

Tuesday 11/24/20

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Biden Says Will Strengthen US Alliances in Asia-Pacific Region
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Presumed US President-elect Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that in a future Biden administration, he would rebuild the US State Department's morale and expand US alliances in the Pacific while dodging involvement in a new war.

Speaking from his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, Biden said his security team was "ready to lead the world," pledging to strengthen US alliances in the Asia-Pacific region.

Earlier, [Biden began announcing some of his nominees](#) to fill key cabinet positions. Biden promised that longtime advisor Antony Blinken, who he picked to become secretary of state, would return "trust" to the department, which is presently run by former CIA director Mike Pompeo.

"He's one of the better-prepared for this job," Biden said of Blinken. "No one's better prepared in my view ... He will rebuild morale and trust in the state department where his career in government began ... Tony is ready on day one."

"This team behind me, they embody my core beliefs that America is strongest when it works with its allies," he said. "Collectively this team has secured some of the most defining national security and diplomatic achievements in recent memory, made possible through decades of experience working with our partners."

"That's how we truly keep America safe without engaging in needless military conflicts," Biden continued.

His comments come on the heels of a group of Asian nations penning the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), [a 15-country trading bloc that notably includes China but excludes](#) the United States. Many of the nations are US allies, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as well as [nations Washington has sought to sway from China's influence](#), including Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

Biden has said he [has no intentions to strengthen the slew of trade restrictions](#) imposed on China by the administration of US President Donald Trump. However, in those same comments, he repeated the same logic Trump has used to enhance its efforts to halt Chinese political and economic expansion: that China isn't playing the game according to the rules and that sanctions and tariffs are intended to force Beijing back into line.

Last week, the US State Department's Office of Policy Planning published a document that laid out a multi-decade plan for stopping China's rise. [As Sputnik reported, several of its policy recommendations](#) included fortifying the "rules-based international order" the US created after World War II; working to "reevaluate its alliance system and the panoply of international organizations in which it participates" to ensure they support this vision; and strengthening existing alliance systems and creating new ones.

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'Needs to Grow Further': US Space Force Acquisition Chief Promises 'Plussed Up' 2022 Budget Pitch

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Pentagon's newest branch, the US Space Force (USSF), has taken over the US' space-based assets and has big plans for expanding its surveillance and offensive capabilities both on the ground and in space.

Lt. Gen. John Thompson, commander of the USSF's Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC), said at a recent forum that the service would continue to seek larger budgets in the coming years, confident that lawmakers and Pentagon planners alike will support a rapid expansion of space capabilities.

"If you thought space was going to be a priority in a kind of one-and-done way, that's not clearly what's been happening, right?" Thompson pointed out at the Air Force Association's Schriever Space Futures Forum [last week, according to C4ISRNET](#). "Three years in a row, budgets have gone to the Hill with foundational changes to the space budget."

"We plussed up the space portfolio significantly to address users' needs," Thompson said about the fiscal year 2022 budget proposal still in the works. "I can't give you the exact dollars and obviously it's all pre-decisional. But the DMAG [Deputy's Management Action Group] and many other DoD [Department of Defense] leaders are clearly sending a message that across the [Future Years Defense Program], the importance of the space enterprise is growing and needs to grow further."

For some perspective, [in fiscal year 2021, the Department of the Air Force boosted](#) its budget for the USSF some \$800 million from the year prior, to \$15.4 billion. That's a lot of money for a service branch officially founded in December 2019 and sporting just 16,000 uniformed and civilian personnel. That's about \$962,500 spent per person.

Earlier this month, amid the ongoing dispute over the November 3 US presidential election results, Joshua Huminski, director of the Mike Rogers Center for Intelligence and Global Affairs' National Security Space Program, [told SpaceNews that whether Donald Trump or Joe Biden](#) becomes the nation's next president, "The mission and threat will continue on and perhaps accelerate" in the coming years.

"I think the important thing to consider is that [the intellectual foundation of the Space Force existed well before](#) President Trump - the need for a separate culture, space as a warfighting domain and the threat from Russia and China on orbit," Huminski added.

The new service is taking over the space-based assets separately managed by each service branch, as well as taking responsibility for a slew of new satellites, weapons systems, and defensive efforts like counter-jamming abilities - ostensibly to better protect them from the increased threat of Russian and Chinese interference or intercept. However, Beijing and Moscow alike have denied any intent to militarize space [and have accused Washington of](#) [perpetrating](#) that which it seeks to prevent.

Last month, the US Air Force Research Laboratory's Space Vehicles Directorate opened its Deployable Structures Laboratory at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, [a facility for testing out new materials and designs](#) for space structures before deploying them into orbit. That could include a slew of [new ballistic missile early warning satellites](#) as well as structures such as a proposed [solar energy collector that would beam its energy](#) down to Earth to provide electrical power.

The Space Force also has offensive weapons in the form of the Counter Communications System, an Earth-based array that can jam enemy satellite transmissions - something SMC combat systems branch materiel leader [Lt. Col. Steve Brogan said at its January unveiling](#) "puts the 'force' in Space Force and is critical for Space as a warfighting domain." [Its next iteration, dubbed "Meadowland,"](#) will see the technology further miniaturized and multiplied into a vast network of offensive jamming capabilities.

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US Troops Stationed in Germany Train on New Anti-Air Variant of Stryker Armored Vehicle by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has rushed development of several new short-range anti-air systems to address the rising threat posed by drones and close a key gap in US air defenses, which have long prioritized taking down ballistic missiles.

A group of US troops in Germany has traveled to New Mexico's White Sands Missile Range to test out the Interim Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (IM-SHORAD) system currently in development. [The range conducted live-fire tests with the IM-SHORAD](#) over the summer as part of its Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS) drills intended to link up various US anti-air assets.

"The reason why this platoon is out here from Germany is we'll be fielding the first system into the Army, so it not only gets us to test the system, but also understand how to use it so we can go back to our home unit and train with them on the system," 1st Lt. Ryan Pitcher, the unit's platoon leader, [said in a US Army news release](#).

The 5th Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery Regiment based in Ansbach, Germany, presently uses the Humvee-based Avenger system that IM-SHORAD is intended to replace. That makes their thoughts on how well the system is designed and operates invaluable while the vehicle remains in the prototype phase.

The IM-SHORAD isn't totally different from the Avenger. Mounted on one of the Stryker wheeled armored vehicles already in use by US Forces Europe, the system includes a 360-degree Avenger air defense turret sporting FIM-92 Stinger and AGM-114 Longbow Hellfire missiles as well as an XM914 30-millimeter cannon and a 7.62-millimeter machine gun. However, the vehicle also carries its own radar and doesn't take the cumbersome time the Avenger does to set up and pack up, which increases its survivability.

The Army recently [signed a \\$1.2 billion contract with General Dynamics Land Systems](#) to produce, test, and deliver 28 Stryker IM-SHORADs, and in the longer run, the service wants 144 systems spread across four battalions by 2023.

IM-SHORAD is just one of a host of short-range air defense systems under development by the Pentagon in the wake of [a devastating drone attack on two Saudi oil facilities](#) in September 2019. When the Army's Patriot air defense systems were unable to engage the swarm of suicide drones the Yemeni Houthi movement claimed responsibility for launching, it opened eyes at the Pentagon, [which set out to develop as many as five anti-drone systems in 2020](#), including IM-SHORAD but also laser systems and even jamming devices.

IM-SHORAD will not be the weapon's name forever, though. [Task & Purpose reported earlier this year that an online poll](#) would decide which of several potential names the vehicle might get, with one of them reportedly being "Manticore" after the fictional missile-armed tank from the Warhammer 40,000 tabletop gaming franchise.

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Video: US Destroyer Performs 'FONOP' in Peter the Great Gulf, Claiming Excess Russian Sea Grab

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The provocative maneuver is just the latest attempt by Washington to cast Russia as a rogue state that wantonly violates international law, and it comes on the heels of a similar action in the Taiwan Strait on Friday.

[The US Navy announced on Tuesday that one of its warships](#), the USS John S. McCain, had performed a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) just miles from Russia's eastern port city of Vladivostok, where the Russian Pacific Fleet is headquartered.

US Warship Deterred

According to the US Seventh Fleet, the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer was upholding "the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging Russia's excessive maritime claims."

The news release notes that in 1984, the Soviet Council of Ministers declared a system of straight baselines for parts of its eastern coast, including those that face the Pacific Ocean, Bering Sea, Sea of Okhotsk and, like Peter the Great Gulf, the Sea of Japan. Some of them Washington has decided to dispute.

"This 106-nautical mile (nm) closing line is inconsistent with the rules of international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention to enclose the waters of a bay," the US Seventh Fleet news release stated.

"By drawing this closing line, the USSR attempted to claim more internal waters - and territorial sea farther from shore - than it is entitled to claim under international law. Russia has continued the USSR claim," the Navy continued. "By conducting this operation, the United States demonstrated that these waters are not Russia's territorial sea and that the United States does not acquiesce in Russia's claim that Peter the Great is a 'historic bay' under international law."

Russia has claimed sovereignty over Peter the Great Gulf since 1860, when it was awarded the surrounding territory by China as part of the Treaty of Beijing, renaming it after the founder of the Russian Empire. No other country has ever laid claim to the gulf and Moscow readily and easily exercises sovereignty over it. As a result and under international custom, Peter the Great Gulf falls under the category of a historic body of water, not international waters or a navigable territorial sea.

The Russian Ministry of Defense has released footage of the incident via Krasnaya Zvezda, the military's news outlet. The film is shot from the deck of the Udaloy-class frigate [Admiral Vinogradov, which responded to the USS McCain's incursion.](#)

[According to the Ministry of Defense, the McCain passed](#) two kilometers beyond the line of Russia's claimed maritime borders.

Another US destroyer, the USS Barry, performed its own FONOP through the Taiwan Strait on November 20, [according to the US Pacific Fleet.](#) The maneuver is just one of several this year intended to flout Chinese claims of sovereignty over the autonomous island of Taiwan, which enjoys informal US support.

Pentagon Calls Russia 'Revitalized Malign Actor'

It's unclear what great material gain Washington expects to make by rejecting this claim and demonstrating it can sail a US warship within a few dozen miles of a major Russian city.

However, the news release notes the US sees itself as upholding international law: in recent years Washington has spared no effort to cast Russia and several other nations as "revisionist" powers who seek to upend the post-Cold War order crafted by the US when it was the world's sole superpower.

The Pentagon's [Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, published in June of 2019,](#) described Russia as "a Revitalized Malign Actor," which it says "seeks to advance Moscow's strategic interests while undermining US leadership and the rules-based international order."

[A 1987 document by the US State Department](#) on the Soviet border changes notes that the US has disputed Moscow's claim that Peter the Great Gulf is a "historical body of water" since 1957. According to [the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea,](#) nations are allowed to employ straight baselines "in localities where the coastline is deeply indented or cut into," among several other situations.

The treaty further notes that "the drawing of straight baselines must not depart to any appreciable extent from the general direction of the coast, and the sea areas lying within the lines must be sufficiently closely linked to the land domain to be subject to the regime of internal waters."

According to the State Department, the line across Peter the Great Bay does not meet any of the UN's requirements, but the department's justifications for that position are subjective and facile, such as that the coastline is not indented enough

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Progressive Pushback Could Block Flournoy Nomination as Biden's Pentagon Chief
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Joe Biden's presumed pick to head the US Department of Defense, Michèle Flournoy, has encountered stiff resistance from progressive lawmakers and activists, and even within Biden's transition team, threatening her chances of being nominated or getting through her confirmation. On Tuesday, presumed president-elect Biden's advance to the presidency seemed to gain momentum, as [US President Donald Trump has given his assent](#) to the General Services Administration beginning the process of providing resources to Biden's transition team, which he has resisted for weeks. However, [Trump has not dropped his legal attempts](#) to win ballot recounts in several key states where he has claimed fraud occurred.

"Flournoy supported the war in Iraq & Libya, criticized Obama on Syria, and helped craft the surge in Afghanistan," progressive [Rep. Ro Khanna \(D-CA\) tweeted on Sunday](#). "I want to support the President's picks. But will Flournoy now commit to a full withdrawal from Afghanistan & a ban on arms sales to the Saudis to end the Yemen war?"

Khanna is just one of several left-leaning US lawmakers wary of the idea of Flournoy heading the Pentagon. Reps. Mark Pocan (D-WI) and Barbara Lee (D-CA) [wrote a letter to Biden over the weekend asking him](#) not to nominate a defense secretary with ties to defense contractors. For Biden, whose presidential bid has depended heavily on [maintaining the support of the Democratic Party's left-wing](#) after the defeat of social democrat Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) in the primaries, spurning their concerns about the makeup of a transition team they believed they would have influence over could be dangerous for the party's unity.

[Flournoy is a member of Booz Allen Hamilton's board](#) and co-founder of defense consulting firm WestExec Advisors, the latter of which several of Biden's office nominees have ties to, including [Antony Blinken, who Biden picked to be secretary of state](#), and Avril Haines, who Biden picked to be director of national intelligence. Flournoy was also the presumed nominee for Pentagon chief for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, had she won the 2016 election.

The other leading contender for defense secretary, Jeh Johnson, sits on the board of Lockheed Martin and was homeland security secretary under US President Barack Obama when Biden was vice president. Under US President Donald Trump, the last two Pentagon chiefs were also from the defense industry: Patrick Shanahan was a former Boeing executive and Mark Esper a former vice president for lobbying at Raytheon.

A group of [people close to Biden's transition team told Politico on Monday](#) that Flournoy was "at the top of the list," but noted that even members of Biden's team are worried Flournoy's multiple past Pentagon positions might mean she is too entrenched to "enact the kind of progressive change Biden is looking for."

Notably, when [Biden announced his first cabinet picks on Tuesday](#), a Pentagon chief was not among them.

Stephen Miles, executive director of progressive foreign policy group [Win Without War, told Defense News on Tuesday](#) that "it would behoove the Biden administration to really demonstrate they are charting a different course and they are adding some protections to restore faith and trust in these institutions."

"You don't have to protest outside the White House when you can go into the White House and make the case for your position," Miles added. "That doesn't mean you never protest outside the White House, but when there's a time and a place for it."

However, some activists may soon see fit to do both.

Women's peace group Code Pink, known for its [publicity-grabbing direct action protests](#) in the halls of US institutions, [has also launched a petition on its website](#) calling on Americans to phone their congressional representatives and tell them to "oppose Michele Flournoy's appointment as secretary of defense."

"Trump and his 'Make America Great Again' represent the epitome of imperial hubris, while Biden pushes the time-worn idea that America should be 'back at the head of the table' internationally, as if America's neocolonial empire was still in its prime," [Code Pink co-founder Medea Benjamin wrote in CommonDreams in September](#), when Flournoy's name first came up as a Biden cabinet potential.

"With enough pressure from the public, Biden might be persuaded to start cutting the imperial military budget to invest in our real needs, from Medicare For All to a Green New Deal. But that's unlikely if he picks Michele Flournoy, a die-hard militarist who has played instrumental roles in America's failed wars and catastrophic imperial adventures since the 1990s," Benjamin added.

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China Tests Millions for COVID-19 After New Cases Reported in Three Cities
by [Mary F.](#)

The first case of the novel coronavirus virus was reported on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China. Since then, the virus has spread to more than 200 countries and territories around the world infecting more than 59 million people and killing more than 1.4 million.

Although China managed to contain its outbreak several months after the first case was reported, a new report by the Associated Press reveals that Chinese authorities are now testing millions of people, imposing lockdowns and closing down schools after locally transmitted cases of the disease were identified last week in three Chinese cities, namely Tianjin, Shanghai and Manzhouli.

According to [AP](#), China's National Health Commission reported two new locally transmitted cases of COVID-19 in Shanghai over the previous 24 hours, causing the number of locally transmitted cases in the city to increase to seven on Friday.

The two latest cases of COVID-19 in Shanghai have been linked to an airport worker who was diagnosed with respiratory illness earlier this month. On Sunday, the authorities tested the city's Pudong International airport, where the infected employee works. Testing in surrounding areas may also take place if additional cases are detected.

In Tianjin, more than 2.2 million samples from residents in the Binhai new district have been collected after five locally transmitted cases were reported there last week. In addition, authorities in Manzhouli are testing more than 200,000 after two cases were reported on Saturday. Schools in the city have also been shut down, including a kindergarten, while large public gatherings have been banned. The residential compound where the five cases were identified has also been sealed.

Although China's approach to controlling the spread of COVID-19 has been called draconian, Beijing's strategy has also led to fewer infections and related deaths compared to other countries.

According to an AP tally, since the pandemic first broke out in the country, China has recorded 86,442 cases and 4,634 deaths despite having a population of over 1.3 billion people. On the other hand, the US, with a population of around 329,000,000 people, has reported more than 12 million cases and over 265,000 deaths, [according to the latest data from Worldometer](#).

"In the entire world, only China has the ability to get to zero. Other countries don't have this ability," Zeng Guang, the chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said in a webinar in September, AP reported. "It's not just getting to zero, even for them to control the first wave of the epidemic is hard."

"'Clearing to zero' is actually the most economically effective way to do epidemic prevention. If you don't do that, then this problem will get more troublesome," he added.

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Apple Security Head Accused of Bribing Police for iPads in Exchange for Concealed Gun Permits
by [Mary F.](#)

Apple, a US multinational technology company headquartered in Cupertino, California, which sells consumer electronics, computer software and online services, is considered one of the Big Tech technology companies.

The company's head of global security, Thomas Moyer, was indicted by a grand jury Monday after being accused of bribing law enforcement with iPads in exchange for obtaining concealed carry permits for employees at Apple's Cupertino headquarters, according to a press release by the County of Santa Clara Office of the District Attorney.

Insurance broker Harpreet Chadha has also been accused, along with Moyer, of offering a bribe to get concealed firearms, while two members of the Santa Clara County Sheriff's office, Undersheriff Rick Sung and Captain James Jensen, have both been indicted with "requesting bribes for concealed firearms."

"Undersheriff Sung and Captain Jensen treated CCW [concealed firearm] licenses as commodities and found willing buyers. Bribe seekers should be reported to the District Attorney's Office, not rewarded with compliance," District Attorney Jeff Rosen said in the release.

Moyer is specifically accused of pledging to donate 200 iPads, worth around \$70,000, to the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office if officials provided him with four permits for Apple workers. Moyer, however, has denied the allegations against him, noting that while he did help arrange a donation of iPads to the sheriff's office's new education center, the donation was not connected to the permits.

“He did nothing wrong and has acted with the highest integrity throughout his career. We have no doubt he will be acquitted at trial,” Ed Swanson, Moyer’s attorney, said in a statement obtained by the Washington Post.

A statement released by the sheriff’s office also addressed the incident.

“As law enforcement officers, we are held to the highest moral and ethical standards,” the sheriff’s office said in a statement. “This is a difficult time for our organization.

The defendants will be arraigned on January 11, 2021 at the Hall of Justice in San Jose and could receive prison time if convicted.

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CDC Finalizing Recommendation to Shorten COVID-19 Quarantine Period
by [Mary F.](#)

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a national public health institute in the US, is a federal agency under the Department of Health and Human Services. The CDC provides guidance documents on a variety of public health issues.

The CDC may shorten the length of time it recommends that a person self-quarantine after potential exposure to the novel coronavirus, a top agency official recently told the Wall Street Journal.

Currently, the CDC recommends that those exposed to COVID-19 “stay home for 14 days after [their] last contact with a person who has COVID-19.”

However, officials are in the process of modifying recommendations to set a new quarantine period that will likely last between seven and 10 days and include a test to ensure that the person is negative for the virus, Henry Walke, the agency’s incident manager for COVID-19 response told the Journal.

Walke also revealed that officials are currently discussing the exact quarantine time period and what type of test someone should take to no longer be required to quarantine.

“We do think that the work that we’ve done, and some of the studies we have and the modeling data that we have, shows that we can with testing shorten quarantines,” Walke said, also noting that if a test comes back negative after seven to 10 days, “then their [patients’] probability of going on and developing an infection after that is pretty low.”

Although there is a risk that some infections may be overlooked, people may also better adhere to a shorter quarantine period, Walke pointed out.

According to Justin Lessler, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, around 59% of people who contract the illness develop symptoms between five and six days after they are infected. Nine percent, on the other hand, develop symptoms after 10 days, while only 2% show symptoms after 14 days.

“If we could get people to quarantine—and really quarantine, like you can’t go to the grocery store when you quarantine—then I think there’s an argument for shorter times,” he told the Journal.

The World Health Organization (WHO) currently recommends that those exposed to COVID-19 quarantine for 14 days.

However, a WHO spokesperson told the Journal that expert groups that advise the organization are currently reviewing the data to determine whether it should alter its quarantine guidelines.

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Nearly One-Third of New Yorkers May Not Use FDA-Approved COVID-19 Vaccine - Survey by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York state, specifically New York City, became one of the top US hotspots that pushed hospitals to their limits and prompted the implementation of refrigerated trucks that were converted into mobile morgues to meet death toll spikes.

A [new survey published Tuesday](#) by the Siena College Research Institute found that one in four New Yorkers would “definitely or probably not get” a COVID-19 vaccine, even if it’s approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is responsible for determining the safety and effectiveness of drugs, vaccines and medical devices.

While 24 percent of the respondents indicated they would opt out, another 34% agreed that they would “definitely get it.” Thirty-four percent of the surveyed Empire State residents stated they would “probably” be willing to sign up for the vaccine.

When broken down by political party affiliations, researchers determined that an overwhelming majority of Democrats, Republicans and surveyed Independents would agree to get the vaccine. Steven Greenberg, a pollster for the organization, noted in a statement that accompanied the released survey that “regardless of party, region, race, age, religion, gender, or even who they supported in the presidential election, [the majority of New Yorkers] will definitely or at least probably” opt for the vaccine.

Asked about US President Donald Trump’s handling of the pandemic, the Siena survey found that 64% of respondents disapproved of the commander-in-chief’s actions, whereas 32% said they approved. The remaining 4% of survey participants said they either had no opinion or mixed feelings.

The survey, which was conducted from November 15 to November 18 and involved some 803 registered voters from New York state, did not highlight what incidents led participants to disapprove of Trump’s handling of the matter.

At present, there are various ongoing COVID-19 vaccine trials in the US and abroad; however, within the Land of the Free, medical experts have hailed the positive efficacy rates of vaccines created by pharmaceutical companies [Pfizer](#), [Moderna](#) and [AstraZeneca](#).

Most recently, Pfizer and its partner BioNTech applied for an emergency use authorization from the FDA last Friday. It’s believed that the health agency is expected to review the details of Pfizer’s vaccine on December 10 when the body’s Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee meets once again.

As for Moderna, the company is forecast to submit an application to the FDA sometime within the next few days so that its review can be carried out at the same time as Pfizer's application. AstraZeneca is taking similar steps as well.

Although it may take days after the initial December 10 meeting for FDA officials to give a clearance, Gen. Gustavo Perna, who leads the White House's Operation Warp Speed effort to distribute vaccines to the public, [told ABC News on Tuesday](#) that a COVID-19 vaccine would be "on the streets" within 24 hours after being authorized by the FDA.

In fact, under Operation Warp Speed, US officials have already begun to undertake a series of field exercises to test out the Trump administration's COVID-19 vaccine distribution networks. Health and Human Services Secretary [Alex Azar told reporters during a Tuesday briefing](#) that tests would help to "ensure that all goes smoothly."

As the US aims to distribute some 40 million COVID-19 vaccine doses by the end of the year, Azar stated that, in conjunction with the federal government, partner CVS Health would begin working to administer shots to nursing home residents within 48 hours of an FDA approval. [Past announcements by the Trump administration](#) have suggested that a vaccine would not be mass-distributed to the American public until April 2021, with vaccines being prioritized to first responders and Americans most vulnerable to the respiratory disease.

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US Secret Service Agents May Relocate to Mar-a-Lago to Guard Trump Post Presidency - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ever since legislation was passed in 1965 by the US Congress, the Secret Service has been authorized to protect former US presidents and their spouses for the remainder of their life, unless they opt to decline the added protection.

Secret Service agents assigned to US President Donald Trump's detail have reportedly recently been asked whether they're interested in relocating to Palm Beach, Florida, where Trump has taken up residence at his Mar-a-Lago resort after changing his official residence from New York to the Sunshine State in 2019.

Trump will be required to spend at least six months of the year in order to maintain his residency status in Florida.

It is presently unclear how many agents have been tapped to relocate to Florida or have been asked about the potential switch. The latest [figures released by the agency](#) states that approximately 3,200 agents are employed by the service; however, it's uncertain how many agents may be assigned to a former president's security detail, as the amount often varies.

Citing sources familiar with the matter, [ABC News reported late Monday](#) that in addition to agents being asked about a transfer to the service's Florida branches, officials stationed at the Miami field office have begun to look into bolstering security reinforcements at Mar-a-Lago, also coined by Trump as the "winter White House."

Although the Secret Service has declined to comment on the development, as that would undermine the effectiveness of ongoing security operations, sources told the outlet that “updates” to the living quarters of the president and the first lady at the resort are fully underway.

Additionally, a police source informed the ABC outlet that the New York Police Department would begin to work alongside the Secret Service to reduce the upped presence of law enforcement officials at the Trump Tower in Manhattan. The partnership is set to begin executing its new objective come Inauguration Day on January 20, 2021.

The revelation came just hours after Emily Murphy, the administrator of the General Services Administration (GSA), issued a letter to presumed US President-elect Joe Biden, indicating that the US presidential transition process would begin and funds would be made available to support the changeover.

Within moments of the announcement, which was first picked up by CNN, [Trump acknowledged the decision](#), indicating that he had recommended “that Emily and her team do what needs to be done with regard to initial protocols.” However, it’s worth noting that Trump has still promised to continue with his lawsuit challenges that allege voter fraud was rampant in the US election.

After having endorsed the GSA’s move, [Trump tweeted Tuesday](#) that while the agency “has been terrific,” it “does not determine who the next President of the United States will be.”

Though it is only the official count of the Electoral College votes that determines the winner of a US election, the GSA move is the first official signal of a formal winner of a presidential race.

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The Fight Goes On - Political Cartoon

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly refused to concede, arguing that the results of the 2020 election were false due to alleged widespread voter fraud. Although many lawsuits have been filed to challenge results in battleground states, many have been dismissed by judges over a lack of evidence.

Stopping short of conceding the US election, Trump [late Monday threw his support](#) behind the move by the General Services Administration to begin the “initial protocol” in the US presidential transition process. The [commander-in-chief tweeted](#) that he acknowledged the development was “what needs to be done.”

However, that’s not to say that the president would be dropping his legal challenges. Trump added in the tweet that his team “will keep up the good fight,” and that he “believe[d] we will prevail!”

The [latest count by NBC News](#) indicates that 36 lawsuits have been either filed by the Trump reelection campaign or Republicans across some six battleground states. Of the legal suits, at least 25 were rejected, dismissed, settled or withdrawn. The most recent challenge - filed in Pennsylvania - [was dismissed](#) and allowed for the Keystone State to [certify its voting results](#).

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People Over 45 at Higher Risk of Contracting STIs 'Than Ever Before,' New Study Finds
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Reports by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention have found that infection rates for sexually transmitted infections have risen year after year for those aged 45 and older. In the US, the top infections were gonorrhea, syphilis and chlamydia.

A three-year study conducted by a team of researchers from the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands recently revealed that as a result of public stigma, individuals over the age of 45 are at a much higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

In a [Monday release](#) issued by the UK's University of Chichester, [one of 10 partners](#) involved in the long-term SHIFT study, researchers concluded that those over 45 years of age "are at a higher risk of contracting STIs than ever before because of society's unwillingness to talk about middle-aged and older people having sex."

"Shame was identified as the biggest barrier to accessing sexual health care services," the release highlighted. "A number of participants felt that sexual health has become a 'dirty' term which is discouraging people from attending regular check-ups."

Additionally, the study found that those over 45 living in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations, such as homelessness, were at an even greater risk of contracting an STI due a lack of knowledge on available health care services or for having less access to said services. Nearly 80% of the survey respondents were between the ages of 45 and 65, with 58% of participants who identified as being socioeconomically disadvantaged between 45 and 54. The study, which involved over 800 participants from southern England and the northern regions of Belgium and the Netherlands, also found that "negative attitudes" toward the examined age group's sexual health needs was "associated with a generation unaware of the dangers of unprotected intercourse."

"Over-45s at most risk are generally those entering new relationships after a period of monogamy, often post-menopause, when pregnancy is no longer a consideration, but give little thought to STIs," Dr. Ian Tyndall, a lead study author, said in a statement accompanying the university release.

"Given improvements in life expectancy, sexual health care needs to improve its intervention for older adults and vulnerable groups to provide a more utilised, knowledgeable, compassionate, and effective service."

Initial findings have led researchers to conclude that use of social media is the best way to promote sexual health services, and that there is an "urgent need" to create training programs that allow health providers to better address growing sexual health concerns.

Although a detailed analysis of the project's findings are ongoing, researchers hope to release an "effective intervention" plan by 2021; however, the group's research isn't expected to be published until 2022.

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Musk: Tesla to Construct World's Largest Battery Plant Near Berlin
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Tesla CEO and product architect Elon Musk, now the second-richest man in the world, plans to expand on an already active construction project near Berlin, Germany, and build what he believes will be the world's "largest battery-cell plant."

Musk announced Tuesday at the European Battery Conference that he was "pretty confident" Tesla Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg will be "the largest battery-cell plant in the world."

During the conference, organized by Germany's economy ministry, Musk claimed it would "make sense" for the smaller Tesla hatchback to be marketed to the European market.

"In the US the cars tend to be bigger... I was driving a Model X around Berlin and we had quite a lot of trouble finding a parking space that could fit it," Musk said, as reported by AFP.

The entrepreneur mentioned he was "pretty confident it'd be the largest battery-cell plant in the world".

Musk also emphasized that locals will not experience "detectable amounts of toxins in the air" from the battery production at the factory.

Construction, on the other hand, has appeared to be another story when it comes to locals' frustrations.

"We are here, we are loud, because Tesla is stealing our water," protesters said in January, [as reported by Reuters](#).

The protests came about following warnings from the Brandenburg water association regarding "extensive and serious problems with the drinking water supply and wastewater disposal" of Tesla Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg.

Environmental group Gruene Liga Brandenburg (Green League of Brandenburg) then took Tesla to court after [Germany's environment ministry](#) granted the company permission to continue tree-felling.

However, the Higher Administrative Court of Berlin-Brandenburg [ultimately ruled](#) Tesla could continue site preparations "at its own risk."

[As of recently, some 92 hectares of trees](#) have been felled in the state and 100 additional hectares are expected to be removed amid construction.

[Sputnik reported earlier Tuesday](#) that Musk surpassed Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates to become the second-richest man in the world, with a net worth of \$127.9 billion. Gates' net worth is \$127.7 billion.

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Pompeo Says US State Dept. Looking at GSA Decision to Greenlight Presidential Transition

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said his department began the process of looking into the the General Service Administration's (GSA) decision to initiate the presidential transition process.

The GSA on Monday said it determined that projected President-elect Joe Biden's transition team could access post-election resources and services. President Donald Trump approved of the move, although he has not conceded.

"Today we began the process to see what the GSA's decision was, and will do everything that's required by law. We'll make this work," Pompeo told Fox News on Tuesday.

Biden has been projected to win the November 3 election by all major US media outlets while several key battleground states - including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Georgia - have officially certified the results. Trump has filed legal challenges in several of these key swing states but his path to change the results has narrowed significantly. Trump's team has filed more than 30 lawsuits, most of which have been dismissed or withdrawn.

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Trump Names New US Envoy to Association of Southeast Asian Nations - White House

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has nominated a new ambassador to the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the White House said in a statement.

"Major General Eldon Regua, (Retired) to be Representative of the United States of America to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, with the rank and status of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary," the statement said on Tuesday.

The White House noted that Regua served with distinction in the US Army and Army Reserve for 36 years before retiring in 2013.

"Major General Regua last served as Deputy Commanding General/Chief of Staff (Wartime) for the United States Eighth Army headquartered in Seoul, Korea. Prior to that he was the Commanding General of the 75th Training Division of the United States Army Reserve in Houston, Texas," the statement said.

Currently, Regua serves as the Vice President of NextStep Technology in Springfield, Virginia, the statement added.

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US Refuses to Lift Chinese Tech Firm ZTE's Threat Designation - Regulator

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Chinese software company ZTE's request to free itself from a US national security threat designation has been denied, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said in a statement.

"The Federal Communications Commission's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau today denied a petition for reconsideration of the Bureau's June 30, 2020 order designating ZTE as a company posing a national security threat to the integrity of communications networks or the communications supply chain," the FCC said on Tuesday. "After reviewing the record, the Bureau found no basis for reconsideration."

As a result, the FCC's \$8.3 billion a year Universal Service Fund cannot be used to purchase, obtain, maintain, improve, modify or otherwise support any equipment or services produced or provided by ZTE, as well as its parents, affiliates, and subsidiaries, the statement added.

The FCC announced in June it had formally designated ZTE and China's Huawei Technologies Co as threats.

The FCC will vote on December 10 on rules to help carriers remove and replace untrusted equipment from networks.

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Purdue Pharma Pleads Guilty to Supplying Opioids in US Overdose Crisis - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Purdue Pharma admitted guilt to three criminal charges of making and distributing opioids in a campaign that led to an overdose epidemic in the United States, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Purdue pleaded guilty to an Information charging it with three felony offenses: one count of dual-object conspiracy to defraud the United States and to violate the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, and two counts of conspiracy to violate the Federal Anti-Kickback Statute," the release said on Tuesday.

For more than two decades, Purdue marketed its synthetic opioid product Oxycontin as a pain reliever, despite knowing the drugs were likely being diverted to drug abusers, the release said. Purdue also admitted conspiring with an electronic medical records company to promote its opioids to doctors, the release also said.

The US opioid overdose crisis peaked in 2017 with about 45,000 opioid-related overdose deaths followed by a small decline the following year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tuesday's admission of guilt follows a deal with prosecutors announced in October that includes one of the largest penalties ever levied against a pharmaceutical manufacturer, including a criminal fine of \$3.54 billion and an additional \$2 billion forfeiture penalty, the release said.

In addition, the plea bargain requires dissolution of the company while leaving owners and former officials liable for additional criminal charges and lawsuits by individual states, according to the release.

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CDC Looking to Shorten Quarantine for Potential Exposure to Coronavirus - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) may soon shorten the length of time it recommends that a person self-quarantine after potential exposure to the novel coronavirus in the hope it will encourage more people to comply, the Wall Street Journal reported.

"CDC officials are finalizing recommendations for a new quarantine period that would likely be between seven and ten days and include a test to ensure a person is negative for COVID-19," the CDC COVID-19 incident manager Henry Walke was quoted as saying in the report on Tuesday.

Walke said CDC officials are also discussing the exact time period and what type of test a person would be given to exit quarantine.

"We do think that the work that we've done, and some of the studies we have and the modeling data that we have, shows that we can with testing shorten quarantines," Walke said.

If a test comes back negative, he added, "then their probability of going on and developing an infection after that is pretty low."

The CDC advised people not to travel for the annual US Thanksgiving holiday this Thursday and celebrate with family members at home and use virtual means to reach out to others.

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White House Authorizes President's Daily Briefing for Biden - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The White House has authorized projected President-elect Joe Biden to receive the President's Daily Briefing, CNN reported citing an administration official.

"The White House has given formal approval for President-elect Joe Biden to receive the President's Daily Briefing... Coordination on when he'll receive his first one is underway currently," the report said on Tuesday.

The report described the President's Daily Briefing as a daily rundown of threats and intelligence developments compiled by the national security community.

On Monday, US President Donald Trump authorized the General Services Administration (GSA) to initiate a formal transition for the Biden team while continuing to dispute the election result in court and saying will not concede to election fraud.

Biden's transition team is now talking to all federal agencies about a transfer of powers, according to the report.

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YouTube Suspends US Media Network OANN Over Alleged COVID-19 Misinformation - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - YouTube on Tuesday suspended One America News Network (OANN) from uploading content for a week for allegedly spreading misinformation about the novel coronavirus and demonetized the media outlet, CNBC reported.

"After careful review, we removed a video from OANN and issued a strike on the channel for violating our COVID-19 misinformation policy, which prohibits content claiming there's a guaranteed cure," the report quoted a YouTube spokesperson as saying.

YouTube also suspended OANN's participation in its monetization program.

It is unclear what specifically OANN's video said about a COVID-19 cure that made YouTube decide to suspend the channel, according to CNBC.

Media outlets supportive of US President Donald Trump routinely accuse popular social platforms - including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter - of censoring their content.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik)

US POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

* Presumed President-elect Joe Biden said during a press conference on Tuesday that his cabinet will maintain US security without engaging in unnecessary wars.

* Biden's pick for the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, announced on that multilateral diplomacy is coming back with the expected change of administrations in the United States.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot congratulate victory to a new US president while the vote count is continuing and recounts are taking place in some states, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Biden has declared the US national election process to be completed following the official certification of his victory in several key battleground states and called for the American people to come together in unity in a statement.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

* Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the ceasefire in Karabakh in two separate phone calls with his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the Kremlin said Tuesday.

* Turkey is still working on mechanisms for control of ceasefire in Karabakh and expects there to be patrols between the observation points, Turkish Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar said.

* The situation in Karabakh is stabilizing, Russian peacekeepers are ensuring security of civilians, Putin said.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, discussed the implementation of the agreements on Nagorno-Karabakh by phone, the Kremlin said in a statement on Tuesday.

* Erdogan, in a phone conversation with Putin, spoke in favor of cooperation between Turkey and Russia to maintain the unity and integrity of Libya, the Turkish leader's office said.

* Erdogan and Putin discussed by phone the creation of a center to monitor the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Turkish leader's administration said.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

* Participants in the pledging conference for Afghanistan committed over \$3 billion in funding for the next year, and expect annual commitments at about the same level through 2024, Finnish minister for development cooperation and foreign trade, Ville Skinnari, said on Tuesday at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference.

* Participants in the pledging conference for Afghanistan called for full ceasefire in the country, and full respect of International Humanitarian Law, according to their final communique.

* Participants in the Afghanistan pledging conference call on the international community to continue supporting Afghanistan financially, according to the conference's final communique.

* The United States will provide \$600 million for civilian assistance in Afghanistan next year but half of those funds will depend on progress made in peace talks, Under Secretary of State David Hale said.

* The United Kingdom is pledging up to 155 million pounds (\$207 million) of development funding to Afghanistan for the next year, UK Minister of State for South Asia and Commonwealth Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said.

OIL PRICES SPIKE

* Global oil markets continue rally, and WTI crude topped \$45 per barrel for the first time since March 6.

* Global oil prices accelerated continued rally as trading opened in the United States, and the price of Brent crude exceeded \$47 per barrel for the first time since March 6.

CHILDREN HOSTAGES IN ST. PETERSBURG

* A man has taken six children hostage in the suburbs of Russia's St. Petersburg, a source in the law enforcement agencies told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* A man who took his six children hostage in St. Petersburg's Kolpino district has surrendered to the authorities, the children are unharmed, a representative of the law enforcement agencies told reporters.

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Pentagon Says Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Deal Appears to Be Holding

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The Russian-sponsored peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia is functioning at the present moment, US Defense Department spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman told reporters on Tuesday.

"There is a peace agreement in place right now - between Azerbaijan and Armenia - and it appears to be holding at the current point," Hoffman said.

On November 10, the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh after weeks of hostilities in the area. Under the agreement, brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Baku regained control of the territories seized during the recent hostilities, while Russia deployed its peacekeepers along the line of contact and in the Lachin Corridor.

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Pentagon, Biden Teams Start Discussions on Transition - Official

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Pentagon officials and President-elect Joe Biden's team have started discussions on the transition process, the head of the Department of Defense transition team Thomas Muir told reporters on Tuesday.

On Monday, General Services Administration Administrator Emily Murphy in a letter to Biden said she had determined his transition team could now access post-election resources and services. Murphy said she made her decision independently and was never pressured by any White House officials to delay her decision.

"First meeting today was by videoconference. Good productive meeting," Muir said during a press briefing, noting that both sides exchanged emails a night before.

The two teams were able to lay out ground rules, and the Biden side agreed with the protection measures Pentagon has in order to contain COVID-19, he added.

"I am providing a small tour on Monday next week," Muir said.

The Biden team will be provided an office space, while Pentagon plans to organize a number of operational and other briefings, he added.

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US Court Dismisses Lawsuit Against FBI Agent Over Killing of Tsarnaev's Friend

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - A US court dismissed an excessive force lawsuit filed by the family of Ibragim Todashev against FBI agent Aaron McFarlane who shot him dead while investigating the 2013 Boston marathon bombings, court documents showed on Tuesday.

Todashev was a friend of suspected Boston marathon bomber Dzhokar Tsarnaev. On May 22, 2013, FBI agent Aaron McFarlane fatally shot Ibragim Todashev during a police interview in connection with the Boston Marathon bombings and a triple homicide in Waltham, Massachusetts in 2011.

"Individual Federal Defendant McFarlane's Motion to Dismiss... is granted," US District Judge Carlos Mendoza said in the ruling.

He cited earlier court decisions on the case in favor of the United States and McFarlane.

McFarlane was cleared of any criminal wrongdoing after a Florida prosecutor and the US Justice Department ruled separately that the FBI agent acted in self-defense. Dzhokar Tsarnaev's older brother Tamerlan was killed in a gunfight with police four days after the bombings.

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UPDATE - US Envoy Discussed Nagorno-Karabakh With Armenian Foreign Minister - State Dept.

WASHINGTON/ YEREVAN, November 24 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun and Armenian Foreign Minister Ara Aytvazyan discussed the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict among other matters, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Tuesday.

"Deputy Secretary Biegun welcomed Foreign Minister Aytvazyan to his new position and expressed hope for continued close US-Armenia cooperation," Brown said in a statement after the call. "They discussed US humanitarian assistance to the region and efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict."

The Armenian Foreign Ministry, in turn, said that Aytvazyan had emphasized the importance of ensuring proper conditions for the return of Karabakh refugees to their homeland, as well as restoration and observance of their rights.

"The sides exchanged views on the steps taken to avert the humanitarian crisis in Artsakh [Karabakh], which was the result of the Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression. In this context, Minister Aytvazyan expressed gratitude for the support provided by the American side, stressing the need to involve relevant international structures on the ground," the ministry said in a statement. The officials, according to Yerevan, also discussed the significance of close cooperation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs — the United States, Russia and France — for the full protection of the rights of those affected by the conflict.

On November 10, the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh after weeks of hostilities in the area. Under the agreement, brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Baku regained control of the territories seized during the recent hostilities, while Russia deployed its peacekeepers along the line of contact and in the Lachin Corridor.

Turkey had consistently backed Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia. Shortly after the November 10 ceasefire, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Russia and Turkey had inked a memorandum on a ceasefire monitoring center in Karabakh. According to the Kremlin, Moscow and Ankara will be cooperating on the Karabakh truce via this center.

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Biden to Name White House Climate Policy Coordinator to Support Envoy Kerry

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The incoming US administration will have a climate policy-making structure and coordinator whose efforts will complement activities of the presidential envoy on the matter, projected President-elect Joe Biden announced on Tuesday. "For the first time ever we will have a presidential envoy on climate. He will be matched with high-level White House climate policy coordinator and policy-making structure to be announced in December," Biden said during a press event in his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. The structure, according to him, will lead efforts in the United States to combat the climate crisis and mobilize action to meet the existential threat.

Biden earlier announced that he has chosen former Secretary of State John Kerry for the position of the presidential envoy on climate. Projected President-elect described the job as "a full-time climate leader."

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Biden's Climate Envoy Kerry Says Paris Accord 'Not Enough' to End Crisis

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The international community must raise its ambition in fighting global environmental problems because the Paris Agreement alone cannot end the crisis, former US Secretary of State and newly-appointed Biden administration climate envoy, John Kerry, said on Tuesday.

"To end this crisis, the whole world must come together," Kerry said at a press conference. "You are right to rejoin Paris [Accord] in day one and you are right to recognize that Paris alone is not enough. At the global meeting in Glasgow one year from now all nations must raise ambition together or we will all fail together, and failure is not an option."

Glasgow is set to host the UN climate change conference in November 2021 after being delayed by one year due to the pandemic.

In 2017, President Donald Trump announced that the US was exiting the UN-brokered Paris climate agreement, a move that took effect on November 4, a day after the presidential election, which saw Trump lose to Biden. The president-elect promised to recommit the US to the pact, among many of his climate change initiatives.

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Biden NSA Pick Pledges to Reimagine US National Security to Address Unprecedented Crises

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Jake Sullivan, who is projected US President-elect Joe Biden's pick for National Security Advisor, pledged on Tuesday to work on re-imagining US national security to address the unprecedented domestic and global crises.

"You have... tasked us with reimagining our national security for the unprecedented combination of crises we face at home and abroad - the pandemic, the economic crisis, the climate crisis, technological disruption, threats to democracy, racial injustice and inequality in all forms," Sullivan said.

Sullivan made the comments during a presentation of Biden's nominees for top foreign policy and national security positions in what is expected to be the new administration.

"The work of the team behind me today will contribute to progress across all of these fronts," he said.

Sullivan, who served as National Security Advisor to Biden during his tenure as Vice-President during the Obama administration, also promised to remain vigilant in the face of enduring threats - from nuclear threats to terrorism.

Sullivan said Biden's national security team will be vigilant when confronting threats from nuclear weapons to terrorism.

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Biden Says His Cabinet Will Keep US Safe Without Engaging in 'Needless' Military Conflicts

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden during a press conference on Tuesday said his cabinet will maintain US security without engaging in unnecessary wars.

"This team behind me, they embody my core beliefs that America is strongest when it works with its allies. Collectively this team has secured some of the most defining national security and diplomatic achievements in recent memory made possible through decades of experience working with our partners, that's how we truly keep America safe without engaging in needless military conflicts," Biden said.

Biden has selected Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State and Avril Haines to be Director of National Intelligence.

The president-elect has also chosen Alejandro Mayorkas to lead the Department of Homeland Security and Jake Sullivan to be his National Security Adviser.

Biden's transition team is set to begin meeting with US federal officials in the next few days after the General Services Administration granted permission to the former vice president and his running mate Kamala Harris to do so.

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Michigan Investigating Threats Against Election Officials - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The state of Michigan has launched a probe into threats made against officials involved in conducting the November 3 residential election, state Attorney General Dana Nessel said in a statement on Tuesday.

"We will investigate any credible complaints of threats to government officials, elected or appointed, and will prosecute criminal conduct to the fullest extent of the law," Nessel said. "And while many of us have been subjected to hateful and often obscene insults, threats of violence and harm will not be tolerated."

Nessel confirmed that her department was actively investigating threats made against members of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers.

Nessel's Criminal Investigations Division initiated its investigation shortly after last week's Board of Canvassers meeting, the Michigan Attorney General's office confirmed.

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Biden's Pick for UN Ambassador Announces Multilateralism, Diplomacy Coming Back

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden's pick for the US Ambassador to the United Nations post, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, announced on Tuesday that multilateral diplomacy is coming back with the expected change of administrations in the United States.

"America is back, multilateralism is back, diplomacy is back," Thomas-Greenfield said after being nominated during a press event at Biden's hometown of Wilmington, Delaware.

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US Charges 156 in Washington, DC Violent Demonstrations - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Months of anti- government demonstrations and riots in the US capital resulted in criminal charges in more than 156 cases for acts of violence, including an attack on police protecting Senator Rand Paul while walking from the White House, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"These cases include Brennan Sermon, who was charged with assaulting a police officer who was responding to assist officers protecting Senator Rand Paul on August 28, 2020; six people who were charged for their role in inciting violence and destroying federal monuments in Lafayette Square on June 22, 2020; and 20 people who have been charged with assaults on civilians and police officers," the release said.

Paul was attacked while walking with his wife from the White House after listening to President Donald Trump's closing remarks to the Republican National Convention, according to video images that showed the lawmaker being escorted by police through an angry crowd.

City police in conjunction with federal law enforcement partners also continue to investigate demonstrations to determine whether an organized architecture was behind the violence in recent months, the release said.

The 156 individuals arrested marked the highest number of people charged in any federal district of the United States for recent protest violence, the release added.

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Russia's Unity Foundation to Hold Space Arts Session for Zambian Cancer Patients

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Russia's Unity Foundation with the support of state agency Rosstrudnichestvo and State Space Corporation Roscosmos will hold a space arts therapy session for Zambian pediatric oncology patients on Wednesday.

The project which unites more than 40 countries will visit Zambia for the first time.

During the art therapy session, which will be hosted by University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka, Zambian cancer patients will be tasked to paint their dreams onto individual rubberized material pieces.

These segments then will be stitched together alongside hundreds of similar segments by Russian spaceflight manufacturer and space suit designer NPP Zvezda into a cover for the Russian Orlan space suit. The idea behind the project is that when kids' dreams reach the International Space Station (ISS), they will come true.

Kids will be able to dream together with the Russian cosmonauts who sent the video address from the ISS and Nicole Stott, the astronaut, artist and the Founder of Space for Art Foundation, USA.

The art therapy session is part of the Space Suit Art Project, a global initiative that has allowed children in pediatric oncology centers around the world to interact with astronauts and send them colorful, hand-painted suits to wear aboard the ISS.

This time, Spacesuit Art Project will spearhead the production of the next spacesuits DREAMER and BEYOND, which are expected to be launched to the ISS in 2021. Dreamer spacesuit is planned to be sent to the ISS by Roscosmos in February.

The Dreamer spacesuit was initiated 2 years ago by Unity Foundation (Russia) in continuous collaboration with Space for Art Foundation supported by Roscosmos and so far Dreamer spacesuit visited 7 countries (Switzerland, Russia, The UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Armenia) and 15 cities. Zambia will participate in the project for the first time and will become the 8th country and Lusaka will be the 16th city.

The project aims to creatively raise awareness about children's cancer while simultaneously giving children around the world a unified platform, encouraging them to dream, to explore, and to have courage in their journeys. Art creates community, letting patients to indirectly connect to others with similar stories internationally.

Alena Kuzmenko, the founder and president of Russia's Unity Foundation told Sputnik that holding such events bears special significance amid the raging pandemic.

"Such kind art projects uniting countries and continents are even more important in the times of pandemic where we feel isolated and it is much harder for the kids with cancer having treatment," Kuzmenko stressed. "At the same time while arranging the art sessions during the Covid pandemic we are very serious about taking all necessary measures to ensure safety of the kids we work with."

Alexander Anisimov, head of the representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo in Zambia, told Sputnik, that the agency welcomes such projects and always stands ready to support them. "We are always happy to support international humanitarian project initiated in Russia. Spacesuit Art project is a great example of international cooperation for the good cause," he said.

Space Suit Art Project was launched in the United States 5 years ago by the artist Ian Cion and the astronaut and the artist Nicole Stott. Currently the project is developed globally by Space for Art Foundation (USA) and Unity Foundation (Russia) with the support of Roscosmos and NASA. Since the beginning of the project 5 spacesuits have been made and every spacesuit has its symbolic name: Hope, Courage, Unity, Victory, Exploration. Three of them has been at the International Space Station.

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Biden Says His Cabinet Will Keep US Safe Without Engaging in 'Needless' Military Conflicts

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden during a press conference on Tuesday said his cabinet will maintain US security without engaging in unnecessary wars. "This team behind me, they embody my core beliefs that America is strongest when it works with its allies. Collectively this team has secured some of the most defining national security and diplomatic achievements in recent memory made possible through decades of experience working with our partners, that's how we truly keep America safe without engaging in needless military conflicts," Biden said.

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Trade Group Seeks Routine Virus Tests of Arriving Int'l Travelers to Save Global Aviation

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Systematic coronavirus testing of airline passengers would allow governments to manage the pandemic without border closures and quarantine measures that threaten to destroy global aviation and 46 million related jobs the industry supports, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) recommended following a unanimous vote at the group's annual meeting on Tuesday.

"Quarantines essentially kill demand for air travel and governments need to immediately consider the drastic socio-economic effect this is having. International air travel continues to be down 90 percent on 2019 levels. Current estimates are that as many as 46 million jobs supported by air travel could be lost and that the economic activity sustained by aviation will be reduced by US \$1.8 trillion," the IATA said in a press release.

Many countries require arriving passengers to isolate for two weeks, with some nations essentially placing travelers under a form of house arrest in hotel rooms.

The IATA also recommended prioritization of aviation staff and international travelers to receive coronavirus vaccinations.

"We must manage how we live with the virus. But that does not have to mean destroying aviation, risking millions of jobs, crippling economies and tearing apart the international social fabric," IATA Director General Alexandre de Juniac said in the release.

Data collected from airline passengers thus far indicates that air travel is relatively safe. For example, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report earlier in November estimated the odds of catching coronavirus in a two-hour domestic flight with a full cabin at one in 3,900 and one in 6,400 when middle seats are kept empty.

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Trump Extends Sanctions on Nicaraguan Officials Over Corruption, Human Rights Abuses

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The US government has extended sanctions for another year targeting any Nicaraguan officials involved with corruption and human rights abuses, President Donald Trump announced on Tuesday.

"The situation in Nicaragua, including the violent response by the Government of Nicaragua to the protests that began on April 18, 2018, and the Ortega regime's systematic dismantling and undermining of democratic institutions and the rule of law, its use of indiscriminate violence and repressive tactics against civilians, as well as its corruption leading to the destabilization of Nicaragua's economy, continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," Trump said in a letter to the heads of the US House and Senate. "For this reason, I have determined that it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13851 with respect to the situation in Nicaragua."

Executive Order 13851 blocks property of Nicaraguan officials involved in human rights abuses or undermining of democracy.

The 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) allows US presidents to invoke emergency authorities to take immediate actions without congressional approval, including imposing economic sanctions - a popular foreign policy and national security tool for many administrations.

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Nevada Supreme Court Certifies Biden's Election Victory - Chief Justice

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The Nevada Supreme Court on Tuesday certified Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's win in the 2020 US presidential election in battleground state, Chief Justice Kristina Pickering said during a meeting.

"The 2020 vote canvass for the Nevada general election is completed," Pickering said.

Earlier on Tuesday, the battleground state of Pennsylvania certified its election results and the battleground state of Michigan certified its results on Monday.

President Donald Trump has sought recounts in several states and has filed lawsuits in state and federal courts, saying only legal votes should be counted and illegal votes should be discarded. Some states have said they found no evidence of substantial fraud and irregularities.

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Trump Congratulates US Public for Stock Market Record, Vaccine Development

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a press briefing on Tuesday thanked his administration and the US public for the Dow Jones Industrial Average index crossing a historic 30,000 point level for the first time and for the development of the coronavirus vaccine.

"I'm very thrilled with what's happened on the vaccine front, it's been absolutely incredible," Trump said. "The stock market has just broken 30,000, never been broken that number, that's a sacred number. I just want to congratulate all the people within the administration, they work so hard, and most importantly I want to thank the people of our country because there are no people like you."

Trump concluded his brief remarks without taking any questions from the press.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average exceeded 30,000 points for the first time based on optimism regarding the coronavirus vaccine trials and the White House's consent to the transition of presumed President-elect Joe Biden.

The Dow was up 1.4 percent at 30,012 points on the New York Stock Exchange at 11:41 a.m. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, also rose 1.4 percent to 3,628. The Nasdaq Composite Index, which counts on the performance of US tech stock giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, rose almost 1 percent to 11,992.

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US Health Secretary Says Staffers in Touch with Biden Transition Team

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - US Health Secretary Alex Azar told reporters on Tuesday that his staffers are in contact with President-elect Joe Biden's team to ensure a professional and cooperative transition.

"Consistent with the GSA administrator ascertainment yesterday, last night, our top career official, Rear Admiral [Erica] Schwartz, who has been leading our transition planning efforts, was last night in communication with the Biden's transition team," Azar announced during a press conference. "We will ensure coordinated briefings with them to ensure they are getting whatever information that they feel they need."

On Monday, the US General Services Administration initiated the transition process by allowing Biden's team to access key resources and services. President Donald Trump, although he still refuses to concede, after the announcement said he recommended the move to get what needs to be done with regard to initial protocols.

Azar reiterated his "firm commitment" to make the transition planning and execution "professional, cooperative and collaborative in the best spirit of looking after the health and well-being of the American people and in particular saving lives through this COVID-19 pandemic."

COVID-19 cases have surged throughout the US in recent weeks, hitting several all-time daily highs, with more than 12.4 million now recorded overall along with over 258,000 related deaths.

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Nevada Supreme Court Certifies Biden's Election Victory - Chief Justice

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"The 2020 vote canvass for the Nevada general election is completed," Pickering said.

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Amazon Partners With US Government in Crackdown of Counterfeit Imports - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The US government's National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center (IPR Center) announced a joint effort with the online retailer Amazon to block imports of counterfeit products, the IPR Center said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Our efforts are increased with partners like Amazon to identify, interdict, and investigate individuals, companies, and criminal organizations engaging in the illegal importation of counterfeit products. This joint operation is our latest public-private initiative bringing us one step closer to border security," IPR Director Steve Francis said in the release.

The operation will analyze data and conduct targeted inspections aimed at preventing counterfeit products from entering the US supply chain, the release said.

The IPR Center and Amazon will leverage evidence obtained during the operation to expand on-going investigations, with the goal of holding bad actors accountable, the release added. Amazon's Counterfeit Crimes Unit will coordinate the effort. The unit was created earlier this year to support law enforcement investigations and to initiate civil litigation against counterfeiters, according to the release.

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US to Provide \$600Mln for Civilian Assistance in Afghanistan in 2021 - Hale

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide \$600 million for civilian assistance in Afghanistan next year but half of those funds will depend on progress made in peace talks, Under Secretary of State David Hale said on Tuesday.

"We stand ready to support Afghanistan, and to that end we have made available \$600 million for civilian assistance needs in 2021," Hale said during a United Nations conference on Afghanistan.

The United States is pledging at present \$300 million of the total sum with the remaining funds to be available as it reviews progress in the intra-Afghan peace process, he added.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed in a videotaped message to the conference the United States' commitment to peace process in Afghanistan. Pompeo urged all countries and organizations to help maintain the previously declared goals, such as Kabul's adherence to the rule of law and respect for its international obligations.

Pompeo also called on Afghan government to do its part to implement security and stability in the country.

"The choices made in peace negotiations will affect the size and scope of future international support and assistance," Pompeo said, adding that the United States looks forward to reviewing progress in one year's time.

The intra-Afghan talks began in September after the Taliban reached a peace agreement with the United States in February. According to the agreement, the United States will withdraw its

troops from Afghanistan, provided that the Taliban stops using Afghan territory for attacks on the United States, its interests and allies.

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REVIEW - COVID-19 Takes Disproportionate Toll on Small, Minority-Owned Businesses in US

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - US small businesses, especially those owned by Blacks and Hispanics, have been hit hardest by the pandemic with no end in sight despite billions of dollars in government stimulus loans.

Last week, US Democratic congressional leaders met with President-elect Joe Biden at his home in the state of Delaware to discuss the need to pass new COVID-19 legislation, including relief for small businesses. US lawmakers failed to strike a compromise on a new COVID-19 stimulus package before breaking for the Thanksgiving holiday.

STIMULUS FALLS SHORT

The US Treasury Department's Small Business Administration agency has approved more than \$525 billion in Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans that were part of a \$2.2 trillion stimulus package Congress passed earlier in the year. However, many small businesses still proved incapable of weathering the COVID-19 economic lockdowns as the pandemic grew worse.

On multiple occasions in the past couple weeks, the US hit new all-time daily highs in COVID-19 case counts, with more than 12 million recorded overall including nearly 257,000 related deaths. Attempts to contain the spread have included mandatory shutdowns of nonessential businesses and advisories calling for social distancing and other measures.

Hundreds of companies that received PPP stimulus loans have filed for bankruptcy, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of government data and court filings published on November 17. And it appears this trend will not stop anytime soon, especially among minority run shops.

Some 44% of minority-owned small businesses nationwide could not afford to make the November rent payment - 12 percent more than nonminority-owned companies - an Alignable poll revealed earlier this month.

Xiomara Pena, vice president of engagement at the Small Business Majority advocacy group, said 1 in 3 small business owners and 41 percent of Black-owned businesses will not make it in the next three months without assistance from the federal government.

"Well, we're going on nine months, and it's fair to say many small businesses are struggling. Black and Latin small business owners have been disproportionately affected," Pena told Sputnik. "They are considerably higher closings in these two groups and consumer spending has affected revenue."

Pena said the uncertainty is absolutely impacting people's ability to plan.

"There are increased costs needed to operate in a COVID world. Consumer spending is not necessarily keeping businesses afloat and operating with very thin pocket margins is devastating," Pena said.

Pena said those involved in the hospitality, personal service and food and beverage industries have been hardest hit by coronavirus, and she expects many businesses will continue cutting back operations.

Meanwhile, unemployment is widespread with two-thirds of hourly small business employees not working. Pena said as the country moves into a long winter, business owners need additional support.

"Small businesses are economically important and are major job creators. There needs to be stability for a smooth recovery process. There have been some grant programs to help people get capital, but the need is great," she said.

One way entrepreneurs are weathering the storm is to adjust to the COVID headwinds by going online. However, "brick and mortar" businesses have found it more difficult to pivot, Pena said.

ADAPT OR DIE

Some small businesses have been fortunate enough to survive, largely due to adapting to conditions, although many in-person service companies are struggling to adjust. Black-owned Rejuve Rejuvenation Suites in Chicago, which provides tools around mindfulness and taking care of one's mental health, is one such business that relies on the physical presence of patrons.

The owner, Florence Hardy, said Rejuve is a studio available to anyone who needs a place to rest if, for example, they have checked out of their hotel but have some hours to kill before going to the airport. Rejuve also provides space for those seeking to sit still and meditate. Hardy, a serial entrepreneur and lawyer by trade, said she positioned her business on the "Miracle Mile," a prime-time strip in downtown Chicago near Lake Shore Drive, because there is an estimated 10,000 office workers in a one-mile radius. However, with the reemergence of another COVID-19 wave, her business has faltered.

"I thought it would be for a short while and figured it could pick up... It's stressful," Hardy told Sputnik. "Of course, it is sort of fearful because you don't know how it [COVID-19] is or works. I am having to make difficult decisions about the product, mail and ordering."

Hardy said Rejuve, which is located in a high-end mall, was damaged in the looting that occurred in Chicago after police officers shot and injured a young Black man. This required Hardy to shut down even longer.

To stay afloat, she launched the "Best Rest Box," a combination of four products which create restful and relaxing environments for customers along with virtual resources.

Fifth-degree Black Belt Master Renard Beaty is another business owner who has been forced to embrace change.

"I had to adjust fast," said Beaty, owner of Kickstart Martial Arts near Grant Park in Atlanta, Georgia. "I had to handle Public Relations, downsize and get ready for re-opening. I had to invest in upgrading the WiFi, hire staff and we handled teaching and screening."

Beaty said the revenue his business generated lasted for the first two months of the pandemic.

"Now I'm back to where I was pre-COVID," he told Sputnik. "If people don't get help or make money, I lose because this is discretionary income they're using."

Beaty said he has concerns about securing funding to remain solvent. With three employees, he has been holding online classes and has seen the membership of his martial arts business decline.

He applied for both PPP and an Employee Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL). He received \$3,000 through EIDL, which is significantly less than the \$10,000 he needed. Beaty said PPP funds allowed him to have some "breathing room" to keep his business operational for another eight months.

However, Beaty said he is not yet out of danger and has had problems paying the rent. At least Beaty can tap into martial arts in dealing with the problem mentally to get through what might be a long and hard winter.

"There is a certain technique called 'easy mind' when sparring. You don't anticipate or guess. You don't overthink it. It has taught me to be calm, to relax, to figure things out," Beaty said.

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Russian Envoy to Washington Says Latest US Sanctions 'Illegitimate,' 'Discriminatory'

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Tuesday that the latest round of US sanctions against Russian entities is illegitimate and discriminatory and does not contribute to normalizing bilateral relations.

"This is another discriminatory step by Washington using sanctions as a key instrument to pursue its foreign policy goals," Antonov said. "Obviously, such a counterproductive approach does not contribute to the normalization of Russia-US relations."

Earlier on Tuesday, the State Department said the United States has applied penalties against three Russian and two Chinese companies for alleged violations of its restrictions on dealings with Iran, North Korea or Syria that may assist these countries in developing weapons of mass destruction or missile systems.

The sanctions activated on November 6 target Russia's Aviazapchast, Joint Stock Company Elecon and Nilco Group as well as China's Chengdu Best New Materials Co Ltd. and Zibo Elim Trade Company, Ltd. The US government is prohibited from any sales, procurements or assistance to these entities, their subsidiaries or successors for the duration of two years. Antonov said the US unilateral actions seek to undermine the economic potential of Russia's companies and are illegitimate.

"Actions like that are illegitimate, because no country has a right to constrain Russian trade and investment relations with other members of the international community," Antonov said. "We call on our US partners to renounce the flawed practice of groundless accusations. We believe that political and diplomatic measures should be used instead of threats and blackmail."

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US Envoy Discussed Nagorno-Karabakh With Armenian Foreign Minister - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun and Armenian Foreign Minister Ara Ayvazyan discussed settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict among other matters, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Tuesday. "Deputy Secretary Biegun welcomed Foreign Minister Ayvazyan to his new position and expressed hope for continued close US-Armenia cooperation," Brown said in a statement after the call. "They discussed US humanitarian assistance to the region and efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict."

On November 10, the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh after weeks of hostilities in the area. Under the agreement, brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Baku regained control of the territories seized during the recent hostilities, while Russia deployed its peacekeepers along the line of contact and in the Lachin Corridor.

Turkey had consistently backed Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia. Shortly after the November 10 ceasefire, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Russia and Turkey had inked a memorandum on a ceasefire monitoring center in Karabakh. According to the Kremlin, Moscow and Ankara will be cooperating on the Karabakh truce via this center.

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US Remains Committed to Cooperation With Afghanistan Despite Troop Withdrawal - Hale

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The United States confirms its commitment to partner with Afghanistan despite its decision to withdraw troops from that country, Under Secretary of State David Hale said on Tuesday.

"America remains committed to cooperation with Afghanistan," Hale said during a United Nations conference.

Hale also said the United States expects to see an "immediate reduction" in violence in Afghanistan.

The US Under Secretary of State noted that the Afghan government and the Taliban movement have made significant progress in the intra-Afghan negotiations.

"If leaders on all sides are ready to move ahead, this will put them one step closer to realizing the vision of the sovereign and unified Afghanistan," Hale said.

The intra-Afghan talks began in September after the Taliban reached a peace agreement with the United States in February.

According to the agreement, the United States will withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, provided that the Taliban stops using Afghan territory for attacks on the United States, its interests and allies.

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US State of Pennsylvania Certifies Biden as Winner in Presidential Election - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Pennsylvania has certified its election results and declared Democratic nominee Joe Biden as the winner of the November 3 US presidential election in the state, giving him 20 electoral college votes, Governor Tom Wolf said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today [the Pennsylvania State Department] certified the results of the November 3 election in Pennsylvania for president and vice president of the United States," Wolf said via Twitter. "As required by federal law, I've signed the Certificate of Ascertainment for the slate of electors for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris."

Biden defeated President Donald Trump by 80,555 votes in the battleground state, according to the final tally from the Pennsylvania Secretary of State. The data shows Biden had 3,458,229 votes while Trump received 3,377,674 votes.

State officials in Michigan, another key battleground state where Trump challenged the results, certified the election results on Monday.

Trump has said he won the election but victory was snatched from him via massive fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in several states and filed lawsuits in state and federal courts, saying only legal votes should be counted and illegal votes should be discarded. Some states have said they found no evidence of substantial fraud and irregularities.

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Biden Declares US Presidential Election 'Over', Calls for Unity

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Presumptive President-Elect Joe Biden has declared the US national election process to be completed following the official certification of his victory in several key battleground states and called for the American people to come together in unity in a statement on Tuesday.

"The election is over," Biden said. "It's time to put aside the partisanship and the rhetoric designed to demonize one another. We have to come together."

Incumbent President Donald Trump has said he won the election and will not concede defeat, adding that his legal team continues to launch challenges in courts.

Biden's transition team is set to begin meeting with US federal officials and conduct other meetings in the next few days after the General Services Administration has allowed Biden himself and his running mate Kamala Harris to do so, the transition team said also on Tuesday.

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US to Provide \$600Mln for Civilian Assistance in Afghanistan in 2021 - Hale

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide \$600 million for civilian assistance in Afghanistan next year but half of those funds will depend on progress made in peace talks, Under Secretary of State David Hale said on Tuesday.

"We stand ready to support Afghanistan, and to that end we have made available \$600 million for civilian assistance needs in 2021," Hale said during a United Nations conference on Afghanistan.

The United States is pledging at present \$300 million of the total sum with the remaining funds available as it reviews progress in the peace process, he added.

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US State of Pennsylvania Certifies Biden as Winner in Election - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - Pennsylvania has certified its election results and declared projected President-elect Joe Biden as the winner of the November election in the state, giving him all 20 of its electoral college votes, Governor Tom Wolf said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today [Pennsylvania State Department] certified the results of the November 3 election in Pennsylvania for president and vice president of the United States," Wolf said via Twitter. "As required by federal law, I've signed the Certificate of Ascertainment for the slate of electors for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris."

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US Applied Nonproliferation-Related Penalties on 3 Russian, 3 Chinese Firms - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has applied penalties against three Russian and two Chinese companies for alleged violations of its restrictions on dealings with

Iran, North Korea or Syria that may assist these countries in developing weapons of mass destruction or missile systems, the US State Department said in a notice on Tuesday. Sanctions that were activated on November 6 target Russia's Aviazapchast, Joint Stock Company Elecon and Nilco Group as well as China's Chengdu Best New Materials Co Ltd. and Zibo Elim Trade Company, Ltd. The US government is prohibited from any sales, procurements or assistance to these entities, their subsidiaries or successors for the duration of two years. "On November 6, 2020, the US government applied the measures authorized in Section 3 of the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (Pub. L. 109-353) against the following foreign persons identified in the report submitted pursuant to Section 2(a) of the Act," the notice said. The State Department explained the Act provides for penalties on foreign entities and individuals for the transfer to or acquisition from Iran, Syria and North Korea of goods, services, or technology controlled under multilateral controlled lists or otherwise having the potential to make a material contribution to the development of weapons of mass destruction or cruise or ballistic missile systems.

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Trump Election-Result Legal Challenge Continues Despite Allowing Biden Transition to Begin

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump said that the General Services Administration (GSA), which authorized the onset of a formal transition to a Biden administration, said the GSA does not determine the outcome of the US presidential election and his campaign's legal challenges of the election results continue.

"Remember, the GSA has been terrific, and [Administrator] Emily Murphy has done a great job, but the GSA does not determine who the next President of the United States will be," Trump said in a Twitter statement on Tuesday.

On Monday, Murphy authorized the release of millions of dollars in official funds to back the transition to the Biden administration after Trump reportedly dropped objections to the move. The decision also allows Biden to coordinate with current federal government officials. At the same time, Trump insisted that he will never concede "to fake ballots and Dominion" and said his team is moving "full speed ahead" with the legal challenges against vote tallies in key battleground states.

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US, Kuwait Sign MOU to Boost Biological Research Cooperation, Data Sharing - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and Kuwait have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on expanding collaboration on biological research and data sharing, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced on Tuesday.

"During that dialogue just now we signed an MOU to increase our cooperation in areas like biomedical research and information sharing," Pompeo said.

The secretary of state said the two countries also finalized another MOU between the Kuwait Fund and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

"Thanks to that agreement, we'll coordinate on assistance on everything from energy to food security as well," Pompeo said.

Pompeo made the announcement during the joint press availability with his Kuwaiti counterpart Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohamed Al-Sabah in Washington. The two leaders are meeting on Tuesday to discuss cooperation after the United States and Kuwait held a new round of bilateral Strategic Dialogue.

the Strategic Dialogue started two weeks ago in virtual format.

Over the last two weeks the two sides discussed cooperation in the fields of politics, human rights, education, science, security, defense, trade and other areas, according to the State Department's release issued earlier this month.

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Rising US Hate Crimes During Trump Admin. Reflects Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric - Report

WASHINGTON, November 24 (Sputnik) - A toxic environment created by Trump administration policies characterized by President Donald Trump's vilification of immigrants, led to a spike in killings linked to hate crimes, the Soufan Group said in a report on Tuesday.

"The FBI Hate Crime Statistics for 2019 showed at least 51 hate-crime killings last year, the most ever since the data has been tracked. A significant rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes was also prevalent in 2019, up 14% over 2018, as part of a rising tide of overt violent extremism," the report said.

The report cited "racist and ugly rhetoric" espoused by President Donald Trump and reinforced and often championed by some of his supporters, in which immigrants were compared to invaders, criminals and parasites, for creating a dystopian environment of intimidation and fear. "Within this toxic environment, hate crimes have spiked. Such crimes have always been an ugly part of American society, but now there is a public embrace of incitement and demonization, beginning with the current political leadership and seeping down into local communities," the report added.

While the 2019 FBI report reflects the latest available tally, reliance on voluntary reports from more than 15,000 local police departments that face no legal requirement to report hate crimes, indicates that the threat is widely underreported, according to the report.