

Video: What Outcome of the Trump-Putin Summit? Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Larry King's "Politicking" Show

Transcript of the interview

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Question: A historic Summit looms between United States President Donald Trump and Russia's leader Vladimir Putin at a time of increased tensions between their two nations. Mr Trump has signalled that Syria, sanctions, military exercises and elections meddling may be on the agenda. But what does Moscow want from this high stakes face-to-face? We find out now, as I talk with Russia's long-time Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who joins me from Moscow. Mr Foreign Minister, thank you very much for being with us.

S.Lavrov: Thank you for the invitation, Larry.

Question: Ok let's get right into it. In the wrap-up of the NATO Summit, which has just ended, President D.Trump and other members agreed to a joint statement, which among other things condemned what they called your country's "illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea" and also reaffirmed support for Ukraine's aspirations to become a member of NATO. What is your reaction to this, Mr Foreign Minister?

S.Lavrov: There is nothing new in these statements. We have been hearing them for quite a number of years, so we take it as inertia by the Cold War thinking. Nothing more than that.

Question: I thought the Cold War was over.

S.Lavrov: The inertia of the Cold War is unfortunately still with NATO. It is high time for NATO to leave it behind.

Question: So, when they say that "annexation of Crimea was illegal and illegitimate", you say that it is not true?

S.Lavrov: No, it is not true. The current status of Crimea was determined by the people, who live there, in a referendum, which was free and fair and which was attended by many of international observers. Not official delegations from any country or from any international organization, but international observers and human rights activists. This was certainly done in a much more transparent and legitimate way than the unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independents without any referendum. By the way, it is interesting speaking of the rules-based order, as our Western friends like to say. They try to invent rules for each individual case, and then they say that this is *sui generis*, this is unique, and for any other issue, which they might not like, there would be other rules. I was told by a friend that when the United Nations General Assembly was supposed to discuss the situation with the Malvinas or the

Falkland Islands, our British colleagues sent instructions to their ambassadors all over the world, saying “you must convince the country of your posting that they should recognize that the status of the Falkland Islands was determined by a free and fair referendum of the people, who live there, in full agreement with the UN Charter and the principle of self-determination of peoples. The fact that the Argentinian Government introduced sanctions because of that referendum is illegitimate and should be condemned”. I hope you understand what kind of parallel I am trying to draw.

Question: I get it. At his news conference this Thursday, President D.Trump said that the NATO allies have stepped up like never before on defence spending. He also called the Alliance “a fine-tuned machine”. Mr Foreign Minister, what are your thoughts about NATO?

S.Lavrov: Well, NATO is a reality. It is an atavism of the Cold War times, but it is a reality and we take it as a reality. We do not believe that what NATO is doing by trying to expand further and further closer to Russian borders, swallowing countries, which, frankly, do not add to the security of the Alliance, we don’t believe this is the way to resolve the problems of today. Today, we have common threats, common enemies: terrorism, climate change, organized crime, drug trafficking. None of this is being effectively addressed by NATO expansion. NATO should certainly be taken as a reality, as I have said, but NATO should understand that it cannot dictate to each and every other country how to handle the international security matters. Dialogue is required. We have been proposing many things to NATO, which we can do together: counter-terrorism, the discussions of military doctrines, the discussion of transparency measures in military build-up. All this was frozen after the referendum in Crimea. NATO took exactly the same approach, as it took in August 2008. Then, President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia launched a war against his own people in South Ossetia. And then we demanded a convening of NATO-Russia Council, but Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State at that time, said “no way, we cannot discuss anything with an aggressor”. Then, she corrected herself and all NATO-members agreed that NATO-Russia Council must be the all-weather forum and that especially at the time of crisis, it should function on the basis of equality and taking into account the interests of each other.

After the Crimean referendum, which was free and fair, as I have said, and as many international observers assert, the mistake was repeated once again. As of the defence expenditure, even without any further rise, the current statistics is that NATO together with the US spends about 20 times more than Russia spends on its defence. Without the United States, the Europeans spend about 4 times more than Russia spends on its defence budget. I assume that it might be partially related to the productivity of labour, to the difference in productivity of labour, but this cannot be the only explanation.

Question: How did you react when President D.Trump said that “Germany is totally controlled by Russia”?

S.Lavrov: Well, my spokesman, Maria Zakharova, addressed this issue yesterday, when she gave facts that we sell gas to Germany, which is business, and the US has dozens of thousands of military men and women on the German soil and a few dozens of military bases. Any international observer, having these statistics in front of him or her, should make his or her own conclusions. I can only quote what President D.Trump said when he was asked whether President V.Putin is his enemy or his friend. He said that “he is a competitor, a strong competitor. And I believe that we can get along with him, and I hope that one day

we might become friends". But speaking of competition, I have always believed in free competition, because the free market is about fair competition. And when speaking of gas and Germany, US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry yesterday said that the "North Stream 2 pipeline must be stopped and those European countries, whose companies would be participating in this project, would be sanctioned by the United States, because the US is for competition and for the sake of competition there must be new terminals to receive American liquefied natural gas." Some competition I would say. Of course, if "Russian authoritarian gas" is supposed to be worse than the "democratic American gas" than I am awfully sorry, but this is not economy, this is not competition, this is pure ideology and unfair competition.

Question: Mr Foreign Minister, are you going to accompany Mr Putin to Helsinki?

S.Lavrov: Yes, I will be there as well as US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. We had a couple of conversations with M.Pompeo, we discussed what kind of arrangements we should foresee for the meeting in Helsinki. Parallel to the meeting between the two Presidents, which they want to start one-on-one, we would be meeting with Mike, with the ambassadors, to Russia and to the US, respectively. We will discuss any issue, which each of us would like to raise. There will be no fixed agenda, but there are obvious items, which will certainly pop-up.

Question: The two Presidents will meet alone. By the way, I have interviewed Mr Putin quite a few times. When I had been with him, he did not speak English. Are there going to be interpreters at that private meeting between the two Presidents?

S.Lavrov: Yes, there will be interpreters. President Putin actually understands English, but for the sake of better expressing his views, he prefers to use the interpreters good offices.

Question: Will there be no other aides in the room? You will not be in the room?

S.Lavrov: Well, as things stand now. That is what the American side proposed and we are polite people, so we have agreed.

Question: Alright, what are you looking forward to from the Summit? What from the Russian standpoint will be a successful Summit?

S.Lavrov: The beginning of the normal communications. Most channels of communications established during last 7-10 years have been frozen, on very important issues: counter-terrorism, energy, drug trafficking, cybersecurity, Afghanistan, other regional conflicts. What we have now is sporadic meetings between the diplomats and the military, mostly on Syria. We also have a channel on Ukraine, where the aide of President V.Putin and the special envoy of the United States met several times, but with no visible progress, because our American colleagues, every time they meet with their Russian counterparts, try to deviate radically from the Minsk Agreements, which underline the consensus on the Ukrainian Crisis. But we keep trying and I hope that we would certainly discuss this issue in Helsinki. Back to your question, regarding the ideal outcome. The ideal outcome would be to agree, to engage all the channels on all the issues, which are divisive, on the one hand, trying to see whether we can get closer on those exact topics, and also on those issues, where we can usefully cooperate now for the sake of interests of the two countries and for the sake of interests of the international community, like the strategic stability, for example.

Question: Are you optimistic about the Summit?

S.Lavrov: I am not paid to be optimistic or pessimistic. I am paid to be realistic, and we try to stick to the reality. We will see what the reality looks like.

Question: We have had great relations, when Mr. Gorbachev was in. Mr Gorbachev and Mr Bush Sr. got along very well. Mr Clinton got along very well. When do these countries start to part? I know Mr Trump said that we should be friends. It seemed that things were going well and then not well. How would you describe American-Russian relations right now?

S.Lavrov: It is very unfortunate that we have our relations in this state. I believe, as President Vladimir Putin many times described it to the audiences he addressed, including to the American audience, that it all started when the US began to understand that Russia wants to have its own view of how to build its own country, how to protect its own security and how to organize its own development. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the American and Western influence in general on what was going on in Russia was very big. The US probably believed that as from that time the Russian leadership would follow the Western line on everything. You remember when Francis Fukuyama called it “the end of history”, meaning that as of that moment, as of the moment of disappearance of the Soviet Union, there would be only one civilization, Western civilisation with its values, rules and everything else, which would determine how the world affairs are run. Russia believed that given its millennium history, given its traditions, given its national character, given its values, including the Orthodox values, spiritual values, that Russia also has a right to have a say in world affairs. On the equal basis, on the basis of the universal respect for the international law, but having its own voice.

We wanted this voice to be received as a voice of an equal partner, which was originally promised, when NATO-Russia Council was created, when OSCE convened the Summit, where all leaders, heads of state and governments proclaimed their determination to respect indivisible security, the principle, which provides for any country not to strengthen its own security at the expense of weakening the security of others. Then, at some point, when the US unilaterally dropped from the Missile Defence Treaty, the revisionism began, which continues until now. The US has dropped from so many international agreements, which is really an attempt to revise the international order. When the US dropped from the Missile Defence Treaty, it became very clear that this violated the principle that no one should increase his security at the expense of security of others. We proposed to make this principle of indivisible and equal security not just a political commitment, but a legally binding principle. We proposed in 2007-2008 to conclude a treaty by all members of OSCE, a treaty on European security, which would codify as a legally binding principle the commitment not to increase your own security at the expense of the security of others. The answer by the NATO members was “no way. The only place, where a country can get legal guarantees for its security, is NATO”. I hope you do not need me to explain in details that this was a very unfortunate decision of NATO. It indicated that what NATO actually wanted was to pull inside the alliance more and more members, getting closer and closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, thus violating another commitment that NATO members accepted in the context of the OSCE summits – not to keep and not to move the dividing lines to the East. On the contrary, they have committed together with us to eliminate those dividing lines. Those are just few examples of how things have deteriorated during that period.

All this in combination brought us to understanding that, for example, the Missile Defence

Treaty was no longer valid, because the US dropped from it. In 2002 George Bush Jr. told President Vladimir Putin, when Mr Putin said that in his view this was a mistake to drop from this treaty, that they needed to build the missile defence system, it was not against us. It was against other countries, he mentioned Iran and North Korea. They advised us to do whatever we want in response to the US leaving the Treaty, because they would take it as not being aimed against Russia as well. That is when we started to develop these new weapons, which could overcome the missile defence, because we do not want to find ourselves in a situation, where we would be armless in front of the US, which would have strategic weapons, but would also have a strategic missile defence shield. It would be a very tempting combination. We are just doing something, which we need in this very particular situation, to defend our own security. Nothing more. We are not going to attack anyone, but we would be protected very well to counter any attack against us.

Question: What does your country think of the United States and its sort of agreement with North Korea? Do you think that it is good for the world, bad from the Russian viewpoint?

S.Lavrov: I think that it is good for the world. We strongly support the efforts undertaken by President Donald Trump and also by the President of South Korea to build up the atmosphere, which would be conducive to resolving the nuclear issue of the Korean peninsula and to bringing all of us to denuclearisation. From the very beginning, we suggested together with China that the first step must be confidence building. The second step should be some confidence building measures, like freezing the launches and tests, like freezing the military games. I believe that what is going on is going in the right direction. I know that the outcome of the meeting in Singapore between President Donald Trump and the leader of North Korea Kim Jong-un is being criticised by many, as just being empty words on paper without any “beef” in it. Later, US Secretary of State Mr Michael Pompeo visited Pyeongyang and he was also criticised for not delivering any specific hard commitments to denuclearisation, but I think that serious analysts understand that this thing cannot be done overnight. It has been a very deep crisis with very serious consequences, which might affect many countries, if things went wrong. We have to build confidence gradually and that is what, I believe President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mr Michael Pompeo are helping to do. We support these efforts and we try to contribute in our contacts with the North Koreans and other players in that region.

Question: It is good to hear. The unanimous conclusion by the entire American Intelligence community is that your government influenced the American elections in 2016 and that President Donald Trump will tell President Vladimir Putin to not do it again. How do you react to all of this, to Your country’s involvement in American elections?

S.Lavrov: I have seen those reports. With all due respect, Larry, I cannot agree that it was the report by “the entire American Intelligence community”. Those who are interested can take a look at the piece written by former American ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, who described the report produced regarding the alleged Russian interference and showed the inefficiencies, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in filing this report without, for example, expressing the view, which the military intelligence had. It is a report signed only by three agencies out of a dozens of intelligence agencies that the US has and which would normally participate in anything called the “opinion of the entire Intelligence community of the United States”. Then I saw the report of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which alleged that Russia has been interfering with elections, that there is proof, but not a single fact was produced. Then, it was announced that the full report would be made secret, because of the “sensitive information”.

It is exactly the same approach, as we see in our relations with the United Kingdom, which accused us ten years ago of poisoning one of the former intelligence officers, who resided in London, Mr Litvinenko. The trial, which concluded that Russia was responsible, was also secret. Now the investigation of the Salisbury poisoning is also going on without any transparent information being provided to the public, without anything given to us, including access to a Russian citizen, and so on and so forth. Now this “highly likely” thing is becoming contagious. The assertion that there is no other credible explanation is becoming a rule on which the Western friends try to base their policy on Russia. The latest event in Greece is absolutely going in the same vein: “highly likely” and we are not given any single fact.

Back to the American elections. I have spent some time in the US, so I believe that I understand how the system is working. A year and a half, even more, the investigation go on, hearings go on, head of Special Counsel for the United States Department of Justice Mr Robert Mueller in line with dozens of people participate in the hearings, being interrogated, and the only thing that the public gets is the assertion that it is proven again and again that Russia did meddle, we are still thinking whether this meddling did have effect on the outcome of the elections, and so on and so forth. Apart from these assertions there is no single fact. Knowing the American system, I am convinced that with so many people involved in all these hearings: closed, public, secret, not secret, it is impossible that no single fact has been leaked yet into the public domain. The US system is leaking very often, especially in issues like this, where so many people are involved, it is impossible not to have any single fact presented to the public one way or another.

Question: So, you categorically deny any Russian involvement?

S.Lavrov: President V.Putin addressed this issue several times. Couple of weeks ago, he once again confirmed that the Russian Government has nothing to do with what was going on during the American elections. We have been reading about somebody else’s meddling with the Democratic Party’s site, but this fact, which has been proven by the way, is not mentioned at all, when this electoral campaign issue is being discussed. What we did say was that we are ready to answer any questions that the American Administration might have, regarding this matter. This was actually offered by us, when President V.Putin met with President D.Trump one year ago on the margins of G20 in Hamburg. We thought that there was an agreement that a group of experts would be meeting. The Americans would put on the table all the issues, which they believe Russia must explain, and then the experts would do this. Somehow, few days after the Summit, under pressure of those, who believed that the Administration should not discuss anything on cybersecurity with Russia, this deal was postponed. Lately, there were signals that the Americans are ready to resume this attempt, we will be ready to discuss any concerns regarding cybersecurity, which the US might have.

Speaking of cybersecurity and freedom of expression, we are concerned that RT, which is not foreign to you, is being labelled by for example the French Government as “an agent of influence”. The same French Government introduced a draft law into the Parliament, which is intended to compile a blacklist of media outlets that are suspected of spreading “fake news”. Even more seriously, this blacklist would be accompanied by a list of media resources, compiled at the legislature level, which would be recommended to national regulators of cyberspace as “reliable sources”. If this is not censorship, if this is not an attempt to squeeze the space of expression than I do not understand much in this life.

Question: I can say concerning this program, which is on RT and other sources, RT has never interfered with this show at all. Never edited us, never censored us or anything, so I would go on record, as saying that. I want to add one thing, Mr Foreign Minister. Morally, how can you support someone like President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who has been so brutal to his own people? How can you support him?

S.Lavrov: I think you are being a politician. Some people say that being a politician is being cynical, some say healthy cynicism is good. I believe that we have to be realistic. We have to be responsible first of all for the world security, for the security of our countries, for the cooperation with others, which would create conditions, making our people safer. If you take a look in retrospect at that region: Saddam Hussein was a dictator, Muammar Gaddafi was a dictator. But if you compare the sufferings of the people of Iraq and Libya, respectively, under these two dictators and the present after the American and NATO interventions in Iraq and Libya in violation of international law than I believe the numbers of those who were killed, who were wounded, who fled their homes would be probably hundreds of thousands more than those, who suffered under those regimes.

The same is true for Syria. The people, who ruined Iraq, who ruined Libya, who now try to invite the international community to share responsibility for the migrants' crisis, the same people draw no conclusions and want to put Syria in the same state. Some analysts say that the US might be interested in keeping this region in turmoil, so that it can fish in these muddy waters. I do not believe that this is what the US wants, but if you look at the facts, it is what is happening. This is not to say that we want to justify dictators, but it is to say that before you start an "adventure", you must make every step not to be reckless and to find a way to promote democratic changes peacefully, like the US is doing in many countries of the very same region. I do not need to list them. My point is that we condemn any violations of human rights, any violations of international humanitarian law, whoever commit them: governments, opposition, foreign countries interfering, but we have to see the entire picture and we have to think about the price of being moral just for the sake of being moral.

Question: So, you include Syria in that statement?

S.Lavrov: Yes, that is what you have asked me about.

Question: I am very glad to hear that. Mr Foreign Minister, thank you so much for giving us your time today. Have a successful trip to Helsinki and let's hope that when we meet in person, we have peace in world, would not that be nice?

S.Lavrov: Thank you, Larry. Thank you very much for the invitation.

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