

01/19/20 Tuesday

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Chinese Academic Pushes Beijing for RCEP-Based SWIFT Alternative to Survive US Sanctions by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After the US unilaterally pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, it was successfully able to pressure the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), the Belgium-based bank wiring service, into cutting transactions with Iran even though Brussels was not party to the sanctions

Liu Xiaochun, deputy dean of the Shanghai New Finance Research Institute, told the [South China Morning Post](#) recently that Beijing should consider developing a digital alternative to SWIFT in order to protect itself from US sanctions.

Liu told attendees at the China Finance 40 Forum, a think tank made up of senior Chinese financial experts and officials, that while creating alternatives to the US-dominated world financial system is tough, the [recent signing](#) of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade pact and a deal the US isn't party to, presents new opportunities.

"Under RCEP, currency choices for regional settlement in trade, investment and financing will increase significantly for the yuan, yen, Singapore dollar and Hong Kong dollar," Liu said.

"Chinese financial institutions must unite with other countries and regions to position themselves beforehand to adapt to the needs."

Building on Domestic CIPS Program

According to SCMP, Liu's outline for such a project would be spearheaded by five Chinese banks with overseas branches, which could establish their own network for exchanging financial information. Then, major Chinese banks could start their own technology platform company that would allow other banks to participate and would be linked to the Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) China started up in 2015. Eventually, this could be extended into a regional and then global system for clearing bank payments.

China and Russia have [previously looked](#) at developing their own SWIFT alternative that would be based on CIPS and Russia's internal wiring service, the System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS).

After the Bank of China [began urging](#) Chinese banks to adopt CIPS in July 2020, the hawkish Washington, DC-based [Atlantic Council](#) think tank dismissed Beijing's fears, saying the suggestion the US would cut an economy as large as China's out of SWIFT is a "red herring."

"US or EU sanctions would need to impair Chinese banks' ability to process domestic transactions for economically- or politically-sensitive Chinese parties for movement away from SWIFT to become possible," the think tank wrote, "an unlikely scenario absent major escalation."

However, SCMP noted that the US could still pressure SWIFT with more targeted sanctions, for example, at specific companies or banks under US sanctions, as it has [repeatedly threatened](#) to do.

Fears Have Precedent in Iran Sanctions

In the months after the US unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018, the US successfully pressured SWIFT into complying with US sanctions against Iran, even though the US was the only country to withdraw from the deal and its other signatories did not agree that Iran had violated the deal's terms. Other partners, including France and the UK, had indicated their willingness to continue trading with Iran, but SWIFT's compliance with US sanctions helped to block those plans.

In response, they formed the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (Instex) to circumvent US control over SWIFT, with eight [European nations](#) joining the mechanism by 2020.

However, despite Instex, Iran's foreign trade has [declined precipitously](#) since US sanctions began being re-implemented in August 2018.

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NY Governor Threatens Lawsuit if Biden's COVID-19 Relief Bill Doesn't Patch State's \$15B Budget Hole

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

With the loss of taxes due to COVID-19-related closures and a massive increase in state service programs, the New York state government has projected a \$59 billion budget shortfall by 2022. During a budget presentation in the state capital of Albany on Tuesday, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo threatened to sue the incoming Biden administration if it fails to deliver on COVID-19 pandemic aid.

"If Washington doesn't provide New York state with our \$15 billion fair share, we will pursue litigation," Cuomo said, according to the [New York Post](#). "The legal crisis is legally and ethically Washington's liability. President Trump is gone. But the damage to New York remains. The COVID assault on New York state in the spring was due to federal negligence."

The [New York Times](#) later reported that Cuomo's office clarified he was referring to "continuing legal efforts to overturn the cap on state and local income tax deductions," which federal courts have already rejected and Cuomo's administration is in the process of appealing.

"This budget is really the economic reconciliation of the COVID crisis, the cost of the COVID crisis," Cuomo said. "The new federal government didn't cause the damage, but they are legally, ethically, and politically responsible for correcting it."

If Biden doesn't deliver, the Democratic governor said stiff cuts to social services await. Even if the Empire State got just \$6 billion of the \$15 billion Cuomo cited, it would require a \$2 billion cut from school funding, \$600 million cut from Medicaid, and 5% across-the-board cuts for local governments, including the Big Apple. Tax hikes on the wealthy would also await, he said.

US President-elect Biden's proposed \$1.12 trillion "American Rescue" relief package, a complement to the smaller relief measures, includes a recent [appropriations bill](#) passed by

Congress late last month, which earmarks some \$350 billion in financial relief for state and local governments - \$6 billion of which would go to New York.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the United States, New York City was the epicenter of the outbreak, [suffering roughly](#) 10% of the nation's COVID-19 cases but 20% of its deaths in March, April, and May, as hospitals overflowed and makeshift morgues were set up on the streets outside.

However, the recent situation in the US is much darker than even those days: in just five weeks, 100,000 Americans have died from the highly infectious respiratory virus, bringing the total close to 400,000 dead since the first case was detected in early 2020. Nationwide, the seven-day moving average of daily new COVID-19 cases was over 221,000 on Saturday, and the same metric for deaths was 3,344 per day, [according to data](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cuomo has sparred with New York's most famous resident, US President Donald Trump, many times since Trump took office in 2017, but in one [particularly nasty](#) exchange in November 2020, Trump said that New York would be left out of a national COVID-19 vaccine rollout because of [Cuomo's objections](#) to the government's vetting process.

"Millions of doses will soon be going out the door," [Trump said](#) in a November 13 speech at the White House Rose Garden. "As soon as April, the vaccine will be available to the entire general population, with the exception of places like New York state where, for political reasons, the governor decided to say - I don't think it's good politically, I think it's very bad from a health standpoint - but he wants to take his time with the vaccine. He doesn't trust where the vaccine is coming from ... We won't be delivering it to New York until we have authorization to do so." "We can't be delivering it to a state that won't be giving it to its people immediately," Trump added. "The governor will let us know when he's ready."

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US Navy Successfully Tracks Submarine Using Modified Reaper Drone for First Time
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US Navy operates few unmanned aerial vehicles, using the handful at its disposal for reconnaissance duties. However, it has plans for a vast expansion of unmanned forces above, on, and below the waves.

General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA ASI) announced on Tuesday that in a test late last year, one of its MQ-9A Block 5 Reaper drones successfully hunted and tracked a submarine using sonobuoys.

"The successful completion of this testing paves the way for future development of more Anti-Submarine Warfare capabilities from our MQ-9s. We look forward to continuing collaboration with the U.S. Navy as they explore innovative options for distributed maritime operations in the undersea domain," General Atomics President David R. Alexander said in a [news release](#).

The test saw the drone deploy 10 sonobuoys of several different types in order to ascertain the sea conditions in a US Navy test range off the California coast, then search the area for targets, finding an expendable training target and tracking it for three hours before transmitting the information to Laguna Flight Operations Facility Arizona's Yuma Proving Ground.

According to the release, the research will go toward General Atomics' version of the Reaper adapted for naval patrol, dubbed the MQ-9B SeaGuardian. The firm has already built small numbers of the drone for the [British Royal Air Force](#) and the [Indian Navy](#), and is considering [selling them to Taiwan](#).

Presently, airborne anti-submarine warfare duties in the US Navy are the purview of specialized helicopters like the [SH-60 Seahawk](#), which have limited range, or massive airliner-size patrol aircraft like the [P-8 Poseidon](#). The ability to transfer those duties to a small drone, even if it doesn't carry weapons, could be extremely valuable.

Also on Tuesday, Italian aerospace company [Leonardo announced](#) a partnership with GA ASI to integrate into the SeaGuardian drone its SeaSpray active electronically scanned array (AESA), a powerful doppler radar that can detect, track and classify hundreds of maritime contacts at a time.

The US Navy also operates the [MQ-4C Triton](#), a version of the RQ-4 Global Hawk surveillance drone modified for maritime patrol, and the [MQ-8 Fire Scout](#), a helicopter drone used for reconnaissance and precision targeting.

While the Fire Scout can fly from warships capable of supporting other helicopters, the US Navy currently only flies its fixed-wing drones from land bases, not aircraft carriers. However, the China State Shipbuilding Corporation's 708 Institute design bureau [has proposed](#) a radical new design that would add a special electromagnetic catapult to China's Type 075 helicopter carriers allowing it to launch fixed-wing drones.

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Trump Declassifies Trove of Crossfire Hurricane Probe Files Over FBI Objection
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Since the Mueller investigation turned up insufficient evidence to accuse US President Donald Trump of colluding with Russia to get elected in 2016, the FBI's case for beginning the probe has slowly fallen apart as sources, surveillance applications, and agents' motives are all brought to light.

In a last-minute move before he exits the White House on Wednesday, Trump has ordered the declassification of key materials related to the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane surveillance operation of his 2016 presidential campaign.

According to the [White House's memo](#), which is addressed to the attorney general, director of national intelligence, and CIA director, Trump ordered a number of documents on the Crossfire Hurricane counterintelligence operation "declassified to the maximum extent possible" over the FBI's persistent objections.

"I hereby declassify the remaining materials in the binder," Trump said on Tuesday. "This is my final determination under the declassification review and I have directed the Attorney General to implement the redactions proposed in the FBI's January 17 submission and return to the White House an appropriately redacted copy."

However, Trump noted that he allowed certain documents to remain classified as required by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) court.

The disclosure follows a [massive release](#) of documents by Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham (R-SC) last week from the committee's investigation of the Crossfire Hurricane operation earlier this year.

In the 2016-2017 operation, undertaken in the months before Trump was elected president, the FBI probed his campaign for suspected links with the Russian government. The first stage of the Russiagate scandal, Crossfire Hurricane ended in May 2017, when Trump appointed former FBI director Robert Mueller as special counsel to head up the investigation.

In a 2019 report, Mueller said he found insufficient evidence to accuse Trump of a crime, but several people who had been figures in or close to Trump's election campaign were charged for unrelated crimes, including financial crimes and "procedural" crimes such as lying to FBI agents. In the aftermath of Mueller's report, Republicans set out to discover the origins of the probe, including why Trump and his campaign affiliates were investigated if there was no evidence of a crime. Headed by US Attorney John Durham, the probe was elevated to the status of special counsel in October 2020.

DOJ Inspector General Michael Horowitz delivered his own report on Crossfire Hurricane in December 2019, finding that while the FBI committed major violations in applying for surveillance warrants at the FISA Court, there was no indication of a political bias at work.

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Biden Nominates Trans Woman Doctor Rachel Levine as Assistant Secretary of Health by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Under the outgoing administration of US President Donald Trump, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was one of several departments to overturn discrimination protections established for LGBTQ people by his predecessor, Barack Obama.

On Tuesday, US President-elect Joe Biden announced he intended to nominate Rachel Levine to be his assistant secretary of health, one of the most powerful positions in the department. If confirmed, Levine will be the first transgender person appointed to such a high position in the federal government.

"Dr. Rachel Levine will bring the steady leadership and essential expertise we need to get people through this pandemic - no matter their zip code, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability - and meet the public health needs of our country in this critical moment and beyond," [Biden said](#) in a statement. "She is a historic and deeply qualified choice to help lead our administration's health efforts."

A pediatrician by trade, 63-year-old Levine has been the Pennsylvania State Secretary of Health since 2017, where she has headed that state's effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. She was previously the state's physician general from 2015 to 2017. She studied medicine at Harvard University and Tulane Medical School, and taught at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, where she was chief resident.

In her position as the Keystone State's top doctor, Levine has [massively expanded](#) the state's fight against the opioid epidemic, which she has called "a medical condition" and a disease. It is not a moral failing." Under Levine's tenure, opioid-based painkiller prescriptions have fallen in Pennsylvania and she has implemented reforms to help people addicted to opioids to slowly [wean off](#) the drug instead of turning to the black market.

However, she has also garnered criticism for the state's [slow reopening](#) of society following the COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020, and her policies have been blamed for [spreading infections](#) in nursing homes and other elderly care facilities. She was also [heavily criticized](#) for taking her 95-year-old mother out of such a facility during the pandemic, although Levine noted at the time that she was following her mother's wishes.

One of Few Transgender Public Officials

Levine is one of the few trans people to hold public office in the United States and has weathered constant attacks from the public and other political figures in the state due to her gender identity.

After a local carnival took a shot at Levine by comparing her to a man in drag who featured in a dunk tank event last year, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf [defended Levine](#), decrying the "vile acts" and how they further fanned the hate directed at trans people across the state. In 2020, at least three Black trans women were killed in [gruesome murders](#) in Pennsylvania, including one woman, 27-year-old Rem'mie Fells, whose body was dismembered and stuffed in a suitcase before being thrown in the Schuylkill River.

Still, Levine told the [Washington Post](#) in 2016 that "with very few exceptions, my being transgender is not an issue." She has been confirmed three times by Pennsylvania's Republican-controlled state Senate.

Mara Keisling, the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, hailed the decision. "President-elect Biden said throughout his campaign that his administration would represent America," she told the Washington Post. "Today, he made clear that transgender people are an important part of our country."

Many of Biden's picks for high-level federal positions have come from minority groups, many of whom would become historic firsts if confirmed for the positions in question. For example, Biden has nominated a gay man and former presidential primary rival, Pete Buttigieg, to be his secretary of transportation, and Gen. Lloyd Austin, a Black man who formerly commanded all US forces in the Middle East, to head the Pentagon. His vice president, Kamala Harris, is the first woman, first Black person, and first South Asian person to hold the position.

DHHS Legacy of LGBTQ Rights Rollbacks

Under the Trump administration, which ends on Wednesday when Biden is sworn in, the DHHS was one of several federal government departments and agencies to implement major policy changes that rolled back discrimination protections for LGBTQ people, in particular transgender people.

In October 2018, the [New York Times](#) reported, citing an internal memo the paper had obtained, that DHHS was spearheading a major effort alongside the Department of Justice and Department of Education to redefine the word “sex” in their policies as exclusively referring to sex assigned at birth. Under the Obama administration, the word had been interpreted to include not just transgender people, but lesbian, gay and bisexual people as well, arguing that discrimination against them came from sex-based stereotypes about sexuality and identity. The Trump administration’s move has affected institutions that segregate people according to sex, including prisons and homeless shelters, as well as sex-based [anti-discrimination protections](#) in various civil rights laws. However, the effort received a major blow in June 2020, when just after DHHS finalized rules changes to the [Affordable Care Act](#) that would have allowed anti-LGBTQ discrimination based on religious belief, the US Supreme Court issued a [stunning ruling](#) in which it said that discrimination against LGBTQ employees is sex-based discrimination.

Civil rights advocates have argued the Supreme Court’s ruling is sweeping, as it effectively validates the Obama administration’s reading of the word “sex” in civil rights laws. Biden vowed in the weeks [immediately prior](#) to the November 2020 election that if elected, he would pass LGBTQ-specific civil rights legislation within his first 100 days in office.

Biden won the election and is expected to be inaugurated as president on January 20. However, Trump has refused to acknowledge Biden’s victory and according to the US House of Representatives, which impeached him last week for inciting an insurrection, Trump urged his followers to attempt to block certification of Biden’s victory by Congress on January 6. Five people died in the subsequent storming of the US Capitol, but while Congress was temporarily dispersed, they later reconvened and certified the results.

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US National Guard Pulls 12 Troops From Biden Inauguration Duty, Including 2 Over Extremist Ties
by [Mary F.](#)

The inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden will take place on January 20 and will make the start of the four-year term of Biden as the 46th president of the United States and Kamala Harris as vice president.

Twelve US Army National Guard members have been removed from the presidential inauguration security mission after it was revealed that they have ties to the right-wing militia groups, [according to the Associated Press.](#)

"I'm not concerned as a large part of our organization. If you look at 25,000, we've had 12 identified and some of those they're just looking into, it may be unrelated to this but we want to make sure out of an abundance of caution that we do the right thing until that gets cleared up," General Daniel Hokanson, chief of the National Guard Bureau, said in a press briefing at the Pentagon Monday.

However, the removed members did not pose any threat to President-elect Joe Biden, two US officials confirmed. In addition, the two officials, a senior intelligence officer, and an Army official, did not reveal which fringe group the Guard members were part of or what unit they served in.

"Due to operational security, we do not discuss the process nor the outcome of the vetting process for military members supporting the inauguration," the Secret Service said in a statement, [USA Today reported](#).

The US Pentagon is currently in the process of vetting 25,000 National Guard members who have been brought in to provide security for the January 20th inauguration event.

The FBI has already warned law enforcement that right-wing extremists, including QAnon followers, may pose as National Guard troops to breach inauguration security, [the Washington Post first reported](#).

"QAnon members have discussed posing as National Guard soldiers, believing that it would be easy for them to infiltrate secure areas," according to the FBI report obtained by the Post. Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray revealed that agents were tracking an "extensive amount of concerning online chatter" surrounding the inauguration.

"We're monitoring all incoming leads, whether they're calls for armed protest, potential threats that grow out of the January 6 breach of the Capitol, or other kinds of potential threats leading up to inaugural events and in various other targets. So we're latched up with all of our partners in that regard," Wray added, the Post reported.

US President Donald Trump loyalists on January 6 breached the Capitol building in Washington, DC, to protest against the certification of the Electoral College, which would have confirmed Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. The US Department of Justice (DoJ) is currently working to bring charges against more than 100 of the rioters who stormed the Capitol.

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Lloyd Austin Says Will Review US Force Presence in Mideast to Address Russia, China Challenges
by [Mary F.](#)

The confirmation hearing for Gen. Lloyd Austin, President-elect Joe Biden's pick to head the Pentagon, took place before the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 19, one day before Biden's inauguration.

During his opening statement during his confirmation hearing, Lloyd Austin, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he will review the US force presence in the Middle East to address challenges from Russia and China.

Austin also said he would review current troop deployments in the Middle East and hinted at a reduction of US forces in the region, stating that "we can better calibrate" the American presence and provide "opportunities to employ the force in other theaters," Bloomberg reported. "If confirmed, I will review our force presence to ensure it is properly balanced to address the broad range of challenges in the Middle East - including from China and Russia - with global

requirements and the health of the joint force," Austin said in a written statement to the US Senate.

'We View China as Our Most Serious Global Competitor'

When asked whether the US National Defense Strategy (NDS) should be revised, Austin responded that the pace at which China is modernizing its military modernization, its "increasingly aggressive actions in the Indo-Pacific and its ability to threaten the US Homeland are concerning and must be continually reexamined."

Austin added that he would ensure China does not gain military superiority over the United States.

"Across much of the Indo-Pacific region, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using military and economic coercion to bully its neighbors, advance unlawful maritime claims, threaten maritime shipping lanes, and destabilize territory along the periphery of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This predatory conduct increases the risk of miscalculation and conflict. The United States stands with its Southeast Asian allies and partners to champion a free and open Indo-Pacific," the US Department of State wrote on [its website](#).

In a written submission to the Senate committee, Austin also revealed that given the "ascent and the scope and scale" of China's military modernization, the Biden administration "will view China as our most serious global competitor and, from a defense perspective, the pacing threat in most areas," [Bloomberg reported](#).

The US has repeatedly accused China of military aggression in the Indo-Pacific region.

Extension of New START Treaty With Russia in US Interests

Extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia is in the national security interest of the United States, Austin said.

"Yes, I do and so does President-elect [Joe] Biden," Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee when asked if extending the New START Treaty is in US national security interests.

"Nuclear arms control is in the US national security interest."

The New START treaty, the last remaining US-Russian arms control pact, expires on February 5.

Biden to Examine US Troop Withdrawal From Germany

According to Austin, the incoming Biden administration will review the decision to withdraw a significant number of US troops from Germany.

"President-elect Biden pledged a comprehensive review of our global military posture relative to the threats we face and, if confirmed, I look forward to leading that effort and examining how that posture should change over time. While I have not yet fully reviewed our deterrent posture in Europe, I believe it must be a part of this review. If confirmed, I will also want this review to examine the Trump Administration decision to withdraw significant numbers of US troops from Germany," Lloyd said during his confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

In addition to that, Austin said he supports the provision in legislation to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.

"I support the provision of lethal assistance to ensure Ukraine has the equipment it needs to defend itself," Austin said in the testimony on Tuesday. "Ukraine also has critical non-lethal requirements, such as secure communications equipment, that is funded through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). There is currently a good balance of lethal and non-lethal assistance to meet Ukraine's capability needs."

Austin Accuses Russia of Recent Cyber Attack Against SolarWinds

The Senate Armed Services Committee also pressed Austin on cyber security, including the latest cyber attack against IT company SolarWinds. Austin said Russia should be held responsible if found to be the culprit behind the recent cyber intrusion.

"I really look forward to understanding with clarity what really happened. The FBI, the NSA [National Security Agency] have given Russia credit for this. They have attributed this activity to Russia and if that's the case, I think Russia should be held accountable. That's my personal belief," Austin said Tuesday.

The cyberattack exposed private data from companies and government agencies, including thousands of emails from the US Department of Justice (DoJ).

In a statement last month, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that Russia was "pretty clearly" responsible for the hack.

However, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has denied the allegations.

"This talk [of cyberattacks] has nothing to do with us, because Russia is not involved in such attacks generally, including this one specifically. We state this officially and decisively. Any accusations of Russia's involvement are absolutely unfounded and are a continuation of the kind of blind Russophobia that is resorted to following any incident," Peskov said in a briefing last month, [Sputnik reported](#).

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Trump's Farewell Address: 'Especially Proud' to Be 1st President 'in Decades' With 'No New Wars'

by [Asya Geydarova](#), [Mary F.](#)

US President Donald Trump's last day in office is January 19, with President-elect Joe Biden set to officially be inaugurated as 46th president of the United States on January 20. Kamala Harris on Wednesday will also become the first female vice president in American history.

US President Donald Trump on Wednesday delivered his farewell speech to the American public, as Democrat Joe Biden [prepares to take office](#).

In his farewell address, Trump highlighted the US-brokered Middle East peace deals and the rallying of nations to confront China as examples of his administration's success.

"We revitalized our alliances and rallied the nations of the world to stand up to China like never before," Trump declared.

"As a result of our bold diplomacy and principled realism, we achieved a series of historic peace deals in the Middle East. It is the dawn of a new Middle East and we are bringing our soldiers home ... I am especially proud to be the first president in decades who has started no new wars," Trump added.

"I took on the tough battles, the hardest fights, the most difficult choices - because that's what you elected me to do," Trump said during his speech.

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump vowed to cease the "endless wars" the US has been engaged in, and return American soldiers home. In 2018, he surprisingly announced a

troop withdrawal from Syria. However, a small contingent has remained in the Middle Eastern country in order to "secure the oil".

During his tenure in the White House, Trump also authorized a troop reduction in Iraq, as the contingent there was reduced from around 5,000 troops to 2,500 by November 2020. As for Afghanistan, Trump managed to secure a peace accord with the Taliban, promising to pull out US troops after a certain period, during which the group has to refrain from attacks and engage in talks with officials in Kabul.

US Vice President Mike Pence has recently praised the outgoing administration for not dragging the US into a new war.

"I'm proud to report with just a few days left in our Administration, our Administration is the first in decades that did not get America into a new war. That's Peace through Strength," [Pence tweeted on Monday](#).

Trump's farewell address [followed a goodbye message](#) by the FLOTUS, Melania Trump, in which she called on Americans to "choose love over hatred, peace over violence, and others before yourself."

Trump Once Again Condemns Capitol Siege

On January 6, thousands of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol in a bid to stop the Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election. The breach forced lawmakers to hide in shelter and resulted in at least five people dead, including a police officer and a female Air Force veteran.

Trump said political violence in the United States should never be tolerated, including the attack at the US Capitol.

"All Americans were horrified by the assault on our Capitol. Political violence is an attack on everything we cherish as Americans. It can never be tolerated," Trump noted.

On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor that the insurrection at the US Capitol was "provoked" by Trump, [the Hill reported](#).

"The last time the Senate convened, we had just reclaimed the Capitol from violent criminals who tried to stop Congress from doing our duty. The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the president and other powerful people," McConnell noted.

The House last week impeached Trump for the "willful incitement of insurrection," as Democratic lawmakers accused him of provoking violence in DC on January 6, and stepped up efforts to oust the president either through invoking the 25th Amendment, or by initiating an impeachment procedure.

McConnell has yet to reveal how he might vote on the article impeachment.

"While the press has been full of speculation, I have not made a final decision on how I will vote and I intend to listen to the legal arguments when they are presented to the Senate," the Senate Majority Leader wrote in a note to colleagues last week.

Trump Extends Best Wishes to Biden, Says Movement He Started Is 'Only Just Beginning'

Following the DC riots, Trump issued a video message on Twitter denouncing the violence at the US Capitol and conceding the election, the results of which he had been challenging since mid-November. He said he was now focused on a peaceful transition of power.

"This week, we inaugurate a new administration and pray for its success in keeping America safe and prosperous. We extend our best wishes and we also want them to have luck," he said.

As he is passing on duties to a new administration, Trump told his supporters that the “movement we started is only just beginning.”

“The greatest danger we face is a loss of confidence in ourselves — a loss of confidence in our national greatness,” Trump said. “We are — and must always be — a land of hope, of light and of glory to all the world.”

Trump is not going to show up at the inauguration ceremony, as he earlier announced, becoming the first president in more than 100 years to skip the formal event. According to media reports, a farewell event will be held for the outgoing president at Joint Base Andrews at around 8 am on Wednesday before he [departs for Palm Beach](#) aboard Air Force One.

CNN reported citing a source familiar with the matter that Trump allegedly demanded a "military sendoff" with a lot of Trump supporters on Wednesday morning, but [Pentagon has reportedly declined](#) to organize an Armed Forces Farewell tribute on the last day of Trump's presidency, in breach with a tradition that has been held since Ronald Reagan's tenure.

Trump's tenure as the 45th president of the United States officially ends at noon. However, chances are high Trump may run for president again in 2024.

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Series Finale Dud - Political Cartoon

With less than 24 hours until US President Donald Trump steps down as acting president, it seems his hopes for a grand send-off are far from becoming a reality, as some officials are opting not to attend the farewell festivities.

With Trump's wish for a military [send-off](#) going unfulfilled, reports are suggesting the commander-in-chief's guest list is looking rather empty, as several individuals who were invited to the [Wednesday gathering](#) have indicated they won't be attending.

The latest reports indicate that Vice President Mike Pence, US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), former Chief of Staff John Kelly and White House adviser Don McGahn won't be in attendance. In fact, even Anthony Scaramucci, who temporarily served as White House director of communications under the Trump administration, won't be making [an appearance](#).

Guess this series finale of the Trump administration won't be riddled with the glitz and glam of a traditional presidential farewell. [The Hill reported](#) the ceremony is expected to be attended by Trump's family and some close White House aides and supporters.

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China, Iran & Russia: Blinken Sheds Light on Foreign Policy Aspirations of Biden Administration by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Antony Blinken, who previously served as deputy secretary of state during the Obama administration, is US President-elect Joe Biden's nominee to fill the role of secretary of state. He is presently appearing before a US Senate panel to begin his confirmation process.

Sitting before a Senate panel, Blinken told lawmakers on Tuesday that there is "no doubt" that China poses one of the most significant challenges to the US, underscoring that Washington should approach Beijing from a "position of strength."

Although [Blinken acknowledged](#) US President Donald Trump was "right in taking a tougher approach to China," he stressed that he "very much" disagreed with the manner in which the president went about the matter.

"The basic principal was the right one," he remarked.

The nominee also informed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that there is a strong enough foundation in place that could help to build a bipartisan policy on China.

Additionally, the former official indicated that the incoming Biden administration intends to "convene a summit of democracies within the first year of his administration to bring democratic countries together to think together."

More recently, the US doubled down on China, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accusing Beijing early Tuesday of genocide over its policies regarding Muslim Uighurs in the Western Xinjiang region. Pompeo's hard-worded Twitter post came months after reports first surfaced that the Trump administration was considering the label last August.

China has repeatedly rejected accusations of abuse.

Asked about Pompeo's statement, Blinken told lawmakers he fully agreed with the secretary of state.

As relations between China and the US have remained tense over the last four years of the Trump administration, experts believe the situation is unlikely to significantly improve under Biden. Alicia Garcia-Herrero, a chief economist at investment company Natixis, [recently stated](#) "the stakes are getting higher, not lower," and that a "reset" with the hopes of improved US economic growth were dwindling.

Tensions between the two countries have reached new heights as Trump accused the foreign nation of trying to take advantage of the US economically - in regards to so-called unfair business practices, allegations which prompted the president to begin using tariffs, sanctions and strongly-worded statements against Beijing.

The war of words between the pair reached a new boiling point at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw Trump accuse China of hiding information regarding the deadly respiratory disease and begin referring to the outbreak as the "Wuhan Virus."

US Will Seek New Nuclear Agreement With Iran

At the hearing, Blinken also revealed that the Biden administration was eyeing the start of a new nuclear agreement with Iran that would also include Israel and Gulf states, long-time foes of the Iranian state.

"The president-elect believes that if Iran comes back in the compliance we would too, but we would use that as a platform with our allies and partners who would once again be on the same side with us to seek a longer and stronger agreement and also ... to capture these other issues, particularly with regard to missiles and Iran's destabilizing activities," Blinken said.

However, the nominee noted that the US was "a long way" from being able to deliver on such an agreement.

Similar to tensions with China, the US and Iran have been at odds since Trump withdrew Washington as a signer of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which lifted a series of sanctions previously imposed on Iran in exchange for guarantees that Iran would place a cap on its stockpile of enriched uranium.

As Trump withdrew from the JCPOA on the grounds that Iran reportedly violated the agreement, the move effectively reimposed tough sanctions on Iran and saw the start of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

Issues between the two countries escalated even further with additional sanctions against Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization, as well as the assassination of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who served as the commander of the IRGC's elite Quds Force.

In a parting shot against Trump and his strategic attacks, [Iran sanctioned](#) Trump and nine other US officials, including Pompeo, for their role in terrorist activities against the Middle Eastern country.

Two-State Solution Best Measure to Ensure Israel's Future

Touching on Middle East conflicts, Blinken stated that the best manner to guarantee Israel's future would be for the US to support a two-state solution in the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The President-elect believes and I share this conviction that the best way and maybe the only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish democratic state and to give the Palestinians the state to which they are entitled is to through the so-called 'two-state solution,' obviously a solution that is very challenged at this moment," Blinken commented.

"I think realistically it is hard to see near-term prospects for moving forward on that."

Blinken also commented that he anticipated the [Abraham Accords](#) "might also create a greater sense of confidence and security in Israel as it considers its relationship with the Palestinians, because whether we like it or not, whether they like it or not it's not just going away."

Although a number of governments and world bodies have voiced their support for a two-state solution in the conflict, achieving the goal has been difficult due to a variety of issues including border lines, the return of millions of refugees who either fled or were expelled from the homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that erupted after Israel's creation, and also the fact that both sides claim Jerusalem as their capital. In fact, Trump's decision to allow for the US embassy to move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem prompted widespread outrage.

Blinken remarked during the hearing that he was in support of keeping the US embassy in Jerusalem.

Russia 'Challenges' Will Be High on Biden Agenda

Blinken's confirmation hearing also saw the nominee state that any and all alleged challenges posed by the Russian state will be "very high" on the incoming Biden administration's agenda.

"The challenge posed by Russia across a whole series of fronts is also one that is urgent," [he told the congressional panel](#). "This is very high on the agenda for the incoming administration."

However, with the New Strategic Arms Reduction (New START) Treaty set to expire on February 5, Blinken revealed that the new administration would be looking into extending the arms control agreement, but would not be committed to limiting American missile defense programs in talks with Russia.

"I think we're going to seek an extension. We will be coming to you very quickly, almost immediately to discuss that," he said, opting to not give specifics on how long the extension may be.

Previously, in [an interview](#) with the New York Times, Blinken explained that Biden's plans with Russia included extending the New START Treaty by five years with the hopes of expanding the agreement to include various other weapons and even additional signatories.

The New START Treaty was signed in Prague on April 8, 2010, and calls for cutting the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers in addition to establishing a verification system that would ensure both parties are in line with the treaty.

Tapping on the possibility of allowing new countries to join the NATO alliance, Blinken stated that the "door should be open" to countries like Georgia, explaining that Tbilisi could ultimately serve as a deterrent to Russia.

In late December the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Turkey over its multibillion-dollar acquisition of Russia's S-400 missile system, a move which prompted outrage from the US and the cancellation of Ankara's participation in the F-35 program. At the time, US and NATO allies argued that the S-400 system purchase posed a risk for the alliance.

Weighing in on Turkey's purchase of the Russian missile system, Blinken remarked the S-400 deal was "unacceptable," and that more needs to be done in response.

US Should 'Not' Stop Recognizing Guaido as Venezuela's Interim Leader

Switching gears to the politics of South America, Blinken stressed to congressional lawmakers that the Land of the Free should by no means stop recognizing Juan Guaido as the so-called interim leader of Venezuela.

When asked whether the US' opinion of Guaido should be altered, Blinken responded by saying, "No, it is not."

"I very much agree with you, Senator, with regard to a number of the steps that were taken toward Venezuela in recent years, including recognizing Mr. Guaido and recognizing the National Assembly as the only democratically-elected institution in Venezuela."

The new head of Venezuela's increasingly defiant congress was pulled from his vehicle and briefly detained by police Sunday, a day after the U.S. backed him assuming the presidency as a way out of the country's deepening crisis. Guaido's wife Fabiana Rosales stands next to him, right. (AP Photo/Fernando Llano)

Additionally, Blinken stated Washington needed to reconsider how it could better target the Bolivarian Republic so that "the regime enablers really feel the pain of those sanctions."

Blinken's remarks came as the Trump administration announced a slew of sanctions against three individuals, 14 business entities and six ships - a network accused of moving oil under the orders of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The US claims the group allegedly was attempting to circumvent earlier sanctions.

Over the last two years, the Trump White House has been placing an increasing amount of pressure on Venezuela as Washington sought to remove Maduro from power by all means necessary, including by trying to organize a coup and installing US-friendly Guaido as the country's new leader.

Although the US Treasury Department [reaffirmed](#) the US' recognition of Guaido as Venezuela's leader in early January, the same could not be said for the [European Union](#), which dropped its acknowledgement after Guaido lost his position as head of parliament.

Biden Administration Will Review 'Entire' North Korea Approach

Noting the troubled ties the US currently has with North Korea, Blinken went on to state that the incoming administration would be taking an entirely new approach on its relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Moving forward, the newly sworn in Biden administration intends to review options and consult with US allies as it hopes to focus on improved ways to ease tensions with North Korea, according to the nominee.

"This is a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration, and it's a problem that has not gotten better, in fact it's gotten worse," Blinken, referring to halted US-North Korea negotiations, said at his nomination hearing. "We do want to make sure that in anything we do, we have an eye on the humanitarian side of the equation, not just on the security side of the equation."

Under the Trump administration, the US was handed a major breakthrough as negotiators managed to score a first face-to-face summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Despite a slew of heated words being exchanged between the two world leaders early on in the Trump administration, the pair agreed to meet in Singapore in June 2018 and walked away with a deal that outlined normalizing ties between the two countries.

However, by the time the pair were set to meet a second time - this time in Hanoi - the summit abruptly ended after two days, with no agreement in sight. It was later revealed that talks were shuttered after Trump officials failed to budge on lifting sanctions against the DPRK despite the country agreeing to denuclearize. Talks between the two countries have been largely silent since the second round of talks failed.

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Majority of Americans Believe COVID-19 Pandemic is Out of Control, Survey Finds
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The latest data released by Johns Hopkins University indicates that the US is still a long ways off from getting a handle on the COVID-19 pandemic. As of Monday, the Land of the Free reported 141,999 new coronavirus cases, with spikes being detected in California, New York, Texas, Florida and Virginia.

A recently published Washington Post-ABC News poll has determined that a majority of Americans believe the COVID-19 pandemic is far from being under control, as medical professionals and hospitals across the nation struggle to keep up with increasing cases.

[The survey](#), which polled a national sample of 1,002 adults through phone calls made to a cellphone or landline, found that 52% of surveyed individuals believed the deadly virus was "not at all" under control. Only 3% of polled Americans held the notion that the deadly viral outbreak was "completely" under control.

In regards to how US President Donald Trump managed to handle the respiratory disease's arrival in the US, a whopping 51% of those surveyed said they strongly disliked his tactics.

Since the start of the US outbreak in early 2020, Trump repeatedly came under fire from critics after being slow to publicly acknowledge the fatal impact that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can have on individuals. At the time, Trump was often heard telling reporters the virus [would disappear](#) on its own.

However, although Trump did hold White House briefings on the US' response to the pandemic for a period of time, they were often riddled with questionable remarks from Trump, one of which included a suggestion to inject oneself with bleach and the use of ultraviolet light as treatments. The daily briefings were promptly cut short after the president faced backlash for mentioning these possible treatments.

As US President-elect Joe Biden is due to be sworn in as the next American president, 53% of respondents said they were confident Biden would be able to get the outbreak under control, compared to 46% of individuals who weren't as optimistic.

At present, upwards of 24 million Americans have contracted SARS-CoV-2, with the nationwide death toll reaching nearly 400,000, according to the [COVID-19 tracker](#) provided by Johns Hopkins University. [Figures released](#) by the COVID Tracking Project indicate that some 123,848 Americans are currently hospitalized with the virus, while 23,226 individuals have been moved into intensive care units.

In light of the spiking case counts being reported across the nation, the survey found that over 60% of respondents were concerned about the possibility of someone in their immediate family catching the virus or contracting the illness themselves. Ten percent stated they had already been diagnosed with COVID-19.

When asked whether they would be subject themselves to a COVID-19 vaccine, 63% of those surveyed said they would be willing; however, when asked if the vaccine were provided at zero cost, the percentage of interested individuals jumped by 8%.

The vaccines currently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration have been provided by pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Moderna. Both are two-part vaccines that must be taken several weeks apart. To date, [over 10.5 million Americans](#) have received either one or two doses of the approved vaccines, the US' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

The newly released poll was conducted from January 10 to January 13. Officials noted the results may have a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

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Pompeo Draws Ire From Twitter in Farewell Denouncement of 'Censorship, Political Correctness'

by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also accused the Chinese Communist Party of "crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uighurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang." The alleged crimes date back to March 2017.

As federal officials prepare for US President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, Pompeo took to social media Tuesday morning to declare that "woke-ism, multiculturalism, all the -isms — they're not who America is."

"They distort our glorious founding and what this country is all about. Our enemies stoke these divisions because they know they make us weaker," he argued. "Censorship, wokness, political correctness, it all points in one direction - authoritarianism, cloaked as moral righteousness."

Many US-based netizens were perplexed and insulted by Pompeo's statement due to the fact that the US has long been referred to as a cultural "melting pot."

Lawmakers such as the outspoken Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) highlighted that the secretary of state recently thumbed his nose at international law when he visited the Golan Heights in November 2020.

Referring to the outgoing secretary as a "monster," Omar used her thread to highlight Pompeo's hand in Iran sanctions and closer relations with Saudi Arabia.

The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria [Zakharova referred](#) to the US secretary's move as "another manifestation of the United States' blatantly disdainful attitude to the globally recognised international legal principles of the Mideastern settlement."

In addition to his questionable comments on multiculturalism and the like, Pompeo also declared that, after a "careful examination of the available facts," China's policies in the western Xinjiang region amount to "crimes against humanity," according to the [Associated Press](#).

"After careful examination of the available facts, I have determined that since at least March 2017, the People's Republic of China, under the direction and control of the Chinese Communist Party, has committed crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang. I believe this genocide is ongoing, and that we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uyghurs by the Chinese party-state," he said in a statement.

The new designation allows the state department to carry out new measures against Beijing at a swifter rate.

Grant Shubin of the Global Justice Center told the Associated Press that he views the last-minute Trump administration designation as a starting point that should be followed by "decisive action."

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My Pillow CEO Facing Possible Dominion Lawsuit as Retailers Cut Ties Over Election Fraud Allegations

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Businessman Michael James Lindell, CEO of My Pillow, Inc., was threatened with "imminent" litigation from Dominion Voting Systems, whose lawyers demand Lindell make a public apology following "false and conspiratorial" claims about the company rigging the 2020 US presidential election in US President-elect Joe Biden's favor.

Speaking to Right Side Broadcasting Newtork's Brian Glenn, Lindell confirmed Saturday that Bed Bath & Beyond and Kohl's were among the many major retailers to cease selling his My Pillow products.

"I just got off the phone with Bed Bath & Beyond. They're dropping My Pillow. Just got off the phone not five minutes ago. Kohl's, all these different places," he told the conservative network host, as reported by [CBS Minnesota](#).

Lindell, who notably overcame a crack cocaine addiction alongside the infomercial growth of My Pillow, asserted that the physical retail companies were simply "scared" to display his product for sale in the current political climate.

"These [companies], they're scared, like a Bed Bath & Beyond, they're scared. They were good partners. In fact, I told them, 'You guys come back anytime you want,'" the 59-year-old claimed.

Lindell's trip to the White House last week gained viral attention after high-quality photos showed him entering the White House with a collection of papers, one of which clearly referenced "martial law." The viral images prompted concerns from netizens fearing a military-imposed, last-stitch move to retain power by the outgoing US president.

CNN's Jim Acosta noted that Lindell's meeting with Trump lasted approximately 5 minutes. The My Pillow CEO denied that "martial law" was written on his widely-seen documents.

The embattled businessman may also face legal backlash from Dominion. The electronic voting hardware and software company [served Lindell](#) with a letter requesting he cease and desist from making damaging claims about Dominion's role in his allegations of widespread election fraud.

The document in question demands Lindell "preserve and retain all documents relating to Dominion and your smear campaign against the company."

Dominion is also calling on the 59-year-old to issue a public apology and official retraction of past election-related allegations.

"Dominion has been forced to expend substantial monetary sums to protect the health and safety of its employees following innumerable death threats from the social media mob that your statements have agitated against Dominion," the company claimed in a statement obtained by CBS Minnesota. "And your misrepresentations have required the company to incur substantial attorneys' fees and to mitigate the damage you have inflicted upon Dominion's reputation."

Twitter has flagged a number of Lindell's election-related tweets in recent days, such as a January 15 tweet alleging China and Russia hacked the presidential election.

[Rudy Giuliani](#), Trump's personal lawyer, and attorney Sidney Powell have been served similar cease-and-desist letters from the voting machine company.

Members of the Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council (GCC) Executive Committee, including those from Trump's fledgling Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, have maintained since their [November 12](#) announcement that "there is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."

Nevertheless, Lindell noted in a Monday CBS interview that such lawsuits would be met with "evidence" exposing "the horrific things that these [Dominion voting] machines are capable of and what they did to our country."

"They're allowing other countries to steal our election and just to hijack our election," he contended.

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REVIEW - Biden Top Cabinet Picks Commit to Continue Many of Trump's Hardline Policies

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden's nominees to lead the State Department and the Pentagon during senate confirmation hearings committed to continue many of the hardline policies of the Trump administration - including those related to Russia, Venezuela, and China - although they appeared willing to cooperate with Moscow in areas like arms control.

A day before Biden is inaugurated, his top cabinet nominees were grilled for hours during separate senate confirmation hearings. Antony Blinken, Biden's secretary of state nominee, during his previous role with the State Department in the Obama era, supported the invasion of Libya and the arming of Syrian opposition. Biden's pick for defense department chief, Lloyd Austin, is a former general who headed Central Command (CENTCOM) during the Obama administration.

RUSSIA 'HIGH ON AGENDA'

Both nominees underscored that Russia would be a central concern of the Biden administration's foreign and national security policies.

"The challenge posed by Russia across a whole series of fronts is also one that is urgent," Blinken said during testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations committee on Tuesday. "This is very high on the agenda for the incoming administration."

Austin during his hearing also struck a tough tone with Moscow, saying the US must hold the Russians accountable if they are responsible for the recent widespread cyber attacks.

In addition, Blinken and Austin both signaled that they support providing Ukraine with lethal weapons. The US 2021 defense budget allocates \$250 million for overall military assistance to Ukraine, including \$75 million in lethal weaponry.

"I support the provision of lethal assistance to ensure Ukraine has the equipment it needs to defend itself," Austin said in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Regarding overseas operations, Austin said he will review the US force posture across the Middle East to ensure it is properly balanced to address a range of challenges including from Russia and China.

Blinken said he would try to persuade allies to stop the completion of the Nord Stream 2 project. Earlier in the day, the US sanctioned Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline route. Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said the sanctions violate international law and represent a US attempt to create an advantage in the European energy market.

Blinken signaled that the Biden administration would take a similar approach towards Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system. He warned that Ankara's "unacceptable" move might require tougher measures to prevent defense cooperation between Russia and Turkey.

The top diplomat nominee said the Biden administration would favor offering Georgia membership in NATO to boost deterrence against Russia.

The nominees had a couple positive suggestions regarding relations with Russia. Blinken said Biden will seek to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) before it expires on February 5. Austin, for his part, said extending the treaty was in the US national interest.

"It is also something that we have to engage very, very quickly because the deadline is very fast upon us," Blinken said. "We will seek the extension... the President-elect has to decide on a duration."

Austin mentioned the United States may cooperate with Russia in the Arctic, but expressed concern about a military build-up in the region.

OTHER DIPLOMATIC, SECURITY PRIORITIES

With respect to Tehran, Biden's pick for top diplomat said the United States will reciprocate in kind to Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement to cover issues like its missile program and alleged malign activities.

Blinken said Biden will follow the same path as the Trump administration with respect to the situation in Venezuela, including supporting Juan Guaido as president. Blinken said he also agreed with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's determination that China committed genocide against the Uighurs – a charge Beijing has strongly denied.

The top diplomat nominee said the Biden administration would not alter course on Israel. When asked, Blinken said he agreed that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and the United States would not relocate the embassy back to Tel Aviv.

However, Blinken suggested that the Biden administration might depart from Trump's line on North Korea. US President Donald Trump opened up historic nuclear talks with Pyongyang. The negotiations saw a promising start before fizzling by the end of Trump's term.

"I think we have to review and we intend to review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea because this is a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration, and it is a problem that has not gotten better. In fact, it has gotten worse," Blinken said.

Although Austin signaled that he agreed with extending New START, he also promised to accelerate efforts to build advanced weapons systems.

"If confirmed, I would encourage efforts to address the full spectrum of missile threats, including the continued development of integrated air and missile defense architectures for both regional and homeland defense, as well as the accelerated development of intercept capability for hypersonic missile defense," Austin said.

Austin, in addition, said he would commit to making sure Taiwan had enough support to defend itself and that he would examine Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Germany.

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Trump Orders US Cloud Services to Require Identification of Foreign Users

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US cloud services will soon be required to verify the identity of any foreign users due to national security concerns, President Donald Trump said in an executive order.

"Within 180 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) shall propose for notice and comment regulations that require United States IaaS providers to verify the identity of a foreign person that obtains an Account," Trump said in the order on Tuesday.

White House National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said in a separate statement that this executive order will reduce malign actors' access to US information technology and communication services for nefarious purposes.

The action was taken in light of the recent cyber intrusion of IT company SolarWinds, he said. In December, media reported that numerous US federal government entities and companies had been targeted in a massive cyberattack after they corrupted the SolarWinds software and blamed the hack on a foreign actor, while some instantly blamed Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack.

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Austin Says Will Review US Force Presence in Mideast to Address Russia, China Challenges

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he will review the US force presence in the Middle East to address challenges from Russia and China.

"If confirmed, I will review our force presence to ensure it is properly balanced to address the broad range of challenges in the Middle East - including from China and Russia - with global requirements and the health of the joint force," Austin said in a written statement to the US Senate.

Austin said he would also review the Trump administration's decision to withdraw a significant number of US troops from Germany as part of the incoming Biden administration's review of the United States' military posture around the world.

In addition, Austin said he supports the provision in legislation to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.

Austin mentioned the United States may cooperate with Russia in the Arctic, but expressed concern about military build-up in the region.

The Senate Armed Services Committee also pressed Austin on cyber security, including the latest cyber attack against IT company SolarWinds. Austin said Russia should be held responsible if found to be the culprit behind the recent cyber intrusion.

Some pundits instantly blamed Russia, but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack.

In addition, Austin said he would encourage the accelerated development of intercept capability for hypersonic missiles.

Austin also said extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia is in the national security interest of the United States.

Regarding China, Austin said the United States holds a competitive edge, but the gap has closed significantly, adding that the United States' goal should be to expand that gap going forward.

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Russian Diplomats Urged State Dept. to Fix Issues With Phones in US Office - Embassy

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Russian diplomats urged the US State Department to fix issues with the telephone lines at the Russian Consulate General in New York, the Embassy in Washington said in a statement.

"With regard to the disconnection of telephone lines at the Russian Consulate General in New York, in addition to the request addressed by the Consulate itself to New York branch of the State Department, a diplomatic note was sent to the Department with a demand to promptly fix the existing problems that seriously impede the work of the foreign mission," the Embassy said in the statement on Tuesday.

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YouTube Restricts Trump Channel Another Week Amid Inauguration Violence Scare - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Youtube is restricting for at least another week uploads and comments on the channel of outgoing US President Donald Trump amid fears of violence ahead of the inauguration of his successor Joe Biden, the social media giant's parent company, Google, said in a statement.

"In light of concerns about the ongoing potential for violence, the Donald J. Trump channel will be prevented from uploading new videos or livestreams for an additional minimum of seven days," Google said on Tuesday. "As we shared previously, comments will continue to be indefinitely disabled under videos from the channel."

Trump's Youtube channel has been prevented from having new content and engagement with viewers in the aftermath of the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, where his supporters stormed the federal legislative assembly building in an attempt to stop lawmakers from certifying the election win of Biden.

Trump has been accused of inciting the attack, with a fiery speech he made to his supporters in the periphery of the Capitol just before the riot - a charge he has denied. Five people, including a policeman on duty and a female air force veteran who supported Trump, died in the attack. The Federal Bureau of Investigation warned last week of planned armed protests at Biden's inauguration in Washington on Wednesday and at all 50 US state capitals. Thousands of National Guard troops and law enforcers have been deployed to secure the capitals.

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Blinken Promises US Embassy to Stay in Jerusalem

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken committed to keeping the American embassy in Jerusalem and continuing to view the disputed city as the capital of Israel.

"Yes and yes," Blinken said during a confirmation hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday when asked if he agrees that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and commits that the US will not move the embassy.

The city, the eastern part of which is claimed by the Palestinians, was recognized as Israel's capital by outgoing President Donald Trump who relocated the US embassy there from Tel Aviv. The move sparked unrest across the entire Middle East.

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Biden Wants to Convince European Partners to Abandon Nord Stream 2 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden believes that Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline is a "bad idea" and will work to convince European states to discard the project, Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken said during his confirmation hearing.

"I know that he would have us use every persuasive tool that we have to convince our friends and partners, including Germany, not to move forward with it. But what I do need to do is to make sure that I have actually consulted with him on the specifics of that," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

"I know his strong conviction that this is a bad idea, the Nord Stream 2. That much I can tell you," Blinken told Senator Ted Cruz, a co-author of sanctions against Nord Stream 2.

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Trump Declassifies Materials Related to Russia Probe - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has declassified material related to the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane investigation that led to the launch of the Russia investigation, according to a copy of the memorandum provided by the White House.

"I hereby declassify the remaining materials in the binder," Trump said on Tuesday. "This is my final determination under the declassification review and I have directed the Attorney General to implement the redactions proposed in the FBI's January 17 submission and return to the White House an appropriately redacted copy."

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation concluded there was no collusion between the Trump campaign in 2016 and the Kremlin.

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Biden Pays Tribute During Ceremony for 400,000 Lives Lost to COVID-19 in US

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - It is time for the American people to come together in the spirit of mourning of the nearly 400,000 victims of the coronavirus pandemic over the past year, US President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris said in remarks during a memorial service below the Lincoln Memorial.

"It is hard to remember but that is how we heal. Let us remember ... all that we lost," Biden said on Tuesday evening.

Four hundred lights lit up in the Reflecting Pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial, each one for a thousand victims of the coronavirus pandemic.

Harris said the American people are gathered tonight as a nation in mourning.

"For many months we have grieved by ourselves, tonight we grieve and begin healing together. ... We, the American People, are united in spirit," Harris said.

Because of the heavy security measures undertaken in Washington for the inauguration, the National Mall and the area around the Reflecting Pool were deserted apart from the Biden, Harris, their spouses and a handful of guests, including Catholic Archbishop of Washington Wilton Gregory.

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Biden Admin. to Engage With Russia 'Very Quickly' on Extending New START Treaty - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden plans to engage with Russia "very quickly" regarding extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his confirmation hearing.

"This is something that we have to tackle but only when President-elect becomes President tomorrow. But it is also something that we have to engage very, very quickly because the deadline is very fast upon us," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday. "We will seek the extension, the President-elect has to decide on a duration."

Blinken praised Russia for making good on its obligations under the last arms control agreement between the two countries.

"Based on what I have seen, based on what the Trump administration reported when it comes to New START Russia was making good on its obligations. New START is not some kind of gift we give to the Russians, its manifestly in our self-interests in terms of giving us a predictable

cap on the core of Russia's nuclear arsenals as well as giving us tremendous access to data and inspections that we otherwise wouldn't have," he said.

Blinken made clear that there were no preliminary contacts with the Russian side on the matter as Biden's team abides by the principle "one President at a time."

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Pentagon Chief Nominee Says to Urge Accelerated Development of Hypersonic Missile Defense

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he will encourage accelerated development of intercept capability for hypersonic missiles.

"If confirmed, I would encourage efforts to address the full spectrum of missile threats, including the continued development of integrated air and missile defense architectures for both regional and homeland defense, as well as the accelerated development of intercept capability for hypersonic missile defense," Austin said in a written statement to the Senate.

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Biden to Examine US Troop Withdrawal From Germany - Defense Secretary Nominee

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming Biden administration will review the decision to withdraw a significant number of US troops from Germany, Defense Secretary nominee Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"President-elect Biden pledged a comprehensive review of our global military posture relative to the threats we face and, if confirmed, I look forward to leading that effort and examining how that posture should change over time. While I have not yet fully reviewed our deterrent posture in Europe, I believe it must be a part of this review. If confirmed, I will also want this review to examine the Trump Administration decision to withdraw significant numbers of US troops from Germany," Lloyd said during his confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

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Austin Says Will Review US Force Presence in Mideast to Address Russia, China Challenges

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he will review the US force presence in the Middle East to address challenges from Russia and China.

"If confirmed, I will review our force presence to ensure it is properly balanced to address the broad range of challenges in the Middle East - including from China and Russia - with global requirements and the health of the joint force," Austin said in a written statement to the US Senate.

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US Defense Chief Nominee Says Supports Provision of Lethal Assistance to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary nominee Gen. Lloyd Austin said in a written testimony that he supports the provision in legislation to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.

"I support the provision of lethal assistance to ensure Ukraine has the equipment it needs to defend itself," Austin said in the testimony on Tuesday. "Ukraine also has critical non-lethal requirements, such as secure communications equipment, that is funded through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). There is currently a good balance of lethal and non-lethal assistance to meet Ukraine's capability needs."

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Extension of New START Treaty With Russia in US Interests - Pentagon Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia is in the national security interest of the United States, Pentagon chief nominee Lloyd Austin said in written testimony to lawmakers' questions.

The New START treaty, the last remaining US-Russian arms control pact, expires on February 5.

"Yes, I do and so does President-elect [Joe] Biden," Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee when asked if extending the New START Treaty is in US national security interests. "Nuclear arms control is in the US national security interest."

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Incoming Biden Administration Will Review Entire US Approach Toward N. Korea - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming US administration will review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing.

"I think we have to review and we intend to review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea because this is a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration, and it is a problem that has not gotten better. In fact, it has gotten worse," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

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Blinken Says Georgia's NATO Membership May Deter Russia

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he favors offering Georgia membership in NATO and claimed that a membership in the alliance may serve as a deterrent to Russian "aggression."

"If a country like Georgia is able to meet the requirements of membership and if it can contribute to our collective security, yes, the door should remain open," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

Blinken also said he disagreed with a remark that offering Georgia membership in NATO would mean a war between NATO and Russia.

"I actually think just the opposite. I think... that with regard to NATO membership, there is a very good reason that Russia has proved aggressive against countries that are not actually under the NATO umbrella," Blinken said.

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US Defense Chief Nominee Says Russia Should Be Held Accountable for Recent Cyber Attack

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary nominee Gen. Lloyd Austin said during a Senate confirmation hearing that Russia should be held responsible if found to be the culprit behind the recent cyber attack against the IT company SolarWinds.

"I really look forward to understanding with clarity what really happened. The FBI, the NSA have given Russia credit for this. They have attributed this activity to Russia and if that's the case I think Russia should be held accountable, that's my personal belief," Austin said on Tuesday. In December, media reported that numerous US federal government entities and companies had been targeted in a massive cyberattack after they corrupted the SolarWinds software and blamed the hack on a foreign actor. Some pundits immediately blamed Russia without offering any proof to back their claims, but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack.

Earlier in January, the Office of Director of National Intelligence, National Security Agency and the FBI said in a joint statement that the cyber attack against SolarWinds is "likely Russian in origin," adding that intelligence gathering was the main purpose of the attack.

President Donald Trump has suggested that China rather than Russia may be responsible for the cyberattacks, adding that the scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

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New US Sanctions on Nord Stream 2 Violate International Law - Russian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - New US sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline violate international law and attempt to create an advantage for the United States in the European energy market, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in a statement. The Department of Treasury on Tuesday imposed sanctions on the Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting route.

"The United States went beyond decency in an attempt to achieve its opportunistic goals. They violate the norms of international law, the principles of fair and free trade," Antonov said on Tuesday. "All this is nothing more than blatant unfair competition. The desire to create an advantage for itself in the energy market of Europe, to force the countries of the region to buy American raw materials."

The ambassador said the US wants to create an advantage for itself in the European energy market and force countries of the region to buy American raw materials.

"In the end there will be no winners in this venture," Antonov said.

Washington has been long trying by all means to hinder the implementation of this international commercial project. Several legislative measures have been adopted and groundless threats are constantly being voiced against Russia and its European partners interested in cooperation in the gas sector, Antonov added.

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Blinken Says During Senate Confirmation Hearing US Should Accept Some Hong Kong Refugees

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he is in favor of the United States accepting a number of refugees from Hong Kong and called for taking a "hard look" on the presence of major companies in the city.

"One of the things, this is not going to fix the problem, but I would like to see us for example to be able to take in some of those fleeing Hong Kong and fleeing the repressions for standing up for their democratic rights," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday. In June, China adopted a law that adjusts security policies in Hong Kong to Beijing's perception of crime and punishment with regard to separatism, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign countries.

Critics of the law in China's special administrative region and abroad have expressed concern the law may limit Hong Kong's exclusive rights and freedoms. China insists the law aims to punish illegal activities in the city without harming the fundamental freedoms of the local population.

Blinken also said that the United States needs to "take a hard look about what our position should be on the presence of institutions and companies" in Hong Kong.

"Is it going to remain a hub and a financial center? Does Beijing get both sides of the benefit?" Blinken asked.

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Blinken Says Biden Administration to Seek Extension of New START Treaty With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden will seek to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia before it expires on February 5, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing.

"I think we're going to seek an extension. We will be coming to you very quickly, almost immediately to discuss that," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday. However, Blinken also said the United States will never agree to any limits on its missile defense programs in arms control talks with Russia.

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Blinken Says Turkey's Purchase of Russian S-400 Air Defense System 'Unacceptable'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, denounced Turkey's purchase of S-400 air defense system from Russia as "unacceptable" and said tougher measures may be needed to prevent defense cooperation between the two countries.

"I think what Turkey has done as a NATO ally in acquiring S-400 is unacceptable. The idea that a strategic, so-called strategic partner of ours would actually be in line with one of our biggest strategic competitors, Russia, is not acceptable," Blinken told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee during his confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

The United States has barred Turkey from acquiring US-made F-35 fifth generation fighter jets and imposed sanctions against Ankara under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for purchasing the Russian system. The restrictions targeted four affiliates of the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries, including its head, Ismail Demir. Blinken called for examining whether sanctions had an effect and whether greater pressure needs to be exerted on Turkey.

"I think we need to take a look and see the impact the existing sanctions have had and then determine whether there is more that needs to be done," he said.

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Biden Administration to Propose Immediate Review of Yemen's Houthi Designation - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming US administration will propose to reevaluate the recent designation of Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist organization, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing.

"I think we would propose to review that immediately to make sure that what we are doing is not impeding the provision of humanitarian assistance even under these difficult circumstances," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

Blinken noted his deep concern is the designation may not bring the Houthis back to negotiation table while making it even more difficult than it already is to provide much needed humanitarian aid to the country.

However, Blinken emphasized that the United States has to view the Houthi movement with clear eyes.

"They overthrew the government in Yemen, they engaged in a path of aggression through the country, they directed aggression toward Saudi Arabia, they've committed atrocities and human right abuses. And that is a fact," Blinken said. "What's also a fact is that though the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen pushed back against the Houthi aggression, it has contributed to what is by most accounts the worst humanitarian situation that we face anywhere in the world."

Blinken explained that one aspect of that situation is that 80 percent of Yemen's population lives in areas controlled by the Houthis.

Last week, the US State Department added the Houthi movement to its list of terrorist organizations. The leader of the movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, his brother and military commander Abd al-Khaliq al-Houthi and another Ansar Allah commander Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim were listed as global terrorists.

Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdessalam said earlier on Tuesday that the inclusion of the Houthi movement in the US list of terrorist organizations will not affect its political position and will not lead to concessions.

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US Leases 9 Oil, Gas Exploration Tracts in Arctic Refuge – Bureau of Land Management

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – The Trump administration signed and issued leases on nine tracts in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge based on bids submitted by oil and natural gas companies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) said in a press release on Tuesday. "These leases reflect a solid commitment by both the state and industry to pursue responsible oil and gas development on the Alaska's North Slope in light of recent assessments" BLM Alaska State Director Chad Padgett said. "While any further actions on the ground will require additional environmental analysis, this is a hallmark step and a clear indication that Alaska remains important to meeting the nation's energy needs." The BLM has now issued leases on 437,804 acres of some of the most highly prospective land on Alaska's North Slope, with the US Geological Survey estimating nearly 8 billion barrels of recoverable oil on the Coastal Plain.

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Biden Nominee Blinken Says Agrees With Pompeo That China Engaged in Genocide in Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said he agrees with current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's

designation of the Chinese Communist Party as having engaged in genocide against the Uighur Muslims and other minority groups in Xinjiang, China.

"Yes," Blinken said on Tuesday during his US Senate confirmation hearing when asked whether he agrees with Pompeo's designation of the Chinese Communist Party as having committed a genocide.

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US Should Not Change Its Stance on Venezuela's Guaido - Secretary of State Nominee Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States should not change its position regarding recognizing Venezuela's self-proclaimed President Juan Guaido as the interim leader of that country, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his US Senate confirmation hearing.

"No, it is not," Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday when asked whether the US stance on recognizing Guaido should change. "I very much agree with you, Senator, with regard to a number of the steps that were taken toward Venezuela in recent years, including recognizing Mr. Guido and recognizing the National Assembly as the only democratically elected institution in Venezuela."

Blinken also said the United States needs to consider how it can target more effectively sanctions on Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro so that "the regime enablers really feel the pain of those sanctions."

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PREVIEW - New US President Takes Office Amid Unprecedented Security, COVID-19 Lockdown

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden will be sworn into office on Wednesday as the 46th US President in the most guarded and one of the least attended inauguration ceremonies in the country's history, as a result of ongoing healthcare and political emergencies that are poised to top the new administration's agenda from day one.

The festivities at the west front of the Capitol building will be kept secure by some 25,000 National Guard soldiers, five times the combined number of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with multilayered fences, closures of metro stations, roads and bridges that put Washington, DC on a virtual lockdown.

The largest peace-time military deployment in the capital followed an attack on the domed residence of US Congress by incumbent Donald Trump's loyalists on January 6, who sought to prevent the certification of Biden's electoral win.

Biden is to take the oath of office at around noon local time (17:00 GMT) with his hand on top of a 127-year-old family Bible, which will be held by his wife Jill, media reported. Chief Justice John Roberts will administer the presidential part of the ceremony, while Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is expected to be sworn in by Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina member of the Supreme Court.

Biden is then expected to appeal for unity during his first presidential address to the nation.

"A message of unity [and] getting things done. That's what he will be talking about January 20," incoming White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain told CNN on Sunday.

Together with Harris, he will take part in a Pass in Review, wherein representatives of every branch of the military greet their new Commander-in-Chief.

The president and vice president are then scheduled to pay a visit to Arlington National Cemetery to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. From there they will head to the White House, accompanied by the First Lady and Second Gentleman, an official title chosen by Harris's husband Doug Emhoff.

A virtual "Parade Across America" with performances from all 50 US states and five inhabited territories is expected to wrap up inauguration events.

Festivities will be attended by most of members of Congress, the Supreme Court and former presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. According to NBC, 96-year-old Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn Carter will not come, but "they sent their best wishes."

Foreign diplomats were also invited, including Russia's ambassador Anatoly Antonov, who told Sputnik that he plans to attend.

Vice President Mike Pence will be the most senior official to represent the outgoing administration at Biden's inauguration. President Donald Trump, who never retracted allegations of fraudulently stolen elections, announced that he would skip the event.

The incumbent is expected to leave the White House early on Wednesday morning and head for his Florida estate after a farewell ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base. Trump still faces a trial at the Senate after the House of Representatives voted for his impeachment over "an incitement of violence against the US government" in January 6 events.

On his first day in office, Biden will sign executive orders that overturn some of Trump's most controversial policies and reinforce pandemic mitigation and relief measures. He is expected to rejoin the Paris climate agreement, end restrictions on travel and immigration from a dozen Muslim countries, and issue a mask mandate on federal property.

The authorities permitted two small "First Amendment" events during the inauguration with activists to be searched and escorted to designated spots on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Due to fears of "a coordinated insider attack" all National Guard servicemen deployed in the city are being vetted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, media reported. US law enforcement agencies warned of new flare-ups of violence across the country, but these fears have not been borne out yet.

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White House Confirms Pence to Attend Biden's Inauguration - Schedule

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence will attend President-elect Joseph Biden's inauguration on Wednesday, the White House public schedule revealed.

"The Vice President and the Second Lady attend the 59th Inaugural Ceremonies," Pence's daily press schedule said on Tuesday.

The Biden inauguration is set to take place on Wednesday at noon EST (17:00 GMT) outside the US Capitol building.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik)

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States has imposed Venezuela-related sanctions on the Russian oil tanker Maksim Gorki, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

* The United States imposed sanctions on the Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting route, the US Treasury Department said.

NORD STREAM 2 DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia regrets latest US sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, but intends to continue work on the project, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* The operator of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project told Sputnik on it was aware of the reports of new US sanctions, adding that the project backers were still committed to it.

* Swiss-based Zurich Insurance Group has confirmed to Sputnik its withdrawal from the Nord Stream 2 project.

TRUMP GIVES FAREWELL ADDRESS

* US President Donald Trump in a farewell address on Tuesday said he is especially proud to be the first US president in decades to avoid starting a new war and highlighted the Middle East peace deals and the rallying of nations to confront China as examples of his administration's success.

* Trump also said political violence in the United States should never be tolerated, including the attack at the US Capitol on January 6.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin does not currently plan talks either with outgoing US President Donald Trump or President-elect Joe Biden, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said ahead of Biden's inauguration, scheduled for January 20.

* Social networks owners should be bound by some obligations, they cannot just act as they wish, Peskov said, commenting on bans of outgoing US President Donald Trump's Twitch, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and Instagram accounts.

* Challenges posed by Russia will be very high on the Joe Biden administration's agenda, the US President-elect's nominee for Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a congressional panel on Tuesday.

* US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan told RIA Novosti he would retain his post, commenting on media reports alleging that US President-elect Joe Biden's transition team asked him to temporarily remain in office.

NEW CORONAVIRUS TEST

* Russia is ready to register a new test that can determine presence of the new UK-strain of the coronavirus, Anna Popova, who heads Russia's consumer health watchdog, said.

NAVALNY CASE

* The Kremlin does not intend to take suggestions from abroad regarding opposition figure Alexey Navalny, but it wants to have a good relationship with all countries, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday.

* The Kremlin is not worried over potential mass unrest over the arrest of Navalny, but believes calls for protests are concerning and should be analyzed, Peskov said.

* The Russian detention authority was lenient toward Navalny when he was receiving medical treatment abroad, but it had questions for him upon his discharge, Peskov said.

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US Legal Advocacy Group Seeks Nationwide Ban on Guns at Public Protests

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The threat of violence by protesters during Wednesday's inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden illustrates the need for a nationwide ban on firearms, which would likely survive a constitutional challenge, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"In light of reports of possible violence in Washington and state capitals in the coming days, we join together to affirm the authority of state and federal governments to prohibit weapons, including guns, at public protests," the ACLU.

The ACLU was joined by a Everytown, a prominent anti-gun-violence group in issuing the release, which accused Trump supporters of waging an "armed insurrection" in a January 6 takeover of the US Capitol.

At least five people reportedly died in the riot followed by an FBI warning that participants and their sympathizers planned demonstrations at state capitals throughout the US to disrupt the inauguration.

Police found several guns among the thousands who stormed the Capitol building, in response to a call by President Donald Trump to protest results of November's presidential election.

Limits on carrying weapons at public protests would not violate the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which allows private gun ownership, because of a historic tradition of firearms prohibitions in sensitive public places, the release said.

The release cited past Supreme Court decisions allowing reasonable regulations on guns to further public safety.

As far back as 1937, the ACLU refused to defend marchers who insisted they had a constitutional right to carry weapons, the release said.

Everytown, an advocacy group founded in 2013, seeks a ban on laws enacted by several US states allowing the open carry of firearms, according to the release.

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Trump in Farewell Message Says Proud to Be First President in Decades to Start No New War

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump in a farewell address on Tuesday said he is especially proud to be the first US president in decades to avoid starting a new war.

"I am especially proud to be the first president in decades who has started no new wars," Trump said.

Trump also highlighted the US-brokered Middle East peace deals and the rallying of nations to confront China as examples of his administration's success.

The outgoing president also said political violence in the United States should never be tolerated, including the attack at the US Capitol on January 6.

Trump said he is preparing to hand power over to the Biden administration on Wednesday, noting that the movement he began is "only just beginning."

The Biden inauguration is set to take place on Wednesday at noon EST (17:00 GMT) outside the US Capitol building.

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Challenges Posed by Russia to Be High on Biden's Agenda - Top Diplomat Nominee Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Challenges posed by Russia will be very high on the Joe Biden administration's agenda, the US President-elect's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, told a congressional panel on Tuesday.

"The challenge posed by Russia across a whole series of fronts is also one that is urgent... This is very high on the agenda for the incoming administration," Blinken said during his confirmation hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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Canadian Premier Pleads for More Vaccine Doses from US in Direct Appeal to Biden

TORONTO, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, on Tuesday pleaded for additional COVID-19 vaccine doses from the United States in a direct appeal to incoming US President Joe Biden.

"My American friends: help us out. We need help once again," Ford said referring to Canada's shortage of personal protective equipment earlier in the year. "We need your support and we look forward to your support and that's a direct message to President Biden."

Ford's statement comes on the heels of an announcement by the country's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, that Canada will not receive any new shipments of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine next week as Pfizer continues to retool production restructuring at its European facility.

Fortin said that he anticipates a considerable decline in delivery over the next three weeks – up to a 50 percent reduction – resulting in significant impact across all provinces.

Canada receives its vaccine supplies from Pfizer's European production facility after US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of COVID-19 vaccines over their shipments to foreign countries.

Ford added that with the Trump administration on its way out tomorrow there is "no excuse" for the US continue to withhold vaccine supply. The premier also expressed his dissatisfaction with Pfizer, saying that other countries are receiving vaccine doses in spite of the logistical and production-related challenges.

Canada's vaccination regime has been the subject of strong criticism, with the latest data showing that only 640,000 doses have been administered to date – far below other nations, including Israel, Russia and the United States.

Last Thursday, the Fortin conceded that Canada will likely experience a shortage of COVID-19 vaccine doses through to the end of the first quarter of 2021.

Amid the shortage some health care providers have already begun canceling inoculation appointments.

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Biden Top Diplomat Pick Blinken Calls 2-State Solution Best Way to Ensure Israel's Future

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden's pick for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said on Tuesday that a two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future, but admitted that there are no prospects for immediate progress.

"The President-elect believes and I share this conviction that the best way and maybe the only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish democratic state and to give the Palestinians the state to which they are entitled is to through the so-called two-state solution, obviously a solution that is very challenged at this moment," Blinken said during a hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I think realistically it is hard to see near-term prospects for moving forward on that."

Blinken called on both parties to avoid unilateral steps that may further impede progress and resort to confidence-building measures instead.

"In the first instance what would be important is to make sure that neither party takes steps that make the already difficult proposition even more challenging and certainly avoid unilateral actions that makes that more challenging and then hopefully to start working to slowly build some confidence, on both sides to create an environment in which we might once again be able to help advance a solution to the Israel and Palestinian relationship," he said.

The two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict envisages an independent state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel, west of the Jordan River. The boundary between the two states is still subject of dispute, with Palestinian and Arab leaders insisting on the 1967

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Trump Says Preparing to Hand Power Over to Biden on Wednesday

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a farewell message on Tuesday said he is preparing to hand power over to the Biden administration on Wednesday. "Now, as I prepare to hand power over to a new administration at Noon on Wednesday, I want you to know that the movement we started is only just beginning," Trump said.

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Trump Cites Mideast Peace Deals, Confronting China as Examples of His Success

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump in a farewell address on Tuesday highlighted the US-brokered Middle East peace deals and the rallying of nations to confront China as examples of his administration's success, "We revitalized our alliances and rallied the nations of the world to stand up to China like never before," Trump said. "As a result of our bold diplomacy and principled realism, we achieved a series of historic peace deals in the Middle East. It is the dawn of a new Middle East and we are bringing our soldiers home."

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Trump in Farewell Message Says Political Violence Can Never Be Tolerated

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump in a farewell address on Tuesday said political violence in the United States should never be tolerated, including the attack at the US Capitol on January 6.

"All Americans were horrified by the assault on our Capitol. Political violence is an attack on everything we cherish as Americans. It can never be tolerated," Trump said.

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Trump in Farewell Message Says Proud to Be First President in Decades to Start No New War

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump in a farewell address on Tuesday said he is especially proud to be the first US president in decades to avoid starting a new war.

"I am especially proud to be the first president in decades who has started no new wars," Trump said.

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US National Guard Pulls 12 Troops From Biden Inauguration Duty - General

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US National Guard has pulled 12 troops from the line of duty at the Biden Inauguration, including two who it removed over suspected ties to extremist groups, General Daniel Hokanson said in a press briefing at the Pentagon on Tuesday.

"I'm not concerned as a large part of our organization. If you look at 25,000, we've had 12 identified and some of those they're just looking into, it may be unrelated to this but we want to make sure out of an abundance of caution that we do the right thing until that gets cleared up," Hokanson said.

Hokanson said the two National Guardsmen who were removed over ties to extremist groups had made inappropriate comments but did not provide further details.

Moreover, Hokanson confirmed several individuals with the QAnon group planned to wear National Guard uniforms to infiltrate the Biden inauguration.

The Biden inauguration is set to take place on Wednesday at noon EST (17:00 GMT) outside the US Capitol building.

The US capital has set up an unprecedented security posture leading up to President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, practically closing the city to the public and calling in 25,000 National Guard troops to ensure security during the event – in the absence of Donald Trump – for fear of ripple effects of the January 6 unrest.

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US Soldier Arrested for Trying to Help Islamic State Conduct Ambush - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Army Private First Class Cole James Bridges provided tactical guidance in an attempt to help the Islamic State (a terrorist group banned in Russia) to attack US forces in the Middle East, the Department of Justice said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Audrey Strauss, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, ..., announced today the arrest of Cole James Bridges, also known as 'Cole Gonzales,' a private first class in the US Army, on federal terrorism charges based on Bridge's alleged efforts to assist [the Islamic State] to attack and kill US soldiers in the Middle East," the release said.

Bridges was charged with attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, and attempting to murder US military service members.

The FBI and Army Counterintelligence arrested him on Tuesday and he will be presented on Thursday in the US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia, the release said.

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US, UK Agreement Allows American Forces to Join Combined Carrier Group - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller and his UK counterpart signed an authorization allowing American warships, fighter jets and Marines to participate in a strike group led by the UK carrier Queen Elizabeth, the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"This deployment underscores the strength of our bilateral ties and demonstrates US-UK interoperability, both of which are key tenets of the US National Defense Strategy," the release said.

The agreement signed by Miller and UK Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace enables US Marines' F-35-B fighter jets and a US Navy destroyer to join the combined carrier strike group.

The group is slated to deploy from the UK later this year, according to the release.

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Biden Wants to Convene Summit of Democracies Toward End of First Year in Office - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden aims to convene a summit of democracies toward the end of his first year in office, the nominee for Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a Senate panel on Tuesday.

"One of the goals that the president-elect has set for us is to try to convene a summit of democracies within the first year of his administration to bring democratic countries together to think together both some of the challenges that we face at home that are common to democracies, including rising populism, but also to think about a common agenda as we are dealing with the work of defending and advancing democracy around the world," Blinken said. "This is something that I hope we'll be able to put together toward the end of this year."

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US Secretary of State Nominee Blinken Says Supports Providing Lethal Assistance to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken said in testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Tuesday that he favors sending lethal aid to Ukraine.

"Senator, I support providing that lethal defensive assistance to Ukraine," Blinken said.

The defense budget allocates \$250 million for overall military assistance to Ukraine, including \$75 million in lethal weaponry.

The fiscal year 2021 defense spending bill directs top Defense Department officials to brief Congress by mid-March on new lethal military assistance to Ukraine, negotiators from both chambers of the Congress said in joint statement.

Lawmakers said the briefing must include descriptions of defense articles and services to be provided to Ukraine.

However, it provides for the possibility "to modify the categories of appropriate assistance, broaden the types of reforms intended to decrease corruption, increase accountability, and maintain sustainability of combat capability enabled by such assistance," the statement said.

In June, US Congress approved \$250 million in security assistance to Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly warned the United States and its allies that providing weapons to Ukraine will escalate the conflict in the country's eastern regions and hinder the implementation of the Minsk peace agreements.

Many European politicians have also spoken against supplying arms to Ukraine. Former OSCE Chairman and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said delivering arms to Ukraine was a very risky and counterproductive way to resolve the crisis in the Donbas.

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US Treasury Secretary Nominee Agrees to Review 'Dark Money' in Political System

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary nominee Janet Yellen at a Senate hearing on Tuesday vowed to seriously scrutinize dark money in politics.

"I would be very glad to work with you on that," Yellen told Senator Sheldon Whitehouse who raised the matter at a hearing held to confirm her appointment as treasury secretary. "You're pointing to a very disturbing situation and I'll need to get up to speed on where things are with that. But I would be glad to initiate a serious review of this matter."

Whitehouse said funding in the US political system had become a "tsunami of slime" and needed to be overhauled by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The political system, he added, is "rotten with dark money," which refers to spending where the source of the money is not disclosed.

He also complained that anonymous donors provide huge contributions with inconsistencies between what they report to the IRS and what they report to election officials.

Whitehouse was among lawmakers who spoke out ahead of the November 2020 US election on how so-called dark money organizations paid for seven-figure TV advertising to target key battleground races and pressure politically vulnerable senators into confirming right-wing special interest nominees for them. He said such groups also regularly attempted to influence Supreme Court appointments to get favorable rulings from the highest court in the United States.

Liberal and democratic candidates have also benefited from dark money. A CNN analysis, based on data from an election watchdog, showed that in 2020 \$132 million in anonymous money backed Joe Biden compared to \$22 million for President Donald Trump.

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US to Reciprocate to Iran's JCPOA Compliance, But Will Seek Broader Agreement - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States will reciprocate in kind to Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement to cover issues like its missile program and malign activities, the nominee for Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a Senate panel on Tuesday.

"The President-elect [Joe Biden] believes that if Iran comes back in the compliance we would too, but we would use that as a platform with our allies and partners who would once again be on the same side with us to seek a longer and stronger agreement and also ... to capture these other issues, particularly with regard to missiles and Iran's destabilizing activities," Blinken said during a confirmation hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Biden's pick for the job added, however, that "we are a long way from there."

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US National Guard Pulls 12 Troops From Biden Inauguration Duty - General

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"I'm not concerned as a large part of our organization. If you look at 25,000, we've had 12 identified and some of those they're just looking into, it may be unrelated to this but we want to make sure out of an abundance of caution that we do the right thing until that gets cleared up," Hokanson said.

Hokanson said the two National Guardsmen who were removed over ties to extremist groups had made inappropriate comments but did not provide further details.

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US COVID-19 Death Toll Surpasses 400,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the United States has surpassed 400,000, John Hopkins University data showed on Tuesday.

US health officials have reported that more than 24.1 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the beginning of pandemic, according to the data, and the death toll now stands at 400,022.

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Canada Vaccine Distribution Czar Says No New Deliveries of Pfizer Vaccine Next Week

TORONTO, January 19 (Sputnik) - Canada will not receive any new shipments of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine next week, the country's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, said during a press conference on Tuesday.

Last week, it was announced that Pfizer will curtail deliveries of its vaccine to Canada amid production restructuring at its European facility.

"Next week's deliveries have been deferred by Pfizer in their entirety," Fortin said.

Fortin said that he anticipates considerable decline in delivery over the next three weeks - up to a 50 percent reduction - resulting in a significant impact across all provinces. Currently, Canada receives 82 percent of what was officials have planned for, he added.

Despite the production issues impacting deliveries across the European Union as well, reports indicate that Europe will be impacted far less substantially than Canada. Speaking to reporters on Monday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refused to draw comparisons to the vaccination regimes of other nations.

Last Thursday, Fortin conceded that Canada will likely experience a shortage of the coronavirus vaccine doses through to the end of the first quarter of 2021.

Some jurisdictions, including the provinces of Alberta and Ontario, have expressed concern with dwindling vaccine stocks, and affected health care providers have begun canceling inoculation appointments.

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Security Situation in CAR Fragile After Deadly Attack on UN Peacekeepers - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - The security situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) remained fragile on Tuesday, following the attack a day before in which two UN peacekeepers were killed, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Tuesday.

On Monday, two peacekeepers from Gabon and Morocco, serving with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, were ambushed and killed in Bangassou, Mbomou prefecture, by the alleged Coalition of Patriots for Change combatants.

"Today, the peacekeeping mission on the ground is telling us that the security situation remains fragile throughout the country," Dujarric said. "Peacekeepers continue to maintain a robust posture to ensure the protection of civilians."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned Monday's attack on peacekeepers and called on all CAR parties to immediately end hostilities and engage in dialogue.

Earlier this month, two other UN peacekeepers were killed and more injured in the CAR in two separate incidents. The situation in the country has deteriorated in the run-up to the December

27 election. Back then, incumbent President Faustin Archange Touadera accused his main rival and predecessor, Francois Bozize, of plotting a coup and militias march on the capital Bangui. The top CAR court barred Bozize, backed by the Coalition of Patriots for Change, from running on "morality grounds." Touadera won a second term, but the outcome still needs to be certified by the constitutional court.

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Biden Departs Delaware, en Route to Washington for Inauguration

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden in a speech near Wilmington, Delaware on Tuesday bid farewell to his home state before departing to Washington for the inauguration.

"It's deeply personal that our next journey to Washington starts here, a place that defines the very best of who we are as Americans," Biden said during a speech at the National Guard Center in New Castle, Delaware.

The Biden inauguration is set to take place on Wednesday at noon EST (17:00 GMT) outside the US Capitol building.

The US capital has set up an unprecedented security posture leading up to Biden's inauguration, practically closing the city to the public and calling in 25,000 National Guard troops to ensure security during the event – in the absence of Donald Trump – for fear of ripple effects of the January 6 unrest.

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Pompeo Accuses China of Committing Genocide Against Uyghurs in Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a statement on Tuesday accused China of committing genocide against Muslim Uyghurs and other minority groups.

"After careful examination of the available facts, I have determined that the PRC, under the direction and control of the CCP, has committed genocide against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang," Pompeo said. "I believe this genocide is ongoing, and that we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uyghurs by the Chinese party-state."

Pompeo, in addition, accused China of arbitrary imprisonment and torture, among other abuses. He also said he directed the State Department to continue investigating the atrocities occurring in Xinjiang and make evidence available to appropriate authorities and the international community.

In June, President Donald Trump signed into law the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act that allows the US government to impose sanctions over alleged human rights violations of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China.

The Chinese government has denied the charges, saying that the camps were built to provide vocational and Chinese language training for Uyghurs and other minorities.

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US State of Georgia Certifies Runoff Elections Solidifying Democrats Control of Senate

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia has certified the results of the runoff elections held earlier this month in which Democrats captured both of the state's US Senate seats, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger's office said in a statement on Tuesday.

On January 5, Democratic candidates Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock captured the traditionally Republican-held seats giving Democrats control of the US Senate with a 50-50 split in seats between the two political parties and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris holding the tie-breaking vote in her position as Senate president.

"The Georgia Secretary of State' Office today certified the results for the January 5, 2021 runoff," the statement said. "The Secretary of State affirms that the statewide consolidated returns for state and federal offices are a true and correct tabulation of the certified returns received by this office from each county."

Following the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, the Democratic Party will wield control over the US House of Representatives, Senate and the White House until, at least, the 2022 interim elections.

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UN in Discussions With Iran to Find Way to Pay Dues, Restore Right to Vote - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is in discussions with the Iranian authorities to find a solution for Iran's outstanding dues that deprived the country of the right to vote in the General Assembly, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We have in fact been in close touch with the permanent mission of Iran as well as other relevant Iranian authorities," Dujarric said. "We have been in discussions, we will continue to be discussions and we fully recognize the goodwill of the Iranian authorities to try to find a solution; we're all trying to find a solution."

Dujarric also said it was clear that the Islamic Republic is keen to find a way to pay its dues to the United Nations, but "specific circumstances" have made it difficult to transfer those payments.

On Monday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a letter to the General Assembly president that seven countries, including Iran, have lost their right to vote because the amount of their arrears exceeded the contributions of two preceding years.

Dujarric pointed out that Guterres' letter was an administrative procedure and did not reflect on the efforts that are currently being made by Iran.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said Tehran had always paid UN membership contributions despite being under US sanctions, but this year the United States blocked all available financial channels.

Iran suggested that it can pay off the outstanding dues via its frozen assets in South Korea and the proposal is currently being discussed with the UN Secretariat, according to the spokesman. Libya, Central African Republic, Congo, Niger, South Sudan, Somalia and Zimbabwe are the other UN member states that lost the right to vote.

The countries can regain their right to vote if they make certain minimum payments. Iran must pay \$16.2 million.

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Two US Airstrikes Kill Three Somali Terrorists - Africa Command

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US targeted al-Shabab terrorists involved in making bombs and training recruits with two airstrikes resulting in the deaths of three fighters, Africa Command (AFRICOM) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Initial assessments indicate the strikes killed three al-Shabaab operatives. The command's initial assessment is that no civilians were injured or killed as a result of this operation," the release said.

These strikes targeted known al-Shabab leaders involved in fabricating improvised explosive devices, planning attacks and training terrorist recruits, Joint Task Force-Quartz commander Major General Dagvin Anderson said in the release.

Media reports over the weekend said the US had completed a withdrawal of about 700 American forces in Somalia - a pullout ordered by outgoing President Donald Trump with a January 15 deadline.

The US military has said support for Somalia's government will remain available from locations outside the country.

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Political Science Professor Charged as Unregistered Iran Agent - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged a high profile political scientist with unlawfully being a paid secret agent of the government of Iran for more than a decade, the Department of Justice said in a news release on Tuesday.

"A criminal complaint was unsealed today in federal court in Brooklyn charging Kaveh Lotfolah Afrasiabi, also known as Lotfolah Kaveh Afrasiabi, with acting and conspiring to act as an unregistered agent of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)," the release said.

The Justice Department said Afrasiabi was also secretly employed by the Iranian government and paid by Iranian diplomats assigned to the country's mission at the United Nations since at least 2007 to the present. Afrasiabi has been paid approximately \$265,000 in checks drawn on the IMUN's official bank accounts since 2007, it said.

"Afrasiabi is a citizen of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a lawful permanent resident of the United States. Afrasiabi holds a PhD, and frequently publishes books and articles, and appears on English-language television programs discussing foreign relations matters, particularly Iran's relations with the United States," the release added.

Afrasiabi was arrested on Monday at his home in Watertown, Massachusetts, and was scheduled to make his initial appearance on Tuesday in federal court in Boston, Massachusetts, according to the release.

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Canada to Lobby Biden Administration at Highest Level in Bid to Save Keystone XL - Trudeau
TORONTO, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will lobby the "highest levels" of the incoming Biden administration in a bid to salvage the Keystone XL oil pipeline extension, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters on Tuesday.

President-elect Joe Biden's list of tasks for Inauguration Day on January 20 includes signing an executive order to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by outgoing President Donald Trump, according to documents obtained by the Canadian Press on Sunday. "Our government is making sure that Canada's views are heard and considered by the incoming administration at the highest levels," Trudeau said, adding that the country's envoy in Washington, Kristen Hillman, has been tasked to engage the Biden administration on the topic. Trudeau, who has repeatedly expressed his support for the pipeline extension project, has already spoken to the president-elect about the endeavor following Biden's victory in the November 3 election, but would not commit expressly to further conversations during Tuesday's press briefing.

Biden's impending decision has received a mixed response among Canada's political leaders. Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, who has pumped billions of taxpayer dollars into boosting the project, urged Biden to "show respect for Canada" and come to the negotiating table before making any rash decisions.

Meanwhile, the leaders of Canada's two left-leaning parties - the New Democrats and Greens - welcomed the news and lauded Biden for tackling what they say is an acute climate crisis.

The Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska, has caused a major uproar on both sides of the border.

The proposed section of the pipeline was twice rejected by the Obama administration, but was backed by Trump, who is set to leave office tomorrow.

In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and TC Energy to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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US Senate Leader Says Inauguration Will Be 'Safe and Successful'

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell in a speech on Tuesday said President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration will be safe and successful. "Tomorrow President-elect [Joe] Biden and Vice President-elect [Kamala] Harris will be sworn in," McConnell said on the Senate floor. "We'll have a safe and successful inaugural right here on the west front of the Capitol."

McConnell said Congress will move forward following the deadly riot at the Capitol building on January 6.

The senator added that the November 3 vote has not given congressional Republicans or Democrats the mandate to seek "sweeping ideological change."

The Biden inauguration is set to take place on Wednesday at around noon local time (17:00 GMT). Some 25,000 National Guard troops have been mobilized as part of enhanced security measures.

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US Senate Leader Says Trump, Other Powerful People 'Provoked' Attack on Capitol

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said in a speech on Tuesday that the Capitol riot on January 6 was provoked by President Donald Trump and other powerful people using lies.

"The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the President and other powerful people," McConnell said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Trump was impeached by the US House of Representatives last week for "inciting insurrection" after a group of his supporters stormed the Capitol to protest lawmakers verify elector slates from US battleground states that Trump claims robbed him of electoral victory.

Although Trump will leave office on Wednesday, the next step in the impeachment process is for the Senate to hold a trial. It will take 67 votes in the 100-seat chamber to convict the president.

McConnell did not mention when the impeachment trial was expected to begin. He noted that the House of Representatives has not delivered the article of impeachment to the Senate yet. In addition, McConnell said the victory in the November 3 election did not hand Democrats a mandate for a "sweeping ideological change."

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Pompeo Accuses China of Committing Genocide Against Uyghurs in Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a statement on Tuesday accused China of committing genocide against Muslim Uyghurs and other minority groups.

"After careful examination of the available facts, I have determined that the PRC, under the direction and control of the CCP, has committed genocide against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang," Pompeo said. "I believe this genocide is ongoing, and that we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uyghurs by the Chinese party-state."

The Chinese central government has repeatedly denied reports of human rights violations and forced labor in China's western Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region.

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Domestic Terrorism Represents Major Threat to US - DNI Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Domestic terrorism represents a major threat to the security of the United States and the intelligence community will provide all the necessary support to law enforcement agencies by identifying connections between domestic and international actors, President-elect Joe Biden's pick for Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines said on Tuesday.

"This is something that I would expect the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security will focus on, but the intelligence community will provide them critical support identifying connections between domestic and international terrorist actors," Haines said during her Senate confirmation hearing.

Haines pointed out that the intelligence community has seen some international connections between local white supremacists and their supporters abroad.

On January 6, a group of supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump stormed Capitol Hill in a bid to protest lawmakers certifying elector slates from battleground US states that Trump

claims are invalid and robbed him of election victory. At least five people, including a female air force veteran, were killed and over 170 cases have been opened by police in connection with the incident.

The US House of Representatives impeached Trump last week for inciting an insurrection regarding the incident on Capitol Hill. Trump has denied the charge, saying he called for a peaceful and patriotic protest and noted that he issued messages for protesters to remain peaceful and go home during the incident.

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US Senate Leader Says Trump, Other Powerful People 'Provoked' Attack on Capitol

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said in a speech on Tuesday that the Capitol riot was provoked by President Donald Trump and other powerful people using lies.

"The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the President and other powerful people," McConnell said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Trump was impeached by the House last week for inciting supporters on January 6 to storm the Capitol as Congress was certifying election results. Although he leaves office on Wednesday, the next step in the process is for the Senate to hold a trial. It will take 67 votes in the 100-seat chamber to convict the president.

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US, Turkey Sign Accord Protecting Turkish Cultural Property - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US law enforcement agencies received authorization to repatriate illegally trafficked Turkish cultural artifacts under a bilateral agreement announced by the State Department in a press release on Tuesday.

US Ambassador David Satterfield and Turkish Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Ersoy signed the bilateral Memorandum of Understanding with measures to protect the nation's cultural property, the release said.

"The agreement also gives US law enforcement the ability to repatriate trafficked cultural objects back to Turkey while fostering the interchange of Turkish cultural heritage with US institutions," the release said.

In addition, the agreement allows the United States to impose import restrictions on certain categories of Turkish artifacts and other cultural items, the release added.

The release noted that terrorists and criminals often trade in cultural artifacts to raise cash. The United States previously imposed emergency import restrictions on cultural property from Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, according to the release.

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Treasury Secretary Nominee Yellen Says Likely Will Review US Sanctions Policy

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's Treasury Secretary nominee Janet Yellen said on Tuesday that she intends to carry out a review of US sanctions policies to ensure they are appropriately used.

"I will be focused on making sure that they're used strategically and appropriately," Yellen said during her Senate confirmation hearing. "We intend to quickly begin a review of our sanctions policy to make sure we're doing this in a strategic way."

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US Sanctions Russian Vessel Fortuna Laying Pipelines for Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on the Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline route, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The following vessels have been added to OFAC's SDN [The Office of Foreign Assets Control Specially Designated Nationals] List ... FORTUNA (UBDP8) Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 8674156," the statement said.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained in a separate statement that the sanctions target KVT-RUS under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for selling, leasing or providing to Russia goods, services, technology, information or support for the construction of Russian energy export pipelines.

Pompeo emphasized the United States will consider additional actions under CAATSA as well as under the Protecting European Energy Security Act (PEESA) in order to protect European energy security.

"Nord Stream 2, if completed, would give Russia the means to completely bypass Ukraine, depriving Ukraine of vital revenues and opening it up to further Russian aggressive actions, while providing the means to use natural resources as a tool of political pressure and malign influence against Western Europe," he said. "Today's announcement demonstrates that the United States is not afraid to hold accountable those who continue to aid and abet this tool of Russian coercion."

Pompeo concluded by saying that the United States will continue to work with its allies to ensure Europe's energy security and diversification.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday Russia regrets the "brutal and illegal" pressure the United States is placing on the Nord Stream 2 project.

The German Eastern Business Association Chairman Oliver Hermes on Tuesday expressed his hope that progress will be made on completing the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline after President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

Hermes also said the European Union is mature enough to protect its own energy interests from external influences, noting that 24 of 27 EU member states have issued a firm rejection of US extraterritorial sanctions.

The US Senate voted in early January to override President Trump's veto on the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, which included provisions for imposing sanctions against the project. The Norwegian quality assurance company DNV GL subsequently said that it would no longer be able to certify the pipeline.

Nord Stream 2, which is currently under construction, is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany.

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US Sanctions Russian Oil Tankers Over Venezuela Operations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two Russian-flagged tankers and their owners for their role in the exports of Venezuelan oil in circumvention of an US-imposed embargo, the Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) put on its Specially Designated Nationals list the vessels Maksim Gorki and Sierra as well as their registered owners - Venezuela's Instituto Nacional de los Espacios Acuaticos e Insulares (INEA) and the Russian-based Rustanker LLC respectively.

"Today's action... includes the designation and blocking of the following maritime entities and vessels. The entities were designated for operating in the oil sector of the Venezuelan economy, and the vessels were identified as blocked property of these entities. All the vessels have recently lifted Venezuelan oil and thus have facilitated continued sanctions evasion and related activities for [Venezuela's state oil company] PdVSA and the illegitimate regime of [Venezuela's President] Nicolas Maduro," according to the statement.

OFAC also blacklisted the Ukrainian-based Fides Ship Management LLC, which manages or operates one Liberian-flagged and three Cameroon-flagged oil tankers.

The latest round of Venezuela-related sanctions targeted a total of three individuals, 14 entities and six vessels for "their ties to a network attempting to evade United States sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector."

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US to Consider Imposing More Russia Sanctions in Near-Term - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States will consider imposing more sanctions against Russia in the near future under two US laws that allow for such actions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Tuesday after unveiling new designations of Russian entities over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline construction.

"The United States will consider further actions in the near term, under CAATSA (the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act), and the Protecting European Energy Security Act (PEESA), as amended," Pompeo stated.

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Pompeo Reaffirms US Support to Guaido 2 Days Before Trump Leaves Office

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reaffirmed the United States' commitment to the Venezuelan people during his conversation with self-proclaimed Venezuelan President Juan Guaido, spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a readout on Tuesday.

"Secretary Pompeo and Interim President Guaido discussed their mutual goal of a peaceful democratic transition in Venezuela and the United States' unwavering support for his leadership and for the liberty and dignity of all Venezuelans," Ortagus said. "Secretary Pompeo reaffirmed the United States' commitment to the Venezuelan people as they continue to face one of the world's worst humanitarian crisis created by the illegitimate Maduro regime."

Ortagus said Pompeo also expressed his personal respect to Guaido for his "commitment to the cause of freedom and his inspiring leadership to millions of Venezuelans yearning for a brighter future."

Earlier in the day, Guaido said he has been invited to attend the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden.

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US Imposes Visas Restrictions on Tanzanian Officials for Undermining Elections - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed visa restrictions on Tanzanian officials allegedly involved in undermining the country's general elections held in October, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the United States is announcing visa restrictions on Tanzanian officials responsible for or complicit in undermining Tanzania's October 28, 2020, general elections," Pompeo said. "The actions of these officials subverted the electoral process, continuing the downward trajectory of the country's democracy."

Pompeo said opposition candidates were routinely disqualified, harassed and arrested, and significant and widespread voting irregularities, internet disruptions and violence by security forces made the election neither free nor fair.

"Civil society leaders remain under threat in the post-election period, and opposition leaders have fled the country out of fear for their safety," he said.

Pompeo continued to say that Washington is calling on the Tanzanian government to change course and hold responsible those responsible for the flawed election, violence and intimidation. The election saw incumbent President John Magufuli claim a victory and ruling party candidates winning seats in most regions of the country.

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US Sanctions Russian Oil Tankers Over Venezuela Operations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Venezuela-related sanctions on the Russian oil tanker Maksim Gorki, the Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

The Treasury Department has also imposed sanctions on Russia's Rustanker and oil products tanker Sierra linked to it.

"The following vessels have been added to OFAC's SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List... MAKSIM GORKY (f.k.a. MAXIMO GORKI) Crude Oil Tanker Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9590008 (vessel) [VENEZUELA-EO13850] (Linked To: INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE LOS ESPACIOS ACUATICOS E INSULARES)," the statement said.

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US Issues Licenses to Allow Aid Groups Work in Yemen Amid Houthi Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States issued licenses to allow some humanitarian activities to continue in Yemen as US sanctions against the rebel Houthi movement came into effect on Tuesday, the US Department of Treasury said in a statement.

"Today, on January 19th, the US Department of State designated Ansarallah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," the statement said. "Concurrent with the designations, [Office of Foreign Assets Control] OFAC issued four General Licenses ... to help facilitate the uninterrupted flow of humanitarian assistance, including COVID-19-related assistance."

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US Sanctions Russian Vessel Fortuna Laying Pipelines for Russian Nord Stream 2 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions on the Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting route, the US Department of Treasury said on Tuesday.

"The following vessels have been added to OFAC's SDN [The Office of Foreign Assets Control Specially Designated Nationals] List ... FORTUNA (UBDP8) Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 8674156," the statement said.

The Treasury said it also imposed sanctions on the limited liability company KVT-Rus, which owns the vessel.

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Politics Divides US Voters' Views of Coronavirus Pandemic, Vaccine Acceptance - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Nearly three-fourths of Democrats in the US view the coronavirus pandemic out of control with an equal portion of Republicans saying the opposite - reflecting a partisan divide that extends to a willingness to be vaccinated, a new ABC/ Langer Research poll revealed on Tuesday.

"The view is deeply partisan; 7 in 10 Democrats and 55 percent of independents say the virus is not at all under control, versus 28 percent of Republicans," a report by ABC explaining the poll said.

Overall, 52 percent of Americans who say they are concerned over record levels of COVID-19 cases reflects a rise from 35 percent just three months ago, the report said.

The survey also reflected a drop in Americans' willingness to be vaccinated from 71 percent in May 2020 to 63 percent, with age and ethnicity influencing opinions as well as political views.

"The decline is steepest among those who haven't gone beyond high school (-14 percentage points), Hispanics (-13 points), those ages 18 to 49 (-12 points) and Republicans and conservatives (each -12 points)," the report said.

The poll also revealed one in ten now say they or an immediate family member already has caught the virus, up from 5 percent last summer, the report added.

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US Disconnects Telephone Lines of Russian Consulate in New York - Mission

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has cut off the telephone lines in the Russian Consulate in New York, leaving it with no connection for over a day as of now, a Diplomatic Mission representative told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Since January 18, the American side has completely disconnected all city telephone lines of the Consulate General. Internet access interruptions occur from time to time," the diplomat said. Russian citizens experience great problems if they want to contact the Consulate General, the diplomat added.

According to the diplomat, the United States has said the interruption is due to technical problems.

"Allegedly, they cannot resolve the issue for two days. This simply never happened. And we have not one or two lines, but a large number. It seems that everything was turned off at once," the diplomat said.

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IATA Expresses Support for EU-Wide Vaccine Passport - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a statement on Tuesday that it supports an initiative to implement a single digital vaccine passport across Europe.

The idea to use a standardized certificate showing that a person has been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus was put forward last week by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. The idea is supported European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and is expected to be discussed by the EU leaders during a virtual summit on Thursday.

"Prime Minister Mitsotakis' initiative should be urgently adopted by the Commission and all member states. Vaccination is a fundamental key to safely reopening borders and stimulating economic recovery. A pan-European mutually recognized vaccination certificate would be an important step towards giving governments the confidence to safely open their borders, and passengers the confidence to fly without the barrier of quarantine," IATA Director General and CEO Alexandre de Juniac said.

In late December, the European Union countries began mass vaccination of their citizens with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, with frontline health workers and people from risk groups listed as a top priority. According to Bloomberg, the EU has administered over 5.7 million doses of the vaccine during that time.

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Trump Approval by US Republican Voters Recovers From Capitol Hill Riot – Poll

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – More than three in four US Republican voters' continue to back outgoing President Donald Trump even as an overall majority of Americans wants him convicted in a Senate impeachment trial, a Morning Consult poll showed on Tuesday.

"The numbers do not constitute a full recovery for a president whose approval had hovered in the mid- to upper-80s among [Republican] party faithful for much of his tenure, but they do indicate that roughly 3 in 4 Republican voters will back the president through it all," the poll found.

However, 55 percent of those surveyed want the Senate to convict Trump in a trial of impeachment charges approved by the House, based on a January 6 takeover of the Capitol by Trump supporters in a riot that reportedly resulted in five deaths, the poll showed. Support for conviction is five points higher than in February 2020 survey, when the Senate voted to acquit Trump of his first impeachment.

The Constitution requires a Senate trial to begin when the House transmits articles of impeachment to the upper chamber.

The decision on when that will happen rests with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and is not expected until after President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration.

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US Secretary of State Nominee Blinken Seeks to Restore Congress' Role in Foreign Policy

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken said in testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Tuesday that the Congress' long-standing role in Washington's international policy should be revived.

"Both the President-elect and I believe we must restore Congress's traditional role as a partner in our foreign policy making," Blinken said in prepared remarks ahead of his confirmation hearing later on Tuesday.

Blinken held top-level national security and State Department positions during the administration of Barack Obama, working side-by-side with President-elect Joe Biden.

Biden's inauguration is scheduled to take place on January 20.

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US Secretary of State Nominee Blinken Aims to Rebuild Alliances to Counter Russia, Iran

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken said in testimony before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Tuesday that Washington should restore its global alliances to counter Russia and Iran.

"We can revitalize our core alliances – force multipliers of our influence around the world," Blinken said. "Together, we are far better positioned to counter threats posed by Russia, Iran, and North Korea."

Blinken previously held top-level national security and State Department positions during the administration of Barack Obama, working side-by-side with President-elect Joe Biden.

Biden's inauguration is scheduled to take place on January 20.