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Report: Accused Pentagon Leaker Teixeira Was Nicknamed 'Active Shooter Kid' by Colleagues

Despite being only 21-years-old at the time, Massachusetts Air National Guardsman Jack Teixeira was granted top-security clearance that allowed him access to highly classified US government information.

Newly-obtained documents have revealed that Jack Teixeira, who was indicted on six counts of willful retention and transmission of national defense information on a gaming platform, was described by his colleagues as "the active shooter kid."

The revelation were outlined in an Air Force Inspector General reportthat was completed in August and since obtained by US media.

The findings detailed that Teixeira—who was arrested in April by the FBI—worried his fellow airmen, who feared he might "shoot up the place" after the since-accused leaker was told off for looking at classified information that had little to do with his job as a computer technician at Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod.

The report adds that in 2022 an airman tried to warn his superiors that then-20-year-old Teixeira "exhibited a fringe perspective" emblematic of Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber - a domestic terrorist who pursued an off-the-grid lifestyle, but was responsible for killing three people and maiming others over a nearly two-decade-long bombing campaign.

Teixeira had talked about "living off the grid" so he could "blow stuff up," a close colleague had said.

Another guardsman added: "From all our training, this was a red flag, it was tripping all the indicators."

The report also determined his colleagues were aware that Teixeira had been suspended when he was in high school for threatening to bring weapons onto school grounds. At the time, his language had prompted fellow students to speak to school officials, which later resulted in the involvement of local police.

Earlier this month, an investigation by the US Air Force resulted in the punishment of at least 15 members from Teixeira's unit. The investigation found no evidence his unit's leadership was aware of the alleged attacks, and it listed several "indirect factors" that allowed the leak to happen.

Those listed failures included: failure to inspect areas under command, inconsistent guidance for reporting security incidents, inconsistent definitions of the "need-to-know" concept and a lack of supervision on oversight and night shift operations.

Additionally, the investigation found the unit's leadership was not "vigilant" in overseeing the actions of the soldiers under their command, nor did they prioritize mission security and "failed to seek proper action after becoming aware of [Teixeira's] intelligence-seeking activities."

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As a result, the military punished 15 personnel in relation to the leak. Teixeira's former unit, the 102nd Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Group was also taken off its mission following the leak.

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US Police Bolster Patrols for Colorado Judges Amid Violent Threats Over Trump Ballot Ruling

The Colorado Supreme Court ruled on Thursday that former US President Donald Trump would not be included on the state's presidential primary ballot under the 14th Amendment's insurrection clause. The decision directly stems from the January 6 riot that saw Trump supporters breach security checkpoints at the US Capitol.

Colorado's Denver Police Department announced on Tuesday it was investigating reports of threats of harassment against justices on the Colorado Supreme Court, adding that as a result security detail had been bolstered for the judges.

"The Denver Police Department is currently investigating incidents directed at Colorado Supreme Court justices and will continue working with our local, state and federal law enforcement partners to thoroughly investigate any reports of threats or harassment," Denver police said in a statement Tuesday.

"Due to the open investigations and safety and privacy considerations, we will not be providing details of these investigations. The Department is providing extra patrols around justice's residences in Denver and will provide additional safety support if/as requested."

On Friday, the FBI also said it was investigating threats against the justices, and was working alongside local law enforcement in order to address potential threats of violence.

"The FBI is aware of the situation and working with local law enforcement," said Vikki Migoya, a spokesperson for the FBI Denver Field Office. "We will vigorously pursue investigations of any threat or use of violence committed by someone who uses extremist views to justify their actions regardless of motivation."

The threats of violence follow a 4-3 ruling made last week by the Colorado Supreme Court in which they made the unprecedented ruling to disqualify Trump from the state's Republican presidential primary ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment.

"We conclude that because President Trump is disqualified from holding the office of President under Section Three, it would be a wrongful act under the Election Code for the Secretary to list President Trump as a candidate on the presidential primary ballot," the court's majority wrote in an unsigned opinion.

Following their decision, a flood of violent rhetoric descended upon the justices across social media platforms, with many of the messages coming from Trump supporters. The messages included posts which pledged to either maim or even kill the justices. Other messages called for the justices to be dragged from their homes, hanged and shot, said the SITE Intelligence Group.

Trump's campaign has vowed to appeal the ruling to the US Supreme Court, which is dominantly conservative. The Trump camp has blasted the effort as yet another politically-motivated effort to block his chances at serving a second presidential term.

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The Trumpian Holiday Spirit - Cartoon

While families across the US were enjoying the holiday, Trump was up to something else. Former President Donald Trump took to his social media platform Truth Social on Christmas Day to air grievances against his opponents including President Joe Biden, the US Department of Justice, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"2024 WILL GO DOWN AS THE YEAR OF GREAT AND FULLY COORDINATED ILLEGAL ELECTION INTERFERENCE BY CROOKED JOE BIDEN, THE WORST AND MOST CORRUPT PRESIDENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, THE DOJ, FBI, A.G.'s, & D.A.'s THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY," he posted on Christmas morning.

Perhaps the former president saw it as a gift to his followers to unwrap on Christmas morning. Trump then wished a "Merry Christmas" to special counsel Jack Smith whom he called an "out of control lunatic", and to: "World Leaders, both good and bad, but none of which are as evil and 'sick' as the THUGS we have inside our Country," he wrote, before adding: "Open Borders, INFLATION, Afghanistan Surrender, Green New Scam, High Taxes, No Energy Independence... are looking to destroy our once great USA. MAY THEY ROT IN HELL. AGAIN, MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

The former president is facing a slurry of legal trials in 2024 which will most likely clash with his campaign to return to the Oval Office. Over a five-month span Trump was changed in four criminal cases: in Washington, DC he faces four felony counts for his alleged effort to overturn the 2020 election, he faces 13 felony countries in Georgia for election what is claimed to be interference, in New York he faces 34 felony counts for a hush money payment, and in Florida he faces more than 35 felony countries for stowing away classified documents after leaving office.

And yet, despite the former president's legal troubles he remains the favorite among Republican voters and is presumed to win the GOP presidential nomination, according to polls. He currently has a 54% leadover his fellow Republican candidates. Meanwhile, his lead over Joe Biden is at 1.9%.

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Boulders Near San Andreas Suggest the 'Big One' May Be Less Destructive Than Originally Predicted

The San Andreas is a major fracture of the Earth's crust that runs through the US state of California. These tectonic plates are responsible for tens of thousands of earthquakes in the US state each year.

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For years, geologic records have pointed to the Big One: an earthquake that is at least a 7.8 magnitude and is predicted to destroy much of Southern California.

But new data suggests the Big One may not be as destructive as previously thought: at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union in mid-December, data was presented suggesting that the Big One will shake Los Angeles 65% less violently than previously predicted.

The data was collected from rocks that are balanced precariously on top of each other in Lovejoy Buttes, a region that is located in northern Los Angeles just 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) from the fault. Thus far the best option for seismologists has been to base their predictions on the extrapolations from historical quakes, but those can be uncertain.

The rocks that were observed in Lovejoy Buttes, however, can tell scientists how strong the shaking from previous earthquakes have been, and their timescale for these quakes is expansive: one boulder holds seismic data from the last 50,000 years.

"Basically, the fundamental problem we're trying to address here is that we've only been recording earthquakes with seismometers not even 100 years," said lead researcher Anna Rood, a seismic hazard scientist at Imperial College London. "They're really uncertain as to what these rare large earthquakes might mean for ground shaking. So this is where the geological data comes in."

“That this rock has been recording and surviving these earthquake events for 50,000 years is a crazy amount of data,” Rood says.

Taking samples from the rocks in 2021 and 2022, Rood and her researchers tested the sample levels of an isotope known as beryllium-10, which is produced when rocks are exposed to the atmosphere and consistent contact with cosmic rays. Doing so helps the researchers figure out when, exactly, the rocks became more fragile and off-kilter.

The researchers also added tape to the rocks, in the same way that Hollywood does with their actors, and digitally recreated and analyzed the shapes in structural models, calculating how much shaking they could take without falling over.

The researchers’ findings will not only allow Los Angeles residents to sleep more peacefully, it could also have a serious impact on a multitude of earthquake preparations including building codes, disaster preparation plans, and even insurance premiums.

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Artificial Rain Used to Fight Air Pollution in Pakistan With Mixed Results

Cloud Seeding was invented in the 1950s and has been used by countries in the Middle East and China to fight pollution and in the United States to combat droughts.

The Pakistani government is using artificial rain to fight air pollution in the city of Lahore, the capital of the eastern province of Punjab.

The city becoming increasingly polluted as its population has grown to over 13 million people. By comparison, New York City has roughly 8.5 million residents. Lahore has been growing too quickly for the city to deal with the pollution created by residents: it has more than doubled in size since 2000 when its population was about 6 million residents.

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The issue had gotten so bad that earlier this month schools, parks and markets were closed for four days and the AQI reached levels considered extremely hazardous to human health.
Last Saturday, the provincial government attempted to address the situation by creating artificial rain through cloud seeding. A small Cessna plane was flown over ten areas of the city, spraying silver iodide on clouds to induce condensation and increase precipitation.
According to the caretaker minister for the environment for the provincial government, the resulting rain was sparse because of a lack of naturally forming clouds which are needed to induce artificial rain. Still, the few millimeters that did fall managed to have an effect, lowering the city's Air Quality Index (AQI) from the "Hazardous" level of over 300 to the merely "Unhealthy" level of 189.
Unfortunately, the effect was short-lived, and a few days later the air quality had returned to hazardous levels.
The seeding was performed by the UAE, which has experience with cloud seeding, which is often called "blueskying." The Punjab government is said to be considering purchasing their own planes to do cloud seeding more regularly.
However, cloud seeding is not a permanent solution and could have unexpected side effects, says Dr Ghulam Rasul, the head of the climate change program at the International Union for Conservation of Nature.
"Overdose [of clouds] may lead to hailstorm or torrential rain," Rasul said, adding that overuse could create very dry conditions that make the pollution issue worse. The only lasting solution is to address the cause of smog and air pollution.

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1 Killed in Florida Mall Shooting, Suspect At-Large

The United States has experienced 645 mass shootings so far this year, according to the Gun Violence Archive.
A shooting at a mall in Ocala, Florida on Saturday resulted in at least one death, local police say.
The shooting occurred at around 3:40 p.m. at the Paddock Mall in Ocala, Florida. Police believe the shooter is still on the loose. Originally, the Ocala police said they were responding to an active shooting, but then clarified that the shooting had ended by the time they entered the mall.
A video, seemingly of the chaotic scene inside the mall during the shooting has been posted on social media.
Police said a deceased adult male was found in the common area hours after the shooting occurred. Police also found an injured woman in the area.
It is unclear if that is the only injury, previously the police stated that there were "multiple" injuries. The woman is being treated for non-life-threatening injuries, they said. The names and ages of the victims have not been released.

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No description of the suspect has been released and police are asking that anyone with information call the local Crime Stoppers. They added that they now believe it may have been a targeted shooting.

While the Ocala mall shooting may not end up classified as a mass shooting, 2023 has been a record-breaking year for mass shootings, defined as a shooting with four or more injuries or deaths, not including the shooter.

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Trump To Be on All Ballots or None, Says Minnesota's Secretary of State

While Colorado is a solid blue state, the state's Supreme Court decision could have national implications when the US Supreme Court rules on it, Minnesota's Secretary of State told US media.

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said on Saturday that the Supreme Court will likely decide if former US President Donald Trump is allowed on all or none of the ballots in the 2024 Presidential election.

Simon's comments come after the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump will not be allowed on the ballot in that state because it determined that he is responsible for the riot on January 6, 2021, and therefore had engaged in an insurrection or rebellion and is not eligible to hold office under the 14th Amendment.

Trump has not been charged with insurrection or rebellion.

The Colorado court stayed its order, expecting Trump's legal team to appeal to the Supreme Court. Simon told US media in an interview on Saturday that the highest court in the land will "have to" take up the appeal.

"We're never going to have a situation in this country where one or some cluster of states decides that Donald Trump is not on the ballot and everyone else decides he is," Simon explained. "He will either be on the ballot everywhere or nowhere, and the US Supreme Court is going to make sure of that."

However, just because Simon is confident that the Supreme Court will ensure Trump's inclusion on ballots nationwide will be all or nothing, he is not as confident that they will decide on the issue of whether the 14th Amendment applies to Presidents or if Trump engaged in an insurrection.

"There's so many different ways that the Supreme Court could go, there are multiple off ramps for them, for example, to decide the case without deciding the ultimate issue, which is, did Donald Trump engage in or help an insurrection?" Simon said. "They don't have to decide that. There are a number of ways they can dispose of the case and get an outcome without deciding that question."

Lawsuits in several states had tried to remove Trump from the ballot, but most were thrown out of court and were seen as longshot cases. The Colorado ruling surprised many. Officials in several Democrat-controlled states have argued the same could be done there, including

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California Lt. Governor Eleni Kounalakis, who on Wednesday, asked California Secretary of State Shirley Weber to "explore every legal option" to remove Trump.
Recent polling shows that Trump is leading his likely opponent in the 2024 election, President Joe Biden in seven swing states, which means he'd likely beat Biden if the election were held today.
After the Colorado ruling, Trump took to his Truth Social, saying "I'm not an Insurrectionist."

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Marjorie Taylor Greene Swatted On Christmas Day

The dangerous trend known as swatting is when a person or group of people falsely report crimes or emergencies at someone's residence, hoping to get the target's house raided by police. In July, the FBI announced that it was developing a national database to prevent the pranks.
Controversial Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) said on X that her family home was swatted on Christmas Day after someone falsely reported a crime at her residence in Rome, Georgia.
"I was just swatted. This is like the 8th time. On Christmas with my family here. My local police are the GREATEST and shouldn't have to deal with this," she said in a post on X.
Greene added that her family remains in "joyous spirits" while celebrating Christmas.
A spokesperson for the Rome police said that several calls were received through a crisis hotline for the city, claiming that there was an emergency at the residence that required assistance.
The spokesperson noted that the force was in contact with Greene's security detail before arriving at Greene's residence.
"While en route to the address, personnel with the Rome Police Department coordinated with Greene's security detail to ensure her safety as well as determine that there was in fact no emergency at the address," the spokesperson said.
According to reports, the emergency hotline in Rome, New York also received false reports.
This is not the first time Greene has been swatted. In August 2022, a caller claimed a shooting had occurred at the Greene household.

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Biden Tells Reporters To Cover the Economy 'The Right Way'

The economy has not plunged into a recession as many predicted it would, but voters still aren't giving the Biden administration high marks on the economy.
US President Joe Biden told the media to report on the economy "the right way" according to a transcript released by the White House on Sunday.

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Biden is facing record-low poll numbers for a President at this stage in their term, including low marks on the economy, despite high job numbers and slowing inflation.
"All good," Biden replied when asked about his economic outlook for the country. "Take a look. Start reporting it the right way."
Unemployment is at just 3.7%, which is just above the pre-pandemic unemployment level of 3.5%, which was a record low. Annual inflation has also dropped from a record-breaking 9.1% in June 2022 to 3.5% in November.
Despite these seemingly strong numbers, Americans have not expressed confidence in the economy or Biden's handling of it. According to a November poll, only 32% of Americans approved of Biden's handling of the economy.
Biden and his allies have insisted that the economy is robust and blame the disconnect with voters on the media. However, there are signs that the economy may not be as rosy as the surface-level statistics indicate.
Homelessness increased 12% through 2023, reaching its highest recorded level. Americans are increasingly dipping into their savings and until last month, food prices were outpacing general inflation, further stretching voters' wallets.
Furthermore, 61% of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck and 74% say they are stressed about their finances.
Part of that may be because wages never caught up with inflation, and Americans are typically used to 2% inflation. While inflation has slowed significantly since its peak, that increase is on top of an already historic increase that consumers struggled through last year. Until and if wages catch up, Americans are likely to continue feeling financially stressed.

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2023 in Review: How US Pushed Deeper Into Asia While Focus Was on Ukraine & Israel

From partnerships with former enemies-turned emerging powers to bulking up the military of a formally neutral country and wooing tiny island nations, the US worked hard in 2023 to improve its position in the so-called "Indo-Pacific" region against what it claims is a Sino-Russian attempt to dislodge it as world leader.
Speaking to Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in August, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned the United States "has become the biggest destabilizing factor in the world."
While the world was distracted by the US-backed conflicts in Ukraine and Israel in 2023, Washington was quietly bolstering its military presence in Asia, which it calls the "Indo-Pacific" and considers to be a key theater for "great power competition" against Russia and China.
The US has accused both nations of seeking to overturn what it calls the "rules-based international order," referring to the post-World War II global order in which the US calls the shots politically, socio-economically, and militarily.
In East and Southeast Asia, the US sought to pry nations away from their partnerships with Beijing and Moscow by casting them as threats to sovereignty that only a military showdown can deter, and to either sell them weapons or place military assets there.

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Here are some of the ways the US has enhanced its military presence in Asia over the past year:

New Bases in the Philippines

In February, Washington and Manila penned a new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement and in April, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. approved the use of four Philippine military bases by US forces.

The sites are Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan; Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela; Balabac Island in Palawan; and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan. Those four are in addition to five other US military bases in the Philippines.

However, the US forces stationed there will be “rotational,” meaning their stationing is not permanent, although the overall US presence is. The Pentagon said the new sites would be for joint training and would “improve regional readiness,” although Marcos denied the US would be able to use the bases for offensive purposes.

“I assured the foreign minister of China these are not intended to be military sites to attack anyone," Marcos told a podcastinterview at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in May. "The United States has never brought up the possibility that these sites will be used to attack anybody. That is not the purpose of these sites and this is not the way that they will be used.”

Washington and Manila have had a mutual defense treaty since 1951 and their troops regularly drill together. Following the new agreement, this year’s Balikatan joint war games were the largest in decades, which the US says are key to preserving the “peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific Region.”

While Marcos is far more pro-US than his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, Manila is still plotting a careful balancing act between Washington and Beijing. Despite welcoming more US troops and penning a nuclear power cooperation agreement with the US, Marcos has also pushed ahead on the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, a peaceful solution preferred by Beijing to the increasingly dangerous quarrels over islands and waterways in the South China Sea.

Arming & Training Taiwan

Joint training has also been used to bring more US forces into the region in Taiwan, a Chinese island province ruled by the former Republic of China government, which is hostile to Beijing and only recognized by a handful of countries around the world - ironically, the US is not officially one of them.

Beijing regards Taiwan as Chinese soil and has warned the US not to violate its sovereignty by sending weapons, troops, or even officials to the island.

However, the White House sees defending Taiwan from being forced to reintegrate into China as a cornerstone of its anti-China policy, and 2023 saw even more weapons sales to the small island.

Gaffe-prone US President Joe Biden has also let the cat out of the bag with repeated statements that the US would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack, despite a decades-long policy of “strategic ambiguity” on the question designed to preserve the status quo by not encouraging either side to act.

There has been some frustration for the US, however, as the Philippines has refused to allow the US to store weapons on Philippine bases that are intended for Taiwan.

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In February, reports in US media indicated several hundred US troops would likely soon be sent to Taiwan to train Taiwanese military units, which Chinese state media referred to as "playing with fire." The US has also welcomed hundreds of Taiwanese soldiers for training on US soil as well.

"Usually, plans like this would remain hush-hush … to prevent drawing the ire of the Chinese communists," a Taiwanese military source anonymously told Chinese media. "But with US-Taiwan relations becoming more solid and US-China rivalry intensifying, sometimes exposure of these activities is done intentionally to show the close cooperation and partnership between the US and Taiwan."

Taiwan managed to break through the Ukraine-Israel news dominance in early December, when the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Pentagon's massive annual budget bill, was temporarily stalled amid a debate about funding for Kiev. The bill was eventually passed and included tens of billions for Kiev and Jerusalem, and also set aside money for Taiwan - that's on top of a $2 billion-a-year stipend over the next five years that was approved in last year's NDAA.

New Partnerships With South Korea, Japan

Seoul and Japan have been US allies since the 1950s, each hosting tens of thousands of US troops at numerous bases. However, Washington pushed both nations to deepen their cooperation even further in 2023, building new connections to the NATO alliance in Europe and North America.

NATO upgraded Japan and South Korea, as well as Australia and New Zealand, to a new category of Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP), deepening their cooperation on collaboration on cybersecurity, space, and fighting disinformation, among other things. NATO also opened a liaison office in Japan, a country that is constitutionally neutral.

In addition, South Korea agreed to host more US forces and to conduct more exercises with US forces and others in the region, including live-fire exercises, and the US and Japan announced a joint effort to develop hypersonic weapons interceptors.

However, much like with the Philippines, China has responded to aggressive American moves by extending a peaceful hand. In May, the Chinese and Japanese defense ministers inaugurated a new open hotlineto "strengthen the capabilities of the two sides in managing and controlling maritime and air crises, and help further safeguard regional peace and stability," according to a joint statement.

The two nations have competing claims over several small islands in the East China Sea that Tokyo calls the Senkakus and China calls Diaoyu Dao.

Pushing AUKUS Ahead

The Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) bloc was announced in September 2021, revealing a new part of Washington's anti-China network-building in South Asia and the Pacific. The "trilateral security partnership" is aimed at sharing advanced British and American weaponry with Australia, most especially nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles, but also cyber, artificial intelligence, and quantum technologies.

The deal was a shock to many nations, not the least of which was France, which suffered a major loss when Canberra canceled its deal to buy French-made diesel-electric submarines in exchange for the American Virginia-class nuclear-powered subs.

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In 2023, the partnership was pushed ahead, with Biden, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese revealing more details about a joint SSN AUKUS program with American and British parts, which would be built for Australia after the completed sale of between three and five Virginia-class nuclear submarines.

Weapons deals also flourished, with Canberra buying up hundreds of long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US, laying plans for joint hypersonic weapons testing in 2024, and the announcement of forthcoming joint intelligence and cloud-based intel-sharing facilities. The US is also slated to open missile manufacturing facilities in Australia and to deploy another 700 US troops to support the nuclear submarines.

However, 2023 also saw something of a thaw in the icy Sino-Australian relationship, with Albanese meeting in Beijing with Chinese President Xi Jinping last month and resuming bilateral exchanges.

The two nations are part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade bloc, which took effect last year. It includes roughly 30% of the world's population and 30% of its gross domestic product.

'Playing Catch Up' in Pacific Islands

In April, Joseph Yun, the US special envoy for negotiations with Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands, opined that Washington was "playing catch up" with Beijing in the Pacific Islands.

While the three island nations to whom Yun serves as envoy are de facto US protectorates without control over their own foreign policy, others, such as the Solomon Islands, have turned decisively toward China, prompting fears of Beijing penetrating in the Pacific beyond the "First Island Chain" off the East Asian coast, which the US sees as the front line for hemming China in.

In May, the US and Papua New Guinea signed a new defensive pact that would give the US military access to the country's airfields and ports, followed by a less comprehensive deal with Australia in December.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also paid a visit to the small island nation of Tonga in July, which Blinken blatantly stated was aimed at turning Tonga against China by convincing the country that Chinese fishing boats were a threat to its sovereignty.

"As China's engagement in the region has grown, there has been some, from our perspective, increasingly problematic behavior," Blinken said. However, Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni seemed to remain unphased, rejecting assertions that China was preying on his country with loans or other activities.

Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff was also dispatched on a diplomatic mission to New Zealand and Samoa in July, which the White House characterized as helping with its anti-China drive as well.

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"Josep Borrell seems to be bent on offering Europeans daily reminders of his diplomatic ineptitude"

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Such was the analysis of Politico which awarded the EU's foreign policy chief the dubious "Borat award for diplomacy" on Tuesday.

The media outlet noted the EU top diplomat's propensity for gaffes – earlier this year he drew ridicule for congratulating Ecuador for "peaceful elections" after a candidate was assassinated.

Borrell was also criticized for comments referring to Europe as a "garden" in need of protection from the "jungle" of the outside world.

Politico also noted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's struggle against Borrell and European Council President Charles Michel to represent the bloc to the public.

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Accused Pentagon leaker Teixeira was nicknamed 'active shooter kid' by colleagues, a new report found

Newly-obtained documents revealed Jack Teixeira, who was indicted on six counts in relation to the 'Discord Leak', was described by his colleagues as "the active shooter kid." According to the report, Teixeira shared his fringe interests with a close colleague, expressing his desire to live "off the grid" so he could "blow stuff up."

The findings detailed that Teixeira—arrested in April by the FBI—worried his fellow airmen, who feared he might "shoot up the place" after the since-accused leaker was told off for looking at classified information that had little to do with his job as a computer technician at Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod.

"From all our training, this was a red flag, it was tripping all the indicators," said a fellow guardsman of Teixeira's.

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Year-end review: How did the US push deeper into Asia in 2023 while world focused on Ukraine & Israel?

While the world was distracted by the US-backed conflicts in Ukraine and Israel in 2023, Washington was quietly bolstering its military presence in Asia, which it calls the "Indo-Pacific" and considers to be a key theater for "great power competition" against Russia and China.

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The US has accused both nations of seeking to overturn what it calls the “rules-based international order,” referring to the post-World War II global order in which the US calls the shots politically, socio-economically, and militarily.

In East and Southeast Asia, the US sought to pry nations away from their partnerships with Beijing and Moscow by casting them as threats to sovereignty that only a military showdown can deter, and to either sell them weapons or place military assets there.

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Michigan Supreme Court Rejects Attempt to Remove Trump From 2024 Ballot – Order

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – The Michigan Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected an attempt to remove former US President Donald Trump from the 2024 ballot in an "insurrectionist ban" case.

"The application for leave to appeal the December 14, 2023 judgment of the Court of Appeals is considered, and it is DENIED, because we are not persuaded that the questions presented should be reviewed by this Court," the order said.

The 14th Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified after the Civil War, bans officials from taking office if they "engaged in insurrection." Thousands of former Confederates were disqualified from elections because of this provision.

Last week, the Colorado Supreme Court disqualified Trump from the ballot based on the US Constitution's "insurrectionist ban."

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New York Times Sues Open AI, Microsoft for Copyright Infringement

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – The New York Times filed a lawsuit on Wednesday against OpenAI and Microsoft for copyright infringement, the newspaper said.

Filed in Manhattan’s Federal District Court, the lawsuit alleged that OpenAI and Microsoft engaged in “unlawful copying and use of The Times’s uniquely valuable works” to train their AI automated chatbots, which sometimes even produced answers near verbatim to the newspaper’s articles.

The lawsuit argued that the tech companies sought to “free-ride on The Times’s massive investment in its journalism” and “steal audiences away from it.” It called for the companies to be held responsible for “billions of dollars in statutory and actual damages” although it did not specify an exact amount.

The New York Times raised its concerns with OpenAI and Microsoft in April but the talks did not end in a resolution.

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OpenAI and other companies developing generative AI technologies use online written texts to train their chatbots. OpenAI, which developed ChatGPT, is currently valued at more than $80 billion, while Microsoft has committed $13 billion to OpenAI and has incorporated its AI technology into its Bing search engine.

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Blinken to Visit Middle East Next Week for Gaza War Talks – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to travel to the Middle East toward the end of next week to continue discussing Israel's war on Gaza, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing US, Israeli, and Arab officials.

This would mark Blinken's fifth visit to Israel since the conflict began on October 7. He is also expected to visit the West Bank, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar during his trip.

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REVIEW - 24 Stories to Know Heading Into 2024: Understand Next Year Through This Year's News

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - As 2023 comes to a close, take some time to head into the new year informed by looking back on the biggest stories in the United States this year:

1. Artificial Intelligence

Widespread adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has been on the horizon for years, but since US company OpenAI's public launch of the ChatGPT model in late 2022, the technology has become closer than ever to a household product. Businesses and government agencies alike discussed throughout 2023 how to begin safely and effectively implementing the tool, as well as regulating it.

The multi-billion dollar AI business world also drew public attention, particularly following the removal, and subsequent reinstatement, of Sam Altman as OpenAI's CEO in November. Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, who co-founded OpenAI, launched a competing chatbot linked to social media platform X.

2. Biden Family

US President Joe Biden will enter the new year facing the prospect of impeachment, while his son, Hunter Biden, faces unresolved legal troubles of his own. Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives formalized an impeachment inquiry into Biden, in connection with his family's alleged criminal activity.

As House lawmakers probe the Biden family for alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery,

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federal prosecutors are also pursuing charges against Hunter Biden for alleged firearms and financial crimes. The cases come as Joe Biden pursues re-election in the 2024 presidential race.

3. Cryptocurrency

Whereas regulators are just beginning to regulate AI technologies, the emerging cryptocurrency industry faced increasing pressure in 2023 from regulators who are becoming more stringent and well-versed in enforcement of rules on the market. In January, cryptocurrency exchange platform Coinbase started the year by agreeing to pay $50 million in fines for violating anti-money-laundering laws.

In late 2022, cryptocurrency company FTX filed for bankruptcy amid a fraud scandal involving chief executive Sam Bankman-Fried. In November 2023, a US jury found Bankman-Fried guilty on seven criminal charges linked to the FTX collapse. In December, International Monetary Fund director Kristalina Georgieva said that the cryptocurrency industry has built a poor reputation, pointing to Bankman-Fried and others in the industry convicted of financial crimes.

4. Donald Trump

Just as Joe Biden enters 2024 facing the prospect of impeachment due to alleged crimes, so too does Donald Trump enter the new year with pending criminal cases. Trump, who is vying for a potential rematch with Biden in the 2024 presidential election, faces charges linked to the January 6 US Capitol riot, his handling of classified documents, alleged hush money payments, and alleged election interference efforts in the state of Georgia.

Trump is fighting the charges as he seeks the Republican Party nomination for the 2024 race. Trump has so far declined to participate in debates with other Republican presidential hopefuls, who could raise concerns about his unresolved legal troubles.

5. Elections

Biden and Trump are not the only people entering 2024 with electoral ambitions, as lawmakers around the country prepare for a showdown over control of the US Senate and House of Representatives. Trump also faces competition for the Republican Party nomination from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

However, control of the US Congress also hangs in the balance. Republicans are seeking to maintain their majority in the House of Representatives, while Democrats seek to do the same in the Senate. Lawmakers will enter the election year with negotiations on appropriations measures, border security and Ukraine aid.

6. Federal Reserve

The US Federal Reserve has raised interest rates four times in 2023, and nearly a dozen times since March 2022. The 5.25%-5.5% range, which has been in place since July, is the highest lending rate in the United States since 2001.

The Federal Reserve must maintain current levels well into 2024, an International Monetary Fund spokesperson said in December. The US economy is not in a recession, but there is a "real possibility" of a recession in 2024, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said this

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month.

7. George Santos

One House lawmaker who will not be up for re-election in 2024 is George Santos, who was expelled from the lower chamber of Congress earlier this month due to alleged criminal misconduct. The House Ethics Committee found "substantial" evidence of wrongdoing by Santos, although the ex-lawmaker has yet to be convicted on criminal charges.

Santos has since been making money through social media engagement and custom videos. New York Republicans selected former Israel Defense Forces soldier Mazi Melesa Pilip as their nominee to fill the vacant House seat.

8. Hamas-Israel

On October 7, Palestinian Hamas militants launched a surprise attack on Israel, including the capture of Israeli and foreign hostages. The attack prompted a military response by Israel, sparking fighting which has since left thousands of people dead and wounded. The conflict has also fomented broader political tensions on the world stage.

The US has provided support to Israel in the conflict, despite calls in the United Nations for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The US has worked alongside Israel and Qatar to broker hostage release deals, as well as the provision of aid to Gaza, but fighting nevertheless continues. The conflict coincides with an increase in attacks on US forces in the Middle East and vessels in the Red Sea.

9. Johnson

The US House of Representatives saw a number of leadership shakeups in 2023, starting with the election of Congressman Kevin McCarthy as Speaker in January, after more than a dozen rounds of voting. However, House lawmakers ousted McCarthy from the role in October and elected Congressman Mike Johnson to the role shortly afterwards.

Whereas McCarthy is set to leave public service at the end of this year, Johnson enters the new year with looming government funding deadlines and pressure from the Biden administration to pass a supplemental funding request with Ukraine and Israel aid. Johnson also leads House Republicans into an election year, in which they will fight to retain control of the lower chamber of Congress.

10. Kennedy

Although Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump and Democratic incumbent Joe Biden are taking up much of the spotlight ahead of the 2024 election, independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has also made a splash in the race. Kennedy started his campaign as a Democrat, but later switched to an independent presidential bid.

Kennedy, nephew of former US President John F. Kennedy, has been a critic of the Biden administration’s approach to Ukraine and spoken out about potential harms of the COVID-19 vaccine. In June, political analyst Ketih Preston told Sputnik that the Democratic Party and partisan media would "pull out all stops" to ensure Kennedy’s 2024 campaign fails.

11. Legislation

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The US Congress enters the new year with two primary tasks on its plate: negotiating a multi-billion dollar supplemental funding request from the Biden administration and avoiding a government shutdown before temporary funding measures expire in January and February.

The White House and Democrats in Congress have urged the swift passage of the supplemental funding request, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel, but Republicans have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent border security measures. However, lawmakers must also fund the US government before temporary measures expire on January 19 and February 2.

12. Mass Shootings

As seems to be the case most years, the US again suffered hundreds of mass shootings in 2023. In January, a gunman killed eleven people in Monterey Park, California, marking the deadliest shooting in Los Angeles County history. The next month, a shooter killed three students at Michigan State University.

In March, a shooter killed three children and three adults in an attack on a Christian elementary school in Nashville, Tennessee. Eight people were killed in a shooting at a mall in Allen, Texas in May. In August, three people were killed by a gunman in a dollar store in Jacksonville, Florida. A gunman in Lewiston, Maine killed 18 people during a shooting spree in October. In December, a group of Democratic US Senators reintroduced a ban on "military-style assault weapons" and other gun control measures.

13. New START

In February, Russia suspended its participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), but did not withdraw from the agreement, citing hostile US actions. New START established an inspection and verification process for the US and Russian nuclear arsenals.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said in October that Russia has seen no signs that the US is ready to change course on the issues that compelled Moscow's suspension of the treaty. However, Russia continues to adhere to restrictions outlined by the treaty. The US also said in October that it is open to working with Russia on returning to full implementation of the agreement.

14. Ohio Train Derailment

In February, a train carrying hazardous materials derailed in the town of East Palestine, Ohio. The incident prompted authorities to begin controlled burns at the crash site, which spewed toxic phosgene and hydrogen chloride gas into the air and prompted evacuations in the area.

The incident resulted in the death of local wildlife and reports of health complications in people who were exposed to the toxins. The US Justice Department and Environmental Protection Agency filed a complaint against the railroad company, Norfolk Southern, in March, alleging the unlawful discharge of pollutants and toxins.

15. Pandas

Three giant pandas were returned to China in November from their temporary home at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington. The zoo facilitated an agreement with China's Wildlife and Conservation Society to house the pandas in the US capital through 2023.

The White House said that the US was sad to see the pandas go and expressed an openness

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to welcoming the animals back in the future. Chinese President Xi Jinping said that he is prepared to continue cooperation with the US on panda conservation, characterizing the creatures as envoys of friendship between China and the US.

16. Russia

US ties with Russia again remained at the forefront of the news in 2023, as the conflict in Ukraine continues. The US provided billions of more dollars in support to Ukraine, despite dwindling optimism about the conflict among some US lawmakers.

However, the Biden administration has doubled down on the need to continue propping up Ukraine, warning that the US will soon run out of time and money to support Kiev unless lawmakers approve more aid, such as through the Biden administration's supplemental funding request. Additionally, the US has continued imposing sanctions throughout the year on Russia and connected individuals and entities in an effort to hinder its operation in Ukraine.

17. Spy Balloon

In late January and early February, a Chinese balloon crossed the US, leading the US government to accuse China of spying on sensitive military sites in the country. However, China claimed that the balloon was a civilian airship engaged in scientific research.

Nevertheless, the US shot down the balloon over the Atlantic Ocean and collected the debris for analysis. The incident prompted US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to postpone a trip to Beijing, which was scheduled to take place in February. The US and Canada shot down three other airborne objects later that month in the ensuing paranoia, although the objects were ultimately determined to have no ties to China.

18. Taylor Swift

In December, US media organization Time named musician Taylor Swift as its person of the year for 2023. Swift launched a retrospective tour in March, which broke ticket-sales records and became the highest-grossing music tour in history.

Swift also garnered significant public attention throughout 2023 for her relationship with National Football League player Travis Kelce. Time characterized Swift as the "main character of the world" due to her public prominence.

19. Titan Submersible

The world was captivated in June 2023 by the disappearance of the Titan submersible during a trip to the wreckage of the Titanic. The submersible, operated by the US company OceanGate, was transporting several tourists to the shipwreck site when it lost communication with the surface.

Ultimately, an international search and rescue effort led by the US and Canadian militaries recovered debris and remains from the Titan, which investigators concluded suffered a catastrophic implosion of the submersible's pressure chamber.

20. UAP

Unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP) garnered attention both among the general public and government officials in 2023. In May, the US House Intelligence Committee held its first

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public hearing in decades on UAP, followed by another hearing in July by the House Oversight Committee.

Lawmakers heard from former US Air Force officer David Grusch, who alleges that the US government maintains a secret UAP crash retrieval and reverse engineering program. In July, a group of US House lawmakers requested the establishment of a Select Committee on UAP, but the idea has yet to come to fruition, leaving the public to speculate on the subject into 2024.

21. Venezuela

In December, the Biden administration reached a deal with Venezuela to release 10 American prisoners, including six who were designated by the US as wrongfully detained, as well as 20 Venezuelan political prisoners. Venezuela also released opposition organizer Roberto Abdul and turned over Leonard Francis — who faces sentencing in the US on charges of bribing US Navy sailors for sensitive information.

In exchange, the US granted clemency to Alex Saab, who was arrested in 2020, while traveling to Iran on a humanitarian mission for the Venezuelan government. Biden said that the US will be watching Venezuela closely to ensure it holds competitive elections in 2024.

22. X

In July, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk officially rebranded the social media platform formerly known as Twitter into X, after acquiring the company in October 2022. However, Musk stepped down as CEO of X after former NBCUniversal advertising chief Linda Yaccarino took on the position in June, but continues to lead elements of the company.

The social media platform has undergone a number of changes under Musk's leadership, including efforts to minimize bot activity, bolstering protections for freedom of speech and introducing community fact-checking. The company also came under fire from advertisers after Musk was accused of promoting hateful speech, in response to which Musk told advertisers to "go f*ck" themselves.

23. Yemen

Tensions related to Yemen and the Houthi fighters in the country escalated following the breakout of the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Houthis have been targeting ships in the Red Sea in response to the situation in Gaza.

In December, the US and several other allied nations formed a naval coalition to protect vessels in the Red Sea. The Houthis have said that they will attack ships that join the US-led coalition. The situation along the busy commercial shipping route has sparked concerns about rising energy prices in Europe.

24. Zelenskyy

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remained in the spotlight in 2023, although with more negative attention than in the previous year. In December, Zelenskyy visited the US to meet with the Biden administration and lawmakers in an effort to bolster support for further Ukraine aid, despite months of relatively little change in the frontlines.

In October, members of Zelenskyy's inner circle reportedly said that the leader feels betrayed by Western backers and deludes himself about Ukraine's situation on the battlefield. Moreover,

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a top advisor claimed that corruption is rampant among Ukrainian officials under his watch. It remains to be seen whether Zelenskyy can recover his reputation in 2024, or see it further sink as Western apathy toward the conflict grows. Zelenskyy is also losing trust at home, according to new data from the Kiev International Institute of Sociology. Zelenskyy was trusted by 84% of Ukrainians at this time last year, a figure which fell to 62%, the poll found. The polls comes amid reported rising tensions between Ukraine's president and army chief Valery Zaluzhny - allegations Zelenskyy has dismissed while saying he wants to see "concrete" progress from the military.

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Biden, Qatari Counterpart Discuss Securing Release of Hostages Held By Hamas - White House

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his counterpart from Qatar in a telephone call discussed ongoing efforts to secure the release of the remaining hostages held by Hamas, the White House said in a press release.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani of Qatar," the release said on Tuesday. "The two leaders discussed the urgent effort to secure the release of all remaining hostages held by Hamas, including American citizens."

The two leaders also discussed the ongoing efforts to facilitate increased and sustained flows of humanitarian aid into Gaza, the release added.

On Friday, US senators urged the administration to leverage the United States' relationship with Qatar to secure the release of hostages held in Gaza by Hamas.

The lawmakers said in a letter to Biden that Qatar maintains close ties to Hamas, hosts some of its senior leaders and provides significant funding to the group, the letter said. As such, Doha maintains "outsized access and influence" to engage in hostage negotiations, the letter said.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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ANALYSIS - US Cannot Win International Approval for Territories, Resource Grab in Arctic

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot hope to win international approval for its unilateral grab of a million square kilometers, or 386,000 square miles of continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean that the State Department announced last week, US authorities told Sputnik.

On December 20, the State Department released a new map showing that the US government

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is now unilaterally claiming additional territories comprising an area more than twice the size of California.

UNITED STATES IS NOT A PARTY TO UNCLOS

There was no way, the Biden administration would be able to convince other nations, including its own allies, to recognize the colossal undersea territory and resource grab, former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Chas Freeman said.

"Washington has no way to achieve international recognition for its unilateral assertion of claims to areas of the Arctic shelf," Freeman said.

The released claim had been made, not in compliance with international law but in defiance of it, Freeman said.

"The United States is not a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This means that this proclaimed jurisdiction over areas beyond the previously understood definition of the continental shelf is unilateral," he said.

As a non-UNCLOS member state, the United States has no way to achieve international recognition for its unilateral assertion of claims to areas of the Arctic shelf, Freeman said.

Instead, the US government "must negotiate the agreement of those with competing claims to these areas like Canada, the Russian Federation, and other members of the Arctic Council," Freeman said.

Such a goal is impossible to achieve in the current global diplomatic climate, he said.

"Even if Americans were not engaged in a proxy war with Russia and an economic war with China, gaining their agreement to this unilateral action by Washington would verge on the impossible," Freeman said.

Also, the Biden administration claim is likely to backfire by providing solid precedent for such unilateral claims to offshore waters and resources by other nations including China, Freeman said.

"Among other consequences, it is hard to see how the claimed extension of US continental shelf claims is consistent with some of the US objections to similar claims by others, like China, in the South China Sea," Freeman added.

UNITED STATES STANDS ON THIN ICE

Oasis Earth Director Richard Steiner agreed that the United States has no solid justification for its vast new claims in the Arctic region.

"As a non-party to UNCLOS, the United States is on thin ice to make such an Extended Continental Shelf (ECS) claim," he said.

While the US government considers UNCLOS as customary international law, its ECS claim and even its 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claim could be challenged, Steiner said.

"Rather than joining this Arctic offshore resource rush, all nations should join together to fully and permanently protect the Arctic Ocean," Steiner said.

Russia has already made its own ECS claim across the Arctic Ocean, extending out the Lomonosov Ridge across the North Pole, and overlapping other ECS claims, Steiner said.

"This is a real mess, and the United States needs to exert leadership in requesting that all ECS claims in the Arctic be held in abeyance and set aside, and even extensive areas currently within coastal EEZs in the Arctic be fully protected in our proposed International Arctic Marine Sanctuary," Steiner added.

Oasis Earth is an Alaska-based environmental organization that conducts sustainability efforts

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around the world, working to find solutions in energy and marine conservation.

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FBI Says Closely Monitoring Threats to US Public This Holiday Season Due to Gaza Conflict

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation is closely monitoring threats to US public safety stemming from unrest over the Israel-Hamas conflict, an FBI spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The FBI is closely monitoring threats to public safety during the holiday season which may be amplified by the ongoing Israel-HAMAS conflict," the spokesperson said on Tuesday.

The FBI is actively communicating and sharing information with US law enforcement partners, faith communities, and others, according to the spokesperson.

Hundreds of pro-Palestine protests marched in New York City on Monday, which led to several violent clashes between demonstrators and police officers that resulted in several arrests, media reported.

Pro-Palestine protesters also held demonstrations on Monday outside the homes of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to demand an end to the Gaza conflict.

More demonstrations are expected on December 31 after the anti-war coalition ANSWER urged protesters to take to the streets on New Year's Eve to demand a ceasefire and an end to the occupation of Palestinian lands. The aim is to increase pressure on the US government with marches, walk-outs, sit-ins, and other forms of protest.

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More Than 42,000 People Killed by US Gun Violence in 2023 - Gun Violence Archive

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) - More than 42,000 people in the United States died as a result of gun violence in 2023, according to data collected by the Gun Violence Archive (GVA).

Most of the deaths, 23,760, occurred as a result of suicide, the GVA data published Tuesday said. Another 18,507 people died of unintentional shooting, murder and defensive use, GVA said.

The figure includes 650 mass shooting incidents, 40 mass murders, 1,161 defensive use cases and 1,543 unintentional shootings, GVA said.

More than 1,600 children between the ages 0-17 were killed in gun violence incidents and 4,444 others were injured, GVA said.

Forty-six (46) law enforcement officers were killed in gun violence incidents and 1,412 suspects were killed in officer-involved incidents, GVA added.

GVA tracks gun violence incidents using law enforcement, media, governmental and

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commercial sources.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 27 (Sputnik) -

GAZA DEVELOPMENTS
* A delegation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headed by Hussein Al-Sheikh is preparing to go to Cairo to meet with the Hamas leadership, a source in the PLO told Sputnik on Tuesday.
* An Israeli delegation has arrived in Cairo to study Hamas' position on a possible truce and a deal to exchange hostages, the Al-Araby Al-Jadeed news website reported, citing sources in Egypt.
* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has appointed Dutch First Deputy Prime Minister Sigrid Kaag to monitor humanitarian aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS
* The prompt conclusion of a peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan is important for Moscow and will bring an atmosphere of predictability in the region, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.
* Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev are ready to finalize peace talks and sign a peace treaty, Peskov said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Ukraine has lost up to 205 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
* The Russian military fulfilled its main goal of 2023 by thwarting Ukraine's counteroffensive, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
* Shoigu reported to President Vladimir Putin about Ukraine's overnight attack on Feodosia in Crimea and the damage done to the Russian naval ship Novocherkassk, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* Russia will organize an informal UN Security Council meeting on December 27 to mark the 10th anniversary of Ukraine's Euromaidan, the Russian mission to the United Nations said.
* Ukrainian Air Force Commander Mykola Oleshchuk, who has been accused of terrorism, has been put on Russia's wanted list, according to the database of the Russian Interior Ministry.

INDIA-RUSSIA COOPERATION
* India and Russia have signed several important agreements concerning the future units of the Kudankulam nuclear power plant, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said on

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Tuesday.
* Russian Foreign Ministre Sergey Lavrov and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar will discuss on Wednesday building transport, banking and financial chains at the upcoming negotiations, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

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US Shot Down 12 Houthi Drones, 3 Ballistic Missiles, 2 Missiles In Red Sea-CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The US forces intercepted and neutralized a barrage of 12 attack drones, 3 anti-ship ballistic missiles, and 2 land attack cruise missiles launched by Houthi rebels in the Southern Red Sea over the past 10 hours, the Central Command said in a social media post on Monday.
"US assets, to include the USS LABOON (DDG 58) and F/A-18 Super Hornets from the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, shot down twelve one-way attack drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles, and two land attack cruise missiles in the Southern Red Sea that were fired by the Houthis over a 10 hour period which began at approximately 6:30 a.m. (Sanaa time) on December 26. There was no damage to ships in the area or reported injuries," the post said.

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UN Continental Shelf Commission Member Unaware of US Submission on Recent Claim

UNITED NATIONS, December 26 (Sputnik) - A member of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf told Sputnik he does not know whether the United States has submitted its extended continental shelf claims to the body.
Last week, the State Department released the geographic coordinates defining the outer limits of the US continental shelf in areas beyond 200 nautical miles from the coast, known as the extended continental shelf (ECS). The US estimated the ECS area as approximately one million square kilometers (386,000 square miles) spread across seven regions.
In a separate fact sheet, it explained that the US ECS partially overlaps with the ECS areas of Canada, the Bahamas, and Japan; and the US and its neighbors will need to establish maritime boundaries in these areas in the future. In other areas, the US has already established ECS boundaries with its neighbors, including with Cuba, Mexico, and Russia, according to the fact sheet.
"As a member of the Commission, I have never been aware of a submission made by the US to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf," Estevao S. Mahanjane said.
"I don't know anything about the US claim," he added.
Sputnik has also reached out to the Secretariat of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. They referred Sputnik to a list of submissions on their website, which does

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not contain a submission from the US.

The UN secretariat, meanwhile, told Sputnik that it "has not been officially notified of this press-report."

"And we are not in a position to make any comment," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Commenting on the US announcement, deputy speaker of the Russian upper house Konstantin Kosachev said that claims related to the continental shelf are to be reviewed by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. The commission's mandate is based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Under Paragraph 8 of Article 76, "information on the limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured shall be submitted by the coastal State to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf." The commission shall make recommendations to coastal States on matters related to the establishment of the outer limits of their continental shelf. The limits of the shelf established by a coastal State on the basis of these recommendations "shall be final and binding," according to the convention.

The US is not a signatory to the convention.

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Dutch Politician Sigrid Kaag Appointed as UN Coordinator for Gaza Aid Deliveries

(Updates with more details, background to paras 7-9)

UNITED NATIONS, December 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has appointed Dutch First Deputy Prime Minister Sigrid Kaag to monitor humanitarian aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres today announced the appointment of Ms. Sigrid Kaag of the Netherlands as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2720 (2023)," Dujarric said in a statement.

In this role, Kaag will facilitate, coordinate, monitor and verify humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza.

She will also establish a United Nations mechanism to accelerate humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza through states which are not party to the conflict, the statement said.

Kaag is expected to begin her assignment on January 8.

Kaag served as the United Nations special coordinator for Lebanon from 2015 to 2017 and was special coordinator of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons - United Nations Joint Mission from 2013 to 2015. She also served in several senior positions with UNICEF, UN Development Program, International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

On December 22, the UN Security Council passed a resolution establishing the new position in a vote of 13 members in favor and two - the United States and Russia - abstaining. The resolution also called for the opening of border crossings into Gaza for the purposes of delivering humanitarian aid.

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US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement that she looks forward to working with Kaag in her new role.

The United States will help support the United Nations' effort to streamline and accelerate the flow of aid into Gaza, the statement said.

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US Home Prices at Record High 9 Month in Row in October - Industry Data

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - US home prices hit all-time highs again in October, marking a ninth straight month of record highs, amid chronic short supply and rising interest rates, industry data showed on Tuesday.

Home prices were 0.6% higher in October than in September, data from the S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller US National Home Price Index showed.

While mortgage rates for homes are hovering at 23-year highs or around 7%, historically low inventory is continuing to push up prices in the US economy, making it harder for prospective first-time home buyers and low-income earners to own a residence.

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

In the 2008-2009 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers. Even the coronavirus pandemic measures in the 2020-2022 period had a fleeting impact on home buying in the United States.

While the supply of homes, both existing and new, have been way below demand the past two years, rising interest rates and record home prices had also discouraged buying.

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Travel Advisory for Guinea Amid Civil Unrest, Rising Crime - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has raised the travel advisory for Guinea to level 3, warning Americans to reconsider traveling to the country due to civil unrest and crime, the US State Department said on Tuesday.

"US citizens should reconsider travel to Guinea due to civil unrest," the State Department said in a statement, adding that those who are in the country should exercise increased caution because of crime and health risks.

The State Department said in the statement that the current advisory replaces the previous one

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it issued on July 31.

On December 18, a catastrophic explosion at Guinea's primary fuel depot has resulted in widespread fuel shortages and increased costs of essential goods and services, the statement said.

"Rising transportation costs have decreased access to basic commodities and health services and contributed to a heightened risk of crime. Due to injuries related to the fuel depot incident, local hospital resources are extremely strained," the statement said.

The US government faces challenges in offering emergency services to its citizens in Guinea beyond Conakry, the statement said.

"US government employees may travel only during daylight hours and are prohibited from walking alone outside of designated areas and times," the statement added.

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US Buys 3Mln Barrels for Oil Reserve Under March 2024 Purchase Award - Energy Dept.

(Adds context and details in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has contracted to buy 3 million barrels of crude for the US oil reserve for delivery in March, the Department of Energy announced on Tuesday as falling crude prices encourage the government to refill the heavily-drawn facility.

"As of December 26, 2023, the following contracts for the purchase of 2,993,692MMB, totaling $231,447,000.00, have been finalized," the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) said in a statement with the heading "March 2024 Purchase Award Information."

The Biden administration has announced various installments of crude purchases in recent months, aimed at refilling the SPR, which saw outflows totaling more than 200 million barrels over the past two years.

It added that the companies providing the oil to SPR would be Phillips 66 Company , which would be supplying 898,102 barrels, Sunoco Partners Marketing & Terminals LP (1,197,485 barrels) and Macquarie Commodities Trading US LLC (898,105 barrels).

Crude prices had fallen sharply over the past two months, losing about 20% of their value, on concerns of oversupply that have proved beneficial to the administration's plans to refill the reserve.

The Biden administration leaned heavily on the SPR between late 2021 and early this year to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last month, the SPR's crude balance was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million barrels or more over the past 18 months.

The administration's use of the SPR has been a highly-charged matter for oil bulls and Biden's political opponents. Both sides accuse him of indiscriminately releasing hundreds of millions of barrels from the stockpile to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters - when the reserve is meant for emergency use, in times of critically short oil supply.

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Biden, in his defense, had said he was only acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above $5 per gallon in June 2022 and has stabilized since at around $3.50. The administration had also blamed last year's high crude oil prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June 2020.

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Significant Winter Storm, Heavy Snow Hit North-Central US - National Weather Service

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - A significant winter storm with heavy snow and icing has hit the northern-central part of the United States, the National Weather Service said on Tuesday.

"Significant winter storm with heavy snow, blizzard conditions and potentially damaging icing continues across portions of the north-central US through early Wednesday," the National Weather Service said in a statement.

The snowfall in parts of the US states of South Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado could reach up to 8 inches, the statement said.

There is a chance that the snowfall in some areas in South Dakota and Nebraska will exceed a foot, the statement said.

"In addition, strong winds gusting upwards of 55 mph will lead to blizzard conditions," the statement said.

The weather conditions have impacted holiday travel plans for many Americans due to the authorities delaying or canceling more than 200 flights at Denver International Airport in Colorado. In addition, the schedules of more than 100 flights in Dallas, Texas, had to be changed.

More than 3,200 flights with US destinations have been delayed or canceled, according to the portal flightawarare.com.

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NY Republican Rep. Brandon Williams' Home 'Swatted' on Christmas Day

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The home of Republican US Rep. Brandon Williams was "swatted" on Christmas Day, the New York politician said on Tuesday.

"My home was 'swatted' on Christmas. Someone hoped police might accidentally kill me," Williams wrote on X.

Williams also bemoaned the fact that a local news outlet published a photo of his New York home, accusing the outlet of "doxxing" his family.

Williams also mentioned on his X account that deputies and troopers had contacted him before arriving in five cruisers at his residence.

"They left with homemade cookies and spiced nuts," Williams added.

In a separate incident, another GOP member, Marjorie Taylor Greene, was also the victim of a swatting incident at her home in Georgia on Christmas Day.

Officers in both jurisdictions are working to determine the origins of the calls.

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Kaag was the UN special coordinator for Lebanon from 2015 to 2017 and was special coordinator of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Mission from 2013 to 2015.

She also served in several senior positions with UNICEF, the UN Development Programme, the International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

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Apple Pulls Smart Watches From Stores Amid Patent Infringement Dispute - Correspondent

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - US tech company Apple is pulling some of its smart watches from stores amid a patent infringement dispute, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Tuesday.

An Apple store in Washington withdrew the contested Apple Watch models from shelves, and it is unknown when they may return to market, a store representative said.

Apple's website also lists the smart watches as unavailable for purchase in the United States.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Biden administration declined to reverse a decision by the US International Trade Commission (ITC), which found that some Apple Watches infringed on patents for blood oxygen monitoring technology.

Apple filed an emergency motion to pause the ban pending further adjudication, although the ITC also sent a letter to the court on Tuesday to oppose the motion.

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Russia to Host Informal UNSC Meeting on Ukraine's Euromaidan on Wednesday

UNITED NATIONS, December 26 (Sputnik) - Russia will organize an informal UN Security Council meeting on December 27 to mark the 10th anniversary of Ukraine's Euromaidan, the Russian mission to the United Nations said on Tuesday.

"This is to inform you that the Russian Federation will be hosting an Arria-Formula meeting of Security Council members on the topic '10 YEARS OF EUROMAIDAN IN UKRAINE: A STEP INTO ABYSS.' The meeting is to take place at 10.00 am on Wednesday, December 27, in CR-6 [at the United Nations]," the mission said.

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US Trade Agency Opposes Apple's Appeal to Suspend Import Ban of Certain Watches - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The US International Trade Commission in a letter on Tuesday said it opposes Apple's request to pause a import ban on certain watches amid a patent dispute.

Apple stopped the sale of particular versions of its watches due to a patent dispute, particularly the Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2.

"This letter concerns Appellant Apple Inc.'s appeal filed on December 26, 2023, from a final

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determination of the International Trade Commission in Investigation...and in particular, two motions filed concurrently therewith: (1) a motion to stay the Commission's remedial orders pending appeal, and (2) a motion for an interim stay of those orders pending this Court's ruling on the motion to stay. The Commission opposes both motions," the trade agency said in a letter to a US appeal court.

The US trade agency also requested the court extend its deadline to respond to Apple's motion in order to give its attorney, who is currently on vacation until January 2, time to review and craft a response.

According to media reports, Apple is taking these watches off the market because of an ongoing dispute with medical maker Masimo over its blood oxygen feature.

Apple is awaiting for the completion and findings of a review period that is in progress with the International Trade Commission on this dispute.

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Ye Says Deeply Regrets Any Pain Caused to Jewish Community by Past Comments

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - US artist Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, released a statement on Monday, formally apologizing to the Jewish community for past anti-Semitic comments.

"I sincerely apologize to the Jewish community… It was not my intent to hurt or disrespect, and I very much regret any pain I may have caused," the statement said.

In 2022, anti-Semitism watchdog group StopAntisemitism named Ye as their "Antisemite of the Year" for his comments, which included praising Nazi leader Adolf Hitler. Sportswear company Adidas also terminated their partnership with Ye due to his comments.

Moreover, several social media platforms suspended Ye's accounts for the comments, although he has since been reinstated on X and Instagram (owned by Meta, banned in Russia).

Ye said that he is committed to learning from the experience to ensure greater sensitivity and understanding in the future, as well as to advance unity.

Earlier this month, Ye announced that Russian designer and photographer Gosha Rubchinskiy will serve as the new Head of Design for his YEEZY brand. The company also announced new footwear, their first product since "liberation from Adidas," according to a Ye statement.

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UPDATE - US Lets Stand Import Ban on Certain Apple Watches Over Patent-Infringing Tech

(Adds details in paras 8-10)

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration on Tuesday let stand a ban on imports of certain Apple watch models caused by a complaint from a medical company over

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patent-infringing technology for detecting blood oxygen levels.

In October, the US International Trade Commission (ITC) found that Apple infringed two patents owned by two US-based companies, Masimo Corporation and Cercacor Laboratories, Inc. The USTR was tasked with reviewing the decision during a 60-day period.

"After careful consultations, [US Trade Representative, USTR] Ambassador [Katherine] Tai decided not to reverse the ITC's determination and the ITC's decision became final on December 26, 2023," Tai's office said in a statement.

Masimo filed its complaint in 2021, accusing Apple of stealing technology and hiring away its personnel. Apple, in turn, sued Masimo for patent infringement in a federal court in Delaware.

The tech giant expressed disagreement with the decision by US authorities and promised to make every effort to return the watches to the American market.

"We strongly disagree with the USITC decision and resulting exclusion order, and are taking all measures to return Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2 to customers in the U.S. as soon as possible," the company's spokesperson told CNBC.

Apple has filed an emergency motion with a US appeals court to pause the import ban.

Apple will suffer irreparable harm if the ban is left in place while the tech company appeals the ban in court, the filing said. Apple requests a stay on the ban until at least January 12, when authorities are set to determine whether redesigned versions of the Apple Watches fall outside the scope of the ban, the filing said.

"Apple accordingly requests that this Court grant an immediate administrative stay of the Orders on an emergency basis, lasting only as long as it takes for this Court to resolve the Stay Motion," the filing said.

The ITC's decision includes multiple errors and will likely be reversed on appeal, the filing added.

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CIA Struggles to Rebuild Spy Network in China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The CIA is struggling to rebuild its spy network in China after it was dismantled about a decade ago, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing current and former US officials.

A former senior intelligence official pointed out that the United States presently lacked "real insight into leadership plans and intentions in China," the report said.

Current US intelligence on China mostly comes from spy satellites and cyber eavesdropping on digital communications like e-mails, the report said.

Intelligence on China otherwise comes from drawing inferences and parsing Chinese President Xi Jinping's public statements, the report added.

From 2010 to 2012, China rounded up as many as two dozen agents working for the CIA and imprisoned or executed them, although this development was never publicly acknowledged by the United States.

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US Lets Stand Import Ban on Certain Apple Watches Over Patent-Infringing Tech

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration on Tuesday let stand a ban on imports of certain Apple watch models caused by a complaint from a medical company over patent-infringing technology for detecting blood oxygen levels.

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Israel Grants Intel $3.2Bln to Help Build Chip Plant – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) – Israel has granted Intel $3.2 billion to help build its new $25 billion chip plant in the south of the country, CNBC reported on Tuesday, citing both parties.

Scheduled to open in 2028, the plant in Kiryat Gat would help Intel build a "more resilient global supply chain," along with other manufacturing investments in the US and Europe, according to a company statement quoted by CNBC.

Intel also committed to buy 60 billion shekels ($16.6 billion) in goods and services from Israeli suppliers over the next decade.

Intel currently operates four development and production sites in Israel, including a manufacturing plant in Kiryat Gat.

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