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12/21/23 Thursday

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Expert: Milquetoast US Support for Two-State Solution Created 'Trigger-Happy' Israeli Politics

The US is majorly responsible for the debacle in the Middle East thanks to decades of "unconditional support" for Israel, which made a two-state solution impossible even as Washington continued to tout it as the only way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a journalist told Sputnik.

Speaking to the British press recently, Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom Tzipi Hotovely flatly dismissed the two-state solution to decades of violence with the Palestinians.

"Israel knows today and the world should know now that the reason the Oslo Accords failed was because the Palestinians never wanted to have a state next to Israel, they want to have a state from the river to the sea," she said, calling the two-state solution created at Oslo "a formula that never worked, that created this radical people on the other side."

Since the accords were signed in 1993 and 1995, the creation of a separate state for Palestinians alongside Israel has been the default political position for Western states as well as the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and several Arab nations. US President Joe Biden recently castigated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, accusing it of rejecting the two-state-solution, to which Netanyahu responded by openly declaring his pride in sabotaging the creation of a Palestinian state.

The issue has received new attention since October 7, when the Palestinian group Hamas led an attack on Israeli border towns near Gaza that killed hundreds of Israeli civilians and soldiers, and triggered a massive Israeli assault on Gaza that has culminated in a ground invasion, the deaths of more than 20,000 Palestinians, and displacement of nearly all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

Veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday that both the Israelis and the Arab states have used the existence of Hamas as an excuse not to push forward on a two-state solution - a dynamic that has only helped fuel the right-wing radicalization of Israeli politics towards a total refusal to work with the Palestinians at all and a willingness to use war as the solution to all issues.

Radicalization of Israeli Politics

"Well, the problem with the Israelis, and particularly the Netanyahu government and people like Netanyahu, or all those radicals who vie among themselves for further radicalism in Israeli politics over the last three decades or so, that they dug behind groups and organizations like Hamas and that. But we all know that they supported Hamas in the formative stage," he said.

"And the other thing is - okay, let's put Hamas aside. There is the Palestinian Authority, the Fatah group, which has acknowledged Israel's right to exist in the Middle East. So, they came down from their earlier position to destroy Israel; but did Israel basically faithfully negotiate with the Palestinian Authority to give them a state, a proper state of their own? No. So basically any time there was a chance, and particularly in Washington, DC, there was an administration which

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was willing to negotiate a two-state solution, then they basically did everything to sabotage that. So there had been a proper set of negotiations through which a Palestinian state had come about in that part of the world, then there may not have been a Hamas organization altogether, or it would have been a very small organization in the fringes of Palestinian politics and the Palestinians would have basically taken care of that."

"So today, when the Israeli side is saying, well, there would be no two-state solution, they are also underlining the fact that they destroyed anything and everything, any basis on which a two-state solution could have been founded. Because look at [how] many settlers that they have built that that they have basically installed in the West Bank area to make sure that no two-state solution ever comes about."

Magnier said that especially since the Oslo Peace Accords, which ended the First Palestinian Intifada, or national uprising, Israeli politics "have become terribly radicalized" even compared to the 1960s and '70s, when Israel was fighting major wars against the Palestinians and surrounding Arab nations.

"Since the Israeli left basically dropped out of the race, Israeli politics became more and more radicalized. And this is, I think, the result of what happened at the time. And it is not only Netanyahu, but all the coalition partners that have very radical agendas. So with people like these in the saddle in Israeli politics, it is not easy to talk about peaceful things, because they are trigger-happy people. They think they can simply bomb one area after the other, they can order a huge military operation against either this or the other with disastrous consequences. But they don't seem to mind all that. I think this is where the problem is," he said.

"And the other problem is, okay, Netanyahu's popularity is going down these days and the main opposition leader, Yair Lapid, has been calling for it, calling on him to resign even before the end of the present operation," he said, adding that "basically there should have been more forceful American administrations over the last three decades or so to put pressure on Israel to bear. That could have smoothened things down a bit, and it would have also paved the way for a comprehensive solution on the basis of two states."

'They Duck Behind Hamas'

Magnier said he was "at the very cautious end of the argument" that the Arab states, even those that have formal relations with Israel, are either willing or able to stop the Israeli assault on Gaza.

"Because, again, the way they seem to look at the whole issue is similar to the Israeli politicians in a way: they duck behind Hamas again. So, Hamas is a radical organization which may be what it is, you know. So there is a lot of truth in what they say. Hamas is being very critical of all the Arab regimes, of all the Arab governments, of all the Arab states, you know. And that makes things difficult for an Arab unity of some sort. In the 1950s, '60s, even in the 1970s, there was always some degree of Arab unity among the Arab states. But that has largely gone because of their internecine fighting over many things. But these radical Islamic organizations like Hamas, with their very radical Islamist views over how to run their government, and their criticism of all their neighboring Arab states."

"So on the one hand, one could say that, yes, Israel is ducking behind Hamas in order to eradicate basically entirely the whole [Palestinian] people. But at the same time, the Arab governments don't want to get involved in this, and then the pretext is, again, Hamas, that it is

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all because of them. But the problem is, Hamas' popularity is increasing not only in the West Bank, but in the streets of the Arab world," he observed.

"So what all this would actually translate itself into in terms of political results? We don't know yet," Magnier said. "But on the other hand, if Israel, after finishing, in whatever form, its operation in the south against Hamas, turns on Hezbollah in the north, and then starts a fight there, then then it would turn into a regional confrontation with Iranian proxies getting involved in various ways in Iraq in particular, and in the Persian Gulf area, including Yemen, and even Iran itself."

"Now, there are calls in the United States saying that unless the United States bombs Iran, then then you can't basically eradicate all these radical movements. So we may be going towards that, or there's going to be some sort of sobering up in Washington in particular, thinking that, you know, this cannot go on like this, one way or the other. Or, perhaps Netanyahu being forced to resign and somebody else takes over, and then they would sort of start from a different basis on which, on the one hand, they can negotiate, on the one hand they can carry on with their policies in a trigger-happy way."

America's Debacle

Magnier noted that the failed US policy of supporting Israel to the hilt has created disastrous consequences for US foreign policy and domestic attitudes as well, creating openings for nations to rise that would otherwise be suppressed.

"In terms of the international geopolitics, one book I could say that the countries who challenged the United States-led unipolar world order, like Russia, China and others, and all the medium-sized countries who don't want to see the continuation of this unipolar world order, are sort of happily watching what is happening, because the more US involvement in the Middle East in unwinnable wars, the better for all of them, because they get precious time to get on with their economic development, particularly in the case of China, and also to get their military preparations for a final showdown with the United States," Magnier said.

"The United States has been wasting its resources in the Middle East, and it is not the first time, but it has been wasting its resources over the last 30, 40 years in particular. And except the US military-industrial complex, which is always very happy with all these expenditures and what-have-you, the United States public basically gain nothing out of that except the world's wrath and the world's frustration. So on that issue, I'm quite optimistic about what Israel has been doing and the unconditional support and solidarity the United States and the Western world have displayed with Israel. They stood behind Israel and are bringing it into the open," he said.

Asked about the US' culpability in Israel's bombing campaign, particularly by sending Israel money and weapons it is using, Magnier questioned how able Biden would be to simply call up Netanyahu and demand a ceasefire.

"Well, I think things have changed over the decades. Maybe some 50 years ago, the United States had a lot of leverage over Israeli political decision-makers and all that. But these days, it seems it is the other way around. Whether the dog actually wags its tail or the tail is wagging the dog is difficult to say these days. The Israeli lobby and its power and strength over American politics, coupled with the military-industrial complex and their power and strength over US politics or US decision-making processes, is enormous. So we can easily talk about a US 'deep state' that wants war all over the world. So from that point of view, yes, it may be that the United

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States is losing its prestige and the United States has been criticized and in the eyes of the world public, its position has come down considerably and all that. But for the US deep state, none of this matters. They seem to have sold out."

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US Hopes New Polish Gov't Will 'Seize Initiative' and Become EU Leader

With a more pliant government in power in Warsaw, the US hopes it can pressure Poland into redoubling its dedication to the cause of supporting Ukraine and bring it more ideologically into line with the rest of the European Union and even become the bloc's leader, an expert told Sputnik. Still, the Polish far-right fears a betrayal by its rivals.

Since the nomination and approval of the pro-Brussels politician Donald Tusk to Poland's premiership earlier this month, analysts have fretted over the potential for a reversal of policies due to the departure of a more conservative and Eurosceptic government.

Former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, of the right-wing Law and Justice Party from which President Andrzej Duda also hails, struggled to walk a tightrope of adhering to NATO and EU policy and defending Poland's own national interests, particularly regarding the effects of the conflict in neighboring Ukraine on the Polish economy.

As Morawiecki's government prepared to leave office following the Sejm's no-confidence vote, ministers expressed fears that Tusk would backtrack on Warsaw's commitments to a military buildup. Last year, Morawiecki declared that Poland would have "the most powerful land forces in Europe."

"The Polish army must be so powerful that it does not have to fight due to its strength alone," he said.

Then-Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak took a swipe at Tusk's previous government, declaring: "We want peace, and if we want that we must prepare for war - in connection with that, we are strengthening the Polish Army in contrast to those who governed until 2015."

Speaking with a Polish news outlet Rzeczpospolita on Wednesday, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said Washington was not at all concerned about whether Warsaw would keep to its previously signed military contracts, which Błaszczak has suggested were in danger.

"What is also important is that we have so far had very good cooperation and support for Ukraine from Poland and we will continue to have it from the new government," O'Brien said. "I'm very encouraged by this. We know many members of the new authorities very well. We understand the values they defend. We are very happy to be able to work with them in the future."

However, O'Brien went on to say: "We really want Poland to be a leader in the European Union."

"I would like to emphasize that security cooperation between Poland and the US has always been very close, regardless of what the American administration and what the Polish government was like," he said. "Today, we really want Poland to be a leader in the European Union. And this is the declared goal of the new government."

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Mateusz Piskorski, political observer and columnist for the Myśl Polska (Polish Thought) newspaper, told Sputnik that such a shift toward Warsaw "speaks to Washington's lack of trust in Germany," the largest country in Western Europe, who it had previously regarded as the EU's leader.

"Despite all the pro-American statements of the German authorities, all Washington still retains a certain level of mistrust of Berlin," he said.

"So naturally, the Biden administration - and I think that any American administration - will actually emphasize the role of Poland and other countries in the European Union. Plus, of course, I think it's also a matter of protocol."

"In Poland, as a result of the elections, those politicians came to power who, due to ideological considerations and various connections from the past, have more trusting relationships with American democrats than the previous Polish government," he observed. "This means that the conflict associated with, for example, issues of minority rights and so on, which previously were the reason for the conflict between Warsaw and Washington, have already disappeared. Therefore, within the framework of a certain protocol, such statements are made to welcome the new Polish government and the new political forces that have come to power."

"In the long term, we can say that since the accession of Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the European Union, certain processes, geopolitical processes, have been under way. Or more precisely, the United States hopes that those countries that are close to Washington will seize the initiative in Europe. Even then, some were saying that the United States is counting on certain countries, including Poland, to represent its interests in the European Union. Therefore, there is essentially nothing new in this statement."

Piskorski said he "very much doubts" that Poland and the US have offensive plans for Russia or Belarus, now that Warsaw has become Washington's chief deputy on the continent and the US has emphasized its military buildup.

"And as for Poland's military potential - again, this is also a matter of time, because now it is difficult to answer what the policy of the new government will be. The previous government was proud that Poland spends 4% of GDP annually on the purchase of new weapons, in particular from the United States," he noted.

"So, I think that it was simply in this way that the representative of the US State Department was trying to emphasize that in Washington they hoped for the continuation of those purchases, and maybe even an increase, for which the previous government was ready."

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US Vetoes UNSC Gaza Peace Bids as Resolutions Would Give 'Legitimacy' to Actions Against Israel

The US is continuing to oppose a UNSC resolution on Gaza because it would give legal sanction to action nations may take against Israel, such as that threatened by Ansarallah, the de facto government in Yemen, a journalist told Sputnik.

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After a second resolution for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza was brought before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) this week, the US has again moved to delay the vote after having vetoed the first resolutionearlier this month.

American diplomats are reportedly engaging in high-level talks with Arab nations and US allies about changing parts of the text they dispute, ranging from references to a cessation of hostilities to a plan for the UN to take over security details for aid trucks entering the Gaza Strip.

After the US veto earlier this month, in which it was the sole nation to vote against the resolution, the General Assembly took up the question and passed a non-binding resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire. Since October 7, Israeli bombing and a ground invasion have killed more than 20,000 Palestinians in Gaza and left over 50,000 wounded. Almost the entire population of 2.3 million people have been uprooted, forced into a tiny corner of the territory where Israel says it will not bomb as it continues to hunt down Hamas forces.

Despite the veto and continued opposition to a ceasefire, there are signs the Biden administration's patience is wearing thin: US President Joe Biden has publicly criticized his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, for being uninterested in a two-state solution, the internationally accepted path to peace for Israel and the Palestinians. Netanyahu replied by confirming the accusation.

Editor of The Polemicist Jim Kavanagh told Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits on Thursday that a UN resolution would give any nation the authority to act to relieve the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza - something neither Israel nor the US will allow.

"A Security Council resolution, at least theoretically, legally opens the door to enforcement, that's the issue here. The United Nations, the United States, can say anything it wants, whatever United Nations resolutions are passed doesn't mean anything if they're not going to be enforced by someone. And as you said, the only ones that get enforced are the ones that allow the United States to go to war," he said.

"In this case, you can't be naive about it, the downside is for the United States. The United States is supporting Israel in its attack on Gaza. And the attack on Gaza has a main objective, which is to kill and expel Gazans, to create a situation where Gazans can no longer live in Gaza, which they have mostly created, to kill as many of them as they can, in front of the world, showing the world they will cruelly and gratuitously attack hospitals, kill doctors and their families, journalists and their families, poets and intellectuals and their families at home. They know what they're targeting, they're destroying the possibility of life in Gaza and they're pushing the Gazans into a corner where they're starving, there's no medicine, there's going to be diseases that even the Israelis are saying you've got to be careful about this because those diseases might come and infect us."

"The purpose of the Israelis is to create a situation where the world is either going to have to take the Gazans out [of the Gaza Strip], which is really what Israel wants … Israel's going to say 'take them.' They're saying it, 'take 25,000 to this country, 50,000 to that - oh, Canada, Germany, you like your immigrants? Take them.' We want the Palestinians to have a nice life - just not in Gaza. They want the Palestinians out of Gaza and they're creating a situation where the world is going to have to either watch the Palestinians get killed or take them out," he said.

Kavanagh noted that despite the dire need for humanitarian aid in Gaza, Israel has jealously guarded its sole control over the aid that goes into Gaza, having for 15 years kept the Palestinians "on a diet," only allowing in just enough to prevent starvation.

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"So you have a situation now where somebody, some force in the world has to come in in defiance of Israel and the United States, which is going to support Israel, and force humanitarian aid in there and force the rebuilding of a country where the possibility of life doesn't exist. It's a very dangerous situation."

"The United States is going to support Israel and is not going to vote for a resolution that Israel doesn't give it the permission to vote for. And no resolution that degrades Israeli control of Gaza, that takes out of the hands of Israel the control of life in Gaza, is going to be okay with Israel."

Calling the humanitarian situation "the most horrible thing since World War II," Kavanagh said the situation is "deliberate" and has "got a purpose: to create misery and pain and starvation and horror until they leave or someone takes them."

"Everybody is complaining about it: the Arab states, Turkiye, Russia, the Gulf states certainly, but what are they doing?" he asked. "Because to do something is going to require defying, with either military and/or economic force, and it must be backed by military force. Why don't Turkiye and Russia say, 'We're having a flotilla of ships and we're coming into Gaza without navies supporting them and we're going to bring humanitarian aid in?' That's the only way it's going to get in."

"The only people who are doing anything are Ansarallah, the Houthis, who are saying, 'We're not going to let Israel have its merchant shipping unless they let humanitarian aid in.' That's the demand of Ansarallah: the demand is to let humanitarian aid into Gaza. Let food and medicine in. So those are the only people I see in the world who are actually doing something. It's hard because they'll threaten you, the Israelis will threaten you and the Americans will back them up," he said.

"A UN Security Council resolution would allow some other country to say, 'well we have the legitimacy of doing this now, we're enforcing a UN Security Council resolution.' But even then, I don't know if anybody would do anything," Kavanagh said.

"Israel doesn't care if it is the most hated country in the world, it doesn't care, it's going to do what it wants to do unless it is forcibly stopped from doing it."

"Why do they do this? Naturally, they represent the interests of their own military-industrial complex. And I think that, most likely, this means that the United States is expressing certain expectations, hopes associated with the continuation of all these orders, maybe even receiving new orders for its own military-industrial complex."

"As for the involvement of the Polish armed forces in any conflicts, I think this is unlikely, because, firstly, I think that at least until the US presidential elections next year, the United States will not be interested in escalating tensions in different places, including in Central and Eastern Europe," he noted.

"And secondly, there is still no desire of the Polish population for Polish citizens participating in any armed conflicts. Just the other day, an opinion poll showed that only 15% of the Polish population is ready to participate in an armed conflict even in the event of an attack on Poland. This suggests that only a small minority of Poles even consider the option of some kind of readiness for military service."

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"In Poland, as a result of the elections, those politicians came to power who, due to ideological considerations and various connections from the past, have more trusting relationships with American democrats than the previous Polish government," Mateusz Piskorski, political observer and columnist for the Myśl Polska newspaper, told Sputnik.

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Earlier this month, former prime minister Donald Tusk returned to Poland's premiership, ousting a Eurosceptic government. A top US State Department official has since said Washington wants Poland to become "a leader of the EU."
Piskorski said that despite their differences, the shift in parties wouldn't lead to a major shift in Polish foreign policy.
He said the official "was trying to emphasize that in Washington they hoped for the continuation of those [arms] purchases, and maybe even an increase, for which the previous government was ready."

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Sensitive military documents AGAIN leaked on War Thunder forums
Technical military docs marked unclassified but export-controlled were posted on the War Thunder forums, a board for users of the hyper-realistic military sim.
Members often engage in arguments and sometimes post technical docs and manuals to support debate. However, posting classified or export-controlled materials is illegal and forbidden by the site.
The files were posted on December 12 and removed within minutes, but not before users managed to create copies. The material included two pages from the M2A2 Bradley Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle's technical manual, including information on the commander's hatch, turret assembly and spall liner (inner armor).
This is the 14th leak of classified or export-controlled documents on the War Thunder forums since the game's initial release in 2012. However, the game's developer insists the leak did not originate on the game's official forums.
Father found dead, police tipped off before shooting, suspect had permit, no criminal record, tied to double homicide possibly last week

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Israel reportedly struck Gazan churches using coordinates received from US Congress
In an attempt to prevent Israeli strikes on religious sites in Gaza, one of the largest Christian aid organizations there, Catholic Relief Services, reportedly passed on the coordinates of several sites in the enclave to Senate staffers, who, in turn, sent them to Israel.
US media reported that the move by the aid organization was an attempt to get a commitment from Israel not to target at least four buildings in Gaza, including the two that were later struck by the Israeli military.

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White House Welcomes Japan's Decision to Transfer Patriot Missiles to US

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday that the White House welcomes Japan's decision to transfer its Patriot interceptor missiles to the United States to refill its stocks as Washington struggles to keep up with demands from both Ukraine and Israel to support their air defense capabilities.
"We welcome the Government of Japan's announcement today that it will transfer Patriot interceptor missiles to the United States to replenish U.S. inventories. This decision will contribute to the security of Japan and to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region by ensuring that U.S. forces, in close cooperation with the Japan Self-Defense Forces, will continue to maintain a credible deterrence and response capability," Sullivan said in a statement.
In October, the Biden administration announced its decision to send additional air defense capabilities, including several Patriot battalions, to the Middle East amid an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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US Issues License Authorizing Transactions Related to Russian Seafood Through February 21

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The United States has issued a general license authorizing transactions related to certain Russian seafood products through February 21, 2024, the Department of the Treasury said on Friday.
"(a) Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this general license, all transactions prohibited by the determination of December 22, 2023 made pursuant to section 1(a)(i)(B) of Executive Order (E.O.) 14068, as amended by E.O. of December 22, 2023 ('Prohibitions Related to Imports of Certain Categories of Fish, Seafood, and Preparations Thereof'), that are ordinarily incident and necessary to the importation into the United States of seafood derivative products, pursuant to written contracts or written agreements entered into prior to December 22, 2023 are authorized

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through 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time, February 21, 2024," the license said.
The license does not authorize any transactions otherwise prohibited by US regulations, including transactions with sanctioned individuals.

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US Bans Certain Seafood Imports from Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The US announced on Friday that is banning four types of seafood imports from Russia, according to a Treasury notice.
The prohibitions, effective immediately, “apply to the following categories of fish, seafood, and preparations thereof, that were produced wholly or in part in the Russian Federation, or harvested in waters under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation or by Russia-flagged vessels, notwithstanding whether such fish, seafood, and preparations thereof have been incorporated or substantially transformed into another product outside of the Russian Federation: salmon, cod, pollock, and crab," the notice stated.

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US Authorizes Wind-Down Transactions With Russia's Expobank Through March 21 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Friday issued a general license authorizing wind-down transactions with Russia’s Expobank through March 21, 2024.
"[A]ll transactions prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 14024 that are ordinarily incident and necessary to the wind-down of any transaction involving Expobank Joint Stock Company (Expobank), or any entity in which Expobank owns, directly or indirectly, a 50 percent or greater interest, are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, March 21, 2024," the license said.
The license also authorized transactions related to the closing of an account at Expobank through March 21, 2024.

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Biden Signs Executive Order to Boost US Sanctions Authorities Against Russia – White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday signed an executive order to boost his administration's sanctions authorities against Russia, the White

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House said.
The new executive order will provide the Biden administration with a tool that will crack down on financial institutions supplying the Russian military-industrial complex or still doing business in Russia.
It will also provide authority to broaden US import bans on certain Russian goods.

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Biden Pardons 11 People Sentenced for Non-Violent Drug Offenses

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden on Friday announced clemency for 11 individuals who committed non-violent drug-related offenses.
"First, I am commuting the sentences of 11 people who are serving disproportionately long sentences for non-violent drug offenses. All of them would have been eligible to receive significantly lower sentences if they were charged with the same offense today," Biden said in a statement.
He also pardoned people who used federal lands for marijuana. "I am issuing a Proclamation that will pardon additional offenses of simple possession and use of marijuana under federal and D.C. law," he added.
Biden stated that no one should be sentenced solely due to the use or possession of marijuana. He promised to continue to review clemency petitions and deliver reforms that advance equal justice, address racial disparities, strengthen public safety, and enhance the well-being of all Americans, according to the statement.

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Canada, Taiwan Sign Bilateral Investment Agreement – Trade Office

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The Canadian and Taiwanese governments have signed into effect a bilateral investment agreement despite warnings from Beijing against infringing on the One-China principle, Canada's Trade Office in Taipei (CTOT) said on Friday.
Canada and Taiwan had agreed to the framework for the newly signed Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Arrangement (FIPA) in October, following several months of negotiations. Both countries had expressed their intention to sign the deal quickly.
The Chinese Embassy in Ottawa at the time told Sputnik that it expected Canada to respect China's sovereignty and to avoid infringing upon the One-China principle, by refraining from interacting with officials from what it considers to be the breakaway province of Taiwan.
"A great day for Canada and Taiwan! The Arrangement Between the Canadian Trade Office in Taipei and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Canada for the Promotion and Protection of Investments has now been signed!" the Trade Office said via social media.

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The newly inked investment deal will add to the predictability off dealings between Canadian and Taiwanese businesses, the CTOT said, adding that it would contribute to both countries' economies and prosperity.

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Biden Signs Executive Order to Boost US Sanctions Authorities Against Russia – White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday signed an executive order to boost his administration's sanctions authorities against Russia, the White House said.

The new executive order will provide the Biden administration with a tool that will crack down on financial institutions supplying the Russian military-industrial complex or still doing business in Russia.

It will also provide authority to broaden US import bans on certain Russian goods.

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Biden Orders Import Restrictions on Russian Diamonds, Seafood – White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will sign an executive order (E.O.) imposing restrictions on imports of certain Russian goods, including diamonds and seafood, the White House said on Friday.

"To curtail Russia's revenue from other sectors, the E.O. will also make it more difficult for specific Russian goods to enter the United States after being modified in a third country. In the coming months, the United States and our partners intend to introduce import restrictions on certain diamonds mined, processed, or produced in Russia, building on an existing U.S. ban on the importation of Russian-origin diamonds," the statement said.

The executive order will ban the imports of certain products mined, extracted, produced, or manufactured wholly or in part in Russia, even if these products are later reprocessed in a third country.

The Biden administration also plans to ban the imports of certain products harvested in Russian waters or by Russia-flagged vessels. Restrictions will apply even to goods transformed in a third country, according to the statement.

"The Department of the Treasury intends to issue a determination identifying specific types of seafood that will be subject to this prohibition," it added.

The new executive order will also provide additional authorities to sanction financial institutions that facilitate significant transactions relating to Russia's military industrial base.

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Biden Ends 2023 With 39% Approval Rating – Poll

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is ending 2023 with an overall approval rating of 39%, a slight increase from the record low of 37% that it fell to for the last two months, according to a Gallup poll released Friday.

At the same time, approval among Democrats fell five percentage points to 78% from last month, while increasing seven points from a record low to 34% among independents.

Gallup found that Biden's current 39% rating, measured from December 1-20, was the lowest among the past seven US presidents at the same point in their terms.

While it observed that American views of the US economy improved this month, they still remained dim overall at -32 in the Economic Confidence Index. Only 3% of Americans described the economy as "excellent" and 19% as "good." Additionally, 68% said the economy is "getting worse."

Gallup also flagged the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and the immigration crisis at the southern border as key challenges in Biden's reelection campaign.

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Fed's Preferred Inflation Gauge PCE Index up 2.6% in Year to November, Below Key 3% Mark

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve grew 2.6% in the year to November, below Wall Street's forecast, and, more importantly, beneath the key 3% mark that suggested a greater likelihood of the central bank cutting rates significantly next year.

The so-called Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index was up 3% during the 12 months to October. Wall Street economists had expected a 2.8% growth at least for last month.

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Mastermind of 2020 Al-Shabab Attack on Kenya Base Killed in Somali-US Operation - Minister

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A senior member of Somalia's al-Shabab group who allegedly masterminded an attack on a US military base in Kenya in 2020 has been killed in a joint US-Somalia operation, Somali Information Minister Daud Aweis said.

Al-Shabab is affiliated with the Al-Qaeda terrorist group (banned in Russia).

"Maalim Ayman, a senior leader of Al Shabab, was confirmed to have been killed in a joint

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operation by the Somali National Army with assistance from US forces on December 17th. Ayman was accountable for planning multiple lethal terrorist attacks in #Somalia and nearby countries," Aweis wrote on X on Thursday.

Ayman is the leader of al-Shabab unit Jaysh Ayman, which was responsible for carrying out multiple terrorist attacks in Kenya and Somalia. Ayman was reportedly killed in Jilib, Somalia.

The US Africa Command confirmed it carried out a strike on December 17, but did not confirm the target of the strike.

In January, the US placed a $10 million bounty on Ayman, who was accused of masterminding the January 5, 2020 attack that killed three US military personnel or contractors and injured three additional US military personnel or contractors. The attack also destroyed six US aircraft.

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US Official Says Any Bank Risks Being Cut Off for Ties to Russian Defense Sector

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Financial institutions around the world risk being disconnected from the US financial system if they continue to facilitate transactions for goods important to Russia's military industrial complex, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"Ultimately, for almost any bank in the world, given the choice between continuing to sell a modest amount of goods to Russia's military industrial complex or being connected to the US financial system, they're going to choose being connected to the US financial system, given that our economy is far bigger and our currency is one used around the world. Fundamentally, people are not going to want to take that risk," the official said.

Over the next several weeks, the Biden administration will talk with US and European banks about the scope of the new executive order that will allow the use of secondary sanctions on financial institutions, which facilitate goods to Russia's defense industry, the official added.

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US Official Says No Update on Efforts to Seize Frozen Russian Assets as Talks Continue

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A senior Biden administration official told reporters that talks with allies continue regarding efforts to seize frozen Russian assets, but there are no new announcements to make on this matter at present.

"I don't think we have anything to announce around changing the US position on seizing assets although I think we have been very public that that is a conversation that we're continuing in the context of those strategic things," the official said.

On Thursday, the New York Times reported that the United States and its European allies renewed discussions to go after $300 billion in frozen Russian assets and use them to aid Ukraine.

Russia has maintained that any attempt by the West to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law.

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US Introduces Tool to Use Secondary Sanctions on Banks With Ties to Russia - Official

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States introduced a new tool that can be used to place secondary sanctions on financial institutions doing business with Russia, a senior Biden administration official said.

"This tool will be the first time that we're introducing a tool that allows us to use secondary sanctions to go after financial institutions during this conflict in order to provide us with a strong tool to disincentivize the type of behavior that is furthering Russia's ability to build weapons of choice that they are using in Ukraine," the official said.

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Biden Will Sign Order to Boost US Sanctions Authorities Against Russia – Senior Official

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WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will sign a new executive order (EO) to boost his administration's sanctions authorities against Russia with a focus on banks facilitating transactions for the Russian defense industrial complex amid its conflict with Ukraine, a senior US administration official said.

"President Biden intends to sign a new executive order that strengthens US sanctions authorities against Russia with a focus on financial facilitators for Russia's war. This EO is an important step to further disrupt material support for Russia's defense industrial base and disrupt Russia's efforts to increase its military capacity," the official said on Thursday.

The new executive order will provide the Biden administration with a tool that will crack down on financial institutions supplying the Russian military-industrial complex or still doing business in Russia, the official added.

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Mayor of US City of Santa Claus Says Feels Like 'Kid at Heart'

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Living in a town named after Santa Claus allows one to feel as a kid, the mayor of Santa Claus in the US state of Georgia, Donita Bowen, told Sputnik.

"I'm serving as mayor and like to believe that I am a kid at heart," Bowen said.

Bowen noted that she followed the footsteps of her father, who also served as mayor, and is always trying to find a ways to enhance the city's appeal as a joyful, celebratory place.

"I'm forever trying to think of things that we can add or incorporate to make the city more festive," Bowen said.

One such move was to include so-called funny games, which were popular in the past but are almost forgotten now and most children do not know about them until recently being introduced, Bowen said.

"They seem to have a great time playing them," she said.

Bowen explained that the city authorities and residents are decorating the streets for visitors to feel welcome and joyful, even in the off-holiday season, and have erected several "directorial signs" such as Grinch's Lair, North Pole, Whoville, Toy Showroom, Santa's House and others that allow for photo opportunities.

Residents are encouraged to decorate and to entice them, the city organizes a Christmas dinner in the month of December, Bowen said.

"The city provides a catered meal, which allows us to all gather at our community center to share a good meal and socialize," she said.

Bowen pointed out that people from around the United States are sending requests to the city authorities to put special Santa Claus stamps on their letters.

"Our city's secretary stamps the letters that she receives and sends them on their way. We have had individuals collect letters from people in their area, as far away I know as Florida, and bring them to be stamped," she said.

Bowen recalled that her family was among the first people to move to Santa Claus, originally a

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pecan orchard, over 80 years ago. The city was incorporated in 1941.

"It has always been a nice place to live. Just a small, quiet and quaint place to live or visit. We are very small town with only 204 residents but because of our love for traditions, we have tried to share our love and fondness with others," she said.

Today, Santa Claus has its own community center, a small gift shop and a museum, a garden area with a chapel, a park with a walking trail as well as several funny photo boards where visitors can take pictures, Bowen said.

However, many people like to take photos even in front of the city hall, she said.

The city one of two places in the United States bearing such a name, the other one being in the US state of Indiana.

Melissa Arnold, Executive Director of the Spencer County Visitors Bureau in Indiana, told Sputnik that the city has a many long-held traditions such as stamping special Santa Claus postmarks and answering thousands of letters.

Arnold explained that there is a group of volunteers called Santa's Elves who help answer all letters addressed to Santa and that number can reach up to 30,000 letters certain years.

"The volunteer elves are headquartered at the Santa Claus Museum and Village, which is home to the original Santa Claus Post Office," Arnold said.

Every year in December, the city holds a Santa Claus Christmas Parade and a special dinner with Santa. Visitors can also enjoy a light show telling the story of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer in brilliant light displays as well as arts and crafts show and other activities, Arnold said.

"Personally, I love living in the town of Santa Claus, Indiana. It's fun to have the Christmassy vibe throughout the year. I've always loved the Christmas season," Arnold added.

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UNSC Delays Vote on Gaza Aid to Friday -Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council has once again postponed a vote on a resolution that calls for boosting humanitarian aid for Gaza until Friday, a source told Sputnik.

The UN Security Council was originally set to vote on the Arab-sponsored resolution on Monday. The vote has since been pushed back several times in an effort to avoid another veto by the US.

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Raytheon Gets $407Mln Contract Boost to Develop Hypersonic Cruise Missile - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Missiles and Defense has received a more than $407 million US Air Force expanded order to develop a Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile

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experiment, the Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Missiles and Defense [of] Tucson, Arizona has been awarded a $407,599,797 ... modification to [a] previously awarded task order for Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile-Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (HACM-SCIFiRE)," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Work on the experiment will be performed at Tucson, Arizona, over the next five years and is expected to be completed by December 31, 2028, the release said.

The Air Force Life Cycle Management Center, Armament Directorate, Agile Weapons Division, HACM-SCIFiRE Program Office based in Florida will oversee the project as its contracting activity, the release added.

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US Congress Investigated 2 US Capitol Sex Tape Scandals in 2 Years - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Congress faced two separate sex tapes scandals involving the US Capitol complex in less than two years, Semafor reported, citing a congressional office and staffer involved in the matter.

Earlier this month, a staffer for US Senator Ben Cardin's office departed his role after a sex tape featuring him and another man filmed inside a Senate office building became public.

However, the incident marked the second time in two years that the US Congress investigated a sex tape filmed inside the US Capitol complex, the report said on Wednesday.

In June 2022, a staffer for US Congressman Dan Newhouse came under investigation for a set of sex tapes filmed in a House of Representatives office building, the report said.

A spokesperson for Newhouse reportedly said that a staffer came under investigation for "purported, unbecoming behavior," after the office was informed that a member of its staff was a suspected participant in the sex tapes. The probe failed to find any conclusive evidence on the matter, the spokesperson added.

The staffer, the name of whom the report withheld, denied filming the explicit videos and said that he left the office on good terms in autumn 2022.

The faces of those involved in the sex tapes are not visible in the material, although surrounding objects indicate that they were filmed in the US Capitol complex, the report said.

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US Navy Orders $Nearly $890Mln in Nuclear Propulsion Parts From Bechtel - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Bechtel Plant Machinery has been awarded two US Navy contracts totaling a $889 million for naval nuclear propulsion components, the Defense Department announced in two press releases.

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"Bechtel Plant Machinery [of] Monroeville, Pennsylvania is awarded a $706,099,984 ... contract for naval nuclear propulsion components," the first release said on Thursday.

The navy also awarded Bechtel a second $182,807,762 contract for more such parts, the second release said.

Work on both contracts will be performed in Monroeville, Pennsylvania and Schenectady, New York over the next decade and is expected to be completed by September 2033, the release added.

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Navajo Tribe Says Disappointed Over Removal of Measures to Address Uranium-Related Issues

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Navajo Nation is deeply disappointed over the recent removal of legislation from the US defense policy bill that would have addressed health and environmental issues associated with uranium mining in the United States, Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik.

"Our nation has a deep sense of disappointment regarding the recent removal of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act [RECA] Amendments from the National Defense Authorization Act," Ahasteen said.

The RECA Amendments would strengthen RECA, including by extending the program to cover uranium miners who mined after 1971 and delaying the program's sunset date.

Ahasteen said this legislation was a crucial step toward addressing the long-standing health issues and environmental damage inflicted upon Navajo and non-Navajo uranium workers who supported the US government's nuclear arsenal in the interest of national defense.

According to the US Justice Department, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act established an administrative program for claims relating to atmospheric nuclear testing and uranium industry employment in the United States.

The United States carried out nearly 200 atmospheric nuclear weapons development tests from 1945 to 1962. Uranium mining and processing, which was carried out by tens of thousands of workers, was also considered essential to the nation's nuclear weapons development.

Numerous lawsuits were filed against the US government for its alleged failure to warn of exposures to known radiation hazards from atmospheric nuclear weapons testing and uranium mining and testing, but these suits were dismissed by appellate courts. Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act in 1990 and broadened it over the years to address these issues.

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US Navy Orders $53Mln More Material for New Virginia Class Attack Submarine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics Electric Boat Corporation has received a more than $53 million US Navy modification contract to provide material for the construction of the nuclear-powered Virginia class attack submarine SSN 812, the Defense Department announced.

"General Dynamics Electric Boat Corporation [of] Groton, Connecticut is awarded a $53,562,109 ... modification contract for Long Lead Time Material associated with the Virginia Class Submarine SSN 812," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Work on the contract will be performed in at least 15 locations across the United States, the release said.

The work is projected to take almost a decade and is scheduled to be completed by September 2033, the release added.

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Biden Ignores Request to Appoint Head of Office of Navajo-Hopi Indian Relocation -Official

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has ignored repeated requests from the Navajo Tribe in the last two years to appoint a commissioner to oversee the Office of Navajo Hopi Indian Relocation, Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik.

According to the US Federal Register, the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation (ONHIR) is an independent agency responsible for assisting Hopi and Navajo Indians impacted by the relocation that Congress mandated in 1974 for members of the tribes who were living on each other's land.

"Despite repeated requests to President Biden over the past two years, this vital position remains unfilled," Ahasteen said. "The absence of a commissioner prolongs the pain of forced relocation that has been a reality for the Navajo people for over 30 years."

Biden has the power to make the appointment of a commissioner to oversee the ONHIR without Senate confirmation, but has refused to do so with no explanation, Ahasteen added.

The US Federal Register explains that the relocation imposed by the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act of 1974 was intended to be a temporary process to resolve land disputes among the tribes that had been ongoing for decades, however, disagreement between involved parties continued to emerge, preventing the desired final resolution, and resulting in the cost of the program ballooning, Congress amending the Act, and various politicians attempting to put an end to ONHIR.

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Navajo Tribe Says 'Deeply Troubling' US Pledges Billions of Dollars for Foreign Nations

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - It is troubling that the United States pledges billions of dollars to assist foreign nations when hundreds of US Native American tribes only receive a small fraction of that support, Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik.

US Senate and White House negotiators are currently negotiating President Joe Biden's $106 billion nationals security supplemental bill that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine. Republicans want the legislation to include stronger changes on border security policy before supporting it.

"It's deeply troubling to see the federal government pledge billions of dollars to foreign nations in the name of national security, while the 574 sovereign tribal nations within its own borders receive a fraction of this support," Ahasteen said.

The Navajo tribe believes that a more domestic-focused approach is needed from the US government, Ahasteen said.

US tribes face pressing domestic issues, from health disparities to cultural preservation, and from economic development to the protection of our homelands, according to Ahasteen.

"Despite the significant contributions of tribal nations to the fabric of American society, we often find ourselves overlooked or marginalized in policy decisions that directly affect us," Ahasteen said.

The Navajo tribe, Ahasteen said, hopes the Biden administration, and future administrations, will strengthen relations with Native American tribes through sustained, meaningful action.

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BAE Wins $86Mln Contract to Support US ISR Navy Command, Control Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems has received a more than $86 million US Navy contract to provide engineering and technical services for Mobile Deployable Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Combat Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C5ISR) systems and platforms, the Defense Department announced.

"BAE Systems Technology Solutions and Services [of] Rockville, Maryland is awarded an $86,790,235 ... contract," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Under the contract, BAE Systems will provide engineering and technical services including, planning and analysis and engineering design in support of both new and legacy (C5ISR) systems and platforms, the release said.

"These services are in support of providing MDC5ISR products ... of small craft, transportable systems, en-route communication systems, and intra-platform systems for the Navy, Special Operations Forces, Homeland Security, and other agencies," the release said.

Work on the contract will be performed in Lexington Park, Maryland (46%); Little Creek, Virginia

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(32%); and St. Inigoes, Maryland (22%) over the next five years and is expected to be completed in January 2029, the release added.

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Austin, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Battlefield Situation, Security Aid - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke by telephone with his Ukrainian counterpart Rustem Umerov to discuss the latest developments on the battlefield and Kiev's security assistance priorities, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke by phone today with Ukrainian Minister of Defense Rustem Umerov to discuss the latest on the situation on the ground in Ukraine and security assistance priorities," Ryder said in a statement on Thursday.

Austin also provided Umerov with an update on the progress of the capability coalitions established as part of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, the statement added.

Earlier this week, US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said that "time is not on our side" regarding the battlefield situation in Ukraine and the prospects of Washington providing Kiev with additional security aid soon.

As 2023 draws to a close, more voices are being heard in the West that highlight the pointlessness of further funding Ukraine in its conflict with Russia against the backdrop of its failed counter-offensive as well as Russia's gains on the battlefield.

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Musk Says X Intends to Become Financial Platform by Mid-2024

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said that social media platform X intends to begin service as a financial platform by mid-2024, pending approval of licenses.

"We're just waiting for the final approvals to come through for the money transfer licenses," Musk said on Thursday during a live conversation via X. "I think we'll probably get our approvals early next year… I would be surprised if it takes us longer than the middle of next year to roll out payments."

The platform obtained licenses in a majority of states, but the effort is "irrelevant" until California and New York approve licenses, Musk said.

In July, Musk said that users would be able to conduct their "entire financial world" through X.

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Israel Struck Gazan Churches Using Coordinates It Received From Congress – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The Israeli military used the locations of a catholic church and a convent in Gaza obtained from US congressional staff to later strike them with rockets and snipers, Politico reported citing a series of emails from October.

In an attempt to prevent Israeli strikes on religious sites in Gaza, one of the largest Christian aid organizations there, Catholic Relief Services, passed on the coordinates of several sites in the enclave to Senate staffers, who, in turn, sent them to Israel, the report said on Thursday.

The move by the aid organization was an attempt to get a commitment from Israel not to target at least four buildings in Gaza, including the two that were later struck by the Israeli military, according to the report.

On more than one occasion, church leaders had shared GPS satellite data with the Israeli military, but it didn't help to prevent the deadly incident, according to Father Ibrahim Nino, a spokesperson for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem cited in the report.

"But what happened, happened," the report cited Father Nino as saying. "And we are sure of it because we have 648 witnesses inside the compound of the church."

On Saturday, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Catholic body overseeing the region, published a statement condemning Israeli sniper and tank attacks on the Holy Family parish, the only Catholic parish in the enclave, and the convent of the Missionaries of Charity located in a shared compound in Gaza killing two women and injuring several more.

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White House Advisor Says Nippon's Deal to Purchase US Steel Deserves 'Serious Scrutiny'

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - White House Economic Advisor Lael Brainard said in a statement on Thursday that Nippon Steel's deal to purchase US Steel should be closely investigated.

"[President Biden] has been clear that we welcome manufacturers across the world building their futures in America with American jobs and American workers. However, he also believes the purchase of this iconic American-owned company by a foreign entity — even one from a close ally — appears to deserve serious scrutiny in terms of its potential impact on national security and supply chain reliability," Brainard said in a statement.

She said the US interagency committee on foreign investment should carefully investigate the proposed sale and emphasized that the Biden administration stands ready to act on any of its findings if appropriate.

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Trump Says Biden Real 'Insurrectionist' After Colorado Ballot Ban for January 6 Role

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said in a statement that incumbent president Joe Biden is the real insurrectionist, after Trump himself was barred from the state of Colorado's presidential primary ballot for his alleged role in the January 6 US Capitol riot.

Earlier this week, the Colorado Supreme Court disqualified Trump from appearing on the Republican Party primary ballot for the 2024 presidential election, based on the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution; section three of the amendment prohibits people who "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office in the United States.

"I'm not an Insurrectionist… Crooked Joe Biden is," Trump said on Thursday via Truth Social.

Trump also highlighted his use of the words "peacefully and patriotically" during a speech to demonstrators on January 6, which his lawyers have argued is proof that the former president did not call for violence or other criminal activity on that day.

Trump campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung said that Trump will challenge the ruling in the US Supreme Court.

It is unclear for precisely what reasons Trump believes Biden engaged in insurrection, although he also issued a statement calling him a "threat to democracy" in the US.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* Israel understands that transitioning the current military operations to a lower-intensity phase is the "most viable" way to continue the fight against Hamas, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

* The Israel Defense Forces said that it destroyed a network of underground tunnels of the Hamas' military leadership.

* If Israel wants to return the hostages alive then it needs to stop its aggression, Hamas Al Qassam Brigades spokesperson Abu Obaida said.

* Western states have shown no willingness to make efforts to create a Palestinian state, trying to "sink" the issue in questionable initiatives, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The White House is of the opinion that it is too early to determine whether frozen Russian

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assets could be used to financially support Ukraine, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.
* The United States is working to make another prisoner swap proposal to Russia in order to bring home both Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich, who are currently being detained in Russia on espionage charges, Kirby said.
* Russia is not shutting itself off from North America nor from European countries but they have to stop fooling around and start benefiting from cooperation with Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Russia's air defense systems destroyed a Ukrainian missile over the Sea of Azov, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
* The Russian forces have repelled 17 attacks in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, whereby Ukraine lost 210 soldiers (killed and wounded), the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
* The United States is prolonging the Ukraine conflict by providing extensive military support to Kiev, Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov said.
*About 40 major NATO military exercises are held every year near the western borders of Russia, with scenarios based on armed confrontation with Russia, Gerasimov said.

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Pentagon Says Aware of Reports of Japan Considering Sale of Patriot Missiles to US

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said that the Pentagon is aware of reports that Japan is preparing to sell Patriot surface-to-air missile systems to the United States.
"I've seen the press reporting on that," Ryder said during a press briefing, when asked about the reports on Thursday. "Japan is one of our strongest allies and we discuss a wide range of issues in the Indo-Pacific and beyond."
However, Ryder deferred to the Japanese government to discuss the reported sale of Patriot missile systems to the United States.
Earlier this week, US media reported that Japan is working on approving the sale of Patriot missile systems to the United States.
Such a sale could enable the Defense Department to provide further military aid to Ukraine by bolstering flexibility in US defense stockpiles.

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US Working on New Prisoner Swap Proposal to Russia to Free Whelan, Gershkovich - Kirby

(Adds background in paras 3-4)
WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to make another prisoner swap proposal to Russia in order to bring home both Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich, who are currently being detained in Russia on espionage charges, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said
"We did in recent days put forward a serious proposal; the Russians rebuffed it regardless of what Mr. Putin says. And we're working hard to see what we can do to get another proposal that might be more successful to get both [Paul Whelan] and Evan [Gershkovich] out," Kirby told a briefing on Thursday.
During his end-of-year press conference last week Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Moscow is not refusing to return Gershkovich and Whelan to the US, but any agreement on the matter should be mutually acceptable.
He added that a prisoner exchange should be based on humanitarian considerations.

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US Expects Red Sea Naval Coalition to Grow, More Than 20 Countries Signed On - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States expects an international coalition to protect maritime traffic in the Red Sea to grow as it continues to consult with partners, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
"In the days ahead, the United States will continue to consult closely with our allies and partners who share the fundamental principle of freedom of navigation, and we expect to see the coalition continue to grow," Ryder said during a press briefing.
More than 20 countries have so far signed on to participate in the coalition, Ryder said. Countries can contribute varying levels of support, ranging from vessels to staff, Ryder added.
Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea are an international problem requiring an international response, Ryder said.

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UPDATE - Air Assets Will be Part of Red Sea's US-Led Coalition to Counter Houthi Attacks – Pentagon

(Adds details in paras 2, 4-5)
WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Air assets will be part of the Red Sea's US-led Coalition acting under Operation Prosperity Guardian, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

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Ryder's remarks addressed whether the US would be deploying other assets beside surface vessels, in the Red Sea under its Coalition.

"I'm not going to go into the specifics in terms of which capabilities or which assets per se, but yes, air will be a part of this. You know, especially when it comes to maritime domain awareness, air power is always a significant contributor to that," Ryder said during a press briefing.

On Monday, the US launched an international operation aimed at protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea from the attacks of Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis. The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, Spain, and Italy will take part.

The Houthi rebels have said they will continue to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end.

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On Monday, the US launched an international operation aimed at protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea from the attacks of Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis. On Tuesday, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said Washington would welcome China playing a constructive role in Operation Prosperity Guardian.

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UPDATE - White House Says Too Early to Talk About Use Of Frozen Russian Assets To Fund Ukraine

(adds details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The White House says it is too early to determine

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whether frozen Russian assets could be used to financially support Ukraine, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question on if supplemental funding is not obtained, would the US consider including potential extraordinary actions, such as using Russian assets to help fund Ukraine.

"Too soon to say," Kirby said during press briefing.

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Western countries have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves, worth close to $300 billion.

The EU has been discussing a legal framework that would allow for the confiscation of assets of Russian citizens and entities accused of violating EU sanctions. Russia argues that any attempt by the EU to confiscate frozen assets would violate international law. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik that Russia would do everything necessary to reclaim its assets.

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White House Says Too Early to Talk About Use Of Frozen Russian Assets To Fund Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The White House says it is too early to determine whether frozen Russian assets could be used to financially support Ukraine, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question on if supplemental funding is not obtained, would the US consider including potential extraordinary actions, such as using Russian assets to help fund Ukraine.

"Too soon to say," Kirby said during press briefing.

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US Working on New Prisoner Swap Proposal to Russia to Free Whelan, Gershkovich - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to make another prisoner swap proposal to Russia in order to bring home both Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich, who are currently being detained in Russia on espionage charges, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We did in recent days put forward a serious proposal; the Russians rebuffed it regardless of what Mr. Putin says. And we're working hard to see what we can do to get another proposal that might be more successful to get both [Paul Whelan] and Evan [Gershkovich] out," said Kirby.

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PURE Insurance Exchange Pays $466,000 for Violating US Sanctions on Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Privilege Underwriters Reciprocal Exchange (PURE) has agreed to pay $466,000 for 39 cases of violating US government sanctions against Russia related to Ukraine, the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Thursday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a $466,200 settlement with Privilege Underwriters Reciprocal Exchange (PURE)," the release said. "PURE agreed to settle its potential civil liability for 39 apparent violations of OFAC's Ukraine- / Russia-related sanctions."

Between May 2018 and July 2020, PURE engaged in transactions related to four insurance policies involving a blocked Panama-based company owned by Specially Designated National Viktor Vekselberg, the release said.

The Privilege Underwriters Reciprocal Exchange is a US property insurance company established in 2006 that serves wealthy customers, according to published reports.

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Vancouver School Went in Lockdown After Report of 'Armed' individual - Law Enforcement

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The Lord Byng High School in Canada's British Columbia capital city of Vancouver went into a short lockdown after a professor reported sighting an armed individual entering the institution, the local law enforcement said on Thursday.

Units were dispatched shortly after 8:05 a.m. (UTC) after a teacher called law enforcement reporting the sighting of an individual armed with a rifle entering the school, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) said in a statement. The institution went into lockdown mainly with the staff, as students were yet to arrive.

"Vancouver Police responded to a report of a man carrying a rifle entering Lord Byng Secondary this morning. Officers from across the city were quick to respond," VPD said.

However, it turned out that the individual was a teacher who had brought a vintage rifle for a presentation, VPD said.

"Working closely with school staff, we were able to locate a staff member who had carried a vintage rifle into the school, for a presentation."

Law enforcement noted that based on the initial investigation, it was determined that the High School professor had no criminal intentions. VPD further added that alongside investigators it would continue to work with the Vancouver School Board to prevent such incidents from happening again.

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Israel Recognizes Shift to Lower-Intensity Phase as 'Most Viable' Strategy - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Israel understands that transitioning current military operations to a lower-intensity phase is the "most viable" way to continue the fight with Hamas, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"They recognize that a transition is not only reasonable, but probably the most viable way to continue this fight. They'll work it out," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Israel will decide on the timetable of transitioning to a lower-intensity phase of the conflict, Kirby added.

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Biden, Lopez Obrador Agree Enforcement Actions Needed to Reopen Key Ports of Entry - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador agreed during a phone call that additional enforcement actions are necessary along the US-Mexico border in order to reopen key ports of entry, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"The two leaders agreed that additional enforcement actions are urgently needed, so the key ports of entry can be reopened across our shared border," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Biden has also asked Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and White House Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall to travel to Mexico in the coming days to meet with President Lopez Obrador and his team to discuss further actions to address current border challenges, Kirby added.

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Speaker Johnson Calls on Biden to Take Executive Action to Boost Border Security – Letter

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Mike Johnson on Thursday sent President Joe Biden a letter urging him to take immediate executive actions to restore order on the US southern border amid record numbers of illegal crossings.

"Statutory reforms designed to restore operational control at our southern border must be enacted, but the crisis at our southern border has deteriorated to such an extent that significant action can wait no longer," Johnson said in the letter obtained by Sputnik. "I urge you to immediately take executive actions available to you under existing immigration laws to stem the

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record tide of illegal immigration."

Amid other actions, Johnson urges Biden to end the "catch-and-release" rule with regard to illegal migrants and either detain them at encounter or turn them back from where they crossed into the United States, according to the letter.

Additionally, Johnson called on the US president to renew the construction of the border wall and expand the use of expedited removal of illegal aliens, the letter said.

According to Johnson, the Biden administration bears full responsibility for the record-high illegal crossings on the southern border, with nearly 2.5 million encounters in the year 2023 alone and projections that the next year will become even worse in this respect.

"All of this is the direct result of your administration's policies," he said in the letter, stating that Biden has "clearly undermined America's sovereignty and security" by ending a series of Trump-era polices.

Disagreements regarding the US southern border with Mexico remain the main stumbling block to Congressional approval of a new multi-billion military aid package for Ukraine and Israel.

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Gaza's Al-Shifa Hospital Not Used as Hamas Command Center Despite Israeli Claims - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Hamas did not utilize the al-Shifa Hospital in the Gaza Strip as a command and control center, despite Israeli claims to the contrary in justification of their military operations there, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

Rooms at the facility that were connected to a tunnel network underneath Gaza show no signs of military use by Hamas, the report said, citing open-source intelligence, satellite imagery and Israel Defense Force (IDF) materials.

None of the five buildings identified by IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari as being linked to Hamas appear to be connected to the tunnel network, the report said.

There is no evidence indicating that the tunnel network could be accessed via the hospital wards, the report added.

In November, the IDF conducted military operations in al-Shifa Hospital, based on purported evidence of Hamas activity at the facility. The United States also claimed to have intelligence backing up Israeli claims.

A senior member of US Congress said that they initially believed claims that Hamas was utilizing al-Shifa Hospital, but now believe that more proof is needed to support the claims.

However, a senior Biden administration official also reportedly said that the United States remains confident in its assessment that Hamas was using the hospital as a command and control node.

An IDF spokesperson claimed that they have published "irrefutable" evidence of Hamas activity at the hospital, the report said.

Neither the US nor Israel could provide further information to verify their claims, the report added.

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US, Allies Renew Talks to Seize $300Bln in Frozen Russian Assets to Fund Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and its European allies have renewed discussions to seize $300 billion in frozen Russian assets to help fund Ukraine, the New York Times reported on Thursday, citing US and European officials.

The report cited officials as saying that talks between US and European finance ministers, central bankers, diplomats and lawyers have intensified on this issue in recent weeks.

Topics discussed by the parties have included possible limitations on how Russian funds might be spent, such as whether they can only be used to fund Ukraine's economy or if they can also be used to fund Ukraine's military.

The United States wants Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan to develop a strategy to seize these funds by February 24, the report added.

US funding for Ukraine is set to run out by December 30 after Congress failed to authorize new funds before going into recess until January. US senators and the White House are currently negotiating President Joe Biden's $106 billion supplemental request for more than $60 billion for Ukraine, as well as funds for Israel and other initiatives. Republicans want any supplemental legislation to include stronger border security measures.

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Third Quarter Final GDP Reading Lags Forecast With 4.9% Growth - US Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US GDP growth for the third quarter of 2023 has been finalized at an annual rate 4.9%, the Commerce Department said in its ultimate reading for the period issued on Thursday.

The number, however, lagged forecasts, with Wall Street’s analyst community targeting a growth of 5.2%.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 4.9 percent in the third quarter of 2023," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit of the Commerce Department, said in a news release.

The Commerce Department releases three GDP readings for each quarter. For the third quarter, the last two readings were the same, reflecting a stable economy.

Yet, real growth was more dynamic, going from a final 1.1% in the first quarter to 2.1% in the second quarter.

"The increase in the third quarter primarily reflected increases in consumer spending and inventory investment," the release said. "Imports, which are a subtraction in the calculation of GDP, increased. Profits increased 3.4% at a quarterly rate in the third quarter after increasing 0.2% in the second quarter. The value added of private goods-producing industries increased

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10.2%, private services-producing industries increased 4.1%, and the government increased 2.0%. Overall, 14 of 22 industry groups contributed to the third-quarter increase in real GDP."

Despite falling short of Wall Street's forecast, the outperformance of the economy in the third quarter reinforces expectations that the US economy might see a "soft landing" for 2023 instead of a recession likely caused by the Federal Reserve's aggressive rate hikes to counter inflation.

To fight inflation, the Fed hiked rates 11 times between March 2022 and August 2023, raising them by 5.25% from a base rate of just 0.25%.

Since July, however, the central bank has held rates unchanged, skipping three opportunities to revise them. That has led to bets that the Fed will be ready to cut rates instead from 2024.

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Giuliani Files Bankruptcy After Ordered to Pay $148Mln in Defamation Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Former Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani filed for bankruptcy after being ordered to pay $148 million to two Georgia polls workers in a defamation case, court documents revealed on Thursday.

The filing showed Giuliani filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the Southern District of New York.

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US Lawmakers Request Info From Special Counsel on Trump Investigation - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Two Republican members of the US House Judiciary Committee sent a letter on Thursday to Special Counsel Jack Smith, requesting information on his investigation into former US President Donald Trump.

"The Committee on the Judiciary is continuing its oversight of the Biden Justice Department's commitment to impartial justice and its handling of an unprecedented investigation and prosecution of President Biden's chief opponent in the upcoming presidential election," the letter said. "To date, both you and the Department have failed to respond sufficiently to the Committee's requests."

The panel is concerned about Smith's commitment to evenhanded justice due to his record of attempting to criminalize political discourse, the letter said. Accordingly, the panel is conducting oversight to determine potential legislative reforms regarding politically motivated prosecutions.

The letter asks Smith to provide documents and communications related to his investigation into Trump, as well as information on personnel participating in the probe. The lawmakers request that Smith provide the materials by January 4, after which point they may resort to compulsory process, the letter said.

The letter was signed by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan and Congressman Andy Biggs.

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US, Danish Top Diplomats Sign Defense Cooperation Agreement

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – US Secretary Antony Blinken and Danish top diplomat Lars Rasmussen on Thursday signed a bilateral defense cooperation agreement (DCA) that will allow the deployment of US troops in Denmark and more frequent joint training between the countries' military.

During the signing ceremony at the State Department, Blinken noted that thanks to the agreement US and Danish troops will be able to train more seamlessly and more often while making the Nordic region safer.

Earlier in December, the United States also signed similar DCAs with Finland, Sweden, and Estonia.

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UN Appeals to All Parties in Syrian Conflict to Let Constitutional Committee Resume

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - All parties to the conflict in Syria should behave in a manner conducive for the Constitutional Committee to resume work, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Thursday.

"I appeal for all to act in a manner that enables the Constitutional Committee to resume, at least initially in Geneva," Pedersen said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Syria.

The special envoy said the United Nations looks forward to engaging across a comprehensive set of issues and concerns the relevant parties have.

In 2018, Russia hosted a congress of the Syrian national dialogue as a first attempt to gather an inclusive pool of Syrian political forces. The participants decided to create a constitutional committee to operate in Geneva and prepare a constitutional reform in Syria.

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UN Country Team Must Find Better Approach to Aid Delivery in Syria - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations country team in Damascus must find a more effective and non-discriminatory approach to delivering humanitarian assistance in Syria, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

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"We urge the UN country team in Damascus to devise a more effective approach to the delivery of assistance to Syrians in all regions of the country without any discrimination whatsoever," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Polyanskiy pointed out that the exceedingly politicized approach to humanitarian operations in Syria has resulted in the fact that the situation on the ground is "swiftly deteriorating."

The Russian diplomat said the Syrian government will soon be presented with allowing the use of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing to deliver humanitarian aid, but the decision on whether to do so is up to the authorities.

"The fate of this is the sovereign decision of Damascus - a decision taken as part of bilateral dialogue between the Syrian government and the United Nations," Polyanskiy said.

The border crossing should not be used by UN personnel for allegedly spontaneous visits to Idlib province from their offices in Turkey's Gaziantep and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should be held fully accountable on this matter, Polyanskiy added.

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New Hampshire Man Charged With Threatening US Presidential Candidates - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A man in the US state of New Hampshire faces criminal charges for allegedly threatening to kill several presidential candidates, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Tyler Anderson, 30, was charged with three counts of transmitting in interstate commerce a threat to injure the person of another," the Justice Department said in a statement. "According to the charging documents, Anderson sent a series of threatening text messages to three separate presidential campaigns going back to November 2023."

Anderson allegedly threatened to disembowel and shoot the presidential candidates, as well as commit mass shootings at their campaign events, the statement said.

Earlier this month, the campaign of Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy confirmed that he received one of the alleged death threats. The campaign issued a statement thanking law enforcement for their swift handling of the matter.

Law enforcement arrested Anderson and December 9 and he made an initial court appearance on December 11, the Justice Department statement said. Anderson was released with conditions on December 14, the statement added.

Each criminal charge against Anderson carries a penalty of up to five years in prison, three years of supervised release and a $250,000 fine, the statement said.

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US Special Counsel Smith Urges Supreme Court to Quickly Decide on Trump Immunity - Filing

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WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel Jack Smith in a new court filing on Thursday reiterated his call on the US Supreme Court to immediately decide whether former President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution in the 2020 election interference case.

"The public interest in a prompt resolution of this case favors an immediate, definitive decision by this Court. The charges here are of the utmost gravity," Smith said in the filing.

Smith has argued that it is of imperative public importance that Trump's claims of immunity be resolved by the Supreme Court so that his trial can proceed as quickly as possible.

On Wednesday, Trump's legal team urged the Supreme Court to reject Smith's request, saying the special counsel was not acting in the "public interest" but rather out of "partisan interest."

Trump's trial is set to begin on March 4, 2024, but legal appeals are threatening to delay the proceedings. Trump's lawyers have been seeking to postpone his trial until after the 2024 election.

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Increased Violence in Syria Shows That Conflict Can Not Be Left Unattended- Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - Increased violence towards the end of 2023 should make it obvious that we have to pay attention to the conflict in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria O. Pedersen said on Thursday.

"As 2023 draws to a close, it seems no coincidence that renewed violence and popular frustrations including protests peaked later in the year. This took place at the same time as raised political hopes on different sides were on met following various diplomatic moves and momentum began to fade. This should remind us that the status quo is unsustainable, and it is unacceptable and that this conflict cannot be left on attendant," Pedersen told the Security Council members.

It also shows that partial approaches are unlikely to address the depths of variance despair and contain the conflict sustainably, he added.

In 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran launched a mediation group on the Syrian settlement in Astana. In January 2018, the Russian city of Sochi hosted a congress of the Syrian national dialogue, the first attempt since the start of the conflict to gather an inclusive pool of Syrian political forces. The main result of the Congress was the decision to create a Constitutional Committee, which operates in Geneva and whose main task is to prepare a constitutional reform in Syria.

In December 2022, the defense ministers of Russia, Syria and Turkey held trilateral talks in Moscow to discuss ways to resolve the Syrian crisis. The negotiations marked the first official meeting between the Turkish and Syrian defense chiefs in 11 years.

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

US Adds 14 People in Central America to Undemocratic Actors List - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States included 14 people from four countries on a list of corrupt and undemocratic actors in Central America, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"The United States today announced new listings of four Nicaraguan, four Guatemalan, three Honduran and three Salvadoran individuals under the Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors report," Miller said in a statement.

The report identifies people who have knowingly undermined democratic processes, engaged in significant corruption or obstructed investigations into corruption in the region, the statement said.

The listed individuals are generally ineligible for visas or admission to the United States, the statement said.

Promoting strong democratic governance in Central America is a priority of the Biden administration, the statement added.

The United States calls on government leaders, civil society, the private sector and the international community to join Washington in strengthening democratic governance and ending corruption in the region, according to the statement.

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Syrian Govt. to Receive Request to Extend Opening of Bab Al-Hawa Border Crossing – UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) – The UN will forward an official request to the Syrian Government for it to consent to an extension of the opening of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the Director for the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Lisa Doughten said on Thursday.

In mid-July, the Syrian Government accepted to maintain the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing open for the delivery of humanitarian assistance for another six months, until 13 January 2024.

“The United Nations is committed to continued engagement to ensure all three border crossings remain open. In the coming days, we will formally request that the government of Syria extend its consent for the use of Bab Al-Hawa border crossing for as long as humanitarian needs are assessed,” Doughten told the UN Security Council (UNSC).

OCHA’s Official noted that the UN would continue seeking the establishment of a sustained and predictable humanitarian access to Syria to supply some four million civilians in need of assistance in Northwestern part of the country, through “all possible means.”

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Most US Voters Oppose Military Aid to Israel, Disapprove of Biden Foreign Policy - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Most voters in the United States oppose sending more military aid to Israel for use in its conflict in the Gaza Strip and disapprove of President Joe Biden's foreign policy overall, a new Quinnipiac University poll revealed.

Forty-six percent (46%) of voters oppose further US military aid to Israel and 45% support it, a report on the poll said.

The figure represents a decline from majority support for military aid to Israel in November, the report said.

Opinions differ by partisan affiliation and age; nearly two-thirds of Republican voters, 65%, support military aid to Israel, while 58% of Democratic voters oppose it, the report said.

A majority of voters ages 50 and older support sending more military aid to Israel whereas a majority of voters 18-49 oppose further assistance, the report said.

Most US voters also disapprove of the Biden administration's handling of the conflict in Ukraine, with 48% disapproving and 45% approving, the report said.

A majority of voters, 59%, disapprove of Biden's handling of foreign policy overall, the report added.

The poll surveyed 1,647 self-identified registered voters in the United States from December 14-18. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus 2.4 percentage points.

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Biden Reiterates US Commitment to Justice in 1988 Lockerbie Bombing - White House

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday reiterated the United States' commitment to bring to justice the terrorists behind the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, on the 35th anniversary of the attack.

"The United States will never waver in our pursuit of those who inflict despicable acts of terrorism. We will never stop working to identify and bring to justice anyone who commits an act of terrorism against Americans at home or abroad," Biden said in the statement.

The president noted that the United States took into custody last year one of the main suspects - Libyan national Abu Agila Mohammad Mas'ud Kheir Al-Marimi.

Two-hundred-seventy people were killed in the attack, including 190 Americans.

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US Pressures Switzerland to Block Meetings on Accountability for Gaza Atrocities - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is privately exerting pressure on Switzerland to block the meetings on violations of the Geneva Conventions that have been suggested to hold to account those responsible for committing atrocities in the Gaza Strip, the Huffington Post reported citing State Department documents.

While Switzerland prepares for meetings to discuss violations of the Geneva Conventions in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United States is attempting to interfere and has already finalized a diplomatic note to Switzerland, the report said on Thursday.

A group of United Nations member states and Palestinian diplomats are planning to call on Switzerland to launch an international conference that would analyze whether any of the parties to the conflict have violated the Geneva Conventions, the report said.

Israel may be condemned for such violations and also the United States for backing Tel Aviv's military operation in Gaza, the report said.

The United States will convey in the note its "serious concern" about the Palestinian effort to gather an international conference on crimes in Gaza and will also point out that the UN General Assembly has not yet passed a resolution calling for such a conference, the report said.

Similar conferences on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were held in 1999, 2001 and 2014, the report noted.

The United States continues to sabotage attempts by the UN Security Council members to adopt resolutions on the humanitarian situation in Gaza, which would also contain a call to increase the amount of humanitarian aid delivered to the Palestinian enclave.

On Wednesday, Ecuadorian Ambassador to the United Nations Jose De La Gasca said the UN Security Council had to postpone again a vote on a resolution calling for boosting humanitarian aid to Gaza until Thursday morning allegedly to allow additional time for diplomacy.

Ecuador presides over the UN Security Council during the month of December.

The UN Security Council was originally set to vote on the resolution on Monday but the vote has since been postponed several times to avoid a veto by the United States.

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Aid Monitoring Mechanism at Heart of Talks With US Over Gaza Resolution - UAE Mission

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - UN Security Council members continue talks with the United States in an effort to adopt a Gaza resolution, with a focus on a key point regarding an aid monitoring mechanism to oversee supplies, UAE mission spokesperson Shahad Matar said on Thursday.

"What we are discussing with them is OP4," Matar told journalists before a Security Council meeting.

The OP4 requests that the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres establish a mechanism that will monitor humanitarian relief coming into the Gaza Strip.

The UN Security Council was originally set to vote on the Arab-sponsored resolution on

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Monday. The vote has since been pushed back several times in a bid to avoid another veto by the US.

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