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Nearly 70% of Children Under Six Exposed to Lead in Chicago Drinking Water - Study

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), lead exposure can affect multiple body systems and is particularly harmful to young children and women of child-bearing age. The organization adds that children absorb 4 to 5 times as much lead as adults from a given source.
A study, published on Monday in JAMA Pediatrics, has estimated that nearly 70% of children in the US city of Chicago may have been exposed to poisonous lead in their household tap water caused by lead pipes. The study added that young children in Black and Latino communities were possibly exposed at higher rates than other children.
The analysis was led by researchers at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which found that 68% of Chicago children under that age of six live in households with tap water containing detectable levels of lead, while 75% of residential city blocks had been potentially exposed.
The study looked at household existing data taken between 2016 and 2023, and were taken from homes that had registered for a free, self-administered testing service, the study said. Nearly 40,000 households were involved in the program.
According to WHO, lead is a toxic metal found in the Earth's crust. While it is natural, its man-made use has resulted in "extensive environmental contamination, human exposure and significant public health problems in many parts of the world." The organization adds that there is "no level of exposure to lead that is known to be without harmful effects" but exposure is preventable.
The study estimated that 19% of Chicago children who have been given unfiltered tap water as their primary drinking source have about twice as much lead in their blood as they would otherwise.
"I think residents have reason to be concerned," said Benjamin Huynh, a public health professor and co-author of the study. "I think this should be a call to get your water tested for lead, see what the results are, then make your decisions accordingly."
The threshold that the researchers used for their study was the lowest detectable level of lead in the water tests which is one part per billion—roughly the equivalent of a half teaspoon of water in an olympic-size swimming pool, the report explains. And 69% of the tests exceeded this level.
The level of lead in drinking water must be at least 15 ppb for the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to suggest taking action. The researchers found that 9% of the tests had lead levels over 15 ppb. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics has called for state and local governments to limit the lead in school drinking fountains to no more than 1 ppb.
Studies have shown that even small exposures to lead can affect childhood brain development and contribute to preterm births, heart problems and kidney disease. Lead pipes were commonly used in construction before they were banned in the US in 1986.

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And while many US cities still use these old lead pipes—with more than 9.2 million households in the US getting their water this way, says the EPA—Chicago has more than any other city. The EPA has suggested that US cities replace all lead water service lines within 10 years, while Chicago would be given 40 years to comply.
“If we’re looking at 40 more years of contaminated drinking water, what does that mean for the children?” Huynh said. “What can we do about that in the meantime?”

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Western Delusions Shattered: Putin's Firm Stance on Ukraine Highlights NATO's Impotence

During his speech, Putin said that Russian forces could establish a “security zone that would be quite difficult for the adversary to overcome with its weapons, primarily of foreign origin.”
On Sunday night in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian public following an election victory which saw over 87% of people vote in his favor, amid a record-high turnout. During his speech, he said that Russia has a “lot of tasks ahead” but if they stay united, no one can “intimidate or suppress” their country.
According to the Russian Defense Ministry, Russia has repelled multiple attacks by Ukrainian sabotage groups that attempted to break into its territory over the past week. As a way to protect its people from cross-border Ukrainian strikes, Russia could set up a buffer zone in Kiev-controlled territories, according to Russian President Vladimir Putin.
On Monday, Sputnik’s Critical Hour spoke to Ray McGovern, who served as a CIA analyst for 27 years and co-created Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. McGovern explained Putin’s approach to a possible battle with NATO, as French President Emmanuel Macron has toyed with the idea of putting boots on the ground—a sentiment his Western counterparts have vehemently rejected.
“This business about Macron and some of the European leaders saying, 'oh, my God, we can't let Putin win in Ukraine,' it doesn't really square with what's reality here because there is no way to prevent Russia from winning in Ukraine except by use of nuclear weapons,” said McGovern.
“What [Putin] has done is just reminded people in NATO that if they send troops into Ukraine, there's going to be a fight with Russia, and a fight with Russia would be very dangerous because they have weapons that NATO doesn’t have—such as hypersonic missiles,” McGovern explained, adding that Russia’s weapons are “fast” and “precise” and can cause a lot of damage without any “nuclear fallout, figuratively or literally”.
“The Western press has taken to accusing Putin of threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons,” McGovern added. “[But] he has not raised the issue of tactical nuclear weapons. It's the US that is raising this, which makes me suspicious. Does the US realize that there's no way they can stop Russia in Ukraine short of using tactical nuclear weapons, which in my view happens to be the case?”
“And so, they are considering that and preparing the propaganda play by blaming the Russians and specifically Putin,” the former CIA analyst added.

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Putin spoke to reporters and journalists following his election victory, and said that at "some point" Russia could set up a buffer zone in Kiev-controlled territories in order to protect the Russian population from Ukrainian strikes. The president explained that if and when Russia considers it appropriate, they will establish a "security zone that would be quite difficult for the adversary to overcome with its weapons, primarily of foreign origin."

"This went back a whole year," said McGovern of the buffer zones. "[Sergey] Lavrov, the [Russian] Foreign Minister said they will be satisfied with the Donbass and those other two oblasts but, as long as there continues to be longer range artillery and missile range that much farther to the west, they're going to have to go."

"So, Putin made that very clear just the other day saying, 'look, there needs to be a cordon sanitaire. There needs to be a kind of buffer zone, a zone where if you have weapons that you're aiming at us, it's got to be that much more towards the West that we will draw this line,'" the analyst clarified.

"As far as what the Ukrainians are trying to do, they're trying to show in one burst of energy that they really have the initiative, or at least they can take an initiative and they got slaughtered just over the weekend. They're all trying to show the US Congress that there's still life in the Ukrainian military—all they need is another $60 billion from Mike Johnson, the speaker of the [US] House," McGovern added.

"In my view, the whole name of the game is to keep it going without an obvious defeat until November, so that Biden has some reasonable prospect of not having to run having lost a war," he said.

Sputnik's Wilmer Leon said the introduction of a buffer zone would be consistent with what Putin has been saying for a "number of years", which is: the West has been encroaching Russia's security space with missiles, and has cut Russia's defense time down as a result, forcing Russia to act to defend its security.

Leon also referred to an article recently published by a Washington, DC newspaper that suggested the Western strategy in their proxy war with Russia is to ignore "reality". The article also highlighted that the Russian economy has withstood Western sanctions "far better" than most predicted, adding that the global economy is interdependent enough that bans on products such as oil negatively impacts everyone—not just those the West is trying to punish.

"The pressure that Putin needs to feel is not long term economic decline, but short term military setbacks, loss of concrete territory, high casualty rates and a collapse of morale," said McGovern. "Well, that would be great but that's not going to happen. Don't these people realize that the battle is lost?"

"For Russia, Ukraine is an existential issue; for the West, it is not. And [former US President Barack] Obama added that, by giving weapons to Ukraine, that would be a bad idea because that would give them the idea that they could prevail against a much more powerful Russia," the former CIA analyst said.

"I don't know where Biden was when that was going on, but he's been persuaded that more and more weapons and it's going to come to a no-good end because even, even if Mike Johnson is browbeaten into approving some or all of that $60 billion more, it's not going to be usable to prevent a defeat," he added. "Whether they can put it off until November, that's questionable."

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‘Say the Right Thing for the Cameras’: The Schumer-Biden-Netanyahu Clash

Schumer said on Thursday that the prime minister had “lost his way”, adding that his coalition no longer fit the needs of the country following the initial attack on October 7. The US senator also said that Israel had been “too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows."

On Friday, US President Joe Biden openly praised US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s recent address in which he called for new elections in Israel. Biden said the speech was “good”, adding that it raised concerns “shared not only by him but by many Americans.”

Schumer’s recent address marks a growing concern among the Democratic party about their weakening voter support. During the Democratic presidential primary in the swing state of Michigan, 14.5% of voters voted “uncommitted” as a protest to Biden’s support for Israel’s offensive in Gaza, which has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza’s health ministry.

On Monday, Sputnik’s Fault Lines spoke with Esteban Carrillo, a Beirut-based Ecuadorian journalist and editor for The Cradle, who agreed that the Democrats’ change in tone is most likely a result of poor polling.

“I'm pretty sure that this is related to the most recent opinion polls,” said Carrillo. “All of a sudden Joe Biden, the White House, is trotting out its highest, most senior Jewish official to essentially call for new elections in Israel.”

Carrillo then suggests that the White House is essentially saying to not “pay attention to what we have been doing for the past six months, pay attention to what we're saying now”.

“Now, we are concerned. Now, we want to see less civilians dead,” Carrillo said. “Joe Biden said it himself in an interview, a few days ago. He said something like Rafah would be a red line and then immediately walked it back, he said there are no red lines for Israel. No matter what, we are going to continue sending weapons.”

“So, this is what Schumer and, I guess, in extension the Democrats are trying to do, is to do what we're seeing across Western media over the past several weeks, which is to paint Netanyahu as somehow external to Israel. Netanyahu is not Israel, Israel is not Netanyahu, despite the fact that Benjamin Netanyahu won, easily won, elections over a year ago,” he added.

“And to this day, 87% of Israeli Jews, which is essentially three quarters of all Israelis, when asked, think that the number of Palestinians killed in Gaza is justified, the number of deaths are justified, and they wouldn't want to see less force being used on the ground. So, this is an attempt to whitewash complicity in genocide. It's really nothing else,” said Carrillo.

In January, it was reported by a global news agency that polls in Israel showed consistently high support for the state’s military offensive in Gaza even 100 days after the conflict first began.

Sputnik’s Jamarl Thomas pointed out that Biden is politically boxed in by the conflict between Palestine and Israel: his voters and even those in his own party are becoming increasingly critical of Israel’s offensive actions which have left thousands of women and children dead,

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hungry, and/or seeking shelter. But Biden is also wary of the “$100 million that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) will use against him” this election season should he pull his support for Israel.

“Joe Biden first of all, is a self-proclaimed, very proud Zionist,” said Carrillo. “He has said this multiple times. So you have that, first of all, then second of all is the amount of influence that AIPAC and the Israeli lobby weighs on US politics is really something that I think generations from now, I think we're going to be studying in terms of what a democracy actually looks like.”

“I mean, look at how quickly the US responded to other nations with sanctions or with military action, and they don't do anything when it comes to this. The US president is afraid to lift a finger,” he added.

“At least 30,000-plus have been killed. So many children, so many women, so many innocents. But, as far as an actual break we'll have to see because what I have seen is that apparently the US is now trying to send more precision-guided bombs, as opposed to the 'dumb bombs' that created so much death and destruction in Gaza,” said Carrillo.

“They're also doing this pier because, yes, apparently, the US president, the most powerful man in the world, cannot pick up a phone and tell the leader of this allied nation to stop killing civilians, to stop dropping bombs on hospitals and on schools and on shelters, or to allow humanitarian aid in.”

Over the weekend, the European Union pledged €7.4 Billion aid package to Egypt to address economic challenges and potential migration pressures. The pledge, Thomas suggests, could be an anticipation of Israel’s invasion of Rafah, and followed news of Egypt building barriers in the Sinai.

“I'm so glad that you brought up the situation with Egypt because, yes, first of all, they have already built a buffer zone on the Gaza border security zone where Egyptian authorities give different answers as to what this is meant for,” said Carrillo. “They say this is an expansion of other work. [But] nobody gives a straight answer.”

“The EU is the last one to have just all of a sudden become so deeply concerned about the Egyptian economy, which has been on the rocks for years now. They've been trying to get a loan extension with the IMF, and it came together, it came together a couple of weeks ago, and an IMF official came out and said the same thing as Ursula von der Leyen, which is we need to make sure Egypt can handle, you know, any upcoming difficulties, especially in relation to the refugee crisis,” he added.

“Then, you also had the Gulf states, you had the UAE investing $35 billion in buying up land in Egypt, you had the Saudis wanting to buy up land in Egypt, you had British Petroleum talking about a 1.5 billion gas project. All of these things just one week after the next, coming together. Just as Egypt is building this security zone and you have Egyptian officials coming out and saying 'this will be an act of war, we will never accept this,' and so on and so forth,” Carrillo continued.

“Today the Egyptian foreign minister, if I'm not mistaken, came out and said that the US needs to remind Israel of the consequences of launching the Rafah invasion. This is exactly the same strategy as we're seeing by the Democrats, as we're seeing by Chuck Schumer, by Joe Biden. [They] go out on the cameras and [they] say the right things and then turn [their] back and do the exact opposite,” said Carrillo.

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“So, the situation in Rafah is catastrophic as it is across Gaza. As we've said before, there is no safe place for Palestinians anywhere in Gaza.”
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed back against Schumer’s calls for new elections in the country, adding that an effort to bring about elections now, at the “height of the war” is an effort to halt the war and subsequently paralyze Israel for at least six months.

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China’s Infrastructure Triumphs Prove West Has Much to Learn From Beijing

China’s engineering achievements are the envy of the world. But will Cold War thinking prevent reconciliation between East and West?
CNN called it “China’s metro system in the middle of nowhere”: a gleaming, modern subway entrance surrounded by barren fields outside the city of Chongqing. The US media outlet compared the scene to “a post-apocalyptic future.” The station is part of a larger scheme, the cable news giant noted, anticipating growth in a rapidly modernizing country, but the author seemed skeptical.
Seven years later, commuters bustle in and out of the subterranean portal surrounded by a modern concrete plaza and towering apartment buildings. Caojiawan Station is a testament to China’s impressive ability to plan and execute large-scale infrastructure and urban development projects.
Hundreds of miles south China is putting the finishing touches on a high-speed rail project. The Guangzhou-Zhanjiang line is one of many that links cities across the country’s vast terrain with modern, rapid transportation. A new undersea tunnel beneath Zhanjiang Bay has just set a record as the country’s longest.
The achievement provides a stark contrast to rail transport in the United States. Although the US and China are comparable in size and geography, America has struggled to build rail lines that even approach the speed and modernity of those that exist throughout the world. A project in California, considered perhaps the country’s best prospect of achieving anything analogous, has been bogged down by repeated delays, endless reviews and massive cost overruns.
The debacle doesn’t suggest a country whose best days are ahead of it.
How does Beijing excel in infrastructure where others flounder? Chinese newspaper the Global Times attributes the country’s achievements to a few key factors.
One, China possesses a great diversity of homegrown manufacturing capabilities. “Globally speaking, China is the only country in the world obtaining all the industrial categories listed in the United Nations industrial classification,” the Global Times notes. China produces everything it needs domestically, without relying on imports of technology or expertise from beyond its borders.
Secondly, China has a greater appetite for long-term investment. While some private US companies have proposed luxury rail lines that hope to quickly recoup investment by marketing service to business passengers, investors in China are willing to fund projects that may require long periods of time to generate returns.

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The reason for this can be attributed to a third factor, perhaps the most important: China has much greater flexibility in financing because of its unique public institutions. In the US, a powerful finance capital class funnels profits to a select few Wall Street interests. America's banks hold enormous influence over its political system, providing the funds and incentives that ensure the election of allied lawmakers and trillion-dollar bailouts when needed.

One might struggle to imagine the prospect of Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, or Chase Bank being nationalized. In China they have done just that. Beijing's largest banks exist to serve the public, funding massive infrastructure and development projects for the greater good. The results speak for themselves.

Behind it all is a degree of state planning and coordination simply not possible in other countries. China's economic and political system is able to act with an impressive singularity of purpose, uniting resources toward the country's development.

A common refrain in the West is that China only began to thrive after it embraced Western-style capitalism. But one only need look next door to India, a country of comparable size and population with a similar history of colonial exploitation, to appreciate that China is unique in its results.

China's rise has seen it transformed from one of the poorest countries on the planet to a force able to challenge the United States in a single lifetime. As a new Cold War emerges between these two global powers, the world is presented with two competing models.

Western observers will immediately reject aspects of China's approach to speech, governance, and individual rights. Every country develops along its own path. And the West may, indeed, be able to embrace certain facets of Beijing's model over others.

Doing so will require a rejection of binary thinking and Cold War hostility. The world has much to learn from China's achievements. But doing so will require tolerance, humility, and good will.

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Slovak Prime Minister Urges Parliamentary Vote Against Sending Troops to Ukraine

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico has consistently criticized EU support for the Kiev regime, calling for a negotiated solution to the Donbass conflict.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico strongly rejected European interference in the Donbass conflict Sunday, urging Slovakia's congress to pass a resolution against the sending of troops to Ukraine.

"Some European politicians talk about the need to directly participate in the war in Ukraine against Russia with such intensity that I am beginning to take it as a reality," said the leader in a video posted on social media. "And that's why I would consider it right if the National Council takes a decision as quickly as possible that it does not agree with such a military adventure."

Fico, often considered a voice of dissent against the increasingly Russophobic tilt of the European Union, took the opportunity to criticize the tenor of debate surrounding the subject. "If you are in favor of peace and stopping the killing of Slavs, you are Putin's man," Fico observed,

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responding to frequent characterizations of himself as an ally of the Russian president. “If you are in favor of killing and involving the EU and NATO in the war in Ukraine, you are in the right place.”

The Prime Minister claimed there is no military solution to the Donbass conflict and urged negotiations for a peaceful settlement. He also promised the cooperation of Slovakia in efforts to provide Ukraine with humanitarian aid.

Fico broadly criticized the direction of the EU in recent years, claiming larger states are infringing on the independence of smaller ones. The Prime Minister insisted Slovakia must maintain the right to a sovereign foreign policy.

“When the war in Ukraine ends, whatever the outcome, Europe will be different,” said Fico. “There will be less democracy and freedom. The national sovereignty of the small member states of the European Union will be suppressed.”

“Look at what they did to the Holy Father [Pope Francis] for [his] peaceful view of the war in Ukraine,” he added, referring to criticism of the Pope’s recent comments urging the Kiev regime to negotiate. “If they could, they would have removed him or punished him economically, which is what they will do in the future with the so-called politically disobedient.”

“I refuse to have an iron curtain built between the EU and the Russian Federation,” said Fico in remarks made late last week.

Fico was sharply critical of recent comments by French President Emmanuel Macron suggesting the possibility of European troops being sent to Ukraine. The proposal was broadly rejected by leaders throughout the continent, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Fico rode to power in Slovakia in 2023 on a wave of discontent over EU support for Ukraine in the Donbass proxy conflict against Russia. It is his fourth time serving as prime minister of the country.

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Western Coverage of Russian Elections Awash in Disinformation

Analyst Mark Sleboda criticized Western reporting on Russia’s presidential election and explained why President Vladimir Putin is so popular in Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will return to the Kremlin this year with a renewed mandate, having won 87% of the vote in an election with over 77% turnout. The outcome suggests strong support for the leader among the Russian public, but Western media has repeatedly attempted to delegitimize the presidential contest with a combination of misleading characterizations, half-truths, and outright lies.

International relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda returned to Sputnik’s Fault Lines program on Monday to break down mainstream media coverage of the election and explain why Putin enjoys such massive support in Russia.

“Putin has won this election by stunning margins,” said host Jamarl Thomas, with early results showing a convincing win for the Russian president immediately after polls closed on Sunday.

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“On some level people expected Putin to win it, and the question was going to be how much enthusiasm was there going to be in this race? And, apparently, there's been a lot of it.”
“All of the polls, of course – domestic polls, opposition polls, foreign polls, take your pick – whichever ones you don't want to trust, they all show the same thing for the election,” noted Sleboda.
“Glancing over the absurdity of the Western media, it's quite obvious they are not going to recognize the results of this election at all, which will make even a slim hope of diplomatic settlement of the current conflict in Ukraine essentially impossible going forward because they will not even recognize the results of the Russian election. But this is nothing new,” Sleboda said.
“Take a look at elections in Palestine and Lebanon when the elections didn't go the way the West wanted,” recalled the analyst. “They just didn't recognize the results.”
The United States has a long history of casting doubt on foreign elections that produce results contrary to the country’s foreign policy aims. In the book Manufacturing Consent, authors Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman recall how the US discounted Nicaragua’s 1984 election, which revealed the Sandinista movement enjoyed the support of more than two-thirds of its citizens. The United States criticized electoral conditions there even while supporting elections in neighboring Central American countries that returned US allies to power in conditions considered far more repressive, according to international observers. The US then backed violent Contra death squads in the country, fueling a bloody civil war until Nicaraguans were compelled to vote for US-backed forces to quell the conflict.
“‘In your country, one of the two major candidates… there's legal battles trying to keep him off of ballots across the country,’” noted Sleboda, referring to Russian presidential spokesperson Maria Zakharova’s response to Western criticism of the country’s election. “Not to mention the Electoral College and all of the corruption with campaign finance… Your criticisms don't mean anything to anyone anymore. You are literally the emperor with no clothes.”
“I think that this vote certainly showed the unity of the Russian people,” Sleboda added, “and the unity, it must be said, of the new regions. The vote in Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporozhye – the turnout was even higher than in the rest of the country, despite some of the people, at least on the front lines, facing going to the polls literally under fire.”
Thomas noted the mendacity of Western coverage on the subject, with CNN and other outlets reporting that people in the Donbass were voting “under gunfire or under gunpoint. But not under gunfire from Ukrainians. But, basically, that they were being pushed to the polling, meaning the impression that is being given in some of the media outlets is the opposite.”
Western outlets also attempted to portray massive turnout in a negative light, with The Wall Street Journal suggesting long lines at voting locations were protesters demonstrating against the presidential elections in Russia.
“It's the opposite of reality,” said Sleboda, criticizing Western media’s dishonest presentation of information. “They [voters in the Donbass] were literally under fire from the country that believes it has the right to rule over them, by the regime in Kiev. So that is a reversal of the portrayal that is in the Western media.”
“All during that time period the [Ukrainian] regime was attacking, they were launching artillery strikes, cluster munitions, trying to hit polling stations, quite obviously to punish the people of the former East Ukraine for choosing wrong and for participating in an actual democratic process

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which they don't have in their own country," he added. "Because, one, Zelensky has banned elections for the time being in the country. And two, he already banned all the parties of eastern Ukraine before anyway."

"Since 2014, since the government was overthrown, there have been over 20 political parties banned in [Ukraine]," Sleboda noted. "All opposition media has been shut down. There's one unified information policy. The largest church in the country is literally undergoing a pogrom, with its leaders being arrested and the leaders of the top three opposition parties in the country… have all been charged with treason against the Zelensky regime. That is what is heralded as freedom and democracy that they're fighting for in the Western media."

The expert pointed out that Russians' turnout in this year's election has surpassed that of even 1991, when Russia held its first elections of the modern era. Russia has been transformed under Putin's leadership since the 1990s, when Western bombs devastated Moscow's ally Yugoslavia and the Russian economy stood in tatters. Some even predicted Russia would collapse as the Soviet Union had only a few years before.

Now Russia is the largest economy in Europe, with a restored military and renewed international standing as a major player in the BRICS alliance.

Sleboda said Putin's strong performance is a ratification of support for the special operation in the Donbass as well as a demonstration of approval of his domestic agenda, which includes support for Russian families, improving standard of living, and developing public infrastructure.

"Everything is as transparent and secure as it can possibly be," he concluded, noting Russia's glass ballot boxes and publicly viewable video feeds from each polling location. "But it doesn't make any difference to the West. They're going to not accept the results no matter what because, ultimately, the results aren't what they want. As Victoria Nuland clearly stated just before resigning, it's not the Russia we wanted."

"Too bad, too bad."

China's infrastructure triumphs prove West has much to learn from Beijing

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In Southern China, workers are putting the finishing touches on a major high-speed rail project. The Guangzhou-Zhanjiang line is one of many that links cities across the country's vast terrain with modern, rapid transportation, and a new undersea tunnel beneath Zhanjiang Bay has just set a record as the country's longest.

The achievement provides a stark contrast to rail transport in the United States. Although the US and China are comparable in size and geography, America has struggled to build lines that even approach the speed and modernity of those elsewhere. A high speed rail project in California, considered perhaps the country's best prospect of achieving anything analogous, has been bogged down by repeated delays, endless reviews and massive cost overruns.

How does Beijing excel in infrastructure where others flounder? Chinese newspaper the Global Times attributes the country's achievements to a few key factors:

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1) China possesses a great diversity of homegrown manufacturing capabilities;
2) China has a greater appetite for long-term investment;
3) China has much greater flexibility in financing because of its unique public institutions.

China's rise has seen it transformed from one of the world's poorest countries to a force able to challenge the United States in a single lifetime. Learning from its example is essential, but will require a rejection of binary thinking and Cold War hostility.

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🏴 Slovak prime minister urges parliamentary vote against sending troops to Ukraine

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Western coverage of Russian elections awash in disinformation

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“It's the opposite of reality,” said analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik’s Fault Lines program, pointing out Western media’s false suggestion that citizens in the Donbass were forced to participate in Russian elections at gunpoint. In fact, people in Russia’s new regions were being fired on by the Ukraine regime as they attempted to cast their ballot.

“All during that time period the [Ukrainian] regime was attacking, they were launching artillery strikes, cluster munitions, trying to hit polling stations, quite obviously to punish the people of the former East Ukraine for choosing wrong and for participating in an actual democratic process which they don't have in their own country,” he added. “Because, one, Zelensky has banned elections for the time being in the country. And two, he already banned all the parties of eastern Ukraine before anyway.”

Sleboda said Putin’s strong performance is a ratification of support for the special operation in the Donbass as well as a demonstration of approval of his domestic agenda, which includes support for Russian families, improving standard of living, and developing public infrastructure.

“Everything is as transparent and secure as it can possibly be,” he concluded, noting Russia’s glass ballot boxes and publicly viewable video feeds from each polling location. “But it doesn't make any difference to the West. They're going to not accept the results no matter what because, ultimately, the results aren't what they want. As Victoria Nuland clearly stated just before resigning, it's not the Russia we wanted.”

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Blinken Welcomes EU's $54Bln Aid Package for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken welcomed the European Union's $54 billion aid package for Ukraine while participating virtually in an EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken participated virtually in the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) yesterday at the invitation of EU High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell. He welcomed the EU’s recent agreement of €50 billion in financial support for Ukraine and emphasized the importance of continued U.S.-EU cooperation and the U.S. commitment to hold Russia accountable," Miller said in a statement.

Blinken also expressed a desire to cooperate with the EU to boost humanitarian assistance for civilians in Gaza, Miller added. Blinken assured participants that the US will work with the EU to protect global trade and commerce from attacks by Houthis.

"He welcomed the support from the European Commission to provide humanitarian aid to Haiti and encouraged EU and member state support for the Haiti Multinational Security Support mission," the statement said.

Blinken and his European partners also discussed China and reviewed the importance of

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maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and preserving the status quo, the statement said.

Western countries, including EU member states, have been providing financial and military aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Russia has consistently warned against the continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Blinken to Visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt for Ceasefire, Hostage Talks

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Saudi Arabia and Egypt this week for talks on a potential ceasefire and hostage release agreement between Israel and Hamas, he said on Tuesday.

"So with regard to the trip that we'll be taking from here going on to Saudi Arabia and to Egypt, the purpose is multifold. It's of course to push for an agreement on a ceasefire and the release of hostages," Blinken said at a press briefing in Manila.

Blinken added that the talks would include governance, security, humanitarian assistance, and the redevelopment of Gaza post-war.

He also highlighted that "100 percent of the population in Gaza is at severe levels of acute food insecurity" and increasing their access to aid would be a "central part" of talks.

Blinken's trip will end in Cairo on March 22, according to a Department of State release.

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US Allies in Europe Have 'Major Concerns' About Biden's Pause on New LNG Exports - Senator

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) - US allies in Europe expressed major concerns on the margins of the Munich Security Conference last month about President Joe Biden's pause on new exports of US liquified natural gas (LNG), US Senator Dan Sullivan said during remarks at CERAWeek.

In January, Biden paused the approval of new LNG exports in the United States, citing a need to better assess climate, health, and economic considerations of pending licenses.

"Every ally that we spoke to had major concerns about the Biden administration's LNG moratorium...the most senior German officials, EU officials, everybody," Sullivan said on Monday.

US allies in Europe and Asia are not fine with the pause, Sullivan said, adding that it is a "huge geostrategic mistake."

Russia immediately reached out to Germany following Biden's pause of LNG exports, which is something the United States does not want to happen, Sullivan noted.

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Chinese Billionaire Admits to Election, Immigration Fraud Acts in US - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - A Hong Kong-based Chinese billionaire entered a guilty plea in US federal court in New York to charges of immigration fraud, making illegally-placed donations, and using a false identification card, the Department of Justice announced in a press release.

"...(I)n federal court in Central Islip, Hui Qin, a citizen of the People's Republic of China who was listed on Forbes Magazine's List of Billionaires and who operated SMI Culture, a Hong Kong-based entertainment entity, pleaded guilty to an Information charging him with making political contributions in the names of others, immigration fraud and producing a false identification document," the release said on Monday.

When sentenced, Qin will face up to 27 years' imprisonment in federal penitentiaries, the Justice Department said.

"Qin pleaded guilty today to engaging in a brazen web of deception, spreading lies to federal election and immigration authorities and a state agency," US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Breon Peace said in the release.

Qin has been incarcerated since his arrest on October 2, 2023, the Justice Department said.

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US Cannot Continue to Take on Trillions of Dollars in Debt - Senator

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot continue to take on trillions of dollars in debt, US Senator Joe Manchin said during remarks at the CERAWeek energy conference in Texas.

"We're $34.4 trillion in debt. We can't continue to carry the debt we're carrying in this country," Manchin said on Monday.

Both Republicans and Democrats are responsible for adding to the national debt, Manchin said.

The US carries approximately $34.54 trillion in debt as of this writing, according to Treasury Department data.

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden released a $7.266 trillion budget request for Fiscal Year 2025, including $965 billion to pay interest on the national debt. However, the budget proposal includes a $1.8 trillion spending deficit.

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US Senator Graham Says Advocated Trump's Loan Idea for Ukraine in Meeting With Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) - US Senator Lindsey Graham said in a statement that during his meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, he advocated former President Donald Trump's idea to help Ukraine by providing a no-interest loan instead of just sending aid for free.

"During my meeting with President Zelensky, I informed him that given the crisis at the United States' southern border and our overwhelming debt, President Trump's idea of turning aid from the United States into a no-interest, waivable loan is the most likely path forward," the statement said on Monday.

Graham added that Trump's idea could be applied not only in the case of Ukraine but also to other countries that the US is supporting.

In February, Trump suggested that Washington put $60 billion in foreign aid for Ukraine in the form of a loan rather than "just handing it over" after the US Senate passed a $95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid, but no border security measures.

Earlier in March, commenting on Trump's idea of a loan for Kiev instead of "no strings attached" aid, Defense Department Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said that Ukraine would have difficulty repaying any loans to the United States for assistance.

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ANALYSIS - Putin Emerges Politically Strengthened by Commanding Reelection Victory - US Experts

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin's landslide victory in the 2024 presidential election on Sunday, garnering 87.28% of voter support along an all-time high voter turnout in post-Soviet Russia of 77.44%, convincingly demonstrated the strength of Putin's ongoing popular support base, US political scientists and other analysts told Sputnik.

Putin continues to enjoy a very strong and broad popular consensus for successfully prosecuting the war against the United States and the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine and there was virtually no significant opposition to the war expressed during the election, Rhode Island University Professor of Political Science Nicolai Petro said.

"The fact so few did so speaks volumes about current public opinion in Russia, and sends an important signal to the West," Petro said. "Putin thus emerges strengthened, particularly when contrasted to the Ukrainian leadership," Petro said.

Petro disputed the widespread Western view that the election was meaningless and did not reflect genuine Russian popular opinion.

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"Elections are never meaningless. If one does not like the options available, one can simply choose not to vote. Low voter participation is typically seen as a measure of low public confidence in the political system. In this election, however, Putin not only garnered 6% more votes than he was predicted to get in polls taken prior to the vote, but voter turnout was 6% higher than expected," Petro said.

Russians were also genuinely presented with real and different policy options to support that were championed by the different presidential candidates, he said.

"Nor is it accurate to say that the choices Russians had were meaningless. Those who prioritize peace and re-establishing relations with the West could have voted for Vladislav Davankov, the candidate who campaigned on making peace with Ukraine, albeit still on terms favorable to Russia, his first priority," Petro said.

The removal of other similarly positioned candidates, like Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova, actually made this choice starker, and gave voters a chance to take a clear stand against the war, he said.

By contrast, the political base of Ukraine's US-backed war leaders was now more precarious than ever, Petro noted.

"[Ukrainian President Volodymyr} Zelenskyy's term in office ends in May, while the Rada's ends in August, but they have decided not to hold elections at all," Petro said.

While there may be a legitimate argument for suspending elections during wartime, this will inevitably raise questions about the legitimacy of the current leadership, at a time when they can least afford it, he added.

Covert Action Magazine Managing Editor Jeremy Kuzmarov agreed that the conduct and outcome of the Russian presidential election confirmed a strong domestic base of support for Putin that was reflected in the results.

"The opposition candidates heralded in the United States like Julia Navalnaya represent a clown show who have no support inside Russia and advocate for policies that would severely harm the Russian population. Navalnaya is a tool of the West and Russians see that," Kuzmarov said.

Putin's popularity stemmed from his reinvigoration of the Russian economy after the disastrous misrule of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s and his effective adaptation to US sanctions that had been imposed upon Russia, he said.

Putin had successfully countered these US efforts to economically ruin Russia "by fortifying Russian trading ties with China, investment and support for domestic manufacturing and industry, fortification of ties with the Eurasian Union and with Middle Eastern countries like Iran and the BRICS countries [Brazil, India, China and South Africa] and increased trade with India," Kuzmarov said.

Many Russians also believed that the war in Ukraine was provoked by the United States and Ukraine, which was transformed into a CIA base for attacking Russia, as the New York Times has reported, he said.

"Putin is seen as defending Russian security interests effectively, as Russia is winning the war, having regained territory from Ukraine and secured its position in Crimea," Kuzmarov said.

Putin had also projected Russian power effectively in Syria where Russia saved the country from the fate of Libya, which had been total dismemberment," Kuzmarov said. "All in all Putin is among the most successful leaders in recent Russian history."

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On Monday, the Russian Central Election Commission data showed that Putin won the 2024 presidential election with 87.28% of the votes after 100% of ballots were counted.
Nikolay Kharitonov, chairman of the State Duma's Far East and Arctic Development Committee, received 4.31% of the votes; Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the International Affairs Committee received 3.20% of the vote; and State Duma's lower house Deputy Chairman Vladislav Davankov received 3.85% of the vote, according to the final results.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) -

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN RUSSIA
* Russian President Vladimir Putin won the 2024 presidential election in Russia with 87.28% of the votes, final data from the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) showed after 100% of the ballots were processed.
* The leaders of six nations who are members of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - congratulated Russian President Vladimir Putin on his victory in the presidential election, noting the broad support that Russian citizens showed, the Kremlin said on Monday.
* Moscow categorically disagrees with Washington's assessments claiming that the presidential election in Russia held over the weekend was not free and fair, Peskov said.
* Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Putin on reelection and expressed hope for joint work to strengthen the partnership between their two states.
* The German government is ready to communicate with Putin, but Berlin will not congratulate him on the victory in the presidential election, government first deputy spokeswoman Christiane Hoffmann said.

MIDDLE EAST
* The EU member states' foreign ministers have expressed support to impose sanctions for the first time on Israeli settlers in the West Bank, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Monday.
* The United States believes that a major ground military operation in Rafah would be a mistake and further isolate Israel internationally, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.
* US President Joe Biden asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to send an interagency team to Washington to hear the United States' concerns about Israel's plans for Rafah and lay out an alternative approach to achieving its goals, Sullivan said.
* Biden and Netanyahu discussed the latest developments in the Gaza Strip, including the situation in Rafah and efforts to surge humanitarian aid in the Palestinian enclave, the White House said.

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* Northern Gaza is facing an imminent famine if no action is taken, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, citing a new report compiled by the world's leading experts on food insecurity.

ARMS CONTROL

* The United States stands ready to engage in bilateral arms control talks with China and Russia without any preconditions, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

* The United States and Russia must lead the way to a nuclear weapons reduction as well as find a way back to the negotiating table to implement the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and agree on a successor treaty, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.

* The strategic dialogue between Russia and the United States on arms control is only possible if the US and NATO revise their anti-Russian course, Deputy Russian Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* EU member states' foreign ministers have agreed to impose sanctions on Russia over the death of Russian politician Alexei Navalny, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Monday.

* There is a strong support among the EU member states for using windfall profits from Russia's frozen assets, Borrell said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russia has prevented the attempts of Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups to infiltrate Russia's Belgorod Region, and Kiev have lost up to 150 soldiers in fighting, the Russian Defense ministry said.

* Two people were killed and four others injured as a result of an air attack by the Ukrainian armed forces in Russia's Belgorod Region, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

* The idea of Russian President Vladimir Putin on the creation of a buffer zone meant taking measures to ensure the security of the territory of Russia which is under attack, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* The EU foreign ministers have decided to expand the European Peace Fund by $5.45 billion to allocate for the procurement of arms for Ukraine, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.

MOLDOVA DEVELOPMENTS

* The Investigative Committee of Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria said on Monday that it had opened a criminal case in connection with the bombing of a helicopter at an airfield in Tiraspol.

* The bombing of the helicopter by a kamikaze drone in Transnistria was a terrorist attack, the region's foreign ministry said.

* Moldovan President Maia Sandu said she will not sign a decree appointing the head of Moldova's autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, as a government member.

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World Needs Both Fossil And Clean Fuels, US Energy Sec. Tells Unenthusiastic Oil Industry

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The world needs both fossil and clean fuels for the foreseeable future, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said Monday, playing down the threat that new energy sources were spelling extinction by the day for the oil and gas industry.

Addressing the who's-who of the energy trade in the Houston city of Texas for the annual CERA Week conference on oil and gas, Granholm said embracing both the old and new in energy had always been an aspiration of the Biden administration.

Her audience — comprising many oil executives who spent much of Biden's three years in office fighting his so-called hostility against fossil fuels as the president prioritized green or clean energy — showed little enthusiasm for her words. A broad section did not clap even as Granholm exhorted them to, as she spoke of the administration's efforts and plans for energy.

"The world will need to secure supply of both traditional and new energy for the foreseeable future. That's one everybody can applaud in this room," the energy secretary told the largely quiet luncheon crowd. "Clean energy investment today is 65% higher than investment in fossil fuels."

Undeterred, Granholm pressed on, saying the United States was seeing unprecedented investments in manufacturing and clean energy technologies.

"Some 600 factories to build energy energy products have been announced since the passage of the president's 'Invest in America' agenda, launched after the coronavirus pandemic," she said.

In electricity alone, there were investment opportunities for at least $250 billion to meet the goal of creating 90 gigawatts of capacity by 2050, Granholm said.

In natural gas, she noted that the United States was already the largest exporter of LNG, or liquefied natural gas, exporting 14 billion cubic feet (bcf) per day.

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Defendants Request Review of Decision to Keep Fani Willis on Trump Election Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump and other defendants requested a review of a court's decision to keep Fulton County District Attorney on a case involving alleged election interference, after accusations of an improper relationship with Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade.

"Defendants … request that the Court grant a certificate of Immediate Review of the Court's Order on Defendant's Motions to Dismiss and Disqualify the Fulton County District Attorney, issued March 15, 2024, to the Georgia Court of Appeals," a joint motion filed Monday said.

Last week, the Superior Court of Fulton County declined to remove Willis from the case,

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characterizing the accusations of impropriety as legally insufficient.
Although the court was presented with evidence that Willis received a direct financial benefit of approximately $12,000 to $15,000 from her romantic relationship with Wade, the court did not consider these grounds sufficient to remove Willis from the case.
The court found that the evidence did not establish Willis' receipt of a material financial benefit as a result of her decision to hire and engage in a romantic relationship with Wade.
The court determined that the evidence demonstrated that the financial gain stemming from Willis' relationship with Wade was not a "motivating factor" in her decision to indict and prosecute Trump for alleged election interference.
However, the court noted that it does not condone Willis' "tremendous lapse in judgment" or her unprofessionalism.
The court ruled that the case against Trump could only proceed if Wade withdrew or the entire investigative team was replaced; Wade resigned from the case after the court's ruling.
Trump pleaded not guilty to the 13 felony counts on which he has been indicted in the case.

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Musk Says Biden Admin Doing 'Nothing' as LAPD Forms Task Force Against Foreign Gangs

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said that the Biden administration is doing nothing as the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) forms a special task force to combat organized foreign gangs burglarizing homes.
"And the Biden Administration does nothing," Musk said on Monday in a social media post.
Last week, the Los Angeles Police Department announced the creation of a task force aimed at tackling organized foreign burglary groups that have been targeting residents in Los Angeles.
The LAPD added that they would collaborate with various agencies in their efforts to tackle this challenge.
Furthermore, since the beginning of the year burglary rings originating from Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile have reportedly broken into over nine hundred homes in Los Angeles.

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White House Says No Intention to Send US Troops to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday that the United States has no intention of sending its troops to Ukraine
"We have made our position clear, which is that we are not intending to send US troops to Ukraine," Sullivan told reporters when asked to comment on French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks.
President Joe Biden reiterated the US's stance in his state of the union address earlier this

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month, Sullivan recalled.

Following a Paris-hosted conference on Ukraine held on February 26, Macron said Western leaders had discussed the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine and that nothing could be ruled out, although no consensus had been reached on the matter. Other Western countries like Germany dismissed the proposals, saying NATO had no intention of sending troops to Ukraine.

A deployment of NATO troops to Ukraine would make a direct conflict between the alliance and Russia inevitable, the Kremlin warned. Russia needs to stay on alert as the current generation of European politicians do not have a self-preservation instinct, the Kremlin said in response to Macron's remarks.

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White House When Asked About Putin's Legitimacy, Says Putin Leader of Russia

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin is the leader of Russia following his landslide win in the election over the weekend, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

“Mister Putin is the leader of Russia,” Karine Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The three-day voting in the Russian presidential election ended on Sunday evening. Putin won the election with 87.28% of the vote, followed by the Communist Party's Nikolay Kharitonov with 4.31%, the New People Party's Vladislav Davankov with 3.85%, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia's Leonid Slutsky with 3.2%, according to data from Russia's Central Election Commission after counting 100% of ballots.

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White House Says US Has Had to Deal With Reality That Putin is Russian President

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Monday that the United States has to deal with the reality that Vladimir Putin is the President of Russia.

"The reality is that President Putin is the President of Russia, we've had to deal with that reality throughout," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said during a press briefing.

The Russian Central Election Commission said on Monday that Putin had won the presidential election with 87.28% of votes.

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US Expresses Concern to Niger About Increasing Ties With Russia, Iran - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States expressed concern to Niger's transitional government about potentially strengthening ties with Russia and Iran prior to Niger's decision to revoke its military agreement with the United States, US Defense Department deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Monday.

"US officials expressed concern over Niger's potential relationships with Russia and Iran," Singh said.

Earlier on Monday, the State Department said the United States and the transitional government of Niger are discussing the issue of the US troop withdrawal from the African country and the next steps that might follow it.

On Saturday, Amadou Abdramane, a spokesperson for the Nigerien military, said that the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) had denounced with immediate effect the agreement that allowed US military personnel and civilian Defense Department employees to operate on Niger's soil. Abdramane said the decision was taken in the interest of the Nigerien people.

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Sullivan Says Israel's Major Ground Operation in Rafah Would Be 'Mistake'

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The United States believes that a major ground military operation in Rafah would be a mistake and further isolate Israel internationally, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"Our position is that Hamas should not be allowed a safe haven in Rafah or anywhere else, but a major ground operation there would be a mistake, it would lead to more innocent civilian deaths, worsen the already dire humanitarian crisis, deepen the anarchy in Gaza, and further isolate Israel internationally," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says US in Diplomatic Talks With Niger About Its Decision to Cut Military Ties

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is continuing to seek clarification from Niger's government at the diplomatic level about its decision to cut military ties between the two countries, Defense Department deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Monday.

"We're aware of the statement that they issued over the weekend. We remain in contact with the CNSP [National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland]," Singh said. "We're continuing to conduct those conversations at a diplomatic level. So I don't have a timeframe of any withdrawal of forces. We're - those conversations are ongoing."

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There are about 1,000 US troops still in Niger, according to the Defense Department.
Earlier on Monday, the State Department said the United States and the transitional government of Niger were discussing the issue of the US troop withdrawal from the African country and the next steps that might follow it.
Amadou Abdramane, a spokesperson for the Nigerien military, said on Saturday that the CNSP had denounced with immediate effect an agreement that allowed US military personnel and civilian Defense Department employees to operate on Niger's soil. Abdramane said the decision was taken in the interest of the Nigerien people.

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US Will Not Normalize Ties With Syria Absent Progress Toward Political Solution - Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will not normalize relations with Damascus without progress towards a political solution to the ongoing conflict , US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Monday.
"We'll not normalize relations with the Assad regime absent genuine progress towards an enduring political solution to the conflict," Leaf said during an Atlantic Council event in Washington.
Syria has been under sanctions from the United States, the European Union and a number of states since the start of the conflict in that country in 2011. The US sanctions include an embargo and affect third parties. US secondary sanctions were restricted until 2020 when the Caesar Act, signed by then-US President Donald Trump in 2019, went into effect.
The Caesar Act is designed to deter support for reconstruction efforts by the Syrian government. It imposes sanctions on anyone who provides funding or assistance to the Syrian government and the country's central bank. The legislation imposes sanctions on those providing aircraft or spare parts to Syrian airlines or who are involved with government-controlled construction and engineering projects.
In May 2023, US lawmakers also submitted the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act to the parliament to amend the Caesar Act and further expand sanctions on those providing financial and technological support to Syrian groups and enterprises. The US government now has the authority to introduce sanctions until the end of 2025, while the new legislation, if adopted, would extend this power through 2032.

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Bipartisan Group of US House Lawmakers Urges Standalone Surveillance Powers Bill - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US House lawmakers sent a letter to House leaders, urging them to present a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section

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702 reauthorization as a standalone piece of legislation.

"We write to urge you to allow floor votes on crucial reforms to protect the privacy rights of Americans … In addition, we urge you to oppose any attempt to attach reauthorization of Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to a 'must pass' legislative vehicle, which could endanger final passage of the underlying bill," the letter, dated March 15, said.

US government agencies have continuously misused Section 702 surveillance authorities, the letter said. In 2022, the FBI used the power to circumvent constitutional protections and search for the data of more than 200,000 US citizens, including members of the US Congress, campaign donors, protestors and activists, the letter said.

The group of lawmakers is willing to negotiate and compromise on legislation to reauthorize Section 702 as long as they have an opportunity to vote to end warrantless surveillance and the purchasing of sensitive information from third parties, the letter said.

"Congress has a real opportunity to make critical reforms to the FISA 702 spying authority. For more than a year, our bipartisan coalition worked to find common ground on reforms to protect Americans' Fourth Amendment rights. But consideration in the House has been repeatedly stalled by Members fearful that the will of the House could lead to fundamental reforms of the program," US Congressman Andy Biggs said on Monday in a statement on the letter.

In February, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the House of Representatives will consider legislation to reform and reauthorize Section 702 at a later date, in order to grant lawmakers more time to come to a consensus on how to move forward.

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Biden Asked Netanyahu to Send Interagency Team to DC Over Rafah Planning Concerns-Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a call to send an interagency team to Washington to hear the US concerns about Israel's Rafah planning and lay out an alternative approach to achieving its goals, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"Today, President Biden asked the Prime Minister to send a senior interagency team composed of military intelligence and humanitarian officials to Washington in the coming days to hear US concerns about Israel's current Rafah planning and to lay out an alternative approach that would target Hamas . . .without a major ground invasion," said Sullivan during a press briefing.

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About 1,000 US Citizens Have Reached Out for Assistance to Exit Haiti - State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - About 1,000 individuals have reached out to the US State Department for assistance to potentially leave Haiti amid ongoing gang violence in the country, Deputy Principal Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"This is a fluid situation, and the number of individuals who have reached out to us through the crisis intake form is approaching 1,000," Patel said during a press briefing, when asked about concerns regarding the safety of Americans who are still in Haiti.

The United States continues to monitor the situation closely, evaluate the demand of US citizens, assess the overall security situation and determine the feasibility of various commercial transportation options.

On Sunday, the United States flew over 30 American citizens from Haiti on a government-chartered flight.

Haiti has long been mired in a social and political crisis that escalated after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July 2021. The country has faced an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups, while the humanitarian situation has deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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US Committed to Expanding Humanitarian Access in Syria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to expanding humanitarian access in Syria and to supporting local ceasefires, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Monday.

"We remain committed to expanding humanitarian access, to ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS (Islamic State terror group, outlawed in Russia), to supporting local ceasefires and to promoting accountability for the Assad regime's atrocities by advancing respect for human rights and justice for victims and survivors," Leaf said during an Atlantic Council event in Washington.

Leaf pointed out that the United States remains engaged in the political process consistent with United Nations resolution 2254 despite what she described as consistent stonewalling by Syria and Russia.

The armed conflict in Syria has been ongoing since 2011, with various insurgent groups, including terrorist organizations, fighting the Syrian Army to topple the government of President Bashar Assad as well as fighting each other. An estimated 15.3 million people in Syria are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, including 5.5 million refugees who were forced to flee Syria to neighboring states as well as 6.8 million internally displaced people, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

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State Dept. Says US Does Not Consider UNRWA to Be Hamas' Proxy

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The United States does not share an assessment that the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has acted as a Hamas movement proxy, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"That's not an assessment that we share," Patel said during a press briefing when asked if the United States believes UNRWA is a proxy for Hamas.

UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in the Gaza Strip, with over 2 million people depending on it for their survival. In January, Israel shared data with the agency's leadership on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror."

The United States, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and some other countries responded by suspending funding for the agency. In early February, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an independent review panel led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna to examine UNRWA activities.

As of today, Canada, Sweden, and Australia have lifted their suspensions of UNRWA funding after a pause of more than two months.

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Russian Voters Send Message to NATO, Results May Deter Macron Proposal - Ex-Senator

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russian voters have sent a message to NATO and the outcome of the Russian presidential election may deter the alliance from advancing the reckless proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron to send troops to Ukraine, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

With 100% of the ballots counted, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed a landslide reelection victory, receiving 87.28% of the vote, the highest ever result in Russia's post-Soviet history.

"Russian voters sent a message to the NATO alliance: 'Keep your hands off our land. We reject your mass migration, your lawlessness, your godlessness, your sexual perversion, your dreams of globalist empire. Russia puts its faith in God, its culture, its traditions. We are prepared to pay for freedom with our blood. You will not order us around,'" Black said.

The former senator said the results of the Russian election may have a positive impact on world opinion after Macron recently launched a trial balloon to test NATO's support for sending troops to Ukraine.

"France's proposal to send troops into Ukraine was echoed by Poland and several other nations. The election results may deter NATO from advancing Macron's reckless proposal," Black said.

Following a Paris-hosted conference on Ukraine held on February 26, Macron said Western leaders had discussed the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine and that nothing could be

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ruled out, although no consensus had been reached on the matter. Other Western states like Germany dismissed the proposals, saying NATO had no intention of sending troops to Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia has taken note of Macron's remarks and some of the countries that participated in the Paris meeting on Ukraine had a rather "wise assessment" of the potential dangers of getting involved in a conflict with Russia.

"Russia's historic elections vindicated President Putin's wartime policies," Black said. "The people expressed solidarity with him; they will not allow Ukraine to remain a dagger pointed at their throats; they are steeled for the struggle that lies ahead."

In addition, Black said Putin's surging popularity was helped by Russia's dramatic economic comeback.

"Despite bank seizures, sanctions, and the sabotaging of Nord Stream pipelines, the economy proved resilient and goods were widely available," he said.

Black pointed out that he believes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy unwittingly boosted voter turnout with "a large-scale suicide attack across Russia's borders to disrupt the election."

"That attack reminded voters that the war poses an existential threat to the nation. The Russian army systematically dismantled the threat, uplifting people's fighting spirits and sense of determination," Black said. "Already, the Ukrainian high command questioned Zelensky's judgement; this bloody debacle will only heighten their contempt for him."

The Western media tried to minimize the news about the Russian election, focusing on dissident elements, but Putin's landslide victory was so massive that it left no question about the Russian voters' enthusiasm for their president, Black said.

"Only a fool would deny that," Black added.

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US, Niger Discussing Withdrawal of American Troops, Next Steps – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The United States and the transitional government of Niger are discussing the issue of the American troops' withdrawal from the African country and the next steps that might follow it, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"This is one of the things that we continue to be discussing with them [CNSP] and discussing next steps," Patel said during a press briefing when asked if the United States is going to pull out its troops from Niger soon.

Amadou Abdramane, a spokesperson for the Nigerien military, said on Saturday that the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) had denounced "with immediate effect" an agreement that allowed US military personnel and civilian Pentagon employees to operate on Niger's soil. He said the decision was taken in the interest of the Nigerien people.

A Nigerien government source told Sputnik that the denunciation of the agreement by Niger's military government, which took power in a coup last July, effectively prohibited US armed

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forces from moving around the country or holding military exercises.

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UN Will Continue to Interact With Russian Gov't After Putin's Reelection - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will continue to cooperate with the Russian government after President Vladimir Putin was reelected for a new term, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday.
"We will continue to interact with the [Russian] government," Haq said during a UN briefing. "Once the government is put in place, we will follow the standard procedures in terms of dealing with that government."

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US Not Behind Protests in Cuba, Accusation 'Absurd' - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States was not responsible for protests in Cuba over the weekend, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.
"The United States is not behind these protests in Cuba and the accusation of that is absurd," Patel said, when asked about alleged involvement in the protests.
The State Department is closely monitoring reports about the protests across several cities in Cuba, Patel said.
The US urges the Cuban government to avoid violence and unjust detentions, Patel said.

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US Astronaut Tom Stafford Who Led Apollo Mission to Dock With Soyuz 19 Dead at 93

US Astronaut Tom Stafford Who Led Apollo Mission to Dock With Soyuz 19 Dead at 93
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US astronaut Thomas Stafford, who commanded the first Apollo mission that docked with the Soviet Soyuz 19 spacecraft in 1975, has died at the age of 93, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson announced on Monday.
"Today, General Tom Stafford went to the eternal heavens which he so courageously explored as a Gemini and Apollo astronaut as well as a peacemaker in Apollo Soyuz," Nelson said via the social media platform X. "Those of us privileged to know him are very sad but grateful we knew a giant."

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Stafford commanded the Apollo 10 spacecraft during the dress rehearsal mission for the Moon landing in May 1969, having made the final test flight before the main mission.
In July 1975, Stafford commanded the Apollo spacecraft that made the first international spaceflight, docking with the Soviet Soyuz 19 spacecraft.
In April 2018, Stafford was awarded the Russian Order of Friendship.

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Russia-US Strategic Dialogue On Arms Control Possible If West Revises Anti-Russian Course

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik)—The strategic dialogue between Russia and the United States on arms control is only possible if the US and NATO revise their anti-Russian course, Deputy Russian Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.
"Any interaction will only be possible if the United States and NATO review their anti-Russian course and when they show that they are ready to participate in comprehensive dialogue taking into account all of our strategic stability factors and removing all of the concerns that we have," Polyanskiy said at the UN Security Council meeting.
He stressed that the strategic dialogue between the US and the Russian Federation cannot be separated from the general and military context.

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Russia Open to Dialogue During NPT Review Conference on Further Nuclear Disarmament

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russia stands ready to negotiate on the issue of nuclear disarmament with interested countries during the new Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) Review conference, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.
"We expect that our Western colleagues will abandon their very dangerous and destructive course. We are open within the new NPT Review conference to a constructive dialogue with all countries interested in reaching a consensus understanding on how we can create preconditions for further nuclear disarmament," Polyankiy said during a meting of the UN Security Council on nuclear non-proliferation.

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China Calls for Nuclear Weapon States to Reduce Strategic Risks, Negotiate Treaty - Envoy

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UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - China says nuclear-armed nations must seek viable measures to mitigate strategic risks and negotiate a treaty, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Monday.

"Nuclear weapon states should explore feasible measures to reduce strategic risks, negotiate and conclude a treaty," Zhang Jun said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Furthermore, Zhang Jun added that nuclear-armed nations must avoid first use, offer binding security assurances, renounce missile defense, and enhance AI control for global stability.

Earlier today, the United States and Japan proposed a UN Security Council resolution urging member states against developing any nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in space.

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US Will Not Make Congratulatory Call After Putin's Election Victory - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Officials from the United States will not make any calls to congratulate Russian President Vladimir Putin on his re-election, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

“I think it is safe to say that there certainly won’t be any congratulatory calls coming from the United States of America,” Patel said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Monday, the Russian Central Election Commission said that Putin won the presidential election with 87.28% of votes.

Patel joked that the outcome of the race was not unexpected, saying he was on the “edge of his seat” during the election.

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Canada, Germany Sign Deal on Hydrogen in Bid to Replace Russian Imports – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The Canadian and German Governments signed on Monday a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on hydrogen committing to increase the fuel’s trade in a bid to replace Russian imports, the Globe & Mail reported.

Accordingly, Canada and Germany both commit under the MoU to back transactions between Canadian hydrogen producers and German industrial manufacturers as well as energy distributors.

The purpose of the deal is to accelerate the process toward reaching commercial-scale trade of hydrogen between both countries, the report said. Moreover, the agreement is in alignment with Canada’s and several European states' goals to get rid of Russian imports of oil and gas, replacing them with “clean” Canadian fuels, it added.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his German counterpart Olaf Scholz agreed in

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August 2022 to establish a transatlantic hydrogen supply corridor. Exports of the fuel are expected to begin in 2025.

In July 2023, the German government said it was seeking to achieve a twofold domestic increase in its hydrogen production by 2030. Berlin said it was mulling cooperation with several international partners such as Canada and the United States to import the rest of the required fuel.

Reducing energy dependence on Russia became one of the European Union's top priorities after the start of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, when the bloc decided to phase out its imports of Russian fuel. The decision led to a sharp increase in gas prices in the European Union. The European Commission presented several measures to curb the price hike, including joint purchasing, price caps and increased energy conservation efforts.

As part of these efforts, the EU has stepped up energy cooperation with a number of countries, including the United States, Algeria and Nigeria, with a particular focus on LNG imports.

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White House Says Opposes US House Bill to Prevent President From Prohibiting Fracking

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Monday that it opposes legislation introduced in the House of Representatives that would prevent the US president from placing a ban on fracking (hydraulic fracturing) for US oil and gas production.

"The Administration strongly opposes H.R. 1121 [Protecting American Energy Production Act], which would prohibit the President from issuing a moratorium on the use of hydraulic fracturing unless Congress authorizes the moratorium," the White House said in a press release.

The legislation hasn't received a full vote on the House floor yet.

The White House explained that the Biden administration has not proposed a ban on fracking on federal lands, and US state governments already have discretion over the use of fracking for oil and gas development on state and private lands.

The Protecting American Energy Production Act is both unnecessary and would set a dangerous precedent for limiting the authority of the US president and US Secretary of the Interior to manage energy resources on federal lands and waters, the release noted.

US oil production has been on a rebound for nearly 15 years thanks to fracking technology. That, combined with horizontal drilling - versus the previous vertical method of oil extraction - has led to prodigious volumes of crude flowing from sedimentary rocks, also known as shale.

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OpenAI CEO Says Company Will Release ‘Amazing’ New Model This Year

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WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said on Monday that the artificial intelligence (AI) company will release a new model and other products later this year.

"We will release an amazing new model this year," Altman said in an interview with podcaster Lex Fridman.

OpenAI will release many different products over the coming months, Altman said.

Last year, OpenAI removed and subsequently reinstated Altman as the company's CEO. OpenAI co-founder Ilya Sutskever stepped down from the company's board after having supported Altman's ousting, which was rooted in accusations of inconsistent communication.

Fridman asked Altman about rumors that Sutskever's concerns may have been linked to the emergence of artificial general intelligence (AGI), which is a form of AI that is equally or more capable than humans at a variety of tasks requiring cognition.

Sutskever did not see AGI and OpenAI has not yet developed such a model, Altman said. Sutskever takes AGI and other AI-related safety concerns very seriously, Altman said.

Prior to Altman's temporary removal from his leadership role, a group of OpenAI researchers reportedly wrote a letter to the company's board of directors, warning them about an AI discovery with the potential to threaten humankind. OpenAI later confirmed the existence of a project known as Q* (Q-Star), which some researchers reportedly believe could be a breakthrough towards AGI.

OpenAI is "not ready" to talk about Q*, Altman said when asked about the project during the interview.

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US Official Says Reports That Iran Delivered Ballistic Missiles to Russia 'Misleading'

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the State Department Henry Wooster called media reports claiming that Iran had supplied Russia with a large number of ballistic missiles "misleading."

"The missiles have not yet [been delivered to Russia]. There was a misleading story. I think it was in Reuters. In fact, I'm pretty sure it was in Reuters that said this transaction 'had occurred,' past tense, and that this shipment, sale, or trans-shipment of these weapons had occurred. That is not the case," Wooster said during a discussion hosted by the Wilson Center.

In February, Reuters reported that Iran had allegedly provided Russia with about 400 surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in January after the White House announced that it knew the two countries made a respective deal.

Iran refuted the reports, saying that it had not provided Russia with ballistic missiles.

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US Sees No Signals, Evidence of Near-Term Attack by North Korea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see evidence of a near-term attack by North Korea, a senior US State Department official said on Monday.

"I don't think we're on the precipice of war … we don't see any signals or evidence of a near-term attack," Jung Pak, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said at a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) event.

Pak also said that the United States was still "watchful" for gray-zone activities.

In addition, Pak noted the United States' concern over North Korea's recent rhetoric that reunification was no longer on the table and that South Korea was its primary enemy.

Pak serves as the US senior official for North Korea at the State Department.

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Biden, Netanyahu Discuss Rafah Situation, Efforts to Surge Humanitarian Aid - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed via telephone the latest developments in the Gaza Strip, including the situation in Rafah and efforts to surge humanitarian aid in the Palestinian enclave, the White House said on Monday.

"President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to discuss the latest developments in Israel and Gaza, including the situation in Rafah and efforts to surge humanitarian assistance to Gaza," the White House said in a press release.

Media reported that the Biden administration is exploring response options if Israel launches a military operation in Rafah contrary to Washington's warnings and without a credible plan to protect civilians.

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US Maintains Goal of 'Complete Denuclearization' in North Korea – State Dept.

The US is maintaining its goal of "complete denuclearization" with regards to North Korea, a senior State Department official said Monday.

"Complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula remains our goal. And toward that effort, we're going to make sure that we strengthen deterrence," Jung Pak, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and senior official for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, said at a CSIS event.

Deterrence efforts include improving relationships with South Korea and Japan, amplifying sanctions, and boosting capabilities to counter cyber threats.

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Pak added that the US had reached out privately and publicly to North Korea via third parties to attempt diplomacy.

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Texas Gun Show Guests 'Crazy' About Buying Firearms Featuring Trump - Shop Owner

FORT WORTH, Texas, March 18 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Firearms featuring former President Donald Trump's mugshot and signature were among items attracting wide interest at a gun show in the Texas city of Fort Worth, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

"People are buying them like crazy. Especially before the elections," Zack, a gun shop owner, told Sputnik.

Zack was demonstrating his main collections at a local convention center over the weekend. He has been in the business for 21 years.

"I myself bought two big rifles with his [Trump's] face on it for $4,000 and I will sell them once he becomes the President for $10,000. It's an investment," Zack said.

Trump's face was etched on many of the pistols on display. Many firearms were decorated with the former president's mugshot photo, his signature, the Bill of Rights, and the number "45." The face of Trump's main running opponent, President Joe Biden, was also seen on one of the handles showing him behind bars.

Russian rifles were also showcased, but they were all sold out on the second day of the show.

"People don't mind that the rifles are Russian. Not the least they care," Andrew, who owns a booth at the exhibition, told Sputnik.

Andrew's store also showcase original WWII helmets.

"I had some Russian rifles but I sold them all," Andrew said. Russian rifles may be not very good looking design wise but they are tough to break, he added.

Forth Worth hosts gun shows on a regular schedule, with one happening usually once a month. To buy a gun or carry a gun, one needs to present a Texan driving license and go through a small background check. The background check for citizens is approved on the spot, while residents need to wait a couple of days. Locals do not need to have a gun license to carry a gun, however, the weapon cannot be visibly displayed but hidden in their handbag or under the jacket.

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US Deputy Treasury Secretary Adeyemo Says Houthi Attacks 'Upending' Regional Economies

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea are "upending" the struggling economies in the region, US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Monday.

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"The Houthis' attacks have upended regional economies as transits through the Suez Canal have plummeted by 40%. This is hurting countries in the region that are working hard to secure better futures for their people," Adeyemo said in an opinion piece published by The National.

The Houthis have been unsuccessful so far in causing global-scale economic disruption but their efforts have taken large tolls on countries like Yemen and Sudan, who rely on regular shipments of food and other much needed supplies and humanitarian assistance, Adeyemo said.

Adeyemo emphasized that the situation has resulted in shipping costs increasing more than eight times their usual price as companies shift to air transport from the more affordable sea routes.

Countries like Egypt and Jordan are reporting a reduction in Suez Canal-related profits of more than $500 million, which makes it very difficult for Egyptian and Jordanian business owners to meet their financial obligations and nearly impossible for citizens to import needed goods.

The Houthis vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until that country halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. Houthi officials have characterized Israel's actions against the Palestinians as "barbaric terrorism" and "deliberate and unjustified aggression."

The United States and the United Kingdom have launched strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen in a bid to degrade their ability to target commercial vessels.

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Bitcoin Seen Reaching Record Highs Of $150,000 By End-2024 - StanChart

NEW YORK, March 18 (Sputnik) - Bitcoin, which has already hit record highs of nearly $75,000, could double in price to $150,000 by end of this year, Standard Chartered said on Monday.

Bitcoin peaked at $74,415 on March 14 in US CME futures trading, up 75% since the end of 2023, propelled by the launch of exchange-traded fund products backed by the spot price of the world's leading cryptocurrency.

In a forecast made public on Monday, Standard Chartered said continued investor appetite for the so-called Bitcoin ETFs will be the driver of its projection for the $150,000 target.

In Monday's CME futures trading, Bitcoin hovered at a little under $67,600.

Standard Chartered had previously forecast Bitcoin to reach $100,000 by end of 2024.

Now, the UK-based banking group says 'sticky' flows of institutional money will likely cause Bitcoin to double its record high thus far for this year.

"For 2024, given the sharper-than-expected price gains year-to-date, we now see potential for the price to reach the $150,000 level by year-end, up from our previous estimate of $100,000," Standard Chartered Bank analysts led by Geoffrey Kendrick wrote.

Standard Chartered has emerged as one of the more Bitcoin-friendly legacy banks, with an active research team covering the cryptocurrency. The UK banking group has likened Bitcoin to "digital gold," a nod towards its ascension as gold itself broke new record highs above $2,200 an ounce in CME trading this year.

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UPDATE - Musk Says Trump Did Not Request Money During Incidental Meeting

(Updates with more details in paras 5, 6)
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Monday that former President and presumptive 2024 Republican Party presidential nominee Donald Trump did not ask him for money during a chance encounter earlier this month.
"He didn't," Musk said in an interview with journalist Don Lemon when asked if Trump asked him for money.
Musk said Trump came by incidentally while he was having breakfast at a friend's house and the former president did most of the talking.
Earlier this month, Musk said that he will not donate money to any US presidential candidate. However, Musk said during the interview that he may endorse a candidate in the "final stretch" of the race.
Musk said that he is not leaning toward supporting any nominee at this time but is leaning away from current officeholder Joe Biden. A lot could happen before Election Day in November, Musk also aid.
Musk added that he will provide an exact explanation for any potential endorsement.

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Trump Facing Difficulties Posting $454Mln Bond in New York Fraud Case - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is struggling to obtain an appeal bond for the $454 million judgment in his New York fraud case because of the size of the penalty, a court document revealed on Monday.
"Diligent efforts since that time, including 'countless hours negotiating with one of the largest insurance companies in the world,' have proven that 'obtaining an appeal bond in the full amount' of the Judgment 'is not possible under the circumstances presented.' The amount of the judgment, with interest, exceeds $464 million, and very few bonding companies will consider a bond of anything approaching that magnitude," Trump's lawyers told a New York appeals court.
Last month, Trump was ordered by a New York court to pay more than $454 million in penalties, which includes interest, after being found liable in his civil fraud trial in New York.
The civil fraud case against Trump was brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James for allegedly lying about the value of Trump properties, for which James sought $370 million in fines and to ban Trump from the New York State real estate industry. Trump has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in the case.

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RECAST - US, Japan Propose UNSC Resolution Urging Against WMD Deployment in Space - Envoy

(Recasts to note that treaty the US envoy referred to was 1967 Outer Space Treaty)
UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan propose a UN Security Council resolution urging member states against developing any nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in space, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.
"Today, I can announce that together with Japan, the United States put forward a Security Council resolution reaffirming the fundamental obligations that parties have under this [1967 Outer Space Treaty] treaty and further calling on member states not to develop any nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in orbit around," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

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US Designates Current, Former Officials for Corruption in Kosovo, Macedonia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated three current and former officials from Kosovo and Macedonia for corrupt acts that undermined democratic institutions and public trust in the rule of law, the Department of State said in a statement on Monday.
"Today, the US Department of State announces the public designation of former North Macedonia Special Chief Prosecutor, Katica Janeva; current mayor of Karpos, North Macedonia, Stevco Jakimovski; and former mayor of Kacanik, Kosovo, Xhabir Zharku. Their actions undermined the rule of law and the public's faith in their respective governments' democratic institutions and public processes," the statement said.
Zharku was involved in corrupt acts, including using his position to interfere with procurement processes to unlawfully permit construction on property owned by the Kacanik municipality, to benefit himself and his associates, the statement said.
Janeva engaged in corruption, misusing her influence for personal gain, and allegedly accepting bribes, while Jakimovski intervened in urban development and procurement for personal benefit, the statement added.
The US government forbids the designated persons and the members of their immediate family entry into the United States, according to the statement.

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US, Japan Propose UNSC Resolution Urging Against WMD Deployment in Space - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan propose a UN Security Council resolution urging member states against developing any nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in space, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"Today, I can announce that together with Japan, the United States put forward a Security Council resolution reaffirming the fundamental obligations that parties have under this [New START] treaty and further calling on member states not to develop any nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in orbit around," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

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UN Secretariat Not Commenting on Results of Russian Presidential Election

UNTED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations does not have any comment on the results of the Russian presidential election, the deputy spokesman for the UN Secretary-General told Sputnik on Monday.

"We don't have any comment on this election," Farhan Haq said.

The UN usually sends a letter to the elected candidate after the inauguration, Haq added.

The three-day voting in the Russian presidential election ended on Sunday evening. In addition to incumbent Vladimir Putin, the candidates included Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the lower house international affairs committee, Nikolay Kharitonov, the chairman of the lower house Far East and Arctic development committee, and lower house Deputy Chairman Vladislav Davankov.

Putin won the presidential election with 87.28% of the vote with 100% of ballots processed, the Russian Central Election Commission announced on Monday.

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US Open to Bilateral Arms Talks With Russia, China Without Preconditions - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States stands ready to engage in bilateral arms control talks with China and Russia without any preconditions, US Ambassador to the

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United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.
"The United States is willing to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and China right now, without preconditions. All they have to do is say 'yes' and come to the table in good faith," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting.

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Musk Says Trump Did Not Request Money During Incidental Meeting

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Monday that former President and leading contender for the 2024 Republican party presidential nomination Donald Trump did not ask him for money during a chance encounter earlier this month.
"He didn't," Musk said in an interview with journalist Don Lemon when asked if Trump asked him for money.
Musk said that Trump came by incidentally while he was having breakfast at a friend's house and did most of the talking.
Earlier this month, Musk said that he will not donate money to any US presidential candidate. However, Musk said during the interview that he may endorse a candidate in the "final stretch" of the race.

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UN Chief Says Humanity Cannot Survive One More 'Oppenheimer'

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Monday that humanity will not be able to survive another Oppenheimer.
"[O]ppenheimer brought the harsh reality of nuclear doomsday to vivid life for millions around the world," Guterres said during a UN Security Council meeting on nuclear non-proliferation. "Humanity cannot survive a sequel to Oppenheimer."
"Oppenheimer" is a Hollywood-made film about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the US theoretical physicist who spearheaded the development of the atomic bomb. The creation - and use - of the atomic bomb changed the course of human history and development. However, Oppenheimer later regretted that he played a role in creating the deadliest weapon in human history.
In his opening remarks, Guterres also mentioned the tragedy of the first and only combat use of nuclear weapons in 1945, but did not say that the attack was carried out by the United States.
Guterres called on countries with nuclear weapons to eliminate their arsenals to prevent an accidental launch that can destroy the entire humanity.

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

Trump Says Media, Democrats Misconstrued 'Bloodbath' Comment on Automotive Industry

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Monday that certain media organizations and Democratic lawmakers misconstrued his use of the word "bloodbath" in a speech over the weekend, claiming that they ignored the context of the term.

On Saturday, Trump delivered a speech in Ohio, during which he commented on the automotive industry and his plan to place tariffs on foreign-made vehicles. Trump said that it is "going to be a bloodbath" for the United States if he is not re-elected as president in 2024, in reference to the country's automotive industry.

However, Trump's comment sparked criticism from some Democratic lawmakers and media figures, who focused on his use of the term "bloodbath" to describe a scenario in which he is not reelected.

"The Fake News Media, and their Democratic Partners in the destruction of our Nation, pretended to be shocked at my use of the word BLOODBATH, even though they fully understood that I was simply referring to imports allowed by Crooked [US President] Joe Biden, which are killing the automobile industry," Trump said in a statement via Truth Social.

Biden's push for electric vehicles will end automobile manufacturing in the US, Trump said, adding that automobile manufacturing would "thrive like never before" in the US if he returns to the White House.

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US Health Researchers Find No Evidence of Brain Injury From 'Havana Syndrome' - Study

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Researchers backed by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) found no significant evidence of brain injury from cases of the so-called Havana Syndrome, according to a study published Monday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

US government and related personnel have reported cases of Havana Syndrome, also known as anomalous health incidents (AHIs), since 2015. Reported symptoms include dizziness, pain, visual problems and cognitive dysfunction, following intrusive sounds and head pressure.

"In this exploratory study, there were no significant differences between individuals reporting AHIs and matched control participants with respect to most clinical, research and biomarker measures, except for objective and self-reported measures of imbalance and symptoms of fatigue, posttraumatic stress and depression," the study said.

The study, conducted between June 2018 and July 2022, involved 86 US government staff and family members from locations including Austria, China and Cuba, as well as 30 US government control participants.

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World Bank to Provide Egypt Over $6Bln to Support Government Programs, Private Sector

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The World Bank announced in a statement on Monday that it will provide Egypt with more than $6 billion to support the nation's government programs and private sector investments.

"Over the coming three years, the World Bank Group intends to provide more than US$6 billion of support to Egypt, including US$3 billion for financial support to government's programs and US$3 billion for the private sector (including mobilization) - subject to [the Executive] Board approval," the statement said.

The programs will focus on increasing opportunities for private sector participation in the economy, including through the so-called Government Asset Monetization Program, strengthening the governance of state-owned enterprises and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public resource management, the statement said.

The World Bank expressed commitment to continue exploring opportunities for guarantees to support impactful private sector investments in Egypt.

"Building on the 2022 Country Climate and Development Report and the Government's Nexus for Water, Food and Energy platform, the World Bank Group also supports climate action in Egypt," the statement said.

The $8 billion World Bank's operational portfolio in Egypt comprises $6 billion from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, US$1.9 billion from the International Finance Corporation, and $0.5 billion from the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, the statement said.

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US Homeland Security Department Announces 'Artificial Intelligence Roadmap'

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Homeland Security announced on Monday its first "Artificial Intelligence Roadmap" regarding how it will incorporate AI into its mission, according to a release.

"The DHS AI roadmap and pilots will guide our efforts this year to strengthen our national security, improve our operations, and provide more efficient services to the American people, while upholding our commitment to protect civil rights, civil liberties, and privacy," Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said in the release.

The roadmap includes three pilot projects. Homeland Security Investigations will use AI to improve investigations to detect fentanyl and to combat child sexual exploitation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will deploy AI to help communities develop hazard mitigation plans. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services will use AI to improve

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immigration officer training.
The pilot programs, which were chosen based on their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of large language models and generative AI technology, are expected to inform the department-wide policies on AI governance.

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UN Chief Says US, Russia Must Negotiate on New START, Agree on Successor Treaty

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia must lead the way to a nuclear weapons reduction as well as find a way back to the negotiating table to implement the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and agree on a successor treaty, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.
"This reduction must be led by the holders of the largest nuclear arsenals, the United States and the Russian Federation, who must find a way back to the negotiating table to fully implement the New START Treaty and agree on its successor," Guterres said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on nuclear non-proliferation.

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Biden to Speak to Israeli PM Netanyahu on Monday – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is expected to speak to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu via phone later on Monday, Axios reported citing two sources in the know.
The phone call will be first conversation between the two leaders since February 15 amid a growing rift between the countries over the situation in Gaza, the report said.
Earlier in the day, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that Palestinians in Gaza are enduring horrifying levels of hunger and suffering and called the current humanitarian situation there a “man-made disaster.”
On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 31,700 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities 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. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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Blinken, South Korean President Discuss DPRK Cooperation With Russia – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discussed with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol North Korea's latest missile launch and its military cooperation with Russia, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

Blinken is currently on a visit to Seoul for the third Summit for Democracy.

"Secretary Blinken and President Yoon emphasized the importance of deterring DPRK aggression on the Korean Peninsula and addressing the destabilizing impacts of military cooperation between the DPRK and Russia on international peace and security and the global non-proliferation regime," Miller said in a statement.

Blinken condemned North Korea's March 17 launch of ballistic missiles and stressed the US commitment to the ROK's security, Miller added.

The two also discussed bilateral cooperation on global issues and the importance of sustained US-ROK-Japan cooperation, Miller said.

"The Secretary congratulated President Yoon for hosting the third Summit for Democracy and reaffirmed the U.S.-ROK Alliance as the linchpin of peace, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific and beyond," Miller said.

Separately, Blinken met with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul to discuss North Korea's alleged military support for Russia's special operation in Ukraine and Pyongyang's "increasingly aggressive rhetoric and activities," the State Department said.

Russia is not breaking any international commitments by developing relations with Iran and North Korea, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in January in response to allegations that the two countries are supplying weapons to Moscow for use in Ukraine.

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Guterres Says Famine in Northern Gaza Imminent

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) – Northern Gaza is facing an imminent famine if no action is taken, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday, citing a new report compiled by the world's leading experts on food insecurity.

"The world's leading experts on food insecurity clearly document that famine in the northern part of Gaza is imminent," Guterres told reporters. "This is an entirely man-made disaster and the report makes clear that it can be halted."

Guterres one more time called upon the Israeli leadership to ensure complete and unfettered access for humanitarian goods throughout Gaza.

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