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4/25/24 Thursday

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AfD Popularity Continues to Ride in Second Place as Crack Downs on Accused Espionage Cases Begin

A poll released just two weeks ago showed the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) as the most favorable party with 31% of prospective voters indicating that they would vote for them. However, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) came in second place with 18% according to the Statista poll.

Germany's right-wing political party the Alternative for Germany (AfD) first gained popularity in opinion polls last spring. It entered the federal parliament in 2017 as the first time that a right-wing party has been elected since the 1950s. Anger swelled as millions protested the party when, in mid-January, politicians from the party reportedly met the head of the rightwing extremist Identitarian Movement and neo-Naxi activists to discuss a "masterplan" for mass deportations in Germany.

On Thursday, Sputnik's Fault Lines spoke with George Szamuely, a senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute and author. Szamuely explained that despite Germany's history with Nazism, there is a growing favorability for the AfD party as a way to confront frustrations surrounding immigration, a suffering economy, and the government's support of a proxy war in Ukraine.

"Germany is supposed to be the industrial powerhouse of Europe. It's an export-driven economy. And, if Germany is having to pay two, three, four times as much for energy as it has in the past, then basically German manufactured products cease to be competitive, and then Germany ceases to be the economic dynamo that it's supposed to be," said Szamuely.

"I think the shift can be explained by Europe essentially losing its independence on sovereignty, of becoming an appendage of the US, and waging a war in Ukraine against Russia," the researcher added. "So European economies are in very poor shape. European industries are in poor shape. Energy prices are through the roof. And much of it can be blamed on this war that Europe has been pushed into."

"So, I think Germans are getting very anxious about their future," he added. "The Germans are increasingly realizing that, well, this war is doing very nicely for the US, it's not doing anything for the Germans."

Szamuely suggested that while the AfD party is primarily concerned with immigration, they also "want peace" including an immediate peace in Ukraine. The party, he adds, has also expressed "considerable skepticism about NATO" and "German participation in NATO", and more importantly the party wants to address how to make Germany's manufacturing industry "the powerhouse of the world again".

"The migrant crisis, it's always been kind of bubbling under the surface in Germany for many years," he explained. "After the war, they started bringing in Turkish migrant laborers and then

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the Turks kind of settled down into Germany. So, there was a certain amount of resentment towards that."

"And, somehow there is a birth dearth in Europe. There's a shortage of labor in Europe. And the only way of resolving this problem is by importing migrants. I think it's a completely ridiculous argument, but nonetheless, it's an argument that is very fashionable and very dominant in Europe," he added. "Now, you're right to say that there has been a reaction against that because - the reaction has expressed itself in the rise of the populist right."

Sputnik's Melik Abdul agreed with his guest's comment, adding that defense contractors in the US as well as the military industrial complex as whole are "benefitting" from the Ukraine war. The US recently approved about $60 billion in funding for Ukraine, as Kiev looks to replenish its artillery shells and anti-aircraft missiles.

"The Alternative für Deutschland is a kind of a populist, right-wing party. It emerged in opposition to the Christian Democrats who were in power for years and years under Angela Merkel. And, well, initially it wasn't doing particularly well," Szamuely explained.

"It really took off after Merkel made that catastrophic decision in 2015 to welcome migrants from the Middle East. And that, from that moment, the Alternative für Deutschland went from strength to strength. I should say, however, that they are now absolutely in the crosshairs of the German intelligence services, the media and German prosecutors."

Early on Tuesday, German prosecutors announced that they had arrested Jian Guo, a German national who worked for AfD MEP Maximilian Krah, on suspicion of spying for China. He was later suspended by the European Parliament after prosecutors claimed he had passed on information about "negotiations and decisions" made in the parliament to China in January, according to one report.

German media found that AfD MEP Maximilian Krah, who is the AfD party's top candidate for European elections in June, had employed Guo.

"For instance, they're now arresting figures within the AfD for supposedly spying for China, receiving money from China, or receiving money from Russia. So, what's now going on in Europe is they're trying to smear the AfD," the author explained. "That didn't really work. Now, they're doing similar to what's being done in the US, they're using lawfare and making all kinds of allegations."

"[The AfD] has nothing in common with the Hitlerite parties and the Nazi Party, because if it did, it would have been banned. I mean, that's still a possibility," he added. "They could still ban the party, claiming that it's extremist. And, again, the German intelligence services are said to be surveilling the AfD with a view to maybe banning it if they decide that it's a danger to democracy, a danger to political stability in Germany. So, that's still a possibility."

"But, right now, in order to head off a good result in the European parliamentary elections, they're going with this familiar Russiagate, Chinagate allegations and, you know, trying to smear them that way."

"I think the German intelligence services aligned with the German prosecutors and the German media are going to do a number on the AfD," he added. "I don't think the AfD is going to do well in the June election. I think they'll do quite well. I don't think they will do anything like as well as they might have done had not the German security services stepped in. And, even if it'll, let's say the National Rally does a little better in France, I think they will be co-opted by the system."

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Strange Spring Weather Leaves Athens in Mars-Like Clouds of Dust

The storm also brought “freak” weather to Finland, with heavier-than-usual snow bringing public transport to a standstill.

This week, Athens was swallowed up by thick orange clouds as a plume of Saharan dust was pushed by jet stream winds and carried northward. It is one of the worst of such instances since 2018, said one official.

“It’s one of the most serious episodes of dust and sand concentrations from the Sahara since March 21-22, 2018, when the clouds invaded the island of Crete in particular,” said Kostas Lagouvardos, weather research director at the Athens Observatory.

The thick, orange haze caused limited visibility and prompted warnings from the authorities about possible breathing risks. The Greek meteorological service said weather conditions on Tuesday had favored the movement of thick concentrations of dust from Africa, particularly in the south of the country.

Luckily the service has predicted that the dust will gradually decrease on Wednesday morning, and from midday onward it will be “limited to the east”. While the dust made Athens look like a “colony of Mars” proclaimed one meteorologist, this natural phenomenon is not unheard of.

The Sahara releases 60 to 200 million tonnes of mineral dust a year. While the largest particles settle, the smaller particles are able to travel thousands of kilometers, including all of Europe.

However, a low-pressure system over northern Africa has already managed to sweep dust over Cyprus several times in mid-April, darkening skies and reducing air quality, according to NASA.

The Saharan air that was pushed over the Mediterranean was substantially hot, with several countries observing their hottest April weather on record. Nifer and Chat also set April high temperature records on Wednesday with 117 degrees (47.2C) in Tillaberi, Niger, and 116.6 degrees (47C) in Bokoro, Chad, according to a London-based meteorologist.

The south of Greece has also been experiencing unseasonal early wildfires due to the strong southerly winds. On Tuesday, the fire service said that a total of 25 wildfires broke out across the region within 24 hours. Three people on the island of Paros, a resort island, were arrested on suspicion of accidentally starting a scrub blaze on Monday. The fire was quickly contained and no significant damage or injuries were reported.

In August, 18 charred bodies were discovered in a remote village in northeastern Greece where wildfires had been burning for days amid record heat waves across southern Europe.

Meanwhile, unseasonably cold temperatures in Europe have been continuous and have set records for being the coldest this late in the year since the 1990s. More than a dozen cities in Germany also set record lows for an unusually cold spring while a number of cities in Italy also recorded their coldest afternoon high temperatures for the season.

Helsinki, Finland has been experiencing heavier-than-usual snow and still had 3.1 inches (8 cm) earlier this week which is the latest of such an instance since 1972.

Some areas experienced more than 20 centimeters (7.9 inches) of snow to some areas causing trams, buses and other metro services in the capital to be delayed as well as flight

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cancellations. The weather is not unusual for the capital, said the press office for Helsinki's public transport operator. But it is unusual for late April.

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Germany Creates a 'Veteran's Day' to Honor Those Who Fought in the Bundeswehr, Breaking Taboo

In 2008, the country introduced a new military decoration for bravery, which gave troops the honor for the first time since World War II, and in 2009 a memorial to soldiers who died while serving in the Bundeswehr was built at the Defense Ministry. Yet a holiday such as this has not occurred since its creation.

The German parliament has passed a bill that will create the first annual national "veterans' day" to honor people who have served in the military. The creation of the holiday breaks a long-held taboo in the country around the homage of soldiers, given Germany's history regarding World War II and Nazism.

The proposal will create a memorial day on June 15 each year, after Members of Parliament in the Bundestag lower house approved the proposal following an agreement made between the government and the conservative opposition. The celebration will be celebrated "publicly and visibly" and improved follow-up care for wounded veterans will also be called for, according to one report.

The decision "is a strong, important and, yes, an overdue signal of recognition and appreciation," Defense Minister Boris Pistorius told lawmakers, adding that the new holiday would counteract the presumption "that our lives in freedom and peace are a given".

The decision was made in an effort to boost public acceptance of the armed forces while also making service in the volunteer army more attractive as Germany increases its defense capabilities. A report from February suggests that German defense officials are privately contacting British and French NATO allies for a potential nuclear weapons deal as an alternative to their nuclear dependency on the US.

Germany fears not only imaginary threat from Russia, but is also concerned that a second Donald Trump presidency will lead the US to disengage themselves from NATO. The debate is a difficult one for the country, as Germany has already surrendered the use of both nuclear energy and the atomic bomb.

The new holiday will honor all Germans who have worn the German military uniform, not just those wounded or killed in combat. One party did raise objections to the initiative - the left-wing party Linke.

Officials within the Bundeswehr have said that long-term underfunding has made their military unfit to fight, Thursday's report adds. Thomas Wiegold, a military affairs expert said that the call will also address emergency preparedness for natural disasters. But regarding border security, the country is still divided.

"In Germany you have an east-west split whether you see a threat from Russia as realistic, and interestingly it tends to be discounted in the east," he said. The Bundeswehr was first founded in

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1955, and served as West Germany's military until the country reunified in 1990. More than 10 million people have served in the Bundeswehr.
While East Germany has celebrated its National People's Army with military parades, West Germany has avoided calling attention to their soldiers given the history regarding World War II and the Holocaust.
Since World War II, Germany has been cautious regarding militarism and war. Following the country's reunification in 1990, then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl first broke ground by sending German troops abroad to serve as military medics for a UN mission to Cambodia in 1992.

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Analyst: Anti-Russia 'Bluster' Designed to Make Biden Appear Strong in Election

Filmmaker Regis Tremblay insisted Russia would not be "intimidated" by the US Congress' passage of $61 billion in aid for Ukraine, noting most of the money would remain in the United States.
Congress' passage of billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan over the weekend has generated significant controversy in the United States.
Recent polling suggests the American public is against the idea. The majority of Democratic Party legislators, now fully identified with the interests of the military industrial complex and national security state, mostly voted in favor of the funding, while the Republican Party remains sharply divided over the issue. Some conservative lawmakers have proposed removing House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) from his post over his support of the massive spending.
The response to the development within Russia has been far more muted according to American filmmaker Regis Tremblay, who currently resides in Crimea. Tremblay joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesdayto discuss the issue with hosts Wilmer Leon and Garland Nixon.
"I don't think it's very much on the minds of ordinary Russian people," said the US-born documentarian. "Those that are paying attention know that most of that $61 billion is never going to reach Ukraine. They know that that is going to go to the United States military industrial complex to replenish America's arsenals. Now how much is going to get to Ukraine? Well, I think people could be sure that some of that money is going to go into the pockets of Zelensky and his cronies."
"What little arrives is not going to make any difference on the battleground," he insisted. "What people are thinking who are paying attention to what's going on in the United States, they know that Biden has got to appear strong as a wartime president who is doing everything he can to win this war against Russia… It is all bluster, it is all designed to make sure that Joseph Biden remains a viable candidate in the coming election."
Americans' support for US involvement in the Ukraine proxy war has followed the familiar pattern of most US-backed military conflicts. The launching of Russia's special military operation was greeted with strong support for Ukraine among the American public, with US aid quickly flowing from Congress.

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But the issue has become sharply polarizing in the two years since, with many conservative Republicans rejecting further funding for Ukraine. The American public has largely come to see the country's decades-long involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan as a costly mistake, with anti-war rhetoric representing a theme of former President Donald Trump's winning campaign in 2016. Sizable portions of supporters of both major US political parties view America's neoconservative foreign policy establishment with skepticism and distrust.

"This war is basically over," said Tremblay. "There's no amount of money and weapons that could get poured into Ukraine today that would help Ukraine win. The only thing that could create a real problem for the entire world is if, as Macron and others have said, they want to send their own troops into Ukraine."

Polling has shown most of the French public are opposed to the idea.

"The other part of this is that this money is really insignificant when it comes to what Ukraine needs," Tremblay added. "Patriot missile systems cost $1 billion. I don't know who in the United States wants to send any more of those Patriots to Ukraine that are going to be destroyed. I think that the United States is sending this money just to save face, period. It is not going to affect anything that's going on on the front lines."

A recent statement by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev criticized the aid bill, suggesting that the United States is unwilling to give up its long-held status of global hegemon. "Unpredictability and the conflict potential in international relations have significantly stepped up," said the official at the opening of the 12th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues.

"We look at statesmanship in the diplomacy from China, whether it be from President Xi or whether it be from Wang Yi," said Leon. "Statesmanship versus brinksmanship is the way that I'll categorize it. Tony Blinken on his way to China to, again, try to lecture the Chinese instead of trying to sit down and do what they've basically been asking, which is 'work with us, not against us.'"

"You have all of those – and they are the majority now – who understand and clearly articulate that the unipolar world is over," said Tremblay. "We are already in the multipolar world. The BRICS movement, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the One Belt, One Road are all groups, organizations that are emphasizing that the future will be a multipolar world and therein lies the crux of the problem."

"This situation has become more dangerous and unpredictable due to the unwillingness of the United States to accept its rightful place in the world order as one among equals."

Reports emerged recently that the Biden administration had pleaded with China to use its influence to prevent Iran from retaliating against Israel, suggesting a recognition of the power the country now holds as a neutral arbiter of global disputes. China surprised observers in 2023 by helping to broker a normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a significant diplomatic development in the region.

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Biden Rushes Aid to Ukraine As US Cost of Living Skyrockets

The US president is focusing on foreign entanglements as Americans insist they are fixated on economic concerns.

American households in 2024 are spending an extra $11,434 annually to maintain a similar standard of living to the one they enjoyed just three years ago.

That's according to a new study by Republican members of the US Senate Joint Economic Committee who examined consumer price data to arrive at an analysis of the impact of inflation from state to state. In some parts of the country the cost of living increase stood at a comparatively modest $8,500 per year, while in states like California and Colorado it approached $15,000.

The Biden White House rejected the study as one-sided, pointing to attendant wage increases across the economy. Still, recent polling suggests most Americans don't feel the increased income makes up for the rise in inflation, and economic issues remain at the forefront of voters' concerns with November's presidential election less than seven months away.

Geopolitical consultant and founder of Global Perspective Consulting David Oualaalou pointed to the troubling data during an appearance on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday, questioning the US president's focus on foreign policy amidst a grim economic outlook for millions of Americans.

"The fact that [the US] keeps sending more money to Ukraine [and] it's already a failed state, what is it for?" asked the author and global speaker. "We have been taking money out of average Americans that are paying taxes. I hope your listeners understand — and this is a sad reality — that the cost now of living in America has risen by about $11,434, give or take, in comparison to when Biden took office."

"And why? Because we are taking money out of Americans and giving it to the corrupted government in Ukraine." he insisted. "I saw those images of the incompetent members of Congress waving the Ukrainian flag inside Congress. Well to me it became like, why don't you go and represent Ukraine? Shame on our politicians. But, again, until the structure of our system has changed, nothing is going to change fundamentally."

Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned Americans about the emergent US military-industrial complex during his farewell address in 1961. What's less well known is that an earlier draft of the speech referred to a "military-industrial-congressional complex." Eisenhower reconsidered the term out of fear of offending Washington lawmakers, but the designation makes clear legislators' key role in what the former leader considered a corrupt and dangerous phenomenon. Military contractors make up one of the largest political lobbies in Washington; recently, a study found lawmakers who voted to pass a recent National Defense Authorization Act received four to five times more in donations from the defense industry than those who did not.

The promise of campaign cash creates a powerful incentive for congress members to vote to fund more war.

"We have nothing to show but conflicts," said Oualaalou. "We do not sell anything to the rest of the world except conflict and weapons. And at some point when the world is shifting, like what we are witnessing right now, most countries are going to say, 'sorry, we are not interested in buying what you have to sell.'"

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Recently the African country of Chad has threatened to order US troops stationed in the country to leave. The move comes after the neighboring country of Niger made a similar request. The United States has, so far, refused to comply, having invested significant amounts of money there as a hub for military and surveillance activity in the region.

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Blinken's Visit to China Signals Ongoing Hybrid War Against Growing World Power

One analyst claims the US is increasingly engaged in a "full spectrum hybrid war" against Beijing, including punitive economic measures and control of the information space.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in China this week amid a period of strained diplomatic relations between the United States and the growing Asian power. In a reversal of roles the two countries played only decades ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping has taken on the mantle of global defender of free trade practices, criticizing tariffs imposed by former US President Donald Trump and continued by President Biden.

The United States has protested Chinese dominance in electric vehicle manufacturing and other areas, accusing the country of "overproduction" and unfair trade practices. The US has also criticized China's continued trade with Moscow as the Ukrainian crisis continues. The US Congress passed a raft of military spending bills over the weekend, including $8 billion for authorities in Taiwan and some $61 billion to support Kiev's war effort.

Author and journalist KJ Noh claimed leaders in Beijing were unlikely to be alarmed by the development, but would continue to prepare for what they view as an intensifying "hybrid warfare" campaign launched by the West. The geopolitical analyst offered his thoughts on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Thursday.

"They're actually not even paying much attention to it," said Noh. "The hypocrisy is off the charts. But as they say, hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue."

"They're going to send $8 billion to Taiwan to weaponize it… And then they're talking that China is using non-market practices against the United States, etcetera. I mean, they think they're talking to children. The Chinese know exactly what the score is," the analyst emphasized.

Noh added that China has asked the United States to meet commitments agreed to at a summit in San Francisco late last year.

Meanwhile, Noh claimed the US and its NATO allies fear a loss in their proxy war with Russia as observers warn Ukraine's front lines are in danger of imminent collapse. The author insisted the West is in search of a scapegoat to blame for the development, with Beijing increasingly filling the role.

"The fact that Russia has been able to defeat the US/NATO against their best war doctrine, their best strategy, their best intelligence, their best trainers, their best weaponry and a decade of preparation – this has been a huge shock to the ruling imperial elite in Washington," he claimed. "That's a clear warning in case they go to war with China because China's watching the Ukraine war very, very carefully."

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“Anytime the US loses a war it always makes excuses for itself,” he added. “Because that exceptional nation, how could they lose a war? And they say ‘we tied our own hands behind our backs’ or ‘there was unfair, underhanded foreign support and influence.’ And then this becomes a license for even more unbridled, unrestrained aggression, and even more severe hate-mongering and information warfare. And that's part of this calculation.”

Noh claimed the criticism of Beijing’s trade with Moscow forms another part of a “hybrid war” being waged against China on multiple fronts.

Hybrid warfare is defined as a strategy in which conventional military force is combined with elements of “soft power” in order to undermine an enemy state. Elements of hybrid war may include cyberattacks, covert action, deceptive media narratives, political subversion, election interference, punitive economic measures, and diplomatic and judicial pressure, as well as irregular security threats and military provocations.

In 2020 the National Endowment for Democracy, a US government organization instrumental in carrying out so-called “color revolution” operations, admitted it had been funding Uyghur separatist groups in China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region since 2004. Western media has frequently attempted to discredit China by criticizing its conduct in the region as Beijing responds to a spate of terrorist attacks launched by religious extremists.

Warnings about China’s “social credit” system have also reemerged online recently as the United States prepares to implement repressive surveillance controls on social media. Such sensational claims have been repeatedly debunked in Western media as distorted and exaggerated. But US intelligence agencies have a long history of media manipulation, recently adapting their tactics to influence online narratives.

“This is all hybrid warfare,” said Noh, drawing a straight line from Trump’s tariffs against Beijing to recent anti-China media narratives. “This trade war is simply a harbinger of a total full-spectrum hybrid war, including information warfare. This is why there is this fight over TikTok. Because the US considers [the] information space, mental space to be a domain of war. And they want to be able to manipulate and monopolize it.”

Noh said Beijing would be prepared in case of increased US sanctions and attempts at decoupling, claiming China has worked to strengthen internal demand and economic links with other countries.

“From China's standpoint, yes, they will pivot back to internal consumption, they will also pivot to the Global South,” he predicted. “This is all their work that they're doing, building up the BRICS and the Belt and Road so that they can continue to trade and develop with the multipolar Global South.”

“They are planning for the worst,” Noh added. “Like the US plans on Russia where they expected Russia to collapse the moment that they put sanctions on it, I think they will find out that China is a much, much tougher nut to crack, not the least of which is the fact that the global supply chains are largely linked to China.”

“The world's largest banks on the planet are Chinese, and they will simply withdraw from the US market. They will stop using the US dollar – they already are. And then the blowback will be extreme for the United States… This quarter, growth was 1.6% [in the US] if we tweak and tap with the numbers. And China's growth was 5.1%. China's growing three times the rate of the United States. It really isn't rocket science. It's very clear what the writing on the wall is,” the analyst emphasized.

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Threats Against Campus Pro-Palestine Demonstrators Echo Deadly Violence of Kent State

As demonstrations spread across US college campuses, so too have threats from officials and prominent politicians.

Pro-Palestine demonstrations have spread across US college campuses in recent days as students denounce Israel's ongoing military operation in the Gaza Strip. Often led by people of Palestinian descent, the protests have attracted demonstrators of diverse backgrounds including Jewish students, who conducted a Passover Seder ceremony at Columbia University's encampment Tuesday evening.

Students throughout the country have taken up the cause this week, with some reports suggesting at least 33 campuses now host pro-Palestine demonstrations. Protest tactics have included sit-ins, hunger strikes, class walkouts, and interfaith prayer as demonstrators call on universities to divest from financial interests connected to weapons manufacturers and the Israeli occupation.

Protestors have faced police repression in some instances, with encampments in Texas and at Columbia being targeted with mass arrests. Tennessee's Vanderbilt University reportedly became the first school to expel students last week for participation in the acts of civil disobedience.

The crackdown has brought light to the work of late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, who once warned that repression of the pro-Palestine cause was giving rise to a new form of McCarthyism on college campuses. Independent journalist Jim Kavanagh joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Thursday to discuss Said's work and the implications of the spreading student protest movement.

"I knew Edward Said, I met him and socialized with him," said Kavanagh. "A very great man and his work has been formative. He was a professor at Columbia and he was under attack from the Zionists and Columbia University supported him, when they still had integrity. This is a situation – I'm just amazed by how quickly it spread."

"[Said] saw how difficult it was to get any kind of message across that the Palestinian narrative was impossible to articulate, that liberals and radicals are unable to overcome their Zionist beliefs, their commitment to Zionism," he added. "It's an almost total absence of historical knowledge from non-Zionist sources, and that has been overcome very quickly because of the availability of knowledge. That's why they want to ban TikTok and control the internet."

The protests have drawn frequent comparisons to the social movements of the 1960s, when college students engaged in mass protest against the Vietnam War. Famously, four students were killed at Ohio's Kent State University in 1970 after National Guard troops were sent to quell protests there. Ten days later, two students were killed under similar circumstances at Jackson State University, an historically Black school in Mississippi.

The threat of deadly police violence against demonstrators looms over the current protests, but such history has not prevented House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) from calling for a National Guard presence at Columbia's Upper Manhattan campus. Student leaders of the protest there

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have claimed the school's administration has threatened to call in the National Guard during talks with demonstrators.

"I was actually on the Columbia campus in 1968 and knew people who were part of the Students for a Democratic Society… and gave hell to the Democrats at the Chicago convention," said Kavanagh. "It's wonderful to see this, and it's really kind of terrifying at the same time. These students are taking real chances. I mean, they're bringing in the cops right away. They're not even making any pretense anymore of waiting for some kind of disruptive protest."

"They're bringing in the cops just to prevent any kind of gathering of students on campus. It's really quite amazing. It's the worst thing I've seen since the '60s," the journalist said.

Fear has grown that Israel will conduct a military operation in the Gazan city of Rafah, where some 1.5 million Palestinians are sheltering. Observers have warned an invasion of the city could result in mass civilian casualties and the forcing of thousands of Palestinians into neighboring Egypt.

The Israeli military has stepped up airstrikes in Rafah in recent days as a spokesperson for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists the country will "move ahead" with a ground operation.

"The kids have seen what's going on," said Kavanagh. "This is a slaughter. This is genocide. Israel killed 22 people a couple of nights ago in one raid. There are mass graves with 700-800 people in them, hands tied behind their back, children being sniped, children dying of starvation while the food sits in a truck spitting distance away."

"The students here are the pride of the world right now. They're standing up for intellectual and ethical integrity and the universities that are supposed to represent them are crushing them on behalf of Israel, on behalf of Zionism," Kavanagh highlighted.

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Prolonged Conflict Not in Country's Interest - Ukrainian Analyst

Polling shows increasing numbers of Ukrainians are unwilling to join the country's faltering military effort and oppose attempts to draft more fighters.

News emerged this week that the United States had secretly sent long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine as part of a weapons shipment announced last month. The provision of the armaments, which are able to strike targets farther away than the mid-range ATACMS sent last year, has stoked fears of escalation amid the threat of the Kiev regime gaining increased capability to strike targets in Russia. The covert weapons transfer forms part of an emerging pattern of the Biden administration secretly providing arms to allied countries amidst growing opposition to US support for wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Former Ukrainian diplomat and whistleblower Andrii Telizhenko joined Sputnik's The Final Countdown program Thursday to discuss the impact of the weapons transfer as well as a recent $61 billion aid package passed by the US Congress.

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“I believe that there is going to be no difference at all with what's happening on the front lines in Kiev today,” said Telizhenko. “We saw more than $200 billion altogether [over] the last years given to Ukraine to fuel this proxy war with Russia and nothing has changed. Ukraine lost 30% of its territory… and more than 600,000 or around 700,000 men from the Ukraine army are in the ground, buried dead because of this proxy war.”

“Ukraine is losing,” he observed bluntly. “More men are going to die. We're going to lose more, 100,000 or 200,000 more Ukrainians. And basically Washington is financing a dictatorship which has no elections. A country which basically canceled its elections.”

Ukraine’s conflict with Russia is often cast in the West as a battle of “democracy” versus “authoritarianism,” with Volodymyr Zelensky fashioned as the brave defender of liberal values. The framing is not unfamiliar for Americans, as the Iraq War was also sold as an effort to “spread democracy” to a purportedly grateful Iraqi people while continued US presence in Afghanistan was justified under the banner of promoting women’s rights.

Such justifications typify the unique “liberal imperialism” of the United States, according to scholars, wherein foreign wars are rationalized under the pretext of exporting America’s “special virtues.” “If people want to say we're an imperial power, fine,” said arch neoconservative commentator Bill Kristol in 2003 shortly after the United States launched its ill-fated invasion of Iraq. “If three years from now we have beaten back these threats and have a decent regime there, it'll be worth it.”

America’s standard of a “decent regime” appears to be one where the country continues to exercise its coercive influence; the US has signaledit’s unlikely to remove military forces from Iraq even after repeated requests from its government. In Ukraine, too, the goal appears to be maintaining a reliable Western client state as observers slam the lack of democratic values embodied by the ruling regime. Zelensky has been heavily criticized for shuttering dissident media outlets, banning opposition political parties and violently press ganging Ukrainian civilians into forced military service.

“Zelensky's staying in power illegitimately by the Constitution of Ukraine,” said Telizhenko. “Its 103rd article [of] the Constitution of Ukraine states that the president's there for five years. He's staying over his term. So, this money is going to finance a dictatorship, a proxy war, and it's all paid by US taxpayers funds.”

What’s more, Telizhenko claimed increasing numbers of Ukrainians are also uninterested in continued aggression against Russia.

“Congress should have listened to Ukrainians because the majority of Ukrainians today, 63% of men don't want to fight,” said the ex-diplomat, pointing to a recent poll of fighting-age men conducted in Ukraine. The survey also found that half of Ukrainians as a whole oppose current attempts to conscript more servicemembers to shore up the country’s battered armed forces.

“I do hope that somebody will listen and have a cool mind to understand that this conflict needs to end,” Telizhenko lamented. “You have even [Rep. Victoria] Spartz (R-IN), who is Ukrainian born, was against giving this money to Ukraine because she understands what it's going to lead to. She understands the situation on the ground in Ukraine. And she's Ukrainian.”

“More than anybody else [she understands]. She knows, she was born in Ukraine, she emigrated to the United States and became a congresswoman. She knew what she was talking about and nobody listened.”

Analyst: anti-Russia “bluster” designed to make Biden appear strong in election

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Filmmaker Regis Tremblay insisted Russia would not be “intimidated” by Congress’ passage of $61 billion in aid for Ukraine, noting most of the money would remain in the United States.

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“I don't think it's very much on the minds of ordinary Russian people,” said the documentarian on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program. “Now how much is going to get to Ukraine? Well, I think people could be sure that some of that money is going to go into the pockets of Zelensky and his cronies.”

“What little arrives is not going to make any difference on the battleground,” he insisted. “What people are thinking who are paying attention to what's going on in the United States, they know that Biden has got to appear strong as a wartime president who is doing everything he can to win this war against Russia… It is all bluster, it is all designed to make sure that Joseph Biden remains a viable candidate in the coming election.”

“I think that the United States is sending this money just to save face, period. It is not going to affect anything that's going on on the front lines.”

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Biden rushes aid to Ukraine as US cost of living skyrockets

American households in 2024 are spending an extra $11,434 annually to maintain a similar standard of living to the one they enjoyed just three years ago, according to a new study by Republican members of the US Senate Joint Economic Committee. Geopolitical consultant David Oualaalou pointed to the troubling data during an appearance on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program, questioning the US president's focus on foreign policy amidst a grim economic outlook for millions of Americans.

"The fact that [the US] keeps sending more money to Ukraine [and] it's already a failed state, what is it for?" asked the former US security analyst. "We have been taking money out of average Americans that are paying taxes... and giving it to the corrupted government in Ukraine."

"I saw those images of the incompetent members of Congress waving the Ukrainian flag inside Congress. Well to me it became like, why don't you go and represent Ukraine? Shame on our politicians. But, again, until the structure of our system has changed, nothing is going to change fundamentally."

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Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned Americans about the emergent US military-industrial complex in 1961. What's less well known is that an earlier draft of his speech referred to a "military-industrial-congressional complex." Eisenhower reconsidered the term out of fear of offending Washington lawmakers, but the designation makes clear legislators' key role in what the decorated military general considered a corrupt and dangerous phenomenon.

Military contractors make up one of the largest political lobbies in Washington; recently, a study found lawmakers who voted to pass the National Defense Authorization Act received four to five times more in donations from the defense industry than those who did not.

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Blinken's visit to China signals an ongoing hybrid war against the growing world power

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in China this week amid a period of strained diplomatic relations between the United States and the growing Asian power. The US has recently accused Beijing of "overproduction" of electric vehicles and other goods while threatening to sanction Chinese banks involved in trade with Moscow.

Journalist KJ Noh claimed the US is increasingly engaged in a "full spectrum hybrid war" against Beijing during an appearance on Sputnik's Fault Lines program.

"They're going to send $8 billion to Taiwan to weaponize it… And then they're talking that China is using non-market practices against the United States," said Noh. "They think they're talking to children. The Chinese know exactly what the score is."
Noh claimed criticism of Beijing forms another part of a "hybrid war" being waged against China.

"This is all hybrid warfare," said Noh, drawing a straight line from Trump's tariffs to recent anti-China media narratives. "This trade war is simply a harbinger of a total full-spectrum hybrid war, including information warfare. This is why there is this fight over TikTok. Because the US considers [the] information space, mental space to be a domain of war. And they want to be able to manipulate and monopolize it."

Noh said Beijing would be prepared in case of increased US sanctions and attempts at decoupling, claiming China has worked to strengthen internal demand and economic links with other countries.

"The world's largest banks on the planet are Chinese, and they will simply withdraw from the US market. They will stop using the US dollar – they already are. And then the blowback will be extreme for the United States.

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Threats against campus pro-Palestine demonstrations echo deadly violence of Kent State

Pro-Palestine demonstrations have spread across US college campuses as students denounce Israel's ongoing military operation in the Gaza Strip. Protestors have faced police repression in some instances, with encampments in Texas and at Columbia University in New York being targeted with mass arrests.

The crackdown has drawn light to the work of late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, who once warned that repression of the pro-Palestine cause was giving rise to a new form of McCarthyism.

"I knew Edward Said, I met him and socialized with him," said independent journalist Jim Kavanagh on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program. "A very great man and his work has been formative. He was a professor at Columbia and he was under attack from the Zionists and Columbia University supported him, when they still had integrity."

The protests have drawn comparisons to the social movements of the 1960s, when students engaged in mass protest against the Vietnam War. Famously, four students were killed at Ohio's Kent State University in 1970 after National Guard troops were sent to quell protests there. The threat of deadly police violence against demonstrators looms over the current protests, but such history has not prevented House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) from calling for a National Guard presence at Columbia's Upper Manhattan campus.

"They're bringing in the cops just to prevent any kind of gathering of students on campus. It's really quite amazing. It's the worst thing I've seen since the '60s," Kavanagh said.

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Prolonged war not in country's interest says Ukrainian analyst

Former Ukrainian diplomat and whistleblower Andrii Telizhenko joined Sputnik's The Final Countdown program Thursday to discuss the United States' latest $61 billion aid package to Kiev.

"I believe that there is going to be no difference at all with what's happening on the front lines in Kiev today," said Telizhenko. "We saw more than $200 billion altogether [over] the last years given to Ukraine to fuel this proxy war with Russia and nothing has changed. Ukraine lost 30%

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of its territory… and more than 600,000 or around 700,000 men from the Ukraine army are in the ground, buried dead because of this proxy war."

"Basically Washington is financing a dictatorship which has no elections. A country which basically canceled its elections," he added. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has been heavily criticized for shuttering dissident media outlets, banning opposition political parties, and violently press ganging Ukrainian civilians into forced military service.

Telizhenko also claimed increasing numbers of Ukrainians are uninterested in continued aggression against Russia.

"Congress should have listened to Ukrainians because the majority of Ukrainians today, 63% of men don't want to fight," said the ex-diplomat, pointing to a recent poll of fighting-age men conducted in Ukraine. The survey also found that half of Ukrainians as a whole oppose current attempts to conscript more servicemembers to shore up the country's battered armed forces.

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US, Allies to Focus on Boosting Ukraine Air Defenses - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The United States and its partners in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group will focus on boosting Ukraine air defenses during a meeting on Friday, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said.

"We are going to have a special focus today on boosting Ukraine air defenses," Austin said in his opening remarks.

He said that the government in Kiev urgently needs air defenses and more interceptors. "That is going to be a huge priority for us all today," Austin stated.

"We now have the nimble, flexible structure to adapt to new challenges and to build up the future force that Ukraine needs for its long-term security," he said.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. In October 2022, Russia started targeting Ukrainian infrastructure, including energy, defense, communications and military administration facilities, following an attack on the Crimean bridge, which was claimed by Ukraine's domestic intelligence agency.

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Blinken Says Did Not Discuss TikTok During Meeting With Senior Chinese Officials

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WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that he did not have conversations about the TikTok social media platform during his meetings earlier in the day with senior Chinese officials.

Blinken earlier on Friday held separate meetings in Beijing with China's President Xi Jinping, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other senior officials.

"No, TikTok did not come up," Blinken said when asked whether he had addressed the subject during his meetings.

On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden signed into law a bill that would ban TikTok if its parent company, China-based ByteDance, does not sell the US business within nine months. The law allows the president to extend the deadline to one year.

The same day, TikTok vowed to challenge what it described as an "unconstitutional" law in US court. On Thursday, the company stressed that it did not intend to sell its US branch.

A campaign against TikTok has been waged in the US for several years, with Congress and the administration citing the company's possible ties to the Chinese government and concerns about the security of Americans' personal data. The social network rejects such allegations.

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US Will Not Sanction IDF Units Despite Human Rights Violations - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has decided against cutting off military aid for three military battalions with the Israel Defense Forces, despite determining that they committed "gross human rights violations" against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank, ABC News reported on Friday.

The assessment was outlined in a letter sent by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to House Speaker Mike Johnson, the report said.

Blinken reportedly wrote that the determination would not cause delays to the delivery of any type of assistance to Israel, which will also receive the full amount appropriated by Congress.

On Saturday, the Axios news website reported that Blinken would announce sanctions against Israel's Netzah Yehuda battalion within days. The sanctions will be related to incidents in the West Bank prior to Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel. Netzah Yehuda is reportedly made up of young, radical Jewish settlers who have not been accepted into other IDF units.

Sanctions were also expected to target other military and police forces in Israel involved in rights violations. The US Department of State has been investigating the Israeli military units for more than a year due to potential violations of human rights.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that he would fiercely oppose any sanctions, while Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, warned that sanctions against the unit would be a "red line."

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Fed's Favorite Inflation Gauge PCE Index Grows 2.7% Year-On-Year in March - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US prices growing 2.7% during the year to March, above Wall Street's forecast of 2.6% and the previous 2.5% growth noted in February, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

The Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, often just referred to as the PCE, has been middling in 2% territory for some time, displaying a stability analysts said the central bank would wish to see for interest rate cuts planned later in the year. Yet, to some Wall Street analysts, the index's inability to approach more rapidly the flat 2% target eyed by the Fed was a sign the central bank would prefer to hold on to a policy pivot at the moment.

"From the same month one year ago, the PCE price index for March increased 2.7 percent Prices for services increased 4.0 percent and prices for goods increased 0.1 percent. Food prices increased 1.5 percent and energy prices increased 2.6 percent. Excluding food and energy, the PCE price index increased 2.8 percent from one year ago," the department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said.

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F-16 Fighters, Pilots on Track to Arrive in Ukraine This Year - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - F-16 fighter jets donated by member nations of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG) will start arriving in the country this year, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

Austin made the remarks as he opened the 21st UDCG meeting in Washington.

"This year more than a squadron of donated F-16s will start to arrive in Ukraine along with pilots and maintainers trained by members of this contact group [UDCG]," Austin said.

On Wednesday, French newspaper Le Monde reported that Ukrainian pilots being trained in Europe to fly F-16s will not be ready until late 2024 or early 2025. Ten Ukrainian pilots lack sufficient experience, causing delays in their training, the report said.

Last July, an international coalition was formed to train Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16s, the fighter jets of its choice, spearheaded by Denmark and the Netherlands. According to Ukrainian defense officials, the coalition also includes Belgium, Canada, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The White House has confirmed that Kiev will receive the US-made jets from third parties as soon as the Ukrainian pilots finish their training.

The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. In April 2022, Russia sent a diplomatic note to all NATO countries on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. Russian officials have warned that any cargo

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containing weapons for Ukraine would become a legitimate target for Moscow.

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US Hiring Cameramen With Combat Experience to Work in Russia

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - An unnamed company in the United States is seeking cameramen with military combat experience for work in Russia to cover unspecified "operations," Sputnik learned.

Candidates will be required to acquire and produce still imagery and video products using digital cameras and accessories including night vision devices, perform maintenance on various media equipment as well as perform ad hoc duties designated by a US media production team.

US officials have consistently stated that they have no plans to send military personnel to Ukraine and do not condone attacks by Ukrainian forces on Russian territories other than those they consider to be Ukrainian. At the same time, many mercenaries with American citizenship have already died in Ukraine, including in new Russian territories.

The vacancy is published on a recruiting website. The employer is not disclosed. When responding to the questionnaire, it states that you should submit an application only if you meet all stated qualifications. If an applicant meets the minimum qualifications in the first part of the recruitment process, a candidate will be required to furnish supporting documentation in the second part.

Without the requested supported documentation, an application will not be considered. The ad does not specify where exactly future employees will work: in a combat zone or not. It is only specified that workers will cover certain operations in various regions of Russia. They promise to pay $700 per day and cover expenses.

Minimum qualifications include experience as a forward-deployed combat cameraman attached to a military unit that can operate motion, still and studio television cameras, has experience with publishing content on websites and social media. Moreover, candidates must be very physically fit and able to carry at least 50lbs while wearing body armor and possess a current passport with at least two blank pages. Preferred qualifications include ability to speak both English and Russian, possess prior experience with media operations in Russia and experience working with private media companies.

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Protesting Students File Civil Rights Complaint Against Columbia - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - A group of Columbia University students filed a federal civil rights complaint against the educational institution, accusing the university of discriminating against Palestinian students and pro-Palestine protestors, CBS reported on Thursday.

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The complaint, which was filed with the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, alleges that the students have been victims of anti-Palestinian discrimination and harassment by students, professors, and administrators at Columbia University, the report said.

The students, who are being represented by an organization called Palestine Legal, are members of a student group called Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine, according to the report.

The complaint cites an event last week that resulted in the university utilizing NYPD officers to arrest over 100 protestors, according to the report.

Numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations have emerged on US college campuses in recent days against the United States military and financial and diplomatic support for Israel's operation in Gaza, which has resulted in the death of more than 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of more than 77,000 Palestinians.

The most numerous protests have occurred at Columbia University in New York, Yale University, the University of Austin, Texas, and others.

Students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel's US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel, and to discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among other demands.

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University of Austin Sees Second Day of Mass Pro-Palestine Protests- Correspondent

AUSTIN, April 26 (Sputnik), Lenka White - For a second day in a row, students and young people participated in mass Pro-Palestine protests at the University of Austin in Texas, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

"I am just standing here in solidarity," Kelly, one of the attendees of the protest, told Sputnik. "I don't like what is happening to Gaza."

The protestors were also heard making remarks about Texas' governor Greg Abbott, calling him a "liar, hypocrite, unAmerican, bully and lawbreaker."

On Thursday, there were about 2,000 protestors along with some faculty staff taking part in the protest. Meanwhile, there was also a small group of pro-Israeli supporters, urging Palestine to free the hostages.

"Yesterday I was spit at twice … but I think it's crucial for people to talk to one another. I try to go out of my way to talk to the protestors," Seth Greenwald, a student protesting on behalf of Israel, shared with Sputnik.

About 20 policemen were standing on the upper level of the university on "stand by," watching the crowd. There was also a drone airborne throughout the entire duration.

A spokesperson of the Texas Department of Public Safety told Sputnik that no arrests were made during the protest on campus on Thursday afternoon. However, some 54 protesters were arrested on Wednesday in connection with the demonstrations on campus.

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Improved Efforts Between US, Mexico Helps Alleviate Surge on Southern Border - White House

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Illegal immigration on the US southern border has decreased by about 40% in the first three months of this year compared to the same period last year due to improved cooperation between the US and Mexican governments, White House National Security Council official Marcela Escobari said during a press briefing.

"We're working closely with our Mexican partners who have increased our enforcement efforts including on rails and highways....Our joint efforts have contributed an almost 40% decrease in encounters of irregular migrants at our southwest border during the first three months of this year compared to the three months immediately prior," Escobari said on Thursday.

Last week, White House Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood Randall met with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to further strengthen collaboration between the United States and Mexico on illegal migration, Escobari noted.

Illegal migration on the US southern border has gone through three consecutive record-breaking years since President Joe Biden took over the White House in January 2021, totaling nearly 8 million illegal encounters during that period, according to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data.

Since October 2023, some 1.3 million migrants have been apprehended for illegally crossing into the United States on the southern border, CBP data shows.

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Columbia University Restricts Access to Campus Amid Palestinian Protest-Correspondent

NEW YORK, April 26 (Sputnik) — The Columbia University administration has imposed strict access restrictions on campus amid a pro-Palestinian protest, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

"We are having protests on campus. So we have extensive restrictions. No guests," a police officer said.

The police have fenced off the entire territory and access to campus has been strictly limited to school passes. Before the protest, the campus was accessible to anyone who wanted to enter.

Dozens of tents have been set up by pro-Palestinian students on the University's lawn,

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however, the atmosphere within campus remains calm with no signs of aggressive behavior.
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The most numerous protests have occurred at Columbia University in New York, Yale University, the University of Austin, Texas, and others.
Students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel's US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel, and to discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among other demands.

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George Washington University Resorts to Force Against Protesters Out of Fear – Student

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The administration of George Washington University (GWU) in the US capital resorts to repressive action against pro-Palestinian protesters out of fear of the student movement, student and protest organizer Nada told Sputnik on the scene of a massive protest at the GWU campus.
Pro-Palestinian student protests on American university campuses have finally reached the US capital. Just a few hundred meters from the White House, several hundred GWU students organized a protest against continued funding of Israel and demanded a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene on Thursday.
The protest at GWU began on Thursday morning with hundreds of protesters coming to the campus carrying Palestinian flags and anti-war banners.
"The goal is to put pressure on our [GWU] administration to divest from their financial material and intellectual ties with the Zionist Imperial machine [Israel] and through that divestment ultimately, the liberation of Palestine and our people because we are facing murder and siege, and genocide," Nada told Sputnik.
Nada said that the protesters will not leave until their demands are met. In confirmation of her words, about 20 students can be seen with tents, expressing their readiness for a long protest against the Biden administration's policies towards Gaza.
In addition to demands specifically related to Gaza and Israel, protesters are also demanding full transparency from their university authorities about investments they are making in secret from students.
"GWU government actually passed the divestment bill in 2018, which our president at the time vetoed, and in that resolution, they named particular companies, particular weapons and defense companies, such as Raytheon, and Boeing, that are financially supported by our university. One thing that GW does not reveal is their financial investments," Nada said. "So, part of our demands is full transparency to all investments made with GWU money."
Nada explains that GWU, among other US colleges, supports the cause of Palestinian freedom and demands that US university and Biden administration officials stop lying about what is

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taking place in Gaza with the help of Washington.

When asked whether the protesters had any response from the GW administration regarding their demands, she said the only response was a threat to use police force.

"Our president released a massive blast email to the student body, affirming that she has mobilized the police against us. That was the response from our president, the official response," Nada said. "I do feel that the university as an institution, and as a mechanism is really feeling fear in the face of the student movement. They are doubling down on the repressive tactics because they know that we have exposed the contradictions in their language and their lies and their defense of Zionism."

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Trump Team Reviewing Options to Stop Countries From Moving Away From Dollar - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's economic advisors are looking into ways the United States could prevent countries from moving away from using the dollar, Bloomberg News reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Thursday that options include potentially imposing penalties for allies or adversaries who try to conduct bilateral trade in currencies other than the dollar.

The penalties could be imposed in the form of export controls, currency manipulation charges, and tariffs, the report noted.

This planning is part of an effort to counter emerging initiatives or blocs that aim to reduce their dependence on the dollar, the report added.

Trump is currently the unofficial Republican nominee for the 2024 US presidential election vote in November. He already secured the delegate votes needed during the Republican primaries to become the party's nominee, which is expected to be made official during the Republican National Convention in July.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently said that restrictions on payments in dollars had led to all countries thinking about payments in national currencies and keeping savings outside the United States, as trust in the West was being undermined.

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UPDATE 2 - Texas National Guard Says Ready to Respond to Gaza Protest at Texas College If Needed

(Update with comment from state police in para 6)
AUSTIN, April 26 (Sputnik) - A Texas National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday that they are prepared to respond to an ongoing pro-Palestine protest at the University of Texas campus in Austin if needed.
"The Texas National Guard is prepared to respond if requested," the spokesperson said.
The spokesperson noted that while the Texas National Guard was prepared to respond to the protest at the University of Texas campus, no soldiers were deployed to the campus as Texas state police and other law enforcement partners did not require help.
On Thursday, there were about 2,000 protestors along with some faculty staff taking part in the protest. Meanwhile, there was also a small group of pro-Israeli supporters, urging Palestine to free the hostages.
About 20 policemen were standing on the upper level of the university on "stand by", watching the crowd. There was also a drone airborne throughout the entire duration.
A spokesperson of the Texas Department of Public Safety told Sputnik that no arrests were made during the protest on campus on Thursday afternoon. However, some 54 protesters were arrested on Wednesday in connection to the demonstrations on campus.
Numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations have emerged on US college campuses in recent days against the United States military, financial and diplomatic support for Israel's operation in Gaza, which has resulted in the death of some 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of more than 77,000 Palestinians.
Students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel’s US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel and to discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among other demands.

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Nearly Third of Children in Northern Gaza Show Signs of Severe Malnutrition - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Nearly a third of the children in northern Gaza are severely undernourished while about a quarter of the population in southern Gaza are facing the consequences of the worsening humanitarian situation in the Palestinian enclave amid Israel’s military operation against Hamas, a senior Biden administration official said.
"Nearly 30% of children in northern Gaza are showing signs of severe malnutrition. And in southern Gaza, nearly a quarter of the population is facing this kind of catastrophic food insecurity," the official said during a press briefing on Thursday.
The official warned that the percentage of people suffering from severe malnutrition in Gaza will significantly increase in the coming months if no urgent humanitarian interventions take place.

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On October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza. During the attack, some 1,200 Israelis - both military and civilian - were killed and some 240 others abducted.

Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and started a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. More than 34,000 Palestinians have been killed so far by the Israeli Defense Forces, according to local authorities.

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US to Announce $6Bln in Weapon Contracts for Ukraine As Soon as Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is expected to announce $6 billion in military contracts for Ukraine as soon as Friday, but they will not arrive in the country for several years, Politico reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Thursday that the contracts would include Patriot air defense systems, artillery ammunition, drones, counter-drone weapons, and air-to-air missiles.

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Hundreds of People Participate in Pro-Palestine Protest at GW University - Correspondent

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Several hundred people participated in a pro-Palestine protest at George Washington University on Thursday, following the emergence of similar demonstrations at college campuses around the United States.

The protesters set up dozens of tents on the Washington, DC campus lawns to protest Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

The crowd grew in size from Thursday morning and has remained peaceful, although there is an enhanced police presence in the area.

Protesters were holding signs with slogans including "Stand with Palestine," and "Stop the Genocide," among others.

Several people also demonstrated in support of Israel on the campus, holding up Israeli flags.

The protests at George Washington University have emerged alongside other demonstrations linked to the Israel-Hamas conflict at US college campuses in recent days. In some cases, protesters have been arrested by law enforcement.

Some of the demonstrations have been characterized as anti-Semitic, including by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Joe Biden. However, US Senator Bernie Sanders, who has Jewish heritage, said on Thursday that opposing the Israeli government's policies does not constitute anti-Semitism.

On October 7, the Palestinian organization Hamas attacked Israel, killing approximately 1,200 Israelis — both military and civilians — and abducting some 230 others. In response, Israel

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launched a military operation in the Gaza Strip, killing more than 34,000 people and injuring over 77,000 others, according to local health authorities.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* The United States has no intention of engaging in combat operations inside Ukraine or deploying its military advisers anywhere near the frontline, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.
* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will host the 21st Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at the Pentagon, Ryder said.
* NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he expects the allies to agree that NATO needs to play a bigger role in coordinating military support for Ukraine during the upcoming summit in the United States this summer.
* Russia will not participate in the Ukraine peace conference hosted by Switzerland in June, Russian Ambassador in Bern Sergey Garmonin told Sputnik.

GAZA STRIP
* The United States would like to see the reports of mass graves in the Gaza Strip investigated and remains in contact with Israel, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.
* A senior US official said that there has been a deal proposed to Hamas that "meets nearly all of the demands" of the group.
* The United States alongside 17 other countries on Thursday released a statement urging the Palestinian movement Hamas to immediately release the remaining hostages in Gaza.
* A major flare-up in Middle East fighting could send global inflation soaring, the World Bank said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN
* The United Kingdom has imposed new sanctions against Iran that targets its drone industry and bans exports of certain manufacturing components, the Foreign Office said on Thursday.
* The United States has designated multiple entities and individuals related to Russia and Iran in a new round of sanctions, the US Treasury Department said.
* he Canadian government has imposed new Iran-related sanctions on two entities and two individuals, including Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Global Affairs Canada said.

RUSSIAN COSMONAUTS

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* Russian cosmonauts Oleg Kononenko and Nikolai Chub on Thursday went into outer space to repair a radar, which did not open last time, and brought it into a working condition as well as installed equipment for experimenting with composite materials, the Russian state space corporation Roscosmos said in a broadcast.
* Kononenko and Chub completed their assigned task two hours ahead of schedule, the broadcast said.

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE
* The United States has started transferring weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, with first deliveries expected within days, if not sooner, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.
* White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said that air defense will remain a high priority when asked about potential additional deliveries of Patriot systems to Ukraine.
* The United States could have violated the law by secretly supplying long-range missiles to Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* Russia will achieve its goal, but this will cause more problems for Ukraine itself, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, commenting on the supply of long-range missiles by the United States to Ukraine.

RUSSIA'S FROZEN ASSETS
* Russia is considering lowering the level of diplomatic relations with the United States in case of potential measures to confiscate its frozen assets, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik on Thursday.
* US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen confirmed that "outright seizure" of Russia's $300 billion in frozen assets was an option for the Group of Seven (G7) countries to pursue based on international law.

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UPDATE-Texas National Guard Says Ready to Respond to Gaza Protest at Texas College If Needed

(updates paras 3-5, 8,9)
AUSTIN, April 25 (Sputnik) - A Texas National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday that they are prepared to respond to an ongoing pro-Palestine protest at the University of Texas campus in Austin if needed.
"The Texas National Guard is prepared to respond if requested," the spokesperson said.
The spokesperson noted that while the Texas National Guard was prepared to respond to the protest at the University of Texas campus, no soldiers were deployed to the campus as Texas state police and other law enforcement partners did not require help.
On Thursday, there were about 2,000 protestors along with some faculty staff taking part in the

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protest. Meanwhile, there was also a small group of pro-Israeli supporters, urging Palestine to free the hostages.

About 20 policemen were standing on the upper level of the university on "stand by", watching the crowd. There was also a drone airborne throughout the entire duration.

Some 54 protesters were arrested on Wednesday and another 30 were reportedly arrested on Thursday in connection with the demonstrations on campus.

The Texas Department of Public Safety did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment about the arrests.

Numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations have emerged on US college campuses in recent days against the United States military, financial and diplomatic support for Israel's operation in Gaza, which has resulted in the death of some 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of more than 77,000 Palestinians.

Students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel’s US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel and discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among other demands.

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No Boots on Ground in Gaza During Execution of Maritime Corridor Mission - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US military personnel will not be present on the ground in the Gaza Strip during the execution of the maritime corridor mission on delivering humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave from the sea, a senior US military official said on Thursday.

"A key point to emphasize is there will be no US military boots on the ground and Gaza in the execution of this mission," the official said during a press briefing.

However, the official also said that 1,000 US soldiers and sailors will support this effort to enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance from the sea to Gaza for further distribution ashore.

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Gaza Pier Assembly Begins, US Aid Delivery Set for Early May - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik)— The assembly of key pieces for Gaza's temporary pier started offshore on Thursday, with plans to initiate maritime humanitarian aid delivery by early May, a Senior Military Official (SMO) said during an on-background press briefing call.

"Earlier today, the at-sea assembly of key pieces of the temporary pier began off the coast of Gaza. We are on track to begin delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza from the sea in early May," the SMO said.

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Biden's Telecom Regulators Reintroduce Internet Neutrality Spurned By Trump

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Telecom regulators under President Joe Biden on Thursday reintroduced laws aimed at ensuring a level playing field for Internet access in the United States and power for the government to crack down on service providers playing favorites with premium-paying clients after such rules and authority were revoked by the Trump administration.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) brought back through a vote so-called net neutrality, which was missing during the Covid-19 breakout era and which officials said had particularly emphasized the importance of making the Internet a public utility.

"Four years ago, the pandemic changed life as we know it," FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel said at the vote. "We were told to stay home, hunker down and live online. So much of work, school, and healthcare migrated to the Internet. If we wanted to engage with the world, we needed to do it all through a broadband connection. It became clear that no matter who you are or where you live, you need broadband to have a fair shot at digital age success. It went from nice-to-have to need-to-have for everyone, everywhere. Broadband is now an essential service. Essential services — the ones we count on in every aspect of modern life — have some basic oversight."

Net neutrality is a controversial policy in the United States, given that service providers for years have been sparring with regulators and activists over Internet access rules for both consumers and businesses.

While changes during the Trump administration didn't materially impact the delivery or cost of Internet services, officials said it was pertinent that action be taken now to ensure equality in the future.

Without neutrality rules, say advocates for the government, service providers like Comcast could charge content owners such as Netflix to pay more, akin to a toll, to have the streaming giant's content delivered smoothly to viewers. Ultimately, Netflix will pass those additional costs on to consumers, meaning ordinary Americans will be paying more to watch their videos.

Meanwhile, proponents on the service side say net neutrality had become especially complicated with the introduction of 5G technology, which made imaging services no longer the sideshow they used to be in a buffet of online offerings.

Despite the well-meaning intent of regulators in bringing back net neutrality laws and authority under the FCC, analysts said Internet providers are likely to challenge those changes in court, potentially resulting in months of legal wrangling before a final measure goes into effect.

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Texas National Guard Says Ready to Respond to Gaza Protest at Texas College If Needed

AUSTIN, April 25 (Sputnik) - A Texas National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday that they are prepared to respond to an ongoing pro-Palestine protest at the University of Texas campus in Austin if needed.

"The Texas National Guard is prepared to respond if requested," the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson noted that the Texas National Guard was prepared to respond to the protest at the University of Texas campus on Wednesday, but no soldiers were deployed to the campus as Texas state police and other law enforcement partners did not require help.

On Thursday, there were about 2,000 protestors, arguing for the freeing of Palestine, using, amongst others, historically controversial lines: "Free Palestine … From River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free…."

The faculty staff also got involved - some of them standing around, others participating within the pro-Palestine group. Many of the attendees were wearing masks and some of them had LGBT flags, too. On the other hand, there was also a small group of pro-Israeli supporters, urging Palestine to free the hostages.

About 20 policemen man were standing on the upper level of the university on "stand by", watching the crowd. There was also a drone the whole time in the air above.

Some 54 protesters were arrested on Wednesday and another 30 were reportedly arrested on Thursday in connection to the demonstrations on campus.

The Texas Department of Public Safety did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment about the arrests.

The protesters are demonstrating against the United States' military, financial, and diplomatic support for Israel's operation in Gaza, which has resulted in the death of some 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of more than 77,000 Palestinians.

Pro-Palestine protests have swept across college campuses and on town squares in the United States - and throughout the world - calling for an end to the war in Gaza.

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US Marine Corps to Hold More Exercises With Partners in Pacific in 2024 - General

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The US Marine Corps plans to participate in additional exercises with partners in the Pacific region later this year, US Marine Corps Forces Pacific Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. Daniel Shipley said on Thursday.

"In 2024, we will continue to do these exercises and we will continue to add more exercises," Shipley said during a discussion at Defense One.

Shipley emphasized that the US Marine Corp has already held drills with different countries in the region and reiterated that is planning to more.

"We also train with India in Tiger Triumph, working on interoperability and commanding control capabilities," Shipley said.

The United States is actively working with regional partners to find points of contact and

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communicates with them on US capabilities and what they would like to allow, Shipley added.

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UPDATE - US to Reposition Some Troops From Chad as Part of Cooperation Review - Pentagon

(adds background in paras 4-5)
WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) is planning to reposition some of its forces from Chad as part of an ongoing review of security cooperation with the country, Pentagon Press Secretary Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.
"As I understand it, talks continue with Chadian officials. US AFRICOM is currently planning to reposition some US military forces from Chad, a portion of which were already scheduled to depart. This is a temporary step as part of an ongoing review of our security cooperation," Ryder said during a press briefing.
The cooperation is expected to resume following the Chadian elections scheduled for May 6, Ryder added.
The announcement comes days after media reported, citing a letter, that Chad had threatened to end the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States, which governs how US military forces can operate in the country.
The letter ordered the United States to remove personnel from the French base in N'Djamena, although it did not explicitly demand the US military to leave Chad. Chadian authorities specifically raised the presence of a US Special Operations Task Force at the base.

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US Vessels Building Initial Stages of Temporary Gaza Pier, Sea Causeway - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The temporary pier and causeway at sea being built off the coast of the Gaza strip are entering their initial construction stages, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.
"I can confirm that US military vessels to include the USNS Benavidez have begun to construct the initial stages of the temporary pier and causeway at sea," Ryder said during a press briefing.
The spokesperson also said more information would be provided in the near future as the United States continues its joint work with the international community to provide humanitarian assistance in Gaza.
In March, the United States announced its intention to deploy the Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS) capability off the coast of Gaza 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

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not deploy on the ground in Gaza as part of the operation. The United States is working with its partners on the logistics flow and the protection of the project, Kirby added.

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US Seeks to Expand Scope, Complexity of Drills With Philippines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States' goal for the joint drills with the Philippines each year is to broaden the exercises both in scope and complexity, Brigadier General Daniel Shipley, Deputy Commander of US Marine Corps Forces, said on Thursday.

"Our efforts each year is to expand what we are doing with our Philippine partners," Shipley said during a Defense One event, adding that they aim to expand not only in size but also in scope and complexity.

Lt. Gen. William Jurney, the commander of US Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, said last week that this year's iteration of the annual US-Philippine military exercise known as Balikatan, which will run from April 22 to May 10, will be the "most expansive" for the two countries and involve more than 16,000 Philippine and US military personnel.

Also last week, The Washington Post reported, citing officials, that the joint naval drills would for the first time take place beyond the Philippines' 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, in parts of open sea to which China lays claim.

In one operation, the forces will simulate capturing two islands along the western and northern coasts of the Philippines and then transport the HIMARS multiple-launch rocket system there for live-fire exercises. In another operation, Philippine warships will debut a South Korean-manufactured ship-based missile system, known as C-star, which can reach targets 90 miles away. They will work in coordination with US Air Force squadrons to hit and sink a decommissioned ship, the newspaper reported.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian said that by involving outside forces, the Philippines could aggravate the situation in the South China Sea.

The spokesman said that the Philippines should not become a pawn in foreign forces' games, adding that handing over its security would "only lead to greater insecurity" in the region.

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US Military Personnel in Ukraine Not Going to Be 'Anywhere Near Frontlines' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has no intention of engaging in combat operations inside Ukraine or deploying its military advisers "anywhere near the frontlines," Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

"[The] United States has no intent of conducting combat operations inside of Ukraine, nor are these forces going to be anywhere near the frontlines ... We recognize the danger, and in any

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place our forces operate, we take the necessary precautions to ensure that they're safe, whether it be there or any other hotspots around the world," Ryder said during a press briefing, when asked about risks to safety of US military personnel in Ukraine.

Ryder said that US troops in Ukraine were in a non-combat role, serving primarily in an advisory capacity.

When commenting on US plans to deploy additional military advisors to Ukraine, Ryder said that it is something that is being considered, but no decision has been made. If that decision is made, it would be "a small number" of military advisors who "would be working out of the embassy under the chief of mission authority," the spokesman stated.

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Pentagon Declines to Comment on Whether New ATACMS in Ukraine Are Enhanced Model

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - A Defense Department spokesperson on Thursday declined to comment on whether the new Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) provided by the United States to Ukraine earlier this month are an enhanced model of the weapon system.

"We're not able to confirm the model/type (or quantity/delivery timelines) for operational security considerations," the spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

According to media reports, the ATACMS that recently arrived in Ukraine have a 190-mile range compared to the previous versions that had a 100-mile reach.

On Wednesday, a Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik that President Joe Biden had secretly directed his national security team to provide ATACMS to Ukraine as part of the security aid package announced in March and those munitions arrived in April.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said also on Wednesday that the United States was confident Ukraine would only use ATACMS within its own territory as it allegedly did with the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).

However, US media reported on Thursday, citing UK Defense Chief Adm. Tony Radakin, that Ukraine may use long-range weapons, including the US-supplied ATACMS missiles, to strike inside Russian territory despite Washington's instructions otherwise.

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White House Says 'Nothing on Schedule' Regarding Potential Biden-Erdogan Meeting

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's schedule does not have any entry at present about a potential visit by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"There's nothing on the schedule to speak to in terms of a specific visit by President Erdogan, so I don't really have a comment on that," Kirby said when asked if Erdogan is expected to visit

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the White House.
Media reported on Wednesday that Ankara was yet to receive any information from Washington about canceling Erdogan's visit to the United States initially scheduled for May 9. The relevant Turkish agencies did not receive information from Erdogan about his visit being canceled.
Last week, Turkish media reported that Erdogan's visit to the United States had been canceled.
In early April, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Erdogan would discuss bilateral relations, the Ukrainian crisis and the conflict in the Middle East during the planned meeting with Biden in the United States on May 9.

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US Starts Moving Weapons to Ukraine, Will Arrive Within Days If Not Sooner - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has started transferring weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, with first deliveries expected within days, if not sooner, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.
"I won't get into the specifics regarding when specific ammunition or equipment is getting into Ukraine other than to say we're moving out already. We've already started the process to move some of the weapons, ammunition, and equipment, which will be, you know, as I mentioned earlier, there within days, if not sooner," Ryder told a briefing, when asked when the US thinks the first munitions will arrive in Ukraine.

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US to Reposition Some Troops From Chad as Part of Cooperation Review - Pentagon

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"As I understand it, talks continue with Chadian officials. US AFRICOM is currently planning to reposition some US military forces from Chad, a portion of which were already scheduled to depart. This is a temporary step as part of an ongoing review of our security cooperation," Ryder said during a press briefing.
The cooperation is expected to resume following Chadian elections scheduled for May 6, Ryder added.

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US Senator Says Pentagon, European Allies Already Planning New Ukraine Aid Request

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Rand Paul said on Thursday that the Pentagon and European allies are already planning another Ukraine aid request, despite the US Congress having passed nearly $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding earlier this week.

"The ink isn't even dry on the $61B foreign aid to Ukraine and big spenders are already planning more," Paul said in a statement via social media platform X.

Paul referenced a US media report released Thursday, in which a Republican congressional aide is cited as saying that US Defense Department officials and European allies will begin drafting a new Ukraine funding request for September.

The Pentagon and European allies intend to present the request to the lame-duck session of Congress, the aide reportedly said.

If prospective 2024 Republican Party presidential nominee Donald Trump wins the election in November, then the outgoing Biden administration would have to consult the incoming administration significantly on any new funding request, the aide said.

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Austin to Convene 21st Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting Friday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will host the 21st Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at the Pentagon, spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

"Looking ahead to tomorrow, Secretary Austin will convene the 21st Ukraine defense contact group meeting here virtually," Ryder said during a press briefing.

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austin to convene 21st Ukraine defense contact group meeting on friday virtually - pentagon

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UN Says Firmly Believes in Freedom of Religion in Response to UOC Oppression in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations firmly believes in freedom of religion, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday when commenting on the the situation regarding the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and reports of acts of repression against it.

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"We firmly believe in freedom of religion," Dujarric told reporters when asked to comment on the oppression against the UOC in Ukraine.

When asked about the recent arrest of Metropolitan Arsenii, the abbot of the Svyatogorsk Lavra, one of the major monasteries in Ukraine, Dujarric said he needs to look into this case.

The UOC said earlier in the day that a court in Ukraine arrested Metropolitan Arsenii for 60 days without providing a chance to post bail.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Russia has called on international organizations to help resolve this case.

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US Delivers First Shipment of Non-Lethal Equipment to Haitian National Police - Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered the first shipment of non-lethal equipment to the Haitian National Police (NHP), White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

"In addition to that, today marks a critical step towards free and fair elections, and of course, we were able to deliver the first shipment of US government non-lethal equipment to the Haitian National Police to bolster their capabilities," Kirby said during a press conference.

When asked how the United States will ensure that the equipment gets where it is meant to go, Kirby said, "We are working with partners on the ground to make sure that it gets to the NHP, that they use it appropriately."

"We are not present there, we are not going to have an inspection regime there on the ground to do that, but we are comfortable that we can work through the embassy, through the Ambassador and partners on the ground," Kirby said.

Earlier on Thursday, the nine-member Presidential Transitional Council was sworn-in in Haiti and Prime Minister Ariel Henry officially resigned.

Kirby said that renewed access to the main airport after a month of closure and steps made today toward inclusive governance should give hope for the future of Haiti.

"As we've said numerous times United States remains committed to supporting Haitian led efforts to restore security and the rule of law to pave the way to democratic governance."

On Tuesday, the US Southern Command said in a statement that it transported support and security personnel to the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince as part of a planned rotation. The security and support personnel will help ensure that the embassy remains open and operational, the statement said.

The embassy remains focused on advancing US government efforts to support the Haitian people, including through supporting the Haitian National Police and Armed Forces, according to the statement.

On Tuesday, a source told Sputnik that the Biden administration is attempting to establish clandestine contacts with the leaders of criminal gangs in Haiti that have taken over much of the country. The goal is to find out their demands and how negotiable they are, the source said.

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US Senator Sanders Says Criticisms of Israeli Government Policies Not Anti-Semitic

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Independent US Senator Bernie Sanders said on Thursday that criticisms of the Israeli government's policies do not constitute anti-Semitism, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu characterized pro-Palestine protests on college campuses in the United States as being anti-Semitic.

"No, Mr. Netanyahu. It is not antisemitic or pro-Hamas to point out that in a little over six months your extremist government has killed 34,000 Palestinians and wounded more than 77,000 - seventy percent of whom are women and children," Sanders said in a statement.

Sanders, who has Jewish heritage, also said that Netanyahu should not use accusations of anti-Semitism to deflect attention from the criminal indictment he faces in Israeli courts for alleged corruption.

Numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations emerged on US college campuses in recent days, sparking accusations of anti-Semitism from Netanyahu, as well as some US lawmakers and the Biden administration. In some cases, the protests have led to the arrest of demonstrators.

On October 7, Palestinian organization Hamas attacked Israel, killing approximately 1,200 Israelis - both military and civilians - and abducting some 230 others. In response, Israel launched a military operation in the Gaza Strip, killing more than 34,000 people and injuring over 77,000 others, according to local health authorities.

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Legislation Passed by US Congress Includes Measure to Expand Sanctions Review Period

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Legislation passed by the US Congress earlier this week includes an expansion of the time period companies will have to assess themselves and potential acquisitions for sanctions violations, according to the bill text.

A bill attached to a $95 billion foreign aid package, dubbed the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act, increases the statute of limitations for violations of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the Trading with the Enemy Act from five years to a decade.

"An action, suit, or proceeding for the enforcement of any civil fine, penalty, or forfeiture, pecuniary or otherwise, under this section shall not be entertained unless commenced within 10 years after the latest date of the violation upon which the civil fine, penalty, or forfeiture is based," the bill text said.

The measure went largely uncovered by the media ahead of the legislation's passage by both the US House of Representatives and the Senate.

The measure enables regulators and prosecutors to double the amount of time they can investigate companies for potential sanctions violations. Companies will also have to double the

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scope of their reviews for possible sanctions violations.

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Biden Doing Nothing to Curb Migrant Influx, Wants More Votes - National Guard Soldier

EAGLE PASS, April 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The Biden administration is not making any efforts to stop an influx of migrants trying to cross the US-Mexico border because it wants to get more votes in the 2024 election, a Florida National Guard soldier deployed to the Texas border told Sputnik.

"The US government is not doing anything to squash this. They want it because they basically want more Democratic voters so you don't have a Republican president ever again," the soldier serving at Shelby Park in Eagle Pass, who preferred to stay anonymous, said.

He went on to criticize Democratic states like New York for their approach to migration, including a program that provides migrant families with debit cards for food and baby supplies.

"They are giving them ... a debit card and flying them to wherever they want to go. And the Mexican government, it has given them this packet with a checklist where to cross," he stated.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott has been in a standoff with the federal government, claiming the state has the right to take immigration enforcement into its own hands. President Joe Biden challenged some of the methods being used by Texas to secure the border.

In January, the US Supreme Court ruled that federal agents can cut the razor wire fencing Texas installed on the US-Mexico border, but it does not require the state to remove it. The court also ordered Texas to allow federal border agents access to the state's border with Mexico.

Abbott has vowed to defy federal efforts that prevent Texas from securing its border with Mexico.

Separately, Republicans want Biden to use executive action to deal with the border crisis instead of trying to work something out in Congress, which is currently at an impasse on border policy due to partisan differences.

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Canada Sanctions Iran Defense Minister, 2 Entities - Global Affairs

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has imposed new Iran-related sanctions on two entities and two individuals, including on Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Thursday.

"Canada is listing the following two individuals and two entities under the regulations: Major General Gholam Ali Rashid, Commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya; Central Headquarters

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Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Minister of Defense," GAC said in a statement.
In addition, Canada sanctioned the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters and Armed Forces General Staff of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the statement said.
The sanctions were imposed under the Special Economic Measures (Iran) Regulations for allegedly posing threats to international peace and security and for their alleged destabilizing role in the Middle East.
Iran's threatening and destabilizing role was exemplified by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) large-scale retaliatory attack on Israel, the statement said.
This increased the risk of escalation and poses a "grave threat" to peace and security both regionally and internationally, the statement added.
In mid-April, the IRGC launched an attack on Israel involving up to 300 drones and missiles in retaliation for an Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Syria.
The Canadian government has so far imposed Iran-related sanctions on 200 individuals and 250 entities.

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Number of Migrants Crossing Into Eagle Pass Drops to 20 Per Day - National Guard Soldier

EAGLE PASS, April 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The number of migrants crossing the US-Mexico border via Eagle Pass in Texas has dropped from 8,000 to about 20 a day, a Florida National Guard soldier deployed to the Texas border told Sputnik.
"We still get a bunch of people, but nowhere near the numbers when they were walking about like 6,000-8,000 a day. Now we have maybe like 20 people," the soldier at Shelby Park in Eagle Pass, who preferred to stay anonymous, shared.
The soldier expressed belief that the Biden administration was to blame for the crisis at the border.
Shelby Park was one of the critical zones in Eagle Pass, where queues of undocumented immigrants were waiting to be let into the United States at the end of last year. In January, the Texas authorities seized the signature public park as part of their effort to combat unlawful immigration, limiting access to federal border authorities.
The Texas Military Department explained that its action to block off federal agents was to "prepare for future illegal immigrant surges and to restrict access to organizations that perpetuate illegal immigrant crossings in the park and greater Eagle Pass area."
The Texas National Guard has secured the park with rows of containers and coils of barbed wire along the banks of the Rio Grande, a Sputnik correspondent reported in early February.
President Joe Biden challenged some of Texas' methods to secure the border. In January, the US Supreme Court ruled that federal agents can cut the razor wire fencing Texas installed on the US-Mexico border, but it does not require the state to remove it.
The court also ordered Texas to allow federal border agents access to the state's border with Mexico.
Governor Greg Abbott has vowed to defy federal efforts that prevent Texas from securing its

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border with Mexico.

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US Envoy Omits US Role in Nagasaki,Blames Russia for Undermining Nuclear Non-Proliferation

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Thursday while recalling her visit to Nagasaki and refraining from mentioning the US role in the bombing, attempted to accuse Russia and China of allegedly undermining the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

"I just returned from a sobering visit to Nagasaki. It was a reminder of our profound responsibility to ensure that no place experiences the horrors of nuclear weapons ever again. Unfortunately, Russia and China, once again, undermined the non-proliferation regime," Thomas-Greenfield said in an X post.

On Wednesday, Russia vetoed the US- and Japan-sponsored UN Security Council draft resolution prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction in outer space.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia shared his reaction to Thomas-Greenfield's statement regarding her trip to Japan following the vote on Wednesday.

"My American colleague [Thomas-Greenfield], by the way, told us about her trip to Japan, about her visit to Nagasaki, about the terrifying consequences of the nuclear bombing. I am wondering if she could enlighten us on who carried out this nuclear bombing, which was the only one in the entire history of mankind, or maybe our colleague from Japan, a country that has never in my memory named the state that bombed it, will disclose this to us?" Nebenzia said.

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Up to 226,000 people - mostly civilians - were killed in the attacks. The two cities' residential structures were mostly burned and destroyed in the detonations.

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US Paces Itself Over Slowing Economy After Shocking GDP Underperformance

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Thursday paced themselves over the slowing US economy after GDP growth for the first quarter registered a surprising low of 1.6% year-on-year versus the Wall Street's forecast of 2.5%.

Coming in at less than half of the previous quarter's 3.4% annual growth and marking the slowest quarterly growth in nearly two years, the data reported by the Commerce Department seemed to validate fears that inflation was getting the better of growth again.

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US stocks plunged across the board, with the broadest market indicator - the Dow Jones Industrial Average - tumbling nearly 600 points, or 1.5%, at the time of writing.

Biden said the GDP data showed stable growth but emphasized that "more work is needed."

Yellen said the US economy was "firing on all cylinders" even as GDP growth underwhelmed.

"What's really important is private final domestic purchases or consumer spending and investment, and they grew solidly," Yellen said. "I still see in the underlying core drivers of economic activity, considerable strength. So I think that the US economy continues to perform very, very well."

Yellen added that headline growth in the economy - at less than half of forecast levels - was "peculiar and not really indicative of underlying strength."

Thursday's GDP reading was what the Commerce Department called advanced, or preliminary. The agency issues three GDP readings per quarter.

Inflation hit a four-decade high in the aftermath of the 2020 coronavirus breakout, with consumer prices growing as much as 9.1% in the year to June 2022.

In response, the Federal Reserve hiked rates by 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023. That brought official lending rates to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% - versus the zero to 0.25% range introduced soon after the start of the pandemic.

While the Fed action has chopped annual inflation by more than half - the US Consumer Price Index rose just 3.5% in the year to March - the central bank just cannot seem to reach its sweet spot of 2% on this. And each recent update on inflation seems to be a tick higher than previously.

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Canada Sanctions Iran Defense Minister, 2 Entities - Global Affairs

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"Canada is listing the following two individuals and two entities under the regulations: Major General Gholam Ali Rashid, Commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya; Central Headquarters Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Minister of Defense," GAC said in a statement.

In addition, Canada sanctioned the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters and the Armed Forces General Staff of the Iran, the statement said.

The sanctions were imposed under the Special Economic Measures (Iran) Regulations for allegedly posing threats to international peace and security and for their alleged destabilizing role in the Middle East.

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

Air Defense Remains 'High Priority' in Potential Patriots Delivery to Ukraine- White House

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) -White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday that air defense will remain a high priority when asked about potential additional deliveries of Patriot systems to Ukraine.

"When we send additional items we can speak to, we'll certainly let you know. ," Kirby told reporters when asked if Washington is considering sending another Patriot battery to Ukraine. "But clearly, air defense is going to remain something that's a high priority for the Ukrainians and as we can contribute to that air defense across the range of different capabilities - long, medium, short-range - we'll do that."

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US Wants Reported Gaza Mass Graves Investigated, Remains in Contact With Israel - Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States would like to see the reports of mass graves in the Gaza Strip investigated and remains in contact with Israel, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

"I mean, we're talking to our Israeli counterparts. You heard Jake [Sullivan] talk about this yesterday. We'd like to see this investigated. We'd like to get more information about it," Kirby said in response to a question whether the United States has received any clarity on the reports about mass graves of Palestinians in Gaza.

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US House Judiciary Committee Says Seeking Information From Banks About Financial Spying

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The US House Judiciary Committee said on Thursday that Chairman Jim Jordan sent letters to the leaders of more than a dozen financial institutions, requesting information relevant to the panel's investigation into the financial surveillance of people in the United States.

"Documents obtained by the Committee and Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government show that the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) circulated specific materials to these banks, and the Committee believes that these banking institutions possess information necessary for the investigation," the panel said in a statement.

The panel sent letters to the Chief Executive Officers of financial institutions including Wells Fargo, US Bank and JPMorgan Chase.

The panel remains concerned about how and to what extent federal law enforcement and

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financial institutions spy on Americans by weaponizing backdoor information sharing, the letters said.

Lawmakers are also concerned about the creation of classes of transactions, purchase behavior and protected political or religious expression as potentially suspicious or indicative of extremism, the letters said.

The panel previously sent letters to some of the financial institutions as part of its probe into how the FBI cooperated with banks to spy on Americans after the January 6 breach of the US Capitol without warrants, the statement said.

The panel sent a letter this week to US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen as well, demanding all Bank Secrecy Act filings related to the events following January 6, the statement said.

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Trump Bid to Overturn Jean Carroll $83Mln Defamation Verdict Rejected - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - A US judge on Thursday rejected former President Donald Trump's bid to overturn the verdict in Jean Carroll's $83 million defamation lawsuit, court documents revealed.

"In short, the argument - which Mr. Trump previously made to the jury, conspicuously without success, and which defies common sense - does not warrant a dismissal as a matter of law," US judge Lewis Kaplan said in the court document. "Accordingly, Mr. Trump's motions for a new trial and for a judgment as a matter of law are denied."

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Russians, Americans in Alaska to Commemorate World War II Meeting at Elbe - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Members of the Russian-speaking community and their American friends in the US state of Alaska will commemorate in Anchorage the 79th anniversary of the historic meeting of Soviet and US troops at the Elbe River in then Nazi Germany, Russian Cultural Center in Alaska Director Anna Vernaya said.

"The members of the Russian-speaking community of Anchorage, together with their American family and friends, are coming to Delany Park Strip at West 9th Avenue to honor Alaskans that fought and have fallen in WW2. Their names are in the sculptured screen panels," Vernaya said in a statement.

All residents of the state have a duty to remember their ancestors' feat and pass that memory onto the younger generations of Alaskans, the statement said.

The Russian Cultural Center called on the residents of Anchorage to attend and listen to the invited distinguished speakers as well as to lay flowers to honor the fallen.

On April 25, 1945, Soviet and US troops met at the Elbe River near the town of Torgau. The

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meeting was a key milestone in the process of ending World War II and came about as US troops advanced from the west while Soviet troops advanced from the east, thus splitting Nazi German territory into two.

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Top US General Says Iran's Activity in Mideast Could Spark Broader Conflict

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Charles Brown on Thursday warned that Iran's response to unrest in the Middle East could spark a broader conflict in the region and emphasized that the United States wants to avoid any escalation.

"The things they do could be the spark of a broader conflict," Brown said during a discussion hosted at Georgetown University.

Brown added that Iran needs to think carefully about how it responds to activity in the region and how they use their so-called "proxies" within the region as well.

However, Brown noted that the United States' goal is to avoid a conflict with Iran.

Brown spoke in light of the exchange of fire between Israel and Iran.

The Biden administration has also reportedly grown frustrated with Israel's reckless handling of the war in Gaza.

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US Must Prove Its Commitment to Not Placing Weapons in Space – Russian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – Russia urges the US to demonstrate not in words, but in deeds that it is willing take steps to reach an agreement that would exclude loopholes for space militarization, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the US Anatoly Antonov said on Thursday.

The Russian envoy commented on the White House accusations against Russia after Moscow vetoed the US-Japan-drafted UN Security Council resolution prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in outer space.

“Russia remains committed to its international obligations. We call on the US to show not in words, but in deeds its readiness to take steps to develop an agreement that would not contain any loopholes for the militarization of space,” Antonov said in a statement distributed by the Russian embassy in its Telegram channel.

The diplomat said that the US has ignored for many years Russia’s and China’s initiative on the conclusion of the Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space. The cause of such an approach lies in Washington’s confidence in its readiness to win “the arms race they are fueling,” he added.

“In 2020, they established the Space Command and adopted the space strategy, which

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involves creating a comprehensive military advantage in near-Earth space over rivals. It's no secret that the Pentagon is developing orbital strike and combat weapons, including for missile defense," Antonov said.

On Wednesday, Russia blocked the US-Japan draft resolution after a Russian-Chinese amendment to extend the ban to the placement of any type of weapon in space rather than just WMDs was rejected in a 7-7 vote with one abstention. Thirteen UNSC members voted in favor of the draft resolution, while China abstained.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Moscow vetoed the draft resolution on the placement of WMDs in outer space because Russian amendments had been ignored.

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More Than Half of Americans Support Mass Deportation of Undocumented Migrants - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - More than half of Americans say undocumented migrants in the United States should be deported from the country, a new Axios Vibes survey by the Harris Poll revealed on Thursday.

The report on the poll pointed out that 51% of Americans supported the idea of mass deportations of migrants who entered the United States illegally.

"And 30% of Democrats - as well as 46% of Republicans - now say they'd end birthright citizenship, something guaranteed under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution," the poll report said.

Only 46% of independent voters and 42% of Democrats shared this view, the poll report said.

At the same time, the poll report said 65% of Americans are of the opinion that the US government should make it easier for immigrants to enter the United States legally, the poll report said.

More than half (58%) support expanding legal ways for orderly immigration, the poll report added.

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US 'Well Positioned' to Begin Moving Military Aid to Ukraine - Joint Chiefs Chairman

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is "well positioned" to begin moving security assistance into Ukraine, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Charles Brown said on Thursday.

"We're well positioned to start moving capability to Ukraine," Brown said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

Earlier this week, Congress passed a supplemental package that includes $61 billion in

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additional aid for Ukraine. A substantial amount of the funding will go toward replenishing US equipment sent to Ukraine from its current inventory.

Politico reported, citing sources, that some officials in the Biden administration are skeptical about Ukraine being able to succeed on the battlefield even with the new aid package.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that the United States admits the possibility that Russia could make additional territorial gains in Ukraine over the coming weeks.

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Russia Demands Israel to Stop Its 'Nefarious' Military Tactics in Syria- Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Sputnik) - Russia urges Israel to stop its "evil" military operations on Syrian territory which drags the whole region down, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"We demand that the Israeli authorities Abstain from this nefarious, embarrassing practice of military operations on Syria's territory and the territory of its neighbors, which brings very serious and dangerous risks across the region," Nebenzia said in the UN Security Council during a meeting on Syria.

This additional destabilization is occurring on top of the existing bloodshed which has been happening in Gaza for over six months now, he added.

On April 1, Israel carried out an airstrike on the consular annex of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, destroying the building. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) said seven of its members had been killed in the attack, including two commanders. On April 2, the Syrian Health Ministry said that the attack had also killed four Syrians and injured 13 more.

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Nebenzia Says Humanitarian Situation Going From 'Bad to Worse' in Syria

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Sputnik) - The humanitarian situation in Syria is constantly getting worse despite Damascus' efforts to use more crossings to get the aid in, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"Despite Damascus' efforts to broaden humanitarian assistance, including by the authorization to use three non-government controlled checkpoints in the country's North, the humanitarian situation is going from bad to worse: the array border crossing is not operational in practice, there is no crossline," Nebenzia said in the UN Security Council. "The UN efforts to get it up and running, have not borne fruit."

In addition, he said that another aspect impacting the humanitarian situation in Syria is that it is

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getting strangled by Western sanctions.

Nebenzia emphasized that Russia has “been demanding for a long time, in fact, the publication of the UN special report about the corrosive effect of sanctions on the work of specialized agencies.”

Syria has been torn by conflict since 2011. Parts of its hydrocarbons-rich east are controlled by the United States and allied militants. After 13 years of instability, more than half of the country’s population requires food assistance, with millions being displaced, according to UN figures.

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US Treasury Unveils New Sanctions Related to Russia, Iran

(Adds quote in para 2; details, background in paras 4-12)

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – The United States has designated multiple entities and individuals related to Russia and Iran in a new round of sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning over one dozen entities, individuals, and vessels that have played a central role in facilitating and financing the clandestine sale of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles for Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, which itself is involved in supporting Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russia’s war in Ukraine," the department said in a press release.

OFAC has imposed sanctions on a total of eight Iranian nationals, 15 entities, including from Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Panama, and India, five vessels, and one aircraft, according to the press release.

The new sanctions package is primarily focused on Sahara Thunder, an Iranian company allegedly playing a key role in the design, development, manufacture, and sale of thousands of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) used by the Iranian and Russian militaries, the release said.

Senior officials of Sahara Thunder are also on the sanctions list, including Kazem Mirzai Kondori, Hossein Bakshayesh, Hojat Abdulahi Fard, and Etemad Tejarat Misagh, according to the release.

The new sanctions also target the Sahara Thunder shipping network to include India-based Zen Shipping & Port India Private Limited operating the Cook Islands-flagged vessel CHEM, UAE-based Safe Seas Ship Management FZE, and Iran-based Arsang Safe Trading Co., the release noted.

The United States has also designated three vessels: the Palau-flagged DANCY DYNAMIC, Cook Islands-flagged K M A, and Cook Islands-flagged CONRAD, all of which are managed and operated by Safe Seas Ship Management FZE, the release added.

The sanctions also target Iran-based Asia Marine Crown Agency, India-based Sea Art Ship Management (OPC) Private Limited, UAE-based company Trans Gulf Agency LLC, and UAE and Iran-based Coral Trading EST for supporting Sahara Thunder commercial operations, according to the release.

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The United States also designated Ilyushin-76 aircraft EP-PUS owned by previously sanctioned Iranian cargo airline Pouya Air for allegedly transporting UAVs and UAV-related cargo from Iran to Russia, the release said.

The new sanctions list also includes another Iranian drone manufacturer, Bonyan Danesh Shargh Private Company, and its senior officials, including CEO Abbas Abdi Asjerd, Seyed Mohsen Vahabzadeh Moghadam, Zahra Abdi Asjerd, Hamid Eidi Ashjerdi, according to the release.

Additionally, Asjerd and Moghadam serve as officials of Iran-based Baran Sazan Caspian Anzali Free Zone Company, Sanaye Motorsazi Alvand Private Company, and Pishro Sanat Aseman Sharif Private Company, which are also included in the new sanctions package, the release said.

Iran has been manufacturing UAVs since the 1980s, but the issue attracted attention in 2022 after Western countries accused Tehran of supplying combat drones to Moscow for alleged use in its military operation in Ukraine. Moscow and Tehran have rejected the allegations.

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G7 Retains Option of Seizing Russia's $300Bln in Frozen Assets - Yellen

(Adds background on Russia's stance in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen claimed on Thursday that the "outright seizure" of Russia's $300 billion in frozen assets was an option for the Group of Seven (G7) countries to pursue based on international law.

"The leaders have asked us to give them a range of options. So we've discussed quite a few. I believe that based on international law and other factors that outright seizure of the assets is something that's justifiable, but that's not the only possibility," Yellen said in an interview.

Russian officials have on multiple occasions said they view the seizure of Russian assets as outright theft and a financial weapon against the country.

Moscow is considering lowering the level of diplomatic relations with the United States if the latter moves to confiscate its frozen assets, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik on Thursday.

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US 'Prepared to Use' Sanctions on Chinese Banks Over Russia - Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to impose sanctions on Chinese banks if they facilitate transactions related to the alleged supply of dual-use goods to Russia, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday.

"It's one that we would be prepared to use if necessary. We've had intensive discussions with

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the Chinese about this; I think they understand our position and it is a tool that's available," Yellen said in a sit-down interview with Reuters.

Yellen said that she had "nothing to announce in terms of sanctions" when asked if the Treasury planned to impose them imminently on China.

President Joe Biden signed an executive order in December granting Treasury the power to sanction foreign banks in China or other places for allegedly facilitating the flow of military goods to Russia.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry called the US interference with the normal trade and economic interaction between Russia and China "hypocritical and irresponsible," notably as the US is "adding fuel to the fire" of the Ukraine conflict.

Beijing controls the export of dual-use goods in line with the law and warns against meddling in its normal economic activities with other countries, including Russia, the ministry said.

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US Supreme Court Hears Arguments in Trump Presidential Immunity Case

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Thursday heard oral arguments in a case centered around former US President Donald Trump's claims of presidential immunity as it relates to alleged crimes linked to the 2020 presidential election.

"Without presidential immunity from criminal prosecution, there can be no presidency as we know it," Trump attorney Dean John Sauer said in the courtroom. "The implications of the court's decision here extend far beyond the facts of this case."

Trump and his legal team contend that his actions related to the 2020 election were official presidential actions. Trump argues that he must be impeached, convicted and removed from office prior to criminal prosecution for official presidential actions.

A federal court rejected Trump's immunity claims, prompting him to take the case to the Supreme Court.

Trump faces four criminal charges for allegedly attempting to overturn 2020 election results, based on an investigation by Special Counsel Jack Smith. A trial in the case is effectively stalled until the Supreme Court rules on Trump's immunity claims.

"If a President does not have Immunity, the Opposing Party, during his/her term in Office, can extort and blackmail the President by saying that, 'if you don't give us everything we want, we will Indict you for things you did while in Office,' even if everything done was totally Legal and Appropriate," Trump said on Thursday is a statement via Truth Social.

The Supreme Court justices questioned Sauer about what constitutes an official act and whether presidents are immune from prosecution for private acts.

US Justice Department attorney Michael Dreeben said during arguments that the Supreme Court has never recognized absolute criminal immunity for any public official. However, Dreeben conceded during questioning that the president holds "special protection" by virtue of the office.

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Honda to Invest Over $10Bln in Developing EV Production Chain in Canada - CEO

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Japan's Honda Motor will invest approximately C$15 billion (US$10.9 billion) to build a comprehensive electric vehicle (EV) value chain in Canada, President CEO Toshihiro Mibe said on Thursday.

Mibe made the announcement during a joint press conference with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ontario Premier Dough Ford and federal Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland among others.

"To further accelerate our electrification efforts in Canada, Honda will take another major step forward. I'm pleased to announce that Honda intends to establish a battery integrated and comprehensive EV value chain in Canada," Mibe said from Alliston, Ontario.

The total value of Honda's comprehensive EV value chain development in Canada will be close to C$15 billion and further evaluation of the investment will be carried over the next six months, Mibe added.

The decision to invest in the value chain is based on a forecast increase in EV demand throughout North America, Honda Canada said in a statement.

Through the investment Honda intends to support a global initiative to make battery electric vehicles and fuel cell electric vehicles represent the entirety of car sales by 2040.

The initiative represents recognition of the long-term attractiveness of the Canadian EV manufacturing ecosystem, the statement said.

Accordingly, Honda has begun a requirements evaluation for the construction of an innovative and environmentally responsible EV plant and a stand-alone Honda EV battery plant in Alliston, the statement added.

Honda expects the EV production to begin in 2028, according to the statement.

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New York Appeals Court Overturns Weinstein 2020 Conviction on Felony Sex Crimes - Ruling

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The New York Court of Appeal overturned Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's 2020 conviction on felony sex crime charges and called for a new trial over critical errors made by the trial judge, according to the court ruling.

"The only evidence against defendant was the complainants' testimony, and the result of the court's rulings, on the one hand, was to bolster their credibility and diminish defendant's character before the jury. On the other hand, the threat of a cross-examination highlighting these untested allegations undermined defendant's right to testify. The remedy for these egregious errors is a new trial," the court ruled in a 4-3 decision.

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The appeals court said the trial court erroneously admitted testimony of uncharged, alleged prior sexual acts against persons other than the complainants of the underlying crimes because that testimony served no material non-propensity purpose.

The appeals court also said the trial court compounded that error when it ruled that the defendant, who had no criminal history, could be cross examined about those allegations as well as numerous allegations of misconduct that portrayed defendant in a highly prejudicial light, adding that the synergistic effect of these errors "was not harmless."

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg will have to decide whether to seek a retrial of Weinstein.

A New York jury found Weinstein guilty of assaulting two women in his 2020 trial and sentenced him to 23 years in prison. While the ruling has now been overturned, Weinstein may not be necessarily free as he was also convicted by a Los Angeles court in 2022 of raping one woman and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

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G7 Retains Option of Seizing Russia's $300Bln in Frozen Assets - Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Thursday confirmed that "outright seizure" of Russia's $300 billion in frozen assets was an option for the Group of Seven (G7) countries to pursue based on international law.

"The leaders have asked us to give them a range of options. So we've discussed quite a few. I believe that based on international law, and other factors that outright seizure of the assets is something that's justifiable but that's not the only possibility," Yellen said in an interview.

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US Treasury Unveils New Sanctions Related to Russia, Iran

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – The United States has designated multiple entities and individuals related to Russia and Iran in a new round of sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has imposed sanctions on a total of eight Iranian nationals, 15 entities, including from Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Panama, and India, five vessels, and one aircraft, according to a press release.

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Biden Appoints Lise Grande as Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has appointed Lise Grande as new US Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Today, President Biden appointed Lise Grande as the new Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues. Lise's decades of humanitarian experience will build on the foundation built by Ambassador David Satterfield and his team to urgently address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza," Blinken said in a statement.

Biden created this position after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel in order to lead US regional diplomacy to surge humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, he said.

Blinken emphasized the importance of providing life-saving humanitarian assistance for Gaza and said the United States will continue to pursue all possible avenues to ensure aid gets to the most vulnerable populations that need it.

"As Special Envoy, Lise will work closely with USAID, other colleagues across our government, regional partners and the government of Israel to ensure this happens," Blinken added.

Grande previously worked in the Middle East, including as head of United Nations humanitarian and development operations in Yemen. She also served as deputy head of the UN's political mission in Iraq, according to the statement.

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