run for president, I have never heard about them. I am sure that there can be, and definitely will be, other candidates.

Question: There is a large and high profile case underway in Russia, Rosneft versus Sistema. Rosneft claims that Sistema has as good as stolen assets and money by withdrawing them from Bashneft. Do you support this view?

Has either company, the defendant or the plaintiff, turned to you for a consultation on this matter? Do you think their dispute can be settled out of court? Those who represent Sistema say that this conflict is worsening the investment climate in Russia. We would like to hear your opinion.

Vladimir Putin: I have held discussions on this issue both with Rosneft and with Sistema CEOs – Sechin and Yevtushenkov. I heard what they had to say on this matter.

I think it would be inappropriate for me to indicate my position on this matter publicly, but I do hope that it will be settled out of court. I believe that this would benefit both companies and the Russian economy as a whole.

I cannot be perfectly sure what turn this case will take because I have never issued any direct instructions and believe that it would be counterproductive to do so.

All the best and thank you.