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USEUCOM Says Tightening Air, Missile Defense Amid Russia-China-Iran-DPRK Partnership

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The US European Command said Thursday that it is tightening its air and missile defense as part of adjusting its posture to address the strategic partnership between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

"I'm under instruction from the 32 heads of state and government to tighten our air and missile defense," EUCOM Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli testified at a Senate armed services committee hearing.

Cavoli added that EUCOM was "working very closely with the interagency across all the instruments of national power" to try to disrupt and hinder the ability of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea to cooperate.

He also said that the US and NATO have also increased their battle groups and air policing on NATO's eastern flank and these will become long-term deployments.

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More NATO Allies Expected to Reach 2% of GDP Defense Spending by June – EUCOM

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The US European Command said Thursday that four to five more NATO allies are expected to reach the standard of 2% of GDP in defense spending by June, amid concerns that the US is shouldering the burden of the military alliance's defense costs.

"Norway just dropped a letter declaring its intention to close that gap by June, and I believe there will be three or four more before June of this year who meet 2%," EUCOM Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli testified at a Senate armed services committee hearing.

He noted that in 2014, there were only three of 32 NATO members who met the 2% threshold. Last year, this increased to 11 nations, and as of this moment, there are 20 nations meeting the threshold.

Cavoli said that the US and the NATO secretary general were actively encouraging the hold-outs to meet their 2% commitment.

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IMF Expects Rate Cuts in Major Advanced Economies in Second Half of Year - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund expects rate cuts in major advanced economies in the second half of the year amid inflation slowdown, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"We expect the trend to continue in 2024, creating the conditions for major advanced economy central banks to begin cutting rates in the second half of the year," Georgieva said in a curtain raiser speech ahead of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

In the final quarter of 2023, headline inflation for advanced economies was 2.3%, down from 9.5% 18 months earlier. At the same time, inflation in the median emerging market and developing economy, inflation declined to 4.1%, the IMF chief said.

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Medium-Term Outlook for Global Growth Just Above 3%, Below Historical Average - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The medium-term outlook for global growth is just above 3% and remains well below its historical average, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"Our medium-term outlook for global growth remains well below its historical average—just above 3 percent," Georgieva said in a curtain raiser speech ahead of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

Georgieva warned that without a course correction, the world risks heading into "the Tepid Twenties," which she described as a "sluggish and disappointing decade."

She also said that the global output loss since 2020 totaled around $3.3 trillion, with the costs disproportionately falling on the most vulnerable countries.

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World Has Avoided Global Recession, Risk of Stagflation – IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The world has avoided the risks of global recession and stagflation, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"We have avoided a global recession and a period of stagflation—as some had predicted," Georgieva said in a curtain raiser speech ahead of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

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US, Australia, Japan, Philippines to Conduct More Joint Sails in S. China Sea - Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States, Australia, Japan and the Philippines will conduct more joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea amid raised tensions between Manila and Beijing over several disputed islands, a senior US official said during a press briefing.

"Over this past weekend, the United States, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia held a joint naval patrol in the Philippines, you can expect to see more of that in the month ahead," the official said on Wednesday.

During the first-ever US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit later in the day, the United States will announce upcoming Coast Guard patrols in the coming year in the Indo-Pacific, building upon the first Coast Guard patrol that was held in 2023, the official added.

On Sunday, the four countries conducted their first maritime patrol in the South China Sea in a show of force following several recent incidents between Chinese and Philippine ships.

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

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

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US to Announce Support for Development of Luzon Corridor in Philippines - Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States will take part in several infrastructure projects in the Luzon corridor in the Philippines to accelerate coordinated investments, including in clean energy, semiconductors supply chains and in rail, a senior US official said during a press briefing.

"We'll be announcing an important set of new infrastructure projects known as the PGI Luzon corridor, the first ever PGI corridor in the Indo-Pacific which will connect Subic Bay, Clark, Manila and Batangas in the Philippines to accelerate coordinated investments in high-impact infrastructure projects, including ports, rail, clean energy, semiconductors supply chains and other forms of connectivity in the Philippines," the official said on Wednesday.

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US Justice Department Says Proposing Rule to Bolster Background Checks for Gun Purchases

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Thursday that it is proposing a new rule to clarify the scope of federal firearms licensing in an effort to increase the number of background checks for gun purchases.

"Under this regulation, it will not matter if guns are sold on the internet, at a gun show, or at a brick-and-mortar store: if you sell guns predominantly to earn a profit, you must be licensed, and you must conduct background checks," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement.

The rule clarifies circumstances in which a person is engaged in the business of selling firearms, and thus required to obtain a federal firearms license, the statement said. Federally licensed firearms dealers are required to run background checks prior to gun sales.

In March 2023, US President Joe Biden directed the Justice Department to develop and implement a plan to clarify the definition of who is engaged in firearms dealing subject to federal regulation. The new rule clarifies conduct that presumptively requires a license under a revised definition included in the June 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.

The rule takes effect 30 days after publication in the Federal Register.

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Musk Slams 'Extreme' Abuse of Judicial Power in Brazil Amid Censorship Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - US entrepreneur Elon Musk said that he has never seen such an extreme abuse of judicial power as in Brazil, amid a newly flared-up conflict over censorship and disinformation.

"The people of Brazil ought to know that there is an abuse of judicial power to an extreme degree that we have not seen in any country on earth," Musk said on Wednesday evening in an online conference on his X platform, formerly Twitter. "I have never seen anything of this magnitude."

Musk claimed that unspecified Brazilian officials have threatened to cut off X entirely from Brazil, arrest the platform's employees and apply a $20,000 day fine.

Unless a user account broke a law, the account should not be suspended, Musk clarified his position.

Brazilian court opened an investigation into Musk last week after the entrepreneur accused Supreme Court Judge Alexandre de Moraes of violating the country's constitution and called for his resignation. This was preceded by alleged demands by Brazil's judiciary for X to block certain users over spreading information deemed fake.

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Space Debris in Orbit Could Threaten Space Station, Astronauts - Senior NASA Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The increase in human-generated satellite and other technological debris in low earth orbit (LEO) could eventually become so bad, if not limited and cleared up, that it could threaten the International Space Station (ISS) and the activities of astronauts and cosmonauts, NASA Space Missions Directorate Associate Administrator Kenneth Bowersox told the agency Space Symposium.

"The orbital debris risk is one of the highest for the space station and humans operating in low earth orbit," Bowersox told the symposium on Wednesday. "Eventually we may have to stop operating with humans in low earth orbit "

Bowersox said he did not assess that danger as imminent or great at the moment, but it could become serious if not soon addressed by spacefaring nations.

"I think we 're a long way from that but it is not impossible if we don't take steps now to think about the future," he said.

There are currently 9,800 satellites from different countries operational in Earth orbit with another 2,000 defunct ones that are also still in space, NASA Deputy Administrator Pam Melroy said on Tuesday. There are also half a million pieces of human technology space debris between 1 centimeter to 10 centimeters in diameter, and 18,000 greater than 10 centimeters in diameter currently in orbit, NASA said. On Tuesday, the US space agency released the first volume of its sustainability strategy to monitor, coordinate, and try to cope with the vast amounts of space debris in orbit.

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US Army Orders Nearly $460Mln in Radios, Components From BAE Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered an almost $460 million contract from BAE Systems Information and Electronic Systems to provide AN/ARC-231/A Multi-mode Aviation Radios, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

“BAE Systems Information and Electronic Systems [of] Fort Wayne, Indiana was awarded a $459,802,408 ...contract for AN/ARC-231/A Multi-mode Aviation Radio," the release said on Wednesday.

The order also includes the supply of hardware components, repair services, and technical/engineering/logistic support, the Defense Department said.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take a decade with an estimated completion date of April 9, 2034, the Defense Department said.

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Trumps Says 'Disinformation Machine' NPR Should Not Receive Funding

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Former US President and presumptive 2024 Republican Party presidential nominee Donald Trump said in a statement that the public news organization National Public Radio (NPR) is a source of disinformation that should not receive US government funding.

"No more funding for NPR, a total scam! Editor said they have no Republicans, and is only used to 'damage Trump.' They are a liberal disinformation machine. Not one dollar," Trump said via social media platform X on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, an article by NPR senior business editor and reporter Uri Berliner for media outlet The Free Press detailed NPR's political biases. An "open-minded spirit" no longer exists at NPR, Berliner said, adding that the organization is negatively impacted by a lack of viewpoint diversity.

Specifically, NPR's coverage of Trump transformed into an effort to "damage or topple" his presidency, he said. Berliner characterized NPR's coverage of alleged collusion between Trump and Russia as a "miscue" and criticized the organization's unwillingness to cover the Hunter Biden laptop story.

NPR is funded through grants from the publicly funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CBP), corporate sponsors and revenue from member stations. NPR claims that, on average, less than 1% of its annual operating budget comes in the form of grants from CPB and federal entities.

Nevertheless, federal funding is "essential" to NPR, according to the organization's website. Eliminating federal funding would result in fewer programs and the loss of stations in rural and economically distressed areas, NPR said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) –

MIDDLE EAST

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday said in a conversation with Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of the political office of the Palestinian movement Hamas, that Israel would answer in court for its crimes, Erdogan's office said.

* An Israeli strike on the Gaza Strip killed three sons and several grandchildren of Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of the political office of Hamas, Al Jazeera reported.

* Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of the political office of Hamas, said that the death of his sons will not affect the movement's demands for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

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* Statements made by US representatives at the UN regarding Washington's disagreement with some provisions of the resolution on a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip are destructive, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Wednesday discussed in Moscow with UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland the situation in the Middle East, primarily in the Gaza Strip, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Wednesday urged EU member states to step up military support to Ukraine, particularly in the form of air defense systems and ammunition, after a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.
* Ukraine is unlikely to retake Crimea from Russia, US House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Adam Smith said.
* Russia has been able to quickly repair energy infrastructure targeted by Ukrainian forces, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said.
* NATO countries are talking about a myth of Russia's cyber "aggression" but, at the same time, they help Ukrainian hackers in their attacks on Moscow, Artur Lyukmanov, the director of the international information security department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, told Sputnik.
* The United States is concerned about Ukrainian strikes on civilian energy infrastructure in Russia, Wallander said.

US-JAPAN TALKS

* Two Japanese astronauts will join future US space missions and one of them will be the first non-American to land on the Moon, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.
* The United States, Japan and Australia will create a network system of air missile and defense architecture, Biden said.
* The United States will change its force structure in Japan for the first time to make the most of joint operations and better integrate the forces of the two allies, a senior US defense official said.
* The United States and Japan will form a military-industrial council to examine potential co-production of arms, a senior Biden administration official said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIAN BUSINESSMEN

* The European Commission will study the decision of the Court of Justice of the European Union to lift sanctions against Russian businessmen Petr Aven and Mikhail Fridman, as well as its legal and practical implications, a EU spokesperson told Ria Novosti on Wednesday, adding that the decision on the need to appeal the verdict would be made by the EU Council.
* Businesspeople are able to challenge sanctions imposed by the European Union and are using this right, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said when asked about the bloc's decision to annul personal sanctions against Aven and Fridman.

UKRAINE PEACE SUMMIT IN SWITZERLAND

* The Swiss government has decided to hold a peace conference on Ukraine in Burgenstock in June, Swiss President Viola Amherd said on Wednesday.
* Russia will not attend the first peace conference on Ukraine in Switzerland, and no peace process is possible without Moscow, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis said.
* Russia needs to participate in the peace process on Ukraine "sooner or later," and it is necessary to think about ways to invite Moscow, Cassis said.

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RUSSIA-US COOPERATION

* Cooperation between Russia and the United States on the peaceful use of space continues, this is important, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* It is impossible to communicate with a country that aims to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia, Artur Lyukmanov, the director of the international information security department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, said on Wednesday when asked about the possibility of Moscow-Washington cyber security talks.

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UPDATE- At Least Two People Shot At End of Ramadan Celebration in Philadelphia - Reports

(Updates with new info in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - A shooting in a large crowd of people celebrating the end of Ramadan in Philadelphia has left at least two people shot, local media reported on Wednesday.

At least two people were shot in the Parkside section of Philadelphia, with a massive police response currently underway, ABC 6 reported.

Two groups are believed to have exchanged gunfire on the street, while at least one officer fired shots at a gunman, CNN reported, citing a law enforcement official.

Moreover, one pedestrian who was running from the scene of the shooting was hit by a car, according to ABC6.

The shooting occurred in an area where locals had gathered to mark Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan. Five people have been detained so far, four of whom are carrying arms, NBC10 reported citing police.

The officials are expected to soon provide details of the incident during the press conference.

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Oil Snaps Loss, Swings Back To $90 On Talk Of Iran Attack Plan For Israel

NEW YORK, April 10 (Sputnik) - Oil markets snapped two straight days of losses, with global crude benchmark Brent swinging back into the $90-per-barrel territory on Wednesday after Iran and its proxies were reported to be readying to carry out attacks against Israel in the coming days.

Reports that three sons of a Hamas leader were killed in an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip added to the upside in oil.

London-based Brent crude settled up $1.06, or 1.2% at $90.48 per barrel in New York trading. The global crude benchmark lost nearly 2% in two previous sessions. On Friday, Brent hit a five-month high of $91.91 after finishing the first quarter up 13%.

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West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, finished New York trading up 98 cents, or 1.2%, at $86.21. Like Brent, the so-called WTI benchmark lost 2% in two previous sessions. On Friday, WTI hit a five-month high of $87.63 and ended the first quarter up 16%.

Crude prices rebounded after Bloomberg reported that the United States and its allies had learned the probability of Israel coming under an imminent attack from Iran and its proxies.

The likelihood of an Iran attack on Israel has grown since an Israeli airstrike that killed two top generals and five other military advisers at the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus.

Iran is a key member of the 13-nation Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. The so-called OPEC group has already been curtailing its oil output over the past two months to force crude prices higher.

Disruptions to crude shipments out of the Middle East have been steadily pushing oil markets higher since the start of 2024, with Brent now up 17% on the year and WTI nearly 20% higher. If Iran enters the Gaza war against Israel, it will add fuel to a market already ablaze from geopolitical frictions, analysts said.

According to the Bloomberg report, based on assessments from US and Israeli intelligence, a potential assault against Israel may happen in the coming days and would likely rely on high-precision missiles.

Citing intelligence sources, the report said Israeli military and government targets were being eyed by Iran and its proxies, in what could be a significant widening of the Gaza conflict that erupted anew in October after Palestinian Hamas fighters launched aerial attacks on the Israel side of that territory.

President Joe Biden added to the speculation when he told reporters at the White House that he was aware of the threat posed to Israel by the Islamic Republic.

At a news conference held jointly with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, where the two announced matters of bilateral and international cooperation, Biden said: “We also want to address the Iranian threat. They’re threatening to launch a significant attack in Israel. As I told Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, our commitment to Israel's security against these threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad. Let me say it again, ironclad. We’re going to do all we can to protect Israel’s security.”

Meanwhile, Pentagon officials, when contacted by Sputnik, said they had no information to provide on a possible imminent strike against Israel.

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At Least Two People Shot At End of Ramadan Celebration in Philadelphia - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - A shooting in a large crowd of people celebrating the end of Ramadan in Philadelphia has left at least two people shot, local media reported on Wednesday.

At least two people were shot in the Parkside section of Philadelphia, with a massive police response currently underway, ABC 6 reported.

Two groups are believed to have exchanged gunfire on the street, while at least one officer fired shots at a gunman, CNN reported, citing a law enforcement official.

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Moreover, one pedestrian who was running from the scene of the shooting was hit by a car, according to ABC6.

The shooting occurred in an area where locals had gathered to mark Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan.

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US Army Secretary Says Hopeful for 'Good' Hypersonic Test Later This Year, But Challenging

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The US Army is hopeful it will conduct a good test later this year of its Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, a joint development program with the US Navy, but it has been difficult to identify issues during testing, US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Wednesday.

"I think some of the testing we've done ... it's harder to determine where the problem areas are when you're testing multiple things all at the same time," Wormuth said during a congressional hearing. "So we are moving to trying to have a more sequential approach to our testing so that we can really nail down where we have issues. We're hopeful that we'll have a good test later this year."

Wormuth did not give an exact date for the upcoming test.

The US Army had initially planned to have the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon ready by the fall of 2023, but that timeline has been delayed after a series of failed or aborted tests.

The Army and Navy last year aborted flight tests in March, October and November due to "challenges at the range."

The US Air Force is also working to develop a hypersonic cruise missile that it aims to field by 2027.

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Japan Will Work to Bolster Ties With NATO - US-Japan Joint Leaders Statement

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan look forward to bolstering cooperation between Japan and the NATO alliance, US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Wednesday.

"As the linkages between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions have become stronger than ever, our two countries look forward to continuing to work together to enhance Japan-North Atlantic Treaty Organization and NATO-Indo-Pacific Four partnerships," Biden and Kishida said in a joint statement.

The statement comes amid a state visit to the US by Kishida, which includes meetings with Biden.

The US and Japan announced several new strategic initiatives to cooperate on security, space,

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technology and climate action as part of Kishida's visit, the statement said.

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Congress Impasse on Supplemental Bill Could Affect US Military Footprint in Europe - Army

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Congress' failure to pass a supplemental bill soon will affect the US military's footprint in Europe and its ability to participate in exercises with allies in the region, US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Wednesday.

"If we don't get that supplemental, we're going to not have money basically by the end of May to be able to get the current units who are over there in Europe doing the reassurance mission, we don't have the transportation money to have them redeploy, we don't have the transportation money to send units to backfill them," Wormuth said during a congressional hearing.

The US military also will not be able to support its participation in exercises in the European Command area of responsibility in the third and fourth quarter if a supplemental bill is not passed by Congress soon, Wormuth said.

The supplemental bill provides $48.43 billion in additional US support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia through military training, intelligence sharing, increased presence in the European Command area of responsibility and via other support activities through December 31.

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US Working With Private Firms to Invest in Cheaper, Effective Counter UAS Systems - Army

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The US military is working with private companies to invest in cheaper but effective systems to shoot down drones, US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Wednesday.

"We are working with companies... to try to invest in smaller, very effective, but less expensive types of UAS [unmanned aircraft systems] and counter UAS systems," Wormuth said during a House of Representatives hearing.

Wormuth made the comment in response to lawmakers' concerns about the United States using costly missiles to shoot down inexpensive Houthi drones in the Red Sea.

The Army chief added that there is a lot of potential in ongoing US investments to develop a laser capability that can shoot down drones.

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Biden Says US Promise To Protect Israel From Iran 'Iron-Clad'

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - America's promise to protect Israel from an Iranian attack is "iron-clad", President Joe Biden said on Wednesday after Bloomberg reported that the United States and its allies believed the Islamic republic and its proxies were planning major missile or drone strikes against Israeli targets.

"We also want to address the Iranian threat," Biden told reporters. "They're threatening to launch a significant attack in Israel. As I told Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, our commitment to Israel's security against these threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad. Let me say it again, ironclad. We're going to do all we can to protect Israel's security," Biden said during a news conference with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

Bloomberg, citing intelligence sources, reported on Wednesday that Israeli military and government targets were being eyed by Iran and its proxies, in what could be a significant widening of the Gaza conflict that erupted anew in October after Palestinian Hamas fighters launched aerial attacks on the Israel side of that territory.

Based on assessments from US and Israeli intelligence, the potential assault may happen in the coming days and would possibly rely on high-precision missiles, the report said, adding that it was more a matter of when, not if, for such an eventuality.

Meanwhile, Pentagon officials, when contacted by Sputnik, said they had no information to provide on a possible imminent strike against Israel.

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Biden Plans to Shrink US Navy as China Challenge Grows 'Troubling' - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's plans in the upcoming Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget to allow the US Navy's surface fleet to further shrink in numbers, despite the growing maritime challenge from China is "troubling," US House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Ken Calvert said on Wednesday.

"I am concerned that the Navy is falling behind, it is falling behind," Calvert said. "The Navy continues to decommission ships faster than it builds them and I am troubled."

In the proposed FY 2024 budget, the Navy requested Congressional approval to decommission ten ships and build only six new ones, Calvert said.

"The Navy also proposes to buy fewer [F-35] strike fighter aircraft than we previously planned," Calvert also said.

The proposed budget also delayed the purchase of critical next generation platforms for the Navy in all domains, Calvert added.

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US Navy Lost Path to Deploying Columbia Strategic Missile Sub On Time - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has lost sight of its top priority "critical path" for delivering the first new Columbia Class strategic nuclear submarine to the fleet and the program is now seriously behind schedule in an unacceptable way leaving no more margin for delays and failures, House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Ken Calvert told a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"Congress has funded every dollar requested for this program [yet] now it is delayed by at least a year leaving no more margin for failure for the rest of the decade," Calvert said. "I want to know how the Navy lost sight of the critical path to delivering this vital platform to the fleet. ...It is simply unacceptable."

Calvert explained he was "especially concerned" about the continuing and accumulating delays in the construction of the lead vessel in the Columbia class strategic nuclear submarine program.

"This program is the Navy's top priority and fundamental to our nuclear triad [the ground-based, undersea-launch, and aircraft-carried three components of the US strategic nuclear missile force]," Calvert said.

Problems with the US nuclear submarine construction program also extended to the Virginia-class attack subs where production remained at a rate, or "cadence" of only 1.2 per year as opposed to the necessary production and replacement rate of two new Virginia-class submarines per year, Calvert pointed out.

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US House Rejects Procedural Measure for FISA Section 702 Reauthorization

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday rejected a procedural measure to advance legislation to reauthorize Section 702 authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

House lawmakers rejected a combined rule for consideration of the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act in a vote of 193 in favor and 228 opposed.

Last week, US House Speaker Mike Johnson urged lawmakers to support the legislation, which includes Section 702 reforms but does not include a warrant requirement to conduct surveillance.

"It is critically important that we succeed in passing these reforms next week because the April 19th expiration of FISA's Section 702 authority is quickly approaching. If our bill fails, we will be faced with an impossible choice and can expect the Senate to jam us with a clean extension that includes no reforms at all," Johnson said in the letter.

Earlier on Wednesday, former US President Donald Trump urged lawmakers to "kill FISA," claiming that the surveillance power was used to illegally spy on his campaign.

FISA Section 702 permits the US government to conduct targeted surveillance of foreign persons located outside the US. However, lawmakers have been pursuing reforms to the

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authority, after an investigation revealed that the US government abused the surveillance power hundreds of thousands of times.

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Delays, Problems Plague US Navy New Ships, Upkeep Despite $2Bln Boost - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The US Navy's shipbuilding program is being seriously delayed by "gross inefficiencies and problems" despite an additional expenditure of almost $2 billion that had been approved to solve the issues, US House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Ken Calvert said on Wednesday.

"My concern [is} regarding the nearly $2 billion requested for completing ship construction that was previously funded," Calvert said. "In a time of constrained budgets, this reflects the gross inefficiencies and problems in our shipbuilding program."

Issues plaguing the shipbuilding and maintenance programs included lack of experienced manpower at public shipyards, inconsistent demand signals from the Defense Department and successive administrations and government paperwork delays, Calvert said.

The almost $2 billion extra expenditure "is a historic level of traditional funding that represents cost overruns driven by schedule delays and poor program execution. ...The committee continues to see the Navy spend every cent appropriated for ship maintenance but complete fewer capabilities than forecasted," Calvert also said.

The Navy's capabilities and capacity were being further eroded by the maintenance delays that plagued the fleet, Calvert added.

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Delays, Problems Plague US Navy New Ships Despite $2Bln Boost - Congressman

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US, China Keep Improving Lines of Communication With One Another - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Wednesday that the US and China continue to improve lines of communication with each other.
"[W]e keep improving our lines of communication with one another," said Biden during the press conference.

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Musk Says Will Meet With Indian Prime Minister Modi

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Wednesday that he will visit India for a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
"Looking forward to meeting with Prime Minister [Narendra Modi] in India," Musk said in a statement via the social media platform X.
Earlier on Wednesday, US media reported that Musk is expected to announce plans to open a new Tesla factory in India.
Musk and other Tesla executives will meet with Modi in New Delhi the week of April 22, the report said, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

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ANALYSIS - Congress Still Likely to Approve All or Part of $61Bln Ukraine Aid But Too Late to Help

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The long-delayed $61 billion in additional military and economic aid to Ukraine will still be approved in Congress given that the funds benefit the US military-industrial complex and no lawmaker wants to be held responsible for the looming collapse of the Volodymyr Zelenskyy's regime in Kiev, former intelligence and military experts and other analysts told Sputnik.

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Congress reconvened this week after its Easter break with the fate of the Ukraine aid package passed with strong bipartisan support in the US Senate still unresolved.

Former CIA and State Department analyst Larry Johnson said the immense power of the main US defense contractors virtually guarantees that the aid package will be approved as it provides more revenue and profits to them.

"I think the approval will occur if most of the money is designated to go to US defense contractors," Johnson said.

However, large amounts of direct aid to the Zelenskyy regime may be drastically cut back or blocked entirely, Johnson said.

"Money to be sent to Ukraine is not popular and would not likely be approved," Johnson added.

UKRAINE AID BILL LIKELY TO BE APPROVED

Approval of the aid bill is not yet imminent but will probably come before the end of this month, retired US Army Lt. Col. and former Vice President of the Eurasia Group Earl Rasmussen said.

"After several months following the Senate passage of the Ukrainian bill combined with the continuing collapse of the armed forces of Ukraine, pressure is mounting on US House Speaker [Mike] Johnson to move forward," Rasmussen said.

Johnson has many things to deal with following the Easter recess, including a challenge within the anti-Ukraine/border security contingency within his own party, and it is doubtful that any action will be taken this week regarding Ukraine aid, Rasmussen said.

Instead, congressional focus will be on reauthorizing/extending Section 702 (regarding warrantless surveillance) of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, and passage of funding for the cleanup and reconstruction of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, he said.

"The bridge cleanup is very critical to address not only shipping and trade issues but also US Navy logistical support," Rasmussen said.

Once that issue was addressed, Johnson and the House of Representatives would likely turn back to the Ukraine aid package, he said.

"I would expect some aid bill to come to the floor this month sometime within the next two to three weeks," Rasmussen said.

Johnson would be reduced to seeking Democratic support to stay in the Speaker's chair against his own Republican right wingers and the price for their support would be passage of the Ukraine aid bill, he said.

"A key component of this is to ensure the votes are there not only for the bill but also to protect Johnson from a potential threat to vacate him from the speakership, he will likely need Democratic support in both," Rasmussen said.

The House of Representatives could even seek to finance the aid by ordering the seizing of frozen Russian assets within the United States even though this would be devastating for the global credibility and financial stability of the United States, he said.

"There has been discussion to structure the aid as a loan and to leverage or illegally seize frozen Russian assets to assist in funding. The latter would be very dangerous and could set a precedence that would damage the US reputation internationally even more," Rasmussen said.

To ensure broad support, the Ukraine aid legislation would be folded into a measure to also boost aid to Israel and supposedly improve US land border security with Mexico, he said.

"I envision a bill coming forward in the next two or three weeks. I also believe that it will be less than initially proposed and will include border security and support for Israel," Rasussen added.

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DILUTING OPPOSITION TO THE AID BILL

University of Rhode Island Professor of Politics Nicolai Petro agreed that Johnson and champions of the bill would try to dilute opposition by watering it down and combining it with other measures.

"I suspect that some sort of face-saving political compromise will be found to send multi-year funding to Ukraine in this range," Petro said.

However, if the bill was passed, it could not affect the looming outcome of the war in Ukraine, he said.

"Although this aid will not make a difference in time to change the military balance on the battlefield, it will be carefully worded, so that it can be used as a talking point for all sides in this November's US political elections," Petro added.

Political commentator Bruce de Torres agreed that the current political momentum would still carry the bill through, despite lack of public support and growing congressional concerns about it and the administration's Ukraine policy.

"I would still bet it passes. Simply because Congress has thrown a lot of good money after bad, in Ukraine. Why not a few billion more?" de Torres said.

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US Air Force Secretary Warns About Potential of Chinese Space Superiority

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 10 (Sputnik) -US Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall on Wednesday highlighted US concerns over new Chinese space capabilities, noting that it can appear as if China has space superiority based on publicly available information.

"When one considers publicly available information on space order alone, it is possible based on sheer numbers alone to argue that China has achieved space superiority," Kendall said. "Of course, there's a lot more to the military balance of power and space than numbers alone. Especially publicly available numbers."

Kendall noted that as of January 2024, China had more than 900 satellites in orbit, over half of which have intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to detect US aircraft carriers, expeditionary forces, and air wings.

"These capabilities combine with a growing arsenal of precision weapons to enable long-range precision strikes against US and allied forces," he added.

Kendall went on to say that China has tested satellite inspection and repair systems that "can move satellites into graveyard orbits above geo."

Moreover, China has launched three usable space planes with a variety of potential military capabilities, the Secretary added.

"China has released minimal information about the purpose of these space planes," Kendall said. "The Chinese Communist Party continues its lack of transparency regarding military space doctrine, and its failure to adhere to our advanced global norms, increasing the risk of miscalculations."

China is moving at breathtaking speed in advancing its space capabilities, Stephen Whiting, US

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Space Command Commander said at the Space Symposium in Colorado Springs on Tuesday.
Whiting went on to say that since 2018, China has more than tripled its on-orbit intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance satellites.
Whiting also said that the United States would like to have a regular path to share safety information with China.

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US, Japan, Australia to Create Network of Air Missile Defense Architecture - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan and Australia will create a network system of air missile and defense architecture, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.
"We're also pleased to announce that for the first time Japan and the United States and Australia will create a network system of air missile and defense architecture," Biden said during a press conference alongside Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

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Two Japanese Astronauts Will Join Future US Missions, One to Land on Moon - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Two Japanese astronauts will join future US space missions and one of them will be the first non-American to land on the Moon, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.
"Two Japanese astronauts will join future American missions, and one will become the first non-American ever to land on the Moon," Biden said during a press conference alongside Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

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Russia's Chess Grandmaster Nepomniachtchi Among Favorites Of FIDE Tournament – Coach

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – Russian chess player Ian Nepomniachtchi is one of the favorites of the ongoing FIDE Candidates tournament in Toronto, but not the only one, Russian and US coach Boris Postovsky told Sputnik on Wednesday.
"Nepomniachtchi is one of the favorites, but there are two or three players who have equal chances to win," Postovsky said.
As a coach, Postovsky led the Russian national team, which won four Chess Olympiads. Under

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his leadership, the US national team took fourth place despite having no chess "stars" on the roster.

Postovsky admitted that while he would root for Nepomniachtchi, the Russian grandmaster cannot be considered an unconditional favorite, as several players, including Caruana, can compete with him.

The coach recalled that he worked with Nepomniachtchi on the Russian team during the 2016 Olympiad in Baku. The player had a brilliant start, scoring 6.5 out of 7 points. However, Postovsky noticed that the grandmaster became tired, although he did not feel it himself.

"I always tell Ian and other players that they have to help themselves during the game. You do not need to sit on the chessboard all the time, and it is important to stand up, move, wash your face with cold water, or do breathing exercises. This allows for improved blood circulation," he added.

During that tournament in Baku, despite advice from Postovsky for Nepomniachtchi to rest, Ian insisted that he was ready to play, and other coaches took his position into account.

"Nepomniachtchi lost the next game. You cannot adequately evaluate your condition, especially if everything is going well. You are tired but do not feel that. Ian has some problems here. He is an extraordinary player, but such little things are typical for him," the coach added.

Speaking of other favorites of the FIDE Candidates tournament, Postovsky stressed that Caruana has a good chance to win. He added that the American grandmaster grew up under the influence of Soviet and Russian chess players and worked with such talented coaches as Miron Sher, Boris Zlotnik, and others.

"But most of all, Caruana worked with my student Alexander Chernin, who began coaching him when his rating was about 2500. In three years, Fabiano already had 2670 points. In fact, Chernin made Caruana a super grandmaster," Postovsky said.

He also pointed out that Caruana is a very strong and stable chess player who works hard on himself.

Eight grandmasters are participating in the FIDE Candidates tournament in Toronto. The winner will play in a match for the chess crown with the current world champion, Ding Liren, from China.

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Wall Street in for Worst Loss in Week Amid Red-Hot US Inflation

NEW YORK, April 10 (Sputnik) - US stocks on Wednesday were headed for their sharpest daily loss in a week after higher-than-expected consumer price growth in March put the Federal Reserve further away from a targeted interest rate cut.

The US Labor Department reported earlier in the day that the Consumer Price Index expanded by 3.5% last month, beating Wall Street's 3.4% forecast and February's annualized 3.2% growth. The Fed's inflation target is 2% per year in order to begin easing interest rates, originally expected in the middle of this year.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, was down 59 points, or 1.1%, at the time of writing to 5,150. It marked the blue chip

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indicator's worst day since April 4, when the S&P closed down 1.2%.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee technology stocks, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, slid 173 points, or 1.1%, to 16,133. It was the Nasdaq's worst performance since March 8, when it lost 1.2%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equities indicator that tracks the stocks of 30 large US corporations, was at 38,382, down 502 points, or 1.3%. It was the Dow's sharpest loss since April 4, when it fell 1.3%.

Treasury yields surged instead as the Fed looked set to delay interest rate cuts, possibly to December or even 2025, according to some predictions. The yield on the US bond market's benchmark 10-year note rose 15 basis points to 4.513 after reaching a five-month high of 4.519.

Other so-called risk assets also swooned, with crude oil prices falling for a third day in a row, not helped by a surge in US crude stockpiles.

Analysts said the risk aversion could last as long as the Fed remained non-committal to interest rate cuts.

"Interest earnings on top-yielding accounts have been running well above inflation," Greg McBride, chief financial analyst at Bankrate.com, said in comments carried by MarketWatch. "If the Fed is delayed in cutting rates, that savings environment will last longer."

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Assange Lawyer Says 'Encouraging' Biden Considering Ending WikiLeaks Founder's Prosecution

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Julian Assange's lawyer Barry Pollack told Sputnik on Wednesday he found it encouraging that President Joe Biden confirmed he was considering Australia's request for the United States to end its prosecution of his client.

Earlier in the day, Biden told reporters that he is considering Australia's request to drop the US government's prosecution against Assange.

"It is encouraging that President Biden has confirmed that the United States is considering dropping its case against Julian Assange," Pollack said. "This unprecedented prosecution of someone for publishing truthful and newsworthy information should never have been brought. It is time to end the matter and allow Mr. Assange to return to Australia."

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Assange lawyer tells sputnik 'encouraging' that Biden confirmed considering Australia's request, says it's time to end prosecution

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US House Speaker Says Moving Forward With Motion to Vacate Threat Would Cause Chaos

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters on Wednesday that if his Republican colleague moves forward with a threat to remove him from his position it would cause chaos in the House of Representatives.

Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene recently filed a motion to remove Johnson from his position but has held off on requesting a vote pending his handling of key issues such as Ukraine aid funding.

"It would be chaos in the House," Johnson said regarding the motion to vacate. "So, Marjorie and I are going to visit later today."

House lawmakers are continuing to actively discuss their options on a path forward with the Senate-passed supplemental bill, which includes some $60 billion for Ukraine, but it's a very complicated matter and everyone feels that time is of the essence, Johnson noted.

Greene told reporters later on Wednesday after a House Republican conference meeting that how Johnson handles votes on renewing the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and how he handles funding for Ukraine may determine the next step on her motion to vacate.

Greene added that it's pretty clear and obvious that Johnson does not have the support of the House Republican conference.

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EUCOM Says Ukraine at 5-1 Deficit With Russia in Artillery Rounds

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department official said on Wednesday that Ukraine is suffering from a 5-1 deficit with Russia in terms of artillery rounds.

"They're already at a five-to-one deficit in artillery fire, as compared to the Russians, and that will obviously increase dramatically in the absence of a supplemental," European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said in a testimony before the US House Armed Services Committee.

Cavoli said that Ukrainian forces were already self-rationing their artillery rounds while waiting for the United States to pass the supplemental foreign aid bill and resupply them.

Congress has been caught in in-fighting for months over a supplemental foreign aid bill that would provide $60 billion for Ukraine, as well as additional aid to Israel and Taiwan.

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No Substantial Evidence Russia Tried to Influence Canada's 2019-2021 Elections – Blair

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – There is no substantial evidence pointing to Russian efforts aimed at influencing the outcomes of the 2019 and 2021 Canadian federal elections, Minister of

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National Defense Bill Blair said on Wednesday.

The Minister made the remarks while testifying before the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions. Blair was Canada's Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness at the time of both elections.

"I did not see substantial evidence of Russian efforts to influence our elections through disinformation … We have observed a fairly concerted effort among a number of hostile actors, including Russia, to engage in disinformation within our society, but not specifically directed at our electoral processes," Blair testified.

While Blair said he was not aware of any sort of activity involving Russian alleged disinformation campaigns to influence the country's elections, he did claim that Russia had attempted to influence other types of public opinion, something he did not elaborate on.

In addition, when asked whether he considered Russia to be part of the "hostile states" engaging in misinformation and disinformation both in Canada and internationally, the minister responded positively.

In early September, Canada announced a public inquiry into foreign interference in its federal elections and democratic institutions. The inquiry was mandated to examine and assess alleged interference by China, Russia, and other foreign states as well as non-state actors.

China and Russia have both dismissed Canada's claims of interference.

Quebec Court of Appeals judge Marie-Josee Hogue, charged with leading the inquiry, is set to deliver a first interim report by May 3 and a definitive assessment by December 31.

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Ukraine Unlikely to Retake Crimea From Russia - US House Panel Ranking Member

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is unlikely to retake Crimea from Russia, US House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Adam Smith said on Wednesday.

"We have got to get off of this Crimea trap that we have walked right into," Smith said during a panel hearing with Pentagon officials. "Realistically, Crimea is not coming back to Ukraine."

Ukraine does not have to retake Crimea for the United States' support for the regime in Kiev to be worthwhile, Smith said.

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Pentagon Says US Oversight of Ukraine Aid Could Diminish Without Supplemental Funding Bill

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States' ability to conduct oversight of Ukraine aid could diminish if the US Congress fails to pass a supplemental funding bill with support for Ukraine, US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said on Wednesday.

The US hires contractors to help conduct oversight of Ukraine aid with frontline units, Cavoli

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said during a US House Armed Services Committee hearing. The contractors are paid using supplemental funding, Cavoli said.

"The supplemental, if it's not renewed, I won't be able to perform that level of fidelity and outside third-party verification of what the Ukrainians are claiming is their accountability," Cavoli said, when asked about the potential impact of congressional failure to pass a supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine.

The Biden administration's supplemental funding request with billions of dollars of Ukraine-related funding has been stalled in the US Congress for months. The legislation cleared the US Senate but has yet to pass the House of Representatives.

US and Ukrainian officials have warned that Ukraine could face battlefield setbacks without further assistance.

Western countries have ramped up their military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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Oil Prices Under Pressure Again on Wednesday as US Stockpiles Surge 3rd Straight Week

NEW YORK, April 10 (Sputnik) - Crude prices came under pressure for a third day on Wednesday after US government data showed oil stockpile growth over the past three weeks that dampened the market.

Hampering oil bulls were higher-than-expected US consumer prices for March that would dissuade the Federal Reserve from reducing interest rates, which would be helpful to fuel consumption, analysts said.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, was down 0.4% in New York trading at $84.92 per barrel at the time of writing. The WTI has already lost 2% in two previous sessions. It ended the first quarter of 2024 up 16%.

Brent crude, the London-based global benchmark for oil, was down 0.3% at $89.17 per barrel in New York trading at the time of this writing. Brent had also lost around 2% in two previous sessions and finished the first quarter up 13%.

Crude prices began Wednesday's trading on a positive note amid little hopes of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the possibility for widening the conflict to include oil-producer Iran.

Iran said earlier this week that its forces would close the Strait of Hormuz straddling their country if such a move is deemed necessary. About a fifth of the volume of the world's total oil consumption passes through this strait daily.

Oil prices slid after data showed the US Consumer Prices Index growing 3.5% in the year to March, beating Wall Street's 3.4% forecast and February's annualized 3.2% growth. That was a sign that inflation is still running hotter than necessary for the US central bank to cut interest rates.

More pressure came on the oil market after the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said

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that domestic crude balances rose by 5.841 million barrels during the week that ended on April 5, after prior weekly builds of 3.21 million and 3.165 million.

A consensus of forecasts by energy analysts on Wall Street showed crude stockpiles were expected to rise by just 800,000 barrels last week.

Gasoline balances also increased by 715,000 barrels during the week that ended on April 5 after the prior decline of 4.256 million barrels, according to the EIA.

Distillate stockpiles were higher by 1.659 million barrels after a prior decline of 1.268 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also go into making airline fuel.

Notwithstanding Wednesday's slide, crude prices remain in an uptrend for the year, with Brent up around 16% and WTI gaining 18%.

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Russia Able to 'Rapidly Repair' Energy Infrastructure Attacked by Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Russia has been able to quickly repair energy infrastructure targeted by Ukrainian forces, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said on Wednesday.

"So far, the strikes that we have seen against Russian energy sources have not significantly altered Russia's ability to prosecute the war … I am not an expert on energy infrastructure, but the evidence we've seen is that the Russians have been able to rapidly repair the facilities that were struck," Wallander said during a US House Armed Services Committee hearing.

The US has concerns about Ukrainian strikes on civilian energy infrastructure in Russia, Wallander also said.

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US Supports European Efforts to Reduce Consumption of Russian Energy - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States supports efforts by European countries to reduce their reliance on Russian energy, US Assistant Defense Secretary for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"They've taken steps, and they can do more, and we fully support that and actively work with them," Wallander told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Wallander made the comment in response to a question as to whether the United States supports efforts to reduce Western Europe's consumption of Russian energy.

The United States and its allies have attempted to diminish Russian energy revenues through sanctions, following the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

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However, Wallander said the United States has concerns about Ukrainian strikes on civilian energy infrastructure in Russia.

In March, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the United States had asked Ukraine to refrain from striking Russian oil refineries.

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Biden Says US, Japan Building Stronger Defense Partnership, Stronger Indo-Pacific

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that the United States and Japan are forging a more robust defense partnership and "a stronger Indo-Pacific than ever before."

"Now our two countries [the US and Japan] are building a stronger defense partnership and a stronger Indo-Pacific than ever before," Biden said during Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's welcome ceremony at the White House.

Biden stated that the partnership with Japan is unbreakable.

During Kishida's visit to the US, the two countries are expected to agree to bolster their defense and security cooperation to enable greater coordination and integration of their forces, the White House said on Tuesday.

They will also announce some deliverables on civil space cooperation, the White House said.

The visit comes as the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) alliance is set to begin consultations with Japan on its possible participation in advanced capabilities projects.

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

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Pentagon Says EU Expects Supplemental Bill Passage to Provide Stop-Gap

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - A Defense Department official said on Wednesday that EU allies were acting as a stop-gap in lieu of US aid to Ukraine with the expectation that the United States will pass its long-awaited supplemental foreign aid bill.

"Europe has stepped up in the four months since we have been unable to provide capabilities and have announced billions of dollars of additional security assistance… However, they stop-gapped us in the anticipation that we will get that supplemental," Assistant Defense Secretary for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said in a testimony before the US House Armed Services Committee.

Wallander said that EU allies were unable to provide the artillery munitions and air defense interceptors normally provided by the United States that were critical to Ukraine's war effort.

Congress has been caught in in-fighting for months over a supplemental foreign aid bill that

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would provide $60 billion for Ukraine as well as additional aid to Israel and Taiwan.

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EUCOM Says Russia-Belarus Relations Headed in 'Wrong Direction'

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – The US European Command (EUCOM) said Wednesday that Russia's relations with Belarus were headed in the "wrong direction."

"Relations with Belarus are going in the wrong direction, and it's because of Russia and it does have military complications," EUCOM Commander General Christopher Cavoli testified at a House Committee on Armed Services hearing. He said that NATO allies had been facing the state weaponization of emigration, with the pushing of Ukrainian migrants into Poland and Lithuania and both countries responding by closing the border with Belarus.

Cavoli also noted the military implications of Russia-Belarus relations: If Belarus is an extension of Russia and its military is an extension of the Russian military, that closes the gap between the Russian Armed Forces and NATO, and that presents additional problems in terms of time, space, in strictly military terms."

Relations between Belarus and Western countries deteriorated sharply after the presidential elections in 2020 in Belarus. The West gradually imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials and enterprises, accusing Minsk of election and human rights violations, which Belarus denied. The sanctions were expanded due to Minsk's support for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022.

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Biden Says US Inflation Down 60% From Peak But Needs to Fall Further

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US inflation has fallen 60% from its peak during the COVID-19 pandemic but needs to ease more to alleviate the pain of ordinary Americans, President Joe Biden said in an election-year message on Wednesday.

"Prices are still too high for housing and groceries, even as prices for key household items like milk and eggs are lower than a year ago," Biden said in the message issued by the White House after the release of consumer price data for March. "Today's report shows inflation has fallen more than 60% from its peak, but we have more to do to lower costs for hardworking families."

The headline number for the Consumer Price Index grew 3.5% in the year to March, beating Wall Street's 3.4% forecast and February's annualized 3.2% growth, the data released by the US Labor Department showed.

The data suggested inflation was running hotter than expected for the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates - further adding to the burden of middle- and lower-income Americans.

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The Fed has indicated that inflation needs to come closer to its annualized 2% target for it to begin lowering interest rates.

The Fed has vexed itself trying to meet that 2% target since the coronavirus outbreak of four years ago that first sent rates crashing by busting the economy, then propelled them skywards by crippling supply chains for goods.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the central bank hiked rates by as many as 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023. That brought official lending rates to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% - versus the zero to 0.25% range introduced soon after the start of the pandemic.

The 5.25% to 5.5% range has been in place since July last year.

Biden said he had a plan to lower costs for housing "by building and renovating more than 2 million homes."

Biden also ratcheted up his reelection speech by calling on corporations, including grocery retailers, to use their record profits to reduce prices.

The president added a litany of campaign boosters such as "lowering costs for prescription drugs, health care, student debt and hidden junk fees."

"Fighting inflation remains my top economic priority," Biden said. "We're making progress: wages are rising faster than prices, incomes are higher than before the pandemic, and unemployment has remained below 4% for the longest stretch in 50 years."

Biden also took aim at Republicans and his likely political opponent in the November presidential election, former President Donald Trump.

"Rather than proposing solutions for hardworking families, Congressional Republicans want to slash taxes for billionaires and big corporations, while helping special interests and Big Pharma raise prices. I won't let them," Biden said.

Early polls suggest that Biden has a narrow lead over Trump.

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Biden Says Considering Australia's Request to End Julian Assange Prosecution

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that he is considering Australia's request for the United States to end its prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, according to the White House press pool.

"We're considering it," Biden said in response to a question about Australia's request that he end the US government's prosecution of Assange.

Last month, the United Kingdom's High Court of Justice in London further delayed the prospects of extraditing Assange to the United States, ruling that he has a real prospect of success on three of the nine grounds of appeal.

The High Court asked the US government to provide assurances that the WikiLeaks founder would be able to claim the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the right to free speech, press, religion, assembly and to petition the government for redress of grievances.

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The High Court also asked the US government to ensure that Assange would not be prejudiced at his trial due to his nationality and that he would not face the death penalty.

The next hearing is scheduled for May 20 if the parties submit the necessary documents.

Assange has been detained in the Belmarsh prison in London, arguably the harshest detention facility in the United Kingdom. The US government seeks Assange for publishing on WikiLeaks acquired video and textual information on its activities in various wars, which may be construed as violations of international law and engagement in war crimes, among others.

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US European Command Says Artillery Munitions, Air Defense Interceptors 'Critical' to Kiev

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – The US European Command (EUCOM) said Wednesday that the US contribution to Ukraine's war effort is most critical in its provision of artillery munitions and air defense interceptors.

"There are two places where the American contribution is critical. They're in the provision of artillery munitions, and interceptors for air defense. Those two things also happen to be the most critical things on the battlefield," EUCOM Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli testified at a House armed services committee hearing.

Cavoli called artillery the "biggest killer," and if the US stopped supplying these munitions, Ukraine would simply run out of them because the US supplies the "lion's share" of 155-mm shells.

He also said that Russia launched "very large-scale" air attacks every few days on Ukraine, and without the interceptors provided by the US, Ukraine's economy, civil society, and military would be "absolutely crippled."

Russia has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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US European Command Says Russia's Alleged 'Military Ambitions' Extend Beyond Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – The US European Command (EUCOM) said that Russia would not stop at Ukraine's borders if it was able to take the entirety of Ukrainian territory.

"I believe Russia would be emboldened…I believe at some point, they would commit further aggression" EUCOM Commander General Christopher Cavoli testified at a House Committee on Armed Services hearing.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander concurred, saying "Putin is not going to stop at Ukraine. Ukraine is a step towards undermining European security and the transatlantic alliance and therefore American security."

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Cavoli said that Ukrainian forces' chances of stopping Russia from advancing beyond their current footing would be “very good” if the US succeeds in getting additional military assistance to Ukraine now.

Western countries have ramped up their military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. 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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ISIS-K Demonstrates Intent to Target US Interests in Middle East – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The ISIS-Khorasan terrorist group (also known as ISIS-K, banned in Russia) continues to demonstrate the intent to target US interests in the Middle East, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Christopher Maier said on Wednesday.

"Despite the removal of key leaders since 2019, ISIS continues to demonstrate the intent to target U.S. interests in the Middle East and reconstitute military capabilities," Maier said in a written testimony prepared for delivery to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the terrorist group is also strengthening its connections to the broader ISIS enterprise and is increasing attacks across the region while exploiting links into Central Asian diasporas abroad to encourage attacks against the West, Maier said.

By way of argument, Maier noted during a hearing at the committee that the terrorist attack in the Moscow region in March is another confirmation that ISIS-K remains active.

In March, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla said in a congressional testimony that ISIS-K retains the capability and will to attack the United States and its Western allies abroad within six months.

ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the March 22 terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall in Russia, which resulted in at least 695 casualties, including 144 deaths, according to the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations.

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US on Track to Deploy Mid-Range Missile System in Asia-Pacific by End of Year - Army

(Adds China embassy comment in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to deploy a medium-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific by the end of this year, a US Army Pacific spokesperson told Sputnik.

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"Everything is on track to meet the goal by the end of the year," the spokesperson said regarding US plans to deploy a mid-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific.

This planned deployment of a mid-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific would be the first of its kind since the United States and Russia agreed to the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987. The INF Treaty previously prohibited the United States and Russia from possessing surface-launched medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometers.

However, both the United States and Russia withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019.

It's still unclear what US ally in the Asia-Pacific will host the mid-range missile system, but the United States reportedly hopes it will serve as a deterrent to China.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said the US plans to deploy the mid-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific will undermine regional stability.

"It's a dangerous move for the US to push for the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik. "It will pose a serious threat to regional countries and undermine regional peace and stability. China is firmly opposed to it."

The United States must refrain from introducing bloc confrontation, conflict and turmoil to the Asia-Pacific, Liu added.

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Biden Says Ukraine Aid Deadlock Due to Trump's 'Death Grip' on Republican Party

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's "death grip" on the Republican Party is the reason behind the ongoing deadlock surrounding the allocation of additional assistance to Ukraine, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"Trump runs that party. He maintains a sort of a death grip on it. Everybody's afraid to take him on whether they agree with him or not, and it's incredibly dangerous," Biden told Univision during an interview that aired on Tuesday night.

Biden made the remarks in response to a question about whether he was closer to reaching a deal with the Republicans on an additional round of military assistance to Ukraine.

The president said the last thing the United States needed was to see the dismantlement of NATO, which would be "a disaster" for the country, for Europe and for the world.

Biden claimed that the vast majority of Americans agree with him and a vote carried out by US House Speaker Mike Johnson would pass "overwhelmingly" by the Republican House and Senate majorities.

The president acknowledged that he had run out of ways to provide more assistance to Ukraine without the help of Congress and expressed hope Johnson would do what needs to be done.

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 of Representatives by Johnson, who prioritized working on budget legislation and exploring other routes for Ukraine funding.

Johnson recently said that the House of Representatives will work on the national security

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supplemental package right after the recess on April 9, noting that it will have some important innovations.

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However, both the United States and Russia withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019.

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Biden Says Examining Whether He Has Authority to Shut US Border

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he is exploring whether he has the power to close the US border with Mexico to prevent the unprecedented number of migrants entering the United States illegally.

"Well, I suggested that. We're examining whether or not I have that power," Biden said in an interview with Univision.

The president pointed out that there is no guarantee he can shut down the border without needed legislation, noting that some advisors have suggested that he try doing that anyway.

Biden's comments come after Republicans in Congress blocked a bill that included border security funding, saying it did not fully and satisfactorily address the illegal immigrant issue.

The Biden administration in October initially requested $106 billion in emergency funding to aid Ukraine and Israel in addition to border security.

But the legislation has remained blocked in Congress since amid the stalemate over the US border crisis. At least eight million migrants have entered the United States illegally since Biden assumed office in 2021, according to reports.

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

Top US General in Europe Says Ukraine Has Not Met Conditions for NATO Membership Yet

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – The US European Command (EUCOM) said Wednesday that Ukraine has yet to meet the two conditions outlined for NATO membership.

"NATO's agreed policy among the 32 nations is that when the time is right and all allies agree, Ukraine will become a member of the alliance. But those two conditions are an important part of NATO's position, and they have not been met yet," EUCOM Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli testified at a House armed services committee hearing.

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NSA Chief Says China, Russia Plan to Use AI to Develop Autonomous Cyber Weapon Systems

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - China and Russia are planning to use artificial intelligence (AI) to develop autonomous cyber weapons to optimize their offensive cyber operations, National Security Agency (NSA) Director Timothy Haugh said on Wednesday.

"We project that both the PRC [People's Republic of China] and Russia will use artificial intelligence to develop autonomous cyber weapon systems to optimize offensive cyber operations," Haugh said in a statement prepared for delivery to the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Haugh claimed that China and Russia have integrated cyber attack capabilities into military planning and operations to gain advantage during a potential crisis or conflict with the collective West, the statement said.

China, Russia and also Iran allegedly increasingly use social media and state-sponsored disinformation sites, both overt and covert, to shape narratives and sow confusion as well as to monitor troop movements of US forces, the statement added.

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US Concerned About Ukrainian Strikes on Civilian Targets in Russia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about Ukrainian strikes on civilian energy infrastructure in Russia, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said on Wednesday.

"When those are civilian targets, we have concerns, because Ukraine holds itself to the highest standards of observing the laws of armed conflict, and that's one of the elements of being a European democracy," Wallander said during a US House Armed Services Committee hearing, when asked about the Biden administration opposing Ukrainian attacks on Russian energy

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infrastructure.
However, it is Ukraine's sovereign decision on where to strike, although the US expresses its concerns, Wallander said.

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Ukraine 'Entirely Dependent' on Outside Support to Fight Russia - US European Command

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is almost "entirely dependent" on outside assistance to continue fighting against Russia, US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.
"Ukraine remains almost entirely dependent on external support to stay in this fight," Cavoli told the US House Armed Services Committee.
Ukraine could lose if the United States and its allies cut support to the regime in Kiev, Cavoli added.
Assistant US Defense Secretary for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said during the hearing that the United States must also be willing to support Ukraine if it chooses to engage in peace negotiations with Russia.

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US Consumer Prices Beat Forecast to Grow 3.5% in Year to March, Vexing Fed Further

(Changes headline, adds details and context in paras 3-14)
WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew 3.5% in the year to March, beating Wall Street's 3.4% forecast and February's annualized 3.2% growth, in a sign that inflation is still running hotter than necessary for the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates.
"The all items index rose 3.5 percent for the 12 months ending March, a larger increase than the 3.2-percent increase for the 12 months ending February," the Labor Department said in a news release, referring to the headline Consumer Price Index number.
Stripped of volatile energy and food costs, the so-called CPI has grown even more, expanding 3.8% over the last 12 months. For March alone, prices rose 0.4%, still above Wall Street's 0.3% forecast for the month.
The data made money-market traders less optimistic that the Fed would do a rate cut by June, as many had initially thought.
Now, bets seemed aligned for a September start to cuts, though a couple of decision makers at the central bank suggested last week that December — or even 2025 — might herald the beginning to that.
Along with the likely push back in the Fed's schedule, the market was also bracing for less generous cuts.

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"The Fed funds futures market is pricing in just 48 bps in easing," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum after the release of the CPI data. Earlier this year, the Fed forecast a 75-basis point rate cut for each of 2024 and 2025.

The central bank has long telegraphed to the market that inflation needs to come closer to its annualized 2% target for it to begin easing.

The CPI's 3.5% growth aside, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Index rose 2.5% in the year to March. The so-called PCE Index is another widely-followed US price gauge and also happens to be a Fed favorite for tracking inflation.

The Fed has vexed itself trying to meet its 2% inflation target since the coronavirus outbreak of four years ago that first sent rates crashing by busting the economy, then propelled them skywards by crippling supply chains for goods.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the central bank hiked rates by as many as 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023. That brought official lending rates to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% — versus the zero to 0.25% range introduced soon after the start of the pandemic.

The Fed's next decision on rates will be on May 1. But June 12 will likely be the more closely-watched date on the Fed's calendar when its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee meets again.

Almost every influential official at the central bank — from Chairman Jerome Powell to the heads of its different regional jurisdictions — wants either the PCE or CPI to make a meaningful descent toward the 2% target to force the Fed's hand. But it's also likely true that none of them believe that will happen by the mid-year point.

In fact, Neel Kashkari, president of the Minneapolis division of the Fed, said last week he could imagine a scenario where there will be no rate cuts at all for 2024.

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Biden Says Netanyahu Making 'Mistake' in Gaza

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in an interview that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's approach to the war in Gaza is a "mistake."

"I think what he's [Netanyahu] doing is a mistake. I don't agree with his approach," Biden told Univision in an interview aired on Tuesday night.

He also mentioned the recent IDF strike that killed seven World Central Kitchen workers.

The US president reiterated his call for a ceasefire in Gaza and urged Israel to allow in "the next six, eight weeks total access to all food and medicine" going into the enclave.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 33,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza

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Strip, according to local authorities.

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Russia 'Most Likely' Plans to Target US Elections in 2024 - National Security Agency

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - Russia has capable and persistent cyber forces and "most likely" will target the upcoming US presidential elections by using its malign influence again, Director of National Security Agency (NSA) Gen. Timothy Haugh said on Wednesday.

"Russia's military and intelligence cyber forces are capable and persistent," Haugh said in a statement prepared for delivery to the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "Moscow likely views the upcoming US election as an opportunity for malign influence and has previously targeted elections in the United States and Europe. We assess they will most likely do so again in this year's elections."

Despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia allegedly continues worldwide intelligence and operational efforts in support of its foreign policy, the statement said.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden extended his national emergency declaration concerning alleged harmful foreign activities by Russia.

Biden accused Russia of attempting to undermine US elections; engage in malicious cyber activities against the United States and its allies; undermine security in countries important to

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the United States; and violate the principles of international law.
In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia does not interfere in any elections and will work with any elected US president.
Last year, then-National Security Agency chief Paul Nakasone said that the agency had not seen evidence of attempts by Russia or China to affect the 2024 US presidential election.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Policy Rate at 5%, Says Inflation Still Too High

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada on Wednesday decided to maintain its policy rate at 5%, arguing that inflation remains too high in a situation in which economic risks persist.
"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the Bank Rate at 5¼% and the deposit rate at 5%. The Bank is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening," the statement said.
The Bank's Governing Council decided to hold the policy rate at 5% and to continue its work toward normalizing its balance sheets, the statement said.
Inflation at present remains too high but the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and core inflation have eased in recent months, the statement said.
Inflation is expected to remain close to 3% in the first half of 2024, move under 2.5% in the second half and reach 2% in 2025, the statement said.
The Governing Council will continue to seek evidence that inflation's downward momentum is sustained, the statement also said.
"The Bank remains resolute in its commitment to restoring price stability for Canadians," the statement added.
Bank of Canada is scheduled to release its next policy rate announcement on June 5.

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US Adds 11 Chinese, Russian, UAE Entities to Export Blacklist Over Security Concerns

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Commerce added 11 Chinese, Russian, or UAE entities on Wednesday to its export blacklist for allegedly acting contrary to US national security, according to a registry notice.
"The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) amends the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding 11 entries to the Entity List, under the destinations of the Peoples Republic of China (China) (6), the Russian Federation (Russia) (3), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (2). These entities have been determined by the US Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the notice stated.

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The entities in China include Beijing Anwise Technology Co., Ltd; LINKZOL (Beijing) Technology Co., Ltd.; SITONHOLY (Tianjin) Co., Ltd.; and Xi'an Like Innovative Information Technology Co., Ltd for acquiring US-origin items to support China's military modernization.

They also include Jiangxi Xintuo Enterprise Co., Ltd. for allegedly developing and procuring UAVs for Russia's military.

China's Shenzhen Jiasibo Technology Co., Ltd, and Russia's Aerosila JSC SPE, Delta-Aero LLC, and JSC ODK-Star are also named for purportedly procuring aerospace components for the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company (HESA). These components are used to develop and produce Shahed-series UAVs.

United Arab Emirates entities include Khalaj Trading LLC, and Mahdi Khalaj Amirhosseini, for allegedly violating sanctions on Iran.

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