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3/29/24 Friday

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Sleeping Better Can Help One Feel Younger - Study

According to the study authors, sleep is crucial for both physical well-being and mental health. The brain undergoes a series of processes while someone sleeps, but how "young" it can make a person feel has rarely been addressed.

Just two nights of interrupted sleep is enough to make a person feel years older than they really are, according to researchers at the Stockholm-based Karolinska Institute. In their study, published this week in the journal Proceedings of the Royal Society B, they found that if people want to feel young they should take a look at their sleeping habits.

"Many people feel younger than their calendar age. While this phenomenon is less prevalent among younger individuals, as we reach our thirties and beyond, the discrepancy between how old we are and how old we feel becomes more pronounced," the researchers write.

"Subjective age, often referred to as how old we feel, is a concept that goes beyond mere perception. It turns out that feeling younger than our actual age is associated with living longer, better mental and physical health, and more positive psychological traits (e.g. optimism, hope, resilience), prompting suggestions to include subjective age as a biophysical marker of aging as part of health examinations," they add.

The first study the researchers ran looked at 429 participants with 66% being women, and with the age range being between 18 and 70. In this first study, they showed that for each additional day of insufficient sleep in the last 30 days, the subjective age increased by 0.23 years (about 3 months). So for each day of poor sleep, the persons in this study felt, on average, roughly 3 months older.

In the second study, researchers looked at 186 participants with 55% being female and the age ranges being between 18 and 46. They asked the volunteers how old they felt after two nights of full sleep (9 hours) compared to two nights in which they slept only 4 hours. The participants said that two nights of sleep restriction (4 hours) made them feel 4.44 years older compared to when they were getting 9 hours of sleep.

The study also found that moving from feeling extremely alert to extremely sleepy was associated with feeling 10 years older in both studies.

The participants also responded differently to sleep loss depending on whether or not they were an evening type person or a morning person. Those who usually stay up later felt older than their actual age even after plenty of sleep, but morning types felt much older than the evening types when their sleep was interrupted.

"Sleep has a major impact on how old you feel and it's not only your long-term sleep patterns," said Dr. Leonie Balter, a psychoneuroimmunologist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and first author on the study. "Even when you only sleep less for two nights, that has a real impact on how you feel."

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Balter added that interrupted sleep could also cause harm to a person's health in other ways including: unhealthy eating, a reduction in physical exercise, and a disinterest in socializing and a disinterest in engaging in new experiences.
"It's important to realize how malleable a subjective age is," she said. "If we can make people feel younger, they may be able to have the associated benefits, such as being more willing to take on new experiences and being socially active and physically active."
"If you want to feel young, the most important thing is to protect your sleep," Balter said.

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Big Names Rake It In - Cartoon

The president's campaign fundraiser was repeatedly interrupted by shouts from protestors outraged by the administration's continued support for Israel's military actions in Gaza.
US President Joe Biden brought out some big names to help him rake in more than $26 million for his reelection campaign, setting a record for the most funds raised for a single political event in the US. Former Democratic presidents of the US Barack Obama and Bill Clinton helped fuel the event's fervor.
Tickets for the event started at $250, though some donors contributed half a million dollars and were compensated with a photo taken by photographer Annie Leibovitz in which they could pose with the three presidents.
The fundraiser took place at Radio City Music Hall in New York City where more than 5,000 people appeared, including celebrities and musicians. Hollywood stars like actor and comedian Mindy Kaling hosted the program, and late night host Stephen Colbert moderated a conversation between Biden, Clinton and Obama.
The event was interrupted at least five times by pro-Palestinian protesters. The shouts from protestors included "blood on your hands" which reportedly drew moments of frustration from the former presidents on stage, including former President Obama. Outside of the venue, more than 100 pro-Palestinian protesters chanted slogans such as, "Biden, Biden, you're a liar." and waved Palestinian flags with anti-war messages.
The three presidents argued that the Biden administration has enough moral clarity to lead Israel and Palestine to a peaceful resolution, arguing that a two-state solution is still an option. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected the idea of a two-state solution, and has said that Palestinian statehood would not be compatible with Israel's security needs.
While the fundraiser showed that Biden's campaign advantages include a sizable war chest—nearly double of what former President Donald Trump has collected for the month of January—and a unified party, the president is going to face roadblocks due to his administration's unwavering support of Israel. A poll this month revealed that 55% of Americans oppose Israel's military offensive, marking a 10% increase since November 2023.

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And on Friday, the Biden administration approved the transfer of billions of dollars of military equipment to Israel, despite the death toll of Palestinians climbing to more than 32,000, with more than 75,000 injured, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

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'Where is the Outrage?': IDF Seen Gunning Down, Bulldozing Palestinians Who Wave White Flag - Report

According to Gaza's Health Ministry, Israel's military assaults in Gaza have killed more than 32,000 Palestinians and wounded nearly 75,000 more. On Friday, the Biden administration approved the transfer of billions of dollars of military equipment to Israel.

On Wednesday, a video was released showing Israeli soldiers gunning down two Palestinians on the coast of northern Gaza, even as one of the Palestinians appears to be waving a piece of white fabric. The footagealso shows one of the men walking in the direction of an Israeli military vehicle with both his hands raised, a recent report claimed. The Israeli soldiers then buried the bodies of slain Palestinians with a bulldozer.

On Thursday, independent journalist and RT correspondent Rachel Blevins sat down with Sputnik's The Critical Hour to discuss the recent atrocity.

"It's yet another horrific video as you were describing it there," said Blevins. "It's horrific to think about, and yet, we have the video evidence and this is just one of several videos showing Israel committing very clear war crimes. It's not much of a debate about this, about who did this or who was it done to - we know, all of the evidence is there. And yet, as you were pointing out, the Biden administration has done nothing."

"And to think if something like this specific incident happened in another country or was done by, you know, someone that the US didn't like, they would be raising an international outrage about it," she added. "But when it's Israel that does this over and over and over again at this point to at least 32,552 Palestinians that they've killed since October 7th, then the US just looks the other way."

"And we can even go back to October when you had those claims of the 40 beheaded babies by Hamas, right? Those claims spread like wildfire. We never saw images, we never saw videos, we never saw any evidence of these claims. Yet, people reported them as fact. And you fast forward to today and you see yet another horrific video of Palestinian civilians being murdered on the spot by Israeli soldiers," she added.

"And you ask yourself, okay, we have the video evidence, where is the outrage? Because this is definitely one of those things where there should be plenty of outrage."

Following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, Israeli soldiers claimed that Hamas terrorists had slaughtered at least 40 infants and young children and even decapitated some of them. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had also shared graphic images of slain infants and children to his X account.

However, there were no photographic images of infants who had been decapitated, and an Israeli spokesperson also retracted the report of decapitated babies just a day after making the

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claim. Likewise, UNICEFreports that children in Gaza are now dying at an “alarming rate” with thousands being killed and thousands more being injured. UNICEF has called for an “immediate and long-lasting humanitarian ceasefire” in Gaza.

“[Those who support Israel] constantly refer back to October 7th as if that one attack justifies everything that Israel has done ever since. And, I think it's very notable when you look at what people like Netanyahu have said, they constantly draw the comparison to 9/11,” said Blevins of the September 11 attacks.

“They point to the US and they say, ‘you know, what? After 9/11, what did you do? You went into Afghanistan, you went into Iraq. You were responsible for the deaths of over a million Iraqis. You did that, as if to say, you have blood on your hands. So, therefore, we get to have blood on our hands, and you don't get to do anything about it.’”

“Yes, the US has done awful, terrible things to civilians, just as Israel is doing right now. But, the difference that we're seeing right now is that we're two decades later and the US is funding all of this,” she continued. “And the difference between right now and so many of the atrocities that have happened in the past is that we're watching it play out on social media right now.”

“And to think that the US is complicit in not allowing that aid and not doing everything in its power to tell Israel, 'we are not going to have a hand in what you were doing,' which has gotten to the point of committing genocide," she added. "It's just shameful to think about the fact that we live in the country that we do, that we have the knowledge that we do, and that we are not doing everything we possibly can to stop what is happening before our very eyes.”

Sputnik’s Wilmer Leon noted that the atrocities being committed by Israel are “bad politics” for US President Joe Biden, as a recent poll showed a majority of US citizens oppose Israel's military actions in Gaza. On Tuesday, Patrick Gaspard, a longtime Democratic insider, released a scathing statement criticizing the Biden administration for accepting at face value the Israeli government’s claim that they are adhering to international law in the Gaza Strip.

“I think that, you know, for how many years now has every US president they have to support Israel. That is the line that they have to take. So it's as if Joe Biden comes into office and he goes, 'oh, I'm supposed to support Israel? Oh, right. Hey, that's great. I'm a Zionist. I'm proud of it.' But now he's gotten himself into a bit of a situation with the fact that his support for Israel, something that every US American president does, well, that's being taken a little too far,” Blevins explained.

“I think it's really important to note here that the US decided that it was going to have a new national security memorandum in which it requires countries armed with US weapons to provide assurances that they won't violate international law or block humanitarian assistance,” she continued.

“Their claim that Israel is following international law is based on the fact that they were given assurances by Israel's defense minister---again, the guy who said 'no food, no fuel, no water'---that he sent a letter to the US earlier this month literally saying we're not violating international law, we're not blocking humanitarian assistance,” Blevins said, in reference to Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant who announced a complete siege on the city of Gaza.

“And it's like that logic seems to be what Joe Biden is kind of operating off of here because, on one hand, he knows that he's supposed to support Israel, he knows that if he doesn't then he's going to be in trouble with part of his base, part of the government and really the political establishment here as a whole. But then, on the other hand, he's got all of these traditionally

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Democrat voters who are saying, 'hey, we need you to pay attention to what's going on in Gaza. We need you to call for a ceasefire.'"

"However, it's him trying to play the middle of the field that I think is going to end up doing him and then being bad for him at the end of the day, because the more he tries to say, 'oh, well, I support Israel, but look at this aid I'm air dropping to Gaza'---even though it's killing Palestinians in some cases, or, you know, causing them to drown as they swim out to try to get access to it, that shows people that he is just playing politics at the end of the day, that he doesn't really care about the Palestinian people," she continued.

"The more that he tries to act like he does, well, for the people who actually do care about the Palestinians, that is going to turn them off. And, for the people who support Israel as well, that's also going to turn them off," said Blevins. "So, I don't think his team has quite figured out exactly what they need to be doing here, but they're also in a scenario of trying to figure out how to navigate this conflict. And, I'm guessing, that they're hoping that things are going to die down by the time that they get to November, although I don't know that that will be the case."

On Friday it was reported that the Biden administration had approved the transfer of billions of dollars of military equipment to Israel, including more than 1,800 MK84 2,000-pound bombs and 500 MK 82 500-pound bombs, according to a report that cited State Department and Pentagon officials. The US has approved the transfer, despite the fact that they are still in the process of rescheduling a meeting with Israel regarding their planned military operation in Rafah.

'Where is the outrage?': the IDF has been seen gunning down, bulldozing Palestinians who wave white flag – report

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Independent journalist and RT correspondent Rachel Blevins sat down with Sputnik's The Critical Hour to discuss the recent atrocity.

"It's yet another horrific video as you were describing it there," said Blevins. "It's horrific to think about, and yet, we have the video evidence, and this is just one of several videos showing Israel committing very clear war crimes. It's not much of a debate about this, about who did this or who was it done to - we know, all of the evidence is there. And yet, as you were pointing out, the Biden administration has done nothing."

Al Jazeera released a video showing Israeli soldiers gunning down two Palestinians on the coast of northern Gaza, even as one of the Palestinians appears to be waving a piece of white fabric. The footage also shows one of the men walking in the direction of an Israeli military vehicle with both his hands raised, a recent report claimed. The Israeli soldiers then buried the bodies of slain Palestinians with a bulldozer.

"Their [the US] claim that Israel is following international law is based on the fact that they were given assurances by Israel's defense minister---again, the guy who said 'no food, no fuel, no water'---that he sent a letter to the US earlier this month literally saying we're not violating

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Suspected Mossad Agent Arrested In Malaysia

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country and has been a steadfast supporter of Palestine. It has no formal relations with Israel and in December, the country banned all Israeli ships from docking at Malaysian ports.

Police in Malaysia arrested an Israeli man suspected to be a member of the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, on Friday.

The man, identified by as 36-year-old Shalom Avitan, according to some media reports, was reportedly arrested in Kuala Lumpur at a local hotel. Authorities say he had six handguns, three of which were loaded, and more than 200 rounds of ammunition. Avitan reportedly gave the authorities a fake French passport but surrendered his Israeli passport during questioning.

The suspect reportedly said that he was there to hunt another Israeli citizen, and the Israeli media has reported that Avitan was a member of the Musli crime family who was attempting to assassinate another crime family's leader.

"We do not fully trust this narrative as we suspect that there may be another agenda," the Inspector-General of Police Razarudin Husain said at a press conference late Friday night. Razarudin added that they do not believe the suspect was working alone and said they were probing the possibility that the suspect has links to the Mossad.

On Saturday, three Malaysian nationals, including a married couple, were arrested under suspicion of helping the Israeli suspect. The couple is accused of providing the alleged agent with weapons, while the third Malaysian is under investigation for acting as the suspect's driver. A pistol was found in the vehicle of the couple, authorities say they suspect they brought weapons from a neighboring country. They noted that the suspect came in from the United Arab Emirates where border security is tight. Cryptocurrency was involved in the purchase of the weapons, the Malaysian authorities said.

In response to the Israeli suspect's arrest, security measures have been stepped up for Malaysia's king, Sultan Ibrahim ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim as well as other top officials.

The Mossad has long been suspected of operating in Malaysia. In 2018, a Gaza-born electrical engineer was gunned down by two motorcyclists suspected of being linked to the Mossad. In 2022, a man was kidnapped in Malaysia, allegedly as part of a Mossad plot.

While legal gun ownership is possible in Malaysia, it is limited to citizens and requires every weapon to be licensed. The country also has some of the strictest punishments in the world for firearm violations. The suspect is being investigated under the Passport Act of 1966 and the Firearms Act for unlicensed possession of weapons. If charged and found guilty, he could be sentenced to death.

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UNRWA Head Calls for Global 'Pressure' Israel to Let Aid in Gaza

According to local media, Israeli forces reportedly shot and killed 12 Palestinian civilians as they waited for aid trucks in Gaza City on Saturday.

The Commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) is calling for increased global pressure to push Israel; into opening more avenues for humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip.

Philippe Lazzarini posed on X on Friday, calling on Israel to “cooperate with the United Nations to facilitate the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid to Gaza.”

“Member states should exert more pressure [on Israel] to implement the ICJ order,” Lazzarini wrote in the post. “Those who stopped funding UNRWA should reconsider their decision to allow the Agency to fulfill its mandate, including help averting famine.”

The tweet came one day after, and referenced, an order by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which unanimously ordered Israel to take immediate and effective action to get aid into Gaza.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, at least 31 people, including 27 children have died of malnutrition or dehydration. The ICJ court noted that in Gaza, “famine is setting in.”

The ICJ report called on Israel to open land bridges into Gaza to let humanitarian aid pour through. It noted that only land deliveries will be enough to prevent hunger in Gaza.

In January, Israel accused 12 UNRWA employees of being involved in the October 7 Hamas attack. According to EU humanitarian aid and crisis management head Janez Lenarcic, Israel never provided evidence to back the claim. The UNRWA also fired the ten surviving employees (the other two have been killed) but 18 countries, including the agency’s top donors the United States and Germany, paused funding.

“Bold action cannot wait any longer,” he concluded.

The survival of the UNRWA is in doubt, despite some of its funders resuming payments. In late February, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu released a post-war plan for Gaza that included the elimination of the UNRWA.

On Monday, US President Joe Biden signed a $1.2 trillion spending bill that forbade funding to the UNRWA until at least March 2025. A day earlier, Israel announced that it would no longer allow any UNRWA trucks to enter North Gaza, where food insecurity is at its worst.

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Oakland Installing 480 Cameras, Joining 'Nationwide Mass-Surveillance System'

In 2023, Oakland, California was the site of 14,554 motor vehicle thefts, an all-time high for the city. With increases in burglaries and robberies as well, violent and property crimes are higher in Oakland than they have been since the early 1990s.

The California city of Oakland has approved a plan to install 480 surveillance cameras equipped with automatic license plate readers in an effort to fight rising crime in the city. Most of the cameras, 290, will be deployed inside the city while the remaining 180 will be placed on freeways.

The cameras will provide law enforcement with the ability to track vehicles as they drive around the area, and can track them using license plates, car type, color, decals, and bumper stickers.

"We're equipping law enforcement with the tools they need to effectively combat criminal activity and hold perpetrators accountable," California Governor Gavin Newsom said on Friday. "[We are] building safer, stronger, communities for all Californians."

The plan, part of a multimillion-dollar contract with private surveillance company Flock Safety and the California Highway Patrol, was approved by the Oakland Privacy Advisory Commission in October. It was a reversal for the commission, which advised in 2019 that the city terminate any automatic license plate readers.

Flock Safety is a Georgia-based private company that advertises its goal of creating a nationwide surveillance network One of its features is the ability to add your cameras to their network, making it easily accessible for law enforcement nationwide. Flock Safety co-founder Garrett Langley has set a goal of 25% of all crimes in the country being solved using the Flock Safety network.

Already, Flock Safety has a significant foothold in the Bay area. A growing number of Homeowners Associations, including in the Oakland area, have already contracted Flock Safety to surveil their neighborhoods. Already, the company has deployed cameras in 2,000 cities in at least 42 states.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) described the Flock Safety system as "blanketing American cities with dangerously powerful and unregulated automatic license plate recognition cameras" that are becoming the first "nationwide mass-surveillance system" using its customers' cameras, including those owned by homeowners and businesses who opt-in.

The ACLU also warned that it could be used to investigate crimes across state lines, such as in immigration and abortion cases. It could also be used to monitor the movements of political activists or track who goes to certain religious services.

In May of last year, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a non-profit digital privacy group, revealed that the San Francisco Police Department requested and received live-feed access to a network of privately owned surveillance cameras prior to protests over the police killing of Tyre Nichols in 2020.

One of the major issues the ACLU has with the Flock Safety system over more traditional automatic license plate recognition cameras is that the company will store the images for up to 60 days.

Traditional systems delete photos immediately if the license plate does not match any law enforcement or AMBER alert lists. New Hampshire mandated all automatic license plate

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recognition camera systems delete photos that do not result in a hit within three minutes, a policy commended by the ACLU.

While most Californian cities saw a reduction in crime last year, Oakland was an exception, jumping 18%, with the largest jumps in robberies and motor vehicle thefts. However, it is unclear if the increased surveillance will actually reduce crime. Of the ten most surveilled cities judged by the number of cameras per 1,000 people, five of them, Washington DC, Chicago, Albuquerque, Detroit, and Memphis, are among the top 35 most dangerous cities in America, including two in the top five (Memphis and Detroit).

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Echos of 1968: How Protest Suppression at the DNC Led to Violence and Could Again

Last week, the Chicago Department of Transportation denied requests for protest permits outside of Union Center, where the Democratic National Convention is set to be held in August. In 1968, the city of Chicago did the same thing to anti-war protesters, with disastrous results.

Fifty-six years ago, Lyndon B Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection as the President of the United States. With an approval rating in the basement and presiding over an even more unpopular war, Johnson knew his nomination would not aid his party and stepped aside.

Anti-war activists were already planning a protest at the Democratic National Convention in August, but Johnson's announcement put more focus on the event because a new nominee was all but assured, and some in the field, including Robert F Kennedy (before his assassination), George McGovern, and Eugene McCarthy were against the war.

The protest, organized chiefly by the Youth International Party (Yippies), Students for a Democratic Society, and the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE) was billed as a "Festival of Life."

"While the Democrats hold their death convention, we are going to hold a life convention," Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman explained.

However, the city of Chicago denied the activist groups' permits to protest. The establishment of the party coalesced behind Johnson's Vice President Hubert Humphry, who staunchly supported the war. And so when the Democratic National Convention kicked off, riots exploded on the streets of Chicago. National Guard troops and city police violently attacked not only "hippie" protesters, but also clergy members, ordinary citizens of Chicago, and the press. Even Hugh Hefner, the founder and owner of Playboy, was said to have been smacked on the head by a police baton while standing blocks from his Gold Coast mansion.

New York Times journalist Tom Buckley, writing weeks after the convention, made clear that he did not side with the protesters who he called "young men" who were "playing a game" primarily to "get their pictures in the papers." He nevertheless described the police response as unjustifiable.

"There could be no possible excuse or mitigation for the conduct of the police. Armed adults facing unarmed youngsters–whom they far outnumbered, by the way– public servants sworn to

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uphold the law by lawful means, they repeatedly broke their oaths, many with evident pleasure," he wrote, adding that, "Young women, lying helpless on the ground, were beaten senseless, and then not even arrested."

The police used so many canisters of tear gas, that the chemical reportedly seeped into the lobby of the Hilton Hotel, where the press, delegates, and even some candidates were staying. "The world is watching" was a common chant during the protests, the police beat them anyway. After the nomination of Humphry, Richard Nixon won the presidency, who went on to illegally and secretly expand the war to Laos and Cambodia, where the effects can still be felt today.

More than five and a half decades later, the Democrats are again holding their national convention in Chicago. There is again an unpopular Democrat in the White House who is presiding over not one but two unpopular wars, albeit without open US troop deployments. While US President Joe Biden has resisted the increasingly loud calls for him to step aside, he, like LBJ, is also beset with protests from anti-war activists and young people inside his party. "Genocide Joe has got to go" is the 2024 version of "Hey Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"

To top it off, anti-war groups, including Students for a Democratic Society, one of the main drivers of the 1968 protest, have filed for permits to protest the war in Gaza, described by multiple human rights organizations as a genocide. As in 1968, the city of Chicago denied their permit request, arguing that the protest would "substantially and unnecessarily interfere with traffic in the area" and suggested a site more than four miles away from the convention.

"[The Chicago Department of Transportation] has sent a clear message. They stand with the political elites in Washington, and against the people of Chicago," Anti-War Committee Chicago member John Metz said.

Again, just like in 1968, the activists are saying they will not be cowed into places where their protests will be more convenient for those they are protesting.

"We want them to literally hear us and literally see us," Hatem Abudayyeh, executive director of the Arab American Action Network, said of the suggestion to move the protest. "We want those warmongers, those people responsible for the killings, those people with blood on their hands to have to walk past tens of thousands of Palestinians who have families that have been killed in Gaza."

The groups, just like they did in 1968, are appealing the decision. Every appeal in 1968 was blocked by the courts, but the protesters showed up anyway and riots ensued. Will history repeat itself again?

In 1968, David Stahl, the deputy mayor to Richard J Daley, was put in charge of negotiations with the Yippies and other organizers. In 1988, he spoke about the meetings in a retrospective article about the riots, saying that it was a mistake to deny their permits.

"In retrospect, I think we could have been more accommodating than we were. There wouldn't have been anything wrong with them sleeping in the parks," he admitted.

Unlike in 1968, the protesters today are not asking for permission to sleep in the parks throughout the convention. Rather, they are asking to be seen and heard by the subjects of their protest and still, the city is denying their permits.

We saw, more than half a century ago, in this same city, with this same political party, during the same event, in extremely similar circumstances, what happens when authorities abuse permits to prevent speech. Yet Democrats are seemingly hellbent on repeating those mistakes.

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After the 1968 riots came the infamous Chicago 8 trial (later changed to Chicago 7, after black activist Bobby Seal was given a separate trial) Jerry Rubin, one of the Yippie leaders, offered to give the judge Julius Hoffman (no relation to Abbie) a copy of his book just before being sentenced, saying that it included an inscription he added. “Julius, You radicalized more young people than we ever could. You’re the country’s top Yippie.”
“We’ve won the battle of Chicago,” Hoffman said weeks after the event.
IDF General Says US Accused Israel of ‘Systematic’ Sexual Abuse In Private Meeting

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Israeli Defense Force Brigade General Amir Avivi said on an Israeli radio show that in private, a US State Department official accused Israel of “systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women,” which may have revealed an internal stance of the US State Department that contradicts its public comments.

“It was a meeting that shook me. We sat there, talked about the situation, and suddenly [the US State Department official] accused Israel of systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women,” Avivi said.

“This is absolutely disconnected from reality. But without hesitation, she said ‘The UN presented evidence to the Israeli government.’”

Miller said the US could only confirm the reports of sexual assault after “A full, independent, credible investigation.”

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Ukraine Being Destroyed from Within by Zelensky Government Corruption – Ex-Diplomat

A former Ukrainian diplomat says the country has been mismanaged since declaring independence in 1991, with birthrates and the standard of living declining precipitously.
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made comments recently acknowledging Ukraine's declining birthrate, which is now the lowest in the world.
"We need not only financial incentives, because in my opinion, finances help, but they do not stimulate birth itself during war," said the embattled leader. "Help, yes. But as for births, it seems to me that it's mainly a matter of security." Zelensky called for more foreign assistance to rectify the problem, claiming Ukraine needs "the latest technologies when it comes to air defense."
The comments provoked discussion on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Friday, where host Jamarl Thomas noted Ukraine's population has been in steady decline since its independence in 1991. Former Ukrainian diplomat Andrii Telizhenko joined Thomas to discuss the issue.
"Ukraine's population, first of all, dropped not only since 2014, it dropped dramatically since 1991 when Ukraine got its independence," noted Telizhenko. "We had 52 million people living in Ukraine, and then within almost the 25-year range it dropped to… 45 million people. 7 million people died or left Ukraine within 25 years of its independence."
The same trend emerged in other post-Soviet nations as governments implemented so-called "shock therapy" economic policy under advisement of the West. Populist leaders maintained significant support, but US-backed political interference broadly ensured neoliberal policy was implemented. Populations sharply declined as a result as Western capital bought up assets at fire sale prices.
"Now, of course, there's much, much less people," Telizhenko continued. "Eight million left to Europe, 1.5 [million] went to Russia… and Belarus. So this is a huge, staggering number of people leaving because, first of all, they don't see prosperity, they don't have security – not only because of the war, but, first of all, from the government itself."
"Pensions are not being paid," the former diplomat explained. "They're asking that money to be paid from abroad. Zelensky – when he was going into this war agreeing not to support the Minsk agreements, the Istanbul accords, the peace deal – he should have understood that the country doesn't have the money, the capacity, the economic capacity to sustain itself."
"Now he's asking for US taxpayers' money to [finance] Ukrainian pensioners, Ukrainian government officials, and more than 25%, 30% of pensioners in Ukraine are basically not getting their pensions," Telizhenko emphasized.
US aid to Ukraine has become highly controversial in the United States as Americans are asked to fund the basic government services of a country halfway across the world. But even with American largesse Ukraine's government has found itself in a state of near-constant collapse. Critics warn that millions of dollars in foreign aid is likely being pocketed by corrupt officials; Ukraine has long been identified as the most corrupt country in Europe in international rankings.
"They can't even feed themselves anymore," said Telizhenko. "So they have no other choice [but] to leave or to just die in Ukraine. This is what Ukraine has become. It was getting worse

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and worse throughout the last 30 years and over the last two and a half years it's being destroyed totally," the ex-diplomat stressed.
"The salary of a teacher is $100 and they're cutting it to $50 right now," he added. "Can you imagine? This is what is happening in Ukraine today. The teachers aren't getting paid, the pensioners aren't getting paid. And this is just destroying the country from within and people have no other choices than to flee the country – not from the war, but to save themselves because they have nothing to feed themselves on."

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US Political Support for 'Terrorist' Ukraine Regime Evaporating – Journalist

The uncovering of additional evidence tying last week's terrorist attack in a Moscow suburb to Kiev will further weaken the country's international support, says one analyst.
Russian media has revealed new links between the Ukraine regime and last week's horrific terrorist attack at a concert venue outside Moscow.
"Investigators have verified information that large amounts of money and cryptocurrency that the perpetrators of the terrorist attack received trace back to Ukraine," reported the Tass news agency Thursday. "The funds were used in preparing the crime."
As the increasingly desperate Kiev regime launches attacks on Russian civilians in Belgorod and other regions, speculation has intensified that elements within Ukraine's military and intelligence service may have played a role in last Friday's incident. Independent journalist Dan Lazare joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday to weigh in on the claim.
"I look forward to the Russian government laying this evidence out – I hope they do," said Lazare. "To me, the fact that four of the accused were apprehended while making a dash for the Ukrainian border and were caught just a short distance away – I mean, to me that speaks volumes. It's not absolute proof, but it certainly strongly suspects that there were collaborators on the Ukrainian side, and that Ukrainian bodies were helping them with this crime."
"We can't help but harken back to the assassination of Darya Dugina in 2022. That was the daughter of the Russian political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin," the author added. "She was killed in a car bomb in Russia. At first the Ukrainian government denied any involvement whatsoever, and the US backed it up. And then a few weeks later the US admitted that the act was done by the SBU, the Ukrainian intelligence service."
The incident prompted little attention in the West, where Dugin is a highly vilified figure. But a terrorist attack killing almost 150 people is significantly harder to ignore.
"I strongly suspect we'll learn the same thing here," said Lazare, suggesting Ukrainian officials may have played a role in the "act of brutal terrorism." "And, if that is true, if my suspicions prove correct, this will be a real game changer."
"Russia will feel justified in responding… and the US will not be in a position to say no to Russia and will have a very hard time continuing its political support of Kiev," he claimed.

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Americans' support for arming Ukraine has already declined heavily over the last few years as a majority now say the US has sent too much money to the Zelensky regime. The full revelation of the extremist nature of the government – in which Nazi sympathizers hold important positions of power in police and military institutions – will likely further provoke opposition to continued Western support.

"What about the discussions about how quick the United States was to attribute blame or credit to ISIS-K*?" asked host Wilmer Leon. "And now we find out that this whole ISIS-K, which was supposed to be created in Afghanistan, that the leader of the organization actually has ties – and numerous ties – to the CIA."

"I'm not very surprised," responded Lazare. "There really has been a tangled relationship between al-Qaeda and its various offshoots in US intelligence. I'm speaking very carefully here – I'm not trying to engage in any kind of a conspiracy theory – but that clearly is the case."

"We know that al-Qaeda back in 9/11 had close ties to the top circles of Saudi Arabia," the journalist continued. "The US chose to look the other way, not to investigate those ties very closely. When al-Qaeda led an assault on Idlib, a province in northern Syria in 2015, they used TOW missiles that were provided by the US via Saudi Arabia."

"Also a later study found out that most of the equipment, ammunition and weaponry that ISIS was using in Syria had come from the US," he added. "This doesn't mean that it was intentionally supplied by the US, but it merely means that US supplies somehow wound up in ISIS hands… So there's a tangled relationship, and US assurances that it was not involved and that Ukraine was not involved simply are not fully convincing given the nature of that relationship."

The United States has historically utilized Islamic extremists to help achieve its geopolitical objectives, perhaps most famously when the country backed Mujahideen rebels against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Elements of the Mujahideen went on to form al-Qaeda, which tragically struck within the United States on September 11, 2001.

More recently the US has backed Islamic extremists in Syria in its effort to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. The country's destabilization has allowed ISIS to find safe haven, another extremist group that emerged in the aftermath of the United States' disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"There's been some very strange overlaps in recent years where ISIS or ISIS-K and its positions have been oddly coincident with those of the US," said Lazare. "It is very hostile to Hamas, for example, it's very hostile to Iran, and it's hostile to Russia."

"And they've been very hostile to governments in African countries that the United States has issues with," added Leon.

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How Barack Obama's 'Minstrel Imperialism' Gave Cover to US Foreign Policy - Journalist

As countries throughout the Global South work to overthrow the legacy of colonialism and imperialist subjugation, the US empire still searches for a token minority to launder its image as eloquently and effectively as Barack Obama.

Algeria vowed to secure full membership status for Palestine at the United Nations Monday. "Algeria will soon return to address the Security Council, once again, to ensure that Palestine is in its rightful place as a full member of the United Nations," said Algerian UN representative Amar Ben Jamai. The move comes as the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the besieged Gaza Strip, where Israel's military operation has killed nearly 33,000. Palestine currently holds observer status in the international body.

The precipitous decline of Israel's international standing has brought renewed attention to the colonial roots of the crisis in Palestine, which was colonized by the British before Zionists declared a self-proclaimed Jewish state in 1948. Author and journalist Jon Jeter joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday to discuss how the United States perpetuates Palestinians' subjugation and how former President Barack Obama put a black face on US imperialism.

"The 60s called, they want their media back," said the former Washington Post bureau chief and two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist as Western media is flooded with bigoted characterizations of Haitians and Palestinians.

Recently, false rumors about cannibalism in Haiti have flooded social media, while Israel continues to spread debunked atrocity propaganda about mass rapes alleged to have taken place on October 7. False accusations of sexual violence have historically been a prominent tacticused against non-white people to uphold racial supremacy.

"We continue to trot out the same answers, the same responses, the same orientalism – if I may quote the late, great Edward Said – the same orientalist narratives which qualify imperialism and colonialism," said Jeter.

"And that's why we can't work our way out, or at least not yet because we've got these same narratives that govern us in a sense and we haven't quite figured out – as Malcolm [X] said, if you're not careful, the media will have you hating the people who are oppressed and love the people who are doing the oppressing."

"And there's another element to this, Jon, that I think is very important," added host Wilmer Leon. "Barack Obama. The image of Barack Obama and his selling us imperialism. That leads us to [US United Nations ambassador] Linda Thomas-Greenfield, it leads us to [House minority leader] Hakeem Jeffries, it leads us to [Representative] Gregory Meeks. It leads us to Kamala – all of these Black faces: as I have dubbed it, 'minstrel imperialism.'"

The tradition of minstrel shows, in which racist depictions of African Americans were used to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes, is understood in the United States as implying that someone is upholding white supremacist power and narratives, even if they themselves are Black.

Leon's accusation, shared by many, is that Obama strengthened the purchase of Western imperialism and its racist, colonial underpinnings by serving as a Black mascot for US policy.

Massive racial disparities continue to exist within the United States while US foreign policy subjugates non-white peoples around the world, with one study by Brown University estimating that at least 3.6 million Arab and Muslim peoplehave died as a result of the United States' so-called "War on Terror."

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“I think this moment has unmasked the United States. I think Barack Obama is part of that,” agreed Jeter. “I have always loathed him. I've loathed him from the first moment I heard his name.”

“He's proven to be even worse than I thought he was, but.. this is the thing about Barack Obama, though, he was the empire's last gasp,” he added. “He was brilliant, right, to put that genie back in the bottle, to keeping the bottle a little bit longer, but the genie is out now, and they don't have anyone to replace him… I think his intelligence was overstated. But they don't have anyone nearly as clever, as charismatic as him in their bullpen. And that's their problem now.”

Jeter noted that Obama was a staunch opponent of the Palestinian cause during his time in office, lavishing Israel with its largest US aid package in history even as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu openly attempted to undermine his political position.

“What the Algerians are now arguing for, are pleading for, are demanding, maybe, is what Barack Obama denied the Palestinians when he was in office, which is full membership in the United Nations,” Jeter noted. “He actively and aggressively opposed it because he understood it would be the end of apartheid Israel.”

“We started this conversation talking about settler colonialism and it just is not something you can get away from,” he added. “Settler colonialism, it is genocidal. It's a genocidal attempt to profit from other people who are unwilling to engage in that enterprise and at that point you do it with violence.”

As countries like Algeria throughout the Global South work to overthrow the legacy of colonialism and imperialist subjugation, the US empire still searches for a token minority to launder its image as eloquently and effectively as Barack Obama.

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US Marines Struggle to Adapt to Fighting Adversary That Can Fight Back - Report

Wherein a writer for the CIA-backed Washington Post muses on prospects for US success in World War III.

After killing at least 3.6 million people in its so-called “War on Terror,” US armed forces are regrouping to combat adversaries capable of mounting a resistance.

In a hagiographic article entitled “Preparing for a China war, the Marines are retooling how they’ll fight,” ruling class stenographer Ellen Nakashima blithely considers the prospect of fighting a war against a nuclear-armed country of 1.4 billion people. The piece, appearing in The Washington Post, details the US Marine Corps’ efforts to adapt to what she appears to believe is an inevitable, and desirable, conflict with China.

“The Marines are striving to adapt to a maritime fight that could play out across thousands of miles of islands and coastline in Asia,” writes Nakashima, admitting the armed service has devoted the last 20 years to fighting less capable forces in the Middle East. “Instead of launching traditional amphibious assaults… nimbler groups are intended as an enabler for a larger joint force.”

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"Their role is to gather intelligence and target data and share it quickly — as well as occasionally sink ships with medium-range missiles," it is explained, "to help the Pacific Fleet and Air Force repel aggression against the United States and allies and partners like Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines."

The country she imagines launching this aggression has not been at war since 1979, while the United States has deployed its military forces almost 400 times during its short history.

"New regiments are envisioned as one piece of a broader strategy to synchronize the operations of US soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen, and in turn with the militaries of allies and partners in the Pacific," the piece continues. "Their focus is a crucial stretch of territory sweeping from Japan to Indonesia and known as the First Island Chain. China sees this region, which encompasses an area about half the size of the contiguous United States, as within its sphere of influence."

Naturally, China needs to understand its coastal waters are not its own concern, but the United States', Nakashima's logic suggests.

"China not only has the region's largest army, navy and air force, but also home-field advantage," Nakashima writes, apparently under the impression the United States will be allowed to attack China without suffering retribution on its own shores. "Taiwan, a close US partner, is most directly in the crosshairs."

China's links with Taiwan go back hundreds of years. In the 1950s the United States attempted to cleave the island off from the country after the Chinese Civil War. As the defeated Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan the US threatened to use nuclear bombs if leader Mao Zedong crossed the Taiwan Strait, seeking to balkanize China as the US did in Korea and attempted to do in Vietnam.

Nakashima writes of the disastrous consequences for shareholder profits of a war over Taiwan: "A successful invasion would… have catastrophic economic consequences due to disruption of the world's most advanced semiconductor industry and of maritime traffic in some of the world's busiest sea lanes — the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea."

"That would create enormous uncertainty for businesses and consumers around the world," she writes. The United States has worked in recent years to prevent the export of semiconductor-manufacturing technology to China, using its political power to ensure it isn't outcompeted in yet another key area.

Nakashima ends her piece by considering the role of allied countries in the United States' hypothetical war, focusing on Japan's Okinawa Prefecture, where Japanese people have protested the US military presence after American troops have been implicated in myriad cases of rape and sexual assault.

Is the 'puppet master' still the 'master'?

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"There's an interesting article… by a former senior Ukrainian official, now living in Russia, who says, 'is this a case where the puppets have become the puppet masters?'" Political Science Professor Nicolai Petro wondered on Sputnik's The Critical Hour.

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“I mean, if you believe what The New York Times and Politico report that Washington in no uncertain terms told Ukrainian officials to cease their attacks on Russian oil refineries and certain other types of targets, and the official response of officials of the Ukrainian government is that, ‘No, we won't do that’ – well, what conclusions are we to draw from that? How subordinate actually is Ukrainian interests and policies now to America and American funding?” the analyst said discussing possible involvement in Crocus City Hall terrorist attack.

“Now there are stories that the leader of ISIS-K, or the creator of ISIS-K, had actually worked in various positions in Afghanistan with the CIA,” host Wilmer Leon suggested. “So, some could posit that the United States didn't want to reveal its sources because those sources would cut too close to home,” he added. Petro agreed that “It's a possibility.”

With radical nationalists and neo-Nazis representing a significant element within Ukraine’s Armed Forces, Petro suggested the possibility of Ukrainian “puppets” acting on their own.

Russian authorities’ revelation that the terrorists attempted to seek refuge in Ukraine has raised questions about Kiev’s guilt and, by extension, its Western benefactors’ involvement. Russia’s foreign minister said on Thursday that Moscow cannot rule out Ukraine possibly benefitting from the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue.

Washington and Kiev have furiously denied Ukrainian involvement in the terrorist attack.

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Ukraine being destroyed from within by Zelensky government corruption – ex-diplomat

“Ukraine's population, first of all, dropped not only since 2014, it dropped dramatically since 1991 when Ukraine got its independence,” noted former Ukrainian diplomat Andrii Telizhenko. “We had 52 million people living in Ukraine, and then within almost the 25-year range it dropped to… 45 million people. 7 million people died or left Ukraine within 25 years of its independence.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made comments recently acknowledging Ukraine’s declining birthrate, claiming the country is in need of increased foreign aid to address the issue. But Telizhenko says endemic corruption has destroyed the country from within since 1991.

“Now, of course, there's much, much less people,” the ex-diplomat continued. “Eight million left for Europe, 1.5 [million] went to Russia… and Belarus. So, this is a huge, staggering number of people leaving because, first of all, they don't see prosperity, they don't have security – not only because of the war, but, first of all, from the government itself.”

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“Pensions are not being paid,” Telizhenko explained. “They're asking that money to be paid from abroad. Zelensky – when he was going into this war agreeing not to support the Minsk agreements, the Istanbul accords, the peace deal – he should have understood that the country doesn't have the money, the capacity, the economic capacity to sustain itself.”

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Is ISIS-K another tool of the CIA?

The Biden administration’s immediate attempt to blame terrorist group ISIS-K for last Friday’s terrorist attack outside Moscow has generated suspicion, noted The Critical Hour host Wilmer Leon. “Now we find out that this whole ISIS-K, which was supposed to be created in Afghanistan, that the leader of the organization actually has ties – and numerous ties – to the CIA,” he noted.

“I'm not very surprised,” responded independent journalist Dan Lazare. “There really has been a tangled relationship between al-Qaeda and its various offshoots in US intelligence.”

“A study found out that most of the equipment, ammunition and weaponry that ISIS was using in Syria had come from the US,” he added.

The United States has historically utilized Islamic extremists to help achieve its geopolitical objectives, perhaps most famously when the country backed Islamist "resistance groups" known as the mujahideen in their fight against the the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Some Mujahideen fighters went on to form al-Qaeda, which tragically struck within the United States on September 11, 2001.

More recently the US has backed Islamic extremists in Syria in its effort to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. The country’s destabilization has allowed ISIS to find safe haven, another extremist group that emerged in the aftermath of the United States’ disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq.

“There's been some very strange overlaps in recent years where ISIS or ISIS-K and its positions have been oddly coincident with those of the US,” said Lazare. “It is very hostile to Hamas, for example, it's very hostile to Iran, and it's hostile to Russia.”

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How Barack Obama’s ‘minstrel imperialism’ gave cover to US foreign policy - journalist

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The precipitous decline of Israel's international standing has brought renewed attention to the colonial roots of the crisis in Palestine. Author Jon Jeter joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss how the United States perpetuates Palestinians' subjugation and how former President Barack Obama put a black face on US imperialism.

"The 60s called, they want their media back," said the two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist as Western media is flooded with bigoted characterizations of Haitians and Palestinians. Recently, false rumors about cannibalism in Haiti have flooded social media, while Israel spreads debunked atrocity propaganda about mass rapes alleged to have taken place on October 7.

"There's another element to this," added host Wilmer Leon. "Barack Obama. The image of Barack Obama and his selling us imperialism. That leads us to Linda Thomas-Greenfield, it leads us to Hakeem Jeffries, it leads us to Gregory Meeks. It leads us to Kamala – all of these Black faces: as I have dubbed it, 'minstrel imperialism.'"

The tradition of minstrel shows, in which racist depictions of African Americans were used to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes, is understood in the US as implying someone is upholding white supremacist power and narratives, even if they themselves are Black.

Leon's accusation, shared by many, is that Obama strengthened the purchase of Western imperialism and its racist, colonial underpinnings by serving as a Black mascot for US policy. Massive racial disparities continue to exist within the United States while US foreign policy subjugates non-European peoples around the world, with one study by Brown University estimating that at least 3.6 million have died as a result of the United States' so-called "War on Terror."

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US military struggles to adapt to fighting adversary that can fight back - report

In a hagiographic article entitled "Preparing for a China war, the Marines are retooling how they'll fight," ruling class stenographer Ellen Nakashima blithely considers the prospect of fighting a war against a nuclear-armed country of 1.4 billion people. The piece, appearing in The Washington Post, details the US Marine Corps' efforts to adapt to what she appears to believe is an inevitable, and desirable, conflict with China.

"The Marines are striving to adapt to a maritime fight that could play out across thousands of miles of islands and coastline in Asia," writes Nakashima, admitting the armed service has devoted the last 20 years to fighting less capable forces in the Middle East.

"China not only has the region's largest army, navy and air force, but also home-field advantage," she continues, apparently under the impression the US will be allowed to attack

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China without suffering retribution on its own shores. “Taiwan, a close US partner, is most directly in the crosshairs.”

As the defeated Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan the US threatened to use nuclear bombs if China crossed the Taiwan Strait, effectively balkanizing China as the US attempted to do in Vietnam.

“This one unit alone is not going to save the world,” Nakashima admiringly quotes a Marines PR official.

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Trump Plans to Roll Back Anti-Racism Policies if Elected – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) – US presidential candidate Donald Trump plans to roll back federal anti-racism policies and programs if elected, Axios reported on Monday, citing his spokesperson.

“As President Trump has said, all staff, offices, and initiatives connected to Biden's un-American policy will be immediately terminated,” campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung told Axios.

The Trump administration would target various policies, ranging from decades-old programs designed to provide minorities with economic opportunities to recent programs established in the shadow of the 2020 killing of George Floyd.

His former aides and allies have already begun to lay the legal groundwork to combat what they claim is anti-white discrimination, filing lawsuits and legal complaints, some through Stephen Miller’s America First Legal.

For example, it has sued CBS and Paramount Global for alleged discrimination against a white man who worked as a show writer; filed a civil rights complaints against the NFL for its Rooney Rule that requires teams to interview at least two racial minority candidates for general manager, head coach, and coordinator position, and sued to block a multi-billion-dollar pandemic aid program for restaurants owned by minorities.

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Trump Slams Biden for Declaring Transgender Day on Easter Sunday, Demands Apology

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's campaign on Saturday called on incumbent President Joe Biden to apologize for declaring a Trans Visibility

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Day on Easter Sunday and banning children from featuring any religious symbols in their designs of Easter eggs at a traditional White House-hosted art event.

Earlier in the day, the White House circulated a leaflet with information and instruction for its annual Easter Egg Roll, in which it said that egg design submissions must not include any "questionable content, religious symbols, overtly religious themes, or partisan political statements."

"It is appalling and insulting that Joe Biden's White House prohibited children from submitting religious egg designs for their Easter Art event, and formally proclaimed Easter Sunday as Trans Day of Visibility," Trump's campaign said. "We call on Joe Biden's failing campaign and White House to issue apology to the millions of Catholics and Christians across America."

Catholics and Christians believe that tomorrow is only one celebration - that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it added.

On Friday, Biden issued a statement proclaiming March 31 the Transgender Day of Visibility, to "honor the extraordinary courage and contributions of transgender Americans," and saying that he and his administration "have your back."

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Lawyer For Russia's Vinnik Tells Sputnik Negotiations Underway With US Related to Plea

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Arkady Bukh, the lawyer for detained Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Sputnik that talks related to a plea with the US government are underway.

"We are in the middle of negotiations related to the plea. We are interested in getting the best possible plea offer from the government," Bukh said.

He emphasized that US District Judge Susan Liston from the US District Court for the Northern District of California in San Francisco set a new hearing date of May 3, 2024.

The US government accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through the cryptocurrency exchange BIC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds. Vinnik denies the charges against him.

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US Orders $181Mln More in Special Tooling For F-35 Fighter Production - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Aeronautics has received a $181 million US Navy contract extension to provide more special tooling and test equipment for the US armed forces' F-35 Joint Strike Fighter fleet, the Department of Defense announced in a press release on Friday.

"Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company [of] Fort Worth, Texas is awarded a ...$181 million ...modification ...contract to procure various special tooling and special test equipment in

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support of F-35 aircraft production," the release said on Friday.
The aircraft operate for the US Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and non-US Defense Department participants, the release noted.
Work on the contract will be performed in Garden Grove, California over the next three years and is expected to be completed in January 2027, the Defense Department said.

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US Navy Orders Two More Test MQ-25 Stingray Refueling Drones From Boeing - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has awarded Boeing a more than $657 million contract extension to build two more MQ-25 Stingray aerial refueling drones, or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), the Department of Defense said in a press release.
"The Boeing Company [of] St. Louis, Missouri is awarded a ... $657,090,000 modification ...contract ...for the production and delivery of two additional MQ-25 System Demonstration Test Article aircraft," the release said on Friday.
The contract will also include tooling and communication system changes for the Navy, the Defense Department said.
Much of the work on the contract will be performed in St. Louis, Missouri (45.43%) and the rest at other locations across the United States and Canada, the Defense Department said.
Work on the contract is scheduled to last four and a half years and is expected to be completed in October 2028, the release added.

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Trump, Co-Defendants Appeal Georgia Judge Ruling to Keep DA Willis on Case – Court Filing

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump and his eight co-defendants in the Georgia election interference case appealed Judge Scott McAfee's ruling rejecting their motion to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from the case, according to a court filing.
Earlier in March, the Superior Court of Fulton County in Georgia declined to remove Willis from the election interference case, arguing that the allegations against her were legally insufficient.
At the same time, the court concluded that given all the circumstances of Willis' romantic relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade, either the district attorney or Wade should leave the case. On the same day, Wade announced his resignation and Willis accepted.
In the appeal, Trump and co-defendants argued that the disqualification of Wade was not enough to move forward with the case.
"The trial court was bound by existing case law to not only require Wade's disqualification (which occurred) but also to require the disqualification of DA Willis and her entire office. The

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trial court's failure to do so is plain legal error requiring reversal," the appeal reads.
The defendants believe that the nature of the Willis-Wade relationship "created an appearance of impropriety in this case that cast a pall over these entire proceedings."
The appeal insists that the court "expressly found an appearance of impropriety existed" and that is why DA Willis and her entire office should be disqualified from this case.
In August 2023, a Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 felony counts related to his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 presidential election.

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US Defense Department Swears in First Ever Science, Technology Chief - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department swore in former NASA official Aprille Ericsson as its first ever Assistant Secretary for Science and Technology, the Pentagon said in a statement.
"Dr. Aprille Ericsson took the oath-of-office to become the first ever Assistant Secretary of Defense for Science and Technology. The Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Heidi Shyu administered the oath at the Pentagon today," the statement said on Friday.
Ericsson worked at NASA for more than three decades prior to her role at the Pentagon, the statement said. Ericsson was the first African-American woman to earn a PhD in engineering from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, the statement said.
In July, the Pentagon established three assistant secretary positions to cover critical technologies, mission capabilities, and science and technology.

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US Navy Says Successfully Intercepted Medium Range Ballistic Missile With Aegis in Test

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - A US Navy vessel equipped with an Aegis combat system successfully intercepted a medium range ballistic missile during its terminal phase of flight during an exercise this week, the Pentagon said in a press release.
"On March 28, 2024, the US Missile Defense Agency, in cooperation with the US Navy, successfully conducted an intercept of an advanced Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) test target utilizing the Standard Missile-6 (SM-6) Dual II with Software Upgrade (SWUP)," the release said on Friday.
The release said the test displayed an Aegis Baseline 9 equipped ship's capability to detect, track, engage, and intercept a medium range ballistic missile target in the terminal phase of flight.

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Wednesday's test marks the fourth flight test of an Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense-configured vessel using the upgraded SM-6 Dual II missile and the second Aegis Baseline 9.C2 (BMD 5.1) intercept of a medium range ballistic missile target using the SM-6 Dual II SWUP missile, the release noted.

The test missile was launched from Hawaii, and the USS Preble navy vessel launched the SM-6 Dual II missiles that successfully intercepted it, according to the release.

The Pentagon said Australia also participated in the military exercise.

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US Army Orders Lockheed Air-to-Ground Missiles For France,Czech Republic, Poland -Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has received a more than $483 million US Army contract extension to produce more air-to-ground missile systems, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Orlando, Florida was awarded a $483,478,740 modification ...contract for air-to-ground missile systems," the release said on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Orlando, Florida over the next two years with an estimated completion date of March 28, 2026, the Defense Department said.

Work on the contract will be overseen by the US Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama and many of the missiles will be sent to three US NATO allies in Europe - the Czech Republic, France, and Poland - under the Foreign Military Sales program, the Defense Department said.

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General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman to Share $3BIn US Army Cartridges Contract -Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems and Northrop Grumman Systems will compete for each order of a more than $3 billion US Army contract for medium caliber training cartridges, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems [of]Marion, Illinois and Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Minneapolis, Minnesota will compete for each order of the $3,053,991,547 ...contract for medium caliber training cartridges," the release said on Friday.

Work on the contract will last for five years with an estimated completion date of April 4, 2029, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command based at Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois will oversee work on

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the program as its contracting activity, the release added.

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Lawyer For Russia's Vinnik Tells Sputnik Negotiations Underway With US Related to Plea

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Arkady Bukh, the lawyer for detained Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Sputnik that talks related to a plea with the US government are underway.
"We are in the middle of negotiations related to the plea. We are interested in getting the best possible plea offer from the government," Bukh said.
He emphasized that US District Judge Susan Liston from the US District Court for the Northern District of California in San Francisco set a new hearing date of May 3, 2024.
The US government accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through the cryptocurrency exchange BIC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds. Vinnik denies the charges against him.

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US Senators Says Europe Must 'Step Up' if Ukraine Needs More Aid

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Europe must increase its support to Ukraine if the regime in Kiev requires further aid, US Senator Mike Lee said in a statement via social media platform X.
"The $113 BILLION we've already provided is far more than what Americans should be asked to give. If Ukraine needs more help, it's time for Europe to step up," Lee said on Friday.
The US Congress has been deadlocked for months on a supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel. The US Senate passed the foreign aid bill, but the legislation is stuck in the House of Representatives.
Ukraine will be forced to retreat "step by step" if the United States does not provide more aid, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a Washington Post op-ed on Friday.

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Ukraine Will Retreat 'Step by Step' If US Stops Aid to Ukraine- Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Ukraine will have to retreat step by step if Washington does not provide assistance to Kiev, according to an op-ed in the Washington Post on Friday.

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"If there is no U.S, support, it means that we have no air defense, no Patriot missiles, no jammers for electronic warfare, no 155-milimeter artillery rounds," he said. "It means we will go back, retreat, step by step, in small steps."

Zelenskyy also said that Ukraine does not have enough interceptors and other air-defense weapons.

"That's true. I don't want Russia to know what number of air-defense missiles we have, but basically, you're right," he said. "Without the support of Congress, we will have a big deficit of missiles. This is the problem. We are increasing our own air-defense systems, but it is not enough."

Zelenskyy shared that Ukraine is trying to find some way not to retreat.

Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. While the Senate approved a $95 billion version of the bill last month, House Speaker Mike Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

Russia has been conducting a special military operation in Ukraine since February 24, 2022. President Putin has said the operation aims to "protect people subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years." According to the president, the ultimate goal of the operation is to liberate Donbas and create conditions that guarantee Russia's security.

Russia earlier sent a note to NATO because of arms supplies to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said any cargo that contains weapons for Ukraine will become a legitimate target for Russia.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) –

MIDDLE EAST

* The Biden administration approved the transfer of billions of dollars of military equipment to Israel, amid concerns about a potential Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip city of Rafah, The Washington Post reported on Friday.

* Russia condemns Israeli strikes targeting Syria, considers them to be unacceptable and provocative, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has decided to send a delegation of negotiators to Doha and Cairo in the next few days to continue negotiations on the release of the hostages held by Hamas, his office said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Belgium will allocate 100 million euros ($107 million) to Ukraine for the maintenance of F-16 jets that the West is going to supply to Kiev, Defense Minister Ludivine Dedonder said on Friday.

* A Ukrainian drone crashed into an apartment building in Russia’s Belgorod, and the blast killed one person, Belgorod Region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

* Moscow does not intend to participate in a conference on resolving the Ukrainian crisis, which

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is planned to be held in Switzerland, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* The Russian armed forces have launched high-precision weapons, including Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, at Ukraine's energy and air defense facilities, the Defense Ministry said.

* Kiev's statement about a possibility of dialogue with Moscow goes against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's ban on negotiations with Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

CROCUS CITY HALL TERRORIST ATTACK

* The terrorists of the Crocus City Hall attack drove towards the border with Ukraine to then travel to Kiev to claim their reward, the Russian Investigative Committee said on Friday.

* The Moscow Basmanny Court has arrested the ninth defendant in the Crocus City Hall concert venue terrorist attack, a Sputnik corresponded reported on Friday from the courtroom.

* Another person who was hospitalized after the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack has succumbed to his injuries, Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said.

* Nine residents of a suburb of Dushanbe have been detained over links to the terrorists who attacked the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow last week, a Tajik intelligence source told Sputnik.

US-RUSSIA TRADE

* US-Russian trade in goods plummeted from $38.2 billion in 2013 to $5.2 billion in 2023, according to the United States' 2024 National Trade Estimate Report released on Friday.

* Russia has sought to ensure its technological sovereignty in recent years by implementing extensive import substitution policies resulting in a decrease in US exports to the country, the office of the US Trade Representative said in its new Trade Estimate Report.

NORTH KOREA

* Delegations of Russia and North Korea have discussed the issue of resumption of direct flights during talks in Moscow, and the sides expressed readiness to launch charter flights for tourists, Russian Natural Resources Minister Alexander Kozlov, who also serves at the chairman of the intergovernmental commission on cooperation between Russia and North Korea, told Sputnik on Friday.

* The European Union has condemned Russia's vetoing a US-drafted UN Security Council resolution to extend the mandate of the group of experts overseeing sanctions on North Korea until April 30, 2025 and called for the decision to be reconsidered.

* Russia's decision to veto the draft resolution of the UN Security Council to extend the work of experts of the UN Sanctions Committee on North Korea suits Moscow's interests, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Biden Unlikely to Reimpose Oil Sanctions on Venezuela Despite Election Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is unlikely to reimpose sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector in April despite concerns over Venezuelan President Nicolas

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Maduro's crackdown on opposition candidates participating in this year's elections, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday, citing people familiar with the matter.

Maduro's government has cracked down on opposition figures ahead of the elections over allegations they are plotting against him.

The report said the United States is worried that reinstating Trump-era sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector will raise the price of gasoline for US consumers and contribute to more US-bound migration from Venezuela amid the ongoing border crisis.

Moreover, the report said that US officials are also concerned that restricting Western investments in Venezuela will tighten global energy supplies and leave a vacuum for Chinese investment to fill in Venezuela's energy sector.

The Biden administration is expected to extend a waiver on US sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector until July 28, when Venezuela is set to hold its elections.

The US Treasury Department issued General License 44 in October to authorize transactions involving Venezuela's oil and gas sector for six months, but the Biden administration has repeatedly warned that it will let the license expire on April 18 if it deems Maduro is preventing free and fair elections.

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Zelenskyy Confirms US Asked Ukraine Not to Strike Russian Oil Refineries - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed that the United States asked Kiev not to carry out strikes against Russian oil refineries and that the request was not well received by Kiev, according to an op-ed in the Washington Post on Friday.

"The reaction of the US was not positive on this," Zelenskyy said when asked about reports the US urged Ukraine to avoid strikes on Russian energy facilities. "We used our drones. Nobody can say to us you can't."

Zelenskyy added that "it's fair" for Ukraine to strike Russian energy facilities as a response to Russian strikes on Ukraine's energy grid.

The Financial Times reported that the United States urged Ukraine to avoid strikes on Russian oil refineries as a means to prevent an energy crisis that could destabilize the global oil market.

US officials have declined to comment on the report, but have instead reiterated that they do not encourage Ukrainian attacks inside Russia.

Earlier this month, Ukrainian drones attacked the Kuybyshevsky Oil Refinery in the Russian region of Samara, causing a fire, and also attempted to attack another refinery,

The Kuybyshevsky Refinery is one of the largest enterprises of the oil industry in Russia's Samara Region. The refinery has been running since 1945.

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US House Bans Its Staffers From Using Microsoft Copilot Powered by AI – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The US House has introduced a strict ban on the use of Microsoft Copilot, an AI-based chatbot assistant, by its staffers amid attempts by US government agencies to harness the rapid development of artificial intelligence, Axios reported on Friday.

In early January, the US software giant Microsoft announced that all future Windows PCs will feature Copilot, a software and a new key enabling AI-generated text conversations with a virtual assistant.

"The Microsoft Copilot application has been deemed by the Office of Cybersecurity to be a risk to users due to the threat of leaking House data to non-House approved cloud services," the report quoted the House's Chief Administrative Officer Catherine Szpindor as saying in guidance to congressional offices.

According to the new guidance, Copilot will also be removed from and blocked on all Windows devices in House, the report said.

In June, the House likewise blocked its staffers from using the free version of ChatGPT but allowed the use of the paid version.

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US Puts Visa Restrictions on 10 Syrian Officials Over Alleged Rights Abuses - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose visa restrictions on 10 Syrian government officials and their immediate family members for their alleged role in human rights abuses, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.

"The Secretary is taking steps to impose visa restrictions against 10 government officials and members of their immediate families for these officials' involvement in serious human rights abuses," Miller said in a press release. "This comes in addition to the 11 Syrian regime officials and their immediate family members the Secretary announced were subject to visa restrictions in December 2023."

The United States will not normalize relations with Bashar al-Assad's government until it sees progress in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria, according to Miller.

Miller added that the Biden administration will continue to seek and pursue visa restrictions against Syrian government officials and other individuals who engage in the "repression" of Syrians.

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

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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.

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US, Japan, Philippines to Jointly Patrol South China Sea Later This Year – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The United States, Japan, and the Philippines are planning to launch joint naval patrols in the South China Sea later this year amid raised tensions with China, Politico reported on Friday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

The leaders of the three countries are expected to unveil their joint naval maneuver plans during a first-ever trilateral summit on April 11, the report said.

Trilateral maritime patrols will mark a new milestone in the development of the tense situation in the South China Sea, as Japan will take part in them for the first time. The United States and the Philippines have previously conducted joint patrols in the region on several occasions, according to the report.

At the summit, President Joe Biden is also expected to announce the US' readiness to "seriously consider" including Japan as a technological partner of the AUKUS partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Last week, the Philippine armed forces said the China Coast Guard had used water cannons against a Philippine supply vessel in the South China Sea. On Sunday, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Wu Qian called on Manila to stop violations and provocations near the Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ren'ai Jiao. He said the incident was caused "exclusively by Philippine provocation," while Chinese actions were "rational, legal and professional."

The territorial affiliation of some islands and reefs in the South China Sea, including the Philippine-controlled Second Thomas Shoal, has been the subject of disputes between China, the Philippines, and several other Asia-Pacific countries for decades.

In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague adjudicating the Philippines' case against China ruled in favor of the former. Beijing has refused to recognize or accept the ruling.

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US Navy Over-Executed Ukraine Funding by $398.8Mln - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The US Navy over-executed supplemental funding for Ukraine by $398.9 million in 2022, the US Defense Department's Office of Inspector General (DoD IG) said in a statement.

On Thursday, Inspector General Robert Storch released a management advisory on the Navy's

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execution of supplemental funding to aid Ukraine, the statement said. An audit of the Defense Department's execution of the funding found internal control deficiencies that resulted in the Navy over-executing funds, the statement said.

"The advisory found that the Navy over-executed its Ukraine funding three times during Fiscal Year 2022 for a total over-execution of $398.9 million. While the Navy had funds available to reverse the over-execution on those occasions, such funds may not be available in the future, which could lead to a potential Antideficiency Act violation," the statement said.

The DoD IG recommended that the Navy develop and implement internal controls to prevent over-execution of supplemental funds, take corrective actions to address the FY2022 over-execution and update procedure documentation to address specific controls put in place, the statement said.

The Navy has long-term plans to address the problem but should take prompt action to implement controls to avoid future over-execution of funds, the statement said.

The DoD IG will continue to monitor the Navy's progress toward implementation of the recommendations, the statement said.

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Sliding Oil Output Helped Crude Prices Make Double-Digit Gains in Q1, US Data Shows

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Sliding oil production in the United States and OPEC+ countries resulted in tighter global supplies in the first quarter, helping crude prices to make double-digit gains, US energy data released on Friday showed.

Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, ended January-March trading at $87.48 per barrel, up 13%.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, finished the quarter at $83.17, up 16%.

The rally came as US crude production fell to 12.5 million barrels per day in January, a 6% decrease from December, data from the Energy Information Administration showed.

Output in Texas, the top US oil-producing state, was down 5% from the previous month while volumes in North Dakota, another major oil-drilling area, were off 13%, the data showed.

Oil producers in both the United States and OPEC+ seem determined to keep the market in a supply deficit this year versus the highs of 2022 and 2023, analysts said.

OPEC+ groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 other oil producing nations steered by Russia. The alliance intends to maintain supply cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day until the end of June.

US crude production averaged 12.9 million barrels per day in 2023, breaking the previous daily record of 12.3 million, set in 2019. Average monthly US production also established a record high in December at more than 13.3 million barrels a day.

A portion of the US output decline in January was due to cold weather freeze-offs "but it also highlights producer discipline," analyst Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum.

While production could rebound in February, "there is tentative evidence that the breakneck

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pace of 2022-23 production growth is done," Button added.

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US Approves Transfer of Bombs, Fighter Jets to Israel Amid Rafah Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration approved the transfer of billions of dollars of military equipment to Israel, amid concerns about a potential Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip city of Rafah, The Washington Post reported on Friday.

The United States will provide Israel with more than 1,800 MK84 2,000-pound bombs and 500 MK82 500-pound bombs, the report said, citing State Department and Pentagon officials.

The MK84 bombs have been connected to mass-casualty incidents during Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, the report said.

The US will also send 25 F-35A fighter jets and engines, the report said.

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Austin, Umerov Discuss 'Urgent Need' for Congress to Pass Ukraine Aid Package - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Ukrainian counterpart Rustem Umerov discussed Kiev's battlefield requirements and the "urgent need" for Congress to pass the national security supplemental bill, Pentagon Press Secretary Patrick Ryder said on Friday.

The US Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide additional funding for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. While the Senate approved a $95 billion version of the bill last month, House Speaker Mike Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Umerov discussed Ukraine's requirements for additional artillery, air defense, and other capabilities and the urgent need for the National Security Supplemental to enable Ukraine's continued fight against Russian aggression," Ryder said in a statement.

The two also discussed recent battlefield developments and the consequences of Russian missile strikes on "Ukraine's cities and critical infrastructure," the statement said.

Air raid alerts went off overnight across Ukraine. Ukrainian media reported explosions in the Dnipropetrovsk, Khmelnytskyi, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Cherkasy regions. Ukrainian Energy Minister German Galushchenko reported a massive new attack on the country's energy facilities, while Ukrenergo, the national power grid operator, said that thermal and hydroelectric power plants in central and western Ukraine were damaged.

Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian armed forces started striking Ukrainian infrastructure on October 10, 2022, two days after a bombing attack against the Crimean bridge claimed by Ukraine's domestic intelligence agency. The strikes

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target energy, defense, military administration and communications facilities across the country. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russian troops in the battles with the Ukrainian armed forces were not targeting residential housing or social infrastructure.

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Israeli Defense Minister Proposes Multi-National Security Force for Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant suggested forming a multi-national military unit with Arab troops to bolster Gaza's law and order and ensure safe humanitarian aid delivery, Axios reported on Friday, citing two senior Israeli officials.

According to the report, Gallant requested US political and material support for the initiative during his meetings with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Washington this week.

Gallant did not ask for US troops to take part in the force, the report said.

The proposal would see an Arab force secure a US-built temporary pier off Gaza's coast and escort humanitarian convoys during a limited transition period, ensuring aid delivery without looting or Hamas control, the report said.

"Such a move will build a governing body in the enclave that is not Hamas and will address Israel's growing problem with the US when it comes to the humanitarian situation in Gaza," a senior Israeli official said, as quoted by Axios.

On Thursday, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) said in a press release that Israel must ensure the unhindered access of humanitarian aid and all necessary services to the Gaza Strip.

Earlier this week, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for Ramadan. The motion was sponsored by the 10 non-permanent members of the UNSC. Fourteen countries voted in favor, while the United States abstained.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. 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 32,400 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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Biden Campaign Launches Ads Targeting Support From Haley Supporters - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's presidential campaign launched an advertisement across digital platforms seeking support from supporters of Nikki

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Haley, who dropped her bid for the Republican nomination earlier this month, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

The report, citing Biden campaign officials, said the campaign is spending $1 million to run the advertisement across different digital platforms for three weeks in battleground states.

The advertisement focuses on recent remarks made by former President Donald Trump claiming he does not need Haley's supporters to win the election.

Trump and Biden have already garnered enough delegates in their respective primaries to secure their nominations later this year.

According to RealClearPolitics, as of Friday afternoon, Trump leads Biden in the seven battleground states by 3.2 points, but holds a 1-point lead nationally.

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Biden Says Will Travel to Baltimore Next Week in Wake of Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he will travel to Baltimore next week in the wake of the recent bridge collapse.

"He'll visit Baltimore 'next week' with the governor," the White House press pool said.

The Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, Maryland, collapsed early Tuesday after it was struck by a shipping vessel. Six construction workers who were on the bridge at the time of its collapse are presumed dead.

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Blinken Says US to Impose New Visa Restrictions on Hong Kong Officials Over Security Law

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose new visa restrictions on multiple Hong Kong officials over legislation it views as repressive, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

Earlier this month, the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region adopted the city's own national security bill, which adds punitive measures for a number of crimes that were missing in the 2020 legislation.

"The Department of State is announcing that it is taking steps to impose new visa restrictions on multiple Hong Kong officials responsible for the intensifying crackdown on rights and freedoms," Blinken said in a press release.

Blinken added that the Biden administration is committed to continuing to work with Congress and the international community to oppose legislation it considers repressive, such as the national security law.

In the summer of 2019, large-scale riots broke out in Hong Kong over the controversial extradition bill and lasted for over six months. In response, the Chinese authorities passed the

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Hong Kong national security law to prevent further unrest. The ban went into effect on June 30, 2020.

Hong Kong was returned to China by the United Kingdom in 1997 and has since been enjoying wider autonomy than the rest of the Chinese regions. China's central government adheres to the principle of "one country, two systems" in governing Hong Kong. According to a joint declaration by China and the UK, Hong Kong will retain broad autonomy until 2047.

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Radio Free Asia Shuts Hong Kong Bureau Amid Article 23 Safety Fears - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The US-funded Radio Free Asia (RFA) has closed its Hong Kong bureau and removed full-time staff due to safety concerns following the enactment of a new national security law, its CEO and president Bay Fang said in a statement on Friday.

"Concerns about the safety of RFA staff and reporters in Hong Kong have led us to restructure our on-the-ground operations there. While RFA will retain its official media registration, at this time we no longer have full-time personnel in Hong Kong and have closed our physical bureau. Actions by Hong Kong authorities, including referring to RFA as a 'foreign force,' raise serious questions about our ability to operate in safety with the enactment of Article 23," the statement said.

RFA has operated in Hong Kong since 1996, and it remains one of the last organizations reporting in Cantonese and Mandarin, the statement said.

The new security law, known as Article 23, entered into force on March 23 and imposes a lifetime sentence as the toughest penalty for crimes such as treason, fomenting a coup and inciting the Chinese military to revolt.

Espionage is punishable by 20 years in prison, stealing state secrets carries a sentence of 3 to 10 years, and up to 14 years can be imposed for participating in the activities of banned organizations, publicly demonstrating intent to commit treason, and covering up treason committed by third parties.

Participation in foreign intelligence organizations and receiving profits from them can also be punished by up to 14 years in prison, according to the document, as published in the Hong Kong government gazette.

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ULA Again Delays Last Launch of Delta IV Heavy Rocket - President

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - United Launch Alliance (ULA) is further delaying the launch of its Delta IV Heavy rocket that was rescheduled for a launch on Friday afternoon, company president Tory Bruno said on Friday.

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"Correct," Bruno said when asked on X if there would be no launch on Friday.

The launch was initially scheduled for Thursday afternoon but called off due to an issue with a liquid pump on the gaseous nitrogen pipeline which provides pneumatic pressure to the rocket, according to ULA.

ULA will retire its Delta rocket program after this mission and replace it with its new Vulcan rocket for future launches.

The Delta IV Heavy rocket is set to launch from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in the state of Florida carrying a US satellite that will service the US National Reconnaissance Office and support the US Space Force's Space Systems Command, according to ULA.

The satellite, ULA added, is designed to provide intelligence data to US senior policy makers, the US Intelligence Community and Department of Defense.

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No Recession Threat, But Not Time Yet to Cut Rates - Powell

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - There is no real threat of a recession in the United States and inflation is not far from the Federal Reserve's target goal but the central bank still needs to see more price moderation before embarking on interest rate cuts, Chairman Jerome Powell said Friday.

An inflation gauge closely watched by the Fed showed US price growth steadying in the mid-2% per annum territory in February, a development Powell called "pretty much in line with our expectations."

"I don't think it is likely for us to begin to reduce interest rates until the committee is confident inflation is moving down to 2% on a sustained basis," Powell, referring to the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, said in comments at a banking forum.

The economy is also sheltered and growing, the Fed chair added.

"The possibility of a recession is not elevated now," he said. "But we are ready for the economy to perform in unexpected ways. We don't need to be in a hurry to cut. Reducing rates too soon would be very disruptive. We want to be more confident before we take that step."

The Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, often known simply as the PCE, grew 2.5% year-on-year last month, data from the Commerce Department showed.

Another widely-watched inflation gauge called the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.2% in the year to February.

Most analysts remember the two inflation indexes being at a four-decade high less than two years ago. A pandemic-induced supply chain breakdown, coupled with a business slowdown, drove the PCE up as much as 7% per annum and the CPI 9.1% a year, in June 2022.

Responding to that runaway inflation, the Fed hiked rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, bringing them to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% — versus the zero to 0.25% range observed soon after the start of the pandemic.

That 5.25% to 5.5% range has not been changed since July of last year.

Now, policy-makers at the central bank see a 75-basis point rate cut each for 2024 and 2025,

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according to the Fed's Summary of Economic Projections released earlier this month.

The central bank's next decision on rates is on May 2.

The Fed ultimately wants to see inflation slow to at least 2% per annum to keep rates low.

"If our base case doesn't happen, we would hold rates where they are for longer," Powell said at Friday's forum. "We've been saying we expect inflation to move to 2% on a sometimes bumpy path. We're going to have to let the data tell us if it's a bump; we don't know."

The Fed chair, however, said there was one thing that could influence the outcome on rates even faster than inflation: Jobs.

"If we were to see unexpected weakness in the labor market, that could draw a policy response," he said, referring to quicker rate cuts.

Powell noted earlier this month that US wage increases were coming down to levels desired by the Fed and would likely sustain their decline. "That is what we want," he said.

While policy-makers over the world typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament as it is also tasked with ensuring inflation that is sustainable for Americans.

Unemployment in the United States remained near 50-year lows in February despite the jobless rate rising to 3.9% from January's 3.7%.

For more than a year now, the country has experienced so-called maximum employment — a Fed term that denotes a jobless rate of 4% or lower.

The greatest job security since the 1970s, coupled with wage growth, have cushioned many Americans from current price pressures and encouraged them to continue spending.

This has produced contrasting results for the Fed, which has seen glorious success in achieving maximum employment and a less desirable outcome with reducing inflation.

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US Senators Urge Immigration Authorities to Stop Using Solitary Confinement - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - A group of US Senators sent a letter on Friday to acting Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) director Patrick Lechleitner, expressing concerns about the agency's use of solitary confinement and urging an end to the practice.

"We are deeply concerned with findings that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement continues to violate its own policies related to solitary confinement," the letter said. "The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) must end the misuse of solitary confinement in immigration detention, particularly for individuals with mental health or chronic medical conditions, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other vulnerable populations."

The number of people placed in solitary confinement by ICE rose by 61% from 2022 to 2023, the letter said. ICE placed people in solitary confinement more than 14,000 times between 2018 and 2023, the letter said.

People placed in solitary confinement have endured additional punishments, including denial of access to legal counsel, reduced meal portion sizes and poor sleeping conditions, the letter said.

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Solitary confinement can result in severe health impacts, including permanent brain damage and heart palpitations, the letter said. Moreover, solitary confinement can act as a trigger for self-harm, the letter said.

DHS should establish alternatives to solitary confinement as a form of discipline and phase out its use, the letter said.

ICE's data shows the agency's use of solitary confinement practices to constitute a "clear violation" of international norms, the letter said. The UN's Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners labels solitary confinement of more than 15 days as a form of torture and inhumane treatment.

However, approximately half of people placed in solitary confinement by ICE remain there for more than 15 days, with an average stay length of 27 days, the letter said. ICE placed nearly 700 people in solitary confinement for more than 90 days and some 40 individuals for more than one year, the letter said.

The letter requests that ICE provide information on steps it intends to take to phase out the use of solitary confinement and data on the agency's use of solitary confinement in recent years.

The letter was signed by US senators including Edward Markey, Elizabeth Warren, Richard Durbin and Bernard Sanders.

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Biden Says World Leaders 'Scared to Death' Trump Might Win Again in 2024 Election

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said that almost all world leaders ask him to not let Donald Trump win in the 2024 election, adding that they are allegedly "scared to death" of the prospect he might be victorious again, according to remarks distributed by the White House press pool on Friday.

During a campaign event on Friday, Biden said that "almost every one of the world leaders" tells him "You can't let him [Trump] win… my democracy is at stake," a pool reporter cited the US president as saying.

"I'm not so special, but I'm not Trump… They're scared to death he's going to win again," the pool report quoted Biden as saying.

Democrat Biden and his Republican predecessor Trump are facing a rematch in the November presidential election after a 2020 outcome that favored Biden.

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US Trade Report Accuses China of Pursuing Non-Market Approach to Benefit Its Companies

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said Friday that China is pursuing a non-market approach to the economy and trade to provide an

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"unfair" competitive edge to its companies.

"The PRC's [People's Republic of China] state-led, non-market approach to the economy and trade continues to shape the industrial policies that the PRC pursues, and provide unfair competitive advantages to PRC companies, " the the USTR's office said in the 2024 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers.

Chinese companies receive massive financial support from the government as well as regulatory and other preferences, the report said.

Beijing is also using formal and informal policies and practices that seek to disadvantage foreign competitors, the report added.

Such practices are heavily distorting and disrupting markets, leading to "severe and persistent excess capacity" in the steel, aluminum, and solar industries, among others, the USTR's office said.

"The PRC is focused on numerous industries in advanced manufacturing, high technology, and other key economic sectors, where the PRC is setting and pursuing production and market share targets that can only be achieved through non-market means," the report said.

The USTR intends to use all available domestic trade tools to protect the competitiveness of US workers and businesses. The US will also continue to work with partners worldwide to address China's policies, it added.

The United States regularly accuses China of implementing non-market policies. Beijing maintains that it "firmly supports" the multilateral trading system and points to the US practice of "bullying" and imposing sanctions to suppress other countries' companies.

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FBI Alleges Libertarian Party Social Media Asset Compromised by Foreign Government - Chair

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The FBI alleges that one of the US Libertarian Party's social media assets was compromised by a hostile foreign government, party chair Angela McArdle said on Friday.

"Yesterday, the Libertarian Party was contacted by an FBI field agent, alleging one of our social media assets had been compromised by a 'hostile foreign government.' She refused to disclose how the FBI came by this information, who the threat was, or what the threat was," McArdle said in a statement via social media platform X.

The Libertarian Party's information technology department and social media team have not yet uncovered any evidence of a breach, the statement said.

The party does not trust the FBI, the statement said. The Biden administration has been targeting dissenting voices ahead of the 2024 US general election, the statement said.

The greatest threat to freedom in the United States is not a foreign government, but rather, the US government, the statement said. The Biden administration has engaged in an unprecedented amount of censorship, coercion and "Orwellian" control tactics, the statement said.

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GOP Leaders Mull Using REPO Act to Sell Ukraine Aid Package to Conservatives – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Republican leaders are considering using the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, also known as REPO, as a way to persuade conservatives in the House to support a new aid package for Ukraine, Punchbowl News reported on Friday.

In January, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced REPO, a bill that would authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Kiev. Sen. Rand Paul was the only one who opposed the bill in the committee, saying that it would be an "act of economic war" against Russia.

The authors of the REPO bill believe that their legislation will serve as a tool to lessen the financial burden on US taxpayers amid a record-high national debt and high inflation and will also increase the chances of passing the multi-billion supplemental aid package for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, the report said.

"We believe that it [REPO] would probably get us some more votes [in the House]," co-author of the bill Sen. Jim Risch was quoted as saying.

In February, the Senate passed a $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes some $60 billion for Ukraine, but it is currently stuck in the House as Republicans look into other options for providing aid to Ukraine while also addressing the crisis on the US southern border. House Speaker Johnson so far has rejected calls from Democrats and President Joe Biden to put the supplemental bill to a vote.

Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its assets would violate international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry has condemned the freezing of Russian assets as outright theft.

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Russian Import Substitution Policies Increase, Ensure Technological Sovereignty – USTR

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – Russia has sought to ensure its technological sovereignty in recent years by implementing extensive import substitution policies resulting in a decrease in US exports to the country, the office of the US Trade Representative said in its new Trade Estimate Report on Friday.

“Russia’s extensive import substitution policies posed a significant barrier to a wide variety of U.S. exports, even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a precipitous drop in trade. These policies … have increased in prominence in the past few years and transformed into a set of policy initiatives to ensure Russia’s technological sovereignty by reducing its dependence on foreign technologies,” the report said.

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The policies have been implemented in a host of sectors of the Russian economy, including agriculture, transport vehicles, telecommunications, consumer goods, textiles, optical fiber, defense, banking, oil and gas, solar and wind energy, software, aircraft manufacturing, and, medical devices, the report added.

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US Crude Oil Production Fell by 6% to 12.5Mln Barrels Per Day in January - EIA

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US crude oil production fell to 12.5 million barrels per day in January, a 6% decrease from December, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Friday.

EIA data also shows that crude oil production in the top US oil-producing state of Texas fell to 5.3 million barrels per day in January, a 5% drop compared to December.

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US-Russia Trade Plummets to $5.2Bln in 2023 From $38.2Bln in 2013 - USTR's Office

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US-Russian trade in goods plummeted from $38.2 billion in 2013 to $5.2 billion in 2023, according to the United States' 2024 National Trade Estimate Report released on Friday.

"Bilateral trade in goods has fallen from $38.2 billion in 2013 to $5.2 billion in 2023. While some of the decline in trade is undoubtedly due to the overall decline in global trade because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decline also reflects the geopolitical tensions and Russia's increasingly inward-looking industrial and trade policies, as well as the impact of US sanctions and export controls applied to Russia," the Office of the United States Trade Representative said in the report.

The report attributed the decline in trade to the overall decline in global trade because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the geopolitical tensions and Russia’s "increasingly inward-looking industrial and trade policies," as well as the impact of US sanctions and export controls applied to Russia.

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US Senators Urge Biden Administration Not to Reclassify Potatoes as Grain - Letter

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WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US senators sent a letter this week to Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack and Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, urging the Biden administration officials not to reclassify potatoes as a grain instead of a vegetable.

The lawmakers drafted the letter, dated March 26, following reports that the Biden administration is considering listing potatoes as a grain in its Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs).

"The scientific justification behind the assertion that potatoes are not vegetables is not strong, and there are documented nutritional benefits of potatoes. Therefore, we strongly oppose any reclassification of potatoes to the grain category under the DGAs," the letter said.

Changing potatoes' classification under the DGAs would confuse customers, retailers, restaurant operators, growers and other parts of the supply chain, the letter said. Reclassifying potatoes as a grain could also impact school food programs, which already struggle to meet vegetable consumption recommendations, the letter said.

There is "no debate" about the physical characteristics of the potato and its horticultural scientific classification, the letter said.

The letter requests an immediate update on the issue from the Biden administration. The letter is signed by US senators including Mike Crapo, James Risch, Susan Collins, Steve Daines, Michael Bennet and Ron Wyden.

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Представители Русского собора в Канаде обратились в полицию из-за угроз – архиепископ

ВАШИНГТОН, 29 мар - РИА Новости, Дмитрий Злодорев. Представители Свято-Николаевского православного собора в Монреале были вынуждены обратиться в местную полицию после получения новых угроз от человека, который, предположительно, также распространял их два года назад, сообщил РИА Новости архиепископ Монреальский и Канадский Гавриил.

"Поступило несколько угроз в адрес нашего кафедрального собора в Монреале. Пришлось опять обратиться в полицию", - сказал архиепископ Гавриил.

Он напомнил, что схожие угрозы в адрес собора уже поступали около двух лет назад, и тогда полиции удалось выследить злоумышленника.

"По-видимому он беснуется, что в свое время полиция смогла проследить, откуда он звонит и пишет, и в последствии нашла и предупредила его", - добавил владыка.

Архиепископ также отметил, что получил угрозы и лично в свой адрес. По его словам, духовенство надеется обсудить ситуацию с полицией на следующей неделе.

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US Likely to Become Communist Country, Face Economic Collapse in Future - Congressman

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is likely to transform into a centrally controlled communist country or face economic collapse in the future, US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Friday.

"There are 3 places we end up: 1) Steer our government away from economic collapse. 2) Economic collapse and then: a. renaissance, b. totalitarianism, or c. national divorce. 3) Slow devolution into Chinese style communism and central control," Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

A slow devolution into communism is the likeliest and most terrifying possibility, Massie said. Rapid devolution through an economic crash is second most likely, Massie said.

It is unlikely the US can "restore" itself without an economic crash, Massie said. However, people who value liberty can preserve it by using technology to "outrun" the government, Massie said.

Technology enables privacy, informational access, decentralized energy and sound money, Massie said, adding that the government fears and seeks to control such technology.

Massie is known for wearing a digital badge that displays the US national debt, the enormity of which the congressman criticizes. The US national debt is approximately $34.57 trillion, according to US Treasury Department data.

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Russian Cathedral in Canada Contacts Police Over Recurring Threats – Archbishop

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The St-Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Montreal has contacted police after receiving increasing threats since the start of Great Lent from an unknown individual believed to have made similar threats against the church about two years ago, Archbishop Gabriel of Montreal and Canada told Sputnik.

"There have been several threats against our Cathedral in Montreal. We had to contact the police again," Gabriel said.

The archbishop recalled that the culprit issued threats against the church about two years ago that enabled the police to trace his location and warn him.

"Apparently, he is furious that the police were able to trace where he was calling and writing from and subsequently found and warned him," he said.

Gabriel said that he has also received personal threats. The clergy hopes to meet with police next week to discuss the situation, he added.

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