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in Russia

Ambassador Sullivan's Roundtable with Journalists (April 22, 2020)

AS DELIVERED REMARKS

Ambassador Sullivan's Roundtable with Journalists – via telephone Wednesday, April 22, 2020

Ambassador Sullivan: Thank you for taking the time to join me on this call today. I hope you are all well, and I'm looking forward to doing a roundtable in person sometime soon. But this is the next best thing.

I had a visit earlier this week to the courthouse in Moscow where the proceedings, the criminal case against Paul Whelan, is being tried. I tried to get into the courthouse on Monday for the proceedings and was not allowed. I had tried the previous Monday and unfortunately was not allowed to see him. Some weeks before, I had been to the courthouse and was able to get into the courtroom. I was able to speak to the judge before the proceedings began and able to speak to Paul before the proceedings began. So, I was disappointed that I wasn't able to see him, but he is foremost in my thoughts everyday as I continue my service as Ambassador, along with other Americans who have been detained – Michael Calvey and Trevor Reed.

With respect to Paul, we've seen in the media that Russian authorities may have decided to allow him to make a few phone calls to his family each month. I certainly hope that is true, and I look forward to learning from Paul's family that they've finally been able to hear his voice on the phone after 16 months of incarceration, which is pretty remarkable if you think about it – being incommunicado from ones friends and family for that long. That's a pretty grueling ordeal. And, I look forward to the day that he can finally get back home and see his friends and family. They've waited long enough.

But I know you want to talk about issues. I understand questions have been submitted and so I will turn to those now.

Moderator: Great, thank you. We have a couple questions that several journalists submitted, so I am just going to ask those upfront. When do you think Embassy operations can resume, when can we resume normal operations, including issuing visas for Russians?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, thanks for that question. Of course given the nature of the pandemic that is affecting every one of us here in Moscow and around the world, it's impossible to predict when things will return to normal.

I was just commenting to a colleague back in Washington, I guess it was yesterday, that when I departed for Moscow in mid-January, I never could've imagined that at the end of April I would be having this type of a virtual roundtable discussion with all of you instead of doing it in person. If you just think of how the world had turned upside down in the last three months, that informs my answer, which is: it's impossible to predict when we'll be able to resume "normal" operations.

I can assure you that we are working hard every day to protect everyone here at the Embassy, my colleagues, their families – that's obviously a high priority. We are following the quarantine that's been imposed by the Russian government. We are engaged daily with counterparts in the Russian government on bilateral and multilateral issues.

And, in terms of consular operations, we look forward to a time in the future when it is safe for us to return to the important work of issuing visas for Russians to travel to the United States. I am a strong believer that travel between our two countries – whether it is for tourism, study, or business – enriches our people and our relationships, and I want to keep Americans and Russians socializing so long as it's safe and not dangerous for their health to do so. So, as soon as it is safe, for my colleagues here to process visas and resume visa operations, we will do so. But not before then.

Moderator: Several of the journalists had inquired about repatriation of Americans to the United States, and someone had worded it this way: How many U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents currently in Moscow have expressed their desire to return to the United States?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, great question. Another question that has been at the forefront of my mind and that of our colleagues that work here. Our consular section has worked hard to keep information flowing to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents across Russia to help them make an informed decision about returning to the United States if they want to do so.

When Russian authorities cancelled flights out of Russia, you may have seen that we organized a special charter flight and were able to repatriate over one hundred U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents.

We've talked to several hundred more who have either already taken commercial flights to the United States or are planning to do so in the near future. It is not possible to give you an exact number. If I had to pick a ballpark figure, I would probably say several hundred. But we are doing all we can, as I say, to push

information out to them so that they can make informed decisions, and if their informed decision is to return to the United States, we will do all that is humanly possible to make that so.

One of the complicating aspects of making that so is the unpredictability of commercial flights from Russia to the United States. We've heard from Americans outside of Moscow that they're not able to get to Sheremetyevo to take a flight given the very short notice given by Russian authorities and Aeroflot of a flight's departure – it's usually just a matter of hours, often as few as two to four. So, we're working to give American citizens and lawful permanent residents as much current information as we have so they can make their travel plans if that's what they want to do, and get to their airport and try to get on one of those flights on short notice.

Moderator: Thank you. Two weeks ago, Russia sent a plane with medical supplies to help fight Coronavirus in New York. Are there plans for further shipments from Russia? Is the United States planning to send medical supplies to Russia?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, that shipment was the result of a conversation between our two presidents, President Trump and President Putin. And President Trump has made clear that the United States is committed to the global fight against COVID-19. We're a generous and reliable contributor to crisis response and humanitarian action across the world, but we can't do it alone. President Trump appreciated very much the offer from President Putin to provide the much-needed supplies that were sent to New York on, I believe it was April 1st. So, both countries have provided humanitarian assistance to each other in times of crisis in the past and have committed to do so again in the future in response to this COVID-19 situation, this pandemic.

President Trump has so indicated that if there are supplies or assistance that the United States can supply to Russia, President Trump has spoken about this, and I know that it is consistent with our approach worldwide to this global pandemic – to be a leader in providing assistance around the world, to engage in the fight against this pandemic.

Moderator: Turning to the Open Skies Treaty. Western press is reporting that the U.S. Administration is about to announce its exit from the Open Skies. Is that so? And, in a follow-on to that – Russia has been criticized for violating the Open Skies Treaty. Can you tell us a little bit more about what happened specifically last September at the TSENTR exercises?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, that's shifting gears from COVID-19 to Open Skies. Let me say first that the United States has not withdrawn from the Treaty on Open Skies. We continue to implement the treaty and fully comply with our obligations. However – and here is the link back to COVID-19 – the United States and

other parties to the treaty have suspended flights until after at least April 26 due to the COVID-19 quarantine restrictions. Further extensions into May, I would guess, are probably likely.

As indicated in the question, the United States assesses that Russia continues to violate the treaty's terms. And this is noted in our annual arms control compliance report which was by my colleagues at the Department of State on April 15th.

In September, Russia denied a planned U.S.-Canadian flight over Russia's TSENTR 2019 military exercise. The proposed flight segment was permitted under the treaty, and it was a violation of the treaty to preclude that flight.

So, we, the United States, continue to have discussions about the treaty with our allies and partners. We've shared our concerns and our desire for accountability and compliance by Russia with the treaty.

The Trump Administration is committed to arms control that advances U.S., allied, and partner security – arms control that is verifiable and enforceable, and we include partners that comply responsibly with their obligations.

So, in conclusion I would say, in light of the violations of the treaty that the United States has publicly indicated, we are currently reviewing the costs and benefits associated with our participation and considering all options under the treaty to achieve our national security objectives and to bring Russia back into compliance.

Moderator: Let's shift again to START. Is the United States ready to discuss the prolongation of the New START agreement with Russia on a two-party basis? Are there any meetings on the issue planned in the coming months?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, as I think was discussed, or there were news releases by both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here and the State Department in Washington, Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister Lavrov had a call at the end of last week to discuss, among other things, arms control issues including New START.

The United States has been quite clear that our priority is to think more broadly than New START, and you've heard President Trump say that it his desire to include both China and Russia in our next steps in pursuing effective arms control. We stand ready to engage with both Russia and China on negotiations for an agreement that meets our criteria of advancing U.S., allied, and partner security, is verifiable and enforceable and, as I said just a minute ago about Open Skies, includes partners that comply responsibly with their obligations.

So, we are continuing to review the possibility of an extension of the New START treaty, taking into account the threats we face today which are different than the threats we faced ten years ago – it's a changed security environment, and we also acknowledge Russia's statement that it has no preconditions to the extension.

We have no meetings to announce at this time, in part due to the COVID-19 situation. But the Secretary and the Foreign Minister are discussing these issues and we'll continue to engage Russia in the New START treaty's bilateral consultative commission, and other diplomatic channels to work cooperatively to address technical questions and issues related to the ongoing implementation of New START.

And one thing I would add is that our interest in dialogue and pursuing discussions on New START and arms control generally was reinforced by the recent announcement that my friend and colleague Marshall Billingslea has been appointed as the Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control. So, my expectation is, in light of Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister Lavrov's conversation on this topic and Marshall Billingslea's appointment is that there will be movement and discussion soon that will illuminate this issue more for all of us.

Moderator: Moving to an issue that is near and dear to my heart, which is freedom of speech and freedom of the media, we have a question about several journalists who have been threatened or charged with various things. So the question is this: Svetlana Prokopyeva, an RFE/RL contributor in Pskov, is awaiting trial on extremism charges for remarks that she made about a November 2018 bomb attack on the FSB offices in Arkhangelsk. Have you followed the case, and will you have an opportunity to raise it with Russian authorities? And, adding into that, we just got a request to also ask you if you are of the threats against Novaya Gazeta's Elena Milashina and RFE/RL's Aslan Doukaev.

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, great questions and the short answer is Yes. Both myself and our Embassy team here are following all of these cases very closely. Freedom of the press is a pillar of any true democracy. It's foundational to the constitutional government in the United States. Our First Amendment, the First Amendment to our Constitution, in our Bill of Rights, it enshrines freedom of the press.

Unfortunately, freedom of the press is under pressure today in Russia. The United States has joined with allies, partners in the international community in repeatedly calling out Russian authorities' attempts to minimize the space for freedom of expression. The three cases that you've mentioned are examples of this disturbing trend.

Ms. Prokopyeva – pardon me if I have mispronounced her name – she deserves the dignity and respect that a member of the press, a member of the press here serving in difficult circumstances has earned. Due to the egregious nature of the government's charges against her, we included her case in our annual

Human Rights Report as an example of one of the ways the Russian government seems to limit Russians' rights to freedom of expression.

And of course, you have also noted, there was a separate question about the recent threats by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov against RFE/RL's Aslan Doukaev and Novaya Gazeta's Elena Milashina. I have raised these issues, we've raised these issues, with the Russian government. Unfortunately, to date, Russian federal authorities have taken no action to address them.

So it is appropriate for us to continue to do so, and we will, particularly as we look forward to marking International Press Freedom Day on May 3. Props to all of you on the phone, all of you are honored members of the press and we recognize that this freedom must be preserved throughout the year. And we are going to continue to advocate that Russia uphold its international commitments to protect journalists and ensure press freedom.

Moderator: Our last question that we had received in advance was a question on economic issues. Are there plans to bring together the heads of the major Russian and American companies to pursue a dialogue among senior business leaders? As you know, SPIEF, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, has been canceled this year, and the dialogue between the private sectors of the two countries has been put on hold due to COVID-19. Do you think dialogue will be resumed soon, can it be resumed soon?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, this is an issue near and dear to my heart. As some of you may know, in my prior government service I was the Deputy Secretary of Commerce of the United States. And so, the interests of U.S. businesses and U.S. investors here is extremely important to me and the pandemic has caused disruptions with U.S. businesses here, as it has with the economy generally, the global economy. And as we work through the current situation, the most important thing we can do is to work together to make sure people are safe.

At some point, however, in the future, and we all hope that this is soon, the experts will determine that we can begin resuming some select, lower-risk pre-pandemic business practices. And I certainly hope that business engagements between our countries will resume and grow in ways that are safe and that the approximately 1,000, I think it is, U.S. companies working in Russia will be able to get back to work.

From those 1,000 U.S. companies, they range from large multinationals to small American entrepreneurs, but collectively they employ thousands of Russians and make important contributions to the Russian economy. I have told the American business community here that promoting business ties in the non-sanctioned portion of the Russian economy is one of my key priorities as Ambassador.

In fact, I have been engaging virtually with the members of the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham). In fact, I had a virtual teleconference today with over 100 members of the AmCham. I had a prior one a few weeks ago. I want to hear what American businesses are saying about their experience here in Russia, and make sure that I know and the Embassy knows what their concerns are, what their issues are, so that we can address them and make sure that they are able to resume business operations when it is safe to do so. And my plan is to continue to have those types of virtual dialogues with the U.S. business community.

Now, with respect to a high-level Business Leaders Dialogue which our two presidents have discussed, and was referred to in the question, we were looking at different models of engagement that would be productive before the current travel restrictions came into place. However, it's become clear to me in my engagement with U.S. businesses active here in Russia, that it is going to be difficult to convene that type of dialogue as long as someone as prominent as in the U.S. business community as Michael Calvey remains under house arrest in Russia. The criminalization of business disputes casts a serious pall over the investment and business climate in Russia, particularly for Americans. So until that case is resolved, it's going to be difficult for me at least to muster interest, serious interest, amongst U.S. business leaders for a dialogue. That doesn't mean we are not committed to it, but it does mean that Michael's case needs to be resolved before there will be serious progress on that front.

In the meantime, as I said, I am going to continue to engage with the American and Russian business communities. In addition to the "AmCham," I am holding a virtual briefing with the Business Council of International Understanding, BCIU, next week, which includes over 50 senior Russian and American business leaders.

And our trade team here at the Embassy is holding several sector specific engagements, including with the information technology, life sciences, and franchising sectors and others, including this week. So, there is a lot of work, virtual though it may be, going on in the background. And I certainly look forward to a time when conditions will allow a more face-to-face interaction, and when the circumstances are right, a high-level business dialogue. When that day comes, this Embassy and U.S. businesses will be ready for a substantive discussion on ways to increase trade between our countries.

Moderator: Why doesn't the United States consider lifting sanctions in light of the COVID pandemic?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, that's a question that has been raised in a number of different fora, and my boss, Secretary Pompeo has addressed it. The bottom line is, our sanctions program is designed to constrain the ability of bad actors to take advantage of our financial system or threaten the United States, our allies, partners, or civilians. We will not allow those who endanger the national security of the United States to exploit the COVID-19 emergency to achieve long-standing goals of sanctions relief.

Plus U.S. sanctions do not inhibit humanitarian assistance. The answer to humanitarian assistance challenges – like what we are seeing now with COVID-19 – is not sanctions relief, because sanctions relief will not convince authoritarian regimes to reverse course and prioritize the well-being of their people. It, in fact, would encourage and embolden them to commit further misdeeds on their people who are already burdened by fighting COVID-19.

And further, there are existing exemptions and authorizations specific to humanitarian assistance and trade, and we continue to encourage governments or institutions that want to provide assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic to take advantage of those exemptions and authorizations and, as necessary seek specific licenses, which I am confident would be granted if the assistance to be provided were purely humanitarian in nature.

I should also note, the United States has been at the forefront of nearly every significant sanctions reform adopted by the UN Security Council, and we are open to considering additional ways to facilitate humanitarian assistance quickly.

The problem is that regimes that are engaging in bad behavior and bad policy that threatens their own people and others, are not interested in assistance from the United States. It's been offered and rejected. Let's also be clear that in the vast majority of UN sanctions regimes, we have not seen sanctions impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations.

I'll just conclude by saying I think this is a red herring that's being raised, taking advantage of the COVID pandemic, to try to get sanctions lifted without any change in the policies and behaviors that have led to the sanctions in the first place, whether its on missile and nuclear testing in North Korea or the repression and the destruction of democracy in Venezuela. All the different sanctions regimes that the United States has in place are there for good and sufficient and moral reasons, unconnected to humanitarian assistance which is not covered by the sanctions, and will not inhibit true humanitarian assistance that would go to relieve any suffering from COVID-19.

Moderator: Following up on that, another question we received: What is the United States doing to help fight this pandemic?

Ambassador Sullivan: Well, the United States is doing a lot. We've provided, first of all, both in response to COVID-19 and more generally over decades, enormous support to multilateral organizations fighting for improved health around the world and, in particular, in response to this pandemic. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the United States – and this is just over the last few months – has committed almost half a billion dollars in assistance.

This assistance helps protect and create healthcare facilities, laboratories, disease-surveillance, rapid-response capacity – you name it – in, I think, almost 60 countries with the world's most at-risk populations. And this money – this half a billion – is just the start. The State Department, USAID, and our Centers for Disease Control, are working to support health systems, humanitarian assistance, economic security, and stabilization efforts worldwide with almost \$2.7 billion in emergency supplemental funding that our Congress has allocated and President Trump has approved. And in one case in particular that's gotten a lot of publicity for the assistance that been provided by Russia to Italy, the United States is also providing generous support to coronavirus victims in Italy and other hard-hit regions all over the world, from Africa to Asia.

And this isn't just with U.S. taxpayer dollars. It is also through private businesses, nonprofit groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations. The American people I know are a kind, a generous people and they are looking to help. And it's not just the U.S. government and it's not just with taxpayer dollars – it's with private money that the United States will continue to be the leader in addressing health challenges globally and this COVID-19 pandemic in particular.

Moderator: I know you have to go, so let me ask the final question which we just got, and which I appreciate, and which will show you how closely we work with all of the journalists here. They are curious about how our community is doing, and specifically about what measures you're taking to protect yourself, and do you have any special advice?

Ambassador Sullivan: Wow. That's a generous question! This must be Russian media. I don't that I would get this from our bullpen media at the State Department – that's just a joke. [Laughter] And so here is part of my response, part of my response is maintaining a sense of humor, maintaining hope, bucking each other up and looking out for each other, thinking of someone other than yourself, in difficult circumstances like this. That's what I see here in our Embassy, in our Mission community, which is inspiring. It's hard. Many of us live – many of my colleagues live here on the compound and it's a strain. Living on the compound and not being able to leave except in limited circumstances, but we are doing all we can to keep our morale up and keep each other safe and healthy and as happy as we can be given these trying circumstances.

So, don't give up hope. This pandemic will pass. I can't say that life is going to go back to normal as we knew it in January, at least not quickly. But we'll get through this, and when we do, I look forward to seeing all of you in person at Spaso House, over a meal or a glass of alcohol or two, and trading stories about how we survived COVID-19. But until then, please take care of yourselves. As this quarantine continues I hope to continue to do events like this virtually, to continue to get our message out, to connect with the Russian people, which is important to me which is why I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you on behalf

of your distinguished media organizations. I want to make sure the U.S. message is heard, and my message in particular, on behalf of President Trump, to improve the relationship between the United States and Russia, continues to be carried.

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