Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 03/22/2023 11:35:18 AM

3/21/23 Tuesday

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Putin: Russia Will be Forced to React if West Starts Using Weapons With Nuclear Components
By - Fantine Gardinier

UK Minister of State for Defense Annabel Goldie said on Tuesday that London would provide Ukraine with armor piercing shells for the Challenger 2 main battle tanks it has decided to send to Kiev, including depleted uranium ammunition.

“Today it became known that the United Kingdom, through its deputy head of the ministry of defense, announced not only the supply of tanks to Ukraine, but also shells with depleted uranium," Russian President Vladimir Putin said, adding that "it seems that the West really decided to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian, not in words, but in deed."

"I would like to note in this regard that if all this happens, then Russia will be forced to react accordingly - I mean that the Collective West is already starting to use weapons with a nuclear component," Putin added.

His comments came after meetings with a delegation of high-level Chinese officials, including Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Later in the day, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned the United Kingdom that there would be few red lines left uncrossed if it delivered on its promise to give Ukraine depleted uranium weapons.

"I can only say this: We are running out of red lines … Another line has been crossed and there are fewer and fewer of them left," he told reporters in Moscow.

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of the uranium refining process composed of uranium-238, which is not useful for generating nuclear chain reactions but which is extremely dense and used to make armor-piercing ammunition. However, it still possesses radioactive properties that can be very harmful to humans and is highly toxic, making it a dangerous weapon long after the engagement in which it was fired.

Sites in Iraq and Yugoslavia which US forces used depleted uranium to attack have been associated with increases in birth defects and rare forms of cancer associated with exposure to radioactive materials, including depleted uranium and related radioactive isotopes.

While Moscow has repeatedly warned about the creeping danger of some kind of nuclear exchange as a result of NATO's support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, Western governments and media have tried to spin such warnings as being threats about the use of nuclear weapons. Putin has since made it explicitly clear that Moscow intends to maintain its no-first-use policy regarding nuclear weapons.

Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine in February 2022 after months of negotiations with Kiev and NATO failed to yield a situation that respected Moscow's security red lines, most especially regarding Ukraine's prospective membership in the alliance and the possibility of NATO weapons being stationed on Russia's borders. The operation aims to neutralize that possibility.

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Experts: Xi-Putin Talks on Expanded Economic Cooperation Part of 'Multipolarity Building Process'
By - Fantine Gardinier

During their multi-day talks in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate in building a world no longer centered on Washington, DC, or Europe.
However, that world order won't simply be one that replaces the United States as the global hegemon, but one that is built upon multipolar relations and a rapidly developing Global South, Fabio Massimo Parenti, a PhD in geopolitics and geoeconomics and associate professor of international political economy and geopolitics at China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing, told Sputnik on Tuesday.
Noting that Putin told Xi he supports using Chinese renminbi (RMB) or yuan as an international means of payment and reserve currency, Parenti said it was part of a larger effort to de-center the US dollar in the global economy.
"The yuan is already the fifth international currency in the world, in terms of global circulation and official reserves. The China-Russia rapprochement has gone hand in hand with global economic transformation towards multipolarity, which passes through a monetary system shift," he explained.
"However, we should bear in mind that 'multipolarity' applied to the monetary system means promoting the usage of a variety of currencies, one of which is already the yuan, avoiding replacing US dollar centrality with another single currency."
Parenti noted that Beijing "does not want to become a US successor in this sense, but it wants to promote a new form of international relations, based on equality, mutual respect and democratization of international relations. This thing is not only related to a Chinese specific worldview but it is also rooted in the pragmatic interest to avoid the problems and structural weaknesses of a unipolar world order, rejected theoretically and practically by China."
The two world leaders have also helped launch new international payment systems that can serve as an alternative to SWIFT, which is centered in Brussels and highly subject to Western sanctions.
"Simply, after building the new platforms, exchanges cannot be blocked by western unilateral actions and international cross-border settlements can be easily done in currencies other than the dollar," the expert explained, adding that "SWIFT was set according to technical characteristics politically oriented, to defend and exploit the dollar tyranny."
He further added that all "Third World countries are and will be in line with this new monetary-financial course," calling it "another sign of a kind of 'multipolarity building process.'"

Parenti said he agreed with Putin's statement about the importance of China and Russia combining their information technology and artificial intelligence efforts as a sort of "tech

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alliance," saying such cooperation is going to be key in the future, especially as the West tries to target both nations' tech sectors.

"China is already a world leader in many fields and Russia can benefit a lot from its partner's ability and development," he said. "At the same time, China can benefit from Russia's new open market left by Westerners, from Russian raw materials and TLC education and expertise."

"Combining financial resources with raw materials, talents and market size, both countries can find mutual advantages by bolstering bilateral relations at an even higher strategic level," he asserted. "It goes without saying that all of these developments will increase both countries' independence from every sort of Western sanctions."

"First, I think that Western sanctions are an abuse and generally detrimental for people's daily lives. Therefore, whilst the West attacks political systems and leaders, it is actually attacking the people of entire countries. Second, the Western abuse of unilateral sanctions is surely accelerating other powers' reorganization, [who are] searching for a greater level of independence and autonomy. Under this respect, I believe that both China and Russia can take advantage of this sanctions crisis/impact."

Turning to Beijing's proposal for peace in Ukraine - and Washington's rejection of such a deal - Parenti said that time and again, "the US has confirmed itself as the biggest threat to humanity, the main promoter of wars, the most irresponsible country, incapable of promoting peace talks and peaceful coexistence."

"They look only at hegemony and unipolarity, rejecting a democratization of international relations. Herein Russia-China ties find their quite recent historical roots. Only starting from this consciousness can we understand these two great countries' will to build a multipolar world system, along with many other countries of the 'Global South' historically enslaved by the West. All of this, in the Chinese view, means building a community with a shared future for humanity."

Jeff J. Brown, author of The China Trilogy, editor at China Rising Radio Sinoland and co-founder and curator of the Bioweapon Truth Commission, told Sputnik that China and Russia "clearly" know that "the West's historical ability to rape and plunder the world's resources for the last 500 years has been enforced by an imposed reserve currency, earlier the British pound and postwar, the US dollar."

"Among non-Western currencies, the Chinese yuan [RMB] is the most sought after to de-dollarize global trade, due to the size and scope of its [China's] economy. With Russia's SPSF [System for Transfer of Financial Messages'] interbank wire system, any use of the RMB is going to enhance the ruble," he noted.

"If India and Brazil buy Russian oil and gas in yuan using the SPSF, it can use them to trade with China, whose bilateral total will easily surpass US$200 billion this year."

Brown noted that for more than five years, the US dollar has faced "death by a thousand cuts" around the world.

"Russia and China trading in their national currencies is more than a cut, it is a gash," he said. He explained that when it comes to SPSF, "countries are lining up to participate, including China, India, Iran and even Germany and Switzerland. Little known is that China has its own payment system, the Cross-Border Inter-Bank Payments System (CIPS). Now that the West's SWIFT has cut off Russia and China knows it could be next, there are plans to integrate these two anti-SWIFTs," he predicted.

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Among those that could join such a Russian-Chinese financial “coalition” are the BRICS nations, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and oil giant Saudi Arabia, the lattermost of which he said was “probably the most disconcerting for Western empire.”
Brown said that “Westerners underestimate Russia’s historical and broad technical prowess. While there is some overlap with China (nuclear, military and aerospace), they have much to offer each other to cooperate in high-tech industries. Why not a combined ‘Manhattan Project’ for microchips, a big problem for both countries? The opportunities are endless.”
The expert also noted that China has benefited “plenty” from Western sanctions against Russia, pointing out that China has been “a win-win partner” for countries around the globe by helping them address trade imbalances in the energy, agricultural, and tech sectors.
“After what the USA and its vassals have done to both Russia and China, in terms of onerous, hegemonic sanctions in the recent years, China and Russia are benefitting tremendously with all their initiatives to enhance bilateral, Asian and African trade,” Brown said. “Over time, sanctions have never worked, especially against two big, powerful and rich countries.”
“All of these Western imperial sanctions are already a huge catalyst for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to seek synergies, as well as China’s SCO and Russia’s Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). ASEAN is tired of US subterfuge, BRICS is expanding and Latin America’s anti-colonial CELAC all have much to offer for continuing multipolar, mutually beneficial integration,” he added.

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'We Need to Do More': Stoltenberg Calls for NATO Members to Pump Out Even More Military Spending
By - Fantine Gardinier

At a Tuesday press conference outside NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, the alliance’s secretary general said member states need to increase their defense spending even more and increase their weapons shipments to Ukraine.
Many allies have also announced significant defense spending increases since the beginning of Russia's special operation in Ukraine, Stoltenberg said.
"Now these pledges must turn into real cash, contracts and concrete equipment," he added.
Noting that the alliance’s collective military spending had increased for eight years in a row, and increased by 2.2% in real terms last year, Stoltenberg urged even bigger increases, saying that "defense spending underpins everything we do" and that "we're not moving as fast as the dangerous world we live in demands."
"We need to do more and we need to do it faster," he stressed. "Today's world is as dangerous as at any time since the Second World War. The years to come will be challenging and NATO must continue to rise to the challenge."
According to alliance statistics, NATO’s combined defense expenditure in 2022 was $1.2 trillion, of which $816 billion came just from the United States. That statistic doesn’t include

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supplemental spending, such as on military aid to Ukraine, which in the US totaled over $100 billion by itself, or other items such as nuclear weapons maintenance, which is not included in military budget totals.

Stoltenburg said that even if the conflict in Ukraine ended immediately, “the security environment has changed for the long term” and NATO members will need to increase their military budgets regardless.

NATO is now "in the process of agreeing to new capability targets for the production of battle-decisive ammunition and engaging with industry to ramp up production - to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression and for our own defense."

Pointing to a new “strategic concept, the first in a decade, to guide our alliance in an era of strategic competition,” the NATO chief said it “identifies Russia as the most significant threat to our security, along with the ongoing threat of terrorism and makes clear that China challenges our interests, security and values."

The White House first laid out that concept in 2018, calling it “great power competition” as well as “inter-state strategic competition” with Russia and China, and saying the US would have to pivot toward that strategy and away from the War on Terror that had dominated its focus during the first two decades of the 21st century.

While Washington’s analysis has identified China as its biggest threat in the long term and called Russia an “acute” threat, the Europe-centered NATO has focused explicitly on Russia, even while extending feelers to US allies in East Asia to increase cooperation there.

Rights of National Minorities of Ukraine to be Discussed

Stoltenberg’s statement comes amid a controversy over the calling of a meeting of the commission with Ukraine without unanimous support for doing so.

Péter Szijjártó, Hungary’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations told reporters on Tuesday following a meeting with Stoltebnerg that the secretary general “said that for various reasons ... he will convene a meeting of the Ukraine- NATO at the ministerial level on April 4-5 during the NATO Council of Foreign Ministers, despite the rejected position of Hungary that the meeting of this commission can only be held with unanimous support.”

While Hungary is a NATO ally, the Central European nation has largely objected to NATO’s enthusiastic support for Ukraine in that country’s conflict with Russia, saying it causes economic chaos across the continent and risks snowballing into a larger war between nuclear powers.

Szijjártó told reporters that Stoltenberg promised that the issue of violations of the rights of national minorities in Ukraine would be discussed at the meeting.

At the initiative of Hungary and Romania, the Council of Europe decided late last year to apply to the Venice Commission about the issue of national minorities in Ukraine, which include Hungarians and Romanians in the Transcarpathian border region. Minorities in the region, which also include Rusyns, have reported being bribed to send their children to learn the Ukrainian language and having their cultural institutions closed by Ukrainian authorities.

Antagonism of non-Ukrainian minorities in the country increased dramatically after the right-wing nationalist coup in 2014, with the moves against Ukraine’s largest minority group, Russians, being the most politically explosive, but with moves against other ethnic groups being no less outrageous. A law that entered force in stages between 2017 and 2020 reduced the ability of members of national minorities to be educated in languages other than Ukrainian, drawing the fury of regional nation-states including Hungary, Romania, and Russia.

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Aside from neutralizing Ukraine as a potential base for NATO weapons, Russia's special operation in Ukraine that began in February 2022 is motivated in part by the Ukrainian government's militant assault on Russian-speaking groups in the eastern Donbass region, and neo-Nazi violence there that killed at least 14,000 people between 2014 and 2022. The two people's republics that arose in the Donbass, which have since joined the Russian Federation in the interests of security, initially formed in the Spring of 2014 in response to the anti-Russophone violence sparked by the nationalist coup in Kiev that February.

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Germany, France Spar Over EU Green Energy Rules on Nuclear Power, Automobile E-Fuel
By - Fantine Gardinier

It's not exactly a World War, but Paris and Berlin are sharply at odds over a group of energy-related policies proposed for the European Union. EU leaders are set to meet later this week in Brussels amid the feud.

Tempers have flared between the two states, anchors of the Brussels-based politico-economic bloc, over nuclear power and synthetic e-fuel for automobiles, as the EU seeks to plot a united path forward from fossil fuel-based energy policies for its 27 member states.

"I am a supporter of permanent Franco-German compromise, but also of truth in the Franco-German relationship. When we have a disagreement, we don't hide it, we work to overcome it," French Transport Minister Clément Beaune said on Tuesday.

Earlier this month, Berlin joined with Italy, Poland and Bulgaria and moved to block proposed green car rules for the post-2035 period that didn't include allowances for synthetic electrofuel (e-fuel), a carbon dioxide-based fuel touted by green power advocates for its lower carbon footprint than fossil fuels such as gasoline.

The European Parliament already debated including such fuels and rejected the notion in negotiations over the rule's final draft last year, but Germany's Free Democratic Party, one of three parties in the ruling coalition, has pushed Chancellor Olaf Schotz's government to demand the rule being included nonetheless, since it would benefit Germany's automobile industry.

France has strongly criticized their move, with French MPE Pascal Canfin saying "it is not acceptable that a country comes back on its word. Germany approved the deal." He urged Schotz not to go down "in the history of Europe as the one that killed the Green Deal."

However, Paris is not without its own controversial stances on energy in the bloc.

France, which gets two-thirds of its electricity from nuclear power plants, has lobbied intensely for nuclear power to be included in the EU's Net Zero Industry Act, a legislative package aimed at pushing "green" tech and electrical generation. In particular, Paris wants the act to include nuclear-based hydrogen, a method of separating H2 hydrogen molecules from other atoms electrolytically inside nuclear reactors. At present, most hydrogen is "liberated" from its host atoms via pollutive fossil fuel sources, including coal gasification.

Germany's Green Party, another member of the ruling coalition, is adamantly anti-nuclear and firmly opposes Paris' push.

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France was particularly incensed when a final draft of the act was published last week and did not include a paragraph about the importance of nuclear power for EU industry decarbonization, according to reports.

The issue has become of much greater importance in the last year as Europe seeks to comply with American demands for a boycott of Russian energy exports, which are nearly all fossil fuel-based. Attempts to restrict purchases of Russian oil and gas have driven energy prices in Europe sharply upward, provoking protests and dividing European policymakers as to whether to push ahead on decarbonization initiatives or fall back on carbon-based energy known to be causing global warming.

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Syrian Defense Ministry: Israel Carried Out 'Numerous' Strikes Against Aleppo Airport, Nearby Sites

Media reports indicated that Syrian air defense systems had been activated after four missiles were detected as incoming from the west of the nation. If confirmed, the Wednesday strike would mark the second incident this month in which Israel allegedly struck the Aleppo airport.

The Syrian Defense Ministry confirmed overnight Wednesday that multiple airstrikes were issued against sites in and around the war-torn nation, with varying degrees of damages reported.

Citing insiders, state media reported that the strikes were reported at about 3:55 a.m. local time and were detected at the Aleppo International Airport. Officials suspect the air attack to have been carried out by Israeli forces; however, no outside confirmation has been provided.

"The Israeli enemy carried out an air attack with a number of missiles from the direction of the Mediterranean, west of Latakia," the Syrian Arab News Agency reported. It added that some material damages had been reported at the Aleppo airport.

Details on potential fatalities, injuries or structural damages have yet to be fully detailed by state officials.

Footage from the scene, however, has since surfaced across social media. Some clips appear to document purported explosions near the Aleppo airport and the state-controlled Nayrab military airport.

The incident comes as Esmail Ghaani, the commander of the Quds Force, was said to have recently transited through the targeted airport.

No comment has been issued from the Israel Defense Forces on the strikes, a move in line with its standard policy of not generally offering remarks on air raids against its neighbor.

However, Israel is believed to be behind many airstrikes against government-controlled sites. In fact, in early March the Syrian Defense Ministry confirmed that the Aleppo airport had been temporarily shuttered after a suspected Israeli strike.

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The latest also comes as Syria and Turkiye have worked to provide aid and improve their infrastructure after devastating earthquakes struck the region, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of residents.

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Western Governments Must Prepare for Long-Term Conflict Amid Ukraine Crisis, Scholz Warns
By - Wyatt Reed

Germany's Scholz claimed in a recent interview that despite marching in lockstep with the Biden administration on the conflict in Ukraine, he continues to seek a peaceful resolution to hostilities.
German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has said Western governments should ready themselves for a long-term conflict amid Russia's special military operation, in comments which seemed to confirm the worst fears of advocates in favor of a peaceful settlement to the Ukraine conflict.
"We must prepare ourselves" for protracted conflict with the Russian Federation, Scholz told reporters at talks arranged by a German outlet, adding, "even when the war is over, everything won't go back to normal overnight."
In spite of his hawkish rhetoric, the chancellor went on to insist that Berlin should seek to mediate in hypothetical talks between Moscow and the US-backed regime in Kiev.
As the economic backlash caused by anti-Russia sanctions continues to reduce support for further arms shipment to the Kiev regime, Scholz insisted he was "not acting recklessly" - comments interpreted by media as "a rejection of too far-reaching arms deliveries to Ukraine."
The chancellor claimed he regularly communicates with Russian President Vladimir Putin via telephone, and that the discussions frequently last over an hour. While Scholz explained Putin is "always polite," German media reports there are fundamental disagreements between the two heads of states.
But Scholz noted that relations with the United States, on the other hand, are flourishing. Indeed, the chancellor shares a "common political concept" with US President Joe Biden, according to the outlet.
Scholz had similar words for the European Union, which he insisted was stronger than it appears to outside observers. But he continued to demand the bloc change its rules nonetheless.
"It has to be that one country cannot stop everything," Scholz said, in comments which sought to establish a reversal of the so-called "unanimity principle" which has traditionally united the EU.
Painting those who oppose a change to the rules as "a bit more Kaiser Wilhelm than democracy," Scholz insisted, "we must not see the fact that not everyone always agrees as a problem."
Seeking universal agreement, "like the Holy Spirit who comes over us… might work in the Catholic Church, but not here," Scholz lectured his opposition," because "we lack divine support there."
"We cannot simply leave all institutional structures as they are," Scholz reportedly insisted, citing foreign policy issues as "a good step" to begin with.

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Trump Blasts 'Fake' Report That He Knowingly Misled Lawyers Over Classified Docs Kept at Mar-a-Lago
By - Wyatt Reed

Following the leak of a preliminary finding against Trump, his campaign wrote "this disinformation is on par with their breathless Russia, Russia, Russia, Ukraine, Ukraine, Ukraine and 'no-collusion' Mueller speculation, all of which were totally disproven."
Citing undisclosed sources, ABC News is exclusively reporting that controversial US Judge Beryl Howell wrote last week that prosecutors in the special counsel's office made a "prima facie showing that the former president had committed criminal violations."
According to the outlet, the determination into claims that former President Donald Trump knowingly misled his legal representatives about mishandled sensitive documents at his Florida residence would mean that "attorney-client privileges invoked by two of [Trump's] lawyers could therefore be pierced."
Howell reportedly ordered Trump's lawyer to comply with a grand jury subpoena for testimony on multiple lines of inquiry which were considered to be protected by attorney-client privilege in a sealed filing.
"In reaching the so-called prima facie standard to pierce Corcoran's privilege," the outlet wrote, the judge who previously oversaw the Mueller investigation into Trump claimed "prosecutors made a sufficient showing that on its face would appear to show Trump committed crimes."
But that opinion is far from an actual determination. Indeed, according to US outlet, the judge "made it clear that prosecutors would still need to meet a higher standard of evidence in order to seek charges against Trump, and more still to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt."
Immediately following publication, the Trump campaign slammed the release of information pertaining to the ongoing legal case against him, writing in a statement that "these leaks are happening because there is no factual or legal basis or substance to any case against President Trump."
"Shame on Fake News ABC for broadcasting ILLEGALLY LEAKED false allegations from a Never Trump, now former chief judge, against the Trump legal team," the campaign wrote.
"This disinformation is on par with their breathless Russia, Russia, Russia, Ukraine, Ukraine, Ukraine and 'no-collusion' Mueller speculation," the campaign stated, adding that all of those cases "were totally disproven."
"The deranged Democrats and their comrades in the mainstream media are corrupting the legal process and weaponizing the justice system in order to manipulate public opinion, because they are clearly losing the political battle," the statement continued.
"The real story here, that Fake News ABC SHOULD be reporting on, is that prosecutors only attack lawyers when they have no case whatsoever," they wrote, concluding: "President Trump is the only leader fighting for the Constitution in order to protect the American people from being abused by a crooked system."

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The latest development comes as reports have kicked into high gear about the looming arrest of the former president in connection to 2016 hush payments made to adult film actress Stormy Daniels over their alleged 2006 affair.
Blasted as a political attack by Democrats against Trump, the possible indictment is reported to be issued sometime over the next few days; however, the former president earlier stated he anticipated being arrested on Tuesday.

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'Why Don't You Release Assange?': Mexican President Strikes Back at US Over Human Rights Report
By - Wyatt Reed

Mexico's president said the US government's destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines and the ongoing political persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange shows the US State Department's accusations of human rights violations in Mexico "should not be taken seriously."
Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador dismissed a report by the US government on Tuesday accusing his administration of human rights violations as "lies."
The State Department issued its annual report Monday on "Human Rights Practices." The publication criticized the Lopez Obrador administration's treatment of journalists and claimed that in Mexico, "impunity and extremely low rates of prosecution remained a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses and corruption."
In a stinging rebuke broadcast during his daily news conference, Lopez Obrador described the allegations as politically motivated, and said America's obvious double standards mean the report "should not be taken seriously."
"Let's see, human rights? Why don't you release Assange?" he asked, referring to the jailed WikiLeaks publisher who faces potential extradition to the US on espionage charges after revealing war crimes committed by American forces abroad. "If you are talking about journalism and freedom, why are you holding Assange?"
"If you talk about acts of violence, how is it that an award-winning United States journalist tells us that the United States government sabotaged the Russian-European gas pipeline?" the president continued.
Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh recently published a bombshell exposé revealing US divers used C-4 charges to demolish the Nord Stream pipelines, which had been providing Germany with cheap Russian gas.
"Why is a cartel, or several cartels, allowed to operate in the United States, freely distributing the fentanyl that does so much harm to young people in that country?"
"With all due respect, that is their nature," Lopez Obrador said of the US foreign policy elite, adding "they do not want to abandon the Monroe doctrine and… the so-called Manifest Destiny."
The US officials behind the report, the president pointed out, "believe themselves to be the government of the world, and they only see the speck in the other's eye and not the error in their own."

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“But it's not worth getting angry over,” he explained, noting “that’s just that’s how they are.” Mexico’s administration wasn’t the only Latin American government with choice words for the authors of the State Department report. Bolivia’s foreign ministry issued a statement condemning US allegations of human rights violations in the Andean nation as “interference in internal affairs,” criticizing the ‘unilateral’ report for failing to maintain objectivity.

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Prosecute Who? Me? No, You! - Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

Former President Donald Trump is inching closer to a possible indictment, and the prosecutor who could initiate the first criminal charge against the former president is Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg. Trump has said Bragg, a DA with a law degree from Harvard Law School, should be arrested instead.

The indictment Trump is expected to be charged with is based on a $130,000 hush-money payout to adult film star Stormy Daniels by Trump’s former lawyer Michael Cohen. Daniels was paid to sign a non-disclosure agreement about a 2006 affair she had with Trump - 10 years before the 2016 US election.

Trump has attacked Bragg, who is Black, and accused him of being “racist in reverse,” and said the DA is running a “witch hunt” against him. He also accused the Biden administration and Democrats, as well as the news media, of encouraging Bragg to prosecute him.

"Bragg is a (Soros) Racist in Reverse, who is taking his orders from D.C. I beat them TWICE, doing much better the second time, and despite their DISINFORMATION campaign, they don’t want to run against ‘TRUMP’ or my GREAT RECORD!" Trump said on his social media site Truth Social on Sunday.

"It is the District Attorney of Manhattan who is breaking the law by using the fake and fully discredited testimony (even by the SDNY [Southern District of New York]!) of a convicted liar, felon and jailbird, Michael Cohen, to incredibly persecute, prosecute, and indict a former president, and now leading (by far!) presidential candidate, for a crime that doesn't exist.

"Alvin Bragg should be held accountable for the crime of interference in a presidential election," Trump added.

On Saturday Trump called on his supporters to protest against his possible indictment, which has drawn criticism and comparisons to the January 6 attacks.

The Manhattan investigation into Trump has largely been called out as a part of a politically-motivated attack against Trump in the run-up to the 2024 election, of which Trump announced his candidacy earlier this year. If charges are ultimately filed against the former commander-in-chief, it would mark a first for a once-sitting US president.

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Duke v. Heritage Foundation: Could Prince Harry's Drug Use Affect His US Visa?
By - Mary Manley

Prince Harry opened up about his illegal drug use in his memoir "Spare," admitting to using cocaine, cannabis, and magic mushrooms, later adding in an interview that cocaine was more of a "social thing" while mushrooms and cannabis were to help with his "trauma."
Right-wing think tank the Heritage Fund is calling for the release of Prince Harry's US visa application so they can see whether or not he admitted to past drug use before moving to his $9.5 billion home in Santa Barbara, California.
"This request is in the public interest in light of the potential revocation of Prince Harry's visa for illicit substance use and further questions regarding the prince's drug use and whether he was properly vetted before entering the United States," said Mike Howell, director of the foundation's Oversight Project.
The Duke of Sussex, 38, wrote in his memoir that he first used cocaine at the age of 17, but since then began to use marijuana, mushrooms and psychedelics to deal with his trauma.
"It was the cleaning of the windscreen, the removal of life's filters — these layers of filters — it removed it all for me and brought me a sense of relaxation, relief, comfort, a lightness that I managed to hold back for a period of time," the Dukesaid of the psychedelics.
"I started doing it recreationally and then started to realize how good it was for me."
The recreational use of marijuana is legal in California, and the state has even begun to address the decriminalization of psychedelics after the state Senate passed a bill to legalize hallucinogenic drugs for Californians 21 years or older. They are still criminalized in the state at this time, though.
"An admission of drug use is usually grounds for inadmissibility," former federal prosecutor Neama Rahmani says, adding there is no exception for royalty or recreational use. "That means Prince Harry's visa should have been denied or revoked because he admitted to using cocaine, mushrooms and other drugs."
However, James Leonard, an attorney who represented reality star Joe Giudice in an immigration case, says Prince Harry's US visa is not at a risk.
"Absent any criminal charge related to drugs or alcohol or any finding by a judicial authority that Prince Harry is a habitual drug user, which he clearly is not, I don't see any issue with the disclosures in his memoir regarding recreational experimentation with drugs," said Leonard.
"You've got to give them something that would trigger it, and revealing it in a book, that you experimented with drugs when you were a young man, I don't think gets you there. Immigration is not going to do anything based on that. If he got arrested or if he got a DWI, then we're having a different conversation."
The Heritage Foundation has reportedly sent a dossier with information on Prince Harry's drug use to officials at the Department of Homeland Security. Prince Harry has previously said, according to a 2021 article, that he has no plans to seek a permanent US residency. However, his wife Meghan Markle, who is a US citizen, could sponsor her husband in the case that immigration issues were to arise.

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Fox Producer Alleges She Was Coerced by Network to Give False Testimony in Dominion Case
By - Mary Manley

Grossberg alleges she was forced on administrative leave after the network discriminated against her based on her gender and religious background. The lawsuit also revealed the network coerced her to give a misleading testimony concerning the Dominion Voting Systems suit.

Abby Grossberg, a Fox News producer who worked with network hosts Maria Bartiromo and Tucker Carlson, sued the company on Monday over allegations the company used her as a scapegoat.

Grossberg's suit, which was filed in New York and Delaware, alleges Fox News attempted to use her as an easy mark in a separate, $1.6 billion defamation lawsuit aimed at the network by Dominion Voting Systems, a voting technology company.

Dominion is seeking damages from Fox News, alleging that the company made false claims about voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election. Grossberg, who says the company coerced her to give misleading testimony regarding the lawsuit, will be a key witness in the trial which is scheduled next month.

Grossberg's court filing alleges she faced discrimination as a woman at the network, saying she was "overworked, undervalued, denied opportunities for promotion" and subjected to "vile sexist stereotypes." The lawsuit adds that while Grossberg and other women worked at Fox News and for Carlson's show they endured frank and open sexism from coworkers and superiors.

Grossberg began work at Tucker Carlson Tonight in September 2022.

In her suit, Grossberg says the network tried to position her and her former boss, Maria Bartiromo, to take the fall for the network's repeated conspiracy theories surrounding Dominion and accusing the company of manipulating the result of the 2020 election, which saw US President Joe Biden snatch the Oval Office from then-President Donald Trump.

Grossberg says because she and Bartiromo were discriminated against, they were left understaffed and were not properly able to vet accusations aired against Dominion on the show.

Grossberg adds that Fox News lawyers coerced and intimidated her into giving a false deposition regarding Dominion's lawsuit. She was allegedly guided into leading the blame away from male executives and male talk show hosts, while using herself as a scapegoat for Fox's male employees.

Grossberg claims in her suit that network executives constantly demeaned and denigrated network host Bartiromo, adding that Carlson's producers would argue about which female candidate for governor of Michigan was more attractive and more "f***able."

Another Fox News producer allegedly called a room for employees to pump their breast milk a "waste of space."

The lawsuit also revealed that while working at Tucker Carlson Tonight, Grossberg was shocked "to be greeted by many large and blown-up photographs of Nancy Pelosi in a plunging bathing suit revealing her cleavage."

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“The images were plastered onto her computer and elsewhere throughout the office,” the suit alleges. “Apparently, the ‘joke’ was that Speaker Pelosi looked terrible in a bathing suit.”

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US Home Prices Fall for First Time in 11 Years as Sales Spike 14.5% in a Month
By - Mary Manley

Data released on Tuesday by the NAR shows that existing-home sales dropped by 0.2% from the previous year to a current cost of $363,000. Home sales last month were still 22.6% lower than they were in February of 2022.
Sales of US homes recorded an eyebrow-raising jump as lowered pricetag figures pulled buyers back into the housing market, effectively breaking a 12-month decline across the industry.
Data released by the National Association of Realtors on Tuesdaydetailed that US home sales rose by 14.5% in February when compared to January figures, which brought the (seasonally adjusted) annual rate to 4.58 million units in February.
The stat marks the largest increase of home sales since July 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first caused a shocking increase in demand for homes.
"Conscious of changing mortgage rates, home buyers are taking advantage of any rate declines," Lawrence Yun, the chief economist at NAR, said in a statement. "Moreover, we’re seeing stronger sales gains in areas where home prices are decreasing and the local economies are adding jobs."
Yun adds that the need for homes in the US remains high, so properties are seeing multiple offers during sales. At the end of February there were only 980,000 homes for sale, which represents a 2.6-month supply, but realtors warn that a level market should have a 4- to 6-month supply.
Average costs for existing homes fell the most in the western US (by about 5.6%). Sales in this region also increased the most, with the number of units being sold rising to 19.4 % in February resulting in an annual rate of 860,000.
The US Midwest saw average home costs rise by 5%, while the US South saw costs rise by 2.7% compared to the average sale costs for these regions in 2022. Existing home sales for February rose in the Midwest by 13.5%, and rose in the South by 15.9%.
Home sale reports for February are based on closings, meaning many of the contracts which make up this spike were likely signed throughout January, when 30-year mortgage rates first fell to around 6%.

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US Ambassador Has ‘Thick Skin’ Because of Interference Record – Chinese Embassy in Canada

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\WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) – The Chinese Embassy in Ottawa said the reason why the US Ambassador to Canada David Cohen has developed "thick skin" is because of his country's record of foreign interference supported by credible evidence.

On Tuesday, the Chinese Embassy issued a series of tweets related to an interview Cohen gave earlier, where he talked about developing a certain level of skepticism and "thick skin" over the years when asked about his concerns regarding alleged electoral interference in Canada by China.

"The most possible reason why some diplomat of the U.S. said he develops a "thick skin" is that there are so many accusations of the U.S. interfering in other countries' internal affairs. Those accusations are supported by credible evidence," the embassy tweeted.

As shown in a report released by the University of Ottawa, US conservative media such as Fox News, and other politicians actively supported far-right extremists in Canada, the Embassy said, noting it represents a far greater threat to Canadian democracy.

The Embassy also listed the many instances of US military intervention, direct or indirect, across the globe since World War II, such as the Korean War, Washington's intervention in Vietnam, and both invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

This "caused immense civilian casualties and property losses as well as humanitarian catastrophes," the Embassy continued.

Additionally, the Chinese mission reminded that the so called "wars on terrorism" have killed nearly a million people, of whom at least 335,000 were civilians, while also injuring and displacing "tens of millions".

Moreover, forcing American-style democracy upon Iraq, totally disregarded the country's national conditions, the Embassy continued, noting that it only aggravated internal armed conflicts.

Chinese-Canadian relations have significantly deteriorated over the past months, notably, since Ottawa accused China, its Embassy, and diplomatic corps in Canada, of allegedly meddling in the country's elections of 2019 and 2021, allegations repeatedly rejected by Beijing.

Last week, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed an "Independent" Special Rapporteur to analyse the extent of the alleged Chinese and other foreign interference in Canada's elections.

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US May See Another 50 Banks Close Amid Crisis, Recession Now 'Certain' - Ex-Lehman Exec

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The United States may see another fifty bank failures if the US government does take appropriate action to fix structural issues and the central bank fails to cut interest rates, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

On March 10, federal regulators seized Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) - the largest US bank to collapse since the 2008 financial crisis and the second largest implosion in the country's history. Two days later, the New York-based Signature Bank was seized in the third largest bank

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collapse in US history, which forced the federal government to take emergency measures and guarantee deposits to stem the crisis, which many blame on rising interest rates.

The US banking crisis has already affected several states around the globe including in Europe. Credit Suisse's share price plunged nearly 30%, sparking concerns about a liquidity crunch. The incident followed the recent collapse of several US financial institutions, including Silicon Valley Bank (SVB).

Later on Wednesday, the US Federal Reserve is widely expected to raise interest rates for the ninth time since last March in its battle against inflation, despite the fact many point to rising interest rates as a primary cause of the banking crisis.

"Yeah, because it's just after the financial crisis, and this all goes back to Lehman," McDonald said when asked if more US banks may be expected to collapse. "So Lehman failed and then it forced this too big to fail system, and then now this interest rate shock to the regional banks is moving hundreds of billions of dollars out of regional banks into the big banks... So you could have another 50 bank failures and unless they fix the structural problem."

McDonald, who served as the vice president of distressed debt and convertible securities trading at Lehman Brothers, added that Washington may be forced to put forward a much larger backstop that covers deposits larger than $250,000.

Bloomberg reported on Tuesday that the US Treasury Department is reviewing whether federal regulators have sufficient emergency authority to insure deposits that exceed the current $250,000 limit for most accounts without approval from the US Congress.

NEXT EXPECTATION IN BANKING CRISIS, FED RESPONSE

The crisis has already affected countries in Europe with UBS moving to acquire and save distressed bank Credit Suisse which suffered a liquidity crisis in the wake of SVB's collapse.

McDonald also said the probability of a recession occurring in the United States is now certain following a banking crisis spurred by frequent interest hikes.

"There's a loss of confidence, financial conditions rips tighter, so the consumer is wounded," McDonald said. "This is in the process of wounding that [current US consumer] boom. The probability of recession is now I think certain."

McDonald said the Federal Reserve's strategy to hike interest rates to combat inflation is essentially creating "another fire." He expects the US banking crisis will cause further damage in the American economy, forcing the Federal Reserve to scale back on interest rate hikes and require Washington to further intervene to secure deposit guarantees.

"The Fed probably cuts rates by 100 basis points by year end, and then unemployment is really going to move here in the next five months, higher, and then we'll get some type of Washington policy response that's bigger and then they'll stabilize the system," McDonald said.

McDonald predicts the US government may spend up to $2 trillion to stabilize the US banking system.

Last week, US banks borrowed a record $153 billion from the Federal Reserve, up from $5 billion the week before.

"Deposits are leaving [regional banks], so the Feds gonna be forced to cut rates, because you've pushed up the Fed Funds rates so high," McDonald said. "[Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome] Powell was on the Hill 10 days ago telling us that the banking system was fine and he doesn't understand this like interest rate risk for the regional banks and it's unconscionable... he was either lying or didn't understand what he's done. It's one of the two."

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GLOBAL IMPACT

McDonald said Russia and China should be more resilient to the impact of the US banking crisis, but Beijing will not be able to completely shield its economy from the fallout considering it is exposed to the European economy and US consumer.

"China is very exposed to the European economy and the US consumer, so China doesn't avoid this at all," McDonald said.

On the other hand, Russia benefits from the fallout because it increases the value of their hard assets, such as gold, McDonald said.

"They [Russia and China] benefit because they're hard asset countries, you know, they benefit from higher gold prices," McDonald said.

However, McDonald pointed out that Russia will be hurt by its oil industry as its current account is starting to roll over.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the countries of the so-called collective West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated in a $60 price cap imposed by the G7 member states and Australia on December 5.

Western sanctions may have weakened some global banks heading into the current shakeup, but it did not play any critical role in the current dilemma, McDonald said.

"Sanctions weaken some of the global banks, you would have had maybe some more assets, but I wouldn't say that's a game changer," McDonald said.

Europe, however, is the region most feeling the ripple effects from the United States.

"We're already seeing leveraged loans, high yield bonds, we're seeing a pretty sharp deterioration in credit conditions, and so equities are bouncing, which they always do on the policy responses," McDonald said. "So we had a big response in Europe. So the European banks have bounced sharply because there's this big merger between Credit Suisse and UBS. You want to use these rallies to sell to lighten on equities."

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US Fed Chair Failed to Grasp Regional Bank Interest-Rate Risk - Ex-Lehman Executive

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell must not have understood the risk constant interest rate hikes to combat inflation would have on US regional banks.

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve is widely expected to raise interest rates for the ninth time in a year in a bid to combat inflation. The move comes after the second and third largest bank failures in US history, which many point to interest rate hikes as a primary cause.

"Powell was on the Hill [two weeks] ago telling us that the banking system was fine... he doesn't understand this like interest rate risk for the regional banks - and it's unconscionable," McDonald said. "He was either lying or didn't understand what he's done. It's one of the two."

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Russia's Hard Assets Benefit From US Banking Crisis, Raises Gold Price - Ex-Lehman Exec

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - Russia benefits from the current US banking crisis because it increases the value of its gold assets, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

Earlier in March, the US saw the second and third largest bank failures in the country's history, forcing the federal government to take emergency measures and guarantee deposits to stem the crisis.

"Yeah, they [Russia and China] benefit because they're hard asset countries… they benefit from higher gold prices," McDonald said when asked if Russia and China will be affected by the crisis.

However, McDonald, who served as the vice president of distressed debt and convertible securities trading at Lehman Brothers, pointed out that Russia will be hurt by its oil industry as its current account is starting to roll over.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the countries of the so-called collective West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated in a $60 price cap imposed by the G7 member states and Australia on December 5.

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China Cannot Avoid Being Impacted by US Banking Crisis - Ex-Lehman Exec

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - China cannot avoid being impacted by the US banking crisis given how highly exposed it is to American consumers and Europe's economy, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

On March 10, federal regulators took over Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) in the largest US bank to collapse since the 2008 financial crisis and the second largest implosion in the country's history. Two days later, the New York-based Signature Bank was seized in the third largest bank collapse in US history, which forced the federal government to take emergency measures and guarantee deposits to stem the crisis.

"China is very exposed to the European economy and the US consumer, so China doesn't avoid this at all," McDonald said.

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Fed Must Cut Interest Rates or US Banking Crisis May Worsen - Ex-Lehman Executive

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The US banking crisis will cause further damage unless the Federal Reserve scales back on interest rate hikes and Washington bails out banks by securing deposit guarantees, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

"There's going to be further damage," McDonald said. "They have to cut rates and then they have to have a deposit guarantee, a larger one, that's what they're going to come up with... That's a bailout. That's basically the federal government taking on bank deposit risk."

McDonald, who served as the vice president of distressed debt and convertible securities trading at Lehman Brothers, added that Washington may be forced to put forward a much larger backstop that covers deposits larger than $250,000.

The US Federal Reserve is widely expected to hike interest rates for the ninth time in a year. Earlier this month, the government was forced to take emergency measures after the second and third largest bank failures in US history. Regulators seized Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) on March 10, two days before New York-based Signature Bank collapsed.

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US May See Another 50 Banks Close if Structural Problems Not Fixed - Ex-Lehman Executive

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The United States may see another fifty bank failures if the US government does take appropriate action to resolve structural issues, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

Earlier in March, the US saw the second and third largest bank failures in the country's history, forcing the federal government to take emergency measures and guarantee deposits. Many attribute the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and New York's Signature Bank to soaring interest rates, which the Federal Reserve is widely expected to raise for the ninth time later on Wednesday.

"Yeah, because it's just after the financial crisis, and this all goes back to Lehman," McDonald said when asked if more US banks may be expected to collapse. "So Lehman failed and then it forced this too big to fail system, and then now this interest rate shock to the regional banks is moving hundreds of billions of dollars out of regional banks into the big banks... So you could have another 50 bank failures... unless they fix the structural problem."

McDonald, who served as the vice president of distressed debt and convertible securities trading at Lehman Brothers, added that Washington may be forced to put forward a much larger backstop that covers deposits larger than $250,000.

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Probability of Recession in US 'Certain' Amid Banking Crisis - Ex-Lehman Brothers Exec

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WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The probability of a recession occurring in the United States is now certain amid a financial crisis rooted in interest rate hikes that led to the second and third largest bank failures in US history, former Lehman Brothers executive Lawrence McDonald told Sputnik.

On March 10, federal regulators seized Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) - the largest US bank to collapse since the 2008 financial crisis and the second largest implosion in the country's history. Two days later, the New York-based Signature Bank was seized in the third largest bank collapse in US history, which forced the federal government to take emergency measures and guarantee deposits to stem the crisis.

"There's a loss of confidence. Financial conditions rips tighter, so the consumer is wounded," McDonald said. "This is in the process of wounding that [current US consumer] boom. The probability of recession is now, I think, certain."

McDonald, who served as the vice president of distressed debt and convertible securities trading at Lehman Brothers, said the Federal Reserve's strategy to raise interest rates to combat inflation is essentially creating "another fire."

Later on Wednesday, the US Federal Reserve is widely expected to raise interest rates for the ninth time since last March.

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IMF Says Reached Staff-Level Agreement on $15.6Bln Loan Program for Ukraine

(Updates with more details in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced that it has reached a staff-level agreement on a $15.6 billion loan program for Ukraine.

"I am pleased to announce that the IMF team has reached a staff-level agreement with the Ukrainian authorities on a four-year IMF-supported program, with access requested of SDR 11.6 billion (US$15.6 billion), or 577% of Ukraine’s quota," IMF delegation chief Gavin Gray said in a statement on Tuesday.

The agreement is subject to approval by the IMF executive board, which is expected to meet in the coming weeks to consider it.

Gray said the IMF expects to see a gradual economic recovery in Ukraine, noting that economic activity is improving in many sectors, including in critical infrastructure.

However, developing a single baseline outlook scenario under exceptionally high uncertainty is exceedingly challenging, as a range of outcomes are plausible, Gray said.

"On that basis, staff currently sees real GDP growth for 2023 ranging from -3 to +1 percent," Gray said.

The IMF-supported program is based on a two-phased approach, Gray said.

The first phase may take 12-18 months to improve fiscal, external, price and financial stability by bolstering revenue mobilization, eliminating monetary financing and aiming at net positive financing from domestic debt markets, Gray said.

The second phase would shift focus to more expansive reforms to entrench macroeconomic

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stability, support recovery and early reconstruction, and enhance resilience and higher long-term growth, including in the context of Ukraine's EU accession goals, Gray added.
US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen issued a separate statement in which she welcomed the IMF announcement. The agreement came about as a result of long-term collaborative work between the IMF and the Ukrainian government, Yellen added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-CHINA TALKS
* Russia and China intend to strengthen dialogue on the World Trade Organization (WTO) agenda, including the organization's reform, according to a joint statement by the two countries on Tuesday.
* The two countries have agreed to support each other's core interests, the joint statement said.
* Russia and China insist that NATO must comply with its own obligations on the regional and defensive nature of the alliance, the joint statement said.
* The two countries support full resumption of the Iran nuclear agreement, the joint statement said.
* Russia and China express serious concern over plans by the AUKUS partnership to build nuclear submarines, the joint statement said.
* Moscow and Beijing express concern that the United States is taking' active steps to create a global missile defense system and deploy ground-based intermediate and short-range missiles in the Asia Pacific and Europe, the joint statement said.
* China is positively assessing the Russian readiness to make efforts on restarting peace talks on Ukraine as soon as possible, the joint statement said.

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* The talks between the Russian and Chinese government delegations on Tuesday were highly productive, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

* Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday that he is not aware of the United States providing depleted uranium munitions to Ukraine following the United Kingdom's decision to provide Ukrainian forces with the armor-piercing rounds.
* The United States will provide Ukraine with the M1A1 variant of the Abrams main battle tank instead of the M1A2 variant as was initially planned in order to expedite delivery to this fall, Ryder said.
* NATO allies have so far delivered military support to Ukraine worth $70 billion, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.
* The United States is not still considering supplying F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, but rather is focusing on delivering weapons that Kiev will soon need the most, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.
* The decision of the United Kingdom to provide Kiev with depleted uranium tank ammunition undermines stability in the world, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday.
* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned the United Kingdom that there would be few red lines left uncrossed if it delivered on its promise to give Ukraine depleted uranium weapons.
* China's peace plan for Ukraine can be taken as a basis for a peaceful settlement, but only when the collective West and Kiev are ready for it, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

NEW IRAN-RELATED SANCTIONS

* The United States has imposed new Iran-related sanctions on three individuals and four companies, including from Turkey, the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control said on Tuesday.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday he had in-depth talks on the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline project with visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping.
* The issues of energy cooperation were discussed in detail during talks with China, Putin said.
* Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom and the China Atomic Energy Authority have signed a long-term cooperation program, Putin said.
* For the eighteenth year in a row, Gazprom has ensured an increase in gas reserves above production, newly added reserves amounted to 529.2 billion cubic meters of gas in 2022, the company said.
* Russia is negotiating participation of Chinese partners in the construction of an LNG plant and a gas chemical complex in Ust-Luga, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.
* Russia is now close to achieving the target oil production cuts of 500,000 barrels per day, planned from March, it will be reached in the coming days, Novak said.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trudeau Orders Chief of Staff to Testify on Chinese Influence in Scandal - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau bowed to growing pressure and agreed on Tuesday to order his office's Chief of Staff Katie Telford to testify before an investigative committee involving foreign interference in Canada's federal elections.

"Ms. Telford has agreed to appear at the Procedure and House Affairs Committee as part of their study," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

Telford is scheduled to testify before the committee by the middle of next month for what is expected to be a two hour session.

Trudeau has claimed to be ignorant of official reports that 11 members of his ruling Liberal Party had accepted foreign money, primarily from Chinese sources, for their election campaigns.

Earlier on Tuesday, opposition deputies from the leftwing New Democratic Party, the rightwing Conservative Party and the Parti Quebecois pressed the government in the House of Commons on what information had been kept from him, who decided not to tell him, or whether he knew all along.

To defuse the scandal, Trudeau appointed David Johnston as a new special rapporteur to probe the election interference allegations while his ministers insist there is no evidence that there was any foreign influence in any of his three general election victories.

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Grand Jury Vote Expected Wednesday In Context of Trump’s Possible Indictment - Report

NEW YORK, March 21 (Sputnik) - The Manhattan grand jury will most probably vote on Wednesday about whether to indict Trump for hush-money payments during his 2016 presidential campaign, NewsNation said on Tuesday, citing a source.

Earlier on Tuesday, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said the authorities have been monitoring social media regarding the Trump case and that the NYPD were on the lookout for illegal actions. New York City has increased its police presence in all five of its boroughs.

Over the weekend, Trump shared on his social media platform, Truth Social, that he was to be arrested on March 21. "PROTEST, TAKE OUR NATION BACK!" Trump said in the post. On March 18, an NYPD representative told Sputnik that police officers in New York were on standby in light of the former president's call for action posted on social media.

Trump's possible arrest is connected with alleged illegal payments to adult film star Stormy Daniels in 2016 in a bid to prevent her from disclosing their 2006 sexual affair. Trump has dismissed his connection to Daniels as well as any other felony on his part. He also refused to testify before the jury.

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US Sees No Sign China Plans to Provide Lethal Aid to Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States sees no sign that China plans to provide Russia with lethal aid for its special military operation in Ukraine, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We don't think that China's taking it off the table but they haven't moved in that direction," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We've seen no indication that they're about to or fixing to provide lethal weapons."

Kirby added that the defense relationship between Russia and Iran is growing sharper.

Kirby's comments come amid Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow this week on the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is Xi's first trip abroad after his reelection for a third term in office earlier in March.

On Monday evening, Putin and Xi met informally for four-and-a-half-hours in the Kremlin. However, official talks began on Tuesday and Putin described them as highly productive to strengthening bilateral ties.

Western countries significantly increased their economic and military support for Ukraine after Russia launched a special military operation there on February 24, 2022. The support well exceeds $100 billion and includes air defense and multiple rocket launching systems, tanks, self-propelled artillery, anti-aircraft guns, armored vehicles and various types of ammunition.

Russia has warned against further arms supplies that could mean direct involvement of the United States and NATO in the conflict.

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Oil Prices Rise 2nd Day in Row as Banking Crisis Abates

NEW YORK, March 21 (Sputnik) - Crude prices rose a second day in a row on Tuesday as worries over a US banking crisis ebbed, helping turn traders attention towards a likely drop in inventories in the world's largest oil consumer.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude settled up $1.69, or 2.5%, adding to Monday's advance of 1.4%. Just on Monday, WTI fell to as low as $64.38, marking a bottom not seen since December 2021. For the whole of last week, the US crude benchmark fell almost $10 a barrel or 13%.

London-traded Brent crude settled up $1.53, or 2.1%, at $75.32 per barrel on Tuesday, adding to the previous day's rise of 1.1%. The global crude benchmark sank to a 15-month low of $70.12 Monday, after finishing last week down 13%.

A technical rebound also appears to have set into oil and could take WTI higher, back into the $70-per-barrel territory it was perched at before the tumble, said Sunil Kumar Dixit, chief technical strategist at SKCharting.com.

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"Oil continues to trade with positive bias as prices test Intraday high of $69.50 , slightly above the 5-Day EMA of $68.90," Dixit said in a text to Sputnik, referring to the Exponential Moving Average. "As long as prices sustain above $68.50, we expect some more up move towards $70."

Crude prices cratered last week on concerns that a US-to-Europe banking crisis could spill over into the broader global economy, denting activity and potentially damaging demand for oil. Fears of slowing demand have weighed heavily on oil markets this year, keeping prices largely depressed.

Worries over the liquidity crisis at banks, however, have abated since midday Monday as Swiss investment bank UBS said it will acquire beleaguered peer Credit Suisse and JPMorgan appeared to make progress in the rescue of First Republic Bank, after last week's federal takeover of regional banks Silicon Valley and Signature.

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US Admits China, Russia Grew Ties Over Time But Does Not Consider Their Relations Alliance

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby on Tuesday admitted that China and Russia have been developing ever closer relations over the past several years now, but stopped short of calling the relationship an alliance.

"I think you've seen over the years how these two kinds of countries go on growing close together," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said he does not consider the closer ties between Russia and China an alliance and called it a "marriage of convenience" instead.

Russia and China are interested in serving as a counterweight to US and NATO influence, Kirby added.

Kirby's comments were in relation to Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow this week on the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is Xi's first trip abroad after his reelection for a third term in office earlier in March.

On Monday evening, Putin and Xi met informally for four-and-a-half-hours in the Kremlin. However, official talks began on Tuesday and Putin described them as highly productive to strengthening bilateral ties.

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US Hasn't Seen Anything From Putin-Xi Meeting Implying Swift End to Ukraine Conflict-Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has not seen anything resulting from the meeting between Russia's President Putin and China's President Xi suggesting a timely

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ending of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, National Security Council Special Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"I don't think the meeting today gives us great expectations that the war is going to end anytime soon," said Kirby during a press briefing.

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If China Seeks Constructive Role It Must Press Russia to Pull Troops From Ukraine - Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - China should urge Russia to pull its troops out of Ukraine if it wants to take on a constructive role in the conflict, national Security Council Special Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"If China wants to play a constructive role here in this conflict than they ought to press Russia to pull its troops out of Ukraine and Ukrainian sovereign territory," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says US on 'Expedited Timeline' to Deliver Patriot System to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will keep to its "expedited timeline" to deliver the Patriot air and missile defense system to Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"I'm not going to get into delivery timelines, other than to say that we're confident that we'll be able to get the Patriots there on an expedited timeline," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Ryder's statement comes after media reported that the Defense Department aims to refurbish existing M1A1 Abrams main battle tank hulls instead of building new tanks in order to get them to Ukraine faster.

Sixty-five Ukrainian soldiers are currently undergoing training on how to operate the Patriot system at the Fort Sill base in the US state of Oklahoma. Once they finish the training in the United States, the soldiers are then expected to continue preparations on operating the Patriot system in Europe.

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US Aware of Reports Saudis Released US-Saudi National From Prison - State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports that Saudi Arabia released a US-Saudi dual national from prison, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We are aware of reports that a US citizen was released from prison in Saudi Arabia and of course we welcome this news, but there's a limit to any further detail that I'm able to get into given privacy considerations," Patel said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, media reported that Saudi Arabia released dual citizen Saad Ibrahim Almadi from prison more than a year after he was imprisoned for posting tweets criticizing the kingdom.

Although Almadi was released from prison, he is currently in Riyadh placed under a travel ban, according to media reports.

Last October, the State Department said Almadi was sentenced to 16 years in prison for tweets critical of the Saudi government.

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US 'Extremely Troubled' by Israel Lifting Ban on West Bank Settlements - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is "extremely troubled" by the Israeli parliament's approval of a new law lifting the prohibition on settlements in the West Bank, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"The United States is extremely troubled that the Israeli Knesset has passed legislation descending important parts of the 2005 Disengagement law, including the prohibition on establishing settlements in the northern West Bank," Patel said during a press briefing.

At least one settlement has been built on private Palestinian land, which is illegal under Israeli law, Patel said.

"Deescalating and reducing violence are in all parties' interests, including the Israelis. The United States strongly urges Israel to refrain from allowing the return of settlers to this area," Patel said.

Establishing settlements represents a barrier on the way to a diplomatic solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he added.

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US Provides $50Mln in New Assistance for Turkey, Syria After Earthquakes – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) –The United States will provide an additional $50 million in humanitarian assistance for Turkey and Syria to support people affected by the devastating earthquakes, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We support and applaud our international partners who raised $7.5 billion in earthquake

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assistance pledges for Turkey and Syria at yesterday's EU-hosted International Donors Conference in Brussels. During this conference, the US announced we are providing an additional $50 million in urgent humanitarian assistance to help earthquake-affected communities in Turkey and Syria," Patel told reporters.

This brings total US humanitarian assistance to both countries to $235 million, he added.

Earlier in the day, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the EC would allocate one billion euros to Turkey and over 108 million euros to Syria for reconstruction.

Other participants of the conference also pledged to allocate additional financial assistance to the affected countries. Finland will provide 12 million euros for the reconstruction of Turkey and Syria, according to the Finnish Foreign Ministry. Romania also promised to add 1.3 million euros to the humanitarian effort. The Swiss Federal Council announced the country will allocate $9.1 million to support people that have suffered from the disaster.

The European Union's total pledge has reached 3.6 billion euros, which is over 50% of a total of 7 billion euros raised for Turkey and Syria by both the EU and its international partners, a statement released by the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU said.

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Existing US Home Sales Reverse 12-Month Slide in Feb, Up Most Since July 2020 - Realtors

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – Sales of existing homes in the United States reversed a 12-month slide in February to post the largest monthly percentage growth since July 2020, despite sales being down year-on-year, the country's leading realtors group said Tuesday.

"Conscious of changing mortgage rates, home buyers are taking advantage of any rate declines," Lawrence Yun, chief economist of the National Association of Realtors, said. "Moreover, we're seeing stronger sales gains in areas where home prices are decreasing and the local economies are adding jobs."

Total existing-home sales — including single-family homes, townhomes, condominiums and co-ops — vaulted 14.5% from January to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.58 million in February, the realtors' group said.

Year-over-year, sales fell 22.6%, sliding from 5.92 million in February 2022.

Sales jumped for February as the median existing-home price for all housing types in February fell 0.2% to $363,000, from the February 2022 level of $363,700, the association reported.

"This ends a streak of 131 consecutive months of year-over-year increases, the longest on record," Yun said. "Inventory levels [for homes] are still at historic lows. Consequently, multiple offers are returning on a good number of properties."

Property prices also dropped as average mortgage, or lending rates, softened from recent highs, the realtors group said.

According to national mortgage agency Freddie Mac, the 30-year fixed-rate on mortgages averaged 6.6% as of March 16. That was down from 6.73% from the previous week but up from 4.16% a year ago.

Properties typically remained on the market for 34 days in February, up from 33 days in

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January and 18 days in February 2022, the realtors group said, adding that 57% of homes sold in February were on the market for less than a month.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008/09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Following that, the property market had been mostly buoyant on the back of steady economic growth and demand from buyers, although surging inflation, interest rates and borrowing costs over the past year have put a damper on the sector.

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Pentagon Says Giving Ukraine M1A1 Abrams Tanks Variant to Expedite Delivery

(Update: adds details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Ukraine with the M1A1 variant of the Abrams tank instead of the M1A2 variant as initially planned in order to expedite delivery of the platform to this fall, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"After further study and analysis… the Defense Department, in close coordination with Ukraine, has made the decision to provide the M1A1 variant of the Abrams tank, which will enable us to significantly expedite delivery timelines and deliver this important capability to Ukraine by the fall of this year," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The M1A2 variant would have taken more than a year to deliver, Ryder added.

The US will ensure that Ukrainian troops receive training on the tanks in time for their delivery, Ryder also said.

The Biden administration's decision to provide Abrams tanks to Ukraine represents an "extremely destructive step" that may escalate the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik earlier this year.

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Pentagon Says Not Aware of US Providing Depleted Uranium Munitions to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday that he is not aware of the United States providing depleted uranium munitions to Ukraine, following the United Kingdom's decision to provide Ukrainian forces with the armor-piercing rounds.

"Not to my knowledge, we are not," Ryder said during a press briefing, when asked whether the US is providing depleted uranium munitions.

On Monday, a member of the UK House of Lords confirmed that the UK will provide Ukraine with depleted uranium rounds, which are effective in fighting tanks.

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Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Tuesday that the delivery of depleted uranium rounds represents another red line crossed by the UK as a backer of Ukraine. Russia is running out of lines to be crossed, Shoigu added.

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TikTok Trackers Found on Over 2 Dozen US State Government Websites - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Web-tracking codes made by ByteDance, the parent company of the popular social media application TikTok, have been found on more than two dozen US state government websites, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

A Feroot Security review of the websites of more than 3500 organizations government entities found that tracking pixels made by ByteDance were present in state government websites of 27 US states.

TikTok pixels can be watching and recording you when you're renewing your driver's license, paying your taxes or filling out doctors' forms, the report quoted Feroot Security CEO Ivan Tsarynny as saying.

The trackers were placed by website administrators to measure the effectiveness of purchased advertising on TikTok, helping agencies determine how many individuals who saw advertisements on the application then visited a website or signed up for a service, the report said.

Any social media platform, data broker or advertising service that is using tracking pixels to monitor people's browsing across the web is violating the privacy of users visiting those websites, the report said.

Most troubling, individuals are being tracked on government websites even as they try to access information and services that are essential, EPIC Executive Director Alan Butler was quoted as saying in the report.

Tracking pixels are usually created by social media platforms or advertising companies and are ubiquitous on commercial websites, the report said.

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The free bits of software code are designed to support digital marketing and advertising by logging a visitor's interactions with the site, such as what is clicked on and the duration of a visit, the report also said.

Though created to bolster and better-direct advertising, the tracking pixels have been criticized by security experts for the threats they pose to society because their malleability in configuration makes them an easy method for collecting sensitive data users enter on websites they visit, the report added.

The more pixels a company has on websites, the better trackers can build detailed profiles of individual web users' habits, according to the report.

The report comes just days before TikTok's CEO Shou Chew is expected to appear before a Congressional committee to defend the application's fate in the United States given that lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are considering imposing a nation-wide ban.

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US to Expedite Patriot Air Defense System Delivery to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will expedite the delivery of the Patriot air defense system to Ukraine so it can arrive faster than expected, CNN reported on Tuesday.

A group of 65 Ukrainian soldiers will soon complete training on the Patriot system at the Fort Sill base in the US state of Oklahoma and then undergo additional preparations in Europe, the report said, citing US defense officials.

The soldiers will train on the two Patriot batteries, which will be deployed to Ukraine in the coming weeks, the report said.

The soldiers already possessed knowledge of air defense systems and that allowed US instructors to speed up the course, the report said.

Due to the soldiers' extensive air defense knowledge and experience in a combat zone, it was easier for them to grasp the Patriot's operations and maintenance concepts, the report quoted Fort Sill Commander Shane Morgan as saying.

Another defense official described the training course schedule as "aggressive," lasting from early morning until evening, the report added.

Assistant Army Secretary for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology Douglas Bush said earlier in March that the US-made Patriot batteries could arrive on the battlefields in Ukraine very soon.

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Russia, China Note CSTO's Positive Input on Cooperation Between Beijing, Block - Statement

MOSCOW, March 21 (Sputnik) - Russia and China have noted the positive contribution of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to the potential for developing cooperation

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between the alliance and Beijing, according to a joint statement published on Tuesday.
"The parties note the positive contribution of the Collective Security Treaty Organization to ensuring regional security, note the potential for developing cooperation between the CSTO and the PRC [the People's Republic of China] in order to ensure peace and stability in the region," the joint statement said following talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Moscow.

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Xi Says Agreed With Putin to Increase Energy Trade, Expand Cooperation in Digital Economy

MOSCOW, March 21 (Sputnik) – China and Russia have agreed to boost energy trade, expand cooperation in digital economy, as well as ensure continuity of logistics and a regular flow of transportation, President Xi Jinping said on Tuesday following his talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
"Our trade has grown by 116 percent over 10 years, which allowed us not only to solidify the basis for bilateral relations, but to give a powerful impetus to the socio-economic development of our countries," Xi said.
"President Putin and I agreed to… expand trade in energy resources and electrical products, to boost resilience of production and supply chains between the two sides, to expand cooperation in information technologies, digital economy, agriculture, to keep ensuring continuity of cross-border logistics and transportation," Xi added.
The Chinese president described his talks with President Putin as "frank, friendly and productive."

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Special Rapporteur to Study Extent of Foreign Interference in Canada's Elections - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has tasked Special Rapporteur on Foreign Interference David Johnston with assessing the extent of such activities in Canada's electoral processes, the Prime Minister's Office said on Tuesday.
"As Independent Special Rapporteur, Mr. Johnston is being tasked with assessing the extent and impact of foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes, including by examining information related to the 2019 and 2021 federal elections to determine what the government did to defend Canada against electoral interference," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.
Johnston will build on the work already done by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians and the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency, the statement said.

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The special rapporteur will identify issues requiring attention as to maintain Canadians' confidence in the country's democracy and elections, the statement said.

In addition, Johnston has been tasked to recommend any additional mechanisms or transparent processes, such as a formal public inquiry, that he deems necessary, the statement said.

Other tasks also include the identification of innovative approaches and other improvements that could be made in the joint work of Canada's public agencies, the statement said.

The special rapporteur will be allowed access to unclassified and classified records and documents as well as hold consultations with various governmental officials, institutions and agencies, the statement said.

Johnston will regularly hand reports to Trudeau, who will share them with the leaders of the parliamentary opposition parties, while also pledging to make them available to the Canadian public, the statement added.

The review is set to be completed by October 31, according to the statement.

Trudeau's decision to appoint Johnston has raised numerous questions among opposition parties and civil society about their integrity, given Johnston's links with Trudeau's family and membership in the Pierre Trudeau Foundation.

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Xi Paid Great Attention to China's Peace Initiatives for Ukraine During Talks – Putin

MOSCOW, March 21 (Sputnik) - During talks in Moscow, Chinese leader Xi Jinping paid great attention to Beijing's peace initiatives for the Ukraine conflict, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday.

"The President of PRC (the People's Republic of China) paid great attention to his peace initiatives during our face-to-face conversation yesterday," Putin told reporters following the talks with Xi Jinping.

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Norwegian Ambassador to US Says Oslo Serious About Survival of Arctic Council

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Norway is serious about the survival of the Arctic Council following the suspension of activities due to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Norwegian Ambassador to the United States Anniken Krutnes said on Tuesday.

"On the cooperation side, things have become a bit more difficult, to say it mildly. The activities of the Arctic Council were suspended last year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine," Krutnes said during a Wilson Center event. "From Norway's side, we are serious in making the Arctic Council survive this process."

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Norway is scheduled to take over the Arctic Council chairship from Russia in May. Norway's first priority will be an orderly transition from a Russian to a Norwegian chairship, Krutnes said.

Norway believes the Arctic Council is the most important forum for cooperation in the region and needs to continue to exist, Krutnes said.

The situation in Ukraine has caused trust issues in the Arctic region, Krutnes added.

The work of the Arctic Council should not be interrupted by the situation in Ukraine, US Senator for Alaska Lisa Murkowski said last month. However, countries cannot simply resume cooperation with Russia in light of the conflict, Murkowski also said.

Last week, Russian Foreign Ministry Ambassador-at-Large Nikolai Korchunov told Sputnik that Moscow is alarmed by reports of the US preparing for conflicts with both Russia and China in the Arctic.

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Republican Lawmakers Urge Biden to Send Cluster Bombs to Ukraine - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican lawmakers on Tuesday sent a letter to President Joe Biden urging him to send cluster munitions to Ukraine for use amid Russia's special military operation there.

"We write to urge you to immediately provide cluster munitions, such as dual purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM), to the Ukrainian Armed Forces," the letter said.

The letter was signed by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Jim Risch and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Roger Wicker, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers.

The lawmakers said supplying Ukraine with cluster munitions would help compensate for Russia's quantitative advantage in personnel and artillery rounds.

The United States has nearly three million cluster bombs in its inventory, mostly located on US bases as well as on allied bases in Europe.

The letter points out that although the Biden administration has said it fears providing Ukraine with cluster munitions could escalate the conflict, other countries have already provided such munitions to Kiev without a meaningful escalation of the conflict by Russia.

The lawmakers requested that Biden facilitate efforts to have allies send cluster munitions to Ukraine as well.

In February, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg rejected Ukraine's demands on the supply of cluster munitions, saying that the alliance delivered artillery and other types of weapons to Kiev and did not recommend deploying such bombs.

Numerous human rights organizations have said that cluster munitions pose an immediate threat to civilians during conflict as well as a post-conflict threat that effectively converts unexploded bomblets over large areas into de facto mine fields.

The 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions prohibits the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of such bombs. It also requires the destruction of stockpiles and clearance of areas

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contaminated by cluster munitions. More than 120 countries have joined the convention and are working to implement its provisions.

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US Lawmaker Says Will Subpoena Blinken if Afghanistan Withdrawal Docs Not Produced Soon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said on Tuesday that he will subpoena US Secretary of State Antony Blinken if the chief diplomat fails to produce documents related to the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan by Thursday.

"On March 3, 2023, I wrote to you regarding the State Department's ongoing failure to comply with the Committee's requests for documents and information concerning the Biden Administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. For the reasons outlined below, it is essential that you produce the items requested in advance of your March 23 testimony before the Committee," McCaul said in a letter to Blinken.

McCaul requested documents including a purported dissent cable sent by State Department officials in July 2021 warning of the rapid expansion of the Taliban's power and potential collapse of US-backed Afghan security forces, an after-action report on the withdrawal and the Kabul embassy's emergency evacuation plan. If Blinken does not provide the documents before 5:00 p.m. EDT (9:00 p.m. GMT) on March 22, the committee will proceed with the compulsory process, the letter said.

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Student Who Stabbed Teachers in Nova Scotia Charged on 11 Counts - Halifax Police

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - A student has been charged on 11 counts for allegedly stabbing two teachers at the Charles P. Allen High School in Bedford, Nova Scotia, the Halifax Regional Police said in a statement on Tuesday.

On Monday, police officers were dispatched to the high school after receiving complaints about the presence of weapons on school premises. The suspect, a 15-year-old student, was taken to a hospital with minor injuries and remains in custody.

"Halifax Regional Police have charged a youth in relation to the stabbing incident that occurred yesterday at Charles P. Allen High School in Bedford," the statement said.

The charges include attempted murder, aggravated assault, possession of a weapon dangerous to the public peace, carrying a concealed weapon, possessing a prohibited weapon and mischief, the statement added.

Halifax Regional Police said the investigation is still ongoing and encourages anyone who may

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have information related to the incident to communicate with them, according to the statement.

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UPDATE- US Imposes New Iran-Related Sanctions on 3 Persons, 4 Companies – Treasury
(Updates with additional details in paras 2, 4-5, 7-10)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new Iran-related sanctions on three individuals and four companies, including those from Turkey, the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said on Tuesday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), designated four entities and three individuals in Iran and Turkey for their involvement in the procurement of equipment, including European-origin engines of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in support of Iran's UAV and weapons programs," OFAC said in a press release.

The United States has subjected Iranian national Amanallah Paidar to secondary sanctions for his alleged link to the Iranian Defense Technology and Science Research Center, OFAC said in a press release.

According to the press release, Paidar has served as a commercial manager and procurement agent for the DTSRC and procured UAV related items, including inertial measurement units and attitude and heading reference systems.

Defense Technology and Science Research Center (DTSRC) is designated for being owned and subordinate to the Iranian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics' (MODAFL) Defense Industries Organization that was designated in 2007 for the development of Iran's nuclear and missile programs, the release said.

OFAC also imposed sanctions on Turkish national Murat Bukey and Iranian national Asghar Mahmoudi for their alleged link to Paidar, the release said.

Three Iranian companies have also been made subject to sanctions, including Defense Technology and Science Research Center, Farazan Industrial Engineering and Selin Technic, as well as one Turkish company, Ozone Havacilik My Savunma Sanayi Ticaret Anonim Sirketi, the release added.

It is alleged that Paidar established Farazan Industrial Engineering to acquire defense equipment for the DTSRC, and attempted to procure European-origin turbine engines applicable for UAVs and Iranian surface-to-air missiles, the release added.

Bukey is being designated for supporting Paidar's DTSRC-related procurement efforts. In 2018, he allegedly directed his associate to launch Ozone Havacilik Ve Savunma Sanayi Ticaret Anonim Sirketi to facilitate his business with Iran, the release said.

Asghar Mahmoudi has allegedly facilitated the supply of items, including marine electronics, to Paidar and the DTSRC using his ownership of Selin Technic Co to facilitate his business with Paidar and other designated military entities, according to the release.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Nominee for World Bank President Ajay Banga to Visit China Wednesday - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Ajay Banga, the US nominee for president of the World Bank, will visit China on March 22, the US Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"The US nominee for World Bank President Ajay Banga will visit Beijing, China, on March 22nd as the next stop on his global tour," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

In Beijing, Banga is scheduled to meet for discussions with the leadership of the People's Bank of China, senior government officials as well as with the president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the statement said.

Discussions will focus on how the World Bank can best meet its core development goals while addressing global challenges such as climate change, the statement added.

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New York Police Increased Its Presence in Five Boroughs to Prevent Possible Trump Protests

NEW YORK, March 21 (Sputnik) - The New York City Police Department (NYPD) has increased uniformed presence throughout the five boroughs amid possible Trump protests, but there are currently no credible threats to New York City, the NYPD spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"While you will see an increased uniformed presence throughout the five boroughs, there are currently no credible threats to New York City. The department remains ready and available to respond to protest and counter protests and will ensure everyone is able to peacefully exercise their first amendment rights," the NYPD statement said.

Earlier on Tuesday, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said the authorities have been monitoring social media regarding the Trump case and that the NYPD were on the look out for illegal actions.

Over the weekend, Trump shared on his social media platform, Truth Social, that he was to be arrested on March 21. "PROTEST, TAKE OUR NATION BACK!" Trump said in the post. On March 18, an NYPD representative told Sputnik that police officers in New York were on standby in light of the former president's call for action posted on social media.

Trump's possible arrest is connected with alleged illegal payments to adult film star Stormy Daniels in 2016 in a bid to prevent her from disclosing their 2006 sexual affair. Trump dismissed his connection to Daniels as well as any other felony on his part. He also refused to testify before the jury, which will decide whether to indict him on Tuesday.

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Yellen Says 'Utterly Essential' for Congress to Raise US Debt Limit to Avoid Catastrophe
WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday that it is "utterly essential" for Congress to raise or suspend the US debt limit and a failure to do so would be "absolutely catastrophic."

"I consider it utterly essential for Congress to act to raise or suspend the debt limit," Yellen said at the American Bankers Association summit.

Failing to raise the debt limit "would be absolutely catastrophic," Yellen also said and called on Congress to act promptly on the matter.

Yellen noted that Congress waited until the last minute to raise the debt ceiling in 2011 and this delay in response resulted in the US government's credit rating being downgraded for the first time in US history.

The downgrading of the US government's credit rating caused "substantial harm" to consumers, small business owners and the financial system, she said.

Yellen dismissed the idea that the Treasury Department should prioritize payments, saying that would be "risky and dangerous" as the system was built to pay all bills on time, not to pick and choose among them.

The treasury secretary characterized "prioritization" in this context as default by another name.

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Complex Military Threats Urge US to Research Its Resources, Reconsider Approach - General

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) –Intensification of international threats, particularly coming from Russia and China, requires the US military to research its resources and reconsider approaches to improve commander control, Director of Strategic Plans, Programs, and Requirements at Air Force Global Strike Command Maj Gen Jason Armagost said on Tuesday.

"The diversification of threats, the intensification of threat really has driven us to think, what our current resources are, how do we take an approach to really make our commander control better, make our targeting process is better," Armagost said during a virtual discussion, when asked about threats from China and Russia.

The US general noted that threats are amplifying and becoming more complex. He also urged colleagues to find lessons from Russia's current activity in Ukraine. "I think we need to take great care to not learn the wrong lessons, more than even the learning of the right lessons," he said.

Armagost also pointed out that the US has "real opportunities" in terms of its military equipment, particularly B-21 and B-52 bombers. Those opportunities provide fundamental questions, answering which will allow the US to challenge threats, he added.

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NORAD to Provide Air Security During Biden Visit to Canada - National Defense

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The North American Aerospace Defense Command will provide air security during US President Joe Biden's visit to the Canadian capital of Ottawa March 23-24, National Defense said on Tuesday.

"The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) Canadian Region will support the Royal Canadian Mounted Police by providing air security for the US President Joe Biden as he visits Ottawa, from March 23 to 24, 2023," National Defense said in a statement.

Residents of the national capital region may witness the presence of NORAD CF-18 Hornet fighter jets and CH-146 Griffon helicopters as soon as on Wednesday, the statement said.

The air security measures will last until Biden departs on March 24, the statement also said.

Civilian aviators are advised to consult NAV Canada, the company operating the country's civil air navigation systems, as the latter will be informing them of any potential flight restrictions, the statement added.

The White House announced earlier that Biden would visit Canada March 23-24 to hold talks with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on bilateral cooperation, modernization of NORAD and continued support for Ukraine.

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Inflation Pressure on US Households Increased Food Insecurity in 2021-2022 – Report

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The highest inflation rate in the United States in 40 years has hammered American families, saddling them with rising costs in food, rent, and health insurance, forcing heads of households to "Rob Peter to pay Paul," doing without, and increasing dependence on food pantries to supplement their meals, an Urban Institute report said Tuesday.

"With significant food price inflation in 2022 and the expiration of COVID-19 pandemic aid, food hardship has increased for many households across the country," the report's authors said. "… In December 2022, 63.2 percent of adults reported their household grocery costs increased a lot in the last year…"

Families had to devote much more of their limited incomes for a range of needs including gasoline, home heating, rent, childcare, health insurance, and mortgage payments. Meanwhile, the disparities between different ethnic groups were magnified, with Hispanic/Latinx and African Americans consistently at greater risk of food insecurity than their white counterparts between 2019 and 2022, reflecting longstanding disparities in opportunities and access to resources, the report said.

"Adults whose grocery costs increased a lot in 2022 relied on charitable food and other coping strategies but still faced high rates of food insecurity," the report found. "Adults whose grocery costs increased a lot were nearly twice as likely as other adults to be food insecure (29.0 percent vs. 16.5 percent)."

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As a result of recent price increases, “62.0 percent of adults whose grocery costs increased a lot reported either reducing the amount of food they bought or not buying the kinds of foods they wanted, 43.3 percent withdrew money from savings, and 36.3 percent increased credit card debt. About 16.5 percent received charitable food,” according to the report.

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Yellen Says Will Not Speculate at Present on Adjustments to Bank Supervision, Regulation

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday that she did not want to speculate on what adjustments should be made regarding bank supervision and regulation in the United States.

"There's time to evaluate whether some adjustments are necessary in supervision and regulation to address the root causes of the crisis," Yellen said at the American Bankers Association summit. "I don't want to speculate at this point on what those adjustments might be."

Yellen pointed out that she was currently focused on stabilizing the banking system and restoring the confidence of depositors.

The Treasury Secretary noted that the post-crisis reforms have greatly improved capital standards and other important improvements in supervision.

Yellen also said that Federal Reserve Vice Chair for Supervision Michael Barr would undertake a "thorough review" of Silicon Valley Bank’s recent failure and determine the next steps in dealing with the situation.

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US Imposes New Iran-Related Sanctions on 3 Persons, 4 Companies - Treasury

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release added.

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US Denies Russia Intercepted Bombers Over Baltic Sea, Flights Stayed in Estonia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Russia did not intercept any US bombers over the Baltic Sea on Monday despite claims to the contrary by the Russian Defense Ministry, US Air Forces Europe said.

On Monday, the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center reported the detection of two US B-52 strategic bombers flying toward Russia over the Baltic Sea. Russia scrambled a Su-35 fighter jet in response, which returned to its base without incident after the US aircraft left the area, the center said.

"Yesterday two B-52s conducted a long-range Bomber Task Force mission with NATO Allies and Partners in Estonian airspace," US Air Forces Europe said in a statement on Tuesday. "The flights remained within Estonian airspace the entire flight at an approx. distance of 50 nautical miles from Russian air space. At no point did B-52's make contact with Russian aircraft."

The mission was part of routine scheduled training operations and executed in accordance with international flight standards, the statement added.

Russia likewise claims the jet it had scrambled acted in accordance with international rules for the use of airspace.

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Senator Paul Says US Ought to Arrest Manhattan Prosecutor for Potential Trump Indictment

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States ought to arrest Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg in the event the prosecutor indicts former US President Donald Trump as anticipated, Senator Rand Paul said on Tuesday.

"A Trump indictment would be a disgusting abuse of power. The DA should be put in jail," Paul said via Twitter.

Last week, Trump said he expected to be arrested some time on Tuesday and called for protests, prompting an array of responses from lawmakers and law enforcement.

Authorities placed barricades outside the Manhattan Criminal Court on Monday ahead of the potential arrest, a Sputnik correspondent reported. The US Capitol Police in Washington are also elevating their security posture on Tuesday, according to US media reports.

Trump's potential arrest is linked to alleged payments made by the former president to adult film star Stormy Daniels in a bid to prevent disclosure of a sexual affair with him. Trump has denied all accusations.

Trump and other Republicans have also criticized Bragg, claiming the prosecution is politically

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motivated. Trump has alleged Bragg received more than $1 million from businessman George Soros and maintains close ties to the campaign of former political rival Hillary Clinton.

On Monday, a group of Republican lawmakers sent a letter to Bragg requesting testimony and documents related to the case, which they characterized as an “unprecedented abuse” of prosecutorial authority.

Trump does not appear to have been arrested by authorities as of 10:20 a.m. EDT Tuesday.

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Canada February Consumer Price Index Slows to 5.2%, Grocery Prices Remain High - StatCan

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Canada’s year-to-year Consumer Price Index (CPI) slowed to 5.2% in February following a 5.9% increase the month before, but grocery prices still remain high, Statistics Canada said in its monthly report on the CPI on Tuesday.

"The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 5.2% year over year in February, following a 5.9% increase in January. This was the largest deceleration in the headline CPI since April 2020," Statistics Canada said in the report.

Prices, excluding food and energy, increased 4.8% year-over-year in February, compared to 4.9% in January, the report said.

The overall CPI, excluding mortgage rates, hit 4.7% in February compared to 5.4% the month before, the report said.

Despite the decrease in the rate of inflation, expenses remain elevated, the report said. This is particularly true for groceries, whose prices have risen by 10.6% in February on a year-to-year basis - a seventh consecutive double-digit increase, the report added.

Unfavorable weather in the produces' regions of origin and higher input costs, particularly regarding energy, packaging and animal feed, are the main causes for the elevated expenses, according to the report.

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