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The Game Has Changed: Iran's Retaliatory Attack Revealed Israel's Military Weaknesses

The scale of Iran's attack forced Israel to uncover the majority of anti-missile technologies the US and it have across the region, one analyst noted. They add that the Iranians likely now have "almost a full map of what Israel's missile defense system looks like".

An article published in [Mondoweiss](#) on Sunday suggested that Iran's retaliatory attack against Iran was not a failure, after Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said that 99% of the launched missiles and drones were intercepted by Israeli air defense systems. The article notes that Iran declared its intentions to attack a week in advance and promised the US that its attack would be "under control" and conducted in a way that "avoids escalation".

On Tuesday, [Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) was joined by Dr. Jim Kavanagh, an independent journalist, to discuss Iran's recent response to Israel's attack over the weekend.

"This was not a failure on Iran's part. This was an action that has changed the game entirely," said Kavanagh.

"This is a new game now because what Iran demonstrated was that the Israelis were defended by the US. The US, Great Britain, France and Jordan - all of them acted in their defense and shot down [Iran's] missiles. They had a 72-hour notice. The Iranians did constrain themselves in the sense that they were targeting specific military installations. They didn't pick a broad target against any civilian targets or urban targets," he continued.

"What Iran demonstrated was that it would act against Israel, it could do so effectively and intelligently," he continued. "That was the best defended territory in the world, the best radar, the best air defense systems. Iran used seven missiles to target that and hit with five. So five or seven missiles struck the best defended and the best air defense territory in the world."

"What Iran demonstrated was that Israel is not safe," said Kavanagh.

Sputnik's Garland Nixon suggested that Iran's recent attack showed how Israel's military is extremely dependent on its Western allies.

"Isn't it strange that the US, Great Britain and France joined in a military attack? A military action with Israel. Where's the justification for that?" Kavanagh responded. "But they're not going to get 72 hours notice [again]. They're not going to get time for the Americans and British and France if there's a real attack. If it's all-out warfare, Israel is not going to have time. They're going to be hurt very badly. And, this is something they cannot stand."

"Israel knows all this. They know how weak they are," he added. "Israel has an ace in the hole that they will use if there's a general war with Iran, and that is nuclear weapons. And that's what they have them for, and that's what they will use to restore the intimidation over the world, over their regional adversaries at least."

On Monday, it was [reported](#) that Israel's military Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi said the country would respond to Iran's attack over the weekend while several of their allies from the West have urged them to avoid escalating the conflict.

The Biden administration has [reportedly](#) told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US would not back an Israeli counterattack. In less than 24 hours on Monday, Netanyahu reportedly summoned his war cabinet to discuss Iran's missile and drone attack.

"Iran is saying that the only thing Israel can do which would demonstrate its conviction would be to attack Iran directly, and if they attack Iran directly, Iran is going to respond. They're not going to sit and take it," Kavanagh suggested.

"Israel has been spoiled, they've been attacking Syria with impunity, attacking all the countries around them with impunity for decades. This is over. And that's why I say it's a change. They're not going to be able to attack Iran with impunity. Iran is going to strike back."

"The Biden administration doesn't want this. No, that's clear and maybe for electoral reasons," the journalist added, referring to the upcoming US presidential election. "The problem is the Israelis, they don't care about Biden. That's the problem. And, once they attack, the game is on. And it's not going to be very easy to control."

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Australia refused Palestinians visitor visas out of fear that their stay wouldn't be 'temporary'

In the first three months of the Israel-Gaza conflict, about 160 Palestinians were refused visitor visas by Australia mostly due to concerns that they would not stay temporarily, a recent report revealed. About 150 people were refused because they "did not demonstrate a genuine intention to stay temporarily in Australia", while ten others who applied were rejected for other reasons.

"It is beyond cruel to deny people fleeing the onslaught in Gaza the possibility of safety because they might be unable to return to their homes," added David Shoebridge, the Greens' immigration spokesperson. "Let's be clear, the main reason people would be unable to return to Gaza is because of the Israeli invasion, with 80% of homes in Gaza made uninhabitable."

This report comes after one made a month ago which revealed that some Palestinians who had been granted visas were experiencing cancellations. Nearly 2,300 temporary visas—allowing persons to travel to Australia but not work, access healthcare, or education—had been granted to Palestinians who had connections to Australia between October 7 and February 6. However, only 330 people made it to Australia during that time period.

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Pot Wants To Be Kettle

While Israel has operated its antagonistic acts against Iran and Palestine upon the background of unwavering US support, Kiev is determined to not be pushed to the sidelines.

On Monday, Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky compared the Western allies' support of Israel to that which he would like to see in [Ukraine](#). The Ukrainian president posted to Telegram on Monday writing, "European skies could have received the same level of protection long ago". Zelensky showered praise for the "allied action", that protected Israel from Iranian projectiles by shooting them down before they reached Israel's airspace. Zelensky claimed "no one was dragged into war" following the Western allies' response to Iran.

"It demonstrated how truly effective unity in defending against terror can be when it is based on sufficient political will. Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Jordan acted together and with maximum efficiency," Zelensky asserted.

"European skies could have received the same level of protection long ago if Ukraine had received similar full support from its partners in intercepting drones and missiles," he added.

"Terror must be defeated completely and everywhere, not more in some places and less in others."

However, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron shot back at the Ukrainian president's plea during an appearance on LBC radio on [Monday](#).

"We've done more than any other country individually to help the Ukrainians," Cameron told the station. "We've trained over 60,000 Ukrainian troops, we were the first to give them anti-tank weapons, long-range artillery and tanks."

He added that to "avoid an escalation in terms of a wider European war, I think the one thing you need to avoid is NATO troops directly engaging Russian troops. That would be a dangerous escalation."

Kiev has repeatedly urged its Western allies to provide protection from Russian airstrikes, going so far as to request a NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Ukraine, according to a recent [report](#).

The US and other NATO allies have also poured billions of dollars' worth of munitions, weapons and other military hardware to Kiev since February of 2022.

The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that any cargo containing weapons for Ukraine would become a legitimate target for Russia. He said the US and NATO are directly involved in the conflict not only by supplying weapons, but also by training personnel in Britain, Germany, Italy and other countries.

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'Justice Delayed Is Justice Denied': Abu Ghraib Victims See First Day in Court After Two Decades

Plaintiffs Suhail Al Shimari, Asa'ad Zuba'e, and Salah Al-Ejaili accuse CACI of conspiring to commit war crimes including torture. CACI is a Virginia-based professional services and

information technology firm hired in 2003 by the Bush administration as translators and interrogators in Iraq during the US-led invasion and occupation there.

Three Iraqi victims were finally given their day in court on Monday after waiting for nearly two decades regarding human rights abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. The case being heard in the US District Court in Alexandria, Al Shimari v. CACI was first filed in 2008 under the Alien Tort Statute which allows non-US citizens to sue for human rights abuses committed abroad, a recent [report](#) said.

On Tuesday, [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) was joined by Dan Kovalik, an American human rights and labor rights lawyer, to discuss the case. When asked about the case that came two decades after the three men were tortured, Kovalik quoted the adage; 'justice delayed is justice denied'. "They say justice delayed is justice denied. And I would say that is true in this case," said Kovalik.

"For people who remember the Abu Ghraib scandal when it first came out, I think it was Seymour Hersh, the journalist, who first exposed it and showed the photos. Ultimately, photos were exposed of prisoners stripped naked [and forced to] make a pyramid," the human rights lawyer said.

"And then, the soldiers would take selfies in front of that, and people were stood up on pedestals and made to at least believe that they were hooked up to electric shocks—and dogs [were also] sicked on people, and people's families [were] threatened and [people were] sexually abused," he added.

"And this was shocking to Americans at the time and it was a big scandal, but then it kind of went away. I mean, the truth is, it shouldn't be surprising to Americans. I mean, when you look at the Iraq conflicts," Kovalik continued. "[The US] destroyed a nation, [the US] killed millions of people, and, in the process, yes, many people were tortured. It shouldn't be surprising to people. And it's sad that now, 20 years later, they're getting their day in court."

Kovalik then suggested that many Americans who follow the mainstream news cycle are not thinking of this case which was first reported in [2004](#). At the time, news of the scandal broke with photos and videos of the alleged abuse being circulated creating a major scandal in mainstream news.

"But Americans aren't thinking of Iraq, they're not going to follow this trial, they're not going to follow what's happening with these folks, and they've moved on. Meanwhile, the Guantanamo torture chambers still exist. There's still a couple people left there. Most of the people who were brought to Guantanamo had nothing to do with terrorism, had nothing to do with 9/11, but they were tortured nonetheless, some tortured to death," he added.

Sputnik's Melik Abdul noted a May 2004 [report](#) by Major General Anthony Taguba which concluded that a majority [70 - 90%] of the Abu Ghraib prisoners were innocent, based on information from the Red Cross.

The [report](#) also found that some women and girls were jailed there as a way to pressure wanted insurgents to surrender. Some of the prisoners said they were raped or sexually abused by their American captors with lesser-known Abu Ghraib photos showing women being forced to expose their bodies. Following the female detainees' release, some of them were reportedly murdered by their relatives in "honor killings".

Eleven low-ranking US soldiers were convicted and jailed for their roles in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Former President Barack Obama had promised to investigate and potentially prosecute any Bush-era officials responsible for the torture but failed to do so.

"Torture has been part of the CIA's program since its inception," said Kovalik, when asked about the lack of accountability. "There are still CIA black sites around the world where people are being tortured as we speak, and this is all part of the US' attempt to rule the world. And part of that is dehumanizing people."

"The things they do are not under much oversight, and the American people generally don't even know what they're doing until years after it's done, if they ever do. And that's a big reason that Julian Assange has been held for years in prison and tortured himself in various ways because he exposed some of that himself through WikiLeaks and that's his punishment. So it's a grim situation, a grim situation."

Last week, US President Joe Biden told [reporters](#) that he is considering Australia's request for the US to end its prosecution of the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. That report follows a decision that was made last month by the UK's High Court of Justice in London which further delayed the possibility of extraditing Assange to the US.

"The US takes the position that the US has immunity in the world. It's not a party to the Rome Statute in the International Criminal Court. It says it's not even subject to the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. It does not want justice for its crimes, particularly those committed abroad, and I don't think you're going to see that justice anytime soon," Kovalik emphasized.

"The game plan has never been to try [Assange]. It's to hold him indefinitely and that's what's happened. He's been awaiting extradition from Great Britain for years now," he added. "Biden's polls are already sinking because of his policies in Gaza. To bring Assange here in chains is not going to be a good look for him. And he knows it, so he's got to find a way out of that situation."

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US Defense of Israel Shows West 'Has Never Been Committed' to International Law

Economist Radhika Desai said the United States' unwavering defense of Israel's deadly Gaza campaign proves the West is merely interested in upholding historic patterns of colonial subjugation and domination.

"Western powers never believed in a rules-based order," declared author and international law expert Richard Falk in [a blog post](#) on the Pearls and Irritations website Monday.

The noted professor at Princeton University disparaged the United States' foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, also criticizing its modern alliances with "special allies, such as Israel, Taiwan and Ukraine, no matter how deeply they challenged international law and evaded peaceful settlement procedures."

"The aftermath of the Cold War led to an era of geopolitical unilateralism," concluded Falk.

Economist Radhika Desai assigned another word to US foreign policy: imperialism. The author and researcher responded to Falk's article Monday on [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program](#).

"Richard Falk is one of the most respected progressive thinkers in the US," conceded Desai. "I suppose when I say the most respected it means he has a wide audience, and you can see that you can't really have a wide audience in the United States unless you make a lot of compromises."

"And so what frustrates me about this article is that while it reaches a perfectly good conclusion that I agree with, which is that the United States' support for Israel is leading to the current genocide in Gaza, etcetera, the fact is that he, in arriving at it, makes so many compromises." Desai challenged Falk's claim that the West wanted to create a world order genuinely rooted in respect for the sovereignty of other countries, insisting the colonial powers were unwilling to give up their global hegemony.

"The only reason the West was forced to at least pay lip service to doing that is because, number one, it couldn't have won the Second World War without the critical aid of the Soviet Union and Chinese forces," the economist claimed. "And, number two, because the developing world or what was then the colonized world was up in arms and the imperialism there had to end. So they had to appear to do this."

"After paying lip service to this, they couldn't win, they had to create a United Nations," she continued. "And even though they managed to win the Security Council – the permanent five rule – which allows a small number of countries a veto of what the rest of the UN decides, they had to include in it Russia and China. So they hated the United Nations and that's why they went off and created NATO."

Desai claimed the creation of Western-led institutions like NATO was designed to offer an alternative to the more egalitarian United Nations and its conception of international law. Through institutions like NATO the United States and its allies could continue to "make the rules as we go along," she argued.

Although frequently billed as a "defensive" alliance, the end of the Cold War and the United States' status as the lone global superpower allowed NATO to undertake a number of openly offensive military operations. NATO played a role in Western operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, but has perhaps been most criticized for its destructive role in the former Yugoslavia. NATO's 1999 bombing of Belgrade, which came on the heels of its 1995 campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was conducted in open defiance of international law after the United Nations Security Council vetoed the alliance's proposed action. Hundreds of civilians were killed in the assault while [increased rates of cancer and birth defects](#) are [still observed](#) decades later after NATO's use of radioactive depleted uranium in the operation.

"I think what's really emerging now is how the US has never been committed to anything vaguely like the United Nations Charter and anything vaguely like international law," Desai claimed as the Biden administration has [repeatedly undermined the UN](#) in recent months in its "ironclad" defense of Israel's Gaza campaign.

Host Garland Nixon agreed with Desai's analysis, offering his view "through the lens of a Black person in America."

"They were still literally hanging Black people for trying to vote in this 'victorious democracy,'" Nixon noted, criticizing Falk's characterization of the United States after World War II.

"[Operation Gladio](#) and all of the countries all over [Latin America and South America](#), they were thrilled. When I read this, I think I don't know what this guy's talking about. It's clearly, obviously, absurd imperialist propaganda."

"Most Western countries did not become democratic until after the Second World War," Desai observed. "The attempt to impose democracy [in Germany] after the First World War led more or less immediately to the rise of fascism because the elite was simply not prepared for popular power, and Hitler could never have come to power unless the elite supported him."

"In the United States, thanks to the Jim Crow laws that still pervaded all over the southern United States, it actually took the Civil Rights Movement to achieve even simple, ordinary, limited universal adult franchise in a meaningful way," she added. "So if you think about it, the United States did not become democratic until the 1970s."

"The fact of the matter is you can't talk about geopolitics," she concluded. "You've got to talk about geopolitical economy. Because what do you think all this militarism is about? It's about essentially material or economic plunder, oppression, subordination, etcetera. So let's call it what it is. The word imperialism very tidily encompasses that whole range of phenomena."

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'Anarcho-Capitalist' President Javier Milei Wraps Elite Subservience in Radical Package

Despite his anti-establishment rhetoric Argentina's president is pursuing familiar policies that place the country under the influence of Western financial institutions, according to analyst Caleb Maupin.

President Javier Milei [isolated](#) Argentina from economic partners and its South American neighbors recently with announced plans to consider sending military aid to Ukraine in its war against Russia.

The controversial leader revealed the proposal during an interview with US-based news outlet CNN in which he [called](#) Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador "ignorant" and labeled Colombian leader Gustavo Petro a "terrorist assassin." The impolitic remark about Petro led to Argentine diplomats being expelled from the country's embassy in Bogotá.

The controversy comes as Milei's approval rating has sunk amidst unyielding protest in Argentina. The country is coping with widespread [hunger](#) for the first time since the early 2000s as Argentina's economic challenges continue. Milei has been criticized in recent days after police violently repressed demonstrators in the nation's capital calling for support for the country's soup kitchens.

Analyst Caleb Maupin joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program on Monday to discuss the latest developments in Argentina, claiming the self-declared "anarcho-capitalist" Milei is attempting to sell elite-friendly neoliberal economics in a faux-radical package.

"I must say that I'm not shocked by Milei's behavior," said the journalist. "He pulled Argentina out of the BRICS talks. He has been mouthing nothing but hatred for both China and Russia since coming into office. He's a huge supporter of Israel and its atrocities against the Palestinians and what's going on right now."

"But what concerns me is that there are many people who are critical of US foreign policy... who seem to be under the impression that Milei is some kind of hero fighting the deep state, that he's somehow sticking it to the global elites," Maupin added. "I find this delusion to be very, very

frustrating. Milei is espousing [the ideology of the global elites](#), which is called neoliberalism, the belief that the market always renders the best solution, the belief that the state has no obligation to protect working people from unemployment, from hunger, etcetera.”

“A layer of people... seem to blindly believe this man is somehow on their side simply because he espouses libertarianism, simply because he frames things in terms of fighting globalism, fighting socialism.”

Milei rose to prominence as a political commentator on Argentine television, known for his bombastic rhetoric and criticism of the country’s political establishment. Many observers gave the upstart candidate [little chance of winning](#) the country’s presidency late last year. But Milei was able to channel deep discontent over Argentina’s dire economic straits after the Covid-19 pandemic into victory over Peronist candidate Sergio Massa.

“One thing that I think is worth pointing out is that part of the way Milei was able to build up support among the Argentine population is that many people in Argentina have been reduced to a very dismal existence by the so-called gig economy,” Maupin claimed. “They don’t have the status of being a regular worker with a regular work contract, working so many hours, guaranteed employment and such.”

“This existence – what some economists are referring to as the precariat, precarious employment – has made these folks very angry at the existing Argentine state that requires them to have certain licenses and taxes them at a substantially higher rate because they’re technically not employees, they’re technically business owners,” he explained. “I think that needs to be addressed because that’s an issue that’s not just affecting Argentina, it’s affecting our country.”

Maupin claimed that despite his anti-establishment rhetoric, Milei is merely pursuing familiar policies that place Argentina [under the influence of Western financial institutions](#).

“He’s now giving up Argentina’s currency, he’s trying to make Argentina at this point have the US dollar,” Maupin noted. “Look across the region. When Ecuador took these moves in the late 90s it completely destroyed Ecuador’s economy. Ecuador had a man-made famine in 1999 where people were starving and dying of malnutrition.”

“That’s what happens when you open up your economy to neoliberal looting,” he claimed. “All throughout Latin America in the 90s we saw Javier Milei’s policies implemented... Neoliberalism has been tried as an economic system, and it has failed. And just because you frame it now all of a sudden in anti-establishment rhetoric, you repackage it... the policies are still the same.”

“Neoliberalism is still the same, and free market policies are what the World Economic Forum and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and these huge globalist institutions, it’s what they’ve been pushing from the beginning.”

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Zelensky Green With Envy as West Comes to Aid of Israeli Ally

The United States’ provision of air defense to Tel Aviv has provoked jealousy on the part of Ukraine’s president, according to one analyst.

The United States rushed to the defense of Israel this weekend to help shoot down a volley of drones and missiles launched by Iran in a retaliatory strike for an attack on Tehran's Syrian consulate earlier this month.

The US was joined in their effort by the UK, flying out of their airbase in nearby Cyprus, and the Western-aligned regime in Jordan. Israeli media alleged that Saudi Arabia came to the aid of the country as well, although observers have [questioned](#) the veracity of those reports. The Gulf monarchy has walked a fine line in recent months, attempting to keep hopes of rapprochement with Tel Aviv alive while also acknowledging the pro-Palestinian sentiment of the country's population.

The dramatic (and reportedly highly expensive) show of force apparently led to some envy from another US ally, according to security analyst Mark Sleboda. The international relations expert joined [Sputnik's Fault Lines program Tuesday](#) to break down the Israel-Gaza conflict's ramifications for the US' relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

"I think that Zelensky has finally come to the realization as the new mistress that the United States is never going to leave its wife, despite all the promises that Joe Biden has given, all of the late-night dinners and the hotel rooms," Sleboda mused. "It's all gone wrong... there's a bit of envy."

"There was even an... interview with a Ukrainian academic, quote-unquote, saying how Ukraine is being two-timed by the United States with Israel and the rock on Israel's finger is much bigger or something like that, that they are souring on the United States. I mean if you didn't realize you were a proxy for US geopolitical motives, that's entirely your problem," the analyst stressed. Sleboda broke down some of the reasons he believes the United States was able to come to the aid of its Middle Eastern ally in a way it hasn't for Ukraine, noting that Israel is a much smaller country with an extensive air defense system in the Iron Dome. The analyst called the network "probably the second best air defense system in the world after Russia's, and very tailored to task."

"Ukraine is an enormous country with very far-flung assets and Russia is a nuclear power with very large conventional and air forces, and it makes a world of difference," Sleboda added. "It has to be said that the Kiev regime started out this conflict with a very formidable integrated Soviet legacy air defense network that took Russia about a year and a half to take apart, which is why only now are you starting to see the fruits of real Russian air superiority."

"Russian forces are apparently able to use SU-25 aircraft in an essentially close air support role because the Kiev regime has no air defense, certainly not on the front line, left," he concluded. "Ultimately the envy is at the moment primarily over air defense... [Zelensky] realizes he's going to get no more air defense, which is simply going to make the end of this conflict come faster than it would have otherwise."

Ukraine has become more insistent over its need for Western aid in recent months as US support has stalled amid domestic political infighting. "Give us the damn Patriots," [demanded the country's foreign minister](#) Dmytro Kuleba last month, referring to the US-developed surface-to-air (SAM) missile system Ukraine sees as crucial to its fight against Russia. [Germany finally relented](#) to Kiev's request recently, pledging to provide Ukraine with a third Patriot system after previously rejecting the idea.

Israel also enjoys far more deeply-rooted political support in the United States, a phenomenon exemplified by former President Harry Truman [who bluntly observed](#), “I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism... I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents.” US President Joe Biden has long described himself as a Zionist, while [Christian Zionism](#) is a powerful force in conservative US politics. Support for Ukraine, meanwhile, has become an increasingly [unpopular](#) cause in the United States, led by opposition from Trump-aligned “America First” conservatives who question Biden’s aid to the country.

Host Melik Abdul inquired about domestic Ukrainian politics, questioning whether people there see the country’s president as a strong or capable figure after being repeatedly rebuffed in his requests for US aid.

“First of all, Ukrainians do live very largely under a very tight propaganda bubble with all media in the country taken under a unified information policy,” noted Sleboda. “That said, enough does get out.”

“Take opinion polls under the Kiev regime with a grain of salt,” he added. “But the opinion polls do show Zelensky’s approval rating dropping. He doesn’t project strength at home. And we’ve seen some other interesting elements in the battlefield in the last few days that are apparently confirmed by Zelensky.”

Sleboda noted the increasingly frequent breakdown of discipline within the Ukrainian armed forces, with entire divisions refusing to follow orders to take part in missions they see as futile.

“Zelensky has already disbanded the 25th and the 67th [divisions] – entire brigades – because they don’t feel that he is a leader anymore,” he said. “Or certainly not their leader, right?”

Particularly after getting rid of [Valery] Zaluzhny who largely spared them from very difficult battles that they feel that they’re being sent into.”

“This is very interesting because these are the far-right, the ultranationalists, the Banderite fascists,” Sleboda added, referring to the Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera who is a hero to many anti-Russian Ukrainians. “And it could entail domestic problems for Zelensky.”

Neo-Nazi paramilitaries are an increasingly influential force in Ukraine, with even the NATO-aligned Atlantic Council [acknowledging](#) the problem. Far-right gangs played an important role in the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and continue to threaten Zelensky against pursuing any kind of diplomatic engagement with Russia.

The future of Ukraine remains uncertain amidst mounting losses on the battlefield, but if extremist elements continue to gain power one can only blame Western leaders, who have revealed themselves willing to support some of the world’s most loathsome people in pursuit of global hegemony.

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Legacy of Operation Mockingbird Lives On in CIA’s Russophobic Influence Over Media

Former US President Harry Truman once penned an op-ed decrying the unaccountable power of the agency his administration created. The piece ran in the Washington Post one morning in 1963, but was removed from the paper's evening edition.

Mainstream US media is gearing up for another election season dominated by Russophobia and neo-McCarthyism, if an article by intelligence agency stenographer Julian Barnes in The New York Times is any indication.

"The US government is preparing for its adversaries to intensify efforts to influence American voters next year," the piece, published late last year, ominously begins. "Russia appears to be paying close attention to the election, as its war in Ukraine is soon to enter a third year... With Republican opposition to Ukraine funding growing, officials believe that Moscow is likely to try to interfere even more in 2024."

Barnes uncritically cites a report issued by US intelligence agencies – institutions that, as former CIA director Mike Pompeo [noted](#) in a rare moment of candor, train their employees to lie, cheat, and steal. [Entire volumes of research](#) have been published detailing Western spy agencies' duplicitous efforts in the name of empire. Barnes, himself an alumnus of Harvard, seems either too dazzled by his sources' credentials or too sympathetic to their mission to exercise journalistic scrutiny.

"It's poppycock. I think the British call it bollocks," said former intelligence analyst Ray McGovern of US media's recent coverage of Russia and China. "I was tempted to use a different word instead of bollocks. My diplomatic friends from the State Department say 'male bovine excrement.' It seethes from The New York Times."

McGovern, himself a reformed ex-employee of the CIA, left the agency in 1990, eventually going on to co-found Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity during the runup to the US war in Iraq. McGovern joined [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Tuesday](#) to criticize Western media's complicity in manufacturing hysteria over the US empire's latest enemy du jour.

"As ludicrous as all this stuff is with prominent congresspeople saying 'the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming'... it's nothing to laugh [at]," said McGovern. "Because Americans are so conditioned now – brainwashed is not too strong a word – to believe the worst of the Russians."

"If Biden decides to up the ante in Ukraine, for example, to prevent a definitive loss to the Russians before the election, I dare say maybe most, at least a good segment of American society will have been so conditioned by this Russiagate stuff that they will support this kind of thing," he claimed. "And who knows what that will do to the rest of us."

Host Garland Nixon shared McGovern's assessment of US lawmakers, speculating, "It's not that they're convinced. And it's not even that they care whether it's true or false. They're, shall we say, apathetic about the truth."

"Words are just something that are a means to an end. And that's, dare I say, evil."

"It's worse than apathy," responded McGovern. "Have you checked how much money Lockheed, Raytheon, Boeing... are giving?... It's the military industrial complex writ large."

US weapons manufacturers maintain influence in Washington not just by contributing to lawmakers, but by funding some of the country's most important institutions. [A study last year](#) by the Quincy Institute found that of the 15 think tanks mentioned most often in America's major newspapers in relation to coverage of Ukraine, 14 of them receive funding from US military contractors.

Think tanks with defense industry funding were found to be seven times more likely to be cited than those without, according to the study.

“That there is guilt by omission,” said McGovern of US media’s coverage of the so-called Russiagate scandal. “Do Americans know that over six years ago it was published that the head of the cyber firm investigating the [alleged] DNC hack, so to speak, by the Russians testified under oath – this fellow’s name is Shawn Henry, the firm is CrowdStrike – that there was no technical evidence that Russia or anyone else hacked into the Democratic National Committee? Sworn testimony under oath.”

“It has not appeared in the New York Times, so most people are blissfully unaware that this thing has been disproven.”

In 1977, investigative journalist Carl Bernstein [revealed the CIA’s Operation Mockingbird](#) to the American public. US intelligence, the reporter demonstrated, had cultivated assets in mainstream media for decades, allowing it to shape coverage at outlets such as the Associated Press, CBS and The New York Times. Although the CIA is legally forbidden from operating on American soil, the agency faced no consequences from the revelation.

The incident would be quickly swept under the rug, and by 1981 the CIA had a strong ally in the executive branch with the ascension of former CIA director George H.W. Bush to the vice presidency.

US Senator Chuck Schumer once cautioned former President Donald Trump about the power of US intelligence agencies. “Let me tell you, you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday of getting back at you,” the lawmaker [warned](#). Years later it was revealed [the CIA had spied on Trump’s campaign](#): another illegal abuse that, predictably, was met with no consequence.

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US Army Struggles to Develop New Howitzer for Close-Range Artillery Combat

The saga is a case study of the inefficiencies of the modern US military-industrial complex as the service has poured billions of dollars into failed development programs.

The US Army is struggling to update a piece of equipment that’s been a staple of militaries since the 16th century.

British newspaper The Telegraph [reports](#) the Pentagon has been attempting to create a next-generation howitzer since the early 1990s. The Army’s current iteration of armament, the M-109, dates back to 1963 although the basic design has undergone minor upgrades.

1.

The service’s first attempt to develop a new howitzer, dubbed the Crusader, had a troubled history, first emerging as a more ambitious concept that was revised after the Cold War ended. Army contractor United Defense attempted to complete the design for a decade before it was canceled by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, citing cost overruns.

2.

A new concept then emerged as part of the Army's Future Combat Systems, a modernization program that proposed a more lightweight howitzer operated by radio control. Billions of dollars were again spent on the plan before its cancellation in 2009. New realities of electronic warfare made the concept unworkable while drone attacks call for weaponry that's more armored instead of less.

3.

The Army's third crack at updating the howitzer, the Extended Range Cannon Artillery (ERCA), took a more conservative approach mainly focusing on upgrading the armament's barrel. By extending the length of the barrel to 30 feet the ERCA was able to strike targets from 46 miles away. But testing revealed the longer barrel was less durable, susceptible to catastrophic explosions upon firing, and the concept was once again scrapped.

Although the US Army has successfully developed long-range artillery such as the High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), the failure to produce a new howitzer has turned into an embarrassment for the service as Ukraine has instead relied on European-produced howitzers. Russia has meanwhile excelled in the technology, utilizing a number of models including the D-20, the D-30, the 2S3 Akatsiya, the [2S19 Msta-S](#), and the [2S5 Giatsint-S](#). The truck-mounted [2S43 Malva](#), in service since last year, features a "fire assault" mode allowing the howitzer to obliterate a target with multiple projectiles moving along different trajectories. The armament is one of a number of pieces of Russian military technology that [have wowed observers](#) throughout the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war.

US defense of Israel shows the West 'has never been committed' to international law

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The United States' unwavering defense of Israel's deadly Gaza campaign proves the West is primarily interested in upholding historic patterns of colonial subjugation and domination, economist Radhika Desai told Sputnik's The Critical Hour program.

"I think what's really emerging now is how the US has never been committed to anything vaguely like the United Nations Charter and anything vaguely like international law," Desai highlighted as the Biden administration has repeatedly undermined the UN in recent months in its "ironclad" defense of Israel.

The analyst claimed the creation of Western-led institutions like NATO was designed to offer an alternative to the more egalitarian United Nations and its conception of international law. Through institutions like NATO the United States and its allies could continue to "make the rules as we go along," she argued.

Although frequently billed as a "defensive" alliance, the end of the Cold War and the United States' status as the lone global superpower allowed NATO to undertake a number of openly offensive military operations. NATO played a role in Western operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, but has perhaps been most criticized for its bombing of the former Yugoslavia.

"The fact of the matter is you can't talk about geopolitics," she concluded. "You've got to talk about geopolitical economy. Because what do you think all this militarism is about? It's about essentially material or economic plunder, oppression, subordination, etcetera. So, let's call it what it is. The word imperialism very tidily encompasses that whole range of phenomena."

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'Anarcho-capitalist' President Javier Milei wraps elite subservience in a radical package

President Javier Milei isolated Argentina from economic partners and its South American neighbors recently with announced plans to consider sending military aid to Ukraine in its war against Russia. The controversy comes as Milei's approval rating has sunk amidst unyielding protest over hunger across the country.

Analyst Caleb Maupin joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss these latest developments, claiming the self-declared "anarcho-capitalist" Milei is attempting to sell elite-friendly neoliberal economics in a faux-radical package.

"I must say that I'm not shocked by Milei's behavior," said the journalist. "He pulled Argentina out of the BRICS talks... He's a huge supporter of Israel and its atrocities against the Palestinians and what's going on right now."

"Milei is espousing the ideology of the global elites, which is called neoliberalism," Maupin explained. "He's now giving up Argentina's currency, he's trying to make Argentina at this point have the US dollar... When Ecuador took these moves in the late 90s it completely destroyed Ecuador's economy. Ecuador had a man-made famine in 1999 where people were starving and dying of malnutrition."

"Neoliberalism has been tried as an economic system, and it has failed... Neoliberalism is still the same, and free market policies are what the World Economic Forum and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and these huge globalist institutions, it's what they've been pushing from the beginning."

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Zelensky green with envy as West comes to aid of Israeli ally - analyst

The dramatic show of Western force in defense of Israel against Iran's retaliatory strike this weekend apparently led to some envy from another US ally, according to security analyst Mark

Sleboda. The expert joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program to break down the Israel-Gaza conflict's ramifications for the United States' relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

"I think that Zelensky has finally come to the realization as the new mistress that the United States is never going to leave its wife, despite all the promises that Joe Biden has given, all of the late-night dinners and the hotel rooms," Sleboda mused. "It's all gone wrong... there's a bit of envy."

"There was even an... interview with a Ukrainian academic, quote-unquote, saying how Ukraine is being two-timed by the United States with Israel and the rock on Israel's finger is much bigger or something like that, that they are souring on the United States. I mean if you didn't realize you were a proxy for US geopolitical motives, that's entirely your problem."

Sleboda noted that Israel is a much smaller country with a preexisting air defense system in the Iron Dome, while Russia's military, one of the world's largest, has progressively worn down Ukraine's defenses over two years of fighting. Israel also enjoys strong historical political support within the United States.

The analyst also observed that military discipline is increasingly breaking down in Ukraine with entire divisions of its armed forces refusing to follow orders from new commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky.

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US media ramps up Neo-McCarthyism as election approaches

"It's poppycock. I think the British call it bollocks," said former intelligence analyst Ray McGovern of mainstream media's warnings of alleged Russian influence in the US' upcoming election. "My diplomatic friends from the State Department say 'male bovine excrement.' It seethes from The New York Times." McGovern, a reformed ex-CIA officer, made the claim on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program.

"As ludicrous as all this stuff is with prominent congresspeople saying 'the Russians are coming'... it's nothing to laugh [at]," said McGovern. "If Biden decides to up the ante in Ukraine to prevent a definitive loss to the Russians before the election, I dare say at least a good segment of American society will have been so conditioned by this Russiagate stuff that they will support this kind of thing. And who knows what that will do to the rest of us."

McGovern recalled the sworn testimony of security firm CrowdStrike's head Shawn Henry in 2018 that it had found no evidence of Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee's

email system in its investigation of the issue – a fact conveniently ignored by media outlets that continue to run jingoistic Russiagate stories at the behest of US intelligence agencies.

US Senator Chuck Schumer once cautioned former President Trump about the power of US intelligence. “Let me tell you, you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday of getting back at you,” the lawmaker warned. Years later it was revealed the CIA had spied on Trump’s campaign: an illegal abuse that was met with no consequence.

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The US Army is struggling to update a piece of equipment that’s been a staple of militaries since the 16th century.

British newspaper The Telegraph reports the Pentagon has been attempting to create a next-generation howitzer since the early 1990s. The Army’s current iteration of armament, the M-109, dates back to 1963.

The service’s first attempt, dubbed the Crusader, first emerged as a more ambitious concept that was revised after the Cold War ended. Army contractor United Defense attempted to complete the design for a decade before it was canceled by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, citing cost overruns.

A new concept then emerged as part of the Army’s Future Combat Systems, a program that proposed a lightweight howitzer operated by radio control. But realities of electronic warfare made the concept unworkable while drone attacks call for weaponry that’s more armored instead of less.

The Army’s third crack at updating the howitzer, the Extended Range Cannon Artillery, featured a long barrel capable of striking targets farther away, but testing revealed the barrel was less durable, susceptible to catastrophic explosions upon firing, and the concept was once again scrapped.

Russia has meanwhile excelled in the technology, utilizing the 2S3 Akatsiya, the 2S19 Msta-S, and the 2S5 Giatsint-S. The truck-mounted 2S43 Malva, in service since last year, features a “fire assault” mode allowing the howitzer to obliterate a target with multiple projectiles moving along different trajectories. The armament is one of a number of pieces of Russian military technology that have wowed observers throughout the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war.

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Egypt Minister of Finance Says Got Invitation to Russia's Kazan Forum in May

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Mohamed Maaait, Minister of Finance of Egypt told Sputnik that he received an invitation to the upcoming 14th International Economic Forum in Kazan, and is looking into whether he can attend.

"We got an invitation. You have this [economic] forum... next month in May, I got an invitation," Maaait said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meetings in Washington DC. "But I still have to see whether I will be able to do it or not."

More than 80 countries have confirmed their attendance at the 15th International Economic Forum "Russia – Islamic World: KazanForum," which will be held in Russia's Tatarstan from May 14-19, the event's organizing committee said earlier this month.

The event is expected to attract not only foreign guests but also participants from various regions of Russia, Tatarstan head Rustam Minnikhanov said.

The KazanForum has been held in the capital of Tatarstan since 2009, providing a platform for strengthening Russia's trade, economic, scientific, technological, social, and cultural ties with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation member states. It has enjoyed federal status since 2023. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Marat Khusnullin is heading the forum's organizing committee.

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Use of Russia's Mir Payment System Discussed With Egypt's Central Bank- Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The use of Russia's Mir payment system is currently being discussed with the Central Bank of Egypt, Mohamed Maaait, Minister of Finance of Egypt told Sputnik.

"This is discussed with the Central Bank of Egypt. I know it, but it is discussed with the Central Bank of Egypt," Maaait said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meetings in Washington DC. "I'm not following, but I know that it is discussed with the Central Bank of Egypt."

Mir payment system cards are now accepted by partner banks in Abkhazia, Armenia, Belarus, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, South Korea, and South Ossetia. Iran, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, India, Venezuela, Mauritius, Nigeria, and Ethiopia have also shown interest in connecting the Mir cards to their systems.

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Egypt Hopes For Increased Numbers of Tourists From Russia This Year - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Cairo hopes to see an increase in the number of Russian tourists this year, Mohamed Maait, Minister of Finance of Egypt told Sputnik.

"I hope it [the number of Russian tourists] will increase," Maait said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meetings in Washington DC.

Maait also expressed hope that the ongoing conflict and tensions in the Middle East will not affect the number of tourists coming from Russia.

"I hope it will not affect Egypt because Egypt is not part of the conflict," he said. "I hope because Egypt is keeping stability in the region. So I hope it will not affect Egypt."

Egypt is in talks with domestic and foreign air carriers to launch new flights to Russian cities to increase bilateral tourist traffic, Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA) chief Amr El Kady told Sputnik in March.

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Egypt Feels Impact of Anti-Russia Sanctions But Sees Ways to Address It - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Egypt sometimes feels the impact of anti-Russia sanctions, but the two countries see how to address the situation together, Egyptian Finance Minister Mohamed Maait told Sputnik.

When asked whether Egypt sees any impact of the anti-Russia sanctions on its cooperation with Russia, Maait said, "Sometimes, yes."

"But we see how to address it together," Maait said on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Spring meetings in Washington.

The United States and other countries have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia in response to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, including restrictions on the country's financial and energy sectors.

Russian officials have said the sanctions have failed despite the attempts by the collective West to contain and weaken the country's economy.

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Egypt Wants to Have More Trade, Cooperation With Russia - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Egypt wants to have more trade and cooperation with Russia, Mohamed Maait, Minister of Finance of Egypt told Sputnik.

"We import from Russia many products like wheat and many others. We hope that in the future there will be more and more cooperation, particularly trade cooperation," Maait said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meetings in Washington DC.

Maait added that Egypt now has a lot of collaboration with Russia.

"You know, these nuclear stations for electricity in Egypt, they are building for us. We have also

the industrial zone and the Suez Canal economic zone. We have a lot of cooperation with Russia," he explained.

Trade between Russia and Egypt grew by 20% last year, reaching \$7.2 billion, according to preliminary data, Russian Ambassador to Cairo Georgiy Borisenko told Sputnik in February.

Last year, Egypt expressed its readiness to join BRICS and applied for membership in the organization in early June. At the beginning of 2024, Cairo officially entered the economic bloc.

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Egypt's Minister of Finance Says Egypt Supports Creation of BRICS Grain Exchange

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Egypt supports the creation of a BRICS grain exchange, Mohamed Maait, Minister of Finance of Egypt told Sputnik.

"We are working with them on many tracks- part of it within the newly developed bank, the other part is direct communication about it, also the third part was in BRICS," Maait said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meetings in Washington DC.

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Northrop Grumman Signs Triton UAV Maintenance Deal With Australia Air Force - Release

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has signed a contract with L3Harris to operate and maintain command-and-control systems aboard Australia's fleet of MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, the US aerospace giant announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Australia has signed a contract with L3Harris Corporation (L3HCA) for the operation and maintenance of command-and-control systems aboard Australia's MQ-4C Triton multi-intelligence uncrewed aircraft fleet," the release said on Tuesday.

Northrop Grumman completed the first flight of Australia's MQ-4C Triton at its Palmdale facility in California in November 2023. All four Australian Tritons currently under contract are progressing as planned through their production schedules, the company said.

"The Interim Sustainment Support Contract covers maintenance of the Triton's Wideband Command, Control and Communications (C3) Subsystem, which was developed by L3HCA," the release said.

The multi-intelligence MQ-4C Triton supports missions including maritime patrol, signals intelligence, search and rescue, and communications relay and will provide commanders with surveillance for prediction of potential adversaries' behavior, the company explained.

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

Trump Says Israel Should Respond to Iran 'Strongly'

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump told reporters that Israel should respond to Iran "strongly" over its retaliatory attack.

On Saturday night, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said. Iranian state media reported that Iran had fired at least seven hypersonic missiles at Israel, with none of them intercepted.

On Sunday, senior US administration officials said that President Joe Biden advised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to think carefully and strategically about its response to Iran.

Israel's war cabinet met on Tuesday to discuss the potential retaliation. Both civilian and military officials of Israel have said earlier this week that a response will follow.

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Telegram Founder Durov Says US Lawmakers Demanded Data of January 6 Protesters

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Pavel Durov, the Russia-born founder of the messaging app Telegram, said in an interview with journalist Tucker Carlson that lawmakers in the United States demanded from Telegram to turn over all data pertaining to the protest at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

"After the events of January 6, we received a letter from, I believe, a congressman on the Democratic side, and they requested that we share all the data we have in relation to what they call this uprising, " Durov said in the interview released on Tuesday.

Telegram's lawyers recommended that the company ignore the request, although the letter seemed serious, Durov said.

However, Republican lawmakers subsequently sent a letter warning Telegram not to provide data as requested by the Democrats, Durov said.

Ultimately, Telegram chose to ignore both letters, as it does with most such requests, as the company does not want to involve itself with internal US politics, Durov said.

Durov pointed out that US federal agents engaged him regularly when he traveled to the United States, where Telegram was once located, and even tried to recruit one of the company's engineers to place backdoors in the messaging app.

Telegram's decision to relocate from San Francisco was influenced by the attention it received from the US government, as well as an incident in which Durov was attacked in the street, Durov said.

Telegram has since moved its headquarters to the United Arab Emirates, where the business

environment is good for the company, Durov added.

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US to Impose New Sanctions on Iran, Including on Its Missile and Drone Program - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States in the coming days will impose new sanctions targeting Iran, including its missile and drone program, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in a press release.

"In the coming days, the United States will impose new sanctions targeting Iran, including its missile and drone program as well as new sanctions against entities supporting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran's Defense Ministry," Sullivan said in the release on Tuesday.

Sullivan added that the United States will also continue to strengthen and expand its integration of air and missile defense early warning systems across the Middle East.

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Judge Swears in 7 Jurors on 2nd Day of Trial in Trump 'Hush Money' Case - Reports

*WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Judge Juan Merchan has sworn in seven jurors out of the 12 needed to proceed with the trial in Donald Trump's "hush money" case, CNN reported from the courtroom in New York.

The selected jurors include an oncology nurse, a corporate lawyer, a software engineer, and a salesperson, among others, the report said on Tuesday.

"President Trump speaks his mind and I'd rather that than someone who's in office who you don't know what they're thinking," the report quoted a young woman - an English teacher - as saying during a questioning session before being sworn in as a juror.

About a dozen potential jurors have been dismissed after they admitted that they could not be impartial toward Trump or were unable to skip several weeks of work due to jury duty.

On Monday, Trump arrived at the Manhattan court to face his first day of trial in the case involving alleged hush money paid via his attorney Michael Cohen to pornography actress Stormy Daniels and others from August 2015 to December 2017.

Last year, Trump pleaded not guilty on all 34 counts of falsifying business records in connection with hush money.

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Polish President to Meet With Trump in New York on Wednesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Polish President Andrzej Duda will meet with former US President Donald Trump for a dinner in New York on Wednesday, Bloomberg reported.

The dinner, which is not mentioned in the official schedule of the Polish leader, will take place at Trump Tower on the first day of Duda's week-long trip to the United States and Canada, the report said on Tuesday.

While in New York, Duda will also meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the report added.

On Monday, the office of the Canadian prime minister announced that Duda will visit Canada from April 18-23 to meet with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and discuss Ukraine as well as the upcoming NATO summit in Washington in July.

Duda will become the second leader of a European Union member country to meet with Trump before the US presidential election in November. In March, Trump met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban at his residence in Florida to discuss various issues of common interest for Hungary and the United States.

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Qatar Says 'Surprised' by Congressman's Threat for US to Reevaluate Bilateral Relations

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The Qatari Embassy in Washington issued a statement expressing surprise at the comments made by US Congressman Steny Hoyer, who threatened to reevaluate bilateral relations if Qatar does not exert pressure on Hamas to make a deal on freeing the Israeli hostages it holds in the Gaza Strip.

"We read with interest Congressman Steny Hoyer's statement today regarding the Gaza hostage negotiations, but we are surprised by his threats to 'reevaluate' the US relationship with Qatar," the Qatari Embassy said in a release on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Hoyer urged Qatar to pressure Hamas to agree to a temporary ceasefire in Gaza and release the hostages it holds. Hoyer said the United States would reevaluate its relationship with Qatar if the latter does not apply pressure on Hamas.

The Qatari Embassy said in the release that Qatar does not have direct control over Hamas or Israel and its sole role is to be a mediator in the conflict.

"Israel and Hamas are entirely responsible for reaching an agreement," the release said. "Blaming the mediator is not constructive."

Hamas rejected all clauses of the latest ceasefire and hostage deal proposal and listed among its expanded demands a permanent ceasefire, according to Israeli media.

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Escaped Circus Elephant Roams Streets of Montana Town, Reunited With Handlers - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - An escaped circus elephant roamed free on the streets of Butte, Montana on Tuesday before being returned to its handlers, NBC Montana reported.

Video footage of the incident shows the elephant crossing traffic, which was halted by the creature.

The elephant escaped ahead of a show by the Jordan World Circus, the report said. The elephant has since been safely reunited with its handlers, the report said.

However, the elephant defected on a local lawn before returning to captivity, the report added.

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US Homeland Security Dept. Considered Secret Program to Probe Advanced Tech - AARO

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) considered establishing a classified program to investigate advanced materials and technologies, according to documents released by the Pentagon's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO).

AARO first learned about the program, dubbed KONA BLUE, from interviews conducted as part of its historical review of matters linked to unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP), AARO said in a document on the program.

KONA BLUE was a prospective special access program with roots in the Defense Intelligence Agency's Advanced Aerospace Weapon System Application and Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification programs, the document said.

After the Defense Intelligence Agency terminated the program, several people involved in the effort advocated for DHS to take over the program under the codename KONA BLUE, the document said.

"According to the proposal, KONA BLUE would continue the work previously undertaken by DIA... to investigate, identify, and analyze sensitive materials and technologies, to include advanced aerospace vehicles," the document said.

However, the prospective program was disapproved by DHS, the document said. Information from the Defense Intelligence Agency's programs was never transferred to DHS, the document added.

AARO declassified the program proposal and associated materials as part of the agencies' commitment to transparency, the document said.

The program would have included several research centers, including a "Consciousness Center," which would utilize remote sensing to investigate advanced technology, the declassified proposal said.

In 2023, former Defense Department intelligence official David Grusch alleged that the United States is engaged in efforts to retrieve and reverse-engineer UAP and has targeted people who speak out about the matter.

AARO has found no verifiable evidence for claims that the US government and private

companies have access to or have been reverse-engineering extraterrestrial technology, the Pentagon said last month.

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Middle East Conflict Escalation to Increase Global Oil Prices - Nigeria Budget Office

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The escalation of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East could spike global oil prices and that could result in slowing down economic growth, Ben Akabueze, the Director General of the Nigerian Budget Office of the Federation told Sputnik.

"If the conflict escalates, it might have implications for global oil prices, oil markets, and to that extent," Akabueze said. "We don't want to see oil prices rising to the point where they begin to slow down economic growth globally and create a problem."

Akabueze noted that at the moment, Nigeria has not been affected by the conflict, stressing that it is a non-aligned country.

He also added that if global oil supplies get disrupted on account of the conflict and result in an oil price increase, that's not likely to hurt Nigeria, as it is an oil exporter.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Tuesday that any escalation in the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine could generate supply shocks that will cause spikes in the prices of food, energy, and transportation.

On Saturday night, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said. Iranian state media reported that Iran had fired at least seven hypersonic missiles at Israel, with none of them intercepted.

Israel's war cabinet is meeting on Tuesday to discuss the potential retaliation. Both civilian and military officials of Israel have said earlier this week that a response will follow.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORY OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

* UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Tuesday told his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, that major escalation in the Middle East is in no one's interest and will only increase the level of instability, Sky News reported, citing a readout of a phone conversation.

* Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that Iran's recent attack on Israeli has failed, adding that only four ballistic missiles landed in Israel.

* The Israeli government has not shared plans with the United States to respond to Iranian

strikes on Israel over the weekend, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

PUTIN-RAISI MEETING

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi confirmed their principled approaches in favor of an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and easing the humanitarian situation there, the Kremlin said after the two leaders spoke by telephone on Tuesday.

* Iran was forced to launch an attack on Israel due to destructive actions of the United Nations, the United States and other Western countries, Raisi told Putin.

* Putin and Raisi expressed mutual commitment to further progressive development of bilateral cooperation, the Kremlin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has lost up to 630 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he expects to see some "concrete commitments" on increasing Ukraine's air defense capabilities during a meeting of European Union foreign and defense ministers on April 22.

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a bill to tighten mobilization into law, according to the Verkhovna Rada's website.

* Ukraine is using initiatives such as a ceasefire in the conflict with Russia for the period of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris to try to regroup its troops and rearm, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON IRAN

* Israel had asked several EU countries, Ukraine, US, Canada, Japan and Australia to adopt sanctions against Iran, the Israeli Foreign Ministry told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* Iran is expected to face additional sanctions from the United States in the coming days after the retaliatory strikes by Iran on Israel, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.

* Yellen said that the Treasury "will not hesitate to work with our allies" to continue to sanction Iran, according to an advance copy of her speech provided to the press.

* The European Union will start working on expanding sanctions against Iran as some member states have made such proposals, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

RUSSIA-PHILIPPINES RELATIONS

* The Philippines hopes to strengthen its economic relations with Russia, Philippine Secretary of Finance Ralph Recto told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* The Philippines would like to see more Russian investment in its infrastructure and digitalization, Recto told Sputnik.

IMF REPORT

* Global growth is expected to remain at 3.2% through 2025 and fall to 3.1% in 2029, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in the latest update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

* The IMF expects economic growth in the Euro area to recover from its current low rate and reach 0.8% in 2024 and 1.5% in 2025, the report said.

* Russia's economic growth is expected to slow down from 3.2% in 2024 to 1.8% in 2025, the report said.

* Economic growth in the United States is expected to increase to 2.7% in 2024 and decrease to 1.9% in 2025, the report said.

* The IMF warned that any escalation in the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine could generate supply shocks that will cause spikes in the prices of food, energy and transportation.

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US Providing Nearly \$154Mln in Additional Humanitarian Funding for Ethiopia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing \$154 million in additional funding for humanitarian needs in Ethiopia resulting from conflict, insecurity and climate shocks, the US State Department said on Tuesday.

"The United States, through the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and USAID, is providing nearly \$154 million in additional assistance for the humanitarian response in Ethiopia to address urgent needs resulting from conflict, insecurity, and climate shocks," the State Department said in a press release.

The new funding will bring the total US assistance for Ethiopia to about \$243 million since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2024, the release said.

Ethiopia is currently home to more than one million refugees, including more than 130,000 new displaced persons from Sudan and Somali who fled conflicts there since 2023, the release added.

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More Than One-Quarter of US Voters Would Cheat in Election to Stop Rival Candidate - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - More than one-quarter of likely voters in the United States would commit some form of illegal voting activity in order to defeat an opposing candidate, a new Rasmussen Results/Heartland Institute poll revealed on Tuesday.

Twenty-eight percent (28%) of likely US voters would engage in at least one kind of illegal voting if it were the "only way to stop" an opposing candidate from winning the race, a report on the poll said.

The figure is relatively consistent across party lines; 25% of Robert Kennedy Jr. supporters, 27% of Joe Biden supporters and 29% of Donald Trump supporters would cheat in such a scenario, the poll report said.

The survey found that 18% of respondents would fill out a ballot for a spouse or family member, 17% for a coworker or acquaintance and 14% for a close friend, the poll report said.

Nine percent (9%) of respondents would alter a friend or family member's ballot selections without their knowledge if given the chance, the poll report said. Moreover, 11% of respondents would destroy a ballot of a friend or family member to help their candidate of choice, the poll report said.

One-in-ten respondents would vote in two different states to help their preferred candidate, and 10% would also offer to pay another voter for their vote, the poll report said. Likewise, 10% of respondents would give another voter misleading information about the time and place of an election to aid their candidate, the poll report addde.

The poll surveyed 1,467 likely US voters from April 5-10. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Chinese Embassy Says Beijing Committed to Resolving S. China Sea Disputes Through Dialogue

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Beijing is committed to resolving disputes in the South China Sea through dialogue and consultation with parties of mutual concern, Chinese Embassy in the United States spokesperson Liu Pengyu told reporters on Tuesday.

"China will firmly guard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests and remain committed to properly settling bilateral issues through dialogue and consultation with the countries directly concerned," Liu said during a press briefing.

Liu pointed out that military exercises were recently being organized by the United States, Japan, Australia and the Philippines in the South China Sea and noted that defense cooperation between any countries should be conducive to regional stability and not target a third party.

Liu also said that China is committed to managing the situation with the Philippines through dialogue and consultation following heightened tensions in the South China Sea.

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 the two countries, which also include several other Asia-Pacific states.

In July 2016, following a lawsuit filed by the Philippines, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that China had no grounds for territorial claims in the South China Sea. The court ruled that the islands were not disputed territory and did not constitute an exclusive economic zone, but Beijing refused to recognize or accept the ruling.

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Nigeria's Budget Office Says Open to Enlarging 'Basket of Currencies'

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) -Although Nigeria's primary source of foreign exchange continues to be oil, and the US dollar serves as the currency for oil transactions, Abuja is open to enlarging the "basket of currencies" in the country, Ben Akabueze, the Director General of the Budget Office of the Federation told Sputnik.

"Nigeria by itself cannot change that, but if the collective of oil exporters decides to take action to change that, then Nigeria would follow suit," he said. "For Nigeria, there's no pursuing the objective of de-dollarization, but we are open to enlarging the basket of currencies."

Several countries, such as China and Russia, have started to trade commodities like oil in currencies other than the dollar.

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Canada Newly-Unveiled Budget Includes \$14Bln in Aid for Ukraine - Finance Ministry

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Canada's newly unveiled 2024 budget includes \$14 billion in aid for Ukraine and \$3.5 billion to renew and expand Operation Reassurance, according to the budget documents released by the Finance Ministry on Tuesday.

"Over \$14 billion in total support for Ukraine, including \$7.4 billion for immediate financial support and \$4 billion for military assistance. \$3.5 billion to renew and expand Operation Reassurance, the Canadian Armed Forces' largest overseas mission, through which it contributes to NATO assurance and deterrence measures in Central and Eastern Europe," the budget documents said.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland presented the 2024 fiscal budget at the House of Commons on Tuesday afternoon.

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Nigeria Would Be Happy to Engage in Digital Currency Payments With Russia- Budget Office

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Nigeria would be happy to engage in cryptocurrency payments with Russia to settle trade between the two nations, Ben Akabueze, the Director General of the Budget Office of the Federation told Sputnik.

"Nigeria was the second country globally to launch a digital currency. So it's something that we're quite happy to engage on," he said. "But we're not trading on digital currency. But digital currency, yes, can be a means for settling the trade."

Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar told Sputnik in February that Nigeria supports the Russian plan to exchange payments with African states in digital currencies, as it would

promote trade and development for countries in the region.

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Nigeria's Plans to Join BRICS Consistent With Country's Philosophy - Government

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Nigeria's intent to join BRICS is in line with its interest in a more equitable global financial and development system, Ben Akabueze, the director general of the country's Budget Office, told Sputnik.

"The way I see it, BRICS is all part of a strategy to seek a more equitable global financial and development system," Akabueze said. "That's consistent with Nigeria's own philosophy," Akabueze said.

Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar said in an interview with Sputnik in March that Nigeria plans to apply for membership in BRICS after the necessary arrangements within the country are finished.

Akabueze shared that when several countries were invited to join BRICS and Nigeria was not invited, "it raised a lot of eyebrows."

"Nigeria would evaluate whatever joining BRICS offers," he added. "Right now I'm not aware that it conflicts with any other aspirations that Nigeria has, but unless it does, there should be no reason why Nigeria will not apply."

BRICS was established in 2009 as a cooperation platform for the world's largest emerging economies, bringing together Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. On January 1, 2024, the bloc expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.

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Nigeria Welcomes Russian Investments, Interested in Expanding Them- Budget Office

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Nigeria welcomes Russian investments and is interested in expanding them, Ben Akabueze, the Director General of the Budget Office of the Federation told Sputnik.

"We would like to see, you know, a scaling up in the cooperation with Russia," Akabueze said on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank spring meetings in Washington DC. "We're looking to see investors coming and Russian investments will be welcome."

In addition, he said that infrastructure is a major area Nigeria would like to see Russian investment in.

"But, you know, even in oil and gas, I mean, Russia has become a significant player globally in oil and gas. I don't recall that any of the Russian oil companies have any significant investment in that sector," he said. "Power is another major area. But even in agriculture, Russia is a big

player in global agriculture as well.”

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US on Track to Deploy Maritime Pier in Gaza by Late April-Early May - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States is on track to deploy a maritime pier in Gaza in late April or early May to increase the flow of humanitarian aid to the besieged enclave, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"We are on track right now for a late April, early May for initial operating capability [of the pier]," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Last month, the United States announced their intention to deploy the Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS) capability off the coast of the Gaza Strip to help facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid into the Palestinian enclave.

White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said that US troops would not deploy on the ground in the Gaza Strip as part of the operation. The US is working with partners on logistics flow and protection of the project, Kirby said.

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US House Delivers Mayorkas Impeachment Articles to Senate - Footage

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers delivered articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the Senate on Tuesday, according to footage of the delivery at the US Capitol.

House impeachment managers walked across the Capitol to deliver the articles of impeachment to the Senate, after House Speaker Mike Johnson signed the articles on Monday.

"I just delivered my Articles of Impeachment against Secretary Mayorkas to the United States Senate. Mayorkas is derelict of his duty and must be removed from office," US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said in a statement via social media platform X.

In February, the US House of Representatives passed impeachment articles against Mayorkas, citing his alleged failure to secure the borders from illegal immigration. The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with and enforce immigration laws.

The US Senate is tasked with holding an impeachment trial, although the Democratic majority in the chamber could dismiss the matter with a simple majority of votes.

US Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin has called the impeachment effort a waste of time.

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Trump Media Team to Soon Launch Its Own Streaming Platform - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's media company announced on Tuesday that it is slated to soon launch its own streaming platform.

"Trump Media & Technology Group Corp., operator of the social media platform Truth Social, announced today that after six months of testing on its Web and iOS platforms, the Company has finished the research and development phase of its new live TV streaming platform and will begin scaling up its own content delivery network ("CDN")," the release said.

The company pointed out that it plans to roll out its streaming content in three phases: introduce the streaming service to the Truth Social app on mobile devices and desktop computers.

The company will then eventually create a standalone app for its streaming service before eventually releasing a streaming app for home television, the release noted.

The release emphasized that its streaming service is expected to greatly enhance and expand Truth Social.

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Yellen Discusses With Chinese Officials Efforts to Stabilize Bilateral Economic Ties

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and a group of Treasury Department officials met with their Chinese counterparts to discuss ongoing efforts to stabilize the bilateral economic relationship, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"Senior officials from the US Treasury and China's Ministry of Finance continued their conversations on the latest macroeconomic situation in China and the United States, shared global challenges including debt issues, as well as areas with divergent views," the Treasury Department said in a release.

The two delegations also engaged in discussions on balanced growth in the domestic and global economies, the release said.

US and Chinese officials agreed to discuss economic policies that support balanced growth of the domestic and global economies on a regular basis, the release added.

The US delegation continued to express concerns about China's non-market practices and industrial overcapacity, and both sides agreed to further discuss these issues, according to the release.

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US, Chinese Officials Discuss Cooperation on People-to-People Exchanges - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Lee Satterfield met with Chinese Vice Minister of Culture and Tourism Li Qun in Washington to discuss cooperation on people-to-people exchanges as well as other issues, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Assistant Secretary Satterfield and Vice Minister Li discussed opportunities for further cooperation on cultural heritage protection and other areas of mutual interest, including people-to-people exchanges," the State Department said in a statement.

Satterfield underscored that the United States remains committed to expanding people-to-people ties with China, the statement said.

Satterfield and Li also discussed the recently extended US-China cultural property agreement and shared goals of protecting heritage, promoting expert exchanges and increasing public access to cultural heritage by fostering museum collaborations, the statement added.

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Blinken to Raise Issue of Beijing's Support for Russia During Visit to China - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will raise the issue of China's alleged support for the Russian military-industrial complex during his trip to the country in the coming weeks, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"The secretary does plan to travel to China in the coming weeks and you can certainly expect that that is an issue [China's support for Russia] that he would be expected to raise," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller emphasized that the Biden administration is "incredibly concerned" about the alleged surge of China's support for Russia over the past several months amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Earlier in April, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States has not yet seen any evidence that China is planning to provide direct military assistance to Russia amid its ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

Before that, The Financial Times reported that during the NATO foreign ministers' summit in Brussels, Secretary of State Antony Blinken rang an alarm over the allegedly "concerning scale" of China's support for Russia amid the special military operation in Ukraine.

Following a new round of sanctions against Chinese entities for their alleged links to the Russian military industrial base in February, the Chinese Commerce Ministry said that China resolutely stands against US sanctions imposed on Chinese enterprises over alleged links with Russia, and it will adopt the necessary measures to protect the rights and interests of its companies.

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US House Passes Bill to Prevent Iranian Abuse of Financial Sanctions Exemptions

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Tuesday passed a bill to prevent Iranian abuse of financial sanctions exemptions, after passing other Iran-related bills earlier this week.

House lawmakers passed the Iran Sanctions Accountability Act in a vote of 408 in favor and 13 opposed, with two-thirds support required for passage.

The bill requires the US president to issue regulations to ensure that humanitarian exemptions for Iran sanctions do not contribute to international terrorism or Iranian weapons programs.

On Monday, the House of Representatives passed a bill to prohibit the US Treasury Secretary from authorizing certain transactions by US financial institutions in connection with Iran.

House lawmakers also passed a bill to impose restrictions on correspondent and payable-through accounts in the United States with respect to Chinese financial institutions that conduct transactions linked to the sale of Iranian petroleum and petroleum products.

The House of Representatives considered the bills following an Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel, which Tehran launched in response to an Israeli strike on Iran's embassy in Damascus.

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UN Chief Reiterates to Iran Foreign Minister UNSC Position on Strikes - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and reiterated his position from Sunday's UN Security Council emergency session on the Iranian strikes on Israel, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"[Guterres] reiterated to the foreign minister the points he had made in his own remarks to the Security Council in relation to the series of Iranian strikes on Israeli military objectives and armed attacks against the Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus," Dujarric said during a briefing.

Guterres has had no direct contact with Israeli officials, Dujarric added.

On Sunday, the UN Security Council held a special emergency session to discuss Iranian's retaliatory strikes on Israel in response to the latter attacking Iran's consulate in Damascus, Syria, in violation of international law. Guterres briefed the UN Security Council and condemned the tense situation in the region.

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US Attorney General Merrick Garland Says Biden Has 'No Impairment'

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland said during a House of Representatives panel on Tuesday that President Joe Biden is without mental impairment.

"The President has no impairment," said Garland to a House appropriations subcommittee.

Garland added that he had "complete confidence" in the president and that in his opinion, Biden has expertly guided cabinet members on issues of foreign affairs and military strategy.

In February, Special Counsel Robert Hur released a report on his year-long investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified documents. Hur concluded that it was not worth initiating a criminal case against the US president because in court before the jury he may appear as a "sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with poor memory."

The report also said that during communication with the special prosecutor's team, Biden demonstrated problems with his memory, and could not accurately place the beginning and end of his term as US vice president or name the date when his son Beau died.

The White House has strongly disputed Hur's statements about Biden's memory, calling the report's findings "flat out wrong" and "gratuitous."

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Philippines Hopes to Strengthen Trade Ties with Russia - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Philippines hopes to strengthen its economic relations with Russia, Philippine Secretary of Finance Ralph Recto told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"We do not have much trade and economic relations with Russia, but we would want to have more economic relations with Russia," Recto said on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

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Philippines Wants More Russian Investment in Its infrastructure - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Philippines would like to see more Russian investment in its infrastructure and digitalization, Philippines Secretary of Finance Ralph Recto told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Same as in any other country, we want to have more investments in infrastructure, digitalization," Recto said on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

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White House Says Hopes to Have Meeting With Israelis on Rafah in Coming Days

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to have a meeting with the Israelis in the coming days about their anticipated operation in Rafah targeting Hamas, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We're hoping to get another meeting on Rafah in the coming days, but I don't have anything on the schedule," Kirby told reporters.

However, lower-level US and Israeli officials have had technical talks on Rafah recently, Kirby noted.

On Monday, CNN reported, citing two Israeli sources, that Israel has postponed its plans for a ground operation in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip while it mulls its security situation with Iran following Saturday's retaliatory attack.

The Israeli authorities intended to undertake steps toward the operation in Rafah this week but are delaying those plans to prioritize security matters concerning Iran, the report added.

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Israel Has Not Shared Iran Attack Response Plan With US - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Israeli government has not shared plans with the United States to respond to Iranian strikes on Israel over the weekend, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"They have not," Miller said during a press briefing, when asked if Israel has shared response plans with the US.

The US has been in close communication with Israel and other partners in the region in recent days, Miller said.

The Iranian strikes on Israel over the weekend came in response to an Israeli strike on the Iranian embassy in Damascus earlier this month.

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UPDATE - More Sanctions Soon on Iran, Yellen Says, Without Confirming If Oil Exports Will Be Hit

(Changes headline, adds comments, details and context, paragraphs 3-15)

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Iran will be slapped with additional sanctions by the United

States in the coming days for its retaliatory attack on Israel, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday, without confirming if the Islamic Republic's oil exports will be further curtailed as well.

"I fully expect that we will take additional sanctions against Iran in the coming days," Yellen told a news conference on the sidelines of the 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

She declined to say if Tehran's oil shipments will face more restrictions too, and how that would impact global energy supplies and prices, given the Islamic Republic's standing as the fourth largest exporter of the commodity with 3% of global output.

Last month, Yellen said the United States remains "strict" with its sanctions on Iranian oil despite a report showing that billions of dollars worth of crude were being carried out of the country by dozens of tankers.

The New York Times in February reported that at least 27 tankers transported oil from Iran over the past year, using liability insurance obtained from the New York-based American Club.

US authorities could have disrupted the shipments by advising the insurer to revoke coverage for the tankers, the Times noted. Yet, the tankers were allowed to proceed, making at least 59 trips since 2023, said the paper, which published publicly-available satellite images of the vessels and their timelines of travel.

Since 1979, the United States has sanctioned Iran over various periods for various reasons. In 2015, the Islamic republic reached a point of no sanctions by signing with then Democratic US President Barack Obama an agreement not to develop nuclear weapons. But Republican Donald Trump, who came to the White House after that, canceled the accord and put sanctions back on Iran in 2019.

Yellen said on Tuesday any decision on new Iranian sanctions would require broader consensus from the Biden administration.

"The Treasury plays an important role when it comes to sanctions [but] the State Department is involved as well but, of course, there's a much broader diplomatic initiative that my colleagues in the administration and President Biden are involved in, that are intended to use a variety of diplomatic tools," she said.

In a speech earlier, Yellen said the Biden administration was responding to the latest challenges in the Middle East posed by Iran.

"The attack by Iran and its proxies [underscores the importance of the Treasury's work to use our economic tools to counter Iran's malign activity," she said. "We've targeted over 500 individuals and entities connected to terrorism and terrorist financing by the Iranian regime and its proxies since the start of the Administration, including targeting Iran's drone and missile programs and its financing of Hamas, the Houthis, Hizballah, and Iraqi militia groups. From this weekend's attack to the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, Iran's actions threaten the region's stability and could cause economic spillovers."

Iran directed some 300 aerial weapons of mixed caliber towards Israel on Saturday which the Jewish states and its allies, led by the United States, intercepted almost entirely without any reported loss of property and life.

The attack was payback for an Israeli raid on Iran's diplomatic compound in Syria that killed senior military officials of the Islamic Republic.

While various Western military and political analysts were broadly of the opinion that Iran fell

short of making good on its intended revenge, some said it showcased Tehran's ability for a measured response that could be recalibrated, with little warning the next time.

Prior to the weekend attack, Iran had also telegraphed that it could do more to assist Hamas in its fight against Israel for Gaza.

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NY Supreme Court Judge Sets Deadline for Trump to Respond to Contempt Finding—Court Filing

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) —The New York Supreme Court ordered Donald Trump to respond to its finding by April 24 that he was in contempt of court for his social media posts attacking witnesses, according to a court filing.

"It is hereby: ORDERED that pursuant to Judiciary Law 750§(A)(3), defendant Donald J. Trump show cause before the Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York, the Honorable Juan M. Merchan presiding, located at 100 Centre Street, Part 59, in Manhattan, on the 24th day of April, 2024, at 2:15 p.m., or as soon thereafter as counsel may be heard, why this Court should not issue an order granting the following relief: 1. Holding defendant in criminal contempt of this Court, and imposing a fine of \$1000..." the court filing stated.

On April 1, the court ordered Trump to refrain from making or directing others to make public statements about witnesses concerning their participation in the investigation or criminal trial.

The court stated in the Monday filing that Trump had violated this order in two posts on his Truth Social account on April 10 and one on April 13. Each of the three violations is subject to a \$1000 fine.

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White House Says Does Not Support Standalone Bill to Solely Provide Aid for Israel

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will not support a congressional bill that provides aid to Israel but excludes provisions for Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We don't support a standalone bill that only funds Israel because Ukraine needs munitions too," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Now look, I think we still have to see the [US House] Speaker's proposal in more detail. The important thing is that the House moves this week to help us get security assistance for Israel, Ukraine and also for the Indo-Pacific."

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Some 40 Americans Will Join Freedom Flotilla to Deliver Aid to Gaza - CODEPINK

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Dozens of Americans will head to Turkey to take part in an international "Freedom Flotilla" mission to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip, co-founder of the peace group CODEPINK Medea Benjamin told Sputnik.

"Many Americans will be on that. I think there will be about 40," Benjamin said, adding that she herself will head to Turkey tomorrow.

Turkish humanitarian relief foundation IHH told Sputnik on Monday that the new Freedom Flotilla with a humanitarian shipment for the Gaza Strip will involve activists from 60 countries and is scheduled to depart from Istanbul for the Palestinian enclave on April 21.

The last Freedom Flotilla sent to the Gaza Strip in 2010 ended with the interception of the ships by Israel.

"Unfortunately, there was a tragic incident in 2010 when there was a flotilla and the Israelis boarded it from helicopters and shot some 10 people," she said. "They were killed. But we're hoping that doesn't happen this time. We are determined to break the siege of Gaza and to bring 5,500 tonnes of humanitarian aid and to challenge the Israelis."

Benjamin shared that the most likely scenario is that the Israelis will stop the activists in international waters and arrest everybody on the boats.

"Take them to Israeli jails and keep them for we don't know how long and then deport them. That's unfortunately the most likely scenario," she said. "The other scenario is that they let us through and we go to Gaza and we deliver the aid. We've been working with a lot of humanitarian groups on the ground."

There is, however, another scenario, Benjamin added, in which the Israelis might allow the aid to go in separately through other channels.

"It's important for me [to join the Flotilla] because I've been watching for six months Israel get away with killing people every single day, day in day out day in day out, and my government paying for it, my tax dollars going toward these bombs. I'm sick and tired of it. I want to do everything that I can."

The Gaza Freedom Flotilla Coalition was established in 2010 by the Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). The coalition aims to support the Palestinian people and deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip by breaking the Israeli blockade of 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 33,800 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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Democrats Will Get Backlash in Communities if They Vote for Israel Aid Bill - Activist

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Democrats in Congress will get a great deal of backlash in their local communities if they vote in favor of the standalone bill for additional aid to Israel, peace advocacy group CODEPINK co-founder Medea Benjamin told Sputnik.

"Almost [all] Republican members of Congress are in favor of sending money to Israel. On the Democratic side, there are maybe about 30 or 40, which means it will pass very easily," Benjamin said. "It will be a problem for those Democrats that vote for it because many of them live in districts where people are just so upset. If they vote for \$14 billion more for Israel in a standalone bill, they're going to get a lot of backlash in their communities."

Earlier on Tuesday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson unveiled his plan to advance foreign aid legislation for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan alongside a bill that includes sanctions on Iran and Russia and a measure to seize Russian assets.

Johnson explained that he intends to try to pass four separate bills instead of a \$95.3 billion national security package passed by the Senate in February because it is the will of the House of Representatives to address it as single subjects.

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Biden Extends for 1 Year Ban on Russian-Affiliated Ships From US Ports - Federal Register

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is extending a ban for another year that prohibits Russian-affiliated vessels from US ports over Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, a notice in the Federal Register revealed on Tuesday.

"I am continuing for one year the national emergency with respect to the Russian Federation and the emergency authority relating to the regulation of the anchorage and movement of Russian-affiliated vessels to United States ports set out in Proclamation 10371," Biden said in the notice.

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US Risks Getting Dragged Into Middle East War if Conflict Escalates - Activist

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States risks being dragged into the Middle East war if the ongoing conflict escalates, co-founder of the peace group CODEPINK Medea Benjamin told Sputnik amid expectations of Israel's response to Iran's retaliatory strikes.

"If it escalates, the United States is going to be under tremendous pressure to support Israel. They will be involved in this war," Benjamin said. "They will be absolutely involved in this war

and this will not be a good thing for Biden. It will not be a popular action in an election year." Benjamin explained that if Israel retaliates, Iran will come back again which may result in Israelis being killed.

The American people do not want to be in the middle of another war, the activist stressed.

"It is really important for Biden to be much stronger in his response to Israel. He should have come out and condemned Israel for attacking a diplomatic compound in Syria," she said. "When he allows those kinds of things to happen, he digs himself deeper and deeper into a hole. But yes, if there is escalation, he's going to feel a lot of pressure inside the US from the pro-Israel groups to be supportive of Israel."

The activist pointed out that the Iranians were very careful in their weekend strikes to try to have a show of force without killing people.

"That's not going to be the case the next time," she warned.

Benjamin also noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is now in a very difficult position because he wants to retaliate and US President Joe Biden is against it.

"I'm sure they are trying to figure out what they can do to retaliate in a way that doesn't alienate the US," she said. "I am hoping that the Israelis won't react or if they do it will be in a minimal way that won't then force the Iranians to respond."

The situation is not just about Iran and Israel, the activist continued.

"This is also about Hezbollah. This is about the militia groups in Iraq. This is about the Houthis," she said. "It's quite remarkable that people haven't been killed in a lot of those confrontations. So whether it's around Iran or one of the other groups that have been very reserved so far, it's not gonna keep being the case if Israel keeps provoking."

Over the weekend, Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles toward military targets in Israel in retaliation for Israel's April 1 strikes on its consulate in Damascus that killed seven Iranian nationals, including two IRGC generals, and six Syrian nationals. Most of them were intercepted by Israel's air defense systems and US, UK, French, and Jordanian forces.

In the wake of the strikes, the US threatened to slap new sanctions on Iran but said it will not take part in a possible Israeli counterattack.

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US Senator Says Seizing Frozen Russian Assets Hinders Future Diplomatic Efforts

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Senator JD Vance said on Tuesday that legislation to seize and spend frozen Russian sovereign assets could hinder future diplomatic efforts by presumptive 2024 Republican Party presidential nominee Donald Trump.

The bill dubbed the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act, authorizes the confiscation and disposition of Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine. "The REPO Act will make it impossible for Donald Trump to engage in diplomacy in Europe during his second term," Vance said in a statement via social media platform X.

The US Congress must kill the bill or make it sunset before the start of the next presidential administration, the statement said.

The legislation is being pushed as part of a House Republican foreign aid plan, which would provide support to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan.

An estimated \$300 billion in Russian central bank assets are frozen in Western accounts. The Kremlin has maintained that any attempts to confiscate Russian assets would violate international law.

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US Energy Secretary Reiterates Support for Congressional Ban on Russian Uranium Imports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm confirmed Tuesday that she supported a Congress ban on imports of Russian uranium.

“That would be my preference,” Granholm testified when asked at a Senate committee on energy and natural resources hearing if she preferred Congress to enact a ban on imports of Russian uranium.

Granholm had testified last month at a House hearing that legislation would make the ban more concrete than if the Department of Energy did it alone.

She also said it would free up funds to support domestic uranium enrichment and develop high-assay low-enriched uranium fuel for next-generation nuclear reactors.

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Musk Says NPR ‘Hard Left Propaganda Machine’ Intolerant of Dissent, Calls to Defund Outlet

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Tuesday that public US news organization National Public Radio (NPR) has become a leftist propaganda outlet that is intolerant of dissent and called to defund the organization.

“NPR has become a hard left propaganda machine that tolerates no dissent,” Musk said in a statement via social media platform X.

In a separate post reply, Musk called for NPR to be defunded. NPR is funded through grants from the publicly funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), 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. However, federal funding is “essential” to NPR, according to the outlet’s website.

Last week, NPR senior business editor and reporter Uri Berliner wrote an article detailing the outlet’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.

NPR’s coverage of Trump transformed into an effort to damage his presidency, Berliner said. NPR suspended Berliner in response to the article.

Former US President Donald Trump also called to defund NPR in the wake of Berliner's article, likewise characterizing the outlet as a "disinformation machine" with a liberal bias.

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US Navy Depletes \$1Bln Worth of Weapons in Middle East in 6 Months - Secretary Del Toro

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US Navy needs to replace about \$1 billion worth of munitions that it used to combat attacks on Red Sea shipping and defend Israel over the last six months, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro said in testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee on Tuesday.

"Over the course of the last six months we have actually countered over 130 direct attacks on US Navy ships and merchant ships," Del Toro said. "We currently are approaching \$1 billion in munitions that we need to replenish at some point in time."

Del Toro emphasized that it would be "critical" for Congress to pass a national security supplemental in order to replace the weapons, which include SM-2, SM-3 and SM-6 missiles.

The national security supplemental passed by the US Senate includes \$2 billion in funds for the US Navy that would be used to replenish the weapons, he added.

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US Army Secretary Says Ukraine Running 'Very Low' on Patriot Interceptors

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is in dire need of ammunition and running "very low" on Patriot interceptors amid a stalemate in Congress regarding the supplemental bill with additional aid for Kiev, US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Tuesday.

"The Ukrainians are in dire need [of US funding]. They are running very low on ammunition, they are running very low on Patriot interceptors," Wormuth said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

While the United States has already invested a billion dollars in its organic military-industrial base to increase the production of 155mm ammunition, it will not be able to reach its target of 100,000 rounds per month without the supplemental funding, Wormuth added.

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

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

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

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G7 Can Work Together in Minimizing Risk of Russia Retaliation Over Frozen Assets - Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Group of Seven (G7) countries can work together in containing any further Russian retaliation over the freezing of its assets related to the Ukraine conflict, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a press conference on the sidelines of the 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on Tuesday.

"Russia has already taken actions against firms based in the United States, in Europe and other countries," Yellen said. "Of course, there could be retaliation and we are looking at the risks that are associated with using these assets and evaluating [the] different strategies that we might present to the G7 [and] evaluating the risks is part of that. But overall, I believe there are ways of managing the risks, particularly if the G7 acts together in unison, and that it's important for us to do [so]."

The United States and its allies froze Russian foreign exchange reserves in the aftermath of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Since then, some G7 officials and commentators have proposed that the assets, reportedly valued at around \$300 billion in total, be seized and used instead to defend and rebuild Ukraine.

Yellen said on Tuesday that the G7 was resolved to holding the frozen Russian assets until Moscow made reparations toward Ukraine.

"So far, we've indicated that the G7 [wants] the assets [to] remain immobilized until Russia has paid for the damage that it's done to Ukraine," Yellen said. "And I would point out that since most of the assets are no longer invested in cash and no longer earning interest, it's quite clear that those interest proceeds do not belong to Russia and [do not] provide a source [for which] they could be used. That should, you know, not be an issue, from Russia's point of view."

Russia has warned that if its frozen assets are not freed, it will retaliate by confiscating the remaining assets of companies from "unfriendly countries" operating on its shores.

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Austin, Chinese Counterpart Discuss Defense Relations, Global Security Issues – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun discussed bilateral defense relations, and regional and global security issues in the first conversation following Beijing's appointment of its new defense chief, the Pentagon said on Tuesday.

“Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Admiral Dong Jun, Minister of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (PRC), spoke today via video teleconference,” the Pentagon said in a press release. “The two officials discussed U.S.-PRC defense relations and regional and global security issues.”

During the call, Austin emphasized the importance of continuing to open lines of military-to-military communication between the United States and China and reiterated the US intention to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, the release said.

Austin also discussed the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and expressed concerns about recent "provocations" from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, according to the release.

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Russia Says Elimination of Foreign Fighters in Libya 'Crucial Goal' - UN Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - Elimination of foreign fighters in Libya is a crucial goal and it needs to be done in a phased withdrawal, Russian Diplomat of the Mission to the United Nations Dmitry Tretyakov said on Tuesday.

“Another important issue is to eliminate the foreign military presence in the country,” Tretyakov told the UN Security Council members during a meeting on Libya. “We are in favor of a balanced gradual synchronized and phased withdrawal of all non-Libyan groups and military units from the country.”

In addition, he said that Russia also continues to prompt all the stakeholders in the conflict to continue dialogue, however, the political stalemate hinders the withdrawal of the foreign mercenaries from the country.

In March, key Libyan political forces, during a meeting at the headquarters of the League of Arab States (LAS) in Cairo, agreed on the need to form a unified government for holding presidential and parliamentary elections in the country.

Libya has faced multiple crises since the 2011 Western military intervention that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi and created a power vacuum that split the nation into rival factions. Although the warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire in 2020, the differences have never been resolved, and the country continues to be ruled by two rival governments. The UN has been struggling to fill the void by helping Libyans hold a general election, although internal divisions led it to cancel the vote set for 2021.

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Political Stalemate in Libya Hinders Implementing Ceasefire Agreement - UN Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - Implementing the main ceasefire agreement provisions in Libya has been hindered by the political stalemate despite the agreement not being violated,

UN Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily said on Tuesday.

"Despite these worrying domestic trends, no violation of the ceasefire agreement was recorded. However, progress on implementing its outstanding provisions, particularly on the withdrawal of foreign fighters, foreign forces and mercenaries, remains hindered by the political stalemate and instability in the southern neighboring countries of Libya, where many of the foreign fighters and mercenaries originate," Bathily said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The United Nations is also concerned about the arbitrary arrests and abductions by the country's security forces, instilling fear, Bathily added.

In March, key Libyan political factions agreed during a meeting in Cairo on the need to form a unified government for holding presidential and parliamentary elections in the country.

Libya has faced multiple crises since the 2011 Western military intervention that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi and created a power vacuum that split the nation into rival factions. Although the warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire in 2020, they did not resolve their differences and the country continues to be ruled by two rival governments.

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Schumer Says Reserving Judgment on US House Foreign Aid Plan, Pushes Senate Supplemental

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that he will reserve judgment on a House Republican foreign aid plan until further details emerge.

"I'm reserving judgment on what will come out of the House until we see more about the substance of the proposal and the process by which the proposal will proceed," Schumer said during Senate floor remarks.

The fastest and surest way to deliver aid to US allies is for the House of Representatives to take up a Senate-passed supplemental aid bill, Schumer said.

On Monday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson unveiled a multi-billion-dollar foreign aid plan, which includes support for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, as well as measures to sanction Iran and Russia and seize frozen Russian assets. House Republicans are also pushing a TikTok ban as part of their plan.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and Congressman Thomas Massie are backing a motion to vacate Johnson as speaker, in response to the foreign aid plan.

Johnson said on Tuesday that he will not resign from the leadership role, adding that he considers himself a "wartime" speaker in difficult circumstances.

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Without US Support Russia Will Reach Kiev in 'Not Too Distant Future' - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Russia will allegedly be in Kiev "in the not-too-distant future" if the United States fails to pass the supplemental security funding to provide additional aid to Ukraine, US Congressman Adam Smith said on Tuesday.

"Absent that [additional aid for Ukraine], you will see Russia in Kiev in the not-too-distant future," Smith said during a US House Armed Services Committee hearing.

US weapons will start flowing to Ukraine "literally within days" if Congress passes the supplemental bill, Smith said.

Earlier on Tuesday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a statement that the House Republican Conference is weighing trying to pass multiple bills this week to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan as separate bills.

House Republicans are reportedly considering providing \$48.4 billion to Ukraine; \$14.1 billion to Israel; \$2.4 billion for security operations in the Indo-Pacific region; \$3.3 billion for the US submarine industrial base and \$2.4 billion for US operations in the Red Sea.

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Russia's Forecast Beating 2024 Growth Due to Oil Exports, Other Factors - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Russia's forecast-beating growth for 2024 is expected to be powered by oil exports and domestic investments, even as Western sanctions continue to weigh on the country's economy, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

Reaffirming expectations for a 3.2% GDP growth for this year versus a previous 0.6% forecast, IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told a news conference that the upgrade represents a "significant upward revision."

His colleague, Petya Koeva Brooks, told reporters that higher growth was expected from four fronts.

"First [is] oil, where export volumes have held steady," Brooks said. "The second is that we've seen a lot of strengthening of corporate investments, including by state-owned enterprises. The third is that we've also seen a lot of robustness in private consumption. That has underpinned growth. And last, but not least, we've also had the impact from government spending though there we've seen much larger increases in security related spending in overall spending."

Brooks pointed out that the Russian economy grew despite the sanctions imposed by Western countries, which have sided with Ukraine in the conflict between the two countries.

"If we look into the medium-term there, we still have growth rates that are significantly below what they were prior to the war," Brooks said. "Now, we have growth rates at the order of one and a quarter as opposed to 1.7, which we had previously, which is another way of saying that [the] Russian economy is still expected to face these headwinds as a result of, again, the impact of the war and the associated sanctions."

Russia's central bank kept interest rates unchanged last month, with Governor Elvira Nabiullina

saying the economy is continuing on the path of robust growth.

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More Sanctions on Iran Expected In Coming Days - Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Iran is expected to face additional sanctions from the United States in the coming days after the retaliatory strikes by Iran on Israel, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

"I fully expect that we will take additional sanctions against Iran in the coming days," Yellen told a news conference on the sidelines of the 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

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New York District Attorney Seeks to Hold Trump in Contempt – Court Filing

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The New York district attorney's office filed a motion on Tuesday to hold Donald Trump in contempt for his social media posts attacking witnesses Michael Cohen and Stormy Daniels, according to a court filing.

"On April 1, 2024, this Court entered an order directing defendant to refrain from, among other things, "[m]aking or directing others to make public statements about known or reasonably foreseeable witnesses concerning their potential participation in the investigation or in this criminal proceeding...[On April 9] and continuing through this past weekend, defendant willfully violated this Court's order by publishing several social media posts attacking two known witnesses— Michael Cohen and Stormy Daniels. These attacks unquestionably violate the Court's April 1 order," the motion stated.

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US Congressman Massie Says Supporting Measure to Vacate Johnson as House Speaker

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Tuesday that he is backing a measure to vacate House Speaker Mike Johnson from his leadership role, after Johnson announced a multi-billion-dollar foreign aid plan.

"I just told Mike Johnson in conference that I'm cosponsoring the Motion to Vacate that was introduced by [Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene]. He should pre-announce his resignation ... so we can pick a new Speaker without ever being without a GOP Speaker,"

Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

Massie added that Johnson told him he will not resign as speaker.

On Monday, Johnson unveiled a plan to pass foreign aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan alongside a bill that includes sanctions on Iran and Russia and a measure to seize Russian assets. The legislation could also include a TikTok ban.

Johnson is a "deep state speaker," Congresswoman Greene said in a statement via X. Johnson is neither holding Democrats accountable nor leading the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, Greene said.

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US Defense Secretary Austin Speaks With Chinese Counterpart - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Chinese counterpart, Defense Minister Dong Jun, via phone as Washington attempts to restore communication channels between the two countries, a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

The phone call has become the first engagement between the military chiefs of the two powers in over a year and the first Austin's communication with Dong Jun following his appointment at the end of 2023.

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US House to Consider Bill This Week That Includes Russia Sanctions, REPO Act - Speaker

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson on Tuesday unveiled his plans to advance foreign aid legislation for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan alongside a bill that includes sanctions on Iran and Russia and a measure to seize Russian assets.

Johnson said in an interview with Fox news that he intends to try to pass four separate bills instead of a \$95.3 billion national security package passed by Senate in February because it is "the will of the House to address it in single subjects."

"So you'll have four different bills ... You have Israel, first in the order, then you have the Indo-Pacific region, then you have the Ukraine matter, and then a fourth bill where we introduce our other national security priorities. And that will include additional sanctions on Russia and Iran, and the REPO Act," Johnson said on Tuesday.

Johnson did not mention legislation to ban TikTok, though media reports say that the fourth bill could also include such a measure.

Speaking on the Ukraine aid bill, the speaker expressed belief that "if you can word assistance to a loan," it would "more palatable for people." Johnson has faced stiff resistance from some Republican members of the House, who strongly oppose any new aid for Kiev.

Johnson also said that 68% of the Ukraine funding is going to replenish US stockpiles. Lawmakers are also "trying merge some" provisions to secure the US border into the legislation, Johnson said.

In January, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill dubbed the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act to authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Kiev. Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its assets would violate international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry has condemned the freezing of Russian assets as outright theft.

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Persistent US Inflation Could Trigger Upward Revision to Interest Rate Expectations - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Persistent US inflation could boost expectations of another rate hike by the US Federal Reserve, leading to an appreciation of the US dollar, the International Monetary Fund said in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday. "Unexpectedly persistent US inflation could, for example, trigger an upward revision to US interest rate expectations and cause a US dollar appreciation," the IMF said in its new report.

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Trade Before, After Ukraine Conflict Confirm Fragmentation Underway - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Bilateral goods trade before and after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrate a trend toward fragmentation, the International Monetary Fund said in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

"Bilateral goods trade before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 confirm that fragmentation is already underway," the IMF said in its new WEO report.

Total goods trade has slowed by about 2.4 percentage points more between countries not in the same bloc than among those in the same bloc, the IMF observed.

"The relationship is especially strong for trade in strategic sectors, such as chemicals and machinery, in which trade has slowed by about 4 percentage points more among countries not in the same bloc," the report said.

Another aspect of fragmentation is that trade links are weakening between China and the United States, it added.

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IMF Projects Russia's Growth to Decline From 3.2% in 2024 to 1.8% in 2025 - WEO

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Russia's economic growth is expected to slow down from 3.2% in 2024 to 1.8% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund said in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

"Growth in emerging and developing Europe is projected at 3.2 percent in 2023 and 3.1 percent in 2024, with an easing to 2.8 percent in 2025, an upward revision of 0.5 percentage point for 2023 and 0.3 percentage point for 2024 and 2025 since January. The moderation reflects a prospective decline of growth in Russia from 3.2 percent in 2024 to 1.8 percent in 2025 as the effects of high investment and robust private consumption, supported by wage growth in a tight labor market, fade," the IMF said in its new WEO report.

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IMF Projects Ukraine GDP Growth to Reach 3.2% in 2024, 6.5% in 2025

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund expects Ukraine's GDP growth to reach 3.2% this year and 6.5% in 2025, according to its new World Economic Outlook (WEO) out Tuesday.

In 2029, the Ukrainian economy is expected to expand by 4.2%, the report said.

For 2023, the World Bank estimated Ukraine's GDP growth at 5%.

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IMF Sees Oil Prices at \$78.60 in 2024, \$67.50 in 2029, Warns of Escalation Risks

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday it expects global oil prices to decrease and average \$78.60 per barrel this year and \$67.50 in 2029, but warned about upside risks to this outlook.

"Futures markets suggest that oil prices will slide by 2.5% year-over-year to average \$78.60 per barrel in 2024 and will continue to fall to \$67.50 in 2029. Risks to this price outlook are balanced. Upside price risks could arise from an escalation of the Middle East conflict and attacks on Russian oil infrastructure," the IMF said in its new World Economic Outlook (WEO) report.

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IMF Projects US Growth to Slow From 2.7% in 2024 to 1.9% in 2025 - WEO

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Economic growth in the United States is expected to increase to 2.7% in 2024 and decelerate to 1.9% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund said in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

"In the United States, growth is projected to increase to 2.7 percent in 2024, before slowing to 1.9 percent in 2025, as gradual fiscal tightening and a softening in labor markets slow aggregate demand," the IMF said in its new WEO report.

For 2024, an upward revision of 0.6 percentage points since the January 2024 WEO Update reflects largely statistical carryover effects from a stronger-than-expected growth outcome in the fourth quarter of 2023, with some of the stronger momentum expected to persist into 2024, the IMF explained.

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Middle East Escalation Can Push Oil Prices Up by 15%, Container Prices by 150% - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - An escalation in the Middle East conflict can push oil prices up by 15% and container prices by 150% in the 2024-2025 period, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its new World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

"Escalation of conflict in the Middle East leads to a surge in oil prices and in shipping costs. Oil prices are 15 percent higher, a moderate increase by historical standards. Average container prices rise by 150 percent in 2024–25, an increase similar to that following recent incidents in the Red Sea. Most of the increase in the cost of shipping is concentrated in Asia-to-Europe routes," the IMF said.

However, oil and container prices are expected to return to their baseline in 2026, the report added.

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IMF Warns Escalation in Middle East or Ukraine Conflicts Risks Generating Supply Shocks

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Tuesday that any escalation in the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine could generate supply shocks that will cause spikes in the prices of food, energy and transportation.

"The conflict in Gaza and Israel could escalate further into the wider region. Continued attacks in the Red Sea and the ongoing war in Ukraine risk generating additional supply shocks adverse to the global recovery, with spikes in food, energy and transportation costs," the IMF said in its latest update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO).

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Growth in Euro Area to Recover to 0.8% in 2024, 1.5% in 2025 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that economic growth in the Euro area will recover from its current low rate and reach 0.8% in 2024 and 1.5% in 2025, according to its latest update to its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

"Growth in the euro area is projected to recover from its low rate of an estimated 0.4 percent in 2023, which reflected relatively high exposure to the war in Ukraine, to 0.8 percent in 2024 and 1.5 percent in 2025," the IMF said.

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IMF Expects Global Growth to Remain at 3.2% in 2024-25, Decline to 3.1% in 2029 - WEO

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Global growth is expected to remain at 3.2% through 2025 before falling to 3.1% in 2029, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its latest update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO) on Tuesday.

"Global growth, estimated at 3.2 percent in 2023, is projected to continue at the same pace in 2024 and 2025. The forecast for 2024 is revised up by 0.1 percentage point from the January 2024 World Economic Outlook (WEO) Update, and by 0.3 percentage point from the October 2023 WEO," the IMF said.

The IMF added that it expects global growth in 2029 to fall to 3.1%, adding that this medium-term forecast — unchanged since the October 2023 WEO — is the lowest in decades.

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China's GDP Growth to Slow to 4.6% In 2024, to 4.1% In 2025 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik)—The International Monetary Fund projected on Tuesday that China's GDP growth will slow to 4.6% in 2024 and further to 4.1% in 2025.

"Growth in China is projected to slow from 5.2 percent in 2023 to 4.6 percent in 2024 and 4.1 percent in 2025 as the positive effects of one-off factors—including the post-pandemic boost to consumption and fiscal stimulus—ease and weakness in the property sector persists," the IMF said in its new World Economic Outlook (WEO).

The IMF did not change its projections in comparison with the January forecast, it added.

Inflation in China fell unexpectedly. This process was associated with a decrease reflecting sharply lower domestic food prices and pass-through effects on underlying inflation, according

to the report.

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US Expects Limited Israeli Response to Iran Strikes – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States expects that Israel's response to Iran's retaliatory airstrikes over the weekend to be limited in scope, while targeting both Iranian military forces and allied groups operating outside of Iran, NBC News reported on Tuesday, citing four US officials.

However, the officials said their knowledge was based on conversation with Israeli officials prior to the actual attack, and they have not been briefed on Israel's final plans. They also said it was unclear when Israel's response would occur, while it could happen anytime.

They believe Israel may opt for a relatively less aggressive response, given that Iran's attack did not result in any deaths or major destruction.

The officials also said that the US does not intend to participate in the response, while they expect Israel to brief the US in advance of its plans.

Over the weekend, Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles toward military targets in Israel in retaliation for Israel's April 1 strikes on its consulate in Damascus that killed seven Iranian nationals, including two IRGC generals, and six Syrian nationals. Most of them were intercepted by Israel's air defense systems and US, UK, French, and Jordanian forces.

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URGENT: US Treasury Won't Hesitate to Work With Allies to Sanction Iran – Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday that the Treasury "will not hesitate to work with our allies" to continue to sanction Iran, according to an advance copy of her speech provided to the press.

"I want to address the unprecedented attack on Israel this past weekend by Iran and its proxies. Treasury will not hesitate to work with our allies to use our sanctions authority to continue disrupting the Iranian regime's malign and destabilizing activity," Yellen said in prepared remarks for a press conference ahead of the 2024 spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank.

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US Launches Global Health Security Strategy Partnering With 50 Countries – Official

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States is launching a new global health security strategy and partnership with 50 countries to strengthen the health security capacity and

prepare for any future outbreaks, a senior US administration official said during a press briefing. "The [new global health security] strategy that we are launching [on Tuesday] is achieved by the hard-earned lessons of COVID-19," the official said on Monday. "With the launch of the strategy tomorrow, we are announcing formal partnerships with 50 countries to strengthen their global health security capacity."

While working on the new strategy, US health experts have identified at least five gaps in each country's capacity to prevent, detect, or respond to biological threats, ranging from surveillance for new pathogens to lab capacity to test samples, and preparedness to communicate about an outbreak, the official added.

The United States will be measuring progress in closing the gaps and will share regular updates through a new website that is launching later on Tuesday, the official said.

The Biden administration will continue to push the rest of the G7 countries to deliver on its commitment to support 50 more countries to reach a total number of 100 countries in the partnership by the end of the year, according to the official.