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4/8/24 Monday

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Russia Urges Calm as Mexico, Ecuador Feud over Embassy Raid

Mexico granted former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas political asylum on April 5, 2024, following accusations he committed bribery while in office. In turn, Ecuador called Mexico's decision illegal and demanded his return, eventually going on to break with international protocol by storming Mexico's embassy in Quito.

The raid on Mexico's embassy and detention of former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas in Quito late Friday has provoked a war of words between two Latin American countries, one analyst has noted.

Late Friday, the Ecuadorian government stormed the Mexican embassy to detain former Vice President Jorge Glas who had been sheltering in the diplomatic mission since December. Mexico announced Monday it would file a case against Ecuador at the International Court of Justice over the incident. The country also suspended diplomatic relations with Quito, claiming Mexican diplomats had sustained injuries as a result of the raid.

Esteban Carrillo, a Beirut-based Ecuadorian journalist and editor for The Cradle, joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday to discuss what occurred in Quito and highlight Ecuador's political trajectory in recent years.

"This was the former Vice President Jorge Glas, who stayed as the vice president of... [former Ecuadorian President] Lenín Moreno, and it was Moreno that removed all of his functions," Carrillo recalled.

The Beirut-based journalist explained that a charge of "psychic influence" was based on Glas' perceived ability to influence cabinet ministers to commit acts of corruption, otherwise known as "influence peddling." The same charge was lodged against former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, under whom Moreno served as vice president.

Glas had served five years in prison for bribery and criminal conspiracy before being released in late 2022. In December 2023 he was sentenced to six more years in prison in a corruption case involving the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, which is now known as Novonor. Glas took refuge in the embassy that same month before an official warrant for his arrest was issued.

"Mexico determined that he [Glas] was being politically persecuted and that this was a case of trumped up charges," argued Carrillo. Ecuador, meanwhile, has argued that Glas' detention was necessary to prevent his flight from Ecuador.

Russia's foreign ministry issued a statement urging calm as relations between Mexico and Ecuador have deteriorated dramatically. The country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized Moscow's commitment to the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which guarantees immunity of diplomatic missions from search, requisition, seizure and enforcement actions.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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The ministry "expressed the hope that Latin American friends will avoid actions that could bring discord to traditionally non-conflict relations of good-neighborliness and partnership, and will find a mutually acceptable way out of the current situation."

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This Week in Multipolarity: BRICS 'Eclipsing G7' and Slovakia's Maverick President

Amid accusations made by the NATO secretary general, Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun stated that the US was targeting Russia and China while “seeking to retain its hegemony around the globe."

Slovak parliamentary speaker Peter Pellegrini, who shares prime minister Robert Fico’s staunch opposition to continued arms supplies to Ukraine, won the second round of Slovakia’s presidential election Saturday. Observers say Pellegrini's success proves his party's left-wing opposition to the Russo-Ukraine war is a winning formula.

Also this weekend, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned that an “authoritarian” alliance of several defiant countries is getting stronger, RT reported. The secretary general identified Russia, China, Iran and North Korea as powers that are becoming “more aligned” and posing a growing threat to the West.

American author and historian Dr. Gerald Horne, who holds the John G. and Rebecca Moores chair of History and African-American studies at the University of Houston, broke down these developments on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program Monday. When asked by Sputnik’s Wilmer Leon if Sunday’s report may give a “broader mindset” in Europe, Horne said, “most definitely”.

“The vote in Slovakia is an indication of the fact that the bloc led by Beijing and Moscow, including the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa – is eclipsing the G7. The Group of Seven led by the US, the Western European nations and Japan. The fact is that the former can offer better deals and better terms than the latter,” Horne explained.

“Later this week there will be a war-making summit between the Japanese Prime Minister, the Filipino president, Mr. Marcos, and, of course, Mr. Biden, taking place in the Oval Office. This inevitably will end in tears, but it will go forward nonetheless,” Horne added.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will hold a summit with US President Joe Biden in Washington, DC Wednesday, where Philippine leaders will also be present. The reported goal of the meeting is to strengthen the alliance between the three states in response to China’s growing influence.

“In other words, they have their fingers in so many different pies that it leads to an outflow of capital and inability to focus and concentrate. And, certainly, you see that with regard to the US with regard to this question of imperial overstretch,” he added, referencing a text by a Yale scholar suggesting that great power oftentimes “run aground” because of imperial overstretch.

“The recent remarks coming out of the NATO leadership suggest that — despite its 75th anniversary as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — it's increasingly focused on the People's Republic of China, which is nowhere near the North Atlantic, because it has

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

constructed this story that behind Russia, behind Iran, behind North Korea is the newest iteration of the evil empire — the People's Republic of China," Horne said.
"But, once again, this focus on China is a nonstarter. Like so many other elements of the US strategy, it will end in tears."
"With regard to NATO, which I'm sure the Slovakian leadership picked up on... NATO is splitting. It's beset by fissures and divisions, particularly at the top between France and Germany, with Germany being more dovish than the hawkishness of France. And this does not bode well for the future of NATO, nor does it bode well for the future of the EU," Horne continued.
"There's a lot of blame to go around with regard to how we have reached the precipice of World War III," he said.
Leon then noted a comment that Stoltenberg mad during an interview Sunday in which the secretary general said China is "propping up the Russian war economy, delivering key parts for the defense industry, and in return, Moscow is mortgaging its future to Beijing."
"Mr. Stoltenberg recognizes that the only way NATO might be able to escape a certain defeat is by driving a stake into the heart of the Russian-Chinese relationship," Horne responded. "But, of course, he needn't look further than the EU to see how the mighty can fall. And that, I'm afraid to say, is a descriptor for his own NATO."

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China Calmly Responds to US Lecturing on Trade During Treasury Secretary's Visit

Yellen's visit to China marks the first high-profile meeting between the two nations since US President Joe Biden hosted Chinese leader Xi Jinping in November. Relations between China and the US remain strained on issues such as trade, Taiwan and the South China Sea, as well as Beijing's growing relationship with Moscow.
According to a recent report from RT, Beijing urged the White House not to politicize bilateral trade and to abide by "basic norms" of the market economy.
The report follows US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's visit to China Sunday. Both Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Yellen said relations between the US and China are "stabilizing" but cautioned that a number of issues remain unresolved.
"It is hoped that the US will abide by the basic norms of market economy including fair competition and open cooperation, refrain from turning economic and trade issues into political or security issues, and view the issue of production capacity objectively and dialectically from a market-oriented and global perspective," the premier told Yellen during the meeting.
Radhika Desai spoke with Sputnik's The Critical Hour Monday about the economic relationship between China and the US. Desai is an author and professor at the Department of Political Studies and director of the Geopolitical Economy Research Group at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.
"The Chinese are pointing out that after decades of banging on about the virtues of the free market and globalization, the US, thanks to its own internal problems, is now being forced to talk

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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about protection and tariffs and industrial policy and subsidies and all those things which it has in the past asked other countries not to do," Desai said in response to the meeting.

"And China is also absolutely right that what the US is doing is turning economic and trade issues into political and security issues," she continued. "China is asking the US to look at the issue of productive capacity objectively and dialectically. Basically, they're asking the US officials to take, shall we say, a Marxist view of these things, because at the end of the day, dialectics is all about Marxism."

"But I think underlying this, there is another level which is entirely serious," the author said. "And this has to do with the fact that what China means by free trade and even globalization is something different from what the US and most of the West mean by it."

"When we talk about free trade and globalization in Western countries, we basically talk about essentially rolling back the state and allowing the free play of market forces both within the country and internationally," she added. "Whereas historically, China has taken an interpretation of all of these terms, which is essentially modified by a consideration or with an eye to the development needs of third world countries."

"So, yes, one should have free trade, but third world countries are allowed to pursue industrial policy. They are allowed to develop their industries because, you know, if you look at the history of industrialization, no country has industrialized without a certain degree of state involvement and certainly very high degree of state involvement, a certain degree of protection, a certain degree of industrial policy, a certain degree of subsidies, you name it. The whole slew of measures were used by the US, Germany, Japan in its day, even by the UK, in order to industrialize."

"All China is doing is saying, 'we should be allowed to do this, otherwise it's actually not a level playing field.'"

Sputnik's Garland Nixon addressed the irony of Yellen's visit to China, as the US is lecturing a nation experiencing economic success on the subject.

"The last couple of days have particularly manifested the inner tension of US policy towards China," Desai suggested. "The US ruling classes and therefore the US government are deeply split about China. On the one hand, after decades of relying on China to essentially produce things for them, the US corporations need to have an ongoing relationship with China."

"On the other hand, other US corporations were threatened by China, for example, Google and Meta and so on," she added. "They want the US to, essentially, wage war against China, hybrid war, military war, everything war. And, of course, the US military industrial complex has its own reasons to do that. So, essentially, the US state is being pulled and pushed in every kind of direction vis-a-vis China and it can't really produce a coherent policy."

"But, quite frankly," Desai continued, "the Chinese have never shut the diplomatic doors. They will always keep it open. They will say 'yes, Madam Yellen, if you want to talk, we will talk some more.' So Yellen is returning with a promise to talk, but that promise to talk, she didn't have to go to Beijing to elicit it."

Leon then asked the professor for comment on the upcoming US presidential election as it related to the country's economic ties with China. Desai suggests that both Republicans and Democrats use China as a scapegoat for the economic hardships their policies have created.

"What we are looking at is a situation in which ordinary people are suffering because of the policies pursued by the US administration, policies that were one-sided [and] in favor of US

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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corporations, so much so that they coddle US corporations and US corporations are not even required to be efficient or competitive," she explained.
"So, essentially, they are accorded to the extent that they have become royalty corporations, their income is no longer earned or most of it is not earned, in any reasonable understanding of the term. So these policies are leading to the repeat suffering of the people."
"But precisely because there is a bipartisan agreement on these policies, neither party is going to talk about what's wrong with them. And that is why China, pointing to China as a source of the misery of the ordinary people has also become a cross-party consensus," said Desai.
"That's why Biden continued Trump's policies and Trump won the election by scapegoating China. And Biden continued his policies. I don't think we're going to see anything different at this point."

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US 'Deep State' Will Call Shots in Ukraine, Not Trump or Biden

One observer warns of the power of the United States' permanent security bureaucracy, which he claims will dictate the country's stance toward Russia regardless of who is elected in November.
Former US President Donald Trump has startled European leaders in recent weeks with plans to interfere in the functioning of NATO and reorient US foreign policy if reelected this November. The brash real estate magnate frequently threatens Western allies with cuts to US funding for the decades-old alliance and has recently touted a proposal he claims would rapidly bring the war in the Donbass to an end.
Both ideas have proven distinctly unappetizing to Europe's political elite, who reject any concession of territory to Russia regardless of the wishes of the region's inhabitants.
The threat of Trump's restoration to power has prompted moves to provide Ukraine with a multi-year fund for President Volodymyr Zelensky to continue hostilities whether his country is supported by the United States or not. But the ultimate decision over whether American aid will continue to flow to the embattled leader may not lie with the US president at all.
That's according to international relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda, who made the provocative comment on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday.
"They're playing a completely different information warfare game than the Kiev regime," noted the expert, responding to Russia's successes on the battlefield in recent days. "The Kiev regime in its eight-month hyped runup to their badly failed NATO proxy offensive in the south – where they were mauled and defeated by Russian forces – They were running… movie-quality trailers, hyping up their offensive."
"And it was on the front page of every major publication and news hour in the West."
Russia, meanwhile, appears to subscribe to the strategic patience embodied by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's mantra: "hide your strength, bide your time."
"Russia is playing a game of operational silence," Sleboda claimed. "While the Avdeyevka siege was going on, the Russian Ministry of Defense never even said the name Avdeyevka. It was

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completely left out of reports. So obviously one of the reasons [for Russia's success] is operational security. They're not giving any information extra to the West or the Kiev regime forces."

"Another thing is there continue to be rumors and there's no question that there's large numbers of Russian troops that have signed up as volunteers, like more than 400,000 now," he added.

A surge of patriotic fervor has spurred thousands of Russian citizens towards military recruitment centers – especially after last month's terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue, for which Russians widely assign blame to Ukraine. Kiev, meanwhile, has relied on forcible conscriptions to fill the ranks of its depleted military as draft dodging remains a major problem for the country.

Ukraine's chronic struggles may lead some observers to conclude the country should seek negotiations with Moscow, something Russian President Vladimir Putin has consistently urged. But Sleboda claims forces behind the scenes will insist on continuing to use the country as a battering ram against Russia.

"All this stuff is not going to be acceptable to the West," said Sleboda, insisting Russia's claims to Kherson and Zaporozhye as well as Crimea and the Donbass will continue to generate opposition. "They can't be seen as losing to Russia here. So I think they'll fight this to the bitter end."

"The Russian government doesn't believe that a Trump foreign policy will be, or can be any different, in essence, than a Biden foreign policy because the US president doesn't actually really make those decisions," he claimed. "The blob – the deep state, the permanent security bureaucracy – does, whatever you want to call them."

Observers have long warned of a "permanent war state" within the US government that continuously seeks global conflict. Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously alerted Americans to a growing "military-industrial complex" during his farewell address, while members of former President Barack Obama's administration often referred to the country's hawkish foreign policy establishment as "the blob."

"Deep state" became a popular term for these interests during the Trump years, but critics of US foreign policy have consistently denounced the power and influence of this increasingly unaccountable state within a state.

"He [former US President Donald Trump] changed his rhetoric completely and subjected himself to the terms of the deep American state, or the deep American regime," concluded Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after Trump launched a massive missile attack on the country.

Regime change in Syria has been a consistent priority of Western intelligence after the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) inaugurated its secretive billion-dollar Timber Sycamore operation in 2012. Observers such as Canadian journalist Aaron Mate reacted with suspicion after an alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria seemed tailor-made to pull the United States into armed conflict there – Obama previously claimed such an attack would constitute a "red line."

Leaks from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) eventually proved Mate's skepticism to be correct after it was revealed doubts about Assad's culpability were airbrushed from the agency's reports. For many, the revelation the attack was possibly staged cemented the impression of an out of control bureaucracy's ruthlessness in achieving its goals.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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“I think that they [Russia] definitely want to remove the regime in Kiev,” speculated Sleboda. “And they're definitely considering absorbing all of Ukraine – possibly excluding West Ukraine – but definitely all the rest so that the West can't weaponize it against Russia any longer because they've promised to.”

“They say as soon as the conflict ends we'll pump it full of weapons and join it into NATO and the EU, and Russia's like, 'well, then the conflict doesn't end.'”

Recent reporting featuring CIA operatives openly boasting about the agency’s expansive influence in Ukraine has led even Western observers to conclude the country is now a wholly-owned subsidiary of US intelligence.

“It turns out the 'Deep State' is actually kind of awesome,” declared The New York Times recently amidst evidence of the US security bureaucracy’s extensive string-pulling in foreign affairs. The editorial was roundly mocked on social media.

Reporter Glenn Greenwald called the piece a “perfect illustration of the subservient relationship between corporate media and the US government.” Both institutions, if recent polling is to be believed, are held in contempt by the public. Most Americans are seemingly opposed to the idea of Washington bureaucrats making decisions for them in a purported democracy.

Whether that sentiment will count for anything is, apparently, another question. But Russia’s leadership has learned to prepare for any contingency.

US ‘Deep State’ will call shots in Ukraine, not Trump or Biden – expert

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The threat of Trump’s restoration to the presidency has prompted moves to provide Ukraine with a multi-year fund to continue hostilities whether the country is supported by the United States or not. But the ultimate decision over whether American aid will continue to flow to its embattled leader may not lie with the US president at all, according to security analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik’s Fault Lines program Monday.

“All this stuff is not going to be acceptable to the West,” said the international relations expert, insisting Russia’s claims to Kherson and Zaporozhye as well as Crimea and the Donbass will generate opposition. “They can't be seen as losing to Russia here. So I think they'll fight this to the bitter end.”

“The Russian government doesn't believe that a Trump foreign policy will be, or can be any different, in essence, than a Biden foreign policy because the US president doesn't actually really make those decisions,” he claimed. “The blob – the deep state, the permanent security bureaucracy – does, whatever you want to call them.”

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Sleboda claimed the West's stated intention to "pump" what remains of Ukraine full of weapons and grant it membership in NATO will force Russia to continue fighting until it feels the threat is eliminated.

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Former Pentagon adviser Macgregor urges US to stop 'marching' into foreign countries

Former Pentagon Adviser Col. Douglas Macgregor said Sunday the United States should stop "marching" into foreign nations to expand their political influence.

"We need to stop marching into other peoples [sic] countries and trying to force people to become like us," Macgregor said on the X social media platform.

Earlier this week US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed the US-led NATO alliance is a defensive organization that has "no designs" to seize the territory of any other country in the world. NATO has carried out bombings and interventions in countries including Libya, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan over its 75-year history.

The alliance also partnered with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to sponsor Operation Gladio, a covert program that backed far-right paramilitaries throughout Europe.

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Growth Spillovers From G20 Emerging Markets Catch Up With Developed States - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Growth spillovers from certain Group of Twenty (G20) emerging markets became similar in magnitude to those from advanced economies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"Growth spillovers from some G20 EMs [emerging markets] have reached magnitudes similar to those from advanced economies," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook report.

The largest spillovers come from China, whose domestic shocks can explain about 10% of the variation in GDP in other emerging markets, the report said.

However, the IMF warned about a weakening outlook for G20 emerging market countries.

The medium-term growth outlook for G20 emerging markets has weakened by 0.8 percentage point to 3.7% as a result of the fallout from the COVID-10 pandemic and the price shocks related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the IMF said.

The evidence that emerging markets are clear sources of international spillovers is growing, the

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report added.

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US Transfers Seized Arms Allegedly Bound for Houthis to Ukraine - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) – The United States transferred more than 5,000 arms and over a half million rounds of ammunition that were seized from alleged Iran-linked vessels destined for Yemen's Houthi rebels, to the Ukrainian armed forces, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said Tuesday.

"On Apr. 4, 2024, the US government transferred over 5,000 AK-47s, machine guns, sniper rifles, RPG-7s and over 500,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition to the Ukrainian armed forces. This constitutes enough materiel to equip one UKR BDE with small arms rifles," CENTCOM stated.

The government obtained ownership of the weapons on December 1, 2023, through the Department of Justice's civil forfeiture claims against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, CENTCOM said.

The weapons were originally seized by CENTCOM and its partner naval forces from four transiting stateless vessels between May 22, 2021 to February 15, 2023, en route from the IRGC to the Houthis in Yemen, according to the command.

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US House Lawmakers Propose Sanctions on Gaza's Popular Resistance Committees - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) – A bipartisan group of US House lawmakers has proposed a bill to sanction Gaza's Popular Resistance Committees for their alleged involvement in the October 7 attack on Israel, Axios reported on Tuesday.

"For far too long, the Popular Resistance Committees have flown under the radar and avoided real consequences for their horrific crimes," Rep. Brad Sherman, one of the bill's co-sponsors, said in a statement quoted by Axios.

The proposed sanctions would block the coalition from doing business or owning property in the US and holding a US entry visa. They would also require the State Department to issue a report on whether to designate it, as well as the Lion's Den group based in the West Bank, as terrorist organizations.

The Popular Resistance Committees is also suspected in the bombing of a diplomatic convoy in 2003 that killed three US security guards.

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China Urges US to Stop 'Harassing' Chinese Citizens Under Security Pretext – Embassy

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - China is calling on the United States to stop "harassing" and deporting Chinese nationals under national security pretext and undermining public support environment for China-US relations, the Chinese Embassy in Washington said.

"In recent years, US border control personnel have continuously and unjustifiably harassed, interrogated, and deported Chinese nationals entering the US … China urges the US to stop harassing Chinese citizens traveling to the US under the pretext of national security, stop undermining the environment of public support for China-US relations, and stop obstructing friendly interactions between the two peoples," the embassy's spokesperson said in a statement.

Nearly 300 Chinese citizens have been deported by the US since July 2021, including more than 70 Chinese students, the statement read. Since November 2023, 10 cases of harassment and deportation of Chinese students have been recorded at the Washington Dulles Airport alone, the statement said.

Moreover, in December 2023, US border control personnel conducted three rounds and a 10-hour long interrogation of a Chinese visiting scholar, including asking whether the scholar was a member of the Chinese Communist Party and "checking his mobile phone, computer and other portable electronic devices," the statement also said. In February 2024, another Chinese visiting scholar was detained for 22 hours at San Francisco International Airport when entering the country, according to the statement.

"Such acts by the US side far exceeded the scope of normal law enforcement and are driven by strong ideological bias … The Chinese Embassy in the US and relevant Consulate General have lodged representations with the US State Department, National Security Council, the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection," the statement added.

The embassy also noted that even Chinese officials invited by the US side for a friendly visit have been "unjustifiably harassed and interrogated" when entering or leaving the country.

On April 2, Chinese President Xi Jinping held phone talks with US President Joe Biden, where the leaders reiterated the need to take further steps to expand people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

Tensions between the United States and China soared in August 2022 after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi traveled to Taiwan despite Beijing's warnings against the visit. Beijing condemned Pelosi's visit, which it regarded as a gesture of support for separatism, and launched large-scale military drills in the vicinity of the island.

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US Space Industry Facing Shortage of Skilled Technical Workers- Vice President

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COLORADO SPRINGS, April 9 (Sputnik) - The US space industry lacks skilled technical workers, US Vice President Kamala Harris said during her video address to the participants of the Space Symposium in Colorado Springs.

"Today our space industry is facing a shortage of skilled technical workers," Harris said during the opening ceremony on Monday. "Thousands of good-paying technical jobs, many of which do not require a four-year degree, are waiting to be filled."

Harris recalled that a year and a half ago, she initiated three regional pilot programs to train more skilled technical workers.

"So far, these training programs have helped hundreds of Americans learn the skills they need to join the space workforce," she said. "Today, I am proud to announce two new regional training programs - one in Alabama and one here in Colorado."

The Space Symposium annually brings together thousands of the world's space, military, civil, and government research industry leaders.

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Woman Claims 'Directed by God' to Commit Shooting on Day of Eclipse - Florida Police

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - A 22-year-old woman in Florida was arrested for shooting at other vehicles on the interstate, claiming that she was directed to do so by God in connection with the solar eclipse, the Florida Highway Patrol said in a statement.

"Today, Florida Highway Patrol Troopers responded to a report of an active shooter in Holmes County. The suspect was reportedly a female who had recently checked out of a local hotel and told the staff she was going on a shooting spree, directed by 'God' in relation to the solar eclipse," the statement said on Monday.

The woman, identified as Taylon Celestine of Georgia, was charged with attempted murder, aggravated battery with a deadly weapon and improper discharge of a firearm, the statement said.

Celestine allegedly struck one vehicle multiple times with gunfire, grazing the driver's arm with a bullet, the statement said. Celestine also allegedly fired at another vehicle, hitting the driver in the neck, the statement said.

Police took Celestine into custody without incident and recovered an AR-15 and a 9mm handgun from her car, the statement said.

The Florida Highway Patrol Bureau of Investigations and Intelligence is probing the incident, the statement said.

On Monday, a solar eclipse occurred across the continental United States with varying degrees of coverage.

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Lockheed Martin Gets $271Mln Boost on US Navy Aegis Missile Test Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has received a more than $271 million contract boost to further develop, test and integrate equipment for the US Navy's Aegis missile system-equipped warships, the US Defense Department announced.

"Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems [of] Moorestown, New Jersey is being awarded a $271,286,879 modification ... contract under Foreign Military Sales," the Defense Department said in a release on Monday.

The extension increases the total value of the contract from $674,477,035 to $946,333,844, the release said.

"The purpose of this modification is to increase the ceiling and extend the period of performance of the contract. The contractor will develop, test, and integrate equipment, material, software and hardware end items in support of the Aegis System Equipped Vessel program," the release added.

Work won the contract will be performed in Moorestown, New Jersey covering 11 months of this year starting on January 1, 2024 and ending on November 30, 2024, according to the release.

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Biden Pause on New LNG Exports to 'Detrimental Impact' Future Investments in US - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's temporary pause on new Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) exports and projects will have a detrimental impact on future energy investments in the United States, US House Energy, Climate, and Grid Security Subcommittee Chairman Jeff Duncan said during a congressional hearing.

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

"This LNG export pause will have a detrimental impact on future investment," Duncan said on Monday.

US lawmakers held the small congressional hearing in Port Arthur, Texas, which is a key site for LNG exports on the US Gulf Coast.

Duncan also mentioned that Biden's temporary LNG export ban is a gift to Russian President Vladimir Putin considering global demand for gas is expected to increase 46% by 2050, and US European and Asian allies who want to do business with the United States will look to Qatar, Russia, Iran, and other "adversaries" to meet their growing energy needs.

Port Arthur Mayor Thurman Bartie, who spoke at the hearing with US lawmakers, urged the Biden administration to abandon its LNG ban.

"The rush to green [energy] concept as it is being applied to this said LNG supplier will have a negative impact on the economic growth and stability of the city of Port Arthur," Bartie told lawmakers.

The negative impact from the suspension will then spread to the region and affect thousands of workers and their families, Bartie added.

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Port Arthur Community Action Network Founder and CEO James Beard appeared to defend Biden's decision, explaining the harmful effects LNG facilities have on local communities.

"I personally live in the shadow of massive petrochemical and LNG infrastructure where many of you in Washington have never ventured, let alone had to breathe toxic air day in and day out," Beard said. "Further up the fossil fuel supply chain are other frontline communities that suffer from the impact of fracking pipelines, compressor stations that are robbing communities of water while perpetuating unconscionable harm to human health."

Moreover, Beard emphasized that Biden's temporary LNG export ban only applies to countries without US free trade agreements, which affects a narrow set of permits.

Beard told the panel that playing politics and misleading the public about the true nature of Biden's action on LNG exports is "shameful and disturbing," adding that the lives of communities along the LNG supply chain are not something to play with.

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US Embassy in Somalia Says Alerted to Potential Threats in Mogadishu, Canceled Travel

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States received information about potential threats to multiple locations in Mogadishu and subsequently canceled upcoming travel for diplomatic personnel, the US Embassy in Somalia said in a statement.

"The US Embassy in Nairobi has received information about threats to multiple locations in Mogadishu, including Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu," the statement said on Monday.

The embassy canceled all travel for personnel scheduled on April 9, the statement said.

The US State Department maintains a "do not travel" advisory for Somalia due to potential crime, terrorism, civil unrest, health issues, kidnapping and piracy, the statement also said.

The US has extremely limited ability to provide emergency assistance to US citizens in Somalia because of a lack of a permanent consular presence in the country, the statement added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORUES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) -

ISRAEL INVASION IN GAZA

* The United States has not yet concluded that Israel has breached international humanitarian law amid its military operation in the Gaza Strip, but it continues assessments in a number of areas, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the date for the start of the Israeli army

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

operation in the city of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip had been set.
* A meeting between US and Israeli officials regarding the latter's military operations in Rafah is not expected to take place this week, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said.
* CIA Director William Burns visited Cairo over the weekend for discussions on a Israel-Hamas hostage release deal, Kirby said.
* Russia calls on all UN member states to support Palestine's application to become a full member of the United Nations, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

CANADA DEFENSE POLICY
* The Canadian Government will be investing C$8.1 billion (US$5.9 billion) over the next five years and C$73 billion (US$53.7 billion) over the next 20 years in its national defense, the new Defense Policy Update of the Ministry of National Defense said on Monday.
* The most pressing task for Canada is to assert its sovereignty in its northern regions and in the Arctic, the Defense Policy Update said.
* Canada is looking into the types of submarines, including nuclear-capable ones, that might be the most appropriate to patrol and protect the Arctic, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Preparations for holding a peace conference on Ukraine in Switzerland are underway and the exact date and place will be announced later, Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesperson Pierre-Alain Eltschinger told RIA Novosti on Monday.
* Ukraine lost more than 460 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

ATTACKS ON ZNPP
* Russia expects that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi respond publicly and truthfully to Ukraine's strikes on the territory of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP), the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.
* Ukraine, supported by the United States and its Western allies, made it clear by strikes on the ZNPP that it had embarked on the path of nuclear terror, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Grossi discussed the Sunday attack on the ZNPP and shared concern over this threat to nuclear safety, the Slovenian Foreign Ministry said.
* A drone downed above the roof of the sixth power unit of the ZNPP did not explode, so the facility was not damaged, the station's press office said.
* Russia is not planning to attack nuclear facilities in Ukraine as the country understands consequences of such actions, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said when commenting on recent attacks on the ZNPP.
* The Kiev regime continues with its terrorist activities, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said when commenting on recent shelling of the ZNPP by Ukraine.

FLOOD IN RUSSIA
* A state of emergency is being introduced in Russia's Tyumen Region as a forecast shows that

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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a significant flooding could occur, Governor Alexander Moor said on Monday.
* The situation in the flood-hit city of Orsk in Russia's Orenburg Region is still difficult, however the flood waters have gone down, the regional authorities said.

RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS
* The exact date for the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not been set yet, but there is an understanding that it will happen in the foreseeable future, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
* Russia and Turkey are maintaining working contacts on financial issues to find a way out of the current situation, Peskov said.
* Turkey and Russia continue to exchange information on the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, and data on attackers' links to the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) is being studied, a source in law enforcement told Sputnik.
* Turkey is aware of media reports and information shared by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) about a company registered in Turkey used by Ukrainian call centers to steal money from Russian citizens and will evaluate it, a law enforcement source told Sputnik.

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Cavoli Says NATO 'Club of Peace' That Does Not Force Any Nation to Join

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Christopher Cavoli on Monday tried to whitewash the actions of the military alliance by calling it a "club of peace" that does not force any nations to join it.
"NATO did not expand per se during this period. We merely opened the door on which nations were knocking in a series of waves. [From 19]99, all the way up to 2017, 14 nations asked to join NATO and were admitted to this club of peace," Cavoli said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.
Despite the claims of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and US officials, NATO is by no means a defensive alliance. Over its 75-year history, NATO has carried out many aggressive interventions in other countries, including the most recent one in Yugoslavia, grossly violating its sovereignty and causing thousands of unnecessary civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure, which was not preceded by an attack on the military bloc.
Moreover, NATO continues to expand eastward, with Sweden and Finland joining the military bloc over the past year citing an alleged Russian threat as an excuse to allow US military equipment to be stationed on their territory.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine would create a direct national security threat to Russia and that Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important to put an end to the years-long conflict.

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Biden Skips Out on Eclipse Monday Afternoon - White House Press Pool

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden skipped out on viewing the eclipse Monday afternoon despite having special glasses in hand to safely view the astronomical event, the White House press pool reported.

"POTUS had special glasses to view the eclipse in his hand as he boarded AF1 [Air Force One] but he did not stop to look up in the sky to view the eclipse," the press pool said.

The total eclipse was visible in regions of Mexico and Canada and will cross the United States from Kerrville, Texas, in the southwest to Houlton, Maine, on the northeast coast.

In 2017, the US last witnessed a similar celestial event, during which then-President Donald Trump was globally seen disregarding NASA and medical advice by looking at the Sun without protective eyewear.

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US Marines Order Prototype to Recover Amphibious Combat Vehicles in Battle Zones - BAE

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US Marine Corps announced in a release on Monday that it has ordered several prototype Amphibious Combat Vehicle Recovery models from BAE Systems to be built this year.

"BAE Systems has received a $79 million contract from the US Marine Corps to build and deliver production representative test vehicles (PRTVs) for the Amphibious Combat Vehicle Recovery (ACV-R) variant later this year," the release said.

The vehicle will provide direct field support, maintenance, and recovery to the Marines' deployed ACV fleet, the release said.

"One of the most challenging things that can happen on the battlefield is for a vehicle to break down or need to be recovered. The ACV-R is a modern, highly capable recovery and mobile repair unit that provides critical expeditionary support to immobilized ACVs in the field and provides maintenance support capabilities without risking our Marines' safety," the release added.

This contract award begins the second phase of the ACV-R program and kicks off the production of PRTVs which will support government testing next year, according to the release.

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Majority of Likely US Voters Believe Inflation 'Very Serious' Problem - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that inflation is a very serious problem, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Monday.

More than eight-in-ten respondents, 84%, believe that inflation is a serious problem, including 57% who believe it is very serious, the poll report said.

Just 14% of respondents believe that inflation is not a serious problem, the poll report said.

The numbers are nearly identical to the results of an August 2023 survey, the poll report said.

The US Federal Reserve may have to increase the policy rate if progress on addressing inflation stalls or reverses, Federal Reserve Board of Governors member Michelle Bowman said on Friday.

The poll surveyed 1,100 likely US voters from March 26-28. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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NATO Nations Do Not Believe to Be in War With Russia Nor Seek One - Cavoli

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The NATO member states do not believe there is a war between the military alliance and Russia and they do not seek one amid the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Gen. Christopher Cavoli.

"The nations of NATO do not believe we are in a war with the Russian Federation and we don't want to be in one," Cavoli said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Cavoli explained that NATO's aim to avoid a potential war with Russia is exactly why the alliance as a whole has not been providing military support to Ukraine letting and its member states do it on a bilateral basis.

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Las Vegas Law Office Shooter Kills Two, Takes Own Life - Police Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) said on Monday that two people were killed by a shooter at a law office, who seems to have also taken their own life.

"Per LVMPD Sheriff Kevin McMahill, this shooting occurred at a law office. There are two deceased victims, and the shooter is dead from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot," LVMPD said in a statement via social media platform X.

Hundreds of people were evacuated from the multi-story office building during the incident, the

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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statement said.
Law enforcement officials are investigating the shooter's motive and their relationship to the victims, the statement added.

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Senior US Diplomat Heads to Baltics to Discuss Energy Security, Support for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt will visit the three Baltic countries from April 8-12 to discuss regional energy security and support for Ukraine's infrastructure, the State Department said on Monday.
"Bureau of Energy Resources Assistant Secretary Geoffrey R. Pyatt will travel April 8-12 to Tallinn, Estonia, Riga, Latvia, and Vilnius, Lithuania," the State Department said in a statement.
Pyatt plans to discuss several key energy security topics with senior officials, focusing on the Baltic states' "swift progress de-coupling from Russian energy," support for Ukraine's energy sector, efforts to limit Russia's energy revenues, and initiatives to progress toward clean energy and secure essential mineral supply chains, the statement said.
On April 9, Pyatt will hold meetings in Tallinn, including with representatives of the Estonian Hydrogen Cluster.
In Riga, he will participate in discussions with President Edgars Rinkevics' advisors, other senior officials, and leaders of Latvia's key energy infrastructure companies.
"Finally, Assistant Secretary Pyatt will lead the US delegation to the 2024 Three Seas Initiative (3SI) Summit and Business Forum on April 11 in Vilnius, Lithuania," the statement said.
There, Pyatt will reaffirm support for Ukraine's energy infrastructure, discuss the 3SI region's role in diversifying Europe's energy, and "highlight opportunities for 3SI countries to build further energy and infrastructure links with new partner-participants Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the Western Balkans," the State Department said.

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Engineers Complete Prototype Manta Ray Uncrewed Underwater Vehicle - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman engineers working with the Defense Advanced Research Agency (DARPA) have completed the assembling of the prototype new Manta Ray unmanned underwater vehicle to carry out a wide range of undersea missions, the US defense contractor announced in a press release on Monday.
"Northrop Grumman completed assembly of a full-size uncrewed underwater vehicle (UUV) prototype known as Manta Ray," the release said.
Manta Ray is the first in a new class of UUV and is an extra-large glider that will operate long-duration, long-range and payload-capable undersea missions without need for on-site

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

human logistics," Northrop Grumman explained.
"Manta Ray was built through a DARPA program aimed at advancing key technologies to benefit future UUV designs, including techniques to manage energy, increased payload capacity and low-power propulsion," the release said.
Manta Ray is payload-capable to support a variety of missions, autonomous without the need for on-site human logistics and energy-saving, with the ability to anchor to the seafloor and hibernate in a low-power state, the release added.

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Three US Science Aircraft Chase Eclipse Above Clouds Collecting Vital Data - NASA

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A flight of three NASA jets is flying at 50,000 feet (15,240 meters) high in the atmosphere on Monday afternoon to record unique scientific data from the solar eclipse that will be fully or partially visible across all 49 of the continental US states including Alaska, the US space agency has announced in a series of official statements and blogs
"The best view might be 50,000 feet in the air, aboard NASA's WB-57 jet planes," one of the blog statements said. "That's where a trio of NASA-funded teams are sending their scientific instruments to take measurements of the eclipse."
Two NASA teams on the aircraft will image the Sun's outer atmosphere or corona and a third will measure the ionosphere, the upper electrically charged layer of Earth's atmosphere. This information will help scientists better understand the structure and temperature of the corona, the effects of the Sun on Earth's atmosphere, and even aid in the search for asteroids that may orbit near the Sun, the US space agency explained.
"The height puts the jets above most of Earth's atmosphere, which allows for the cameras to take crisper images and capture wavelengths, such as infrared light, that don't make it to the ground. Since the planes can travel at 460 miles per hour, they're also able to extend the time they spend in the Moon's shadow," the NASA blog said.
The total eclipse will last no more than four and a half minutes at any point on the ground in the 15 states where it is fully visible. However, the three aircraft will see, film, and monitor an eclipse that lasts about 25% longer, over 6 minutes and 22 seconds, the U.S. Space agency said.

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RPT - Solar Eclipse Started in Colorado, Coinciding with Largest Annual Space Event

(Repeats to correct day of week in lede)
COLORADO SPRINGS, April (Sputnik) - A solar eclipse is now happening in the US state of Colorado, also coinciding with the largest annual space event, Space Symposium, hosted by

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Colorado Springs, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Monday.
Hundreds of participants of the annual Space Symposium rushed outside just after 11:00 am local time (17:00 GMT) to watch the rare solar eclipse event.
In Colorado, however, it is partial - at about 70%.
Although it is taking place amid cloudy skies, the eclipse can be clearly observed through special protective glasses.
The Space Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is hosting a watch party for the eclipse. There are also experts available to talk to the guests about the rare event.
The total eclipse will be visible in regions of Mexico and Canada and will cross the United States from Kerrville, Texas, in the southwest to Houlton, Maine, on the northeast coast.
The Space Symposium annually brings together the world's space, military, civil, government research industry leaders.

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Solar Eclipse Started in Colorado, Coinciding with Largest Annual Space Event

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US Monitoring Conditions at Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Plant After Drone Attack - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports of a drone attack on the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant (ZNPP) and continues to monitor the situation, US State

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We are aware of the reports of a drone attack at Zaporizhia nuclear power plant," Miller said during a press briefing. "We are continuing to monitor the conditions at the plant, including through official reporting from the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency], which fortunately notes that the damage resulting from that drone strike has not compromised nuclear safety."

On Sunday, Ukraine attacked with kamikaze drones the territory of the ZNPP right after an inspection carried out by experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but no serious damage at the facility was reported.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said earlier on Monday that Russia expects International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi to respond publicly and truthfully to Ukraine's strikes on the ZNPP territory.

Russia has agreed to the presence of IAEA representatives at the ZNPP with the expectation that either it would stop Ukrainian attacks on the nuclear plant "or at least clearly on behalf of the IAEA will point to the Kiev regime as the source of the attacks," the Foreign Ministry said.

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Palestine's Full UN Membership 'Strictly in Hands' of Member Nations - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The approval of Palestine's application for full membership in the United Nations needs to be fully decided by UN members, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

“This process as well as the judgment on the validity of the membership is strictly in the hands of the member states,” Dujarric said in a briefing.

Earlier today, Palestine's application to join the United Nations as a full member was referred to the Committee on the Admission of New Members without objection at a UN Security Council meeting on Monday.

The application was conveyed in an April 2 letter from Palestine, requesting renewed consideration of its 2011 application for UN membership.

The admission of new members to the UN is decided by the General Assembly upon the Security Council’s recommendation, which requires favorable votes from at least nine of the 15 members of the council and no vetoes from the five permanent members (US, UK, France, China, and Russia).

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Las Vegas Police Say Investigating Shooting Inside Business

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) said on Monday that officers are investigating a shooting at a business near the Red Rock

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Casino Resort.
"We are investigating a shooting inside a business near Pavilion Center Drive and Charleston," LVMPD said in a statement via social media platform X.
The incident is a dynamic event with multiple LVMPD and emergency vehicles responding, the statement said, adding that people should avoid the area.

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US Made Clear to Iran Not to Take Escalatory Actions After Damascus Strike - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has made clear directly to the Iranian government that it should not use the Israeli strike on Iranian targets in Damascus as a pretext for any escalatory actions in the region, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.
"We have made clear directly to the Iranian government that it should not use this incident as a pretext to attack American troops or American facilities in the region, and we will continue to make clear to them that they should not take any escalatory actions," Miller said during a press briefing.

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US Envoy to UN to Travel to Demilitarized Zone With North Korea - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield next week will visit Japan and South Korea and will also go to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with North Korea, US mission spokesperson Nate Evans said on Monday.
"Next week, [Thomas-Greenfield] is headed to ROK [South Korea] and Japan, she will emphasize US commitment to the trilateral partnership and to the peace and stability of the region. The ambassador will also travel to the DMZ," Evans said via the social media platform X.
At the end of March, the United States and South Korea jointly coordinated sanctions against six individuals and two entities for allegedly aiding North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. The sanctions target alleged agents of designated banks and companies that employ North Korean information technology workers abroad.

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NATO Official Says Defense Industrial Policy Has Become Issue Within Alliance

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The NATO alliance is dealing with defense industrial policy issues that have emerged from struggles to maintain national stocks while providing security assistance to Ukraine, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defense Policy and Planning Angus Lapsley said on Monday.

"I think the broader question of industrial resilience has really come into play over the last few years when we've seen how much both North America and Europe has struggled to produce quickly enough what we need both to support Ukraine and to support our own armed forces," Lapsley said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University. "So I think industrial policy or defense industrial policy has become an issue."

Lapsley also noted that NATO alliance members seek to strengthen their interoperability standardization.

The senior NATO official explained that the standard artillery shell in NATO is the 155 millimeter shell, but over the last 20 years, allies have slightly modified their shells, meaning they cannot share ammunition.

The United States has repeatedly pointed out several issues in its own defense industry base, including the lack of an adequate workforce, that it hopes to strengthen over time with new investments in the sector.

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No Conclusion Yet That Israel Has Violated Int'l Humanitarian Law – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The United States has not yet at this time concluded that Israel has breached international humanitarian law amid its military operation in Gaza, but continues assessments in a number of areas, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We have not yet at this time concluded that Israel has violated international humanitarian law, but we have ongoing assessments across a number of different fronts," Miller said during a press briefing.

On October 7, 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 33,100 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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

NATO Official Says Any Idea of Poland Acquiring Nuclear Weapons 'No-Go' Due to NPT

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - There is no clear path for Poland to acquire nuclear weapons because of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), NATO Assistant Secretary-General for Defense Policy and Planning Angus Lapsley said on Monday.

"Not only would Poland have to withdraw from the NPT, but any ally that helped Poland would have to withdraw, so that's a real no-go," Lapsley said regarding whether it is possible for Poland to develop its own nuclear weapons.

Lapsley made the remark during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Poland has said that it wants to join NATO's nuclear weapons sharing program in response to Russia deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, which shares a border with Poland.

Lapsley also responded to a question about whether it is feasible for France or the United Kingdom to extend their nuclear umbrella over Poland.

Any possible changes to the United Kingdom and French nuclear deterrence postures would almost certainly still be within a broader NATO framework as it is the only credible framework in which to do that, Lapsley said.

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Biden Says Eclipse Viewers Should 'Play It Safe, Wear Protective Eyewear'

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) — US President Joe Biden, on Monday, in a social media post, urged the use of protective eyewear for the upcoming solar eclipse viewing.

"An eclipse is worth marveling at. But don't be silly, folks – play it safe and wear protective eyewear," US President Joe Biden said in a social media post on Monday.

Moreover, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, in a conversation on Monday, echoed the President's sentiments, expressing the hope that we all can share in the wonder of the Eclipse while also stressing the need to protect our eyes.

In 2017, the US last witnessed a similar celestial event, during which then-President Donald Trump was globally seen disregarding NASA and medical advice by looking at the Sun without protective eyewear.

Later today, a total solar eclipse will be visible across the US, including regions of Mexico and Canada. It will cross the United States from Kerrville, Texas, in the southwest to Houlton, Maine, on the northeast coast.

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Musk Says Social Media Platform X Experiences Little Influence Activity From Russia

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Monday that there is little Russian influence activity on social media platform X.

"We don't see a lot of Russian activity, to be frank, on the system. We see very little," Musk said during a so-called Space on X.

The platform experiences attempts to influence discourse, but the attempts appear to originate in the West, not Russia, Musk said.

Russia restricted access to X, then known as Twitter, prior to Musk's acquisition of the company, in response to the platform restricting Russian media and government accounts and failing to take down material considered illegal in Russia.

The platform is not banned in Russia, but rather, operates under a special management regime, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev said last year.

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Air Canada Says Will Resume Flights to Israel on Tuesday After 6 Months Pause

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Air Canada will resume flight services between Canada and Israel on Tuesday after a six month pause, the company confirmed to Sputnik.

On March 14, Air Canada issued a notice saying that service to Israel would resume on April 9, but noted that the company would continue to monitor the situation in the region and adjust the planned resumption accordingly.

Air Canada had said that in preparation for the scheduled resumption of flights to Israel, the company had undertaken "extensive safety analysis," which included consultations with the government, flight-crew unions and security experts.

"Our service to Tel Aviv is scheduled to resume tomorrow," Air Canada told Sputnik when asked to confirm whether flights would be resuming as planned.

The April schedule will consist of four non-stop return flights per week from Toronto, whereas the May schedule will include three weekly return flights from Toronto and a once-weekly return flight from Montreal.

Air Canada is the country's flag carrier and its largest airline. The company suspended its flights to Israel on October 8, in the wake of resumed hostilities between Israeli government forces and Hamas.

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UPDATE - Canada To Invest $5.9Bln in National Defense Over Next Five Years - Defense Policy Update

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

(Updates with more details in paras 2-3, 5)

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government will be investing C$8.1 billion (US$5.9 billion) over the next five years and C$73 billion (US$53.7 billion) over the next twenty in its national defense, the country's Defense Policy Update said.

On Monday, the Ministry of National Defense released its defense policy update "Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defense," which responds to the significant global shifts that have occurred since Canada's comprehensive defense policy was announced in 2017.

In the updated defense policy, National Defense determined that the most pressing task for Canada was to assert its sovereignty in its northern regions and the Arctic.

"Canada will invest $8.1 billion over the next five years, and $73 billion over the next 20 years, in our national defence over six major themes to support our people; strengthen our foundations; build an innovative industrial base; defend Canada; defend North America; and defend Canada's global interests and values," the policy update reads.

The investments will be part of Budget 2024 which is set to be unveiled on April 16. The increased spending will bring the country's defense budget to 1.76% of its GDP by 2029-2030, bringing it closer to NATO's 2% commitment agreed at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, the update said.

The planned investments include C$2.7 billion (US$1.9 billion) over twenty years to acquire long-range missile capabilities, C$9.5 billion (US$6.9 billion) to accelerate the establishment of new artillery ammunition production capacity in Canada, and C$1.4 billion (US$1 billion) to acquire specialized maritime sensors to conduct ocean surveillance, the update said.

Other investments will include C$18.4 billion (US$13.5 billion) over 20 years to acquire a more modern, mobile, and effective tactical helicopter capability, C$9.9 billion (US$7.3 billion) to improve the sustainment of naval fleets, and C$5.5 billion (US$4 billion) to develop a comprehensive worldwide satellite communication capability.

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Palestine's UN Membership Application Referred for Deliberation – UNSC

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Palestine's application to join the United Nations as a full member was referred to the Committee on the Admission of New Members without objection at a UN Security Council meeting on Monday.

"Unless I hear a proposal to the contrary, I shall refer to the committee of admissions of new members the request that renewed consideration be given to the application of the observer state of Palestine during the month of April 2024. As I hear no objection, it is so decided," said UN Security Council President and Malta's Permanent Representative Vanessa Frazier.

The council will hold its first meeting on the matter later in the day. The application was conveyed in an April 2 letter from Palestine, requesting renewed consideration of its 2011 application for UN membership.

The admission of new members to the UN is decided by the General Assembly upon the

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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Security Council's recommendation, which requires favorable votes from at least nine of the 15 members of the council and no vetoes from the five permanent members (US, UK, France, China, and Russia).

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US Practices With Allies Repelling Potential Russian Attack in Space - Space Operations

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US military practiced repelling a potential Russian attack with the use of counter-space capabilities during the sixth iteration of the Vulcan Guard exercise, Space Operations Functional Area Manager and Exercise Planner US Air Force Lt. Col. Ian Harper said on Monday.

"[During the exercise] we played out kind of the whole gambit of Russian counter-space capabilities from reversible. An example would be ground-based jamming non-kinetic effects all the way up to kinetic non-reversible effects such as a direct descendant anti-satellite weapon," Harper said during a virtual roundtable discussion hosted by the US National Guard.

Earlier on Monday, the US National Guard said that military personnel from the United States, Poland and Romania, among other allied countries, took part in the sixth iteration of the Vulcan Guard Bolt exercise at NATO's Allied Air Command in late March.

In February, the United States claimed that Russia was allegedly developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon that poses a serious US national security threat. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Moscow had always been categorically against deploying nuclear weapons in space and its position on this issue is clear and transparent. Russia's activities in space are no different from those of other countries, including the United States, and they know it, Putin added.

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NATO Allies Seek to Reinforce Civilian-Military Partnership for Times of War - Official

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - NATO allies will push during the upcoming leaders summit in Washington for each member state to pledge to strengthen the partnerships between their militaries and private sectors as a means to strengthen supply chains during a period of war, NATO Assistant Secretary-General for Defenes Policy and Planning Angus Lapsley said on Monday.

"One of the things we're looking at for the Washington summit is allies making a pledge that they will all have nationally, each according to their own systems, a mechanism for doing that...civilian military planning so that they know they are ready for that," Lapsley said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University.

Lapsley said that enhancing cooperation ensures the private sector is capable of supporting

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

military needs in time of war, including ensuring access to stocks of food and energy, among other necessities.

In addition, Lapsley said that NATO and the European Union are having a debate on how to avoid being exploited by China during a period of crisis or war, considering a number of the alliance's member states' economies rely on China for certain services.

The next NATO leaders summit will be held in Washington from July 9-11.

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Canada Looking Into Acquiring Nuclear Capable Submarines to Defend Arctic - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Canada is looking into the types of submarines, including nuclear-capable ones, that might be the most appropriate to patrol and protect the Arctic, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.

Trudeau made the remark during the unveiling of Canada's defense policy update in response to a question about whether acquiring nuclear submarines would make more sense to protect the Canadian Arctic.

The update emphasized that the most pressing task for Canada was to assert its sovereignty in its northern regions and in the Arctic.

"That is certainly what we will be looking at as to what type of submarines are most appropriate for Canada’s responsibility in protecting the longest coastline in the world and certainly the longest Arctic coastline in the world," Trudeau said.

When questioned on whether the Canadian government was considering joining the second phase of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) military partnership, Trudeau said the country already had observer status in one of the AUKUS working groups and it was seeking closer cooperation with the member states.

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State Department Says Work on Prisoner Swap With Russia ‘Ongoing, Sensitive’

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The work on a potential prisoner swap of Paul Whelan and journalist Evan Gershkovich with Russia is ongoing and sensitive, and therefore the United States will not make public the details of the negotiations, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

“We aren’t going to negotiate in public. The work is ongoing and sensitive, and we don’t think it helps Paul or Evan to get into the details at this time,” the spokesperson said in a statement when asked to provide any updates on the negotiations with Moscow.

A year ago, Gershkovich was arrested in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of trying to collect classified defense information for the United States. Earlier this week, the

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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Moscow City Court extended his pre-trial detention.

Whelan, a former US Marine, was arrested in Moscow in December 2018 and subsequently sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges. Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, has maintained his innocence, insisting that he came to Russia to attend a friend's wedding.

US authorities unsuccessfully sought to include Whelan in the latest prisoner swap deal with Russia but had to settle for basketball player Brittney Griner, who was returned to her homeland in exchange for Russian citizen Viktor Bout.

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NATO Would Defend Eastern Flank With 'Enormous' Air, Sea Power - Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A senior NATO defense official said on Monday that the military alliance would defend its eastern flank not only with land forces but also with an "enormous amount" of air and sea power.

"If the only way we were going to defend the eastern flank was through the battle groups, even when scaled up to brigade level, the answer would be no. Of course, that's not the only way that we plan to defend all of the territory of the alliance. One of the things which obviously Ukraine can't draw on but we would is the enormous amount of air power and power that can be projected from the sea," Angus Lapsley, NATO Assistant Secretary-General for Defense Policy and Planning, said at a conference held by Georgetown's Center for Security Studies.

He also said that NATO was now working to give the necessary authority to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in order to move forces in place ahead of an anticipated Article Five situation.

Moscow has for years objected to NATO's continued expansion and military buildup near Russian borders.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said on several occasions that Moscow is not going to attack NATO countries. Russia does not threaten anyone, but will not ignore actions that are potentially dangerous to its interests, the Kremlin has said.

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Canada's Most Urgent Task to Assert Sovereignty in Arctic - Defense Policy Update

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The most pressing task for Canada is to assert its sovereignty in its northern regions and in the Arctic, the Ministry of National Defense said in its Defense Policy Update on Monday.

Eaerlier in the day, the Ministry of National Defense released its "Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defense," which responds to the significant global shifts that have

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

occurred since Canada's comprehensive defense policy was announced in 2017.
"The most urgent and important task we face is asserting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic and northern regions, where the changing physical and geopolitical landscapes have created new threats and vulnerabilities to Canada and Canadians. This includes the need to upgrade our continental defenses to threats or defeat them, when necessary," the policy update said.

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AUKUS Committed to Openness, Transparency With International Partners - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The defense chiefs of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) said on Monday that the group is committed to openness and transparency with international partners.
"Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States are committed to continued openness and transparency with international partners on AUKUS," the defense chiefs said in a joint statement.
AUKUS will hold the first meeting of its Advanced Capabilities Industry Forum on April 9, the statement said.
The forum will bring together AUKUS governments and industrial bases for talks focused on the development and delivery of AUKUS advanced capabilities, the statement said.

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NATO Cannot Rule Out Attack on Allies Amid Alleged Russian Threat- NATO Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – A senior NATO defense official said Monday that the military alliance cannot take its history of not being attacked for granted, particularly amid the alleged challenge posed by Russia.
"The primary goal of the alliance is to make sure there isn't an attack on any NATO ally, and we've been pretty successful at that for the last 75 years, but I think there is a recognition amongst allies at the moment that the scale of the challenge, in particular from Russia... means that we absolutely cannot take our success in that for granted," Angus Lapsley, NATO assistant secretary general for defense policy and planning, said at a conference held by Georgetown's Center for Security Studies.
Moscow has for years objected to NATO's continued expansion and military buildup near Russian borders.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has said on several occasions that Moscow is not going to attack NATO countries. Russia does not threaten anyone, but will not ignore actions that are potentially dangerous to its interests, the Kremlin has said.

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Eclipse Day Treated as 'All-Hazards Approach' Amid Surge in Air Traffic - NAV Canada

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Canadian air navigation service provider NAV CANADA said on Monday that it was treating the eclipse day with an "all-hazards approach" due to an expected important surge in air traffic activity around the event.

Monday will mark the first total eclipse observable from Canada in the past 45 years. The event will also be visible in regions of Mexico and will cross the United States from Kerrville, Texas, in the southwest to Houlton, Maine, in the northeast.

"Today marks Canada's first total eclipse in 45 years and will be a notable event for many Canadians. NAV CANADA's prepared for today's burst of aviation activity and we're treating today as an all-hazards approach," the service provider said in a statement via X.

More recreational pilots will be following the eclipse in the air, NAV CANADA said, and commercial flights will likely request to be allowed travelling within the total eclipse's path, the statement said.

Everyone seeking to experience the eclipse from the height of Canadian skies will be supported in the best possible way, the statement added.

NAV CANADA is a privately run non-profit organization that owns and operates the country's civil air navigation system in accordance with the Civil Air Navigation Services Commercialization Act.

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US-Israel Meeting on Rafah Not Expected This Week - White House

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A meeting between US and Israeli officials regarding the latter's military operations in Rafah is not expected to take place this week, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Monday.

"On Rafah, still no dates certain, nothing set for the calendar," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We were hoping to be able to do it this week, but I'm not sure that it's going to actually happen this week."

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Canada To Invest $5.9Bln in National Defense Over Next Five Years - Defense Policy Update

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government will be investing C$8.1 billion (US$5.9 billion) over the next five years and C$73 billion (US$53.7 billion) over the next twenty in its national defense, the country's Defense Policy Update said.

"Canada will invest $8.1 billion over the next five years, and $73 billion over the next 20 years, in our national defence over six major themes to support our people; strengthen our foundations; build an innovative industrial base; defend Canada; defend North America; and defend Canada's global interests and values," the policy update reads.

The planned investments include C$2.7 billion over twenty years to acquire long-range missile capabilities, C$9.5 billion to accelerate the establishment of new artillery ammunition production capacity in Canada, and C$1.4 billion to acquire specialized maritime sensors to conduct ocean surveillance, the update said.

Other investments will include C$18.4 billion over 20 years to acquire a more modern, mobile, and effective tactical helicopter capability, C$9.9 billion to improve the sustainment of naval fleets, and C$5.5 billion to develop a comprehensive worldwide satellite communication capability.

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CIA Chief Visited Cairo Over Weekend for Hostage Talks, Deal Presented to Hamas - Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - CIA Director William Burns visited Cairo over the weekend for discussions on a Israel-Hamas hostage release deal, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.

"Director Burns was in Cairo over the weekend as part of the hostage negotiations," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Where we are now is that a proposal has been presented to Hamas, and we're waiting on Hamas' response."

The United States wants to finalize a hostage deal as soon as possible, because a hostage deal will include a multi-week ceasefire, Kirby said.

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US Signs Cybersecurity Cooperation Agreement With Ukraine National Bank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US Department of the Treasury announced on Monday that it had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Bank of Ukraine to cooperate in the area of cybersecurity.

"The memorandum renews the shared understanding on cybersecurity and operational resilience, which has been in place since 2020. As a part of that effort, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) facilitates an ongoing exchange of information between the National Bank of Ukraine and the Treasury Department," the US Department of the Treasury said in a

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

statement.

The memorandum, which became effective on April 4 after it was signed in Washington and in Kiev, outlines methods for exchanging information on cybersecurity threats, incidents, cyber threat actors, and best practices, the statement said.

The memorandum adheres to the principles of transparency and confidentiality, and motivates the involved parties to share perspectives, facilitate training as well as offer assessments and capacity support, the statement added.

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US, Poland, Romania Conduct Vulcan Guard Exercise With Focus on Space – National Guard

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Military personnel from the United States, Poland, and Romania among others took part in the sixth iteration of the Vulcan Guard Bolt 6 exercise at NATO's Allied Air Command in late March, the US National Guard said on Monday.

"About 50 members of the Air National Guard and Romanian and Polish Armed Forces focused on space as a warfighting domain during exercise Vulcan Guard Bolt 6 at NATO's Allied Air Command in late March," the National Guard said in a press release.

The sixth iteration of the exercise, which had its first iteration in February 2022, was the first time NATO held an exclusively space-based exercise with the participation of airmen from eight units and five states, the release said.

More specifically, the exercise focused primarily on space domain awareness, joint commercial operations, cyber, satellite communications, and intelligence, according to the release.

The next or the seventh iteration of the Vulcan Guard exercise will focus on the Indo-Pacific region, the release added.

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AUKUS Considering Cooperation With Japan on Advanced Capabilities - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The defense chiefs of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) said on Monday that the group is considering cooperation with Japan on advanced capability projects.

"Recognizing Japan's strengths and its close bilateral defense partnerships with all three countries, we are considering cooperation with Japan on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects," the defense chiefs said in a joint statement.

AUKUS considers factors including technological innovation, financing, industrial strengths, data security and regional impact in identifying collaboration opportunities, the statement said.

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Japan's Prime Minister to Underscore US Alliance in Address to Congress – Ambassador

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Japan's Ambassador to the US Shigeo Yamada said Monday that he hoped that Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's upcoming address to Congress will demonstrate that his country is a "reliable and determined global partner of the United States."

"I hope the prime minister's address to the joint meeting with Congress, which is only the second ever by a Japanese prime minister, [will] impress upon the American people, that Japan is a reliable and determined global partner of the United States," Yamada said at a CSIS event.

Kishida will emphasize that Japan is prepared to "work with the United States shoulder-to-shoulder on various global issues," he added. The prime minister will also discuss major changes in Japan's security policy and economic situation.

Kishida is the first Japanese leader to make a state visit to Washington since 2015. He will arrive on Monday for the start of his seven-day trip.

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Message Must Be Sent to Israel, US That Actions in Gaza Inadmissible - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - A clear message must be sent to Israel and the United Sttates that their actions in the Gaza Strip are inadmissible, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"There's an important need to send both West Jerusalem and Washington a clear message about the inadmissibility of their actions in Gaza," Polyanskiy said.

The Russian diplomat emphasized that a tragedy in Gaza is unfolding in front of our eyes.

On Tuesday, Palestine sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres seeking renewed consideration of its application for membership in the United Nations. The application was first submitted on September 23, 2011.

The United Nations confirmed that Palestine's membership in the world body has to be decided by the organziation's member states.

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East Asia Could Become Tomorrow What Ukraine is Today - Japanese Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The current security situation in Ukraine could resemble the

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

future security environment in East Asia, Japanese Ambassador to the United States Yamada Shigeo said on Monday.

"[Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's] conviction is that today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia," Shigeo said during a discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "From that conviction, the prime minister has been very firm in support for Ukraine and introducing stronger sanctions against Russia."

The ambassador emphasized that Japan will continue to support Ukraine militarily and economically.

On Wednesday, Kishida will meet with US President Joe Biden as part of an official visit to the United States. Kishida is expected to deliver remarks to the US Congress during his visit.

Shigeo said that Kishida and Biden will likely discuss the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

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Japan, North Korea Would Mutually Benefit from Productive Ties - Japanese Ambassador to US

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Both Japan and North Korea would benefit from establishing more productive ties, Japanese Ambassador to the United States Shigeo Yamada said on Monday.

"[Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida] believes that if we can ever establish productive relationships with North Korea, it would be beneficial to Japan and North Korea, as well as to the region to establish stability in the region," Yamada said during a discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

However, Kishida believes that Japan and North Korea must resolve outstanding issues, including missile, nuclear and abduction issues, Yamada said.

Recent statements from North Korea indicate that they are not prepared to address such issues at this time, Yamada said.

Kishida is ready to have a dialogue with North Korea to resolve such issues if Pyongyang is forthcoming, Yamada said.

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Ukraine to Be One of Main Discussion Topics During NATO Summit in July – US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The NATO summit in July will spend a lot of time discussing Ukraine's aspirations to become the alliance's 33rd member, US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said on Monday.

"We of course will be spending a lot of time at the [July] summit focusing on Ukraine. I can't predict - none of us can - with any certainty what the war will look like come July," Smith said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2024 11:05:37 AM

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On Thursday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Ukraine will become a member of NATO. He said later in the day that the NATO summit in Washington in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in supporting Ukraine in the longer term.

On the same day, The New York Times reported that despite public statements of support for Ukraine's membership in NATO, the United States and Germany remain opposed to offering Kiev to start membership negotiations at the NATO summit in Washington and want the issue to be off the table in July.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine would create a direct national security threat to Russia and that Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important to put an end to the years-long conflict.

Kiev's plans to join the bloc were among the reasons why Russia launched its special military operation in February 2022.

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Russia Urges International Community to Support Palestine Membership in UN - Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on all UN member states to support Palestine's application to become a full member of the United Nations, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"We urge the entire international community to support Palestine's application to membership at the UN," Polyanskiy said.

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Defense Industry Hesitant to Boost Output Due to Long-Term Uncertainty - US Envoy to NATO

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Defense industry companies are reluctant to boost the production and pace at which they deliver weaponry due to long-term uncertainties, US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said on Monday.

"The answer you get from defense industry so often now when we pound on their doors and say: 'Please produce more and faster both, with our own stocks and for our friends in Ukraine,' they often say 'Well, you need it right now. Will you need it next year?" Smith said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Smith pointed out that the defense industry often poses the question regarding future needs due to past instances when NATO member states said they needed to acquire certain military capabilities but then proceeded to back off or pivoted to something else.

NATO has been increasingly thinking about how its standards must continue to drive production and send signals to the defense industry, Smith added.

Smith made the remarks amid discussions about the necessity of increasing the production of

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ammunition and other weaponry for NATO as well as in support of Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation in that country.

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US NATO Envoy Says Hopeful Ukraine Aid Bill Will Get Through Congress by End of April

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said on Monday that she hopes to see Congress pass the national security supplemental bill, which includes $60 billion in new funding for Ukraine, as early as the end of this month.

"I very much hope, we all hope that that supplemental will get through no later than the end of this month," Smith said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Ukraine "desperately" needs the supplemental funding because its military is facing ammunition shortages on the battlefield, Smith added.

In February, the Senate passed a $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes some $60 billion for Ukraine, but it was held up in the House by Speaker Mike Johnson, who prioritized working on budget legislation and exploring other routes for Ukraine funding.

Ukraine is in dire need of additional funding from the United States, which has provided more than $75 billion since Russia's special military operation started in February 2022. Since US funds allocated for Ukraine ran out in December, the United States has been able to provide only a $200 million aid package in March.

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Global Private Credit Market Topped $2.1 Trillion in 2023 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The global private credit market exceeded $2.1 trillion in 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Monday.

“The private credit market, in which specialized non-bank financial institutions such as investment funds lend to corporate borrowers, topped $2.1 trillion globally last year in assets and committed capital,” the IMF said in a new report.

About three-quarters of these activities took place in the United States, where the market share is nearing that of syndicated loans and high-yield bonds, the report said.

The IMF noted that private corporate credit has created significant economic benefits by providing long-term financing to corporate borrowers. However, the IMF also warned about potential risks related to the migration of this lending from regulated banks and more transparent public markets to the “more opaque world.”

“Valuation is infrequent, credit quality isn’t always clear or easy to assess, and it’s hard to understand how systemic risks may be building given the less than clear interconnections between private credit funds, private equity firms, commercial banks, and investors,” the report

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said.

The immediate financial stability risks from private credit are limited now but existing vulnerabilities could become a systemic threat to the broader financial system, the report said.

"[C]ompanies that tap the private credit market tend to be smaller and carry more debt than their counterparts with leveraged loans or public bonds. This makes them more vulnerable to rising rates and economic downturns," the report also said.

Another potential risk lies in the increased competition from banks on large transactions and this development has put pressure on private credit providers to deploy capital, leading to weaker underwriting standards and looser loan covenants, the report added.

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Trump Says States Should Determine Abortion Rights

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump said on Monday that states should determine abortion rights by vote or legislation.

"My view is now that we have abortion where everybody wanted it from a legal standpoint, the states will determine by vote or legislation or perhaps both, and whatever they decide must be the law of the land. In this case, the law of the state," Trump said in a video shared on the Truth Social platform.

The former president acknowledged that regulations will likely be different depending on a state with some opting for more conservative or liberal approaches to the issue, including on the number of weeks within which abortion is legal.

Trump encouraged individuals to make the right choices for themselves and their families as well as for their children and for the country.

"At the end of the day, it's all about 'will of the people.' That's where we are right now and that's what we want - the will of the people," he stated.

Trump during his time in the White House appointed three of the Supreme Court justices who voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, a ruling that recognized women's constitutional right to abortion. As a result, the issue of access to abortion was left for the US states to decide.

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