

**04/29/21 Thursday**

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'In Jerusalem as in Ramallah': Abbas Delays Palestinian Elections After Israel Blocks City's Votes

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Israel's separation wall cordoning off large portions of the West Bank from Israel has divided East Jerusalem's suburbs from its central city. As a result, about 150,000 of its 314,000 Palestinian residents live outside the walls under Palestinian Authority governance, while the rest are under the city's Israeli administration.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said early Friday morning that the anticipated Palestinian elections will be postponed "until the participation of our people in Jerusalem is guaranteed."

"Israel is still determined not to allow elections to take place in Jerusalem, and we, on our part, have repeatedly tried to hold gatherings of representatives and candidates of the electoral blocs [in Jerusalem], but were attacked and barred from holding any activity," Abbas said, according to the [Wafa news agency](#). "Today, a message came from Israel and the United States stating: 'We cannot give you an answer on Jerusalem because we don't have a government to decide that and we're busy with the [Israeli] elections. This excuse is not convincing.'"

"We want the elections to be held in Jerusalem as they are in Ramallah, including the election campaigning, the arrival of candidates, and the freedom of action of the Central Elections Committee," Abbas continued, adding that the Israelis had said if the Palestinian Central Elections Commission president, Hanna Nasser, were to go to Jerusalem, "we should send a lawyer with him to defend him upon his arrest."

Abbas also said that Palestinian leaders had decided to form a "national unity government" that would respect the agreements made by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The president announced the decision after a [post-iftar meeting](#) on Thursday night to which all Palestinian leaders were invited. However, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, two militant factions that operate in the Gaza Strip, boycotted the meeting in protest of what was sure to be a vote delay.

"Our position regarding the elections is clear: Rejection. We will not countenance or provide cover for the delay of the elections," Hamas' electoral campaign said on Thursday, as quoted by the [Times of Israel](#).

According to the Associated Press, Hamas quickly denounced the election cancellation on Friday as a "coup."

News of the decision prompted celebrations at Jerusalem's northwestern Damascus Gate, the site of [recent violence between](#) Palestinian and Israeli groups.

In January, Abbas called for new legislative elections in May and a presidential election in July, both of which would be the first since 2006. However, it was not the first attempt at elections

since then, with past attempts collapsing amid the myriad of issues to be settled both with Israel as well as between competing Palestinian factions.

East Jerusalem is a major sticking point. Both Israel and the Palestinians claim the holy city as their capital, and Israel claimed to annex the territory in 1980 against international law. However, Israel agreed in the 1994 Oslo Accords that elections would take place in East Jerusalem at designated post offices.

"The elections must take place in Jerusalem, our eternal capital, and its people should be allowed to become candidates, vote and take part in campaigns. Anything other than this means returning to the Deal of the Century," read a statement [issued by Fatah](#), the Palestinian party that dominates the Palestinian Authority and to which Abbas belongs.

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Beijing Urges US to 'Restrain Frontline Forces' After Spy Flights, FONOPS Spike by 20% Under Biden  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While US spy plane flights near China increased dramatically under former US President Donald Trump, they have only increased further since Joe Biden entered the White House in January. Biden recently told lawmakers the US is competing with China to "win the 21st century."

Speaking to members of the press on Thursday, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson [Senior Col. Wu Qian said](#) provocative actions in and near Chinese waters have increased in 2021 and that the US needs to back off.

"Since the current US administration took office, the number of activities conducted by US warships and surveillance aircraft in the sea areas around China has increased by more than 20% and 40% respectively over the same period last year. The US frequently sends ships and aircraft to conduct activities in waters and airspace around China, escalating regional militarization and threatening regional peace and stability," Wu told reporters.

"China is firmly opposed to that. We urge the US side to strictly restrain its troops on the ground, abide by the 'Rules of Behaviour for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters between China and the US' and 'International Maritime Collision Prevention Regulations,' so as to prevent the recurrence of similar dangerous incidents," he added.

Wu noted in particular that the recent patrol by the US Navy destroyer USS Mustin, which passed just miles from the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning in the Philippine Sea, had "seriously obstructed regular training of the Chinese side and threatened the safety of ships and personnel of both sides."

"It's of an egregious nature," Wu added. "The Chinese naval ships on site warned the US ship to leave. The Ministry of National Defense has lodged a solemn representation with the US side in this regard."

The April 4 incident was accompanied by the release of a photo in which Cmdr. Robert Briggs, commanding officer of the USS Mustin, is seen sitting casually with his legs kicked up as he

looks at the Liaoning just a few thousand yards away alongside his executive officer, Cmdr. Richard Slye.

#### More Spy Plane Flights

Under the Trump administration, US spy plane flights near the Chinese coast, but especially in the South China Sea, [increased dramatically](#). As Sputnik has reported, this has made the airspace increasingly crowded with aircraft flown not just by the US military, but by Pentagon-employed contractors flying their own spy planes as well.

In January, a US Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft flying south of Taiwan to refuel US spy planes on patrol flew just 250 feet away from an EVA Air passenger airliner flying from Taipei to Singapore. The close pass, in violation of international air safety regulations, was recorded [by a radio operator](#) who caught the airliner warning off the USAF tanker.

The following month and the first full month of Biden's administration, the US flew an unprecedented [75 spy plane missions](#) near China, and in March, a US Air Force RC-135U Combat Sent reconnaissance aircraft made the [closest-ever pass](#) by a US spy plane to the Chinese coast, soaring just 25 nautical miles off the coast near Shantou, at the southern end of the Taiwan Strait.

#### Trump-Biden Continuity

Under Trump, the US shifted away from the War on Terror and toward "great power competition" with [Russia and China](#), an extension of the Barack Obama-era policies of forward-deployment on Russia's European border and the "pivot toward Asia" that put Asia and the Indian and Pacific Oceans - collectively termed the "Indo-Pacific" by the Pentagon - at the center of US concerns. Not just a trade war, but [an ideological offensive](#) was opened, and competition with China's rapidly modernizing military took on an increasingly urgent tone.

In the 2020 election campaign, Biden cast Trump as weak on both fronts and promised to stand up to Russia and China. In [his joint address](#) to the US Congress on Wednesday, which functioned similarly to a State of the Union address, Biden boasted of his tough measures on both nations.

"In my discussions with President Xi [Jinping], I told him we welcome the competition,' Biden said. "We're not looking for conflict. But I made absolutely clear that we'll defend America's interests across the board ... we'll maintain a strong relationship in the Indo-Pacific, just as we do for NATO and Europe. Not to start a conflict, but to prevent one."

Earlier this month, Biden forwarded a \$753 billion [national security budget](#) request for fiscal year 2022, a 1.6% increase over Trump's budget for fiscal year 2021. The US spends more on its military than the next several competitors combined, including China. However, even that increase wasn't enough to satisfy hawkish Republicans, who demanded an increase of between 3-5%.

Wu spoke to this on Thursday, saying some in Washington are "getting really paranoid and keep playing up the so-called 'China threat' and "China challenge.' This reflects a mental illness."

"This kind of behavior will only harm others and itself and lead to a 'self-fulfilling prophecy.'

China has no intention to threaten or challenge any country. However, if someone insisted on threatening or challenging China, we would have no choice but to fight back."

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Watch: Kalibr Cruise Missile Spirals Out of Control in Test by Russia's Marshal Shaposhnikov Warship  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Russian naval strategy has long emphasized long-range missiles as the key to balancing against US aircraft carriers, the 3M-54 Kalibr cruise missile packs an especially nasty surprise to catch enemy ship defenses off-guard: a supersonic terminal phase that triples its speed.

During a recent test of its new vertical launch tubes, Russia's Project 1155 destroyer Marshal Shaposhnikov launched several Kalibr cruise missiles, one of which spiraled out of control just seconds after launch.

Little is known about the test, but it seems to have been part of a recent round of firings in the Sea of Japan in early April. The tests, otherwise successful, were the first time Marshal Shaposhnikov had fired missiles from the Kalibr family since finishing its refit in which vertical launch tubes were installed.

While the Ministry of Defense [released one video](#) of a successful Kalibr launch, another video leaked on social media shows what happens when something goes wrong.

Less than a second after blasting off from the Marshal Shaposhnikov, something goes wrong with the cruise missile's engines and it begins to spin violently out of control - so violently, in fact, that the engine is ripped off the body of the missile and the two halves plunge separately into the Sea of Japan.

Even then, the rocket engine isn't done creating chaos: its solid fuel continues to burn, spinning the engine around in the sea and churning up a huge maelstrom, occasionally emerging for a thunderous moment before plunging back again.

Thanks to its reconstruction completed last year, which [converted the ship](#) from a submarine hunter into a multirole destroyer, the Marshal Shaposhnikov can carry up to 16 of the long-range Kalibr missiles. The Kalibrs are versatile as well, capable of striking ships, submarines and land targets, the latter of which were being used in other Sea of Japan tests that were successful. A new version of the Kalibr, the Kalibr-NK, debuted in 2015 when several were fired [against Syrian rebels](#) by warships in the Caspian Sea, more than 1,100 miles away.

While a missile spiraling out of control or exploding can seem dissuading, it is an unfortunate event that sometimes occurs to many models.

In 2015, for example, an SM-2 anti-air missile the US Navy destroyer USS The Sullivans attempted to fire [instead exploded](#) right out of the launch tube, showering the warship with burning pieces of rocket. In another terrifying incident in 1989, the first time the US Navy tried to fire a [Trident II ballistic missile](#) from a submerged submarine, the jet of water surrounding the rocket got inside the engine nozzle as it ignited, sending the missile into a spiral just above the water's surface before exploding a few seconds later.

In one Russian accident in 2009, the third stage of a Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile suffered a bizarre failure that some experts speculated was a damaged nozzle that

[redirected the jet stream](#) sideways instead of down. The rocket spiraled in the upper atmosphere for some time, creating an enigmatic spiral cloud in the skies over Norway.

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NASA's Mars Helicopter 'Ingenuity' Fails to Take Off in Ambitious Fourth Flight Attempt  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Ingenuity mini-chopper on NASA's Perseverance Mars probe has suffered a major problem in its attempt at a fourth flight on the Red Planet, the US space agency said Thursday. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California [tweeted on Thursday](#) that the Ingenuity Mars Helicopter "didn't get off the ground, but the team is assessing the data and will aim to try again soon."

The day prior, the [JPL said Ingenuity's](#) next flight would attempt to go further, faster, and [longer than before](#). "We'll up the time airborne to 117 seconds, increase max airspeed to 3.5 m/sec (8 mph), & more than double the total range," the mission center said.

Weighing just four pounds when here on Earth, the tiny Ingenuity chopper is the first human-made object to take off from another world. It arrived on Mars atop the Perseverance rover, which plunged onto Earth's rusty [neighbor in February](#). Ingenuity [flew for the first time](#) through the thin Martian atmosphere on April 19.

Perseverance isn't the first rover to land on Mars, but for the first time, even its arrival wasn't alone: just days earlier, separate probes from China and the United Arab Emirates also arrived in Martian orbit. The UAE's Hope probe is only an orbiter, but [China's Tianwen-1 orbiter](#) will soon disembark its own rover to the surface. While a specific time and landing site has not yet been determined, May or June are expected. Earlier this week, China's National Space Administration revealed the [rover's name is Zhurong](#), after the Chinese god of fire.

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Washington, DC, Drops Cases Against 220 Protesters Arrested During June 2020 Anti-BLM Crackdown  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In just 10 days of protest in late May and early June of 2020, more than 10,000 protesters were arrested by police across the US as millions hit the streets and faced a militant police response. They were, ironically, protesting police violence.

Washington, DC's chief legal officer has revealed that charges against 220 protesters arrested at a Black Lives Matter protest last summer will not be prosecuted.

"We declined to prosecute the vast majority of protesters who were arrested in early June 2020 for violating the Mayor's curfew order while peacefully protesting in the District," Abbie

McDonough, director of communications for the Officer of the Attorney General of Washington DC, told local [media on Thursday](#).

“OAG is also proactively offering to file motions on behalf of eligible individuals and ask a judge to seal their arrest records to help make the process easier for those individuals and reduce hurdles to have their arrest records sealed.”

[According to WJLA](#), only five people have actually been charged for curfew violations from any of the arrests made in early June. However, while 220 arrested will not be prosecuted, 80 of them are not eligible to have their records sealed.

After Minneapolis, Minnesota, Black resident George Floyd was [murdered by Derek Chauvin](#), a now-jailed former city police officer, in late May 2020, protests erupted across the country, including in the nation’s capital. By June 1, they had already become the largest mass uprising seen in the US since the 1960s, and then-US President Donald Trump began toying with the possibility of invoking the Insurrection Act and deploying active-duty US troops to the streets to reinforce the National Guard.

After threatening to invoke the act in a stormy speech in the White House Rose Garden on the afternoon of June 1, Trump then exited via the mansion’s front door and [crossed Lafayette Park](#) to pose in front of a nearby church with a Bible. However, just moments earlier and well before the 7 pm curfew, DC and federal police had violently cleared the park and surrounding streets of hundreds of peaceful protesters, deploying tear gas, stinger grenades, and horses, and attacking both protesters and [the press indiscriminately](#).

The attack was just the beginning of a city-wide crackdown by police and National Guard that night, who cleared the streets with prolific use of force that included Army [helicopters “buzzing” protesters](#) just feet above their heads in a so-called “persistent presence” maneuver. According to a redacted DC [National Guard report](#) published earlier this month, a strong display of force was clearly desired by Pentagon leaders, but lower-level officers liberally interpreted that directive.

One pilot told the investigators they believed their mission to be to “establish an aerial dominance.”

Meanwhile, police arrested protesters in groups, with the biggest being several dozen people kettled [onto Swann Street](#), a narrow lane roughly a mile from the White House, where police trapped protesters for most of the night and pelted them with tear gas. Many sought refuge in nearby homes, where sympathetic residents opened their doors to shelter them from police. Those 194 people still on the street [were arrested](#) and kept zip-tied overnight in packed, enclosed spaces.

Last month, the American Civil Liberties Union [released a report](#) on the Swann Street incident, calling for extensive reform of how the DC Metropolitan Police Department handles both mass arrests and curfew violations, calling the situation “a choice” by MPD.

The OAG’s decision comes just days after Washington, DC, agreed to [pay out \\$1.6 million](#) to settle two lawsuits alleging MPD violated the constitutional rights of more than 200 protesters arrested at protests on January 20, 2017, the day Trump was inaugurated as president. According to the suits, MPD rounded protesters up, accused them of rioting after unaffiliated people started fires and smashed shop windows, and then held them without food, water or bathroom access for 16 hours.

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US State Dept: 'Big Challenges Remain' as 'Some Progress' Made Amid Ongoing JCPOA Talks by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several weeks, signers of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action have been holding meetings in Vienna in an efforts to build a pathway to restoring both the US and Iran's compliance to the nuclear deal. Talks have been ongoing since early April.

The US Department of State indicated on Thursday that progress is being made amid the ongoing Vienna talks, but that, ultimately, further discussion is necessary before an agreement can be officially reached.

Ned Price, spokesperson for the State Department, told reporters during a briefing that a long road remains ahead in talks but that a deal seems within reach among negotiators.

"We've been able to engage indirectly with the Iranian delegation in largely thoughtful business-like constructive dialogue but there is still a great distance to travel, and what we have said before about having more road ahead of us than road behind us, remains accurate," Price said at a briefing.

"It is fair to say that some progress has been made. We have a better understanding of what we might need to do, were Iran to go back into compliance, and it is our assessment that the Iranians have a better sense of what they would need to do to resume their compliance with the JCPOA."

However, he also underscored that "big challenges remain," and that indirects talks "are not on a cusp of a breakthrough."

Price also relayed to reporters that the current standing with Iran is a "crisis that we inherited," and that it was a result that came from both the US and Iran "distancing themselves" from the measures outlined under the 2015 nuclear deal.

Talks for both the US and Iran to resume JCPOA stipulations began in early April, although concerns that discussions would end surfaced after Iran's Natanz nuclear facility suffered setbacks to its electricity grid. At the time, Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, [called](#) the attack "nuclear terrorism" and blamed the incident on Israel. Iranian officials have remained positive over the talks, with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani [recently remarking](#) during a meeting with activists that an understanding could be reached with Washington so long as American negotiators proceed with "honesty."

Rouhani also [told](#) cabinet members during a Wednesday meeting that the recent tape leak involving Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif came to be because the Vienna talks were "at the height of their success."

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Worldwide Number of COVID-19 Cases Surpasses 150 Million, Johns Hopkins University Says by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all nations have imposed their own lockdown procedures in an effort to curb the spread of the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the respiratory illness. Health professionals have urged individuals to follow strict masking and social distancing measures to limit contamination.

New figures released by the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) on Thursday revealed that over 150 million cases of COVID-19 have been documented around the world since records began in early 2020.

The exact number released by the university's tracker stands at 150,068,372, with the US remaining the sole country that has reported over 32 million cases since the start of the pandemic.

JHU's COVID-19 [dashboard](#) also states that global COVID-19 death toll has reached 3,160,617. Similar to the case count, the US is also leading in total COVID-19-related deaths as Brazil follows closely behind with over 401,000 fatalities.

Earlier, JHU issued an [update](#) indicating that the US is experiencing a positivity ratio of 3.90% as states Florida, Michigan, Texas, Pennsylvania and New York are seeing a daily rise in COVID-19 cases.

Globally, officials have determined that India has taken the lead on new daily cases after recording over 379,000 cases as of Thursday. Brazil, Turkey, France and the US rounded out the top five countries reporting the highest daily case counts, according to JHU.

As the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to spread in India, the US has called on all its citizens within the South Asian nation to leave "[as soon as it is safe](#)" to do so. The recent notice filed by the US embassy in India notes that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention implemented a level four warning, the highest possible travel advisory.

The [Worldometer tracker](#) also notes that India reported over 3,500 new deaths on Thursday, the highest daily death toll count to date.

The latest figures come as New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio [announced](#) on Thursday that the Big Apple would be fully reopened on July 1, more than a year after the densely populated city became one of the early US epicenters during the pandemic. The city has so far administered more than 6.4 million vaccines.

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DoJ Sought to Charge Chauvin With Civil Rights Violation if Acquitted of Floyd Death - Report by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty in mid-April on all charges stemming from the May 2020 murder of Minnesota resident George Floyd, who died after Chauvin refused to remove his knee from Floyd's neck, despite pleas that he could not breathe. The death prompted outrage and reignited nationwide calls for police reform.

Newly surfaced reports have revealed that officials with the US Department of Justice (DoJ) intended to arrest and charge Chauvin with civil rights violations if he was found not guilty for Floyd's in-custody death.

Citing sources familiar with the case, the Minnesota Star Tribune [recently reported](#) that DoJ officials had a contingency plan in place that would have seen Chauvin charged via a criminal complaint in the event that he was either found not guilty on all counts or a mistrial was declared. A subsequent move would have been to then seek a grand jury indictment. That plan, which would have seen federal officials immediately take Chauvin into custody at the courthouse, never materialized on account of the [guilty verdicts](#) brought down by the jury on April 20. However, that's not to say officials have abandoned their plans entirely, either. The Star Tribune's findings indicate that federal prosecutors are now planning to obtain a grand jury indictment against Chauvin and three other former cops - J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao - who were involved in the fatal encounter. A source informed the outlet that the indictment would be based on civil rights violations, noting that the new offenses would be on top of the state's charges. Although prosecutors are seeking to indict Chauvin for kneeling on Floyd's neck during the fatal arrest, they are also reportedly looking to connect the indictment to the violent 2017 arrest that saw Chauvin repeatedly strike a 14-year-old boy in the head with a flashlight and grab him by the throat. The 2017 arrest also saw Chauvin pinning the teen down on the ground with his knee, ignoring pleas he could not breathe. Unlike Chauvin, the federal case would only charge Kueng, Lane and Thao over Floyd's death, the source detailed to the outlet, further revealing that the indictments are expected to be delivered soon. Grand jury proceedings were initially taken on in February, the New York Times [reported](#) at the time. Kueng, Lane and Thao are scheduled to be tried together in one trial in mid-August. The events are expected to be livestreamed like that of the Chauvin trial. The trio are each charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter; however, prosecutors are attempting to add aiding and abetting third-degree murder to each of the defendants' cases. Chauvin is currently [in custody](#) at Minnesota's maximum security Oak Park Heights prison while awaiting his sentencing hearing, which is expected to be held in June. The three fellow officers are currently out on bail.

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Roman Polanski to Direct New Film 'The Palace' After Expulsion From Academy  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Polish-French film director Roman Polanski was booted from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in May 2018 after the Academy Board of Governors determined that he did not meet the organization's standards of conduct. Polanski has been living in exile for years after pleading guilty to raping a 13-year-old girl in the late 1970s. Two years after being booted from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Polanski is set to resume his post behind the camera in a new film project centered around the lives of several individuals staying at a hotel in the Swiss Alps, it was announced Thursday.

The film has been dubbed “The Palace” and is set to take place on New Year’s Eve in 1999, per a lineup presentation unveiled by RAI Cinema, the film operations of Italian public broadcaster RAI.

Paolo Del Brocco, the chief of RAI Cinema, [told Variety](#) that the film is based out of a “big hotel immersed in the Swiss Alps where the lives of the guests and those who work for them intersect.” He did not offer further details, noting that he is not allowed to give any additional information about the storyline.

The project was written by Polanski and fellow Polish filmmaker Jerzy Skolimowski, who also happened to co-write the troubled director’s Oscar-nominated debut feature, “Knife in the Water.” The production will also be co-produced with Italian actor Luca Barbareschi’s Elisea Entertainment company.

Acknowledging Polanski’s controversial past, Brocco also [told the media](#) that RAI was focusing more on the “artistic side” of the project, as well as the “quality of the stories, not the personal story.”

Polanski has remained a controversial figure within the entertainment industry, more so since the MeToo movement gained renewed traction over the last few years. More recently, Polanski prompted outrage after his last film, “An Officer And a Spy,” premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2019 and managed to win the Grand Jury Prize.

Filming for “The Palace” is expected to begin this fall.

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The Withdrawal Tango - Political Cartoon

Earlier, US President Joe Biden announced that all US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by September 11, breaking a previous understanding that suggested American forces would be fully removed by May 1.

As the US has begun its troop withdrawal procedures in Afghanistan, it was recently revealed that the Biden administration would be deploying members of its US Army Rangers to the Middle Eastern country to serve as added security during the shift.

Karine Jean-Pierre, who serves as the principal deputy press secretary for the White House, [informed reporters](#) on Thursday that “elements of an Army Ranger task force” will be temporarily deployed to the region “to assist with the force protection of forces.”

“The president’s intent is clear – the US military’s departure from Afghanistan will not be rushed or hasty,” she stated. “It will be deliberate, and will be conducted in a safe and responsible manner that ensures the protection of our forces.”

The latest move follows another [decision](#) by the Biden administration to deploy B-52 bombers to the area in order to help “ensure security” while US soldiers depart the war-torn nation.

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## US Needs to Keep Lines of Communication Open With Russia to Achieve Some Stability, State Dept Says

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, a senior Biden administration official said US and Russian officials would meet to discuss and clarify their respective positions regarding sanctions that have further strained the relationship between the two countries in recent weeks. At the time, the official claimed Washington does not wish to escalate tensions with Moscow.

Ned Price, spokesperson for the US Department of State, told reporters on Thursday that the US "would like to be both stable and predictable" when it comes to [bilateral relations](#) with Russia.

"We know that an ingredient to seeing that through is engagement," he said, noting Washington remains hopeful that avenues for engagement - or communication - with Moscow will not be "shut off."

Price also revealed that the State Department has received some, but not all, information about additional actions that Moscow "is choosing to impose on our mission to Russia."

"We are in the process of reviewing the measures that have been formally relayed to us," he said, adding that the State Department believes the actions will "have a negative impact on our mission's ability to operate."

He highlighted that the US reserves the right to respond to these actions.

Price argued that US President Joe Biden's imposition of sanctions against a number of Russian entities and individuals was a response to their alleged interference in the 2020 US presidential election, and their purported involvement in a cyber attack that exploited the SolarWinds platform.

The Kremlin has denied such allegations, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has warned that the US' continued anti-Russian sanctions could escalate tensions to a ["Cold War"](#) level.

Later in the Thursday briefing, the State Department spokesperson revealed that the US is also prepared to respond to what he described as "the Russian government's long-running campaign against independent media and voices."

He also expounded on the US' stance on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) - a US-funded media outlet that was recently fined more than \$900,000 after Russian media watchdog [Roskomnadzor identified](#) nearly 400 administrative violations. The violations related to the organization's refusal to label its content as that of a foreign agent as required by law. The purpose of the law is to inform Russian readers that content shared by such media may be pursuing the interests of foreign countries.

RFE/RL has since filed [a lawsuit](#) against Russia with the European Court of Human Rights.

"Should the Russian government continue to move to forcibly shut down RFE/RL, we will respond," he asserted, just a day after Secretary of State Antony [Blinken said](#) that he had spoken with Lavrov concerning the situation.

The Russian foreign minister told Sputnik in an interview that bilateral relations between Russia and the United States likely would have been normalized already if it were up to Moscow. Lavrov stated that the first step towards a normalization in bilateral relations would be the

[mutual lifting of restrictions](#) on diplomats in Moscow and Washington, adding that Russia made such an offer to the Biden administration as soon as it took office.

At the same time, the Russian foreign minister stressed that Moscow is ready to act if its so-called red lines are crossed.

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'Irresponsible': New York Gov. Cuomo Slams Mayor De Blasio, Says State Could Reopen Ahead of July 1

by [Evan Craighead](#)

As of Thursday, New York City has logged a total of 924,000 COVID-19 cases and 32,461 novel coronavirus-related deaths. The densely populated city was notoriously known as an early epicenter for the US COVID-19 pandemic, but has recently seen a drop in novel coronavirus cases as nearly 6.5 million vaccines have been administered.

Speaking to reporters during a surprise news conference on Thursday, NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the city will be fully reopened, "all systems go," on July 1 - just three days before Independence Day in the US.

The mayor highlighted that in order for this to happen, city residents must continue to get vaccinated.

"Everyone who hasn't yet been vaccinated, come forward now. This is the time. This is the right moment. It's easier than ever. It's simple. It's convenient. Let's keep moving with vaccinations," he urged.

According to [data](#) from the city's health department, more than 7.5 million COVID-19 vaccines have been delivered throughout NYC's five boroughs, and over 6.4 million vaccine doses have been administered so far.

Embattled New York Governor Andrew Cuomo chastised de Blasio's remarks in his own news conference in Buffalo, New York, arguing that setting such reopening projections is simply "irresponsible" because "reopening means, literally, everything back to normal."

At the same time, the Democratic governor appeared hopeful about the statewide lifting of COVID-19-related restrictions.

"July 1 - you have May, June, what happens in May? What happens in June?" Cuomo said. "I'd like to get the hopeful reopening date before that. I don't want to wait that long. I think if we do what we have to do we can reopen earlier."

"There is no person who will safely reopen faster than myself," he said.

According to de Blasio's Thursday remarks, he and Cuomo have yet to discuss NYC's plans or any related thresholds.

More recently, de Blasio has [repeatedly suggested](#) the New York governor resign amid [several allegations](#) of sexual misconduct and unwanted contact with numerous women - many of them current, or former state employees. Additionally, [Cuomo's administration](#) has come under fire for allegedly carrying out a months-long plot to hide the true COVID-19-related death toll of New York nursing homes.

Cuomo has denied any wrongdoing, and even took time to speak directly against de Blasio during the news conference.

"First, the mayor of New York, I don't know what he's indicative of," Cuomo said.

"Ask the people of New York what they think about the mayor of New York City and I'll second their opinion," he added.

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Twitter Intervenes After Netizens Label Sen. Scott 'Uncle Tim' Over Biden Rebuttal Speech by [Evan Craighead](#)

The phrase "Uncle Tom," derived from the lead character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, is a racial epithet that is traditionally used to describe a Black person in the US who is excessively subservient to white people, and overly seeks their approval. Twitter confirmed in a Thursday statement that the social media platform had to intervene and block the trending phrase "Uncle Tim" - a play on "Uncle Tom" - after Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) delivered [a rebuttal](#) to US President Joe [Biden's address](#) to a joint congressional session. Scott is the first Black US Senator from South Carolina, as well as the only Black Republican senator in Congress.

"I can confirm that we are blocking the phrase you referenced from appearing in Trends. This is in line with our policies on Trends," a Twitter spokesperson said to the [Washington Examiner](#). "We want Trends to promote healthy conversations on Twitter. This means that at times, we may not allow or may temporarily prevent content from appearing in Trends until more context is available. This includes Trends that violate The Twitter Rules."

"I get called Uncle Tom and the N-word by progressives ... I know firsthand, our healing is not finished," the Republican senator remarked Wednesday night, following Biden's address.

"Hear me clearly: America is not a racist country," he said later on. "And it's wrong to try to use our painful past to dishonestly shut down debates in the present."

However, when Scott appeared on Fox News' "Fox & Friends" on Thursday morning, he claimed that he was the victim of race-based discrimination in present-day America.

"What they want for us is for us to stay in a little, small corner and not go against the tide that they think is America. Their America and my America aren't the same America, if, in fact, they think that discriminating is the fastest way to end discrimination," he added.

Despite the removal of the trending topic, one who searches "Uncle Tim" on Twitter can still see the tweets, which includes a mix of posts attacking and defending the Republican senator.

"Tim Scott gets called Uncle Tom by progressives. But he's an Uncle Tim," [tweeted](#) music journalist and former MSNBC host Touré.

Bishop Talbert Swan [also railed](#) against Sen. Scott, saying "Uncle Tim Scott has perfected the art of sycophantic bootlicking. He's a master step n fetch it artist [sic] and cunning white supremacy apologist, who demonstrated his buck dancing skills in front of the entire world."

On the other side of the aisle, Scott's fellow Republicans came to his defense and asserted that it was "the left" and "progressives" who were being hypocritical.

"Uncle Tim' is trending on Twitter right now because apparently it's okay to use racist epithets as long as they're directed at a Republican," [tweeted](#) writer Eddie Zipperer.

"The fact that 'Uncle Tim' is trending on Twitter — right after Tim Scott's speech where he pointed out that progressives often call him the N-word — tells you everything about the left's double standards," [tweeted](#) biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. "Anti-racists' turn out to be the real racists almost every time."

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Biden's American Family Plan Proposes Tax Increase on Investment Wealth  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Most investors buy with the intent to expand, and do so by planting seeds into newer and growing properties, which is called building equity. If investments are kept within a close circle, there are ways to bear the fruit of the labor without government interference. Investments like this are referred to as a like-kind, or "1031" exchange.

The Biden administration is introducing a new economic plan that will remove the right to defer federal tax payments on realized property-investment gains that are projected as being worth over \$500,000. The move is in an effort to raise taxes on those with higher investment opportunities to increase funding for the American Families Plan.

"Get rid of a loophole allowing Americans to make over \$1 million a year and pay a lower tax rate on their capital gains than Americans who receive a paycheck," US President Joe Biden proposed during his first joint address to Congress.

"CEOs make 320 times what the average worker in the corporation makes," he added, pointing out that only 1% of Americans were considered millionaires and billionaires.

The [American Families Plan](#) is a proposed \$1 trillion bill allocated towards providing free child care, paid leave, universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, two years of community college and expanding health care. The measure is related to Biden's "Build Back Better" agenda, which focuses on generating human capital by reinvesting into the system in a way that would increase the desired outcome of institutionalized education.

For low-income families, the plan would provide an incentive to increase family growth while maintaining a tax bracket that will ensure a fixed amount of income built within the federal system.

"Trickle down economics has never worked. It is time to grow the economy from the bottom and middle out," Biden boasted to a round of applause.

For those with property investments that span across long-term financial safety nets, the suggested plan will allow the federal government to take from the profits of realized investments and push them towards the maintenance of generating human capital.

The like-kind exchange has been a part of the US tax code since 1921, when it was originally intended for farmers to participate in the fair exchange of liquid assets, like cattle. For the Biden administration, this form of independent transaction has been taken advantage of by the limited few who are allowed to make above the suggested federal amount of earned income.

As long as income is kept below \$500,000, investors can maintain the freedom of better controlling their cash flow without the federal government focusing too much on the generated value of their assets.

The American Family Plan is expected to be pushed by some [Democratic lawmakers](#) as it includes a \$200 billion allocation to the Affordable Care Act and a boost to the child tax credit. Politicians like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) encourage passing of the bill because it is a push forward towards the overall fight for universal health care.

For some Republicans, it will be a fight against undoing the tax cuts put into place by former US President Donald Trump in 2017. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 also limited the use of like-kind exchange when dealing with [farmer-style tactics](#) of trading as-is equipment by allowing the exchange to be financially viewed as a necessary business upgrade, rather than an individual non-taxable sell.

Through this form of tax cuts, investors are able to reinvest in themselves through a form of self-employment tax set at a higher rate than the original depreciated value of the old business equipment. This kind of self-generated wealth is the reason why many view the top 1% of earners in the US as benefiting the most, when under the proposed American Family Plan, the only difference is the government decides on the allowed gain and worth of the investments. The vote for Biden's package, if pushed through Congress, will increase IRS funding by \$80 billion in an effort to target realized investments and generate over \$700 billion in profit for federal services in the next 10 years.

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Kanye West Spotted Still Wearing His Wedding Ring Despite Separation From Kim Kardashian by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The circle of a ring is sometimes referred to as a symbol of eternity and the unknown. Over time, the symbol began to represent loyalty and devotion to another individual. For most divorces, the symbolism goes out the door and the monetary value of the ring makes room for disputes.

American rapper, producer and fashion designer Kanye West has been spotted still wearing his wedding ring, despite going through what is believed to be a costly divorce from his wife, socialite and TV personality Kim Kardashian.

In a Wednesday Instagram post shared by fellow producer DJ Khaled, West is pictured with his hands raised to the sky.

"True Story: Kanye stopped by my house at 8am the other day! I didn't know he was coming," DJ Khaled captioned on the post.

"You know when you get this expression that it's sounding amazing! This album Gods hands is all over it," he added, referring to his new album scheduled for release this Friday.

The picture appears to be in good faith of West enjoying the music, but what shocked plenty of fans was the metal band wrapped around his left ring finger.

Two months ago, Kardashian filed for divorce from West, calling the end of their seven-year marriage. West responded to the divorce this month, asking for joint legal and physical custody of their four kids - North, Saint, Chicago and Psalm.

For some fans, seeing the rapper still donning his wedding ring represents the idea that maybe Kanye has not yet fully accepted his separation from Kardashian, and to others it may express a deeper meaning that only the pair truly understands. What is for sure is that netizens have taken notice.

The rapper even went as far as to accuse Kardashian of attempting to have him involuntarily committed to a psychiatric institution.

After his seemingly bizarre Twitter rant, Kardashian took to social media to respond by referencing mental health concerns as the reason behind West's behavior. West has had a history of unpleasant experiences involved around his mental health, which some assume has been in decline since the passing of his mother in 2007. His most recent album, which has yet to be released, is titled "DONDA," in reference to his late mother Dona.

In 2019, West bought two ranches in Wyoming, where he has been living since his split from the Kardashian family. The end of his short-lived presidential run has seen the rapper on less of a Twitter binge and more social, as he has only been spotted on social media when being tagged by one of his fellow celebrities. His lucrative Nike Air Yeezy business has recently made the news after his prototype pair sold for over \$1.8 million, and his new slide sandals saw a same-day release sell out.

While it appears as though Kardashian and West are living their lives separately, and in better financial shape than most, both appear to be more focused on individual goals than on redeeming their relationship.

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**ANALYSIS - Biden Likely Sowed Seeds for Economic Crisis Amid 100-Day Boom**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden while riding a wave of explosive economic growth in his first 100 days in office may have laid landmines that could send inflation skyrocketing and reduce productivity, analysts told Sputnik.

Biden reached the much-hyped 100-days-in-office landmark on Thursday, a period of heightened performance scrutiny that began with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who enacted 76 laws during this symbolic period.

#### LANDMINES

The economy has heated up under Biden but many economists have worried about inflation. US GDP expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter after a surge in consumer spending, the Commerce Department said on Thursday. The economy is also projected to grow by 6.6% in 2021 after shrinking by 3.5 percent last year due to pandemic lockdowns.

The US stock market, meanwhile, is on pace for its best start under a new president since 1945, according to Barron's. Both the S&P 500 and Dow Jones indices are up nearly 9 percent since

inauguration day and hit record highs on April 26. During Trump's first 100 days the same indices both grew by around 6%.

Earlier in April, however, the US central bank said the federal debt, which now stands at an all-time high of more than \$27 trillion, was unsustainable over the long term. Moreover, US consumer prices, the key gauge for inflation, rose 0.6 percent in March for its highest growth in nearly a decade.

"[Biden] throwing money around... re-imposition of regulations and continuation of funny money means productivity will crater," former international merchant banker Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik.

Hutchinson, author of "Alchemists of Loss: How modern finance and government intervention crashed the financial system," also said Biden's economic policies are considerably worse than Trump's and more "left-wing" than he had expected.

He even suggested the United States could see inflation rise to higher levels than the 1970s, when the average rate was 6.8 percent.

In March, Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package into law to jump-start the economy.

During his first address to Congress on Thursday, the president unveiled a plan to invest another \$2 trillion in jobs, infrastructure and education.

Center for Peace & Freedom, Independent Institute Ivan Eland believes Biden may even turn out worse than Trump in adding to the US deficits and debt.

The president's new spending plans, Eland argued, are unnecessary given the Congressional Budget Office is forecasting 3.6% growth.

"Biden's pork-laden COVID relief bill is unneeded [and] could cause inflation in a roaring post-pandemic economy," Eland warned.

#### NO RESISTANCE

Because the Democrats in the 2020 election swept control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, the Republicans will be hard-pressed to prevent Biden from passing many policies.

On Wednesday, Republicans pushed back against Biden's infrastructure blueprint and have recently put forth a \$568 billion plan of their own.

"Maybe he [Biden] will compromise with the Republicans, hopefully somewhere closer to the lower Republican number," Eland said.

Hutchinson argued that the economic recovery was on the right track under Trump and will probably now stall due to Biden's radical solutions.

The former merchant banker, however, believes that some of the president's bills will get blocked in Congress.

Biden's Gallup favorability rating of 57% is 16 points higher than where Trump's was at this point in 2017. President John F. Kennedy's 83% is the highest 100-day approval rating recorded by Gallup, which began tracking the measure in the 1950s.

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RPT - US WWII Veterans Hope to Visit Russia Again Once Travel Restrictions Lifted - Foundation

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US World War II veterans hope to visit Russia again when the travel restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic are removed, president and CEO of The Greatest GENERATIONS Foundation Timothy Davis told Sputnik.

"What a difficult time for the world, more importantly, our esteemed World War II veterans," Davis said. "We still have high expectations of returning to Russia - once COVID-19 is over and cleared to travel."

Last year, twelve World War II veterans from the United States were scheduled travel to Russia in May to celebrate the anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War in Moscow as well as visit St. Petersburg and Volgograd.

The trip, sponsored by the foundation, was canceled due to the measures the various authorities undertook to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Ahead of the upcoming 76th anniversary of Victory Day on May 9, Davis shared with Sputnik that the majority of the US veterans are doing well and prepared to travel.

"Most of our veterans are doing great, vaccinated, and are ready for the next mission with me," he said. "As another year has gone by, time is against us, and we all hope and pray we can help the last living heroes of World War II before it is too late."

Davis said they believe the foundation can continue its programs serving World War II veterans through 2025 - the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

The Greatest GENERATIONS Foundation is a charitable organization and is not part of the US federal government. The foundation operates more than 30 chapters across North America and exists because of the generosity of individuals and various organizations that are supportive of its mission.

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South Korea's Moon to Visit US on May 21 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - South Korean President Moon Jae-in will visit the White House on May 21 to meet President Joe Biden to discuss matters of mutual concern, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press release.

"President Biden looks forward to welcoming Republic of Korea President Moon Jae-in to the White House on May 21, 2021," Psaki said on Thursday.

Psaki said the two leaders will discuss bilateral relations and cooperation between the two countries.

The two leaders are meeting weeks after Biden hosted his Japanese counterpart as the US administration finalizes its policy on North Korea.

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**FBI Raid at Giuliani's Home Sought Evidence Related to Ex-US Envoy Yovanovitch - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - One of the warrants used to raid former Donald Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani's home was issued to gather evidence related to the removal of former US Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch, the New York Times reported citing people familiar with the matter.

Yovanovitch was removed from her post in Kiev by former President Donald Trump in May 2019. Trump never gave a clear explanation for this action, but her dismissal came at a time when Giuliani was investigating Joe Biden, then a Democratic presidential candidate, and his son Hunter Biden over their involvement in Ukraine during the Obama administration.

On Wednesday, US media reported that FBI agents in New York's Manhattan district raided Giuliani's home as they stepped up a criminal investigation into his alleged dealings in Ukraine. The investigators had seized Giuliani's electronic devices, the reports said.

Investigators were probing whether Giuliani illegally lobbied the Trump administration in 2019 on behalf of Ukrainian officials and oligarchs, according to the reports.

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**US Secretary of State Blinken to Visit Ukraine Next Week - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Ukraine next week amid concerns over military movements on the country's border with Russia, CBS correspondent Norah O'Donnell reported citing the top US diplomat.

O'Donnell reported on Blinken's trip on Thursday but her full interview with the Secretary of State will be broadcast on Sunday on CBS' 60 Minutes show.

Sputnik reached out to the State Department to confirm the trip but did not receive an immediate response.

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**UPDATE - Blinken, US Security Aides Meet With Israel Spy Chief to Discuss Iran - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and several senior Biden administration national security aides in the Biden administration met with Israel's intelligence chief Yossi Cohen, the Associated Press reported.

The two-hour meeting was the second this week in Washington involving senior US and Israeli officials and underscored Israel's unease with the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States, the report said on Thursday citing people familiar with the matter.

The group of US officials included Blinken's deputy Wendy Sherman, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, National Security Council Middle East expert Brett McGurk and diplomat Derek Chollet. In addition to Cohen, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Gilad Erdan was also present at the meeting.

The meeting occurred amid ongoing negotiations in Vienna between the United States and Iran on reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement.

When asked about the meeting with Israel's spy chief, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik the department did not have a comment on the story.

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Blinken, US Security Aides Meet With Israel Spy Chief to Discuss Iran - Reports

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"The two-hour meeting was the second this week in Washington involving senior officials from the two countries and underscored Israel's unease with ongoing indirect nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States in Vienna and Iran more broadly, the officials said. Although other issues were discussed, Israel used Thursday's meeting to 'express strong concerns' about Iran," the report said on Thursday.

The group of US officials included Blinken's deputy Wendy Sherman, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, National Security Council Middle East expert Brett McGurk and diplomat Derek Chollet. In addition to Cohen, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Gilad Erdan was also present at the meeting.

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US Senate Confirms By Unanimous Consent Ex-Senator Bill Nelson to Be NASA Chief

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate has confirmed former senator and astronaut Bill Nelson to serve as the head of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The Senate confirmed Nelson's nomination by unanimous consent on Thursday afternoon.

Nelson served as a chairman of the US House Space Subcommittee for six years, then while in the Senate he served as the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Space and Science

Subcommittee and Ranking Member of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Nelson traveled to space in 1986 aboard the Space Shuttle Columbia and served as a payload specialist. His trip made him the second sitting US lawmaker to travel into space.

US space activity has been very active over the last several years as NASA works with private companies like billionaire Elon Musk's SpaceX to boost efforts to develop new ways to send humans to space and the moon.

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US Senate Confirms Victoria Nuland as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Senate confirmed Victoria Nuland to be Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the upper chamber's press gallery said.

"The Senate just confirmed Victoria Nuland to Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs by voice vote," the gallery tweeted.

Nuland has served in the State Department for 32 years - as Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, Ambassador to NATO and chief negotiator on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

Nuland has been posted to serve overseas in Russia, China and Mongolia.

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Canada's Employment 1.2M In Off Pre-COVID-19 Levels - Statistics Agency

TORONTO, April 29 (Sputnik) - Canada's employment levels remain well below pre-coronavirus levels, with the country counting more than one million fewer payroll workers a year after the pandemic began, the state statistics agency said.

"The total number of payroll employees in February was down 1.2 million (-6.8%) from one year earlier, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic," Statistics Canada said in its monthly survey of employment, payrolls and hours on Thursday.

Canada did, however, add 43,400 payroll employees in February, after a substantial drop at the height of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in January, with Quebec and Alberta reporting the largest increases, the agency said. The gains were offset by a decrease of nearly 21,000 payroll employees in Ontario.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has vowed to recover the jobs lost during the pandemic, with the government expecting employment levels to return to pre-pandemic levels at some point during 2021, according to the federal budget delivered last week.

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**US Senate by Unanimous Consent Confirms Ex-Senator Bill Nelson to Be NASA Chief**

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**US Earmarks \$29Mln for Communities With Elevated COVID-19 Risk - Health Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL) will receive \$29 million in new grants for research targeting COVID-19 vaccine confidence and access, as well as outreach to communities hard hit by the pandemic, the agency said.

"The awards will provide \$15 million to 11 teams already conducting research and outreach to help strengthen COVID-19 vaccine confidence and access, as well as testing and treatment, in communities of color. An additional \$14 million will fund 10 new research teams to extend the reach of COVID-19 community-engaged research and outreach," NIH said in a press release on Thursday.

Throughout 2021, CEAL researchers will tap community leaders, trusted organizations, and experts familiar to their communities, including NIH Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx) testing centers, state health departments, and certified diabetes educators and community health workers, the release added.

The new funding provided by the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan adds to \$17 million in CEAL grants in 2020 that also targeted Americans at risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes, primarily in minority communities, according to the release.

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**US Senate Confirms Victoria Nuland to Serve as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs**  
Sputnik

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik)

### US TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

\* The NATO headquarters confirmed on Thursday the beginning of a gradual withdrawal of the alliance's forces from Afghanistan in accordance with the earlier decision, a NATO official told Sputnik.

\* The United States has begun pulling out its forces from Afghanistan, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters.

### KYRGYZSTAN-TAJIKISTAN TENSIONS

\* The death toll among Kyrgyz citizens in the conflict on the border with Tajikistan increased to three people, including a 13-year-old girl, and the number of injured has risen to 31, the Ministry of Health told Sputnik.

\* The United Nations is following with concern the reports of cross-border shelling between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and calls on the countries to engage in direct talks, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said.

\* Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have agreed on a ceasefire on the border from 14:00 GMT on Thursday and the withdrawal of forces to the places of the previous deployment, the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry said.

\* Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev expressed concern over the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and expressed his readiness to make efforts to restore confidence between the parties.

### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* The United States is eyeing potential strategic stability talks with Russia and an early renewal of the New START Treaty, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia Laura Cooper said on Thursday.

\* The United States will respond if Russia shuts down Radio Free Europe, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

\* Moscow welcomes US President Joe Biden's statements about his intentions to avoid escalation with Russia, but the deeds of the current US administration are at odds with its words, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

\* The US believes Russia will seek to build on the extension of the new START treaty with bilateral cooperation over the next year, including talks on strategic stability, Director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Scott Berrier, said in a testimony to the Congress,

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to meet Biden without any preconditions, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

\* The United States is alarmed by the Ukraine cabinet ministers' actions to dismiss the supervisory board of Naftogaz, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing on Thursday.

\* The Russian Foreign Ministry states that the rejection of the Minsk agreements is already becoming the official position of Kiev, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

\* Russia hopes that the Ukrainian military will not resume combat operations in the country's southeast, which otherwise will be "madness," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said.

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#### US WWII Veterans Hope to Visit Russia Again Once Travel Restrictions Lifted - Foundation

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Last year, twelve World War II veterans from the United States were scheduled travel to Russia in May to celebrate the anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War in Moscow as well as visit St. Petersburg and Volgograd.

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The Greatest GENERATIONS Foundation is a charitable organization and is not part of the US federal government. The foundation operates more than 30 chapters across North America and exists because of the generosity of individuals and various organizations that are supportive of its mission.

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#### Report Predicts Asians to Become Largest US Immigrant Group By Mid-Century

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Non-Hispanic Asians will become the largest immigrant group in the United States, surpassing Hispanics by 2055, the PEW Research Center said in a report on Thursday.

"By then, Asians are expected to make up 36 percent of all US immigrants, while Hispanics will make up 34 percent," the report based on data extrapolated from the US Census said. The modern immigration wave from Asia has accounted for a quarter of all immigrants who have arrived in the United States since 1965, the report noted. Chinese Americans are the largest Asian origin group in the United States, making up 23 percent of the Asian population, or 5.4 million people, the report said. The next two largest origin groups are Indian Americans, who account for 20 percent of the total (4.6 million people), and Filipinos, who account for 18 percent (or 4.2 million people), the report said. Vietnamese, Koreans and Japanese account for 9 percent, 8 percent and 6 percent of the US Asian population respectively, the report added.

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Blinken Praises Algeria for Stabilizing Libya, Welcoming US Business - State Dept.  
WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call to his Algerian counterpart Sabri Boukadoum Thursday praised Algeria's role in stabilizing Libya, the Sahel as well as its willingness to attract American businesses, the State Department said. "The Secretary expressed his appreciation for Algeria's role in fostering stability in the Sahel and Libya. The Secretary commended Algeria's economic and energy diversification efforts and its desire to attract more US businesses to Algeria," the statement said. The State Department added that Blinken and Boukadoum discussed further strengthening of the bilateral relationship and explored opportunities for cooperation in promoting economic prosperity and regional stability in Africa.

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German Company SAP to Pay \$8Mln for Iran Sanctions Violations - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The German software company SAP has agreed to pay \$8 million in penalties for violating US sanctions imposed against Iran, the Department of Justice said in a statement on Thursday. "SAP SE, headquartered in Walldorf, Germany, has agreed to pay combined penalties of more than \$8 million as part of a global resolution with the US Departments of Justice, Commerce and Treasury," the statement said. The Justice Department said SAP has acknowledged violating the Export Administration Regulations and the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations by willfully exporting its products to users in Iran between 2010 and 2017, the statement said. The US government and SAP entered into a non-prosecution agreement as a result of cooperation and strong remediation costing more than \$27 million, the statement also said.

"SAP will suffer the penalties for its violations of the Iran sanctions, but these would have been far worse had they not disclosed, cooperated, and remediated," Assistant US Attorney General John Demers said.

The US Treasury Department said in a separate statement that SAP agreed to pay more than \$2.1 million to settle violations of sanctions against Iran.

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US Must Keep Lines of Communication With Russia Open to Achieve Stability - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia must keep lines of bilateral communication open in order to achieve some stability, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We need to keep those lines of communication open if we are to inject some degree of stability and predictability into the relationship," Price said in a press briefing.

The Biden administration recently expelled 10 Russian diplomats from the United States and imposed sanctions on 32 Russian entities and individuals as part of a new round of sanctions over Moscow's alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts against US interests.

Moscow has denied the allegations and said the latest US sanctions run contrary to the US administration's rhetoric that it seeks a stable relationship with Russia.

Price said the US administration hopes not all avenues of engagement with Russia will be shut off following the latest US sanctions and expulsions of several Russian diplomats.

Moscow has provided the United States a list of reciprocal actions it will impose on the US Mission to Russia, which is currently being reviewed by the Biden administration, Price said, adding that Washington will respond if it deems it necessary.

The United States and Russia are currently working on possibly holding a summit between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the early summer.

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US Approves Proposed \$1.685Bln Sale of Heavy Armored Combat Systems to Australia

WASHINGTON, April 29, (Sputnik) - The US State Department has given its approval to a proposed plan to sell approximately \$1.685 billion worth of heavy armored combat systems, including tanks and other armored vehicles, to the Australian military, according to an announcement by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Australia of Heavy Armored Combat Systems and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.685 billion," the DSCA said.

The proposed sale, which has been sent to Congress for further approval, includes 160 M1A1 Tank structures that will be used to produce 75 M1A2 SEPv3 Abrams Main Battle Tanks, in addition to 29 M1150 Assault Breacher Vehicles, 18 M1074 Joint Assault Bridges, six M88A2 Hercules Combat Recovery Vehicles, and 122 AGT1500 gas turbine engines.

The equipment is intended to help Australia meet current and future threats by enhancing the lethality, survivability, and interoperability of their forces, as well as helping the US support its own foreign policy and national security objectives in the region, the agency said.

Furthermore, the State Department also approved a proposed sale of \$259 million worth of Chinook helicopters and related equipment on Thursday.

Whereas the heavy armored combat systems will be provided by US contractors, the helicopters will be taken from US Army stock. At the same time, the DSCA statement emphasized that the sales would in no way impact US defense readiness.

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US to Retaliate If Russia Shuts Down Radio Free Europe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will respond if Russia shuts down Radio Free Europe, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Should the Russian government continue to move to forcibly shut down RFE/RL [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty], we will respond," Price said in a press briefing.

Earlier in the month, Russian media watchdog Roskomnadzor said it drew up nearly 400 administrative violation protocols against the US government-funded organization over continuing to refuse to label its content as foreign agent, leading to fines totaling \$919,000.

Price said US officials will continue to raise the issue concerning RFE/RL with their Russian counterparts.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that he had addressed the situation of RFE/RL, which targets media consumers in Russia and the post-Soviet space, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The Moscow bureau of RFE/RL, designated as a foreign agent in Russia, recently filed a lawsuit against the country with the European Court of Human Rights in order to appeal Russian court rulings obligating it to pay fines for not identifying itself as a foreign agent as required by law.

The purpose of the law is to inform Russian readers that content shared by such media may be pursuing the interests of foreign countries.

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US Concerned by Ukraine Cabinet Move to Dismiss Naftogaz Supervisory Board - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is alarmed by the Ukraine cabinet ministers' actions to dismiss the supervisory board of Naftogaz, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are deeply concerned by the Ukrainian cabinet ministers' recent actions to manipulate existing regulations to dismiss the supervisory board and replace the management of Ukraine's leading energy company," Price said. "This calculated move using a procedural loophole to oust well-regarded experts from the boards of several key state-owned enterprises reflects a disregard for fair and transparent corporate governance practices and complicates long-standing efforts to reform Ukraine's energy sector and improve its investment climate." Ukraine's state energy company Naftogaz CEO Andriy Kobolyev said on Wednesday that he learned about his dismissal from the news and did not in fact tender his resignation. Earlier on Wednesday, lawmaker Olga Vasilevskaya-Smaglyuk wrote in her Telegram channel that the cabinet fired Kobolyev.

"Unfortunately these actions are just the latest example of ignoring best practices and putting Ukraine's hard-fought economic progress at risk," Price said. "We will continue to support Ukraine in strengthening its institutions including advancing democratic institutions and corporate governance reforms but Ukraine's leaders must do their part as well."

Ukraine's government appointed Yurii Vitrenko as the new chairman of the board of state energy company Naftogaz after terminating the contract with the former CEO. Vitrenko had served as acting energy minister from December 2020 until his appointment.

The decision was triggered by the review of the company's performance in 2020. According to the statement, the net consolidated loss of the Naftogaz group of companies was estimated at 19 billion hryvnias (about \$680 million) as opposed to the predicted profit of 11.5 billion hryvnias. In light of the losses, the company's shareholders viewed the work of the supervisory board and the management board as "unsatisfactory." The new chairman will be tasked with "systematically increasing Ukrainian gas production, as well as assisting in the formation of a full and fair gas market in Ukraine."

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US State Department Says 'Some Progress' Made in Talks With Iran, More Remains to Be Done

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Progress has been made in the Iranian Nuclear Deal talks while much more remains to be done in order to reach the agreement, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We've been able to engage indirectly with the Iranian delegation in largely thoughtful business-like constructive dialogue but there is still a great distance to travel, and what we have said before about having more road ahead of us than road behind us, remains accurate," Price said at a briefing. "It is fair to say that some progress has been made. We have a better understanding of what we might need to do, were Iran to go back into compliance and it is our assessment that the Iranians have a better sense of what they would need to do to resume their compliance with the JCPOA."

UPDATE - Stratolaunch Aircraft Designed to Carry Hypersonic Vehicles Completes Second Test Flight

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Aerospace company Stratolaunch's carrier aircraft, which is designed to launch hypersonic and space vehicles, has successfully performed its second test flight in California's Mojave Desert, the company said on Thursday.

"Touchdown!! Successful flight tests to round out the day," the company statement said, marking Stratolaunch's second test flight since April 2019.

The company website emphasizes that the aircraft will be used as a mobile launch platform capable of launching more than one hypersonic vehicle during a flight. The company hopes this aircraft will create a more affordable and convenient hypersonic market by eliminating certain technical and logistical barriers in the industry, such as delayed launches due to bad weather.

Stratolaunch has already partnered with aerospace research development company Calspan Systems to build and test a reusable hypersonic prototype vehicle called Talon-A. Stratolaunch's aircraft is the largest aircraft in the world. It has six Boeing 747 engines that allow the aircraft to carry a maximum payload weight of at least 500,000 pounds. The aircraft's wingspan stretches over 100 yards.

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US Nursing Home Data Shows 22 COVID-19 Cases in 14,765 Vaccinated Residents – Report WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Twenty-two of nearly 15,000 staff and residents at 78 Chicago senior care facilities contracted COVID-19 despite being fully vaccinated, according to a report published by the US Centers for Disease Control on Thursday.

"Nearly two thirds (14 of 22; 64%) of persons with breakthrough infections were asymptomatic; two residents were hospitalized because of COVID-19, and one died," the report said.

The report examined data from a three-month period ending on March 31, 2021. During the investigation period, an estimated 7,931 SNF residents and 6,834 staff members received two doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

A total of 627 confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infections were identified across 75 of the 78 Chicago-based skilled nursing facilities. However, COVID-19 cases contracted more than 14 days after the second dose of a two-dose vaccine - the threshold for full immunity - totaled 22, with zero cases of facility-associated secondary transmission, the report said.

Nevertheless, the report recommended that nursing homes continue to quarantine staff and residents after close contact with an infected person because it remains unknown whether vaccinated asymptomatic persons can transmit the disease.

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US Aerospace Company Blue Origin to Begin Selling Tickets for Tourist Trips in Space

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US aerospace company Blue Origin announced on Thursday that it will soon begin selling tickets to individuals interested in travelling to space.

"It's time. You can buy the very first seat on New Shepard. Sign up to learn how at blueorigin.com. Details coming May 5th," Blue Origin said via Twitter.

The company's New Shepard rocket - named after US astronaut Alan Shepard - is designed to bring a crew up into suborbital space before safely returning to Earth's surface.

A video accompanying the tweet appears to show the New Shepard rocket booster completing a vertical landing while a crew capsule also returns to land using several parachutes.

Private aerospace companies like Blue Origin, founded by multi-billionaire Jeff Bezos, and rival Elon Musk's SpaceX, have seen significant growth in recent years, both in terms of public-private partnerships with space agencies and in terms of private space tourism.

To date, the Russian space agency Roskosmos is the only entity that has sent tourists in space.

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US Concerned by Ukraine Cabinet Move to Dismiss Naftogaz Supervisory Board - State Dept WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is alarmed by the Ukraine cabinet ministers' actions to dismiss the supervisory board of Naftogaz, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing on Thursday.

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German Software Firm SAP to Pay \$2.1Mln to Settle Iran Sanctions Violations - US Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – German software company SAP agreed to pay the United States over \$2.1 million to settle violations of sanctions against Iran, US Treasury said in a statement on Thursday.

"OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] has announced a \$2,132,174 settlement with SAP SE ("SAP"). SAP, a software company located in Walldorf, Germany has agreed to settle its potential civil liability for 190 apparent violations of the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 560," the statement said.

US government has accused SAP of engaging in export, re-export, sale or supply technology or services from the United States to companies in third countries in 2013-2018. These transactions were undertaken with knowledge or reason that the software or services were intended specifically for Iran, the Treasury added.

"OFAC determined that SAP voluntarily self-disclosed the apparent violations, and that these apparent violations constitute a non-egregious case," the statement added.

Iran has been under strangling US-led sanctions since then-US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action intended to curb Tehran's nuclear program. Indirect talks have commenced between the two sides under Joe Biden to reinstate the US as part of the deal.

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## US Marines Commandant Says US Must Learn Lessons From Azerbaijan's Successes Against Armenia

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijan easily rendered useless formidable Armenian ground forces with swarms of unmanned aerial systems during their recent standoff in Nagorno-Karabakh offering potential lesson to be learned by the United States military, US Marine Corps Commandant David Berger said in a congressional testimony on Thursday. Berger used last year's conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a case for embracing "a new readiness paradigm" in which the availability of forces ranks behind their ability to generate a warfighting advantage.

"During the most recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenian ground forces that we would have labeled ready based on availability, were easily targeted and destroyed by Azerbaijani forces employing elements of a precision strike regime to include swarms of loitering munitions and lethal unmanned systems," Berger told the US House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

"While Armenia's tanks and infantry fighting vehicles were available, they were not operationally suitable, thus not ready for the conflict," Berger said.

In the latest round of hostilities, Azerbaijan reclaimed from Armenia parts of Nagorno-Karabakh region before both countries signed a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement.

Berger warned that the United States may soon find themselves outmatched by competitors unless "the readiness framework" is changed.

"To do so, we should embrace a new readiness paradigm in which availability ranks behind generating a relative warfighting advantage," he said.

For a force to be deemed ready, a capability must be both available when needed and creating "a strategic warfighting advantage against a specific threat in great power competition and conflict," he added.

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## Sheriff's Office Releases Names of Officers Involved in Andrew Brown Jr. Shooting

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The Pasquotank County Sheriff's office released a statement on Thursday giving the names of the seven officers involved in the police shooting of Andrew Brown Jr. in Elizabeth City, North Carolina earlier this month, in what the office is calling a delivery on its promise of transparency and accountability.

"Today, I'm releasing the names of the seven deputies who I placed on administrative leave after this incident. After reviewing the preliminary conclusions of the independent investigators conducting the internal review, and after carefully examining the body camera footage of the incident with my own staff, it's obvious that four deputies never fired their weapons and deserve to be reinstated to active duty," Pasquotank County Sheriff Tommy Wooten said.

The four deputies who have been reinstated include: Lieutenant Steven Judd; Sergeant Michael Swindell; Sergeant Kenneth Bishop; and Sergeant Joel Lunsford. The three officers who fired their weapons at Andrew Brown Jr., and as such will remain on administrative leave while the investigation continues include Corporal Aaron Lewellyn, Deputy Sheriff II Robert Morgan, and Investigator Daniel Meads.

Brown was shot and killed while driving away from officers carrying out a warrant, in what Brown's legal team has called an execution. Law enforcement officials, however, have argued that Brown's history as a felon who has previously resisted arrest made the situation high-risk.

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**US Needs Bigger Navy as China, Russia Challenge Its Supremacy at Sea - Admiral**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States needs a bigger Navy as it risks losing its advantage at sea to China and Russia within the next decade, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"The PRC's [China's] and Russia's aggressive naval growth and modernization are eroding US military advantages. Unchecked, these trends will leave the Navy unprepared to ensure our advantage at sea and protect national interests within the next decade," Gilday told the US House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

Gilday accused Russia and China of working to undermine the rules-based international maritime system, including through the militarization of the South China Sea and the Crimean peninsula.

"Based upon multiple rigorous, threat informed assessments conducted over the past five years - both inside and outside the Navy - it is my best military advice that America needs a larger Navy to counter the People's Liberation Army Navy that is growing in both capability and capacity," Gilday said.

China has grown its navy from 262 to 350 ships that include aircraft carriers, submarines and polar icebreakers in addition to building what he described as "the world's largest missile force to target regional waters," he added.

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**Canada Launches Independent Review of Sexual Misconduct in Military - Defense Minister**

TORONTO, April 29 (Sputnik) - The federal government is launching an independent review of the seemingly rampant culture of sexual misconduct in the Canada's armed forces, Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan announced on Thursday.

The review follows months of political turmoil after multiple allegations of sexual misconduct were leveled at the country's former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance and his

successor, Admiral Art McDonald, was forced to temporarily step from his post last amid a probe into misconduct allegations dating back to 2010.

"Louise Arbour, former Supreme Court Justice, has agreed to lead an independent external comprehensive review of our institutional policies and culture," Sajjan said.

Arbour's work will focus on implementing an external reporting system, outside of the chain of command, Sajjan said. Arbour will be able to make interim recommendations throughout the course of the inquiry, he added.

The upcoming inquiry will be the second comprehensive review of the toxic culture within the Canadian military in the past decade. In 2015, retired Supreme Court justice Marie Deschamps delivered her report that shed light on rampant misconduct within the armed forces, which primarily targeted women and sexual minorities, and called for several policy changes, including an external reporting system.

Canada's defense minister was repeatedly asked about the Deschamps report, including why the military still hasn't implemented an external reporting system, with the minister admitting that the CAF has much work to do in fully realizing the past report's recommendation but emphasizing that the Trudeau government want to take "bolder" action to address the culture long-term.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Sajjan have faced questions about what they knew and didn't know about Vance's misconduct, and are facing mounting criticism for alleged inaction upon learning of the claims.

Trudeau has asserted that he and his government handled misconduct allegations against the country's former top soldier appropriately. The Prime Minister, who vowed to take a zero-tolerance approach for sexual conduct allegations upon taking office, has stated that his office was aware of complaints but not the nature of the allegations.

However, the opposition said they are skeptical of Trudeau's assertions, accusing the Prime Minister of a cover up citing testimonies from former officials, including Maj. Kellie Brennan, the mother of two of Vance's children, who said the former top soldier believed himself to be "untouchable" and that he "owned" the military police that would have been in charge of investigating him.

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UN Security Council Will Hold Closed Discussion on Myanmar Friday - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will hold a closed informal meeting on Friday to discuss the situation in Myanmar, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday.

"There will be an informal closed meeting on the situation in Myanmar on Friday," the source said.

Earlier in the day, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener would brief the council on her recent engagements during the visits to Thailand and Indonesia.

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#### Americans Evenly Split on Senate Filibuster Reform, Few Want it Dumped Entirely - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Nearly four in 10 US citizens want reforms to the Senate filibuster, which requires a 60 vote supermajority to approve controversial legislation, while just two in 10 want the parliamentary maneuver eliminated, a Monmouth University poll said on Thursday.

“Nearly 4 in 10 Americans (38%) want to keep the filibuster in its current form with no changes, while a majority either think the Senate should reform how it can be used (38%) or get rid of it entirely (19%),” a press release explaining the poll said.

Most Democrats would like to see some changes, including 49 percent who want reforms and 30 percent who want it eliminated entirely, the release said.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Republicans think the filibuster should not be changed at all while about one-third are open to either some reforms (22%) or elimination (10%), the release said.

Among independents not affiliated with either major party, 41 percent want the filibuster kept as is, 38 percent want reform and 16 percent favor elimination, according to the release.

On specific issues, about half of the public supports using the filibuster to block bills on federal tax rate changes (52%), new programs and spending (50%), gun control (48%), raising the minimum wage (47%), immigration (46%), and election rules (46%), the release said.

Many Senate Democrats want the filibuster scrapped entirely, fearing that the parliamentary device will allow Republicans to prevent the passage of President Joe Biden’s plans to expand government with an ambitious social-spending agenda that the president outlined in a Wednesday speech to Congress.

Thus far, however, opposition from at least two Democratic Senators appears to leave Democrats short of the 51-vote majority needed to eliminate the filibuster, analysts say.

The survey was conducted by telephone between April 8 and April 12, 2021, among 800 US adults and comes with a 3.5 plus-minus margin of error.

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#### US Marine Corps Do Not Have Enough Pilots, Maintainers for F-35 Aircraft - Commandant

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US Marine Corps does not have sufficient personnel to fly and service its current and projected fleet of the F-35 jets as it continues to lose the competition to the civilian sector, Marine Corps Commandant David Berger said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

“We are not maintaining sufficient numbers of naval aviators and F-35 maintainers to sustain either our existing inventory of aircraft or aircraft programmed for the years to come. Within our

F-35 community, we have a shortfall of both pilots and maintainers," Berger told the US House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

Berger explained that the military services, including the Marine Corps, continue to lose the competition with the airline industry for personnel and even the adverse impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the civilian sector failed to improve the situation.

Unless these shortfalls are remedied in "the very near future," the Marines may find themselves in a situation "in which we are directed by Congress to procure aircraft for which we have insufficient pilots and maintainers," Berger said.

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#### Oregon Governor Extends State of Emergency Amid Increase in Coronavirus Cases

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Oregon Governor Kate Brown on Thursday announced that she has extended the COVID-19-related state of emergency for another 60 days after a reported increase in the number of people who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus. "We are in the middle of the fourth surge of COVID-19 in Oregon, driven by more contagious variants of the disease. We must stop hospitalizations from spiking, so we can save lives, help our nurses and doctors weather this surge, and ensure no Oregonian is denied vital health care," Brown said.

The state of emergency now extends to June 28, unless Brown decides to end it ahead of time or extend it yet again. By declaring a state of emergency, Oregon officials are able to gain access to additional federal and state resources that otherwise would not be available.

Brown also urged the residents of her state to continue practicing physical distancing, wear masks and get vaccinated.

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#### UPDATE - White House Says US Troops Start Withdrawing From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has begun pulling out its forces from Afghanistan, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Thursday.

"A drawdown is underway," Jean-Pierre said. "Last week, Secretary of Defense approved the request from US Central Command for the temporary deployment of additional military assets into the Centcom AOR [area of responsibility] in order to support a safe and deliberate withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan."

Jean-Pierre noted that the US Army Ranger task force will be sent to Afghanistan amid the ongoing US troop withdrawal.

"Elements of an Army Ranger task force will temporarily deploy to Afghanistan to assist with the force protection of forces on the ground as we initiate withdrawal operations," Jean-Pierre said. "In the weeks and months ahead, the US Central Command will continually assess force protection requirements in coordination with US forces in Afghanistan and has the flexibility to move additional capabilities into and out of Afghanistan as required."

Jean-Pierre pointed out that the Administration remains committed to withdrawing all US military personnel from Afghanistan by September 11, stressing, however, that the pullout will be conducted in a safe and responsible manner.

"Potential adversaries should know that if they attack us, our withdrawal, we will defend ourselves, our partners with all the tools at our disposal," she warned.

On Tuesday, US officials urged American civilians and embassy employees to leave the country as soon as possible, given that a non-aggression agreement between the US and the Taliban is set to expire by May 1.

US President Joe Biden announced earlier this month the decision to withdraw troops from the country starting on that May 1 deadline, with the aim of completely withdrawing from Afghanistan by September 11, which would mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that sparked the war in Afghanistan, the longest conflict in American history.

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UN Trusts Russia Will Ensure Required Medical Treatment for Navalny - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations trusts that Russian authorities will ensure required medical treatment for jailed opposition figure Alexey Navalny, UN spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters on Thursday.

"We continue to trust that the relevant authorities in Russia will ensure the provision of any required medical treatment for him," Haq said during a press briefing.

On April 19, Navalny, who has been complaining about severe back and leg pain and went on a hunger strike at the end of March, was transferred to a prison hospital, where he was given intravenous glucose infusion.

Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatiana Moskalkova said that four independent doctors had also visited Navalny, having reported no serious health issues.

Navalny is currently serving a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for a financial misdemeanor. Russian prosecutors seek to label his Anti-Corruption Foundation and the Citizens' Rights Protection Foundation as extremist organizations. The court hearings are scheduled for May 17.

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White House Says Elements of Army Ranger Task Force Will Temporarily Be Deployed

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Elements of the US Army Ranger task force will be sent to Afghanistan for a period of time amid the ongoing US troop withdrawal, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Thursday.

"Elements of an Army Ranger task force will temporarily deploy to Afghanistan to assist with the force protection of forces on the ground as we initiate withdrawal operations," Jean-Pierre said. "In the weeks and months ahead, the US Central Command will continually assess force protection requirements in coordination with US forces in Afghanistan and has the flexibility to move additional capabilities into and out of Afghanistan as required."

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UN Confirms Guterres to Visit Moscow on May 12 at Russia's Invitation - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will, at the invitation of Russia, visit Moscow in May, where he will meet with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General will travel to Moscow next month on the 12th of May, at the invitation of the government of the Russian Federation," Haq said. "Certainly, the relations between Russia and other key countries would be one of many different topics that could come up."

Besides Guterres' meeting with Lavrov, no more engagements have been scheduled so far as the program of the visit will be worked out in the coming days, the spokesman said.

In recent weeks, the relations between Russia and the West have significantly deteriorated over Moscow's alleged troop buildup on the Russian-Ukrainian border. Russia maintains that other countries should not be bothered by its troop movements along its own borders.

In addition, on April 17, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis said that Prague suspected Russia's intelligence of involvement in a 2014 explosions at a munitions depot, expelling 18 Russian diplomats from the Czech Republic. Moscow refuted the accusations and expelled 20 Czech diplomats in response.

Prior to that, the United States expelled 10 Russian diplomats from the country and imposed sanctions on 32 Russian entities and individuals as part of a new round of sanctions over Moscow's alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts against US interests.

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US Begins Regulatory Push to Ban Menthol Cigarettes - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US government plans to ban menthol flavoring in cigarettes, claiming the prohibition will save lives, especially among the nation's African-American population, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Thursday.

"Banning menthol - the last allowable flavor- in cigarettes and banning all flavors in cigars will help save lives, particularly among those disproportionately affected by these deadly products," the FDA said in a press release.

The release claimed a menthol ban would especially benefit African-Americans.

"For far too long, certain populations, including African-Americans, have been targeted, and disproportionately impacted by tobacco use," FDA Tobacco Products Director Mitch Zeller said in the release.

The release cited two studies, including one claiming that a menthol ban would lead to an additional 923,000 smokers to quit within 17 months, including 230,000 African-Americans. The second study claimed a menthol ban would save 633,000 lives, including about 237,000 deaths of African Americans.

However, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) warned that the ban amounts to a prohibition with adverse implications for racial justice.

"There are serious concerns that the ban implemented by the Biden administration will eventually foster an underground market that is sure to trigger criminal penalties which will disproportionately impact people of color and prioritize criminalization over public health and harm reduction" the legal advocacy group said in a press release prior to the FDA announcement.

In a letter to US Health Secretary Xavier Becerra and acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock, the ACLU noted that a number of police encounters resulting in the death of African-American suspects were linked to enforcement of existing tobacco laws.

As an example, the ACLU cited the 2014 killing of Eric Garner, who died during an arrest by New York City police for selling untaxed individual cigarettes.

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#### White House Says US Troops Started Withdrawing From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has begun pulling out its forces from Afghanistan, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Thursday.

"A drawdown is underway ," Jean-Pierre said. "Last week, Secretary of Defense approved the request from US Central Command for the temporary deployment of additional military assets into the Centcom AOR [area of responsibility] in order to support a safe and deliberate withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan."

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#### UN Says Following With Concern Shelling Between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Urges Direct Talks

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) -The United Nations is following with concern the reports of cross-border shelling between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and calls on the countries to engage in direct talks, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"This is something that we're following with concern," Haq said when asked about the clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in which at least four people died.

"We're also aware that there's been an announcement by the two countries that a ceasefire has now been agreed. If that's the case, it would be welcomed, and we would encourage both sides to continue direct negotiations to resolve any outstanding issues in a peaceful manner," he said.

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#### **Stratolaunch Aircraft Designed to Carry Hypersonic Vehicles Performing Second Test Flight**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Aerospace company Stratolaunch's carrier aircraft, which is designed to launch hypersonic and space vehicles, is performing its second test flight in California's Mojave Desert, the company said on Thursday.

"We are airborne," the company said in a statement. "Currently performing various flight test maneuvers."

The aircraft will complete its test flight at about 2 p.m. Eastern Time (18:00 GMT)T. It is Stratolaunch's second test flight since April 2019.

The company website emphasizes that the aircraft will be used as a mobile launch platform capable of launching more than one hypersonic vehicle during a flight. The company hopes this aircraft will create a more affordable and convenient hypersonic market by eliminating certain technical and logistical barriers in the industry, such as delayed launches due to bad weather. Stratolaunch has already partnered with aerospace research development company Calspan Systems to build and test a reusable hypersonic prototype vehicle called Talon-A.

Stratolaunch's aircraft is the largest aircraft in the world. It has six Boeing 747 engines that allow the aircraft to carry a maximum payload weight of at least 500,000 pounds. The aircraft's wingspan stretches over 100 yards.

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#### **Pelosi Estimates Three-Fourths of Lawmakers Vaccinated Against COVID-19**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – About 75 percent of US lawmakers have been vaccinated against coronavirus disease, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"It's about 75 percent. It may be in the last few days some more but I think it's about 75 percent [vaccinated]," Pelosi said in response to a reporter's question during a press conference.

Just over 200 masked and socially distanced lawmakers sat in the House chamber for US President Joe Biden's speech, following instructions from the Capitol physician, Pelosi said. The chamber normally holds about 1,600 members and guests during presidential addresses.

"The Capitol physician insisted... that that social distancing, that mask wearing were necessary so that we're not contributing to the spread of covid," Pelosi said.

According to the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, fully vaccinated people can gather indoors without wearing masks or social distancing. But Pelosi said the COVID-19 jabs cannot be required of lawmakers due to privacy concerns, nor could she or any other lawmaker obtain a list from the Capitol physician of unvaccinated members of Congress.

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Moderna Commits to Supply 3Bln of Coronavirus Vaccine Doses in 2022 - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Moderna has made funding commitments to increase the supply of its coronavirus vaccine to 3 billion doses depending on the mix that will include its variant booster candidates and pediatric vaccines if they are authorized by the relevant governments, the company said in a statement on Thursday.

"[Moderna] today announced it is making new funding commitments to increase supply at its owned and partnered manufacturing facilities, which it expects will increase global 2022 capacity to up to 3 billion doses of its COVID-19 vaccine, depending upon the mix between the authorized Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine at the 100 µg dose level and potentially lower doses of the Company's variant booster candidates and pediatric vaccines, if authorized," the statement said.

Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said in the statement that the investments will be made to the company's production facilities in Europe, including Spain, France, Belgium and Switzerland, as well as in the United States.

The company's ongoing vaccine development will support a three-month refrigerated shelf storage at temperatures of 2-8 degrees Celsius. Today, the vaccine is approved for storage of up to 1 month at 2-8 degrees Celsius and up to seven months at -20 degrees Celsius, the statement said.

The Moderna shot is one of three vaccines authorized for emergency use in the Food and Drug Administration.

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US Pending Home Sales Below Expectations in March As Prices Skyrocket - Data

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US pending home sales rose almost 2 percent in March from a contraction of nearly 11 percent in February, industry data showed Thursday, but the

growth was still less than half of market expectations amid signs that record-high prices were beginning to weigh on the sector.

Pending home sales, a measure of signings on existing home purchases that have yet to be concluded, rose 1.9 percent last month, after shrinking by 10.6 percent in February, the National Association of Realtors said.

Economists polled by US media had expected a 4.4 percent growth in March and blamed the smaller-than-expected expansion on record-high home prices in the United States in recent months, despite an economy still restrained by the coronavirus pandemic.

"While we saw an increase in new sellers in April, we still don't have as many as in recent pre-pandemic years," Danielle Hale, chief economist at realtor.com said in a comment carried by CNBC.

Existing homes offered for sale in the United States fetched \$330,000 each on average in March, an all-time peak based on data tracked by the National Association of Realtors.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell, commenting on the phenomenon in the housing market, said on Wednesday that since it was the biggest boom he had seen since the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

At the same time, Powell said he was not unduly concerned about a bubble forming in the housing sector due to runaway demand, saying he believed the average buyer was financially sound to keep up with mortgage payments. The housing market experienced its worst crash in March 2007, just before the 2008-2009 recession, due to over-gear'd buyers.

Economists said the current supply-demand mismatch and record-high prices for housing were partly due to the Federal Reserve keeping interest rates at near-zero over the past year, enabling people to borrow cheaply to buy homes.

The National Association of Realtors said on Thursday it expected the lag in home supply versus demand to ease in the coming months as more inventory came on the market.

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#### US Senator Manchin Introduces Bipartisan Bill to Enhance American Electric Grid Security

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia introduced a new bill – The PROTECT Act – that would attempt to protect America's electric grid by encouraging energy companies to invest in their cybersecurity, according to a Thursday press release from his office.

"The reliability and resilience of our electric grid goes hand-in-hand with the economic and national security of the United States, so it's critical that we're two steps ahead in planning for unexpected events and threats, Manchin said. "The PROTECT Act would create incentives for utilities to enhance their cybersecurity efforts and increase their resilience to attacks. I urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to support this common sense, bipartisan legislation to ensure we're keeping our grid – and our nation – safe."

The PROTECT Act, which stands for Protecting Resources On The Electric grid with Cybersecurity Technology, has received support from both sides of the aisle, with Senators Lisa

Murkowski, James Risch, Angus King, and Jacky Rosen joining Manchin in reintroducing the legislation.

If passed, the Secretary of Energy would work alongside the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, and the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council to establish a program called the Rural and Municipal Utility Advanced Cybersecurity Grant and Technical Assistance Program, which would provide grants and technical assistance to eligible energy entities to protect against cybersecurity threats.

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UPDATE: US Looking at Early Renewal of New START Treaty With Russia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is eyeing potential strategic stability talks with Russia and an early renewal of the New START Treaty, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia Laura Cooper said on Thursday.

"On the bilateral track, we very much are... pursuing the potential for a strategic stability dialogue with Russia and looking at the early renewal of the New START agreement," Cooper said.

Cooper also stressed that they aim to take the treaty's renewal not as an end accomplishment but as a beginning of a process that can lead to further progress on arms control.

In February, Russia and the US agreed to extend the New START treaty for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026. It is currently the only arms control agreement between two countries that is still in force.

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"On the bilateral track, we very much are... pursuing the potential for a strategic stability dialogue with Russia and looking at the early renewal of the New START agreement," Cooper said.

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Russia May Seek to Built New START Treaty Extension With Cooperation – Top Intel official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – The US believes Russia will seek to build on the extension of the new START treaty with bilateral cooperation over the next year, including talks on strategic stability, Director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Scott Berrier, said in a testimony to the Congress on Thursday.

“Over the next year, Russia may seek to build on the February 2021 extension of the New START treaty with new bilateral cooperation on select issues that meet Russian strategic interests, such as talks on strategic stability,” Berrier said.

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Russia Has No Preconditions for Putin-Biden Summit - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to meet his US counterpart Joe Biden without any preconditions, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said in a press briefing on Thursday. "The problem was created by the United States, it's up to the United States to clear this mess," Polyansky said when asked about the state of the US-Russia relations. "If they [US side] want normal relations, okay, we will wait, no problem, we are there, President Putin is ready to meet... When and where - no problem from our side, I assure you, and no preconditions." Last month, the White House said that Biden will meet the Russian leader "when the time is right."

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UPDATE - US Weekly Jobless Claims Down 2% in Continued Recovery from COVID - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Some 553,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, about 2 percent below the previous week's level, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that showed the job market continuing to turn the corner on the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending April 24, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 553,000, a decrease of 13,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

The 2 percent weekly decline in jobless claims came on top of the 7 percent drop in the previous week and a 25 percent plunge the week prior.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 540,000 filings for unemployment benefits last week, putting the 553,000 claims reported by the Labor Department above estimates but not grossly.

"With the prior week revised higher to 566K, this week's number for initial claims at 553K is the lowest since the start of the pandemic," noted economist Greg Michalowski in a post on ForexLive.

Continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag — however, rose marginally to 3.66 million for the week ended April 24, from 3.65 million during the week to April 17.

That kept the weekly reading for unemployment unchanged at 2.6 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the major challenges for US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About nine million of those jobs have not returned, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021, released on Thursday by the Commerce Department, showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast an economic growth of 6.5 percent for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, said he did not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to return before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 6 percent at the end of March.

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**US Intel Official Accuses Russia, China of Using COVID-19 to Conduct Information Warfare**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – US Defense Intelligence Agency chief Scott Berrier on Thursday accused Russia and China are using the COVID-19 pandemic to conduct information warfare against Western governments.

"They are also using the COVID-19 environment to conduct information warfare to undermine Western governments, attack Coalitions and compel economic and political outcomes in their favor," Berrier said during Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

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**US Couple Charged Over Firing Gun at Police Officer's House - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Prosecutors charged a couple in Puerto Rico with possession of a machine gun after they fired it to threaten a police officer, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"According to the Government's allegations, Joshua Meléndez-Rivera and Joyce Torres-Vivas parked in front of a police officer's residence in Utuado on April 26, 2020. When the officer asked if they needed anything, the occupants of the car—Meléndez-Rivera and

Torres-Vivas—responded angrily and Meléndez-Rivera pointed a gun,” the department said in a press release.

After the officer withdrew into her house, shots were fired. Meléndez-Rivera and Torres-Vivas were subsequently detained in the car and a pistol modified to be fully automatic was found inside, the release added.

If convicted, the defendants face a maximum sentence of ten years in prison, according to the release.

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US To Apply Pressure If Foreign Forces Do Not Withdraw From Libya – Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – The US will apply pressure to those countries that will not withdraw its forces from Libya as the international agreement requires, Laura Cooper, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, said during the Atlantic Council discussion on Thursday.

“In the case of Libya, we continue to watch, we continue to speak in terms of the absolute necessity for all foreign forces to withdraw, which is what the international agreement is at this point. And, you know, we will be prepared to continue to apply pressure if that does not happen,” Cooper said.

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UN Chief Guterres to Visit Moscow May 12-13 for Talks With Lavrov - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is set to visit Moscow from May 12 to 13 where he will meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said in a press briefing on Thursday.

“The Secretary-General will visit Moscow. He will be there on the 12th and the 13th of May,” Polyanskiy said. “We expect very fruitful negotiations with Foreign Minister Lavrov.”

The diplomat said Guterres and Lavrov will cover a wide range of topics, including Ukraine, Syria, Libya and the climate issue.

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UPDATE - US Q1 GDP Grew By 6.4%, Rebounding From COVID - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product likely expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday, as the world's largest economy rebounded sharply from the lows of the coronavirus pandemic after a surge in consumer spending.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, according to the 'advance' estimate released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis," the Commerce Department said in statement.

Typically, the department issues three GDP readings for each quarter, with Thursday's being its first estimate for the January-March period.

For the fourth quarter of 2020, GDP grew by 4.3 percent, the department said in its final reading issued on March 25.

The first quarter estimate released Thursday came in slightly lower than the 6.6 percent forecasts by economists polled by US media.

"The underlying picture is even stronger than the headline," economist Adam Button said in a comment posted on ForexLive. "Trade and inventories were a big drag in the quarter but consumer spending and investment bode well going forward. A huge jump in new truck sales skewed durable consumer spending higher but even as that fades, spending elsewhere will pick up the torch."

Consumer spending got a boost at the start of the year, helped by COVID-19 relief checks of \$1,400 per person sent out by the Treasury.

While the Q4 GDP growth for last year was positive, the economy still shrank 3.5 percent for all 2020 due to COVID-19 related measures. One main reason was that some nine million jobs lost at the height of the pandemic have not returned, officials said.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent GDP for all of 2021, although it says it does not expect "full employment" — defined by an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to return before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 6 percent at the end of March.

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**Trump Calls Raid on Giuliani's Apartment 'Very Unfair' - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Former US President Trump called the raid by federal agents on Rudy Giuliani's home "very unfair," media reported on Thursday.

The New York Times reported on Wednesday that Federal investigators in New York's Manhattan district raided the home of Giuliani, the one-time mayor of the city and personal lawyer of Trump, as they stepped up a criminal investigation into his alleged dealings in Ukraine. "Rudy Giuliani is a great patriot. He just loves this country, and they raid his apartment," Trump said in an interview with Fox Business. "It's like so unfair and...it's like a double standard like I don't think anybody's ever seen before... It's very, very unfair. Rudy is a patriot who loves this country."

The investigators had seized Giuliani's electronic devices, the report said, citing people with knowledge of the matter.

While the United States Attorney's office in Manhattan and the FBI had for months sought to secure a search warrant for Giuliani's telephones, the raid still marked a watershed moment in the investigation, the report said.

Investigators were probing whether Giuliani illegally lobbied the Trump administration in 2019 on behalf of Ukrainian officials and oligarchs, according to the report.

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#### US Investigating Suspected Direct-Energy Attack Near White House - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – US authorities are investigating a possible attack using direct-energy weapons near the White House along with at least one more similar incident in the country, CNN reported on Thursday, citing multiple sources familiar with the matter.

The alleged attack near the White House occurred last November and made sick one National Security Council official, the broadcaster noted, with another similar incident happening with a White House official in 2019 in a Washington, DC suburb.

The reports are not unlike those in 2016, US personnel in Cuba claimed to have fallen sick after hearing a high-pitched sound pierce through the building, something later theorized to be a direct-energy weapon aimed at the diplomats.

Meanwhile, investigators from the Pentagon and other federal agencies have not reached clear conclusions on what happened yet, CNN added.

On Friday, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said he is not ready to discuss reports about suspected attacks by direct-energy weapons against the US military.

Politico, citing two sources familiar with the matter, reported earlier last week that the Pentagon briefed top US lawmakers on suspected directed-energy attacks against American troops, claiming that Russia may be behind these incidents.

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#### RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Edges Trump in First 100 Days Despite Flawed Security Policies, Mental Gaffes

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden potentially outperformed his predecessor overall during his first one hundred days in office yet the administration's aggressive security policies - along with concerns over the commander-in-chief's mental stability - bode ill for America's future, analysts told Sputnik.

Thursday marks Biden's "first 100 days" in office - a much-hyped performance benchmark for new US administrations. The tradition began in 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who enacted 76 laws during this symbolic period.

#### EARLY SUCCESSES

As he hits the 100-day mark, Biden's Gallup job approval rating sits at 57 percent - 16 points higher than Trump's was at this point in 2017, a margin many attribute to progress in the fight against COVID-19 and the economic recovery.

Biden's approach to the pandemic has contrasted sharply with the one embraced by his predecessor, who admitted to downplaying the virus. Trump supporters, however, have argued that Biden is taking credit for the success of the previous administration's vaccine development and COVID-19 relief programs.

"After the disaster of four years of Trump's fascist, racist and incompetent misrule, for the majority of Americans Biden's presidency comes as a relief," historian and anti-nuclear campaigner Joseph Gerson told Sputnik.

Many in the US, Gerson added, are celebrating Biden's commitments and policies to stanch the pandemic, revitalize the economy and implement systemic changes to address painful inequalities.

Historian and political commentator Dan Lazare believes Biden has won praise for reversing many of his predecessor's environmental, nuclear and immigration policies, while following Trump's strategy on Afghanistan and COVID-19 relief.

"Biden's \$1.9-trillion economic stimulus package was immensely popular, as were his decisions to end US support for the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen, re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement, end Trump's Muslim immigration ban, and announce an Afghan pullout by September 11," Lazare told Sputnik.

#### SECURITY ISSUES

Since taking over in January, the Biden administration has taken Washington's relationship with Moscow to new lows, just after many thought it bottomed out during the Trump years. The White House has levied new rounds of sanctions against Russia over allegations ranging from election meddling to cyber warfare – accusations Moscow has repeatedly denied.

On the other hand, Biden also agreed to extend the New START treaty which was on the verge of expiring, quite a turnabout from the previous administration that appeared bent on destroying every US-Russian arms control pact.

Meanwhile, Biden has also escalated tensions with Beijing well beyond where they sat under Trump. On Wednesday, during his first joint address to Congress, the president vowed to keep a strong US military presence in the so-called "Indo-Pacific" region to counter China.

Lazare is concerned with Biden's inner circle - including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan - both of whom during the Obama administration supported US involvement in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Relations with China and Russia are also big unknowns, and the Biden foreign policy team, i.e. Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, does not exactly inspire confidence," Lazare said.

Lazare is also worried Biden's few foreign policy achievements could unravel. In Yemen, for example, the Houthis are closing in on the strategic city of Marib. If it falls, he added, US policy will be thrown into crisis since the balance of power could shift toward Iran.

Lazare also suggested the delayed extraction from Afghanistan could resemble the ugly scenes at the end of the Vietnam War.

Other critics have argued that if the Biden administration simply followed Trump's timeline American troops would already be home.

"Similarly, I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that the exit from Afghanistan will not go smoothly and may well end in a Saigon-style rooftop escape," Lazare said.

Gerson also raised red flags about the Biden administration's foreign and military policies which risk sparking a war with other great powers.

#### MENTAL CONCERNS

No less important for Lazare is the frightening glimpses into Biden's state of mind during these first 100 days.

Lazare speculated that Biden's gaffes may signal he is suffering from a severe mental disorder.

"Biden is the reincarnation, more or less, of Konstantin Chernenko, the Soviet leader who expired after just 13 months in office in the early 80s. It was plain that poor Konstantin had one foot in the grave from the moment he took office," Lazare explained.

The fact the Politburo chose Chernenko regardless of the situation shows how decrepit the Soviet system had become, Lazare claimed.

"But is Biden any different? Plainly he's suffering from early-onset senile dementia and is not all there either. So there's a hole where a president ought to be, which means that the executive branch at this point is a bit of a leaderless mob. It may not matter for now, but it will soon. So I think mucho trouble is brewing," Lazare concluded.

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#### New York City to Fully Reopen on July 1 – Mayor

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Authorities in New York City plan to fully reopen businesses including restaurants and theaters by July 1, Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Thursday. "Our plan is to fully reopen New York City on July 1," de Blasio told MSNBC. "We are ready for stores to open, for businesses to open, offices, theaters, full strength."

De Blasio noted that the city has made considerable progress on vaccine distribution, adding that 6.3 million New Yorkers have been vaccinated to date.

"We know, the vaccination efforts are going to grow and grow," he said.

On Friday, de Blasio announced that New Yorkers now can get vaccinations without appointments.

New York state was the biggest COVID-19 hotspot at the height of the pandemic last year. At the peak of the outbreak in April 2020, the state had about 18,000 people in hospitals and there were roughly 800 people dying a day from complications caused by the virus.

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#### US Weekly Jobless Claims Down 2% to 553,000 Last Week - Labor Dept

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US State Dept Allows Employee Family Members to Leave India Amid Worsening Pandemic

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States State Department has allowed family members of government employees to depart from India amid a worsening COVID-19 situation in the country.

"On April 28, 2021, the Department approved the voluntary departure of family members of U.S. government employees," the department said. "U.S. citizens who wish to depart India should take advantage of available commercial transportation options."

The State Department also renewed its travel advisory for India, calling on US citizens to avoid traveling to India.

"The Department of State renewed its Travel Advisory for India on April 28, 2021. The Department continues to advise travelers not to travel to India," the release said.

India has the second-highest number of COVID-19 infections in the world with a total of 18.3 million, registering over 300,000 new cases daily. The death toll is estimated at more than 200,000 people.

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US First Quarter GDP Grows by 6.4% - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US gross domestic product likely expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday, as the world's largest economy rebounded sharply from the lows of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, according to the 'advance' estimate released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis," the Commerce Department said in statement.

Typically, the department issues three GDP readings for each quarter, with this being its first estimate for the January to March period.