

**05/06/21 Thursday**

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Kiribati Clamor: Western Experts Fear Chinese Runway Repair Actually Aims at New Air Base by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Western strategists continue to worry China may turn some remote Pacific island into a new military base, the US operates several large military facilities in the region, some just 400 miles from the Chinese coast.

A derelict airfield on a remote Pacific island in the Republic of Kiribati could soon get an upgrade from the People's Republic of China. The two nations re-established ties two years ago and have embarked on new cooperation projects, including infrastructure investment as well as trade and cultural exchanges.

According to a [report by Reuters](#), Gilbertese opposition lawmaker Tessie Lambourne told the outlet the government of Kiribati President Taneti Maamau had been negotiating repairing the airfield on Kanton Island with China, but had not been informed if it was part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

"The government hasn't shared the cost and other details other than it's a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the runway and bridge," Lambourne told Reuters. "The opposition will be seeking more information from the government in due course."

According to Google Earth measurements, Kanton is located 5,280 miles southeast of Hong Kong, 1,850 miles southwest of Hawaii, and 800 miles north of the US territory of American Samoa. The airstrip, located on the northwestern corner of the porkchop-shaped atoll, is about 8,000 feet long, but only 6,500 feet of it looks remotely usable, with the remaining 1,500 feet overgrown with trees and shrubs.

The airstrip was built in the 1940s by the US Navy. Previously, PanAm had envisioned using the island's large, almost totally-enclosed lagoon as a stop-off point for flying boat service to New Zealand. The island itself has just two dozen inhabitants today and the airstrip has only been used sporadically since World War II.

One "adviser to Pacific governments" told Reuters that if repaired, Kanton "would be a fixed aircraft carrier." However, the airstrip would require considerably more construction in order to turn it into any kind of militarized facility, including hangars, repair facilities, storage, and, of course, housing. At its present length, it could accommodate some fighter jets with shorter takeoff distances, but larger transports or bombers - the ones with the gas tanks to fly that far out - aren't going to be able to use the runway even if it is restored to its full length.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a Canberra-based think tank funded in part by the Australian Department of Defense, fretted in a [September 2020 article](#) that Beijing was likely to reclaim seabed and expand island installations in Kiribati as well as fortify them, as it has done to some South China Sea islands. It accused China of "moving to achieve control over the vital trans-Pacific sea lines of communication under the guise of assisting with economic development and climate-change adaptation."

The think tank noted that Pacific islands are “vulnerable” to Chinese influence because of their dependence on other nations for financial support, but the same could also be said of the government on Taiwan, which is largely kept afloat by [informal military](#) and trade deals with the United States, despite Washington having switched its recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979. [The War Zone noted](#) the airstrip, if it even becomes a military facility, which is also far from certain, would most likely be used as a base for the plethora of unmanned [reconnaissance drones](#) used by the People’s Liberation Army.

Indeed, Lambourne’s concern is whether the airstrip will be part of the Belt and Road Initiative, a globe-spanning infrastructure megaproject sponsored by Beijing that is building or expanding transportation as well as electrical networks, with projects ranging from wind farms in Kenya to port facilities in Pakistan and railroads across Central Asia.

In January 2020, just months after Kiribati switched its recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, the two nations announced a Kiribati 20-Year Vision development plan. According to [China Global Television](#), this will include cooperation on “economy and trade, fishery, agriculture, education, healthcare and people-to-people exchanges,” as well as global issues such as climate change, to which the network of low reefs and islets that make up Kiribati are uniquely vulnerable. In 2014, [then-president Anote Tong](#) urged that “according to the projections, within this century, the water will be higher than the highest point in our lands.” Just 14 nations continue to recognize the government in Taiwan as representative of China, four of which are Pacific island nations: Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands. A year before Kiribati switched its recognition, [the Solomon Islands](#) also recognized Beijing, and Australia and some Western media began to fret that Beijing would seek to establish military facilities there. Those fears were heavily based on false reports that China had been scouting Vanuatu, another Pacific island nation, for a [new naval base](#) location; instead, China financed a \$90 million wharf on Vanuatu’s Santo Island.

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US Air Force’s Skyborg ‘Loyal Wingman’ AI Pilots Kratos Mako Drone for First Time  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Artificial intelligence is seen as a key component of the next generation of aircraft, both manned and unmanned, and networking them to operate as a cohesive unit over the battlefield is a major focus of projects funded by the Pentagon, as well as other nation’s militaries.

The US Air Force’s Skyborg autonomous AI piloting system took the helm of an aircraft for the first time last week when it flew an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) in a test at Florida’s Tyndall Air Force Base.

The Air Force announced on Thursday that on April 29, the Skyborg team conducted a 130-minute test flight of a Kratos UTAP-22 Mako UCAV flown by the Skyborg autonomy core system (ACS), which they dubbed “Milestone 1.”

“We’re extremely excited for the successful flight of an early version of the ‘brain’ of the Skyborg system. It is the first step in a marathon of progressive growth for Skyborg technology,” Brig.

Gen. Dale White, program executive officer for fighters and advanced aircraft, said in [a press release](#). “These initial flights kick off the experimentation campaign that will continue to mature the ACS and build trust in the system.”

According to the release, the Skyborg ACS “demonstrated basic aviation capabilities and responded to navigational commands, while reacting to geo-fences, adhering to aircraft flight envelopes, and demonstrating coordinated maneuvering.” It was monitored by both ground and airborne observers.

Skyborg will be the basis of the [“loyal wingman” system](#), which will allow a human pilot in an aircraft to direct one or several Skyborg-linked drones during combat missions. The system will be “attributable,” meaning it can be expended if necessary, such as taking gunfire or a missile intended for the human-flown aircraft like a sort of aerial bodyguard. However, it will also be able to scout ahead, fly diversionary maneuvers, and perform its own strikes according to the pilot’s directions.

Kratos’ drone is [just one of several](#) in the running for the Air Force program. Based on the BQM-167 subscale aerial target, the Mako was converted into a UCAV in 2015, but remains launched from a rail using a rocket-assisted takeoff. However, a previous prototype used for early Skyborg testing by the Air Force Research Laboratory, the XQ-58 Valkyrie, flies from runways like a typical aircraft; General Atomics GA-ASI Avenger and Boeing’s Airpower Teaming System (ATS) do the same.

The stealthy Valkyrie isn’t part of the competition with Boeing and General Atomics, but it could still one day receive the Skyborg system. The Air Force is continuing to test it for other uses as well. Last month, a Valkyrie flying out of Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona used its internal weapons bay to [deploy an ATIUS-600](#), a small drone typically launched from a tube that can be used for scouting or delivering very small payloads. In December, a Valkyrie was successfully [used as a “translator”](#) for the immense computers on an F-22 Raptor and an F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

In addition to testing AI for drones, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is also working on an Air Combat Evolution (ACE) AI that will be able to [take the helm](#) of a human’s fighter jet in a dogfight, freeing up the pilot to worry about other concerns. The AI has proven capable of beating human pilots in a simulated dogfight, but the greater challenge is convincing human pilots to trust the computer to fly for them in a life-and-death fight.

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USTR Tai Will Meet With Chinese Counterpart ‘In the Near Term’ for Talks on Trade Deal Phase 1  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just weeks after the US and China penned the first part of a trade deal intended to settle years of tariff wars, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and shut down the global economy, sending trade into

a tailspin. The deal was heavily premised on pledges to buy a minimum volume of goods from the other country.

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday she expects to meet with her Chinese counterpart, vice-premier and head of the Communist Party of China's Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, Liu He, "in the near term" to discuss implementation thus far of the January 2020 trade deal.

Tai made the comments during an event hosted by the London-based [Financial Times](#), noting she respected the need for continuity in trade policy. The deal was penned by the prior administration of Donald Trump, from whom Biden has sought to distance himself, despite largely adhering to Trump's strategic foreign policy orientation.

"It's the agreement that we have, it's the agreement that we will work from, that we will build from," Tai said. "It is our responsibility in the Biden-Harris administration to carry forward the relationship, where we do not shy away from being tough, but where we also know we must be fair and must be future focus-oriented," Tai said.

She added that she is "very much looking forward to formally meeting my Chinese counterparts and assessing their performance and measuring what they have to say, pressing our interests and backing up a path forward."

While Tai was born and raised in the United States, her parents are from Taiwan and she is fluent in Mandarin.

By the terms of the deal, the two parties are supposed to meet every six months to reevaluate their progress and adherence, but no meeting has taken place since August 2020.

Phase 1 of the trade deal was signed in January 2020 and expires at the end of the year. In it, the two nations pledged to buy certain minimum amounts of products from the other side, spanning a variety of agricultural and manufactured goods. However, in March of that year, the COVID-19 novel coronavirus outbreak had reached the scale of a global pandemic and nations began curbing international trade in a bid to stop the spread of the highly infectious respiratory disease, putting fulfillment of the pact in danger.

In June of last year, the US and China [rededicated themselves](#) to the terms of the deal; however, [according to data](#) collected by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a Washington, DC-based think tank, by March 2021 the US was still buying just 75% of the goods it had committed to, and China had bought just 61% of its committed purchases, as compared to 2017 levels before the two nations began trading trade tariffs.

While China's lockdowns ended in the middle of 2020 and its economy had [come roaring back](#) by the end of the year, the pandemic has persisted in the United States, where the deadliest months came in late 2020 and early 2021, and [daily new COVID-19 cases](#) have still not declined below 40,000 per day.

Lu Xiang, a senior researcher on China-US relations with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the [South China Morning Post](#) that "bilateral trade has spiked so far this year, but there are still difficulties in fully making up for the shortfall last year. Both sides, especially the US, need to show the utmost sincerity in cooperation. We will be outspoken on problems but also stick to cooperation. The deal is not perfect for either side, and now it is time for the US to propose solutions."

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All Felony Charges Dropped Against Denver Activists Charged for 'Justice for Elijah McClain' Protest  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amid the nationwide protests against police brutality and anti-black racism last summer, more than 10,000 protesters were arrested in less than two weeks and thousands more were injured by batons, tear gas, and less-than-lethal ammunition deployed against them as well as journalists covering the demonstrations.

Four anti-racist activists in Denver, Colorado, have had a slew of felony charges against them dropped on Thursday. The activists had potentially faced decades in prison after being accused of fomenting a riot in a 2020 protest that surrounded an area police precinct.

At a Thursday hearing, Adams County District Attorney Brian Mason moved to dismiss all remaining charges his office had brought against Lillian House, Joel Northam, Eliza Lucero, and Terrance Roberts, including both felonies and misdemeanors. According to [a press release](#) by the National Committee for Justice in Denver (NCJD) solidarity group, Mason said he has "an ethical obligation to only proceed on charges [his] office can prove and to dismiss charges that [they] cannot prove."

"We are very glad to see earnest steps toward justice from both new district attorneys presiding over this case," the NCJD said in a Thursday statement. "We continue to call on District Attorney John Kellner to end the prosecution in total and drop all remaining charges, which currently include a total of twelve misdemeanors and low-level offenses against Joel Northam, Lillian House, and Terrance Roberts."

"As we have stated previously, not a single charge would have been filed were it not part of a broad and punitive attack initiated by the prior administrations against protest leaders who challenged the impunity of the police. Continuing to put these peaceful protesters through a grueling court process on charges representing the remnants of this case is not justice", the statement read.

The ground was laid for Mason's decision during a preliminary hearing in March, when Adams County Judge Leroy Kirby [decided to drop](#) the first-degree kidnapping charges against the protesters, calling them "a bridge too far." The slew of charges against the four, plus another whose charges had already been dropped, stemmed from a July 3 protest at an Aurora Police Department precinct in which hundreds of demonstrators surrounded the station for several hours before leaving in the early hours of the morning. Police had argued the protest amounted to the kidnapping of the 18 officers inside the station, but lawyers for the defense successfully demonstrated the officers were free to leave and that the crowd dispersed when ordered to.

Then in April, neighboring Arapahoe County dropped [all 16 felony charges](#) against House and Northam, as well as several misdemeanors. After Thursday's decision, the only charges remaining against the activists are several misdemeanors in Arapahoe County. The committee didn't say what the maximum penalties at this point could be if their case proceeds to trial.

Protests Demand Justice After Killing by Police

The NCJD has claimed the five were targeted by police for revenge after organizing the July 3 protest and several others over the course of the summer demanding accountability for the August 30, 2019, death of Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old black man who died after being stopped by APD officers while walking home from the store. Four of the activists are members of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a revolutionary Marxist party that worked with community members to help put a nationwide spotlight on McClain's case by organizing the largest protests in Aurora's history.

The three officers who tackled McClain that night, putting him in a headlock until he fell unconscious, then telling medics to give him a fatal dose of ketamine to calm him down, have not been charged in McClain's death. A subsequent police investigation exonerated the three - Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt and Randy Roedema - of wrongdoing, but a [separate probe funded](#) by the Aurora city government found catastrophic faults with both their actions and the internal police probe.

After McClain's death, community members began [building a movement](#) to demand justice and hold the officers accountable, including other members of the same force who were caught [mocking McClain's death](#) in photos leaked on social media and were subsequently fired. Family and friends of McClain vouched for his gentle nature, noting he was neither as big or as violent as police claimed him to be. They fault racist perceptions of Black men for both the police stop and the violent incident that led to his death. Their protests shut down highways and rallied thousands in the Denver area.

Police arrested the five activists in a series of surprise raids on September 17, 2020, that included a SWAT team and armored vehicle sent to Northam's home and swarms of cop cars descending on the others while they were jogging or performing errands. The activists said they were not even aware warrants had been posted for their arrest. They were then kept in a COVID-infested jail for eight days, well beyond the two-day standard maximum period by which a bail hearing is required to be held. Independent news outlet BreakThrough News has created [a short documentary](#) about their arrests and charges and the Justice for Elijah McClain movement.

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Pentagon Adds 'Package' of F-18 Jets to Assist With US Troop Withdrawal in Afghanistan

© REUTERS / Bob Strong

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Joe Biden announced in April that the withdrawal of American troops in Afghanistan would not be completed by the previously agreed upon May 1 deadline, declaring instead that the forces would be out of the war-torn country by September 11, marking the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US.

The US military added a "package" of F-18 fighter jets to the security detail offering added muscle to protect US troops who are being withdrawn from Afghanistan, Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said [in a Thursday statement](#).

The announcement, made by Milley during a joint conference with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, revealed that approximately 12 F-18s would be deployed to the region.

The fighter jets are in addition to a [previously announced](#) deployment of B-52 bombers and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as [temporary](#) “elements of an Army Ranger task force.”

The US Central Command, which oversees US operations in the Middle East, has been tasked with assessing the security needs of the ongoing withdrawal procedures.

Acknowledging recent attacks by the Taliban in the Middle Eastern country, Milley stated that there have been no strikes against the US or coalition forces since troops began pulling out of Afghanistan.

Earlier, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [noted](#) that officials had documented “small harassing attacks” but that they had “not had any significant impact.” Similarly, US Forces Afghanistan reported that “ineffective indirect fire” had been detected at the Kandahar Airfield over the weekend, and that it had been addressed with an airstrike.

Milley stated during the Thursday conference that between 80% and 90% of all airstrikes are being handled by the Afghan air force, adding that providing continued air support to Afghan forces will be “key.”

Additionally, Milley revealed that the US Department of Defense was considering a variety of options to help support Afghan troops once US soldiers are officially withdrawn from Afghanistan. One possibility included training Afghan service members in another country. “We haven’t figured that out 100% yet,” Milley acknowledged.

The US Central Command [reported](#) on Tuesday that the withdrawal is only between 2% and 6% complete, with officials identifying some 1,300 pieces of equipment to be destroyed and transferring one base to the control of the Afghan military.

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Germany Rejects US Proposal to Waive COVID-19 Patents, Warns of ‘Severe Complications’ by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the Biden administration came out in full support of waiving the intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines, effectively siding with an international initiative to bolster vaccine production. The waiver proposal is currently making its way through the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Taking a stance against the US’ recent decision to support waiving patent protections for COVID-19 vaccines, Germany recently blasted the move and warned that the effort would create issues for future vaccine production.

A spokesperson for the German government [told Bloomberg](#) on Thursday that the waiver would create “severe complications” when it comes to producing new vaccines, highlighting growing concern that the proposal would ultimately prompt a loss in incentive for the industry and set a dangerous precedent moving forward.

Supporters of the waiver proposal have argued that it will help to increase the production of vaccines and see a spike in delivering life-saving jabs to developing nations. The proposal was

initially put forth by South Africa and India, two countries that have been undergoing devastating surges in COVID-19 cases.

[Latest figures](#) released by Johns Hopkins University indicate that when ranked against fellow countries, India has the second-highest COVID-19 case count and the third-highest death toll. In fact, India, which has recently been experiencing a case surge, added nearly 413,000 new COVID-19 cases on Thursday alone, according to [Worldometers](#).

To date, India has administered some 160 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, but has continued to see a COVID-19 surge over a lack of supplies and a highly-infectious strain of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes the novel coronavirus.

Similarly, South Africa, which saw the emergence of its own fast-spreading strain of the novel coronavirus, has undergone a spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths since late January. Health professionals [reported](#) over 2,100 new cases and approximately 63 deaths on Thursday.

The German government's spokesperson noted that the "limiting factor for the production of vaccines are manufacturing capacities and high quality standards, not the patents," underscoring that "the protection of intellectual property is a source of innovation, and this has to remain so in the future."

While both representatives of [South Africa](#) and [India](#) have hailed the US' support for the waiver, negotiations regarding the proposal are [reportedly](#) expected to unfold over a period of several months. All 164 member nations of the World Trade Organization would also have to consent to the decision.

On the European Union front, Ursula von der Leyen, who serves as the president of the European Commission, declared on Thursday that she is also willing to raise talks on a potential patent waiver.

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Not in My House - Political Cartoon

Following the storming of the US Capitol by hundreds of people, including Trump supporters, former US President Donald Trump was booted off various platforms after being blamed for inciting the deadly insurrection. In fact, Facebook's oversight board recently upheld Trump's ban from the platform.

Twitter suspended an account on Thursday that appeared to be tied to Trump's new communications platform, noting that the social media giant is dead set on taking action against any potential work-around on the former commander-in-chief's ban.

The account in question used the handle "@DJTDesk" in reference to Trump's newly-launched "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump" [platform](#), with a brief bio that explained Twitter posts were "copied from Save America on behalf of the 45th POTUS; Originally composed via DonaldJTrump/Desk."

As it turned out, the account managed to stay live for a few hours before it was inevitably suspended. Twitter later cited its [ban evasion policy](#) over the suspension, stating that the

platform would take action against any account that intends to promote content affiliated with a suspended account.

However, it has since been [confirmed](#) that the account was never an official Trump-affiliated account - at least not one that was launched by a member of the Trump team.

The latest Trump-social media development came as the former US president blasted Facebook after its oversight board backed his suspension from the platform. Trump [warned](#) that the "corrupt social media companies" would pay a "political price" for deplatforming him.

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Childish Gambino Sued for Copyright Infringement Over 'This is America' Song  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Donald Glover, also known by his rapper stage name Childish Gambino, shook netizens worldwide when on May 5, 2018, he released the song "This is America." In 2019, the track made history after winning song of the year at the Grammy Awards.

Childish Gambino is being sued for copyright infringement by Emelike Nwosuocha, who raps under the name Kidd Wes and claims that the famed actor-musician's hit song is too similar to his song "Made in America."

Citing court documents filed in New York, the [BBC reported](#) that Nwosuocha claimed Glover's hook of "This is America" is "unmistakably substantially similar, if not practically identical" to his track, which was released on SoundCloud in September 2016. He also notes how the choruses are written in the same metre.

Nwosuocha's legal case has called for charges against Glover's record label RCA, the song's co-writers Young Thug and Ludwig Göransson, and Roc Nation, which split from RCA in 2019. He is also demanding a trial to seek damages related to lost profits and opportunities estimated to be worth "hundreds of millions of dollars."

The lyrics Nwosuocha has referred to as being too similar include:

"Made in America / Flex on the radio / Made me a terrorist / Pessimistic n\*\*\*as / You should just cherish this," compared to Glover's lyrics: "This is America / Guns in my area / I got the strap / I gotta carry 'em."

This is not the first time the Grammy Award-winning song has been accused of plagiarism. In 2018, a community of hip-hop aficionados on Reddit [drew similarities](#) between Glover's song and another track released in 2016 by Jase Harley, entitled "American Pharaoh." For some netizens, the instrumental and subject matter seemed all too familiar.

Harley himself originally cited in an Instagram [post](#) that he felt humbled when hearing the similarities, but later [blasted](#) Glover after the song's Grammy win. According to Complex, at that time, Glover's co-manager, Fam Udeorji, [responded](#) to the allegations with claims that "This is America" had origins that date back to a 2015 Pro Tools file.

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China Launches Driverless Taxi Service Ahead of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The upcoming Winter Olympics are scheduled to take place across China's Beijing, Yanqing and Zhangjiakou cities, starting in early February 2022. However, the games have been the focus of a potential boycott over allegations that the Chinese government is committing human rights abuses against Uyghurs, Tibetans and the residents of Hong Kong.

Beijing-based tech company Baidu recently announced that it would start China's first paid robotaxi service in Shougang Industrial Park, one of the venues for the 2022 Winter Olympics. The May 2 announcement detailed that Baidu had launched the Apollo Go robotaxi service, which will allow users to reach various shops and central hotels located within the area. Using the Apollo Go app, riders will scan a QR code and a health code in order to locate a taxi operating at level-4 autonomy, which indicates a vehicle will be capable of driving under certain restrictions, such as speed limits and geofencing.

Geofencing is the use of software to track mobile devices entering certain places. The use of this technology is currently limited, but expected to expand in the coming months.

The health code required for the app was previously unveiled in [March 2020](#), as part of China's effort to create a software capable of reading a person's health risks through an app. The initiative was developed as an added method to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Introducing unmanned services is an indispensable stage for the commercialization of autonomous driving," [said](#) Yunpeng Wang, vice president and general manager of autonomous driving technology at Baidu. "Today, we are opening the fully driverless robotaxi services in Beijing for the public, which we achieved only after conducting countless scalable driverless tests in many cities over a long period of time."

"In the future, Baidu Apollo will launch driverless robotaxis in more cities, enabling the public to access greener, low-carbon, and convenient travel services, while continuing to improve the unmanned service process and user experience," Wang added. "The commercialization of autonomous driving can alleviate congestion effectively and help to reach the peak carbon dioxide emissions and achieve carbon neutrality in China."

According to [Autoweek](#), ride-sharing companies Uber and Lyft have also recently submitted research in the anticipated release of their driverless vehicles. Lyft is estimated to cut over \$100 million a year in costs with the driverless initiative.

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McConnell Warns Lack of US Troops Will See Afghanistan 'Overrun' by Taliban  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) previously criticized US President Joe Biden's plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September 11, as he and other Republican lawmakers have seen the move as a decision that will leave Afghanistan vulnerable.

Touching on Biden's withdrawal efforts, McConnell claimed on Thursday that the Taliban could overrun the Afghan government by the end of the year should US forces be removed from the war-torn nation.

"I think there's a high likelihood that the Taliban will be back in control of the country, maybe as early as the end of the year," McConnell [told reporters](#) while in Kentucky.

The congressional lawmaker underscored that it is a "mistake to completely pull out" of Afghanistan, noting that "some presence [of US troops] there for counterterrorism and training purposes is an American's best interest."

Last month, Biden made the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, which was met with backlash from the Taliban since it pushed back the May 1 deadline agreed to under the Trump administration.

McConnell, as a part of the [GOP backlash](#) in April, previously called on Biden to explain why he chose now to retreat when the presence of the Taliban was still strong. On Thursday, McConnell emphasized the fact that in more than a year since the withdrawal agreement, the Taliban had largely held back on attacking US and coalition forces.

The Taliban has since threatened to resume the attacks due to the change in deadline, as [reports state](#) that in recent days the Taliban has occupied 52% of the country. The Taliban had previously held off on attacks largely as a result of the withdrawal agreement that was drawn up under the previous US administration.

Earlier, Pentagon spokesperson Jack Kirby remarked that American forces had only detected "some small harassing attacks," and that they did not have "any significant impact, certainly not on our people or our resources there and bases."

Following the withdrawal initiative, the US has dispatched additional [military muscle](#) to Qatar in what the US has maintained as efforts to bolster security amid the withdrawal process and decrease the spread of the Taliban.

The Afghan government and Taliban have continued talks related to the fight for peace, but many activists have voiced their concerns over the lack of focus on [the rights](#) of minority men and women living in Afghanistan.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#) on Thursday that the troop withdrawal procedures are proceeding as planned.

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'Not Out of the Question': Elon Musk Tweets Hope for Uncrewed Mission to Mars in 2024  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

SpaceX founder and CEO Elon Musk has since the start of his career held hopes of sustaining human life on Mars while increasingly exploring the expansion of human consciousness. In

2002, he launched his efforts through an aerospace company with realized ambitions to colonize Mars.

Musk, who dreams of settling on the red planet, took to Twitter on Thursday to say that launching an uncrewed flight mission in 2024 was "not out of the question."

At the time, Musk had been responding to a variety of questions via a Twitter thread about the expected launch date of his mission to Mars.

Musk launched his SpaceX Company in hopes of making life multiplanetary. At the International Mars Society Convention in 2020, Musk said that his goals were to expand humanities consciousness while exploring the depths of space, with the more prominent goal being to build a self-sustaining city on Mars.

Musk has a history of being a social media influencer with regards to space, crypto-currency and other futuristic investments. Despite the backlash related to a few of his Twitter posts, some netizens are rooting for Musk and his space ambitions.

Musk mentioned in 2020 that he was "80% to 90%" confident that the company's Starship rocket would reach orbit this year. However, that estimation is likely to change as the prototype projection only recently managed launch and land successfully.

SpaceX on [Wednesday](#) declared the launch of its SN15 prototype was a success as it proved to be the first test flight that did not end in an explosion of the vessel.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced in 2019 that [2024](#) would be the year in which astronauts would return to the Earth's rocky lunar satellite.

Earth and Mars reach their conjunction every 26 months, which is the most popular time for government space agencies to launch their multiplanetary missions.

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'Grow a Backbone': Rep. Omar Calls on Democrats to Abandon Bipartisanship, Abolish Filibuster

by [Evan Craighead](#)

During a virtual news conference on Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) told reporters in his home state that "one-hundred percent" of the GOP's focus is on "stopping this new administration." Critics of McConnell have likened his remarks to his 2010 push to make then-US President Barack Obama "a one-term president."

Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) took to Twitter on Wednesday to respond to McConnell's remarks, and call out Democratic lawmakers pushing for bipartisanship.

"Please stop asking us about bipartisanship when this is what the leader of the other party is focused on," she tweeted, quoting a clip of McConnell's virtual news conference. "Democrats can't repeat the mistake of 2009, we must abolish the filibuster & move legislation that helps us deliver progress for the American people."

"Let's grow a backbone," she concluded.

The Senate minority leader's comments came in response to reporter queries of his opinion on the future of the Republican party. Recently, reports have claimed GOP lawmakers are

attempting to oust the [already-embattled](#) Rep. Liz [Cheney](#) (R-WI), the No. 3 House Republican, after she claimed on Monday that anyone opposing the 2020 election results is "poisoning our democratic system."

"One-hundred percent of our focus is on stopping this new administration," McConnell told reporters in Kentucky on Wednesday. "We're confronted with severe challenges from a new administration, and a narrow majority of Democrats in the House and a 50-50 Senate to turn America into a socialist country, and that's 100 percent of my focus."

McConnell's comments on blocking the agenda of US President Joe Biden [have been](#) likened to his 2010 comments to National Journal ahead of the 2010 Midterm elections. Then-US President Barack Obama was in his first of two terms at the time.

"The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president," McConnell told the outlet.

"I don't want the president to fail; I want him to change," he emphasized later in the interview. Biden, who was vice president during Obama's tenure, has contended that their Democratic administration was able to get a lot done in spite of McConnell's partisan push.

"The president and I have been very clear, including his remarks in the chamber during the joint session of Congress, that we will continue to attempt to work on the most pressing issues facing the American people in a bipartisan manner," Vice President Kamala Harris told reporters on Thursday when asked about McConnell's statement.

She also asserted the White House would continue to hold bipartisan meetings with US lawmakers.

Harris did not comment on whether the Biden administration supports eliminating the filibuster: a procedural mechanism that allows one, or more senators to stop a bill from reaching a vote on the Senate floor.

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Video: Two Hostages Released as FBI, Minnesota Police Negotiate With Bank Robbery Suspect  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Officers with Minnesota's St. Cloud Police Department (SCPD) responded to reports of an active bank robbery at an area Wells Fargo around 1:45 p.m. local time Thursday afternoon. Hostage negotiators were later called to the scene to assist authorities.

The SCPD confirmed on Thursday that the reported hostage situation at Wells Fargo bank was underway, and agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were assisting with operations.

Several streets have reportedly been blocked off and the public has been told to avoid the immediate area.

Around 6:30 p.m. local time, one hostage suspect [was seen](#) leaving the bank with their hands up, according to area reports. A second suspect was release some 30 minutes later. Others remain in the building.

"Negotiations are ongoing," said SCPD Lt. Lori Ellering in a memo released around 5:15 p.m. local time. "The situation remains an active incident. There are an undisclosed number of bank employees being held hostage inside. There are no reports of injuries. The SCPD and FBI are working together on this incident and are working with SWAT resources on scene."

Eyewitness video recorded by Facebook user Seairra Farber showed law enforcement officers with tactical gear - including riot shields - waiting outside the Wells Fargo building.

Several individuals can be seen observing the scene from a nearby parking lot.

Earlier, following media reports on an active hostage situation, representatives of the bank issued a statement, confirming the incident.

"We can confirm a hostage situation at Wells Fargo's St. Cloud South branch, located at 200 33rd Avenue South," a Wells Fargo spokesperson said in a statement issued to local outlet [KARE 11](#). "We are cooperating with local law enforcement and will do whatever we can to assist the authorities in their investigation. We recognize this is a traumatic moment for the community and our colleagues. The safety and security of our customers and employees is our most important priority."

No further details were immediately available.

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Long March 5B: Astrophysicist Photographs Chinese Rocket Around 700 km Above Earth  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Beijing launched a Long March 5, or Chang Zheng 5 (CZ-5), rocket into Earth's orbit last week to deliver a key component of the future Chinese space station. It is unlikely that major space organizations will be able to accurately pinpoint the crash zone of the Chinese heavy-lift launch vehicle until it first re-enters Earth's atmosphere.

Virtual Telescope Project 2.0 published a photo on Thursday showing the CZ-5 rocket some 700 kilometers (435 miles) from its robotic telescope "Elena."

The image, captured by Italian astrophysicist and astronomer Gianluca Masi on Thursday, showed the rocket body glowing brightly. According to the telescope's data, the CZ-5 rocket was traveling with an apparent motion of 0.3 deg/second.

"This is a huge debris (22 tons, 30 meters long and 5 meters wide), but it is unlikely it could create serious damages. Of course, such an event reminds us about the importance of the space debris issue," Masi [wrote](#).

Experts believe the rocket will re-enter Earth's atmosphere on May 8 or 9, but it is difficult to identify an impact area at this time.

Dmitry Rogozin, head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, was recently able to narrow down the possible strike zone for the Long March 5B.

Roscosmos is one of several space organizations monitoring the Long March body's coordinates.

US Space Command is also tracking the rocket, according to [Wednesday remarks](#) by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

"We want to work with the international community to promote leadership and responsible space behaviours," Psaki claimed, when asked about space congestion and debris. "It's the shared interests of all nations to act responsibly in space to ensure the safety, stability, security and long-term sustainability about outer activity."

While experts have expressed doubt about the rocket being a cause for alarm, space agencies will not have concrete answers until the rocket re-enters Earth's atmosphere.

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Beijing Wants Ottawa to Respect China's Judiciary on Fate of Detained Canadians - Envoy

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Ottawa should respect China's judicial system, the East Asian nation's envoy to Canada said, responding to claims that Beijing is engaging in coercive diplomacy through its ongoing detention of two Canadian nationals.

Former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor, charged with espionage in China, have been in detention for over 800 days. Ottawa maintains that the "arbitrary" detentions came in retaliation for Canada detaining Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

"Please also respect our judicial system as we respect your judicial system, is my suggestion," Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu said on Thursday during a virtual discussion hosted by the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, in response to a question about the "two Michaels," as the pair is referred to at home.

Cong said that Chinese authorities are doing everything necessary to protect Kovrig's and Spavor's rights but emphasized that the two are charged with serious crimes.

The ambassador renewed calls for the release of Meng, saying that deteriorating bilateral relations can be repaired if that happens.

The envoy also stressed the importance of people-to-people ties - noting that polls show very few in Canada hold favorable opinions of China - and encouraged Canadians to visit the East Asian country.

The arrests of Meng and the two Canadian nationals, along with Ottawa's condemnation of Beijing's national security law implemented in Hong Kong and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province, has led to a deterioration of relations between China and Canada.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents. However, Chinese officials have said that Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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Blinken Says Held 'Productive Talks' in Kiev on Russia, Reforms With Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that he had productive talks about Russia and government reforms with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials.

"Productive time spent in Kyiv with President Zelenskyy and all those with whom I met," Blinken said via Twitter. "The United States is resolute in the face of Russian aggression and in our support for the reform work needed to ensure a sovereign, democratic, and prosperous future for Ukraine."

On Thursday Blinken started his two-day official visit to Kiev to meet with Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and other Ukrainian officials. He is the first member of the Biden administration to visit Ukraine.

The United States and other European partners have expressed concern over the military buildup on Ukraine's eastern border with Russia. The United States provides Ukraine an annual \$250 million in security assistance.

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Blinken to Participate in UNSC Meeting on Multilateralism on Friday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will virtually attend a UN Security Council meeting on multilateralism on Friday, the State Department said in a press release.

"On Friday, May 7, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will participate virtually in a UN Security Council meeting on Multilateralism," the release said on Thursday.

The meeting will be chaired by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other top diplomats from other UN Security Council member states, the release said.

Blinken will use this opportunity to discuss the importance of multilateralism cooperation and maintaining a rules-based international order, the release said.

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**Biden Announces Extension of National Emergency With Respect to Syria for 1 Year**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that he is extending for another year the state of emergency with respect to Syria.

"I am continuing for one year the national emergency declared with respect to the actions of the government of Syria," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said the United States will reconsider the existing policy based on the future actions of the Syrian government.

In 2004, then President George W. Bush issued the original order and subsequent US presidents extended it in response to what they said was a national security threat posed by the Syrian government, including its alleged support for terrorism, the weapons of mass destruction and missile development programs and its efforts to undermine stabilization efforts in neighboring Iraq.

Biden also condemned the government of President Bashar Assad and what he called were the enablers, Iran and Russia.

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**Canada's NDP Party Vows to Introduce Foreign Home Buyers Tax, Build 500,000 Housing Units**

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canada's opposition New Democrat Party (NDP) is vowing to introduce a tax on non-resident home buyers and build 500,000 new housing units if elected, leader Jagmeet Singh said.

For years, average Canadians and industry watchdogs have raised the alarm about skyrocketing housing prices and diminished supply driven by foreign speculators and a steady stream of news immigrants.

"Everyone is struggling, everyone is having a hard time finding a place to call home... we know people are treating Canada as a stock market when it comes to housing... we want to bring in a national foreign buyer's tax," the leader of Canada's resident left-wing party said during a virtual news conference on Thursday.

Singh also committed to new "massive" new investment that would create 500,000 new housing units of different types, including rental units, condos and single-family homes.

The NDP leader emphasized that the housing crisis is affecting everyone, from young professionals to middle income families and slammed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for not taking the situation seriously, instead preferring to engage in politicking.

Canada's housing crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with the Canadian Real Estate Association saying that sales in March were up 76 percent compared to a year ago – despite

most the country being locked down because of the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic – and average prices were up by nearly a third.

Singh's promise is being seen as a pre-election announcement just as the Canadian political parties gear up for an anticipated federal election later in the year.

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US Trade Chief, Pakistan Commerce Minister Agree to Continue Negotiations Framework

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Top US trade negotiator Katherine Tai and Pakistan's Minister of Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood have agreed to continue their dialogue on trade relations between the two countries, the Office of the Trade Representative (USTR) announced.

"US Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met virtually with Pakistani Minister of Commerce and Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Abdul Razak Dawood," the USTR said in a readout on Thursday. "[They] agreed to continue the US-Pakistan Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA) Agreement dialogue."

Tai also expressed the desire to build a strong US-Pakistan trade relationship, the readout added.

Tai said the Biden-Harris administration's top priority was saving lives and ending the pandemic in the United States and around the world, along with expanding vaccines production and distribution for developing countries, the readout said.

The US-Pakistani TIFA, signed in 2003, stipulates that both parties affirm the need to promote an attractive investment climate and expand trade in products and services between the two nations. The parties also recognize the need to reduce tariffs and eliminate non-tariff barriers to facilitate greater access to the markets of both countries, according to the document.

TIFA also calls for monitoring trade and investment relations and identify opportunities for expanding trade that may be appropriate for negotiation. The framework, both sides agree, can help prepare the parties for an eventual free trade negotiations.

According to the USTR, Pakistan is the United States' 56th largest trading partner with some \$6.6 billion in two trade during 2019. The US goods trade deficit with Pakistan was \$1.3 billion in 2019, the agency said in a fact sheet.

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Over 41% of Adult Canadians Have Received at Least One Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine - Official

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - More than two-fifths of Canadian have received their first dose of available coronavirus vaccines, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said.

"As of today, more than 14.5 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Canada," Njoo said on Thursday. "As of last Saturday, more than 41 percent of the adult population in Canada has received one dose of the vaccine."

The vast majority of Canadians older than 80 have received their first dose, while 16 percent are now fully vaccinated, Njoo said. Among those between the age 70 and 80, 86 percent have received their first dose and five percent have received both doses.

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, despite a much-maligned vaccine rollout which currently leaves Canada lagging behind other industrialized countries by most metrics, has vowed that the country's vaccination campaign will be complete by September.

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**Biden Renews US National Emergency on Chaos in Central African Republic - White House**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has renewed the seven-year-old US declaration of national emergency on the continuing chaos in the Central African Republic (CAR), the White House announced.

"The situation in ... the Central African Republic continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," Biden said in a notice on Thursday. "For this reason, the emergency declared in Executive Order 13667 on May 12, 2014, to deal with that threat must continue in effect beyond May 12, 2021."

Former President Barack Obama first declared the emergency to deal with the breakdown of law and order in the Central African Republic, the White House notice said.

Since then, this condition has continued, characterized by "intersectarian tension, widespread violence and atrocities, and the pervasive, often forced recruitment and use of child soldiers, which threatens the peace, security, or stability of the Central African Republic and neighboring states," the notice said.

The renewed state of emergency will continue for at least one more year, the White House added.

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**Biden Extends for 1 Year National Emergency With Respect to Syria - White House**

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"I am continuing for one year the national emergency declared with respect to the actions of the government of Syria," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said the United States will reconsider the existing policy based on the future actions of the Syrian government.

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**Biden Extends Sanctions Related to Stabilization of Iraq - Order**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has extended for another year the national emergency sanctions related to the stabilization of Iraq, the White House said in a notice

"Therefore, in accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency with respect to the stabilization of Iraq declared in Executive Order 13303," the notice said on Thursday.

Executive order 13303 was declared in 2003 during the Bush administration imposing sanctions related to rebuilding funds and oil development.

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**Canada Records 11 Blood Clot Cases After AstraZeneca Jab, Death Toll Rises to 3 - Official**

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials have recorded 11 blood clot cases following immunization with the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, while the death has climbed to three, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said.

The Canadian province of Quebec recorded the country's first death following immunization with the AstraZeneca shot on April 27, with a 54-year-old woman, who in spite of medical treatment succumbed to the deadly side effect. Since then, a woman in her fifties from Alberta and individual in their 60s from New Brunswick have also died, according to provincial health officials.

"As of May 6, there have been 11 cases of blood clots with low platelets following the receipt of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Canada, reported to the federal level," Njoo told reporters on Thursday. "Sadly, two additional people from Alberta and New Brunswick, following the initial death reported in Quebec, have passed away."

Health Canada had temporarily paused inoculation for Canadians under the age of 55 with the AstraZeneca vaccine following a recommendation from Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations. The immunization drive has since resumed among those over 30 eligible to receive it.

Last month, a Canadian safety review of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine concluded that blood clotting events are possibly linked to it. As a result of the review, Canadian health officials introduced a warning section indicating the "stronger link" between the blood clotting events and the AstraZeneca vaccine on the safety label.

The controversy surrounding the UK drugmaker's vaccine has undermined confidence in the shot, with the latest polling numbers showing that only 52 percent of Canadians are comfortable receiving the AstraZeneca inoculation and 40 percent of this group would reject it if offered.

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#### Raytheon Wins \$275Mln Contract to Upgrade Earth Science Data Collection - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - A five-year \$275 million contract awarded to Raytheon seeks to upgrade management of information from the US Earth Observing System Data and Information System, NASA said.

"The purpose of this contract is to acquire services for the continued improvement, reliability, availability, functionality, operability, and performance of hardware, software, and cloud-based systems within the EOSDIS that provide science data management for the Earth Science Data and Information System Project within the Earth Science Division of NASA's Science Mission Directorate," NASA said in a press release on Thursday.

A major activity under this contract will be the evolution and development engineering of several on-premises and commercial cloud-based systems, the release added.

The maximum value of the contract is \$275 million during the agreement's five-year duration, according to the release.

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#### US Federal Elections Commission Recommends Ban on Automatic Recurring Donations

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Federal Elections Commission (FEC) voted unanimously to adopt a motion that recommends a ban on the practice of automatically registering political donors as recurring contributors.

"Congress should amend FECA [Federal Election Campaign Act] to require those soliciting recurring contributions to receive the affirmative consent of the contributors, to disclose additional information to their financial supporters and to immediately cancel recurring contributions upon request," the FEC said on Thursday.

Donors who find out that they have become recurring contributors to political action committees have contacted the FEC and said many have not been made aware of the pre-checked boxes used to sign them up.

The FEC recommendation will be sent to Congress as it ultimately has the authority to amend the relevant sections of the Federal Election Campaign Act.

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US Committed to Support India Amid COVID-19 Surge, Address Other Challenges - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States remains committed to support India in overcoming COVID-19 surge and both countries are ready to address other common challenges, Defense Department Deputy Press Secretary Jamal Brown said.

"Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin H. Kahl spoke with Indian Defense Secretary Dr. Ajay Kumar by phone today. Dr. Kahl underscored the United States' commitment to support the people of India as they battle a surge in COVID-19 cases," Brown said in a release on Thursday. "They [Dr. Kahl and Dr. Kumar] reiterated their commitment to working closely with like-minded countries - including Quadrilateral partners - to address the defining challenges of our time."

The two officials have also underscored that the bonds between the two nations have only deepened in times of crisis, the release said.

Dr. Kahl has also assured his Indian counterpart that the US Defense Department will continue to stand by India in its moment of need and support US assistance efforts in the days and weeks ahead, the release added.

India is experiencing a surge in the number of coronavirus cases and hospitalizations with over 412,000 cases reported on Thursday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) -

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

\* The United States and Iran can reach a deal and return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) prior to Iran's upcoming June 18 elections if Tehran is prepared to cooperate, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

US POLICY ON UKRAINE

\* The United States is committed to ensuring that NATO's door is open to all aspirants who meet the obligations for membership in the alliance, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the gaggle on Thursday.

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and discussed building a stronger partnership and enhancing NATO cooperation, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said.

\* Blinken has urged members of Ukraine's parliament to adopt legislation to fight corruption and promote the rule of law, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout after the top diplomat's meeting with members of the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev.

\* Blinken said the United States was closely monitoring the situation on Ukraine's border, where it believes the concentration of Russian troops was the highest since 2014.

\* Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy mentioned discussing with Blinken a possible meeting with Joe Biden, as well as inviting the US president to visit Ukraine.

#### GUNFIGHT IN BRAZIL

\* One police officer and 24 suspects were gunned down in an altercation in the subway of Rio de Janeiro, G1 website reported on Thursday.

#### EU-RUSSIA TENSIONS

\* Russia did not ask to be an observer at NATO's Steadfast Defender 2021 drills, but the alliance's exercises are always transparent, Vice Chief of Staff of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Lt. Gen. Brice Houdet said Thursday.

\* EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, said Thursday it was "unclear" if Russia wanted to fully engage on the de-escalation of tensions in Ukraine and implementation of Minsk agreements.

#### RUSSIAN CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that although global markets have decided to go with the coronavirus vaccine made by US company Moderna, it would be clear how good the vaccine really is no sooner than in about a decade.

\* Russia would back the proposal to waive intellectual property rights for coronavirus vaccines, Putin said.

\* Russian coronavirus medicines and vaccines are extremely safe and reliable, just like famous AK-47 rifle, Putin said.

\* Over 20 million people globally have been administered the first shot of the Sputnik V vaccine, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.

#### RUSSIA-ARMENIA TALKS

\* Moscow and Yerevan are discussing the possible production of Russia's coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V in Armenia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday during a press conference after the talks with his Armenian counterpart, Ara Aivazian.

\* The settlement process in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh should not be politicized, Lavrov said.

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US Charges Hedge-Fund Manager With \$3.8M In COVID-19 Relief Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The owner of a New York City hedge-fund management firm faces multiple charges of wire fraud and money laundering for receiving nearly \$4 million from the COVID-19 Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) using bogus applications, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[Gregory] Blotnick submitted eight falsified loan applications to numerous lenders on behalf of five of Blotnick's businesses, including his New York City-based hedge fund management firm, Brattle Street Capital LLC and related entities," the Justice Department said in a press release. To obtain the PPP loans, Blotnick submitted false information, including the number of his employees, federal tax returns for his businesses, and his payroll documentation, and he certified that he would use the loan money only for business-related purposes, the release said. Blotnick transferred the funds to brokerage accounts, losing more than \$3 million in stock trades, the release added.

Blotnick is charged with eight counts of wire fraud and six counts of money laundering, with an initial court appearance scheduled May 19, according to the release.

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Dow Jones Hits Record High Second Day in Row on US Jobs Optimism

NEW YORK, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equity barometer, hit record highs for a second straight day on Thursday on optimism that the rapidly improving US labor market will accelerate the United States' recovery from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic-related measures.

The Dow crossed 34,500 points for the first time ever after filings for jobless benefits, a key weekly indicator of US employment, fell for a fourth week in a row and to levels last seen in March 2020 - just before the implosion of the labor market from the coronavirus outbreak.

The Dow closed the session up 0.9 percent, or 319 points, at 34,549, after a record high at 34,561. For the year, the index was up almost 13 percent.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 0.8 percent, or 34 points, at 4,201.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which groups Big Tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google, gained 50 points, or 0.4 percent, to close at 13,633.

The Labor Department reported on Thursday that some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the US outbreak of COVID-19 last year. Employment numbers for all of April will be reported on Friday.

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UN Chief Expresses Wish to China's Xi for More Cooperation on Climate, Rights - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday held a phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which he expressed a wish for strengthened cooperation between the world body and Beijing on issues that include climate change and human rights, the United Nations Office of the Spokesperson said in a statement. "Mr. Guterres expressed his appreciation for the Chinese support to the United Nations and multilateralism," the statement said. "The Secretary-General also expressed the wish for enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and the People's Republic of China in all the pillars of the Organization's work – Peace and Security, Sustainable Development, including Climate Change and Biodiversity, and Human Rights."

During the conversation, Guterres expressed the commitment to the success of the COVAX facility and the establishment of a global vaccination plan, the statement said.

Guterres outlined his commitment to ensuring that the Biodiversity COP 15 in the Chinese city of Kunming and the Climate COP26 in Glasgow will be a success.

The UN Secretary-General also congratulated Xi on the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021.

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Facebook Removes 1,565 accounts, 724 pages in April for 'Inauthentic Behavior'

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Facebook said on Thursday that it has removed from its platform nine coordinated networks from six nations during the month of April.

"We view CIB [coordinated inauthentic behavior] as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation," Facebook said in a press release. "There are two tiers of these activities that we work to stop: 1) coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of domestic, non-government campaigns and 2) coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government actor."

April's enforcement action removed 1,565 Facebook accounts, 141 accounts from the company's Instagram subsidiary, 724 pages and 63 groups, the release said.

The removed networks were based in Palestine, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Mexico, Peru and Ukraine, the release added.

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US Considering Training Afghan Security Forces in Another Country - Joint Chiefs of Staff

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering training Afghan security forces in another country after its troop withdrawal is complete later this year, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told reporters on Thursday.

"We'll also continue to look at training them in perhaps another location," Milley said during a press conference at the Defense Department.

Milley emphasized that the United States will continue to provide logistics and financial support to Afghan security forces following the US exit from Afghanistan.

The US Central Command estimates that the United States has completed between 2 percent to 6 percent of the entire withdrawal process.

Milley said the United States has pulled out about 60 C-17 plane loads of equipment from Afghanistan and marked more than 1,300 pieces of equipment that will be destroyed. Moreover, the United States has formally handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army, he added.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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#### Twitter Suspends Account for Posting Comments From Trump's New Blog

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - An account that attempted to post comments from a blog by former President Donald Trump on Twitter was suspended, the social-media giant said on Thursday.

"As stated in our ban evasion policy, we'll take enforcement action on accounts whose apparent intent is to replace or promote content affiliated with a suspended account," Twitter said in a statement as quoted by Politico.

Trump unveiled a new blog Tuesday, with links for users to share his latest statements directly on Twitter, where he is permanently banned.

On Thursday, an account with the handle @DJTDesk appeared on Twitter saying, "Posts copied from Save America on behalf of the 45th POTUS; originally composed via DonaldJTrump/desk," according to images posted by NBC and other media outlets.

Trump spokesman Jason Miller told NBC the account was not set up by, or with the permission of, anyone affiliated with the former president.

On Wednesday, Facebook's independent advisory board upheld the Trump ban while faulting the platform for creating a new rule for the former president following the January 7 riot in the Capitol that critics say was instigated by president just days before leaving office. The board also gave Facebook a 6-month deadline to revise its rules to avoid future situations in which it responds to unusual situations by creating new penalties.

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#### US Homeland Security Secretary Travels to Texas for Update on Migration

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas travels to Texas on Friday for an update on illegal migration across the country's southern border, the department said.

In the city of Donna, Mayorkas will be briefed about unaccompanied children, the single largest category of migrants who are allowed to temporarily stay in the US, and view conditions at the local Customs and Border Protection processing facility.

Official data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March to 172,331 migrant encounters, the highest monthly total in over two decades.

President Joe Biden and other US administration officials downplay the surge as a seasonal fluctuation and claim the situation is gradually improving.

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UPDATE 2 - US Drawdown in Afghanistan Going 'According to Plan' - Defense Secretary Austin

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US pullout of troops from Afghanistan is proceeding according to plan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a press conference on Thursday.

"So far, less than one week in, the drawdown is going according to plan," Austin said.

Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley during the press conference said the Taliban have not conducted any attacks against US or Coalition forces in Afghanistan since the drawdown began May 1.

Austin said the United States has pulled out about 60 C-17 plane loads of equipment from Afghanistan and marked more than 1,300 pieces of equipment that will be destroyed. Moreover, the United States has formally handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army, he added.

US Central Command estimates that the United States has completed between 2 percent to 6 percent of the entire withdrawal process.

Austin said Washington will do everything to make the drawdown deliberate, orderly and safe as well as to protect its people and partners.

He also said the United States is shifting to a new bilateral relationship with Afghan Security partners in which the two nations will work towards common goals in some new and different ways.

The US administration is hopeful that the Afghan security forces will be able to play a major role in stopping the Taliban, but acknowledged that it will be a challenge for them, Austin said. The United States will continue to support the Afghan security forces through logistics and financial support after the US withdrawal, Austin said.

The defense chief also said the United States will withdraw all contractors working for US forces in Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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US Market Regulator to Formulate New Short-Selling Rules in Wake of GameStop Saga - Chair

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is coming up with new rules to boost transparency on the US stock market in the area of short-selling to prevent trading upheavals like those triggered by the GameStop saga, Chairman Gary Gensler said Thursday.

"I've asked SEC staff to prepare recommendations on transparency, and short selling of stock," Gensler, who came to the helm of the regulatory agency in mid-April, told a hearing held by Congress.

Shares of GameStop suddenly surged in January, from as low as \$17 to over \$480 at one point, after retail stock buyers on social media site Reddit pushed the video-gaming retailer's shares higher in an apparent organized bid to frustrate hedge funds "shorting" those shares in a move to drive their price down.

Shorting is essentially selling shares one does not already own at a higher price and buying them back lower to pocket a profit. It's a strategy that can make huge profits when done well. But in the case of GameStop, some of the hedge funds on the other side of the retail investors on Redditors lost billions of dollars as the shares rose heavily in price after they were shorted. Gensler is also under pressure to act tough against Wall Street after the implosion in March of a New York-based fund called Archegos that exposed gaps in the SEC's rules.

Gensler told Thursday's hearing that the new trading rules being considered by the SEC included greater disclosure of short-selling, an increase in transparency around securities lending and new reporting rules for "total return" equity swaps — such as the kind that ruined Archegos.

"Generally speaking, we are reviewing order, routing practices and the circumstances under which trading restrictions were imposed, any potential manipulative conduct and compliance with short sale requirements among other matters," he said. "I can assure the committee that we will take all appropriate, disciplinary or other remedial action, as warranted as the facts indicate a violation of SEC or federal rules."

Gensler also said he has asked SEC staff to draft a request for public input into how trading apps attract retail customers with game-like features such as points, rewards and competitions — a strategy known as "gamification." Besides this, he said he has asked for a proposal on expediting the two-day trade settlement procedure for stocks to reduce systemic risks.

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US Does Not Plan to Shoot Down Chinese Rocket Debris - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US military does not plan to shoot down a piece of Chinese rocket debris making an uncontrolled reentry back to Earth, hoping that it will land in a harmless place like an ocean, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"We don't have a plan to shoot the rocket down. We're hopeful that it will land in a place where it won't harm anyone, hopefully in the ocean or somewhere like that," Austin said.

The piece of space debris - a portion of a rocket used to launch a module up to China's new space station - is expected to make impact on Saturday or Sunday of this week, although estimates are imprecise.

The defense chief said the US may have the capability to shoot it down if necessary.

Austin added that this situation highlights why there ought to be safe and thoughtful operating requirements for countries working in space.

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Austin said Washington will do everything to make the drawdown deliberate, orderly and safe as well as to protect its people and the partners.

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Pfizer, Moderna Jabs 94% Effective at Keeping US Seniors Out of Hospitals - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines have proven 94 percent effective in preventing hospitalization of patients aged 65 and older, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Thursday.

"Effectiveness was 94% among adults who were fully vaccinated and 64% among adults who were partially vaccinated," a CDC report said.

The study based its findings on data from 417 patients at least 65-years-old who were hospitalized during the first three months of 2021 - 187 with COVID-19 and 230 who were virus free. Among the infected patients, 18 were partially vaccinated and one was fully vaccinated.

The 3-month examination of data drew from 24 hospitals in 14 states. Researchers relied on a mathematical probability model based on the likelihood of a hospitalized COVID-19 patient having been vaccinated to extrapolate estimates of vaccine effectiveness in preventing hospitalization, according to the report.

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US Air National Guard Examines Potential Upgrades to MQ-9 Reaper Drone

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Tests of possible upgrades to older models of the MQ-9 Reaper drone will attempt to allow fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft to communicate with each other, the 174th Attack Wing of the US Air National Guard said on Thursday. "From May 3-14th, the pods will demonstrate their capabilities onboard a... MQ-9 focusing on a higher level of integration with additional air and ground based assets during Pacific Command's premier exercise, Northern Edge, at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska," the Air National Guard said in a press release.

Tests will examine three separate pods, or configurations, for the Reaper, each specializing in a different set of capabilities, the release said.

The pods are designed to help the MQ-9 play a more prominent role in battlefield command and control, including the ability to receive and pass information to and from older fourth generation and newer fifth generation aircraft, the release added.

The tests are funded solely by the Air National Guard since the Guard only operates legacy aircraft, according to the release.

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US Accuses Iran of 'Unspeakable Cruelty' for False Reports on Foreigners' Release

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Iran leaking false information on the the release of foreign detainees was a cruel move intended to mount pressure on Washington, a senior US State Department official told reporters on Thursday.

Last Sunday, reports of a deal allegedly struck between Iran and Western countries on the repatriation of foreigners including at least five Americans made headlines across the world before being refuted by the United States which vows to continue efforts to bring its citizens home.

"One can only imagine the suffering that the families of the detained had to endure when they thought for a moment that their loved ones are going to be brought back home. That's unspeakable cruelty," the official said.

The US is determined to do everything it can to bring them home, the official added.

"But we would really hope that Iran would not subject the detainees and their families to what they had to endure last Sunday when for a brief moment they read the news that their loved ones were coming home because a deal has been struck," the official said.

The official accused Iran of using detainees "as pawns to try to extract concessions from the United States or from other countries." He reiterated that there is still no agreement, but the US is actively seeking one independently of the Vienna talks on the reinstatement of the nuclear deal with Iran.

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US Air Force Awards \$175M In Deal to Collect, Analyze Signal Intelligence - Raytheon

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has awarded a \$175 million contract to collect and analyze signals intelligence, Raytheon announced on Thursday.

"Raytheon Intelligence & Space (RI&S), a Raytheon Technologies business will provide signals intelligence field services for the US Air Force's Distributed Common Ground System, which collects, processes and analyzes intelligence," the company said in a news release.

Under the deal, RI&S will support seven different intelligence applications the Air Force uses to collect and correlate data under the new program, DCGS-Signals Intelligence Field Support, the release said.

"The five-year contract, valued up to \$175 million, will combine information from airborne, ground and other systems. ... Under the contract, RI&S will leverage its mission domain knowledge to provide high mission availability in support of end-to-end operations," the release added.

Under the contract, Raytheon will create a mission plan for an airborne sensor to receive data, process it and then either produce a report, store it or enhance it by fusing it with other data, according to the release.

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## Canada to Host Pledging Conference for Aid to Displaced Venezuelans in June - Statement

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canada will host an international pledging conference to raise financial support for Venezuelan refugees and migrants displaced by the ongoing political and humanitarian crisis in the South American country, Global Affairs Canada said on Thursday. "On June 17, 2021, led by Karina Gould, Minister of International Development, Canada will host a high-level International Donors' Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in collaboration with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Organization for Migration," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

The event aims to solicit additional financial and technical support, raise awareness about the crisis and discuss next actions, the statement said.

The last such event was convened by the European Union and Spain in May of 2020. Venezuela has experienced political and humanitarian crisis since 2019 after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself to be an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust re-elected Nicolas Maduro from power. Maduro has said Guaido is a US puppet working with Washington to orchestrate a coup so that the United States can control Venezuela's natural resources. Canada is among a handful of countries that still recognizes Guaido as Venezuela's president. The European Union recently revoked its recognition of Guaido.

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## US Worker Productivity up 5.4% in First Quarter in Progress From COVID - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Worker productivity in the United States rose more than 5 percent in the first quarter of this year, the Labor Department said on Thursday, unveiling another piece of data that pointed to encouraging recovery in the world's largest economy from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nonfarm business sector labor productivity increased 5.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021," the department said in a news release.

Economists polled by US media had expected a productivity rate of 4.3 percent for the January-March period.

The Labor Department had initially reported a decline of 4.2 percent in productivity for the previous quarter between October and March, but revised that to 3.8 percent in Thursday's update.

Earlier on Thursday, the Labor Department reported that some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the US outbreak of COVID-19 last year.

The jobless claims number followed a rash of bullish macroeconomic data accompanied by falling infection rates for the virus versus a spiking vaccination drive by the government.

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#### White House Says New Florida Election Integrity Law Move in 'Wrong Direction'

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Florida legislators and Governor Ron DeSantis had no reason to change the existing voting rules because the 2020 election was one of the most secure in the history and this is a move in "wrong direction", White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"The 2020 election was one of the most secure elections in American history. There's no legitimate reason to change the rules right now to make it harder to vote, that's built on a lie. The only reason to change the rules right now is if you don't like who voted, and that should be out of bounds," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "Florida is moving in the wrong direction."

Former President Donald Trump, numerous Republicans and others have charged that the Democrats stole the 2020 election by using mass mail-in voting, relaxed identification and voting deadlines and other similar practices.

Jean-Pierre pointed out that Florida changing its elections law is not the same as some other states implementing allegedly better new voting rules.

Earlier on Thursday, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law a new measure that is expected to strengthen the existing voter identification requirements, prohibit mass mailing of ballots and ban voter harvesting. However, Democrats have criticized the measure, saying it is an attempt to limit the voting rights of the people in Florida.

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#### UN Envoy Urges Israel to End Demolitions, Show Restraint in West Bank - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator Middle East Peace Process Tor Wenneslan on Thursday called on Israel to cease evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank and demonstrate maximum restraint amid the recent surge in violence.

"I am deeply concerned by the surge in tensions and violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan," Wennesland said. "I reiterate that Israeli Security Forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life."

Wennesland said a Palestinian woman and a child were killed in separate incidents by the Israeli forces amid clashes.

In addition, the latest eviction of Palestinian refugee families Sheikh Jarrah and other neighborhoods in occupied East Jerusalem are also very concerning, Wennesland said.

"I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law," he added.

The special representatives further called on all political, religious and community leaders on both sides to denounce violence, warning that the situation could spiral out of control if it is not addressed.

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#### US Upgrade of Nuclear Triad Systems 'At Risk of Delays' - Government Accountability Office

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to modernize its nuclear triad of bomber aircraft, intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, but the upgrade is at risk of delays, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said on Thursday.

"DOD [Department of Defense] and DOE [Department of Energy] are working to replace triad systems nearing retirement, but these replacement programs face schedule risks that could exacerbate challenges with existing triad systems," the GAO said in a report to Congress. GAO said in the report the risk factors include concurrency between phases of acquisition programs from development through production, immature technologies and limited schedule margin. Many Energy Department facilities needed for these efforts are outdated or obsolete with more than half being over 40 years old, the report said.

GAO also said both departments have limited ability to mitigate risks to the efficacy of the nuclear deterrent with their current strategy, and "are beginning to consider alternatives."

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#### Three Shot in Idaho School Shooting, Suspect in Custody - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Three people, including two students and one adult custodian, were shot during a school shooting incident in Rigby, Idaho, the East Idaho News reported on Thursday.

The injuries that the victims sustained are not believed to be life threatening, the report said.

One male student was taken into police custody and the the school district confirmed that it was an active shooter situation, the report said.

The authorities evacuated the students from the Rigby Middle School to the nearby Rigby High School and notified the parents of the incident who then arrived to pick up their children, the report added.

The students who were not picked up will be bused home later, according to the report.

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## Russia Asks Chinese Presidency of UNSC to Promptly Resume In-Person Meetings - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Chinese presidency of the UN Security Council should immediately enable a return to in-person meetings this month, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky said on Thursday. "I'd like to express my disappointment in connection with the fact that our meeting today is once again taking place in a virtual format," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting on the Syrian chemical dossier. "We ask the Chinese Presidency of the Council to take immediate measures so that our Council can return to its traditional forms and methods of work." Polyanskiy said Russia was deeply convinced that nothing was preventing the diplomats from returning to the UN Security Council Chamber at UN headquarters in New York as it meets all social distancing requirements necessary to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. In addition, resuming the in-person meetings will send an important signal to the international community which has been long-awaited from the UN Security Council. As the situation with the coronavirus has significantly improved in New York City, local authorities decided to lift most restrictions by mid-May. Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jung, who presides over the UN Security Council during the month of May, said earlier that he may hold up to three in-person meetings this month.

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## Iran Nuclear Deal Can Be Revived Prior to June 18 Election - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iran can reach a deal and return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) prior to Iran's upcoming June 18 elections if Tehran is prepared to cooperate, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday. "Is it possible to get a deal before the Iranian elections? Absolutely," the official said. "If Iran makes that political determination that it is not going to ask more from the United States in terms of sanctions relief than, what a return to compliance with the JCPOA requires, and it's not going to do less in terms of its nuclear commitment than a return to compliance requires, then that could be done relatively quickly."

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## White House on Ukraine Joining NATO: Biden Committed to Ensuring Door Open to Aspirants

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to ensuring that NATO's door is open to all aspirants who meet the obligations for membership in the alliance, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the gaggle on Thursday.

"The Biden administration is committed to ensuring that NATO's door remains open to aspirants when they are ready and able to meet the commitments and obligations of membership and contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area," Jean-Pierre said when asked about Ukraine's intent to join the alliance.

The United States supports Ukraine's effort to advance reforms pertaining to the rule of law and economic growth, Jean-Pierre added.

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New York Asks to Join Lawsuit Against Campaign to Suppress Black Vote - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US state of New York has filed a request to join a court case against two conspiracy theorists who flooded the state with robotic telephone messages warning African-Americans that personal information from mailed ballots would be shared with police and other government agencies, state Attorney General Letitia James said on Thursday. "Jacob Wohl and Jack Burkman, while hiding behind their sham organization "Project 1599," violated state and federal laws by orchestrating robocalls to threaten and harass Black communities through disinformation, including claims that mail-in voters would have their personal information disseminated to law enforcement, debt collectors, and the government," James said in a press release.

The campaign reached about 5,500 voters in New Yorker state in an attempt to interfere with efforts to administer the 2020 elections during the COVID-19 crisis and protect citizens from voter intimidation and harassment, the release said.

New York seeks to join an existing lawsuit filed by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights on behalf of voters and the National Coalition on Black Civic Protection against Wohl, Burkman, Project 1599 and Burkman's lobbying firm J. M. Burkman & Associates, the release added.

The lawsuit seeks to prohibit the defendants from future voter intimidation campaigns, and to impose fines of up to \$500 for each violation of New York State laws protecting citizens from discrimination, according to the release.

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Blinken, Ukraine's Kuleba Discuss Enhancing Partnership, NATO Cooperation - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and discussed building a stronger partnership and enhancing NATO cooperation, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kyiv," Price said in a statement. "They discussed US-Ukraine cooperation on shared priorities, including forging an even stronger partnership and enhanced NATO cooperation."

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Ukraine Must Make More Progress on Reforms for IMF to Complete Review - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Ukraine should make more progress on the reforms it has undertaken in order for the first IMF review under the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) to be completed, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Our board has approved as of last year... a \$5 billion stand-by arrangement, financial arrangement from IMF to Ukraine amongst other things to help the country with its COVID-19 response, but beyond that to support an important set of reforms to strengthen recovery and growth," Rice said.

The spokesperson noted that Ukraine and the IMF held virtual discussions earlier this year on the progress made thus far in implementing stated policies and reforms.

"The discussions were productive, but in terms of the status, more progress is needed to support completion of the first review under the program," he said.

Rice explained the program is aimed to help Ukraine cope with the current crisis, but also focus on safeguarding medium-term fiscal sustainability, preserving the independence of its central bank, enhancing financial stability as well as tackling corruption and enhancing good governance.

"Discussions continue, as I said and we will keep you posted as to further progress," he added. IMF Resident Representative for Ukraine Goesta Ljungman said in February that Ukraine failed to demonstrate to a special International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission enough progress on reforms under a \$5-billion economic support arrangement to receive the next tranche.

Ljungman described the talks with Ukrainian officials as productive, but said that the IMF wanted to see more progress on the commitments under the deal, which applies to such items as the management of Ukraine's financial and regulatory institutions, banking legislation and anti-corruption efforts.

The Stand-by Arrangement describes the measures as "a small set of key structural reforms, to ensure that Ukraine is well-poised to return to growth when the [COVID-19] crisis ends."

The IMF approved the \$5-billion program last June and wired \$2.1 billion right away. The rest of funding was made conditional upon Ukraine's satisfactory progress on the outlined criteria. The original schedule of further payments entailed four \$700-million installments - two in late 2020 and two during 2021 - but none were wired so far.

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**Mayorkas, Mexican Minister Agree to Boost Cooperation on Migration - US Homeland Security**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations Marcelo Ebrard have agreed to boost their direct collaboration on dealing with cross-border migration issues, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"On Wednesday ... Mayorkas spoke with Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Relations Marcelo Ebrard," the DHS said in a readout of the conversation. "[The two secretaries] discussed deepened collaboration on the development of regional approaches to irregular migration, including through the creation of legal pathways for migrants in the region."

Mayorkas and Ebrard also expressed a mutual desire to work together to create economic opportunities across the Western Hemisphere and combat unlawful activities such as human smuggling that threatened both countries' national and economic security, the readout said. The two officials also emphasized their shared focus on enhancing bilateral economic cooperation, agreed to work together on COVID-19 mitigation measures, the readout added.

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**Florida Governor Signs Election Bill Into Law Prohibiting Mass Mailing of Ballots**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Thursday signed into law a new voting measure that strengthens the existing voter identification requirements, prohibits mass mailing of ballots and bans voter harvesting.

"Today, Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law Senate Bill 90, Florida's new election integrity bill, strengthening voter identification, prohibiting the mass mailing of ballots, banning ballot harvesting and prohibiting private money from administering elections in our state," a release accompanying the bill said.

The new law requires additional identification when a voter seeks to change any registration information or requests a vote-by-mail ballot, the release said.

Under the new law, the number of ballots a person may handle other than those of immediate family members is not allowed to be more than two, the release said.

In addition, the law prohibits the mass mailing of ballots and ensures vote-by-mail ballots are only sent to those individuals that requested them.

DeSantis said the new law aims to increase the transparency and security of elections in Florida. However, Democrats have criticized the measure, saying it is an attempt to limit the voting rights of the people in Florida.

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US Picks Florida Airport For Test of Latest Drone Detection Systems - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Miami International Airport (MIA) in the US state of Florida will conduct an initial test of technologies that will detect, track, and identify drones entering into restricted airspace, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said on Thursday.

"The technologies will be evaluated in laboratory and operational field environments. During the test at MIA, TSA will review a range of security and surveillance technologies that are able to detect, track and identify UAS [drone] operations by radar, thermal imaging, and artificial intelligence," a TSA said in a press release.

TSA said the threat from drones pose a threat to commercial aviation when flown into certain restricted airspaces, adding that in recent years it has increased exponentially.

The information and data collected from the test will help develop solutions that mitigate the risks that unauthorized drone operations to the US transportation system, according to the release.

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Guterres Says 336 UN Employees Lost Their Lives on Duty in 2020

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has seen 336 personnel losing their lives in the line of duty in 2020, constituting the highest number of fatalities among the organization's employees in a single year, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at an annual memorial service held on Thursday.

"In view of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its extraordinary impact, this memorial service also honors all colleagues who passed from illness in 2020," Guterres said.

"As a result, this year's memorial service pays tribute to the highest number of colleagues lost in a single year. We honor 336 UN personnel who lost their lives in the line of duty and due to the COVID-19 and related circumstances between January 1 and December 31, 2020," he said.

Guterres explained this year's ceremony recognized UN personnel from 82 nations who died from the novel coronavirus and those whose illness may not have been recorded as COVID-19, but might still be related to it.

The UN chief said the ceremony also honored those UN employees who passed in 2020 due to reduced access to healthcare amid the pandemic.

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#### UN Releases \$65Mln to Support Aid Work in Ethiopia, Tigray Region - OCHA

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement on Thursday that it has released some \$65 million to assist more than 16 million people in Ethiopia, including in the embattled Tigray region.

"The United Nations has released US\$65 million for the humanitarian response in Ethiopia," the statement said. "More than 16 million people need humanitarian assistance throughout Ethiopia, including an estimated 4.5 million in the Tigray region."

OCHA said a total of \$40 million will support the aid operation in Tigray and fund the emergency shelter, clean water, health care and assistance in sexual violence cases.

The remaining \$25 million will support humanitarian operations in the rest of Ethiopia, including funding the response to drought in the Somali and Oromia regions, support for the treatment of children with malnutrition and enabling aid organizations to pre-position supplies.

OCHA said the current response throughout Ethiopia, heavily impacted by drought and an ongoing conflict in Tigray, is insufficient and urgently requires additional funding as well as unimpeded humanitarian access.

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#### US Weekly Jobless Claims Dip Below 500,000, Lowest in 14 Months - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic last year, the US Labor Department said Thursday.

"In the week ending May 1, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 498,000, a decrease of 92,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000." Economists polled by US media had anticipated 538,000 filings for unemployment benefits last week.

It was the fourth week in a row that filings had fallen, signaling a rapid recovery from the COVID-19 marked by other bullish macroeconomic data and falling infection rates versus vaccinations for the virus.

The Labor Department will publish on Friday jobs numbers for all of April, with economists projecting a growth of 978,000 for last month, to build onto the March gains of 916,000.

In its latest weekly report, the department said continuing claims for the week ended May 1 — reported with a one-week lag — rose, however, to 3.69 million, from 3.65 million during the week to April 24.

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 biggest challenges of 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. More than 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021, released last week 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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Blinken Urges Members of Ukraine's Parliament to Combat Corruption - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has urged members of Ukraine's parliament to adopt legislation to fight corruption and promote the rule of law, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout after the top diplomat's meeting with members of the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken underscored our commitment to democratic principles and institutions as well as the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and Rada members discussed the importance of passing key legislation to advance rule of law, anti-corruption, and economic reforms that will strengthen Ukraine's democracy and economy, and further Euro-Atlantic integration."

**05/06/21 Thursday**

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Kiribati Clamor: Western Experts Fear Chinese Runway Repair Actually Aims at New Air Base by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Western strategists continue to worry China may turn some remote Pacific island into a new military base, the US operates several large military facilities in the region, some just 400 miles from the Chinese coast.

A derelict airfield on a remote Pacific island in the Republic of Kiribati could soon get an upgrade from the People's Republic of China. The two nations re-established ties two years ago and have embarked on new cooperation projects, including infrastructure investment as well as trade and cultural exchanges.

According to a [report by Reuters](#), Gilbertese opposition lawmaker Tessie Lambourne told the outlet the government of Kiribati President Taneti Maamau had been negotiating repairing the airfield on Kanton Island with China, but had not been informed if it was part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

"The government hasn't shared the cost and other details other than it's a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the runway and bridge," Lambourne told Reuters. "The opposition will be seeking more information from the government in due course."

According to Google Earth measurements, Kanton is located 5,280 miles southeast of Hong Kong, 1,850 miles southwest of Hawaii, and 800 miles north of the US territory of American Samoa. The airstrip, located on the northwestern corner of the porkchop-shaped atoll, is about 8,000 feet long, but only 6,500 feet of it looks remotely usable, with the remaining 1,500 feet overgrown with trees and shrubs.

The airstrip was built in the 1940s by the US Navy. Previously, PanAm had envisioned using the island's large, almost totally-enclosed lagoon as a stop-off point for flying boat service to New Zealand. The island itself has just two dozen inhabitants today and the airstrip has only been used sporadically since World War II.

One "adviser to Pacific governments" told Reuters that if repaired, Kanton "would be a fixed aircraft carrier." However, the airstrip would require considerably more construction in order to turn it into any kind of militarized facility, including hangars, repair facilities, storage, and, of course, housing. At its present length, it could accommodate some fighter jets with shorter takeoff distances, but larger transports or bombers - the ones with the gas tanks to fly that far out - aren't going to be able to use the runway even if it is restored to its full length.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a Canberra-based think tank funded in part by the Australian Department of Defense, fretted in a [September 2020 article](#) that Beijing was likely to reclaim seabed and expand island installations in Kiribati as well as fortify them, as it has done to some South China Sea islands. It accused China of "moving to achieve control over the vital trans-Pacific sea lines of communication under the guise of assisting with economic development and climate-change adaptation."

The think tank noted that Pacific islands are “vulnerable” to Chinese influence because of their dependence on other nations for financial support, but the same could also be said of the government on Taiwan, which is largely kept afloat by [informal military](#) and trade deals with the United States, despite Washington having switched its recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979. [The War Zone noted](#) the airstrip, if it even becomes a military facility, which is also far from certain, would most likely be used as a base for the plethora of unmanned [reconnaissance drones](#) used by the People’s Liberation Army.

Indeed, Lambourne’s concern is whether the airstrip will be part of the Belt and Road Initiative, a globe-spanning infrastructure megaproject sponsored by Beijing that is building or expanding transportation as well as electrical networks, with projects ranging from wind farms in Kenya to port facilities in Pakistan and railroads across Central Asia.

In January 2020, just months after Kiribati switched its recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, the two nations announced a Kiribati 20-Year Vision development plan. According to [China Global Television](#), this will include cooperation on “economy and trade, fishery, agriculture, education, healthcare and people-to-people exchanges,” as well as global issues such as climate change, to which the network of low reefs and islets that make up Kiribati are uniquely vulnerable. In 2014, [then-president Aote Tong](#) urged that “according to the projections, within this century, the water will be higher than the highest point in our lands.” Just 14 nations continue to recognize the government in Taiwan as representative of China, four of which are Pacific island nations: Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands. A year before Kiribati switched its recognition, [the Solomon Islands](#) also recognized Beijing, and Australia and some Western media began to fret that Beijing would seek to establish military facilities there. Those fears were heavily based on false reports that China had been scouting Vanuatu, another Pacific island nation, for a [new naval base](#) location; instead, China financed a \$90 million wharf on Vanuatu’s Santo Island.

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US Air Force’s Skyborg ‘Loyal Wingman’ AI Pilots Kratos Mako Drone for First Time  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Artificial intelligence is seen as a key component of the next generation of aircraft, both manned and unmanned, and networking them to operate as a cohesive unit over the battlefield is a major focus of projects funded by the Pentagon, as well as other nation’s militaries.

The US Air Force’s Skyborg autonomous AI piloting system took the helm of an aircraft for the first time last week when it flew an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) in a test at Florida’s Tyndall Air Force Base.

The Air Force announced on Thursday that on April 29, the Skyborg team conducted a 130-minute test flight of a Kratos UTAP-22 Mako UCAV flown by the Skyborg autonomy core system (ACS), which they dubbed “Milestone 1.”

“We’re extremely excited for the successful flight of an early version of the ‘brain’ of the Skyborg system. It is the first step in a marathon of progressive growth for Skyborg technology,” Brig.

Gen. Dale White, program executive officer for fighters and advanced aircraft, said in [a press release](#). “These initial flights kick off the experimentation campaign that will continue to mature the ACS and build trust in the system.”

According to the release, the Skyborg ACS “demonstrated basic aviation capabilities and responded to navigational commands, while reacting to geo-fences, adhering to aircraft flight envelopes, and demonstrating coordinated maneuvering.” It was monitored by both ground and airborne observers.

Skyborg will be the basis of the [“loyal wingman” system](#), which will allow a human pilot in an aircraft to direct one or several Skyborg-linked drones during combat missions. The system will be “attributable,” meaning it can be expended if necessary, such as taking gunfire or a missile intended for the human-flown aircraft like a sort of aerial bodyguard. However, it will also be able to scout ahead, fly diversionary maneuvers, and perform its own strikes according to the pilot’s directions.

Kratos’ drone is [just one of several](#) in the running for the Air Force program. Based on the BQM-167 subscale aerial target, the Mako was converted into a UCAV in 2015, but remains launched from a rail using a rocket-assisted takeoff. However, a previous prototype used for early Skyborg testing by the Air Force Research Laboratory, the XQ-58 Valkyrie, flies from runways like a typical aircraft; General Atomics GA-ASI Avenger and Boeing’s Airpower Teaming System (ATS) do the same.

The stealthy Valkyrie isn’t part of the competition with Boeing and General Atomics, but it could still one day receive the Skyborg system. The Air Force is continuing to test it for other uses as well. Last month, a Valkyrie flying out of Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona used its internal weapons bay to [deploy an ATIUS-600](#), a small drone typically launched from a tube that can be used for scouting or delivering very small payloads. In December, a Valkyrie was successfully [used as a “translator”](#) for the immense computers on an F-22 Raptor and an F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

In addition to testing AI for drones, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is also working on an Air Combat Evolution (ACE) AI that will be able to [take the helm](#) of a human’s fighter jet in a dogfight, freeing up the pilot to worry about other concerns. The AI has proven capable of beating human pilots in a simulated dogfight, but the greater challenge is convincing human pilots to trust the computer to fly for them in a life-and-death fight.

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USTR Tai Will Meet With Chinese Counterpart ‘In the Near Term’ for Talks on Trade Deal Phase

1

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just weeks after the US and China penned the first part of a trade deal intended to settle years of tariff wars, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and shut down the global economy, sending trade into

a tailspin. The deal was heavily premised on pledges to buy a minimum volume of goods from the other country.

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday she expects to meet with her Chinese counterpart, vice-premier and head of the Communist Party of China's Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, Liu He, "in the near term" to discuss implementation thus far of the January 2020 trade deal.

Tai made the comments during an event hosted by the London-based [Financial Times](#), noting she respected the need for continuity in trade policy. The deal was penned by the prior administration of Donald Trump, from whom Biden has sought to distance himself, despite largely adhering to Trump's strategic foreign policy orientation.

"It's the agreement that we have, it's the agreement that we will work from, that we will build from," Tai said. "It is our responsibility in the Biden-Harris administration to carry forward the relationship, where we do not shy away from being tough, but where we also know we must be fair and must be future focus-oriented," Tai said.

She added that she is "very much looking forward to formally meeting my Chinese counterparts and assessing their performance and measuring what they have to say, pressing our interests and backing up a path forward."

While Tai was born and raised in the United States, her parents are from Taiwan and she is fluent in Mandarin.

By the terms of the deal, the two parties are supposed to meet every six months to reevaluate their progress and adherence, but no meeting has taken place since August 2020.

Phase 1 of the trade deal was signed in January 2020 and expires at the end of the year. In it, the two nations pledged to buy certain minimum amounts of products from the other side, spanning a variety of agricultural and manufactured goods. However, in March of that year, the COVID-19 novel coronavirus outbreak had reached the scale of a global pandemic and nations began curbing international trade in a bid to stop the spread of the highly infectious respiratory disease, putting fulfillment of the pact in danger.

In June of last year, the US and China [rededicated themselves](#) to the terms of the deal; however, [according to data](#) collected by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a Washington, DC-based think tank, by March 2021 the US was still buying just 75% of the goods it had committed to, and China had bought just 61% of its committed purchases, as compared to 2017 levels before the two nations began trading trade tariffs.

While China's lockdowns ended in the middle of 2020 and its economy had [come roaring back](#) by the end of the year, the pandemic has persisted in the United States, where the deadliest months came in late 2020 and early 2021, and [daily new COVID-19 cases](#) have still not declined below 40,000 per day.

Lu Xiang, a senior researcher on China-US relations with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the [South China Morning Post](#) that "bilateral trade has spiked so far this year, but there are still difficulties in fully making up for the shortfall last year. Both sides, especially the US, need to show the utmost sincerity in cooperation. We will be outspoken on problems but also stick to cooperation. The deal is not perfect for either side, and now it is time for the US to propose solutions."

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All Felony Charges Dropped Against Denver Activists Charged for 'Justice for Elijah McClain' Protest  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amid the nationwide protests against police brutality and anti-black racism last summer, more than 10,000 protesters were arrested in less than two weeks and thousands more were injured by batons, tear gas, and less-than-lethal ammunition deployed against them as well as journalists covering the demonstrations.

Four anti-racist activists in Denver, Colorado, have had a slew of felony charges against them dropped on Thursday. The activists had potentially faced decades in prison after being accused of fomenting a riot in a 2020 protest that surrounded an area police precinct.

At a Thursday hearing, Adams County District Attorney Brian Mason moved to dismiss all remaining charges his office had brought against Lillian House, Joel Northam, Eliza Lucero, and Terrance Roberts, including both felonies and misdemeanors. According to [a press release](#) by the National Committee for Justice in Denver (NCJD) solidarity group, Mason said he has “an ethical obligation to only proceed on charges [his] office can prove and to dismiss charges that [they] cannot prove.”

“We are very glad to see earnest steps toward justice from both new district attorneys presiding over this case,” the NCJD said in a Thursday statement. “We continue to call on District Attorney John Kellner to end the prosecution in total and drop all remaining charges, which currently include a total of twelve misdemeanors and low-level offenses against Joel Northam, Lillian House, and Terrance Roberts.”

“As we have stated previously, not a single charge would have been filed were it not part of a broad and punitive attack initiated by the prior administrations against protest leaders who challenged the impunity of the police. Continuing to put these peaceful protesters through a grueling court process on charges representing the remnants of this case is not justice”, the statement read.

The ground was laid for Mason’s decision during a preliminary hearing in March, when Adams County Judge Leroy Kirby [decided to drop](#) the first-degree kidnapping charges against the protesters, calling them “a bridge too far.” The slew of charges against the four, plus another whose charges had already been dropped, stemmed from a July 3 protest at an Aurora Police Department precinct in which hundreds of demonstrators surrounded the station for several hours before leaving in the early hours of the morning. Police had argued the protest amounted to the kidnapping of the 18 officers inside the station, but lawyers for the defense successfully demonstrated the officers were free to leave and that the crowd dispersed when ordered to.

Then in April, neighboring Arapahoe County dropped [all 16 felony charges](#) against House and Northam, as well as several misdemeanors. After Thursday’s decision, the only charges remaining against the activists are several misdemeanors in Arapahoe County. The committee didn’t say what the maximum penalties at this point could be if their case proceeds to trial.

Protests Demand Justice After Killing by Police

The NCJD has claimed the five were targeted by police for revenge after organizing the July 3 protest and several others over the course of the summer demanding accountability for the August 30, 2019, death of Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old black man who died after being stopped by APD officers while walking home from the store. Four of the activists are members of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a revolutionary Marxist party that worked with community members to help put a nationwide spotlight on McClain's case by organizing the largest protests in Aurora's history.

The three officers who tackled McClain that night, putting him in a headlock until he fell unconscious, then telling medics to give him a fatal dose of ketamine to calm him down, have not been charged in McClain's death. A subsequent police investigation exonerated the three - Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt and Randy Roedema - of wrongdoing, but a [separate probe funded](#) by the Aurora city government found catastrophic faults with both their actions and the internal police probe.

After McClain's death, community members began [building a movement](#) to demand justice and hold the officers accountable, including other members of the same force who were caught [mocking McClain's death](#) in photos leaked on social media and were subsequently fired. Family and friends of McClain vouched for his gentle nature, noting he was neither as big or as violent as police claimed him to be. They fault racist perceptions of Black men for both the police stop and the violent incident that led to his death. Their protests shut down highways and rallied thousands in the Denver area.

Police arrested the five activists in a series of surprise raids on September 17, 2020, that included a SWAT team and armored vehicle sent to Northam's home and swarms of cop cars descending on the others while they were jogging or performing errands. The activists said they were not even aware warrants had been posted for their arrest. They were then kept in a COVID-infested jail for eight days, well beyond the two-day standard maximum period by which a bail hearing is required to be held. Independent news outlet BreakThrough News has created [a short documentary](#) about their arrests and charges and the Justice for Elijah McClain movement.

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Pentagon Adds 'Package' of F-18 Jets to Assist With US Troop Withdrawal in Afghanistan

© REUTERS / Bob Strong

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Joe Biden announced in April that the withdrawal of American troops in Afghanistan would not be completed by the previously agreed upon May 1 deadline, declaring instead that the forces would be out of the war-torn country by September 11, marking the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US.

The US military added a "package" of F-18 fighter jets to the security detail offering added muscle to protect US troops who are being withdrawn from Afghanistan, Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said [in a Thursday statement](#).

The announcement, made by Milley during a joint conference with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, revealed that approximately 12 F-18s would be deployed to the region.

The fighter jets are in addition to a [previously announced](#) deployment of B-52 bombers and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as [temporary](#) “elements of an Army Ranger task force.”

The US Central Command, which oversees US operations in the Middle East, has been tasked with assessing the security needs of the ongoing withdrawal procedures.

Acknowledging recent attacks by the Taliban in the Middle Eastern country, Milley stated that there have been no strikes against the US or coalition forces since troops began pulling out of Afghanistan.

Earlier, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [noted](#) that officials had documented “small harassing attacks” but that they had “not had any significant impact.” Similarly, US Forces Afghanistan reported that “ineffective indirect fire” had been detected at the Kandahar Airfield over the weekend, and that it had been addressed with an airstrike.

Milley stated during the Thursday conference that between 80% and 90% of all airstrikes are being handled by the Afghan air force, adding that providing continued air support to Afghan forces will be “key.”

Additionally, Milley revealed that the US Department of Defense was considering a variety of options to help support Afghan troops once US soldiers are officially withdrawn from Afghanistan. One possibility included training Afghan service members in another country. “We haven’t figured that out 100% yet,” Milley acknowledged.

The US Central Command [reported](#) on Tuesday that the withdrawal is only between 2% and 6% complete, with officials identifying some 1,300 pieces of equipment to be destroyed and transferring one base to the control of the Afghan military.

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Germany Rejects US Proposal to Waive COVID-19 Patents, Warns of ‘Severe Complications’ by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the Biden administration came out in full support of waiving the intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines, effectively siding with an international initiative to bolster vaccine production. The waiver proposal is currently making its way through the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Taking a stance against the US’ recent decision to support waiving patent protections for COVID-19 vaccines, Germany recently blasted the move and warned that the effort would create issues for future vaccine production.

A spokesperson for the German government [told Bloomberg](#) on Thursday that the waiver would create “severe complications” when it comes to producing new vaccines, highlighting growing concern that the proposal would ultimately prompt a loss in incentive for the industry and set a dangerous precedent moving forward.

Supporters of the waiver proposal have argued that it will help to increase the production of vaccines and see a spike in delivering life-saving jabs to developing nations. The proposal was

initially put forth by South Africa and India, two countries that have been undergoing devastating surges in COVID-19 cases.

[Latest figures](#) released by Johns Hopkins University indicate that when ranked against fellow countries, India has the second-highest COVID-19 case count and the third-highest death toll. In fact, India, which has recently been experiencing a case surge, added nearly 413,000 new COVID-19 cases on Thursday alone, according to [Worldometers](#).

To date, India has administered some 160 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, but has continued to see a COVID-19 surge over a lack of supplies and a highly-infectious strain of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes the novel coronavirus.

Similarly, South Africa, which saw the emergence of its own fast-spreading strain of the novel coronavirus, has undergone a spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths since late January. Health professionals [reported](#) over 2,100 new cases and approximately 63 deaths on Thursday.

The German government's spokesperson noted that the "limiting factor for the production of vaccines are manufacturing capacities and high quality standards, not the patents," underscoring that "the protection of intellectual property is a source of innovation, and this has to remain so in the future."

While both representatives of [South Africa](#) and [India](#) have hailed the US' support for the waiver, negotiations regarding the proposal are [reportedly](#) expected to unfold over a period of several months. All 164 member nations of the World Trade Organization would also have to consent to the decision.

On the European Union front, Ursula von der Leyen, who serves as the president of the European Commission, declared on Thursday that she is also willing to raise talks on a potential patent waiver.

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Not in My House - Political Cartoon

Following the storming of the US Capitol by hundreds of people, including Trump supporters, former US President Donald Trump was booted off various platforms after being blamed for inciting the deadly insurrection. In fact, Facebook's oversight board recently upheld Trump's ban from the platform.

Twitter suspended an account on Thursday that appeared to be tied to Trump's new communications platform, noting that the social media giant is dead set on taking action against any potential work-around on the former commander-in-chief's ban.

The account in question used the handle "@DJTDesk" in reference to Trump's newly-launched "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump" [platform](#), with a brief bio that explained Twitter posts were "copied from Save America on behalf of the 45th POTUS; Originally composed via DonaldJTrump/Desk."

As it turned out, the account managed to stay live for a few hours before it was inevitably suspended. Twitter later cited its [ban evasion policy](#) over the suspension, stating that the

platform would take action against any account that intends to promote content affiliated with a suspended account.

However, it has since been [confirmed](#) that the account was never an official Trump-affiliated account - at least not one that was launched by a member of the Trump team.

The latest Trump-social media development came as the former US president blasted Facebook after its oversight board backed his suspension from the platform. Trump [warned](#) that the “corrupt social media companies” would pay a “political price” for deplatforming him.

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Childish Gambino Sued for Copyright Infringement Over ‘This is America’ Song  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Donald Glover, also known by his rapper stage name Childish Gambino, shook netizens worldwide when on May 5, 2018, he released the song “This is America.” In 2019, the track made history after winning song of the year at the Grammy Awards.

Childish Gambino is being sued for copyright infringement by Emelike Nwosuocha, who raps under the name Kidd Wes and claims that the famed actor-musician’s hit song is too similar to his song “Made in America.”

Citing court documents filed in New York, the [BBC reported](#) that Nwosuocha claimed Glover’s hook of “This is America” is “unmistakably substantially similar, if not practically identical” to his track, which was released on SoundCloud in September 2016. He also notes how the choruses are written in the same metre.

Nwosuocha’s legal case has called for charges against Glover’s record label RCA, the song’s co-writers Young Thug and Ludwig Göransson, and Roc Nation, which split from RCA in 2019. He is also demanding a trial to seek damages related to lost profits and opportunities estimated to be worth “hundreds of millions of dollars.”

The lyrics Nwosuocha has referred to as being too similar include:

"Made in America / Flex on the radio / Made me a terrorist / Pessimistic n\*\*\*as / You should just cherish this," compared to Glover’s lyrics: "This is America / Guns in my area / I got the strap / I gotta carry 'em."

This is not the first time the Grammy Award-winning song has been accused of plagiarism. In 2018, a community of hip-hop aficionados on Reddit [drew similarities](#) between Glover’s song and another track released in 2016 by Jase Harley, entitled “American Pharaoh.” For some netizens, the instrumental and subject matter seemed all too familiar.

Harley himself originally cited in an Instagram [post](#) that he felt humbled when hearing the similarities, but later [blasted](#) Glover after the song’s Grammy win. According to Complex, at that time, Glover’s co-manager, Fam Udeorji, [responded](#) to the allegations with claims that “This is America” had origins that date back to a 2015 Pro Tools file.

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China Launches Driverless Taxi Service Ahead of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The upcoming Winter Olympics are scheduled to take place across China's Beijing, Yanqing and Zhangjiakou cities, starting in early February 2022. However, the games have been the focus of a potential boycott over allegations that the Chinese government is committing human rights abuses against Uyghurs, Tibetans and the residents of Hong Kong.

Beijing-based tech company Baidu recently announced that it would start China's first paid robotaxi service in Shougang Industrial Park, one of the venues for the 2022 Winter Olympics. The May 2 announcement detailed that Baidu had launched the Apollo Go robotaxi service, which will allow users to reach various shops and central hotels located within the area. Using the Apollo Go app, riders will scan a QR code and a health code in order to locate a taxi operating at level-4 autonomy, which indicates a vehicle will be capable of driving under certain restrictions, such as speed limits and geofencing.

Geofencing is the use of software to track mobile devices entering certain places. The use of this technology is currently limited, but expected to expand in the coming months.

The health code required for the app was previously unveiled in [March 2020](#), as part of China's effort to create a software capable of reading a person's health risks through an app. The initiative was developed as an added method to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Introducing unmanned services is an indispensable stage for the commercialization of autonomous driving," [said](#) Yunpeng Wang, vice president and general manager of autonomous driving technology at Baidu. "Today, we are opening the fully driverless robotaxi services in Beijing for the public, which we achieved only after conducting countless scalable driverless tests in many cities over a long period of time."

"In the future, Baidu Apollo will launch driverless robotaxis in more cities, enabling the public to access greener, low-carbon, and convenient travel services, while continuing to improve the unmanned service process and user experience," Wang added. "The commercialization of autonomous driving can alleviate congestion effectively and help to reach the peak carbon dioxide emissions and achieve carbon neutrality in China."

According to [Autoweek](#), ride-sharing companies Uber and Lyft have also recently submitted research in the anticipated release of their driverless vehicles. Lyft is estimated to cut over \$100 million a year in costs with the driverless initiative.

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McConnell Warns Lack of US Troops Will See Afghanistan 'Overrun' by Taliban  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) previously criticized US President Joe Biden's plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September 11, as he and other Republican lawmakers have seen the move as a decision that will leave Afghanistan vulnerable.

Touching on Biden's withdrawal efforts, McConnell claimed on Thursday that the Taliban could overrun the Afghan government by the end of the year should US forces be removed from the war-torn nation.

"I think there's a high likelihood that the Taliban will be back in control of the country, maybe as early as the end of the year," McConnell [told reporters](#) while in Kentucky.

The congressional lawmaker underscored that it is a "mistake to completely pull out" of Afghanistan, noting that "some presence [of US troops] there for counterterrorism and training purposes is an American's best interest."

Last month, Biden made the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, which was met with backlash from the Taliban since it pushed back the May 1 deadline agreed to under the Trump administration.

McConnell, as a part of the [GOP backlash](#) in April, previously called on Biden to explain why he chose now to retreat when the presence of the Taliban was still strong. On Thursday, McConnell emphasized the fact that in more than a year since the withdrawal agreement, the Taliban had largely held back on attacking US and coalition forces.

The Taliban has since threatened to resume the attacks due to the change in deadline, as [reports state](#) that in recent days the Taliban has occupied 52% of the country. The Taliban had previously held off on attacks largely as a result of the withdrawal agreement that was drawn up under the previous US administration.

Earlier, Pentagon spokesperson Jack Kirby remarked that American forces had only detected "some small harassing attacks," and that they did not have "any significant impact, certainly not on our people or our resources there and bases."

Following the withdrawal initiative, the US has dispatched additional [military muscle](#) to Qatar in what the US has maintained as efforts to bolster security amid the withdrawal process and decrease the spread of the Taliban.

The Afghan government and Taliban have continued talks related to the fight for peace, but many activists have voiced their concerns over the lack of focus on [the rights](#) of minority men and women living in Afghanistan.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#) on Thursday that the troop withdrawal procedures are proceeding as planned.

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'Not Out of the Question': Elon Musk Tweets Hope for Uncrewed Mission to Mars in 2024  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

SpaceX founder and CEO Elon Musk has since the start of his career held hopes of sustaining human life on Mars while increasingly exploring the expansion of human consciousness. In

2002, he launched his efforts through an aerospace company with realized ambitions to colonize Mars.

Musk, who dreams of settling on the red planet, took to Twitter on Thursday to say that launching an uncrewed flight mission in 2024 was "not out of the question."

At the time, Musk had been responding to a variety of questions via a Twitter thread about the expected launch date of his mission to Mars.

Musk launched his SpaceX Company in hopes of making life multiplanetary. At the International Mars Society Convention in 2020, Musk said that his goals were to expand humanities consciousness while exploring the depths of space, with the more prominent goal being to build a self-sustaining city on Mars.

Musk has a history of being a social media influencer with regards to space, crypto-currency and other futuristic investments. Despite the backlash related to a few of his Twitter posts, some netizens are rooting for Musk and his space ambitions.

Musk mentioned in 2020 that he was "80% to 90%" confident that the company's Starship rocket would reach orbit this year. However, that estimation is likely to change as the prototype projection only recently managed launch and land successfully.

SpaceX on [Wednesday](#) declared the launch of its SN15 prototype was a success as it proved to be the first test flight that did not end in an explosion of the vessel.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced in 2019 that [2024](#) would be the year in which astronauts would return to the Earth's rocky lunar satellite.

Earth and Mars reach their conjunction every 26 months, which is the most popular time for government space agencies to launch their multiplanetary missions.

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'Grow a Backbone': Rep. Omar Calls on Democrats to Abandon Bipartisanship, Abolish Filibuster

by [Evan Craighead](#)

During a virtual news conference on Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) told reporters in his home state that "one-hundred percent" of the GOP's focus is on "stopping this new administration." Critics of McConnell have likened his remarks to his 2010 push to make then-US President Barack Obama "a one-term president."

Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) took to Twitter on Wednesday to respond to McConnell's remarks, and call out Democratic lawmakers pushing for bipartisanship.

"Please stop asking us about bipartisanship when this is what the leader of the other party is focused on," she tweeted, quoting a clip of McConnell's virtual news conference. "Democrats can't repeat the mistake of 2009, we must abolish the filibuster & move legislation that helps us deliver progress for the American people."

"Let's grow a backbone," she concluded.

The Senate minority leader's comments came in response to reporter queries of his opinion on the future of the Republican party. Recently, reports have claimed GOP lawmakers are

attempting to oust the [already-embattled](#) Rep. Liz [Cheney](#) (R-WI), the No. 3 House Republican, after she claimed on Monday that anyone opposing the 2020 election results is "poisoning our democratic system."

"One-hundred percent of our focus is on stopping this new administration," McConnell told reporters in Kentucky on Wednesday. "We're confronted with severe challenges from a new administration, and a narrow majority of Democrats in the House and a 50-50 Senate to turn America into a socialist country, and that's 100 percent of my focus."

McConnell's comments on blocking the agenda of US President Joe Biden [have been](#) likened to his 2010 comments to National Journal ahead of the 2010 Midterm elections. Then-US President Barack Obama was in his first of two terms at the time.

"The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president," McConnell told the outlet.

"I don't want the president to fail; I want him to change," he emphasized later in the interview. Biden, who was vice president during Obama's tenure, has contended that their Democratic administration was able to get a lot done in spite of McConnell's partisan push.

"The president and I have been very clear, including his remarks in the chamber during the joint session of Congress, that we will continue to attempt to work on the most pressing issues facing the American people in a bipartisan manner," Vice President Kamala Harris told reporters on Thursday when asked about McConnell's statement.

She also asserted the White House would continue to hold bipartisan meetings with US lawmakers.

Harris did not comment on whether the Biden administration supports eliminating the filibuster: a procedural mechanism that allows one, or more senators to stop a bill from reaching a vote on the Senate floor.

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Video: Two Hostages Released as FBI, Minnesota Police Negotiate With Bank Robbery Suspect  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Officers with Minnesota's St. Cloud Police Department (SCPD) responded to reports of an active bank robbery at an area Wells Fargo around 1:45 p.m. local time Thursday afternoon. Hostage negotiators were later called to the scene to assist authorities.

The SCPD confirmed on Thursday that the reported hostage situation at Wells Fargo bank was underway, and agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were assisting with operations.

Several streets have reportedly been blocked off and the public has been told to avoid the immediate area.

Around 6:30 p.m. local time, one hostage suspect [was seen](#) leaving the bank with their hands up, according to area reports. A second suspect was release some 30 minutes later. Others remain in the building.

"Negotiations are ongoing," said SCPD Lt. Lori Ellering in a memo released around 5:15 p.m. local time. "The situation remains an active incident. There are an undisclosed number of bank employees being held hostage inside. There are no reports of injuries. The SCPD and FBI are working together on this incident and are working with SWAT resources on scene."

Eyewitness video recorded by Facebook user Seairra Farber showed law enforcement officers with tactical gear - including riot shields - waiting outside the Wells Fargo building.

Several individuals can be seen observing the scene from a nearby parking lot.

Earlier, following media reports on an active hostage situation, representatives of the bank issued a statement, confirming the incident.

"We can confirm a hostage situation at Wells Fargo's St. Cloud South branch, located at 200 33rd Avenue South," a Wells Fargo spokesperson said in a statement issued to local outlet [KARE 11](#). "We are cooperating with local law enforcement and will do whatever we can to assist the authorities in their investigation. We recognize this is a traumatic moment for the community and our colleagues. The safety and security of our customers and employees is our most important priority."

No further details were immediately available.

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Long March 5B: Astrophysicist Photographs Chinese Rocket Around 700 km Above Earth  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Beijing launched a Long March 5, or Chang Zheng 5 (CZ-5), rocket into Earth's orbit last week to deliver a key component of the future Chinese space station. It is unlikely that major space organizations will be able to accurately pinpoint the crash zone of the Chinese heavy-lift launch vehicle until it first re-enters Earth's atmosphere.

Virtual Telescope Project 2.0 published a photo on Thursday showing the CZ-5 rocket some 700 kilometers (435 miles) from its robotic telescope "Elena."

The image, captured by Italian astrophysicist and astronomer Gianluca Masi on Thursday, showed the rocket body glowing brightly. According to the telescope's data, the CZ-5 rocket was traveling with an apparent motion of 0.3 deg/second.

"This is a huge debris (22 tons, 30 meters long and 5 meters wide), but it is unlikely it could create serious damages. Of course, such an event reminds us about the importance of the space debris issue," Masi [wrote](#).

Experts believe the rocket will re-enter Earth's atmosphere on May 8 or 9, but it is difficult to identify an impact area at this time.

Dmitry Rogozin, head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, was recently able to narrow down the possible strike zone for the Long March 5B.

Roscosmos is one of several space organizations monitoring the Long March body's coordinates.

US Space Command is also tracking the rocket, according to [Wednesday remarks](#) by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

"We want to work with the international community to promote leadership and responsible space behaviours," Psaki claimed, when asked about space congestion and debris. "It's the shared interests of all nations to act responsibly in space to ensure the safety, stability, security and long-term sustainability about outer activity."

While experts have expressed doubt about the rocket being a cause for alarm, space agencies will not have concrete answers until the rocket re-enters Earth's atmosphere.

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Beijing Wants Ottawa to Respect China's Judiciary on Fate of Detained Canadians - Envoy

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Ottawa should respect China's judicial system, the East Asian nation's envoy to Canada said, responding to claims that Beijing is engaging in coercive diplomacy through its ongoing detention of two Canadian nationals.

Former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor, charged with espionage in China, have been in detention for over 800 days. Ottawa maintains that the "arbitrary" detentions came in retaliation for Canada detaining Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

"Please also respect our judicial system as we respect your judicial system, is my suggestion," Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu said on Thursday during a virtual discussion hosted by the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, in response to a question about the "two Michaels," as the pair is referred to at home.

Cong said that Chinese authorities are doing everything necessary to protect Kovrig's and Spavor's rights but emphasized that the two are charged with serious crimes.

The ambassador renewed calls for the release of Meng, saying that deteriorating bilateral relations can be repaired if that happens.

The envoy also stressed the importance of people-to-people ties - noting that polls show very few in Canada hold favorable opinions of China - and encouraged Canadians to visit the East Asian country.

The arrests of Meng and the two Canadian nationals, along with Ottawa's condemnation of Beijing's national security law implemented in Hong Kong and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province, has led to a deterioration of relations between China and Canada.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents. However, Chinese officials have said that Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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Blinken Says Held 'Productive Talks' in Kiev on Russia, Reforms With Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that he had productive talks about Russia and government reforms with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials.

"Productive time spent in Kyiv with President Zelenskyy and all those with whom I met," Blinken said via Twitter. "The United States is resolute in the face of Russian aggression and in our support for the reform work needed to ensure a sovereign, democratic, and prosperous future for Ukraine."

On Thursday Blinken started his two-day official visit to Kiev to meet with Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and other Ukrainian officials. He is the first member of the Biden administration to visit Ukraine.

The United States and other European partners have expressed concern over the military buildup on Ukraine's eastern border with Russia. The United States provides Ukraine an annual \$250 million in security assistance.

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Blinken to Participate in UNSC Meeting on Multilateralism on Friday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will virtually attend a UN Security Council meeting on multilateralism on Friday, the State Department said in a press release.

"On Friday, May 7, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will participate virtually in a UN Security Council meeting on Multilateralism," the release said on Thursday.

The meeting will be chaired by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other top diplomats from other UN Security Council member states, the release said.

Blinken will use this opportunity to discuss the importance of multilateralism cooperation and maintaining a rules-based international order, the release said.

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**Biden Announces Extension of National Emergency With Respect to Syria for 1 Year**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that he is extending for another year the state of emergency with respect to Syria.

"I am continuing for one year the national emergency declared with respect to the actions of the government of Syria," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said the United States will reconsider the existing policy based on the future actions of the Syrian government.

In 2004, then President George W. Bush issued the original order and subsequent US presidents extended it in response to what they said was a national security threat posed by the Syrian government, including its alleged support for terrorism, the weapons of mass destruction and missile development programs and its efforts to undermine stabilization efforts in neighboring Iraq.

Biden also condemned the government of President Bashar Assad and what he called were the enablers, Iran and Russia.

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**Canada's NDP Party Vows to Introduce Foreign Home Buyers Tax, Build 500,000 Housing Units**

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canada's opposition New Democrat Party (NDP) is vowing to introduce a tax on non-resident home buyers and build 500,000 new housing units if elected, leader Jagmeet Singh said.

For years, average Canadians and industry watchdogs have raised the alarm about skyrocketing housing prices and diminished supply driven by foreign speculators and a steady stream of news immigrants.

"Everyone is struggling, everyone is having a hard time finding a place to call home... we know people are treating Canada as a stock market when it comes to housing... we want to bring in a national foreign buyer's tax," the leader of Canada's resident left-wing party said during a virtual news conference on Thursday.

Singh also committed to new "massive" new investment that would create 500,000 new housing units of different types, including rental units, condos and single-family homes.

The NDP leader emphasized that the housing crisis is affecting everyone, from young professionals to middle income families and slammed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for not taking the situation seriously, instead preferring to engage in politicking.

Canada's housing crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with the Canadian Real Estate Association saying that sales in March were up 76 percent compared to a year ago – despite

most the country being locked down because of the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic – and average prices were up by nearly a third.

Singh's promise is being seen as a pre-election announcement just as the Canadian political parties gear up for an anticipated federal election later in the year.

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US Trade Chief, Pakistan Commerce Minister Agree to Continue Negotiations Framework

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Top US trade negotiator Katherine Tai and Pakistan's Minister of Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood have agreed to continue their dialogue on trade relations between the two countries, the Office of the Trade Representative (USTR) announced.

"US Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met virtually with Pakistani Minister of Commerce and Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Abdul Razak Dawood," the USTR said in a readout on Thursday. "[They] agreed to continue the US-Pakistan Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA) Agreement dialogue."

Tai also expressed the desire to build a strong US-Pakistan trade relationship, the readout added.

Tai said the Biden-Harris administration's top priority was saving lives and ending the pandemic in the United States and around the world, along with expanding vaccines production and distribution for developing countries, the readout said.

The US-Pakistani TIFA, signed in 2003, stipulates that both parties affirm the need to promote an attractive investment climate and expand trade in products and services between the two nations. The parties also recognize the need to reduce tariffs and eliminate non-tariff barriers to facilitate greater access to the markets of both countries, according to the document.

TIFA also calls for monitoring trade and investment relations and identify opportunities for expanding trade that may be appropriate for negotiation. The framework, both sides agree, can help prepare the parties for an eventual free trade negotiations.

According to the USTR, Pakistan is the United States' 56th largest trading partner with some \$6.6 billion in two trade during 2019. The US goods trade deficit with Pakistan was \$1.3 billion in 2019, the agency said in a fact sheet.

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Over 41% of Adult Canadians Have Received at Least One Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine - Official

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - More than two-fifths of Canadian have received their first dose of available coronavirus vaccines, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said.

"As of today, more than 14.5 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Canada," Njoo said on Thursday. "As of last Saturday, more than 41 percent of the adult population in Canada has received one dose of the vaccine."

The vast majority of Canadians older than 80 have received their first dose, while 16 percent are now fully vaccinated, Njoo said. Among those between the age 70 and 80, 86 percent have received their first dose and five percent have received both doses.

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, despite a much-maligned vaccine rollout which currently leaves Canada lagging behind other industrialized countries by most metrics, has vowed that the country's vaccination campaign will be complete by September.

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Biden Renews US National Emergency on Chaos in Central African Republic - White House

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has renewed the seven-year-old US declaration of national emergency on the continuing chaos in the Central African Republic (CAR), the White House announced.

"The situation in ... the Central African Republic continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," Biden said in a notice on Thursday. "For this reason, the emergency declared in Executive Order 13667 on May 12, 2014, to deal with that threat must continue in effect beyond May 12, 2021."

Former President Barack Obama first declared the emergency to deal with the breakdown of law and order in the Central African Republic, the White House notice said.

Since then, this condition has continued, characterized by "intersectarian tension, widespread violence and atrocities, and the pervasive, often forced recruitment and use of child soldiers, which threatens the peace, security, or stability of the Central African Republic and neighboring states," the notice said.

The renewed state of emergency will continue for at least one more year, the White House added.

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Biden Extends for 1 Year National Emergency With Respect to Syria - White House

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that he is extending for another year the state of emergency with respect to Syria.

"I am continuing for one year the national emergency declared with respect to the actions of the government of Syria," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said the United States will reconsider the existing policy based on the future actions of the Syrian government.

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**Biden Extends Sanctions Related to Stabilization of Iraq - Order**

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has extended for another year the national emergency sanctions related to the stabilization of Iraq, the White House said in a notice

"Therefore, in accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency with respect to the stabilization of Iraq declared in Executive Order 13303," the notice said on Thursday.

Executive order 13303 was declared in 2003 during the Bush administration imposing sanctions related to rebuilding funds and oil development.

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**Canada Records 11 Blood Clot Cases After AstraZeneca Jab, Death Toll Rises to 3 - Official**

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials have recorded 11 blood clot cases following immunization with the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, while the death has climbed to three, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said.

The Canadian province of Quebec recorded the country's first death following immunization with the AstraZeneca shot on April 27, with a 54-year-old woman, who in spite of medical treatment succumbed to the deadly side effect. Since then, a woman in her fifties from Alberta and individual in their 60s from New Brunswick have also died, according to provincial health officials.

"As of May 6, there have been 11 cases of blood clots with low platelets following the receipt of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Canada, reported to the federal level," Njoo told reporters on Thursday. "Sadly, two additional people from Alberta and New Brunswick, following the initial death reported in Quebec, have passed away."

Health Canada had temporarily paused inoculation for Canadians under the age of 55 with the AstraZeneca vaccine following a recommendation from Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations. The immunization drive has since resumed among those over 30 eligible to receive it.

Last month, a Canadian safety review of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine concluded that blood clotting events are possibly linked to it. As a result of the review, Canadian health officials introduced a warning section indicating the "stronger link" between the blood clotting events and the AstraZeneca vaccine on the safety label.

The controversy surrounding the UK drugmaker's vaccine has undermined confidence in the shot, with the latest polling numbers showing that only 52 percent of Canadians are comfortable receiving the AstraZeneca inoculation and 40 percent of this group would reject it if offered.

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#### Raytheon Wins \$275Mln Contract to Upgrade Earth Science Data Collection - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - A five-year \$275 million contract awarded to Raytheon seeks to upgrade management of information from the US Earth Observing System Data and Information System, NASA said.

"The purpose of this contract is to acquire services for the continued improvement, reliability, availability, functionality, operability, and performance of hardware, software, and cloud-based systems within the EOSDIS that provide science data management for the Earth Science Data and Information System Project within the Earth Science Division of NASA's Science Mission Directorate," NASA said in a press release on Thursday.

A major activity under this contract will be the evolution and development engineering of several on-premises and commercial cloud-based systems, the release added.

The maximum value of the contract is \$275 million during the agreement's five-year duration, according to the release.

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#### US Federal Elections Commission Recommends Ban on Automatic Recurring Donations

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Federal Elections Commission (FEC) voted unanimously to adopt a motion that recommends a ban on the practice of automatically registering political donors as recurring contributors.

"Congress should amend FECA [Federal Election Campaign Act] to require those soliciting recurring contributions to receive the affirmative consent of the contributors, to disclose additional information to their financial supporters and to immediately cancel recurring contributions upon request," the FEC said on Thursday.

Donors who find out that they have become recurring contributors to political action committees have contacted the FEC and said many have not been made aware of the pre-checked boxes used to sign them up.

The FEC recommendation will be sent to Congress as it ultimately has the authority to amend the relevant sections of the Federal Election Campaign Act.

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US Committed to Support India Amid COVID-19 Surge, Address Other Challenges - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States remains committed to support India in overcoming COVID-19 surge and both countries are ready to address other common challenges, Defense Department Deputy Press Secretary Jamal Brown said.

"Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin H. Kahl spoke with Indian Defense Secretary Dr. Ajay Kumar by phone today. Dr. Kahl underscored the United States' commitment to support the people of India as they battle a surge in COVID-19 cases," Brown said in a release on Thursday. "They [Dr. Kahl and Dr. Kumar] reiterated their commitment to working closely with like-minded countries - including Quadrilateral partners - to address the defining challenges of our time."

The two officials have also underscored that the bonds between the two nations have only deepened in times of crisis, the release said.

Dr. Kahl has also assured his Indian counterpart that the US Defense Department will continue to stand by India in its moment of need and support US assistance efforts in the days and weeks ahead, the release added.

India is experiencing a surge in the number of coronavirus cases and hospitalizations with over 412,000 cases reported on Thursday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) -

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

\* The United States and Iran can reach a deal and return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) prior to Iran's upcoming June 18 elections if Tehran is prepared to cooperate, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

US POLICY ON UKRAINE

\* The United States is committed to ensuring that NATO's door is open to all aspirants who meet the obligations for membership in the alliance, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the gaggle on Thursday.

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and discussed building a stronger partnership and enhancing NATO cooperation, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said.

\* Blinken has urged members of Ukraine's parliament to adopt legislation to fight corruption and promote the rule of law, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout after the top diplomat's meeting with members of the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev.

\* Blinken said the United States was closely monitoring the situation on Ukraine's border, where it believes the concentration of Russian troops was the highest since 2014.

\* Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy mentioned discussing with Blinken a possible meeting with Joe Biden, as well as inviting the US president to visit Ukraine.

#### GUNFIGHT IN BRAZIL

\* One police officer and 24 suspects were gunned down in an altercation in the subway of Rio de Janeiro, G1 website reported on Thursday.

#### EU-RUSSIA TENSIONS

\* Russia did not ask to be an observer at NATO's Steadfast Defender 2021 drills, but the alliance's exercises are always transparent, Vice Chief of Staff of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Lt. Gen. Brice Houdet said Thursday.

\* EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, said Thursday it was "unclear" if Russia wanted to fully engage on the de-escalation of tensions in Ukraine and implementation of Minsk agreements.

#### RUSSIAN CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that although global markets have decided to go with the coronavirus vaccine made by US company Moderna, it would be clear how good the vaccine really is no sooner than in about a decade.

\* Russia would back the proposal to waive intellectual property rights for coronavirus vaccines, Putin said.

\* Russian coronavirus medicines and vaccines are extremely safe and reliable, just like famous AK-47 rifle, Putin said.

\* Over 20 million people globally have been administered the first shot of the Sputnik V vaccine, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.

#### RUSSIA-ARMENIA TALKS

\* Moscow and Yerevan are discussing the possible production of Russia's coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V in Armenia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday during a press conference after the talks with his Armenian counterpart, Ara Aivazian.

\* The settlement process in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh should not be politicized, Lavrov said.

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US Charges Hedge-Fund Manager With \$3.8M In COVID-19 Relief Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The owner of a New York City hedge-fund management firm faces multiple charges of wire fraud and money laundering for receiving nearly \$4 million from the COVID-19 Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) using bogus applications, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[Gregory] Blotnick submitted eight falsified loan applications to numerous lenders on behalf of five of Blotnick's businesses, including his New York City-based hedge fund management firm, Brattle Street Capital LLC and related entities," the Justice Department said in a press release. To obtain the PPP loans, Blotnick submitted false information, including the number of his employees, federal tax returns for his businesses, and his payroll documentation, and he certified that he would use the loan money only for business-related purposes, the release said. Blotnick transferred the funds to brokerage accounts, losing more than \$3 million in stock trades, the release added.

Blotnick is charged with eight counts of wire fraud and six counts of money laundering, with an initial court appearance scheduled May 19, according to the release.

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Dow Jones Hits Record High Second Day in Row on US Jobs Optimism

NEW YORK, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equity barometer, hit record highs for a second straight day on Thursday on optimism that the rapidly improving US labor market will accelerate the United States' recovery from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic-related measures.

The Dow crossed 34,500 points for the first time ever after filings for jobless benefits, a key weekly indicator of US employment, fell for a fourth week in a row and to levels last seen in March 2020 - just before the implosion of the labor market from the coronavirus outbreak.

The Dow closed the session up 0.9 percent, or 319 points, at 34,549, after a record high at 34,561. For the year, the index was up almost 13 percent.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 0.8 percent, or 34 points, at 4,201.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which groups Big Tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google, gained 50 points, or 0.4 percent, to close at 13,633.

The Labor Department reported on Thursday that some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the US outbreak of COVID-19 last year. Employment numbers for all of April will be reported on Friday.

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UN Chief Expresses Wish to China's Xi for More Cooperation on Climate, Rights - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday held a phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which he expressed a wish for strengthened cooperation between the world body and Beijing on issues that include climate change and human rights, the United Nations Office of the Spokesperson said in a statement. "Mr. Guterres expressed his appreciation for the Chinese support to the United Nations and multilateralism," the statement said. "The Secretary-General also expressed the wish for enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and the People's Republic of China in all the pillars of the Organization's work – Peace and Security, Sustainable Development, including Climate Change and Biodiversity, and Human Rights."

During the conversation, Guterres expressed the commitment to the success of the COVAX facility and the establishment of a global vaccination plan, the statement said.

Guterres outlined his commitment to ensuring that the Biodiversity COP 15 in the Chinese city of Kunming and the Climate COP26 in Glasgow will be a success.

The UN Secretary-General also congratulated Xi on the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021.

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Facebook Removes 1,565 accounts, 724 pages in April for 'Inauthentic Behavior'

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Facebook said on Thursday that it has removed from its platform nine coordinated networks from six nations during the month of April.

"We view CIB [coordinated inauthentic behavior] as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation," Facebook said in a press release. "There are two tiers of these activities that we work to stop: 1) coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of domestic, non-government campaigns and 2) coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government actor."

April's enforcement action removed 1,565 Facebook accounts, 141 accounts from the company's Instagram subsidiary, 724 pages and 63 groups, the release said.

The removed networks were based in Palestine, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Mexico, Peru and Ukraine, the release added.

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US Considering Training Afghan Security Forces in Another Country - Joint Chiefs of Staff

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering training Afghan security forces in another country after its troop withdrawal is complete later this year, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told reporters on Thursday.

"We'll also continue to look at training them in perhaps another location," Milley said during a press conference at the Defense Department.

Milley emphasized that the United States will continue to provide logistics and financial support to Afghan security forces following the US exit from Afghanistan.

The US Central Command estimates that the United States has completed between 2 percent to 6 percent of the entire withdrawal process.

Milley said the United States has pulled out about 60 C-17 plane loads of equipment from Afghanistan and marked more than 1,300 pieces of equipment that will be destroyed. Moreover, the United States has formally handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army, he added.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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Twitter Suspends Account for Posting Comments From Trump's New Blog

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - An account that attempted to post comments from a blog by former President Donald Trump on Twitter was suspended, the social-media giant said on Thursday.

"As stated in our ban evasion policy, we'll take enforcement action on accounts whose apparent intent is to replace or promote content affiliated with a suspended account," Twitter said in a statement as quoted by Politico.

Trump unveiled a new blog Tuesday, with links for users to share his latest statements directly on Twitter, where he is permanently banned.

On Thursday, an account with the handle @DJTDesk appeared on Twitter saying, "Posts copied from Save America on behalf of the 45th POTUS; originally composed via DonaldJTrump/desk," according to images posted by NBC and other media outlets.

Trump spokesman Jason Miller told NBC the account was not set up by, or with the permission of, anyone affiliated with the former president.

On Wednesday, Facebook's independent advisory board upheld the Trump ban while faulting the platform for creating a new rule for the former president following the January 7 riot in the Capitol that critics say was instigated by president just days before leaving office. The board also gave Facebook a 6-month deadline to revise its rules to avoid future situations in which it responds to unusual situations by creating new penalties.

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US Homeland Security Secretary Travels to Texas for Update on Migration

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas travels to Texas on Friday for an update on illegal migration across the country's southern border, the department said.

In the city of Donna, Mayorkas will be briefed about unaccompanied children, the single largest category of migrants who are allowed to temporarily stay in the US, and view conditions at the local Customs and Border Protection processing facility.

Official data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March to 172,331 migrant encounters, the highest monthly total in over two decades.

President Joe Biden and other US administration officials downplay the surge as a seasonal fluctuation and claim the situation is gradually improving.

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UPDATE 2 - US Drawdown in Afghanistan Going 'According to Plan' - Defense Secretary Austin

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US pullout of troops from Afghanistan is proceeding according to plan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a press conference on Thursday.

"So far, less than one week in, the drawdown is going according to plan," Austin said.

Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley during the press conference said the Taliban have not conducted any attacks against US or Coalition forces in Afghanistan since the drawdown began May 1.

Austin said the United States has pulled out about 60 C-17 plane loads of equipment from Afghanistan and marked more than 1,300 pieces of equipment that will be destroyed. Moreover, the United States has formally handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army, he added.

US Central Command estimates that the United States has completed between 2 percent to 6 percent of the entire withdrawal process.

Austin said Washington will do everything to make the drawdown deliberate, orderly and safe as well as to protect its people and partners.

He also said the United States is shifting to a new bilateral relationship with Afghan Security partners in which the two nations will work towards common goals in some new and different ways.

The US administration is hopeful that the Afghan security forces will be able to play a major role in stopping the Taliban, but acknowledged that it will be a challenge for them, Austin said. The United States will continue to support the Afghan security forces through logistics and financial support after the US withdrawal, Austin said.

The defense chief also said the United States will withdraw all contractors working for US forces in Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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US Market Regulator to Formulate New Short-Selling Rules in Wake of GameStop Saga - Chair

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is coming up with new rules to boost transparency on the US stock market in the area of short-selling to prevent trading upheavals like those triggered by the GameStop saga, Chairman Gary Gensler said Thursday.

"I've asked SEC staff to prepare recommendations on transparency, and short selling of stock," Gensler, who came to the helm of the regulatory agency in mid-April, told a hearing held by Congress.

Shares of GameStop suddenly surged in January, from as low as \$17 to over \$480 at one point, after retail stock buyers on social media site Reddit pushed the video-gaming retailer's shares higher in an apparent organized bid to frustrate hedge funds "shorting" those shares in a move to drive their price down.

Shorting is essentially selling shares one does not already own at a higher price and buying them back lower to pocket a profit. It's a strategy that can make huge profits when done well. But in the case of GameStop, some of the hedge funds on the other side of the retail investors on Redditors lost billions of dollars as the shares rose heavily in price after they were shorted. Gensler is also under pressure to act tough against Wall Street after the implosion in March of a New York-based fund called Archego that exposed gaps in the SEC's rules.

Gensler told Thursday's hearing that the new trading rules being considered by the SEC included greater disclosure of short-selling, an increase in transparency around securities lending and new reporting rules for "total return" equity swaps — such as the kind that ruined Archegos.

"Generally speaking, we are reviewing order, routing practices and the circumstances under which trading restrictions were imposed, any potential manipulative conduct and compliance with short sale requirements among other matters," he said. "I can assure the committee that we will take all appropriate, disciplinary or other remedial action, as warranted as the facts indicate a violation of SEC or federal rules."

Gensler also said he has asked SEC staff to draft a request for public input into how trading apps attract retail customers with game-like features such as points, rewards and competitions — a strategy known as "gamification." Besides this, he said he has asked for a proposal on expediting the two-day trade settlement procedure for stocks to reduce systemic risks.

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US Does Not Plan to Shoot Down Chinese Rocket Debris - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US military does not plan to shoot down a piece of Chinese rocket debris making an uncontrolled reentry back to Earth, hoping that it will land in a harmless place like an ocean, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"We don't have a plan to shoot the rocket down. We're hopeful that it will land in a place where it won't harm anyone, hopefully in the ocean or somewhere like that," Austin said.

The piece of space debris - a portion of a rocket used to launch a module up to China's new space station - is expected to make impact on Saturday or Sunday of this week, although estimates are imprecise.

The defense chief said the US may have the capability to shoot it down if necessary.

Austin added that this situation highlights why there ought to be safe and thoughtful operating requirements for countries working in space.

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US Drawdown in Afghanistan Going 'According to Plan' - Defense Secretary Austin

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"So far, less than one week in, the drawdown is going according to plan," Austin said.

Austin said Washington will do everything to make the drawdown deliberate, orderly and safe as well as to protect its people and the partners.

He also said the United States is shifting to a new bilateral relationship with the Afghan Security partners in which the two nations will work towards common goals in some new and different ways.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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Pfizer, Moderna Jabs 94% Effective at Keeping US Seniors Out of Hospitals - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines have proven 94 percent effective in preventing hospitalization of patients aged 65 and older, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Thursday.

"Effectiveness was 94% among adults who were fully vaccinated and 64% among adults who were partially vaccinated," a CDC report said.

The study based its findings on data from 417 patients at least 65-years-old who were hospitalized during the first three months of 2021 - 187 with COVID-19 and 230 who were virus free. Among the infected patients, 18 were partially vaccinated and one was fully vaccinated.

The 3-month examination of data drew from 24 hospitals in 14 states. Researchers relied on a mathematical probability model based on the likelihood of a hospitalized COVID-19 patient having been vaccinated to extrapolate estimates of vaccine effectiveness in preventing hospitalization, according to the report.

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US Drawdown in Afghanistan Going 'According to Plan' - Defense Secretary Austin

\*WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US pullout of troops from Afghanistan is proceeding according to plan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a press conference on Thursday. "So far, less than one week in, the drawdown is going according to plan," Austin said.

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US Air National Guard Examines Potential Upgrades to MQ-9 Reaper Drone

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Tests of possible upgrades to older models of the MQ-9 Reaper drone will attempt to allow fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft to communicate with each other, the 174th Attack Wing of the US Air National Guard said on Thursday. "From May 3-14th, the pods will demonstrate their capabilities onboard a... MQ-9 focusing on a higher level of integration with additional air and ground based assets during Pacific Command's premier exercise, Northern Edge, at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska," the Air National Guard said in a press release.

Tests will examine three separate pods, or configurations, for the Reaper, each specializing in a different set of capabilities, the release said.

The pods are designed to help the MQ-9 play a more prominent role in battlefield command and control, including the ability to receive and pass information to and from older fourth generation and newer fifth generation aircraft, the release added.

The tests are funded solely by the Air National Guard since the Guard only operates legacy aircraft, according to the release.

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US Accuses Iran of 'Unspeakable Cruelty' for False Reports on Foreigners' Release

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Iran leaking false information on the the release of foreign detainees was a cruel move intended to mount pressure on Washington, a senior US State Department official told reporters on Thursday.

Last Sunday, reports of a deal allegedly struck between Iran and Western countries on the repatriation of foreigners including at least five Americans made headlines across the world before being refuted by the United States which vows to continue efforts to bring its citizens home.

"One can only imagine the suffering that the families of the detained had to endure when they thought for a moment that their loved ones are going to be brought back home. That's unspeakable cruelty," the official said.

The US is determined to do everything it can to bring them home, the official added.

"But we would really hope that Iran would not subject the detainees and their families to what they had to endure last Sunday when for a brief moment they read the news that their loved ones were coming home because a deal has been struck," the official said.

The official accused Iran of using detainees "as pawns to try to extract concessions from the United States or from other countries." He reiterated that there is still no agreement, but the US is actively seeking one independently of the Vienna talks on the reinstatement of the nuclear deal with Iran.

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US Air Force Awards \$175Mln Deal to Collect, Analyze Signal Intelligence - Raytheon

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has awarded a \$175 million contract to collect and analyze signals intelligence, Raytheon announced on Thursday.

"Raytheon Intelligence & Space (RI&S), a Raytheon Technologies business will provide signals intelligence field services for the US Air Force's Distributed Common Ground System, which collects, processes and analyzes intelligence," the company said in a news release.

Under the deal, RI&S will support seven different intelligence applications the Air Force uses to collect and correlate data under the new program, DCGS-Signals Intelligence Field Support, the release said.

"The five-year contract, valued up to \$175 million, will combine information from airborne, ground and other systems. ... Under the contract, RI&S will leverage its mission domain knowledge to provide high mission availability in support of end-to-end operations," the release added.

Under the contract, Raytheon will create a mission plan for an airborne sensor to receive data, process it and then either produce a report, store it or enhance it by fusing it with other data, according to the release.

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## Canada to Host Pledging Conference for Aid to Displaced Venezuelans in June - Statement

TORONTO, May 6 (Sputnik) - Canada will host an international pledging conference to raise financial support for Venezuelan refugees and migrants displaced by the ongoing political and humanitarian crisis in the South American country, Global Affairs Canada said on Thursday. "On June 17, 2021, led by Karina Gould, Minister of International Development, Canada will host a high-level International Donors' Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in collaboration with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Organization for Migration," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

The event aims to solicit additional financial and technical support, raise awareness about the crisis and discuss next actions, the statement said.

The last such event was convened by the European Union and Spain in May of 2020. Venezuela has experienced political and humanitarian crisis since 2019 after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself to be an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust re-elected Nicolas Maduro from power. Maduro has said Guaido is a US puppet working with Washington to orchestrate a coup so that the United States can control Venezuela's natural resources. Canada is among a handful of countries that still recognizes Guaido as Venezuela's president. The European Union recently revoked its recognition of Guaido.

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## US Worker Productivity up 5.4% in First Quarter in Progress From COVID - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Worker productivity in the United States rose more than 5 percent in the first quarter of this year, the Labor Department said on Thursday, unveiling another piece of data that pointed to encouraging recovery in the world's largest economy from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nonfarm business sector labor productivity increased 5.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021," the department said in a news release.

Economists polled by US media had expected a productivity rate of 4.3 percent for the January-March period.

The Labor Department had initially reported a decline of 4.2 percent in productivity for the previous quarter between October and March, but revised that to 3.8 percent in Thursday's update.

Earlier on Thursday, the Labor Department reported that some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the US outbreak of COVID-19 last year.

The jobless claims number followed a rash of bullish macroeconomic data accompanied by falling infection rates for the virus versus a spiking vaccination drive by the government.

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#### White House Says New Florida Election Integrity Law Move in 'Wrong Direction'

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Florida legislators and Governor Ron DeSantis had no reason to change the existing voting rules because the 2020 election was one of the most secure in the history and this is a move in "wrong direction", White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"The 2020 election was one of the most secure elections in American history. There's no legitimate reason to change the rules right now to make it harder to vote, that's built on a lie. The only reason to change the rules right now is if you don't like who voted, and that should be out of bounds," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "Florida is moving in the wrong direction."

Former President Donald Trump, numerous Republicans and others have charged that the Democrats stole the 2020 election by using mass mail-in voting, relaxed identification and voting deadlines and other similar practices.

Jean-Pierre pointed out that Florida changing its elections law is not the same as some other states implementing allegedly better new voting rules.

Earlier on Thursday, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law a new measure that is expected to strengthen the existing voter identification requirements, prohibit mass mailing of ballots and ban voter harvesting. However, Democrats have criticized the measure, saying it is an attempt to limit the voting rights of the people in Florida.

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#### UN Envoy Urges Israel to End Demolitions, Show Restraint in West Bank - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland on Thursday called on Israel to cease evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank and demonstrate maximum restraint amid the recent surge in violence.

"I am deeply concerned by the surge in tensions and violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan," Wennesland said. "I reiterate that Israeli Security Forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life."

Wennesland said a Palestinian woman and a child were killed in separate incidents by the Israeli forces amid clashes.

In addition, the latest eviction of Palestinian refugee families Sheikh Jarrah and other neighborhoods in occupied East Jerusalem are also very concerning, Wennesland said.

"I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law," he added.

The special representatives further called on all political, religious and community leaders on both sides to denounce violence, warning that the situation could spiral out of control if it is not addressed.

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US Upgrade of Nuclear Triad Systems 'At Risk of Delays' - Government Accountability Office

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to modernize its nuclear triad of bomber aircraft, intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, but the upgrade is at risk of delays, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said on Thursday.

"DOD [Department of Defense] and DOE [Department of Energy] are working to replace triad systems nearing retirement, but these replacement programs face schedule risks that could exacerbate challenges with existing triad systems," the GAO said in a report to Congress. GAO said in the report the risk factors include concurrency between phases of acquisition programs from development through production, immature technologies and limited schedule margin. Many Energy Department facilities needed for these efforts are outdated or obsolete with more than half being over 40 years old, the report said.

GAO also said both departments have limited ability to mitigate risks to the efficacy of the nuclear deterrent with their current strategy, and "are beginning to consider alternatives."

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Three Shot in Idaho School Shooting, Suspect in Custody - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Three people, including two students and one adult custodian, were shot during a school shooting incident in Rigby, Idaho, the East Idaho News reported on Thursday.

The injuries that the victims sustained are not believed to be life threatening, the report said. One male student was taken into police custody and the the school district confirmed that it was an active shooter situation, the report said.

The authorities evacuated the students from the Rigby Middle School to the nearby Rigby High School and notified the parents of the incident who then arrived to pick up their children, the report added.

The students who were not picked up will be bused home later, according to the report.

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## Russia Asks Chinese Presidency of UNSC to Promptly Resume In-Person Meetings - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The Chinese presidency of the UN Security Council should immediately enable a return to in-person meetings this month, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky said on Thursday.

"I'd like to express my disappointment in connection with the fact that our meeting today is once again taking place in a virtual format," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting on the Syrian chemical dossier. "We ask the Chinese Presidency of the Council to take immediate measures so that our Council can return to its traditional forms and methods of work."

Polyanskiy said Russia was deeply convinced that nothing was preventing the diplomats from returning to the UN Security Council Chamber at UN headquarters in New York as it meets all social distancing requirements necessary to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

In addition, resuming the in-person meetings will send an important signal to the international community which has been long-awaited from the UN Security Council.

As the situation with the coronavirus has significantly improved in New York City, local authorities decided to lift most restrictions by mid-May.

Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jung, who presides over the UN Security Council during the month of May, said earlier that he may hold up to three in-person meetings this month.

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## Iran Nuclear Deal Can Be Revived Prior to June 18 Election - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iran can reach a deal and return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) prior to Iran's upcoming June 18 elections if Tehran is prepared to cooperate, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

"Is it possible to get a deal before the Iranian elections? Absolutely," the official said. "If Iran makes that political determination that it is not going to ask more from the United States in terms of sanctions relief than, what a return to compliance with the JCPOA requires, and it's not going to do less in terms of its nuclear commitment than a return to compliance requires, then that could be done relatively quickly."

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## White House on Ukraine Joining NATO: Biden Committed to Ensuring Door Open to Aspirants

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to ensuring that NATO's door is open to all aspirants who meet the obligations for membership in the alliance, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the gaggle on Thursday.

"The Biden administration is committed to ensuring that NATO's door remains open to aspirants when they are ready and able to meet the commitments and obligations of membership and contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area," Jean-Pierre said when asked about Ukraine's intent to join the alliance.

The United States supports Ukraine's effort to advance reforms pertaining to the rule of law and economic growth, Jean-Pierre added.

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New York Asks to Join Lawsuit Against Campaign to Suppress Black Vote - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US state of New York has filed a request to join a court case against two conspiracy theorists who flooded the state with robotic telephone messages warning African-Americans that personal information from mailed ballots would be shared with police and other government agencies, state Attorney General Letitia James said on Thursday. "Jacob Wohl and Jack Burkman, while hiding behind their sham organization "Project 1599," violated state and federal laws by orchestrating robocalls to threaten and harass Black communities through disinformation, including claims that mail-in voters would have their personal information disseminated to law enforcement, debt collectors, and the government," James said in a press release.

The campaign reached about 5,500 voters in New Yorker state in an attempt to interfere with efforts to administer the 2020 elections during the COVID-19 crisis and protect citizens from voter intimidation and harassment, the release said.

New York seeks to join an existing lawsuit filed by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights on behalf of voters and the National Coalition on Black Civic Protection against Wohl, Burkman, Project 1599 and Burkman's lobbying firm J. M. Burkman & Associates, the release added.

The lawsuit seeks to prohibit the defendants from future voter intimidation campaigns, and to impose fines of up to \$500 for each violation of New York State laws protecting citizens from discrimination, according to the release.

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Blinken, Ukraine's Kuleba Discuss Enhancing Partnership, NATO Cooperation - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and discussed building a stronger partnership and enhancing NATO cooperation, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kyiv," Price said in a statement. "They discussed US-Ukraine cooperation on shared priorities, including forging an even stronger partnership and enhanced NATO cooperation."

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Ukraine Must Make More Progress on Reforms for IMF to Complete Review - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Ukraine should make more progress on the reforms it has undertaken in order for the first IMF review under the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) to be completed, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Our board has approved as of last year... a \$5 billion stand-by arrangement, financial arrangement from IMF to Ukraine amongst other things to help the country with its COVID-19 response, but beyond that to support an important set of reforms to strengthen recovery and growth," Rice said.

The spokesperson noted that Ukraine and the IMF held virtual discussions earlier this year on the progress made thus far in implementing stated policies and reforms.

"The discussions were productive, but in terms of the status, more progress is needed to support completion of the first review under the program," he said.

Rice explained the program is aimed to help Ukraine cope with the current crisis, but also focus on safeguarding medium-term fiscal sustainability, preserving the independence of its central bank, enhancing financial stability as well as tackling corruption and enhancing good governance.

"Discussions continue, as I said and we will keep you posted as to further progress," he added.

IMF Resident Representative for Ukraine Goesta Ljungman said in February that Ukraine failed to demonstrate to a special International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission enough progress on reforms under a \$5-billion economic support arrangement to receive the next tranche.

Ljungman described the talks with Ukrainian officials as productive, but said that the IMF wanted to see more progress on the commitments under the deal, which applies to such items as the management of Ukraine's financial and regulatory institutions, banking legislation and anti-corruption efforts.

The Stand-by Arrangement describes the measures as "a small set of key structural reforms, to ensure that Ukraine is well-poised to return to growth when the [COVID-19] crisis ends."

The IMF approved the \$5-billion program last June and wired \$2.1 billion right away. The rest of funding was made conditional upon Ukraine's satisfactory progress on the outlined criteria. The original schedule of further payments entailed four \$700-million installments - two in late 2020 and two during 2021 - but none were wired so far.

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Mayorkas, Mexican Minister Agree to Boost Cooperation on Migration - US Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations Marcelo Ebrard have agreed to boost their direct collaboration on dealing with cross-border migration issues, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"On Wednesday ... Mayorkas spoke with Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Relations Marcelo Ebrard," the DHS said in a readout of the conversation. "[The two secretaries] discussed deepened collaboration on the development of regional approaches to irregular migration, including through the creation of legal pathways for migrants in the region."

Mayorkas and Ebrard also expressed a mutual desire to work together to create economic opportunities across the Western Hemisphere and combat unlawful activities such as human smuggling that threatened both countries' national and economic security, the readout said. The two officials also emphasized their shared focus on enhancing bilateral economic cooperation, agreed to work together on COVID-19 mitigation measures, the readout added.

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Florida Governor Signs Election Bill Into Law Prohibiting Mass Mailing of Ballots

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Thursday signed into law a new voting measure that strengthens the existing voter identification requirements, prohibits mass mailing of ballots and bans voter harvesting.

"Today, Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law Senate Bill 90, Florida's new election integrity bill, strengthening voter identification, prohibiting the mass mailing of ballots, banning ballot harvesting and prohibiting private money from administering elections in our state," a release accompanying the bill said.

The new law requires additional identification when a voter seeks to change any registration information or requests a vote-by-mail ballot, the release said.

Under the new law, the number of ballots a person may handle other than those of immediate family members is not allowed to be more than two, the release said.

In addition, the law prohibits the mass mailing of ballots and ensures vote-by-mail ballots are only sent to those individuals that requested them.

DeSantis said the new law aims to increase the transparency and security of elections in Florida. However, Democrats have criticized the measure, saying it is an attempt to limit the voting rights of the people in Florida.

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US Picks Florida Airport For Test of Latest Drone Detection Systems - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Miami International Airport (MIA) in the US state of Florida will conduct an initial test of technologies that will detect, track, and identify drones entering into restricted airspace, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said on Thursday.

"The technologies will be evaluated in laboratory and operational field environments. During the test at MIA, TSA will review a range of security and surveillance technologies that are able to detect, track and identify UAS [drone] operations by radar, thermal imaging, and artificial intelligence," a TSA said in a press release.

TSA said the threat from drones pose a threat to commercial aviation when flown into certain restricted airspaces, adding that in recent years it has increased exponentially.

The information and data collected from the test will help develop solutions that mitigate the risks that unauthorized drone operations to the US transportation system, according to the release.

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Guterres Says 336 UN Employees Lost Their Lives on Duty in 2020

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has seen 336 personnel losing their lives in the line of duty in 2020, constituting the highest number of fatalities among the organization's employees in a single year, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at an annual memorial service held on Thursday.

"In view of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its extraordinary impact, this memorial service also honors all colleagues who passed from illness in 2020," Guterres said.

"As a result, this year's memorial service pays tribute to the highest number of colleagues lost in a single year. We honor 336 UN personnel who lost their lives in the line of duty and due to the COVID-19 and related circumstances between January 1 and December 31, 2020," he said.

Guterres explained this year's ceremony recognized UN personnel from 82 nations who died from the novel coronavirus and those whose illness may not have been recorded as COVID-19, but might still be related to it.

The UN chief said the ceremony also honored those UN employees who passed in 2020 due to reduced access to healthcare amid the pandemic.

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## UN Releases \$65Mln to Support Aid Work in Ethiopia, Tigray Region - OCHA

UNITED NATIONS, May 6 (Sputnik) - The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement on Thursday that it has released some \$65 million to assist more than 16 million people in Ethiopia, including in the embattled Tigray region.

"The United Nations has released US\$65 million for the humanitarian response in Ethiopia," the statement said. "More than 16 million people need humanitarian assistance throughout Ethiopia, including an estimated 4.5 million in the Tigray region."

OCHA said a total of \$40 million will support the aid operation in Tigray and fund the emergency shelter, clean water, health care and assistance in sexual violence cases.

The remaining \$25 million will support humanitarian operations in the rest of Ethiopia, including funding the response to drought in the Somali and Oromia regions, support for the treatment of children with malnutrition and enabling aid organizations to pre-position supplies.

OCHA said the current response throughout Ethiopia, heavily impacted by drought and an ongoing conflict in Tigray, is insufficient and urgently requires additional funding as well as unimpeded humanitarian access.

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## US Weekly Jobless Claims Dip Below 500,000, Lowest in 14 Months - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - Some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic last year, the US Labor Department said Thursday.

"In the week ending May 1, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 498,000, a decrease of 92,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000." Economists polled by US media had anticipated 538,000 filings for unemployment benefits last week.

It was the fourth week in a row that filings had fallen, signaling a rapid recovery from the COVID-19 marked by other bullish macroeconomic data and falling infection rates versus vaccinations for the virus.

The Labor Department will publish on Friday jobs numbers for all of April, with economists projecting a growth of 978,000 for last month, to build onto the March gains of 916,000.

In its latest weekly report, the department said continuing claims for the week ended May 1 — reported with a one-week lag — rose, however, to 3.69 million, from 3.65 million during the week to April 24.

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 biggest challenges of 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. More than 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021, released last week 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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Blinken Urges Members of Ukraine’s Parliament to Combat Corruption - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has urged members of Ukraine’s parliament to adopt legislation to fight corruption and promote the rule of law, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout after the top diplomat’s meeting with members of the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev on Thursday.

“Secretary Blinken underscored our commitment to democratic principles and institutions as well as the United States’ unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence,” Price said. “Secretary Blinken and Rada members discussed the importance of passing key legislation to advance rule of law, anti-corruption, and economic reforms that will strengthen Ukraine’s democracy and economy, and further Euro-Atlantic integration.”