05/14/21 Friday

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US Army's Controversial Ground-Based Hypersonic Missile to Have Over 1,700-Mile Range
by Morgan Artyukhina

The Pentagon has several hypersonic weapons programs currently in development in a bid to close the gap with Russia and China, both of which already have hypersonic missiles deployed. The ultra-fast weapons are capable of evading most methods of detection as well as interception.

The US Army has let slip the range of its forthcoming ground-launched hypersonic missile system, revealing the weapon has a range in excess of 1,700 miles.

Breaking Defense reported earlier this week that an Army spokesperson had told the outlet the service's forthcoming Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) will be able to strike targets "at a distance greater than 2,775 kilometers," or 1,725 miles.

At that range, the weapon will be nearly equal to intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), but due to its maneuverable hypersonic glide vehicle, it will be much more potent a threat than existing IRBMs. The weapon will also become the latest addition to the growing list of ground-based missiles developed by the US that would have violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty the US withdrew from in 2019.

The 1987 bilateral treaty the US signed with the Soviet Union banned ground-based surface strike missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,000 kilometers over fears that a nuclear-armed missile at that range would be able to deliver a strike so quickly as to make war much more likely. While the US withdrew from the treaty in 2019 after claiming Russia was violating the treaty, within weeks of the treaty's lapse, the US had begun testing missiles that themselves violated the treaty's restrictions. The Pentagon has also stated it has no intent to equip its hypersonic weapons with nuclear warheads, but there have been some indications it may be exploring the possibility of doing so.

The LRHW is being developed by Lockheed Martin and is expected to fly for the first time in 2023 at the earliest. A separate system with a shorter and more variable range is being developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), but it isn't likely before 2023 either and the Pentagon may not be interested in the weapon by then. Both weapons will launch from a mobile transporter erector launcher (TEL).

Another hypersonic missile in development, the AGM-183 Air-launched Rapid-Response Weapon (ARRW), is also being developed by Lockheed Martin. The ARRW was due to be test-fired for the first time earlier this year off the coast of California, but it failed to detach from the B-52 bomber that was carrying it. It is expected to have a range of more than 1,000 miles.

Ground-based long-range missiles have encountered some resistance from inside the Pentagon and in allied countries, especially as the US redirects its strategic focus toward great power competition with Russia and China. Last month, the commander of Air Force Global Strike

Command revealed that he thinks the Army's Long Range Precision Fires program is "brutally expensive" and "stupid" to boot.
"I just think it's a stupid idea to go and invest that kind of money that recreates something that the service has mastered and that we're doing already right now," USAF Gen. Timothy Ray said on a podcast hosted by the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies. "Why in the world would you try that? I try to make sure that my language isn't a little more colorful than it is, but give me a break."
Plans to establish a ring of missile bases on the island nations off the coast of China have also been resisted by locals, including in Japan, where plans to build several Aegis Ashore stations have been scuttled thanks to protests by the towns that would have hosted them.

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Videos: Protests Against Israel's War in Gaza Rock Over 65 US Cities on Nakba Day
by Morgan Artyukhina

Palestine solidarity activists have called for demonstrations in dozens of US cities on Saturday, protesting Israeli airstrikes in Gaza and the recent violence by Israeli police and citizens in Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem. The protests fall on the 73rd anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence in 1948.
While sizeable demonstrations have popped up in several US cities throughout the week, much larger protests are expected on Saturday as groups in more than 65 cities have signed onto a national call to action posted by the Palestinian Youth Movement and the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition.
Thousands gathered at the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, on Saturday afternoon, before marching through the city. The US capital city has seen several protests this week, including one on Tuesday with several hundred people that included US Reps. Andre Carson (D-IN) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MG), the latter of whom is Palestinian and has been blocked by the Israeli government from visiting her family in the West Bank.
One journalist estimated 10,000 people in attendance at the DC protest.
"In response to the mobilization of tens of thousands of Palestinians to defend the right to live in the Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem and worship at the Al-Aqsa mosque, Israel has unleashed murderous actions all across occupied Palestine," ANSWER said in a statement.
"The depth and breadth of the Palestinian resistance has shocked the ruling establishments in Israel, the US, European Union and many regimes in the region, including Jordan, whose population is more than half of Palestinian descent and which is the official "guardian" of the Al-Aqsa mosque," the statement continues. "The new wave of resistance has seen mass protests not only in cities and towns across the West Bank and East Jerusalem, but also in many Palestinian cities inside the 1948 borders of Israel. From the latter cities, thousands of Palestinians have traveled to take part in Ramadan prayer at the Al-Aqsa and many have joined

the protests outside the mosque and Sheik Jarrah. Solidarity protests have taken place in many other countries, including a huge march in Yemen."
Large marches were also reported in the California cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and New York City.
In Minneapolis, Minnesota, another sizable protest took place, coverage of which MintPress News editor Mnar Muhawesh Adley reported Facebook not only took down, but disabled her account over.
Their demonstrations accompanied large protests in London and other European cities, as well as in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel. In Paris, police attacked a banned protest with water cannons.
Since hostilities began, the armed wing of Gazan ruling party Hamas has launched more than 2,300 rockets into Israel, according to a count by the Israeli Defense Forces, striking targets in cities as far away as Tel Aviv, where the IDF headquarters are located, and knocking out electricity in the coastal city of Ashdod. In turn, the IDF has pounded Gaza, launching more than 1,000 missiles and artillery shells that have destroyed numerous apartment buildings, including several housing the offices of international media outlets like the Associated Press and Al Jazeera.
At least 145 people have been killed in Gaza by the Israeli bombardment, including 41 children, and more than 1,000 people have been wounded, according to local medical officials. In the West Bank, at least 11 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli police and civilians. In Israel, more than 300 people have been injured and seven killed.
Palestinian Ambassador to the EU Abdalrahim Alfarra told Sputnik Saturday that Sven Koopmans, the European Union's special representative for the Middle East Peace Process, would be convening a meeting with the Middle East Quartet of international mediators - Russia, the US, EU, and UN - on the conflict. However, the administration of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly stated it is not interested in de-escalation, and he pledged in a Saturday speech to continue taking action against Hamas.
Saturday is also the 73rd anniversary of the 1948 declaration of Israeli independence, which Palestinians call al-Nakba - "the catastrophe."Territory seized from the Ottoman Empire by the United Kingdom in 1917 was to be partitioned by the United Nations into land for both Zionist Israeli settlers and native Palestinian Arabs, but in the war with several surrounding Arab states that followed, Israeli paramilitaries expelled more than 700,000 Palestinians and seized a large part of the territory set aside for them. Denied the right to return after the war ended, those Palestinians evicted by the war became refugees, many of whom continue to live in surrounding lands, including Gaza.

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'Lost Their Moral Compass': Muslim States Blast Normalization Dealmakers at Summit Condemning Israel
by Morgan Artyukhina

In 2020, the Trump administration successfully pushed four Arab nations - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco - to recognize the state of Israel in a peace deal that promised to halt Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank.

At a Sunday emergency summit by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the 57 Muslim-majority member nations sharply condemned Israel's attacks on Gaza and the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, but also criticized several of their own number who signed controversial normalization deals with Israel last year.

In a joint statement after the summit, the OIC said it "condemns in the strongest terms the barbaric attacks launched by Israel, the occupying authority, against the Palestinian people and their land and holy sites."

The group called on Israel to put "a stop to all violations being carried out by Israel, the occupying authority, including disrespect for the holy sites," noting it "holds Israel, the occupying authority, fully responsible for the deterioration of the situation caused by its systematic crimes against the Palestinian people … in particular, the extensive barbaric military attack on the besieged Gaza Strip."

The OIC further urged the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to "act swiftly" to end the Israeli attacks, which UNSC head China similarly moved the body to do on Sunday.

Violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories had been escalating for weeks before the May 7 attack on al-Aqsa, the third-holiest site in Islam, by Israeli police that injured more than 300 Muslims attending the final Friday prayers of Ramadan. Protests against the closure of the Old City's Damascus Gate and the imminent eviction of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood were met with violence by both Israeli police and mobs of civilians who attacked homes and people in the street. When Hamas fired off a hail of rockets at Israel in response to the Jerusalem violence, Israel responded with airstrikes in an exchange of fire that has continued unabated for a week.

As of Sunday evening, 193 people have been reported killed in Gaza by Israeli bombing, 55 of whom were children, and more than 10,000 people have been displaced. Another 11 people have been killed in the West Bank, while in Israel, 10 people have been killed, two of whom were children.

"We are facing a long-term occupation. that's the base of the problem," said Foreign Minister Riad Malki of the Palestinian Authority at the start of the conference, as quoted by The New Arab. "Crimes are committed against the Palestinians without consequences," he said. The PA controls the West Bank, which is heavily saturated with Zionist settlements, but not the Gaza Strip, which is ruled by a Hamas-led government. Hamas did not take part in the meeting.

"The plight of the Palestinian people is the bleeding wound of the Islamic world today," Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar added.

Normalization Deals Draw Criticism

However, the OIC summit, which was hosted online by Saudi Arabia, also saw fighting between the foreign ministers of several members after some raised criticisms of others having signed supposed peace deals with Israel just months earlier.

"The massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, according to the Associated Press. "This criminal and genocidal regime has once again proven that friendly gestures only aggravate its atrocities."

"Make no mistake: Israel only understands the language of resistance and the people of Palestine are fully entitled to their right to defend themselves," Zarif added.
Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu joined in, saying those nations who signed peace deals "have lost their moral compass," adding that "If there are half-hearted statements within our own family, how could we criticize others? Who will take our words seriously?"
Beginning in September 2020, four Arab nations signed deals recognizing Israel and extending normal diplomatic relations to the Jewish state: the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Previously, Egypt and Jordan did the same in 1978 and 1994, respectively. The deals amounted to a repudiation of the "three nos" agreement signed by Arab League members in Khartoum in 1967 in the aftermath of the disastrous Six-Day War. There they pledged no peace, no recognition and no negotiations with Israel. In the war, Israel had seized the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Sinai from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria.
The peace deals, heavily coordinated by Jared Kushner, the adviser and son-in-law of then-US President Donald Trump, bore substantial fruit for each signatory, including weapons deals for Abu Dhabi and Manaus and recognition of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara, despite a UN-mediated independence process there. The deal averted a planned annexation of parts of the Jordan River valley in the West Bank by Israel, but was denounced by Palestinian leaders as a betrayal of their cause.
After the Sunday summit, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud held a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss "the most prominent developments, foremost of which are developments in Palestine, and in the region," according to the Saudi Press Agency. While Riyadh has not formally recognized Israel, its informal relations are an open secret even as the kingdom postures as a champion of the Palestinian people.
Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani had a similar call with Blinken. The Qatari foreign minister said he urged the need of the international community to end "the repeated brutal Israeli attacks against civilians in Gaza and the blessed Al Aqsa Mosque" and reaffirmed "the firm position of the State of Qatar on the justice of the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the brotherly Palestinian people."

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US Space Force Colonel Fired After Publicly Attacking Pentagon's Inclusion Policies as 'Marxism'
by Morgan Artyukhina

Former Pentagon chief Mark Esper likely lost favor with then-US President Donald Trump in July 2020 after attempting to rename several US military bases named after heroes of the Confederacy, a pro-slavery insurrection that was defeated in 1865. Trump called them "part of a Great American Heritage" and reversed the order.
A US Space Force colonel has been relieved from his post following his appearance on a podcast in which he advised servicemembers not to comply with diversity training because it is "Marxism."

Military.com reported that Lt Col. Matthew Lohmeier, commander of 11th Space Warning Squadron at Buckley Air Force Base, Colorado, had lost his post on Friday "over a loss of confidence in his ability to lead," the publication said.
A spokesperson for the USSF told the outlet the move "was based on public comments made by Lt. Col. Lohmeier in a recent podcast" and that his commander, Lt. Gen. Stephen Whiting, had begun a probe into "whether these comments constituted prohibited partisan political activity."
According to Military.com, Lohemier recently appeared on a podcast called "Information Operation" to promote his new self-published book, titled "Irresistible Revolution: Marxism's Goal of Conquest & the Unmaking of the American Military." He reportedly claimed that diversity and inclusion trainings, which teach servicemembers to be tolerant and welcoming of comrades with different ideologies and identities, are examples of "critical race theory," which he in turn claimed "is rooted in Marxism."
Critical race theory is an academic movement that emerged in the 1990s that sought to re-emphasize the continuation of racism and racial disparities in US culture and institutions in a direct challenge to the notion of a post-racial society that became popular after the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s and 70s.
After the nationwide protests against police brutality and anti-Black racism rocked the United States in the summer of 2020 and forced a reckoning with many of these lasting institutions, then-US President Donald Trump led the charge against the trend, labeling discussions of white privilege and structural racism, including criticism of the continued veneration of heroes of the pro-slavery Confederate separatist movement from the 1860s, "un-American propaganda."
Conservatives who have rallied around him have since adopted the criticism as well, using it especially against the administration of US President Joe Biden, which has focused heavily on appointing gender, racial, and sexual minorities to key positions in the government. Biden also used several executive actions in his first days in office to undo many of Trump's discriminatory policies, including one that barred transgender Americans from serving in the US military.
In the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol, in which Trump supporters attempted to overthrow the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and keep Trump in office, the Pentagon and police forces across the country began a systematic search for right-wing extremists and sympathizers after finding that many active duty servicemembers had taken part in the failed putsch. However, both institutions have spent years chasing down a growing network of white supremacists and neo-Nazi recruiters and sympathizers.
In a May 6 review of the progress of the Biden administration's policy changes, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who is the first Black man appointed to the position, hailed the Pentagon's accomplishments.
"I want to be blunt: There is no place for hatred or bigotry or extreme extremist behavior in this department or in the military," Austin said. "This department has an open door to any qualified American who wants to serve. That's a matter of both national principle, and national security. Diversity throughout the force is a source of strength. We can't afford to deprive ourselves of the talents and the voices of the full range of a nation that we defend."
Lohmeier attacked Austin in his podcast appearance, saying, "I don't demonize the man, but I want to make it clear to both him and every service member this [diversity and inclusion] agenda, it will divide us, it will not unify us."

According to Military.com, Lohmeier noted a February 5 stand-down order by Austin in the aftermath of the Capitol insurrection concerning extremism in the ranks. The USSF officer said he was given a booklet that described the riot as an example of extremism, but not the anti-racism protests from the previous summer.
While Lohmeier hasn't been discharged from the service, it's unclear what his present assignment is. He had previously been in charge of a unit tasked with detecting ballistic missile launches.

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Vietnam's Da Nang Cancels All Taxi, Food Delivery Services Amid COVID-19 Spike
by Morgan Artyukhina

After a taxi driver tested positive for COVID-19 and contact tracing became a headache, the Vietnamese city of Da Nang has put a halt to all taxi and related services, such as ride-hailing and food delivery.
VN Express reported on Monday, citing comments from Le Quang Nam, deputy chairman of the municipal People's Committee, that the suspension order in Vietnam's third-largest city would include automobiles as well as motorbikes and that all drivers would have to medically declare themselves and be tested for COVID-19.
The coastal city recorded 12 new COVID-19 cases on Sunday out of a total of 187 new cases nationwide, the largest daily number for Vietnam since the pandemic began. Vietnam has only recorded 4,175 COVID-19 infections since January 2020 and had just 37 deaths from the illness.
The latest outbreak, which began in late April, is the largest wave in Vietnam thus far, with more than 1,100 new cases recorded since then. Authorities have tightened border restrictions, especially after arresting three people for smuggling others across the border from China earlier this month, and travelers are required to quarantine for 21 days instead of the typical 14 in a bid to ensure those entering the country don't spread the disease.
They are also strictly enforcing mitigation measures like mask-wearing, social distancing, and hand-washing, and are issuing stiff fines for spreading false information about the pandemic.
Da Nang has already suspended other non-essential activities, such as bars and restaurants as well as facilities like massage centers and even banned public gatherings of more than five people.
The Vietnamese Health Ministry announced last week it had finalized plans to buy 110 million COVID-19 vaccine shots this year, including 31 million from Pfizer-BioNTech and 38.9 million AstraZeneca shots. However, just 1% of the 96-million-strong population has been inoculated thus far. Hanoi has also pushed the World Health Organization to get access to the mRNA technology used to make vaccines like Pfizer-BioNTech's, so it can manufacture the drug domestically.

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Blinken-Lavrov Summit to Discuss 'Totality' of US-Russia Relations, State Dept. Says
by Evan Craighead

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov phoned each other earlier this week to discuss arrangements pertaining to their upcoming meetings on the sidelines of the Arctic Council ministerial in Iceland.
The US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price detailed on Friday that Blinken plans to discuss the totality of US-Russia relations during next week's meeting with Russian counterpart Lavrov.
According to the department, the upcoming meeting comes as part of a larger effort to reach their goal of a more stable, predictable path for bilateral relations.
"The point of this discussion is to discuss the totality of the relationship, to explore - if there is - the potential to cooperate when and where our interests do align," Price remarked told reporters via phone.
Blinken intends to explore possible areas of cooperation regarding topics such as Iran and North Korea, the State Department said. Issues surrounding the topic of climate change may be brought up as well.
The Blinken-Lavrov summit will also the first high-level, in-person meeting between US and Russian officials since US President Joe Biden took office.
Details of Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin's anticipated summit will also be discussed by officials next week.
"So both this meeting and a potential meeting with President Biden later on is all part and parcel to being a test ... [of whether] we can achieve a relationship with Moscow that is more stable and more predictable," Price said. That's what will be the focus of the meeting next week in Iceland.

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Tesla Hit With Class-Action Lawsuit Over Huge Solar Roof Price Hikes
by Evan Craighead

Last month, Tesla revealed to its Solar Roof customers that it would be raising the price of the feature due to "added adjustments for individual roof complexity." Since then, a number of customers have taken the company to court, including one Pennsylvania couple who claimed their initial contract went from $46,084.80 to $78,352.66.
Tesla, Inc. was slapped with a class-action lawsuit on Thursday claiming the California-based electric vehicle and clean energy company pulled a bait-and-switch on Solar Roof customers, Business Insider reported.

The suit detailed that plaintiff Matthew Adams, an associate professor of clinical radiology at the University of California San Francisco, initially signed a Solar Roof contract in June 2020 and agreed to pay $71,662.06.
However, when April rolled around, Tesla informed him that he would have to pay $146,462.22 - more than double the original amount.
Adams told Insider that a Tesla representative reached out to him about his contract and offered a free Powerwall storage battery - Tesla's rechargeable lithium-ion battery.
"Basically a $5,000 price cut off of the $76,000 price hike," he said.
Adams' class action suit is seeking for Tesla to honor the agreed-upon prices in the original Solar Roof contracts.
It was revealed in April that Tesla's Solar Roof customers would be experiencing price hikes that, in some cases, reportedly amounted to a 70% increase. The brief email from the company did offer customers the chance to cancel their Solar Roof contract and receive a refund on their deposit.
"We did find that we basically made some significant mistakes in assessment of difficulty of certain roofs," Tesla CEO Elon Musk admitted during a first-quarter earnings call.
According to Musk, there is no "one-size-fits-all situation" when it comes to Tesla's Solar Roof , which is why the "cost can double, sometimes three times what our initial quotes were."
One former Solar Roof customer told The Verge that he decided to part ways with the company after receiving the "terse" April email.
The individual said their initial $30,000 contract from February was ultimately adjusted to $75,000 for the Solar Roof and the Powerwall storage battery.
"It's painful to move on, but the customer service / sales process was really painful even before this change," they said.
Despite the loss of contracts, Tesla boasted in its most recent earnings report that the company is expanding its solar team and improving its installation efficiency to match demand.

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ViacomCBS: Ousted CBS CEO Les Moonves Will Not Receive $120 Million Severance Check by Evan Craighead

Leslie Moonves notoriously resigned as chairman and CEO of the CBS Corporation in September 2018, shortly after a series of damning articles prompted an investigation into several allegations of both sexual harassment and sexual assault. Moonves has denied all allegations of non-consensual sex.
A Friday filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) confirmed the conclusion of Moonves' two-year legal battle over the CBS Board of Directors' 2018 investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct by him.
"The disputes between Mr. Moonves and CBS have now been resolved, and on May 14, 2021, the parties dismissed the arbitration proceeding," the SEC filing read.

Moonves, now 71 years old, initiated a binding arbitration proceeding in January 2019 to obtain a severance package and dispute the Board's investigation. Per the CBS Corporation's "Separation Agreement" with Moonves, a total of $120 million was contributed to a grantor trust back in October 2018.
"The assets of the grantor trust will revert to the Company in their entirety," the filing concluded.
While Moonves has been denied a severance package, it is unlikely the former CBS executive is broke, as he raked in an industry-leading salary of approximately $69.55 million for 2016 alone, according to SEC data. That year, CBS registered the most total viewers of any TV network amid coverage of the US presidential election race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, which Moonves said "may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

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China's Tianwen-1 Probe Touches Down on Mars in Historic First
by Evan Craighead

The Tianwen-1 probe of the China National Space Administration (CNSA) was successfully launched from the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site on July 23, 2020, and has been orbiting Mars since February 10. The interplanetary mission comes as China's second attempt to reach the Red Planet following a 2011 Mars mission dubbed Yinghuo-1.
Citing CNSA sources, Chinese state media confirmed that the Tianwen-1 probe successfully touched down on May 15 in the Red Planet's Utopia Planitia: Mars' largest recognized impact basin, with a diameter of around 3,300 kilometers (2050 miles).
Following the spacecraft's touchdown, the Zhurong rover is expected to begin global imaging of the landing site and undergo a self-inspection before parting from the probe, according to Xinhua News Agency.
Reports of the historic event came hours after the Chinese space agency announced the tentative landing of the probe. The 5,000-kilogram (11,000-pound) spacecraft in question consists of an orbiter, deployable camera, lander and Mars rover Zhurong.
"Tianwen-1 probe has functioned normally since its successful launch on July 23rd, 2020," the CNSA said in a Friday morning statement.
At the time, officials slated the landing for some time between May 15 and May 19 (Beijing Time) in Utopia Planitia.
Prior to the May 15 landing, the CNSA touted that it had amassed a "huge amount" of scientific data while orbiting Mars.

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Any Life 'Discovered' on Mars Likely to Have 'Hitchhiked' From Earth, Scientist Warns
by MariTi Blaise Lovell

The recent discovery of new types of bacteria found aboard the International Space Station (ISS) draws questions about the expansion and evolution of DNA traveling through space. Christopher Mason, a geneticist at Cornell University, has warned that any organism discovered in humanity's colonization of Mars could have already had origins that trace back to certain organisms living here on Earth.

Mason notes in an article for the BBC that since the pursuit of Mars started, many different spacecraft and rovers have been sent into space. Currently, Perseverance, a rover sent to Mars by NASA, is cruising around Mars collecting samples and observing the red planet.

Mason outlines that the presence of new organisms, despite their alien appearance, would have to be studied to check for the presence of DNA sequences found here on Earth. The geneticist maintains that this form of DNA contamination can be found throughout different points in history, such as the American spread westward across the North American continent.

"Humans have a poor track record of this on our own planet. Smallpox, for example, was spread on blankets given to indigenous people of North America in the 19th century. Even in 2020, we have been unable to contain the rapid spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2," Mason wrote.

The scientific term used for this form of spread is called "forward contamination," which Mason believes is necessary in the evolution of expansion of DNA. NASA also fears the risks of "backward contamination" when pursuing future return missions to Mars, but believes that the evolution of its species will make for interesting samples.

Mason and his team are particularly interested in the presence of microorganisms that can withstand extreme temperatures, radiation resistance and antibacterial resistance as it can provide more insight into the expansion of DNA.

"Microbes could potentially hitchhike their way to Mars, even after pre-launch cleaning and exposure to radiation in space, and their genomes may change so much that they look truly otherworldly, as we have recently seen with microbes that evolved on the International Space Station," Mason stated, referring to research where he and a team of scientists studied four different strains of bacteria some with origins mostly related to North American, European and Pacific island types.

"If these types of species were found in the Martian soil, it could potentially spark misguided research into the universal features of life or Martian life," Mason added.

For years, science has experimented with the evolution, expansion and spread of organisms in a research method they call "shotgun metagenomes."

Scientists still wish to discover the presence of actual alien life forms, but Mason says that it would not be a shocker if DNA results from organisms found in space ended up being present on Earth, as well.

Researchers are continuing to expand their database of Earth present DNA samples in order to learn more about the expansion of the solar system. Mason believes that in the next 500 years, forward contamination will be the only way to preserve certain life samples found here on Earth.

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China's Tianwen-1 Probe Expected to Land on Mars as Early as Saturday
by MariTi Blaise Lovell

The China National Space Administration (CNSA) joined the rat race to explore Mars after the launch of its Tianwen-1 probe, consisting of an orbiter and a rover named Zhurong, which entered Mars orbit on 10 February 2021.
CNSA has announced that based on the current flight situation of the probe, Zhurong will be landing on Mars' Utopian flatlands between early May 15 and May 19, Beijing time. According to observers, the landing could come on the 15th, since Tianwen-1 was spotted likely engaging in a maneuver to prepare for launching the surface lander earlier on Friday.
This represents a large leap for China as the 46th human mission to Mars since the former Soviet Union attempted to launch a Mars-bound spacecraft in 1960. So far, only the US space agency NASA has successfully operated a rover on the Martian surface, although the USSR landed a probe on Mars and several European probes to the red planet crashed.
In 2016, NASA reported that it had found underground ice in the region estimated to be the size of Lake Superior. That same year, China announced its exploration program with the intent to explore, investigate soil and water samples, study the physical geography and inspect the climate.
The rover Zhurong, named for the Chinese god of fire, is expected to last a little over three months and will remain in contact with China's other rover, Yutu 2, which is currently exploring Earth's moon. The United Arab Emirates also launched the Mars Hope probe in their expanding pursuit of studying organisms in space, but it is only an orbiter.
Last month, China launched the first module of its own space station mission into low Earth orbit on a Long March-5B rocket, with an operation date of 2022. There are expectations that the space station will operate for 10 to 15 years, and will include four crewed missions.
NASA blasted China earlier this month after debris from the rocket plunged into the Indian Ocean.

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Videos: Tornado Blasts Through China's Wuhan, Killing 6, Injuring Over 200
by MariTi Blaise Lovell

A tornado occurred in the central Caidian district of the Chinese city of Wuhan on Friday at 12:40 GMT, local authorities reported, just one of several tornadoes in an outbreak caused by severe storms in eastern China.
The storm packed winds of 23.9 meters per second, toppling construction site sheds, killing six people and injuring 218, 41 of whom are currently seeking treatment for non life-threatening conditions at hospitals in Wuhan.
Videos posted on social media show the extent of the damage from the whirlwind.

Factories were toppled, and both electrical facilities and residential buildings were reported as damaged.
A second tornado has blasted through Shengze, a town in the city of Suzhou, also killing one person and injuring 21 others, two of whom are in serious condition. Local authorities say they are still assessing the damage and the casualties.

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PREVIEW - Blinken Departs on Nordic Trip for Arctic Council Meeting, Talks With Russia

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Denmark, Iceland, and Greenland where he will engage with the United States' regional allies as well as participate in the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik and in bilateral US-Russia talks planned to take place on the margins of the meeting.
The Arctic Council - the premier policy body in the Arctic - is composed of eight countries, including the United States, Russia, Canada and the Nordic states that coordinate and cooperate on issues concerning development and environmental protection in the region.
Russia will be assuming the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, with the upcoming ministerial meeting marking the organization's 25th anniversary as well as the end of Iceland's two-year term at its helm.
Blinken said he plans to meet with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting in Reykjavik.
The US Secretary of State will start his trip by visiting Denmark, where he will meet with the country's leadership to discuss climate change and strengthening bilateral relations.
Blinken will then depart for Iceland to participate in the Arctic Council ministerial meeting.
During the next stop in Greenland, Blinken will meet with top government officials and discuss continued cooperation in the Arctic region.

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PREVIEW - UN Security Council to Meet on Sunday Over Conflict in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council agreed to convene a meeting on Sunday to discuss the ongoing hostilities between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza Strip.
The decades-long conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians has this week seen the worst since 2014 escalation. About 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Palestinian enclave toward Israel, which responded with airstrikes. Over 130 Palestinians and seven Israelis have been killed in the conflict.
Upon the request of China, Norway and Tunisia, the UN Security Council had agreed to meet for a third time in one week for an emergency meeting on Sunday. The last time the UN's most

powerful body met on Sunday was in September 2017, after North Korea detonated a hydrogen bomb.
The representatives of Palestine and Israel will participate in the Sunday meeting, which will be held virtually.
Reaching a consensus on a date for the meeting was stalled by the United States that initially opposed the gathering.
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday he wanted to wait a few days "for the diplomacy to have some effects."
Sunday will ironically mark the International Day of Living Together in Peace, and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expects that following the Security Council meeting, Palestine and Israel will commit to a ceasefire and get back on track to find a political solution to the border conflict, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.
Dujarric also said he did not exclude that the UN chief himself would brief the council on Sunday.
"I didn't say he wasn't," Dujarric said when asked why Guterres was not planning to participate in the council's meeting. "I just said that we're working out the logistics of who will brief on Sunday."
UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland will speak before the Security Council members on Sunday. In addition, Wennesland was also ready to go to the Gaza Strip at the earliest convenience if needed, Dujarric said.

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RPT - UNSC Unlikely to Adopt Any Statement on Gaza After Meeting on Sunday - Sources

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will unlikely produce any statement on the situation in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem after it convenes for an emergency open meeting on Sunday, diplomatic sources at the Security Council told Sputnik.
"It is unlikely that any document will be adopted. But public speeches by the UN Security Council members are already worth a lot," said one of the sources, adding that initially, the United States generally opposed holding open meetings on the topic of the escalation between Israel and Palestine.
After holding two closed consultations on the renewed Israeli-Palestinian conflict this week, the UN Security Council could not agree to produce any unified statement. According to a diplomatic source at the council, the United States was the only member state that voiced its opposition to adopting a statement.
On Wednesday, the EU countries at the Security Council- Estonia, France, Ireland and Norway - issued a statement which condemned violence perpetrated on both sides of the conflict.
Later that day, China, Norway and Tunisia requested to gather for a third Security Council meeting on May 14; however, Washington did not agree to hold consultations, citing the diplomatic efforts if was undertaking that might be affected by such a meeting.

At the same time, the United States proposed to organize a meeting on May 18 and the UN Security Council agreed to compromise and meet two days earlier.
None of the sources also expected that any resolution would be adopted to help calm the situation in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.
"Not at this stage," said one of the sources when asked whether any member state planned to submit a draft of a relevant resolution.
"At least we have an open meeting," the diplomat added.
Another source at the Security Council said people will obviously be most interested in the attitude of the Americans.
"I guess it remains to be confirmed whether or not Israel and Palestine will participate, but I expect that they will," the source said.
According to the diplomat, not a single member state is currently working on a draft of a possible resolution that potentially could be adopted on Sunday.
"There's a long time between now and Sunday, so let's see what happens on the ground, but there's no product on the table [and] I don't expect [anything] to be adopted either," the source said.
The US Permanent Mission to the United Nations did not immediately reply when asked whether it expects any concrete results from the Sunday meeting.
The situation on the border between Israel and Palestine's Gaza Strip escalated on Monday evening. Since then, around 1,750 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. Israel has responded by launching multiple strikes against Hamas. Over 130 Palestinians and seven Israelis have been killed in the conflict escalation.
The conflict has garnered international attention, with regional and international mediators such as Egypt, Qatar, the United States, Russia, proposing to step in to negotiate a truce.

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RPT - US Establishment's Growing Political Disunity Sign of Imperial Decline - Ex-Intel Official

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The recent attack on President Joe Biden by former US military officials reveals the defense establishment is politically polarized, which is yet another sign that the American empire is on the decline, former FBI special agent and intelligence analyst Coleen Rowley told Sputnik.
Rowley was commenting on the letter from 120 retired US generals and admirals published on Thursday that called for the removal of Biden from office on the grounds of his allegedly impaired mental and physical condition.
"I think this letter seems to represent the right-wing side of the - yes, fairly unprecedented in my lifetime at least- political politicization occurring in the United States which is now extending to the military and MIC [military-industrial complex] hierarchy," Rowley, who was TIME magazine's joint Person of the Year in 2002, said. "Power-mongering and corruption at the top just seems to reach ever greater peaks as blowback in a declining US-NATO-Israel Empire."

These officials, she added, are ever more desperate and recklessly grasping to retain power vis-a-vis the rest of the world, and thus "falling into more internal strife and division."
Both the left and right wing's powerful factions' scapegoating of each other were equally nonsensical, Rowley said.
The right, she added, is claiming Biden is Marxist while the left had claimed former President Donald Trump was either "a Hitler fascist or a Commie pawn."
The absurdity of current US public discourse on national security issues is obvious to any outside observer, Rowley pointed out.
"Martians would undoubtedly find the entire power-mongering situation in the world's latest empire hilarious as both politicized sides of the Military War Hawk MIC are sadly in total agreement about the need to use military force to the point of omnicidal nuclear bombs, in order to retain the Empire's control," she said.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Soaring US Inflation? The Fed is Razor-Focused on Employment

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Spiking US inflation and trillion-dollar budget deficits from COVID-19 may scare many economists but the Federal Reserve is virtually ignoring these as it focuses on getting laid-off Americans back to work.
The Fed has a dual mandate of ensuring maximum employment and sustainable inflation, and it is no secret which of the two the central bank is prioritizing, analysts told Sputnik.
The Consumer Price Index (CPI), the world's most popular inflation gauge, rose 4.2 percent in the United States in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years. The Producer Price Index (PPI), a measure of what wholesalers pay for goods, meanwhile, grew 6.2 percent in the year to April, the most in a decade.
The US budget deficit already stands at $1.93 trillion in the first seven months of fiscal 2021, versus $3.13 trillion in 2020 and $984 billion in 2019. Since March last year, nearly $6 trillion in coronavirus relief payments have been distributed by the Treasury and added to the country's balance sheet, severely distorting the deficit.
The succession of government stimulus packages to combat the pandemic has increased the broad supply of money in the United States from $15.5 trillion in February 2020 to $19.4 trillion in January — a record one-year increase.
While policymakers at the Fed are well aware of these figures, they aren't expressing as much worry about them as they do with figures on unemployment.
The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell and his retinue of senior central bankers routinely remind the nation that more than 8 million of those jobs have not returned.
The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020 and the Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent growth for 2021. Since the pandemic broke out, the central bank has kept interest rates at

between zero and 0.25 percent to stimulate growth, and has made monetary policy as accommodative as possible.

BY BEING BLIND TO INFLATION, FED 'PLAYING WITH FIRE'

Powell says he'll be comfortable raising interest rates when there's 'full employment' — which will be marked by the rate of joblessness falling from the current 6.1 percent to 4.0 percent — or there were signs that employment was growing apace with inflation.

His timeline for that? Not before 2023.

"Jerome Powell doesn't care about a 4 percent headline increase in the CPI. He cares about seeing a 4 percent unemployment rate which is maximum employment," said Ramesh Mohan, Professor of Economics at Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island. "Under him, the Fed is turning a blind eye to inflation, and is playing with fire."

Many economists attribute the rising costs reflected by the CPI and PPI to record growth in money supply, saying the two will not stop expanding as long as the Treasury continues to dole out trillion-dollar stimulus payouts on top of the Fed's accommodative policy.

"The consequence of this can be bubbles in the equity and housing markets," said Mohan. "People unaffected by the pandemic have been borrowing money cheaply to buy stocks and houses, pushing prices for both to record highs. Once these bubbles burst, the economy can crater worse than it did at the height of the COVID-19. This time, the recovery might take a lot longer than it did after the Great Recession of 2008/2009."

Bond traders have been selling off US Treasury notes since last year to demonstrate their inflation expectations, pushing yields attached to the benchmark 10-year note to 14 month-highs at one point in March.

Despite this, the Fed remains unperturbed. Powell and various policymakers at the central bank say inflation readings now are distorted by price pressures arising from bottlenecks in supply chains struggling to cope with demand from an economy reopening after months of pandemic-suppression.

The Fed officially measures inflation via the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index that strips out volatile energy and food prices. It has forecast an inflation rate that will average 2.4 percent in 2021 and 2.1 percent in 2023.

The Fed has been using a 2 percent target for inflation since 2012 as its benchmark for raising interest rates. The trouble is the central bank has never achieved that inflation goal from the time the target was set. Prior to the 2008/09 financial crisis, there have been only four years when US inflation exceeded the target, from 2004 through 2007.

SHORTAGE IN CHIPS TO SPIKE IN GASOLINE

Critics also argue that the Fed is missing more obvious examples of rising costs across the economy.

Among these is the chronic short supply of semiconductors for automobile circuitry that has forced companies like General Motors to idle production at several plants. CPI data shows that the crisis in microchips has indirectly boosted demand for used vehicles, pushing up prices for second-hand cars and trucks by 10 percent in April, the most in a month since 1953.

The average price for a single home in the United States is up by almost 30 percent, or $36,000, over the past year while the price of lumber has increased about 30 percent — reaching a record high above $1,700 per 1,000 board feet. For context, lumber has historically fluctuated between $200 to $400.

Prices of other building-related raw materials such as copper and iron ore have hit all-time highs too from a broader boom in commodities from oil to even soybeans. Gasoline prices are up almost 50 percent over a six-month period.

Powell and his coterie of Fed bankers say these price pressures are "transitory" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from the pandemic.

Reinforcing the central bank's point, retail sales for April were flat after a buoyant 10.7 percent jump in March, as most Americans appeared to have finished spending their latest round of government stimulus checks. Retail sales are closely watched as a gauge of consumer mindset.

Despite this, few outside Powell's circle are convinced that inflation will just go away without intervention.

"The problem is that investors do not buy it," economist, fund manager and author Daniel Lacalle said, referring to the Fed's mantra of "transient inflation".

"We know that central banks do not change course even if inflation is high and persistent because we have seen it in numerous countries," Lacalle added. "Governments always justify printing more money with the excuse that there is no inflation. When inflation rises, they say it is transitory. And when inflation soars, governments blame businesses and shop owners, presenting themselves as the solution with 'price controls.'"

As a fund manager, Lacalle said his obligation was to protect his clients' money from inflation. But he had an even bigger concern — stagflation, which is identified as persistently high inflation combined with high unemployment and stagnant economic demand.

"A rising number of funds are looking at a highly likely risk of stagnation after the chain of stimuli but with rising prices," Lacalle added. "CPI may not reflect the rise in healthcare, education, fresh food prices and rent, but citizens feel it."

IN POWELL'S CORNER: THE 'PHILLIPS CURVE'

Mohan said from a central bankers' perspective, Powell has history on his side in prioritizing employment over inflation. He cited the "Phillips Curve" — a global recipe central bankers the world over relied on for post-recession recovery. The theory states that with economic growth comes inflation, which in turn should lead to more jobs and less unemployment.

"In a recession, the clear trade-off for boosting recovery and employment is inflation," said Mohan. "Yet, sometimes, in those situations, there are some who might feel that a rate hike is also necessary to maintain balance."

Such a situation occurred in the United States earlier this month, when Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen candidly observed that interest rates may "have to rise somewhat to make sure our economy doesn't overheat." She quickly recanted the position after US stock prices fell as much as 2 percent on her comments.

Some fund managers argue that Powell is acting conscientiously, with one eye on Wall Street. By keeping rates where they are, the Fed chief, they say, is providing indirect support to the stock market, given that a hike at this point would set off alarm bells for investors worried about a broad tapering — or pullback — in the accommodative policy of the pandemic-era.

Steven Keller, investment manager at New York-based Wexler Capital, told Sputnik that Powell's action was warranted, given the impact that turbulence on Wall Street has on the rest of the economy.

"It's easy for anyone not associated with the stock market to say 'to hell with what Wall Street wants or thinks!'," said Steven Keller, investment manager at New York-based Wexler Capital.

"But don't forget, here's where the shares of America's biggest corporations are. If their stock prices crash, what do you think that will do to the country's employment? It's like what Sherlock Holmes famously tells his partner all the time: 'Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary'."

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RPT - Retired US Generals' Letter 'Ominous Departure' From Tradition - Ex-Diplomat

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The growing militarization of US foreign policy and increasingly extreme, polarized national politics are crippling rational policymaking in the United States, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman told Sputnik.
Freeman was commenting on the letter from 120 retired US generals and admirals published on Thursday that called for the removal of President Joe Biden from office on the grounds of his allegedly impaired mental and physical condition.
The letter was an example of "manifestation of both the increasing militarism evident in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and the polarization of politics that now impedes rational policymaking in the United States," Freeman, former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Clinton administration said.
Freeman said the letter marked an "ominous departure" from the long-established US tradition of separating politics from military affairs going back at least a century and a half.
"I can think of no precedent for an attack on the commander-in-chief of this sort by retired flag officers. This is an ominous departure from the American tradition of military self-exclusion from politics," he said.
The letter reflected the fading of civilian control of the military that has been a proud and much-celebrated tradition throughout US history, Freeman pointed out.
"It is symptomatic of a breakdown in civilian control of the military that has been in progress for some time, aided and abetted by members of Congress who seek to enlist military officers in partisan attacks on incumbent administrations," he said.
In the past, such officers, whether on active duty or retired, sought to remain apolitical, as their oath to defend and protect the constitution requires, Freeman recalled.
World War II and Korean War commander General "Douglas MacArthur, a great strategist who disagreed with President Truman about policy during the Korean War, was fired for violating this standard. It is now routinely ignored," Freeman said.
Recent political party conventions have featured flag officers delivering highly partisan speeches, Freeman noted.
"The now ever more frequent advocacy of specific policies by military officers, including some disapproved by their civilian leadership, is a manifestation of ...the increasing militarism evident in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War," he said.
In their letter, the 120 retired generals and admirals called on all US citizens to get involved at all levels to elect politicians who would act to save the nation and hold those currently in office to account.

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RPT - US-Based Medical Group Conducts 10 Surgeries in Russia for First Time Since Pandemic

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - An international group of pediatric cardiologists from the US-based Novick Cardiac Alliance has resumed trips to Russia's city of Kemerovo to perform surgeries there after they were temporarily suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, the head of the organization Bill Novick told Sputnik.
"Our team operated on ten patients ranging from infants to mid-age children. The diagnoses were from moderate to complex," Novick said about the two-week trip.
Novick noted that one of the children had a cardiac arrest and the doctors put the child on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) - a small by-pass machine - to support the heart and blood pressure, after which the medical staff took the child back to the operating room.
"The team did the absolute right things for this child," Novick said. "They were able to take the child off the ECMO machine a couple of days later, close the chest and localize the infection in the nasal sinuses, drained both of those sinuses, and the child got better."
The next trip is scheduled for late August - early September, he added.
Novick and his colleagues have conducted more than 400 surgeries in Russia since 2008. The Novick Cardiac Alliance comprises a group of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in different "hot spots" around the world. Previously, the group has performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including in Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

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RPT - Israel-Gaza Flareup Displaces Families, No Evacuations Yet - UNICEF Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Constant violence in the Gaza Strip has displaced families with children, but there have been no evacuations, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is helping with medical supplies, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"No, we don't have that," Touma said, when asked whether there have been any evacuations amid the escalation of violence in the Middle East. "What we do have is a constant violence in the Gaza Strip and we have reports that some families have been displaced, so they have to leave their homes and go somewhere else... We don't have exactly the number of the people who have been displaced. But so far, we don't have reports of the evacuations."
Touma underscored that the United Nations and UNICEF have called several times on all to deescalate and end the violence.

"So far, the violence continues. The violence needs to come to an end... so that we spare the lives of civilians, especially children," she stated. "What we're calling for, we're calling for a deescalation and we're calling for we're calling for the violence to come to an end."
The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank. Since Monday evening, around 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, which responded by launching strikes against Hamas.

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RPT - UNICEF Helping With Medical Supplies in Gaza, But More Aid Must Be Mobilized - Official

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"What we are doing right now is we are giving supplies, medical supplies. And this is what we need more - to mobilize medical supplies for the health centers in Gaza," Touma said.
Gaza has 13 hospitals, she said, and the health system has been overwhelmed because of the covid-19 pandemic.
"And so now the violence comes to add to the overwhelmed health system on the ground," she said. "The hospitals in general have been overwhelmed because of the covid-19 pandemic. So this comes to make it a burden double."
Touma also noted that UNICEF has been on the ground in Gaza for many years now and throughout the different conflicts that have taken place in the area.
"We have been on the ground and we have an office and the team - mostly Palestinians who are based in the Gaza Strip," she said. "Right now, our focus is going to be on providing medical supplies and on working on the clean water and sanitation. And of course, at some point we will start providing psychosocial assistance to children who have been impacted, who are, of course, understandably shocked because of the violence."
UNICEF will continue to assess the situation as the days go by to see what the needs are on the ground so they are ready to respond with assistance.
Touma went on to say that UNICEF is not alone on the ground, as there is a number of humanitarian partners who work in Gaza.
"They have been there also for decades, working side to side with the medical associations and medical non-governmental organizations. And so they are working night and day to provide help to those who got injured, medical help," she said.
The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank. Since Monday evening, around 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, which responded by launching strikes against Hamas.

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RPT - Over 30 Schools in Gaza Have Been Damaged, None Currently Operating - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - More than 30 schools have been damaged in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing violence in the region and none are currently in operation, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"More than 30 schools in Gaza have been damaged and that will surely impact the education of children," Touma said. "And for now, there are no schools in Gaza because of the situation."
Touma stressed that the schools need to resume.
"But for schools to resume, we need to cease fire and we need for the violence to stop," she stated. "We're calling for a de-escalation and we're calling for the violence to come to an end."
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Most Palestinian Children Arrested in East Jerusalem Have Been Released - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Most of the Palestinian children who were arrested during the unrest in East Jerusalem have now been released, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"You know, most of the Palestinian children who were arrested in East Jerusalem are now released," Touma said.
Touma also noted that 34 children in the Gaza Strip and two children in Israel have been killed in clashes between Israel and the Palestinians.
The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank. Since Monday evening, some 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel and the latter responded by launching strikes against Hamas.

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"No, we don't have that," Touma said, when asked whether there have been any evacuations amid the escalation of violence in the Middle East. "What we do have is a constant violence in the Gaza Strip and we have reports that some families have been displaced, so they have to

leave their homes and go somewhere else... We don't have exactly the number of the people who have been displaced. But so far, we don't have reports of the evacuations."
Touma underscored that the United Nations and UNICEF have called several times on all to deescalate and end the violence.
"So far, the violence continues. The violence needs to come to an end... so that we spare the lives of civilians, especially children," she stated. "What we're calling for, we're calling for a deescalation and we're calling for we're calling for the violence to come to an end."
The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank. Since Monday evening, around 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, which responded by launching strikes against Hamas.
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Over 30 Schools in Gaza Have Been Damaged, None Currently Operating - UNICEF
WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - More than 30 schools have been damaged in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing violence in the region and none are currently in operation, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"More than 30 schools in Gaza have been damaged and that will surely impact the education of children," Touma said. "And for now, there are no schools in Gaza because of the situation."

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UNICEF Helping With Medical Supplies in Gaza, But More Aid Must Be Mobilized - Official

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - UNICEF is helping with medical supplies in Gaza but more aid is needed amid the escalated tensions between Israel and Palestine, Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"What we are doing right now is we are giving supplies, medical supplies. And this is what we need more - to mobilize medical supplies for the health centers in Gaza," Touma said.

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Israel-Gaza Flareup Displaces Families, No Evacuations Yet - UNICEF Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Constant violence in the Gaza Strip has displaced families with children, but there have been no evacuations, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is helping with medical supplies, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"No, we don't have that," Touma said, when asked whether there have been any evacuations amid the escalation of violence in the Middle East. "What we do have is a constant violence in the Gaza Strip and we have reports that some families have been displaced, so they have to

leave their homes and go somewhere else... We don't have exactly the number of the people who have been displaced. But so far, we don't have reports of the evacuations."

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UNICEF Says 34 Palestinian, 2 Israeli Children Killed in Past Four Days

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Thirty-four children in the Gaza Strip and two children in Israel have been killed in clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Middle East and North Africa regional Chief of Communications Juliette Touma told Sputnik.
"According to reports that UNICEF received, 34 children have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the May 10. So, in the past four days alone, we have 34 Palestinian children who were killed, which is a huge number," Touma said on Friday. "We also have two children in Israel."
Touma continued to say that there are also children injured, and moreover, some have been arrested.
It is a very violent situation almost everywhere in the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank and inside Israel, she said.
When asked about the injured children, Touma noted that some received medical assistance on the spot from the first aid, while some were sent to the hospital, and now there are the children who are receiving assistance in the medical facilities and hospitals on the ground in the Gaza Strip.
"We have seen different sorts of injuries. so they continue to get medical assistance," she said.
"Like I said, we will do a better assessment of the situation so that will help us to send the supplies needed to the hospitals and the medical facilities in Gaza."
The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank. Since Monday evening, around 1,800 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, which responded by launching strikes against Hamas.

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US Negotiator, Euro Commission Seek to End Airliner Subsidies Dispute - Trade Office

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's top negotiator on international trade and the vice president of the European Commission have pledged to finally resolve their long-running trade dispute on subsidies for their respective civilian aircraft industries, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said.
"US Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met virtually with European Commission (EC) Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis to discuss opportunities to strengthen economic ties between the United States and the European Union and resolve the long-running dispute over large civil aircraft subsidies," the USTR said in a readout of the conversation on Friday.
Tai expressed her commitment to finding a permanent solution before the tariff suspension expires in July that would level the playing field and create a platform for future cooperation to address the shared challenges from non-market economies, such as China, the USTR said.
Tai and Dombrovskis "also discussed the need to increase vaccine production, and the proposed waiver to certain provisions of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for the COVID-19 pandemic," the readout said.
Tai highlighted the Biden-Harris administration's support for the waiver of intellectual property for coronavirus vaccines and her commitment to text-based negotiations at the WTO and explained how this effort supports the administration's comprehensive effort to expand vaccine manufacturing and distribution around the world, the readout added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS
* More than 2,000 rockets were fired by Palestinian groups from the Gaza Strip at Israeli territory by the evening of Friday since the beginning of the escalation of the conflict, almost 1,000 of them were intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system, the Israeli army said.
* The Israeli Air Force attacked a multi-story building in the north of the Gaza Strip, which housed one of the branches of Hamas Bank, the army's press service said.
* Some 10,000 Palestinians have already fled their homes in the Gaza Strip as the result of the ongoing fighting, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Jerusalem Lynn Hastings said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE

* The US is closely monitoring the situation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and expects Baku to withdraw its military forces from the bordering region, the State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.
* Armenian acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said that France was ready, within the framework of the UN mandate, to provide military assistance to international efforts in resolving the problem in the Syunik region on border with Azerbaijan.
* Pashinyan said on Friday that he wrote a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin to seek Moscow's help, including military assistance, over the tense situation in the Syunik region that borders Azerbaijan.
* Azeri Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and US Assistant State Secretary Philip Reeker on Friday discussed the situation on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, and Baku told Washington that it is committed to stability and negotiations with Yerevan, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry said.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS
* The United States is troubled by the recent reports of the Russian authorities blocking the bank accounts of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) operating in the country, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.

RUSSIA LIST OF UNFRIENDLY STATES
* The Russian government has approved the list of unfriendly foreign countries and it includes the United States and the Czech Republic, according to a document published on the internet portal of legal information on Friday.
* Russia's decision to include the Czech Republic to the list of unfriendly states confirms that Prague correctly responded to the "Vrbetice case," Czech First Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamacek said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* Russian President Vladimir Putin noted with regret on Friday that Ukraine was being turned into Russia's antipode.
* The Western countries do not react to the political "clearance" that is happening in Ukraine right now, Putin said.
* Putin said that it seems that Ukraine will prosecute everyone who advocates for good relations with Russia when commenting on the case of Ukrainian opposition politician Viktor Medvedchuk.
* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed the belief that legal instruments were used to deprive Medvedchuk of the possibility to inflict harm on the national security.

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White House Says Investigating Reports Migrant Kids Housed in Buses Near Federal Facility

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The White House is investigating reports that migrant children have been held in buses for extended periods of time outside federal care facilities, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.
"The reports of children being held in buses outside of the HHS [Health and Human Services] facility in Dallas for extended periods of time are outrages, they're unacceptable and they do not meet our standard for childcare," Psaki said in a press briefing. "It's being fully investigated."
Psaki added that she cannot predict what the consequences will be until the investigation has concluded.
US media reported that several migrant children had been housed in buses outside a federal care facility in Dallas, Texas, some of them for a prolonged period.
In April, a total of 17,171 migrant children arrived at the US southern border alone, which represents a slight drop from the record set in March with nearly 19,000 arrivals of unaccompanied migrant children.

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Wall Street Ends Week Down Despite Tech Stocks' Biggest Win in 2 Months

NEW YORK, May 14 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell on the week but the technology sector had its biggest bounce in two months for Friday's trade, making up for some of its hefty losses over the past four weeks in a row.
The Nasdaq Composite index, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, gained 305 points, or 2.3 percent, to close at 13,430. It was the technology bellwether's biggest one-day win since March 11, when it rose 2.5 percent.
But the Nasdaq also balanced that positive close with an equally spectacular loss of 2.3 percent on the week, after a selloff from the previous week that lasted through the first three days of this week. Cumulatively, the index has lost 4.4 percent over the past four week.
The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, rose 61 points, or 1.5 percent, to close at 4,173. It fell 1.4 percent on the weeks.
The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer, rose by 361 points, or 1.1 percent, to settle at 34,382. For the week, it lost 1.1 percent.
US stocks have had a rollercoaster week after the release of mixed economic data on inflation. The US Consumer Price Index grew by 4.2 percent in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years, while the Producer Price Index expanded by 6.2 percent last month over a one-year period, for its biggest expansion in a decade.
US industrial production rose 0.7 percent in April, slowing by a third from March as carmakers idled some plants after a shortage in auto circuitry microchips, although a spike in mining still boosted activity, the Federal Reserve reported.
An early reading of US consumer confidence in May showed a drop as Americans worried about inflation and its impact on their income, the University of Michigan said in a survey closely followed by the country's economists.

US retail sales, meanwhile, turned flat in April after a jump of nearly 11 percent in March, according to data from the Commerce Department that took some heat off inflationary expectations in an economy rapidly recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.
The Federal Reserve acknowledges price pressures arising from bottlenecks in supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of pandemic suppression. But the central bank insists that these inflationary pressures are "transitory" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from the pandemic. It also does not see the need for a hike in interest rates, something stock market investors are petrified of.

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Blinken to Discuss Totality of US-Russian Relationship With Lavrov - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken looks forward to discussing with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov the totality of bilateral relations and exploring areas for potential cooperation at their meeting next week in Iceland, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Friday.
"The point of this discussion is to discuss the totality of the relationship, to explore - if there is - the potential to cooperate when and where our interests do align," Price said during a telephone briefing.
Blinken and Lavrov are expected to meet on the margins of the Arctic Council ministerial that is held on May 19-20 in Iceland's capital city of Reykjavik. The Russian Foreign Ministry said earlier after a phone conversation between Lavrov and Blinken that they agreed to hold a bilateral on May 20.
Price mentioned climate, strategic stability, Iran and North Korea among issues where Russia and the United States potentially can cooperate.
"So both this meeting and a potential meeting with President [Joe] Biden later on is all part and parcel to being a test... [whether] we can achieve a relationship with Moscow that is more stable and more predictable. That's what will be the focus of the meeting next week in Iceland," he said.
Biden offered Russia's President Vladimir Putin to meet in summer in Europe with both sides currently ironing out details of the possible summit.

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Upcoming Blinken-Lavrov Talks Part of US Effort to Establish Stable Relations - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - One of the central aims of an upcoming meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the sidelines of Arctic Council meetings will be to try and establish a more solid

relationship between the two countries, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday
"That's in part what this meeting [between Blinken and Lavrov] is going to be all about: it's an effort to try to get this relationship on a more stable and predictable path," Price said.
The two leaders are expected to hold bilateral discussions on the margins of upcoming ministerial meetings of the Arctic Council, the governing body of the arctic region of which both the US and Russia are members.
Price added the it was their hope that the meeting between Blinken and Lavrov can act as a good predecessor to a meeting between Biden and Putin this summer in Europe.

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Biden Revokes Trump Order Barring Migrants Who 'Burden' US Health System - White House

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has revoked a Trump-era executive order that denied entry to migrants who were considered a burden on the US healthcare system, the White House said on Friday.
"I, Joseph R. Biden ... hereby find that the unrestricted entry into the United States of noncitizen immigrants based solely on the reasons articulated in Proclamation 9945 is not detrimental to the interests of the United States," the White House said in a press release.
In October, then-President Donald Trump issued an order suspending the entry of migrants who could not prove they would be covered by health insurance within 30 days of their entry in the United States.
The measure was introduced as a way to end the costs to healthcare providers and US taxpayers in paying expenses incurred by migrants who did not have health insurance or did not have ability to pay their hospital bills.

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Retired US Generals' Letter 'Ominous Departure' From Tradition - Retired Diplomat

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The growing militarization of US foreign policy and increasingly extreme, polarized national politics are crippling rational policymaking in the United States, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman said on Friday.
Freeman was commenting on the letter from 120 retired US generals and admirals published on Thursday that called for the removal of President Joe Biden from office on the grounds of his allegedly impaired mental and physical condition.
The letter was an example of "manifestation of both the increasing militarism evident in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and the polarization of politics that now impedes

rational policymaking in the United States," Freeman, former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Clinton administration said.
Freeman said the letter marked an "ominous departure" from the long-established US tradition of separating politics from military affairs going back at least a century and a half.
"I can think of no precedent for an attack on the commander-in-chief of this sort by retired flag officers. This is an ominous departure from the American tradition of military self-exclusion from politics," he said.
The letter reflected the fading of civilian control of the military that has been a proud and much-celebrated tradition throughout US history, Freeman pointed out.
"It is symptomatic of a breakdown in civilian control of the military that has been in progress for some time, aided and abetted by members of Congress who seek to enlist military officers in partisan attacks on incumbent administrations," he said.
In the past, such officers, whether on active duty or retired, sought to remain apolitical, as their oath to defend and protect the constitution requires, Freeman recalled.
World War II and Korean War commander General "Douglas MacArthur, a great strategist who disagreed with President Truman about policy during the Korean War, was fired for violating this standard. It is now routinely ignored," Freeman said.
Recent political party conventions have featured flag officers delivering highly partisan speeches, Freeman noted.
"The now ever more frequent advocacy of specific policies by military officers, including some disapproved by their civilian leadership, is a manifestation of ...the increasing militarism evident in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War," he said.
In their letter, the 120 retired generals and admirals called on all US citizens to get involved at all levels to elect politicians who would act to save the nation and hold those currently in office to account.

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Biden Revokes Trump Orders Protecting Monuments, Preventing Internet Censorship

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has revoked Trump-era executive orders that protected federal monuments and sought to prevent censorship on the internet, the White House said on Friday.
"The following Presidential actions are revoked: Executive Order 13925 of May 28, 2020 (Preventing Online Censorship), Executive Order 13933 of June 26, 2020 (Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence)," the White House said in a press release.
Last year, then-President Donald Trump signed an executive order on the protection of the country's monuments, which became a major target for protesters during a summer of violent clashes and demonstrations following the death of George Floyd, a 46-year old black man, in Minneapolis police custody on May 25.

According to Trump's order, those found guilty of vandalizing statues and monuments could face ten years in jail.
Trump's executive order to protect the internet asked US federal regulators to determine whether current laws protect social media companies from being sued for altering or otherwise censoring free speech.

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US Sentences Ex-Army Green Beret to 15 Years for Spying for Russia – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has sentenced a former US Army Green Beret Peter Dzibinski Debbins to 15 years and 8 months in prison for spying for Russia, the Department of Justice said in a statement on Friday.
"A former Army Green Beret was sentenced today to 188 months in prison for conspiring with Russian intelligence operatives to provide them with U.S. national defense information," the statement read.
Acting US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia Raj Parekh accused Dobbins of trading secrets and jeopardizing US national security.
"The defendant's brazen disclosures to Russian intelligence agents jeopardized U.S. national security and threatened the safety of his fellow servicemembers," Parekh said.
US authorities resolute to prosecute those who betray their sworn oath, he added.
Court document showed that Debbins, now 46, conspired a Russian intelligence agency from December 1996 to January 2011 and visited Russia numerous times. In 1997, he received a code name and signed an agreement to cooperate with Russia, it added.

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US House Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Secure Pipelines From Cyber Attacks

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - More than a dozen members of the US House Homeland Security Committee re-introduced legislation on Friday that would help support efforts to secure the country's pipelines from terrorist and cyberattacks alike, Representative Emanuel Cleaver's office said in a release.
"Members of the Committee... re-introduced legislation to support the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) efforts to secure pipelines and pipeline facilities from cyberattacks, terrorist attacks, and other nefarious efforts to target pipeline infrastructure," the release said.
The move comes amid heightened discussion among Washington officials about the importance of cybersecurity, particularly when it comes to protecting critical infrastructure. These discussions are largely inspired by the recent Colonial Pipelines, SolarWinds, and Microsoft Exchange hacks.

"The recent ransomware attack against Colonial Pipeline Company further highlights the threats facing our nation's critical infrastructure and the potential cascading impacts cyber attacks can have on our economy. With the attacks of this nature on the rise, it's more important than ever to strengthen our cyber resilience," Ranking Member John Katko said in the release.
Cleaver and Katko are joined by Chairman Bennie Thompson and 12 other members of the committee in supporting the re-introduction of the legislation.

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UPDATE - US Troubled by Reports of Russia Blocking RFE/RL Accounts - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The US is troubled by the recent reports of the Russian authorities blocking the bank accounts of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) operating in the country, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.
"We are deeply troubled by reports that Russian authorities have frozen Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's bank accounts, and Russia's latest attempt to suppress independent media and deny the Russian people access to objective news. We will continue to unequivocally support RFE/RL and its affiliates, and to stand up for freedom of expression, including for members of the press," Porter said during a briefing.
The deputy spokesperson also noted that the people of Russia deserve access to a wide range of information and opinion while Moscow should respect freedom of expression in keeping with its international obligations.
Earlier on Friday, RFE/RL reported that bailiffs visited the Moscow bureau and inquired about the equipment inventory while not interfering with the work of the editorial staff. Later in the day, RFE/RL said that its Moscow bank accounts were blocked.
According to the Russian communication watchdog Roskomnadzor, the agency drew up 390 reports against RFE/RL for the lack of "foreign agent" marking on the media's resources with the total amount of fines reaching nearly $1 million.
The federal law of Russia "On Mass Media" states that all materials from foreign media outlets that act as a foreign agent, i.e. represent interests of the foreign state actors, must be distributed in Russia with the appropriate labeling. Similar legislation exists in a number of countries, including the United States.

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New York Police Investigating Subway Slashing, Two Men in Questioning

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The New York City Police Department (NYPD) is investigating three slashing incidents and one assault that occurred on the subway system early Friday morning, the department said in a statement.

"In the span of an hour this morning, several subway riders were the victims of unprovoked assaults, likely perpetrated by the same suspects. We won't stand for these acts of violence in our subways. Detectives are pursuing all leads & these criminals will be brought to justice," the NYPD said.
Police are questioning two of the suspects, local WABC reported citing official.
Three of the men, all in their forties, were slashed in a spree in the early hours of Friday morning while the fourth was punched during one of the altercations, the report said, adding that the victims went to the hospital for medical treatment and are currently in stable condition.
The police described the suspects, as well as the men being questioned, as two black males in their twenties, the report said.

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Canada to Receive 4.5Mln Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Next Week – Procurement Minister
TORONTO, May 14 (Sputnik) – Canada is set to receive 4.5 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna coronavirus vaccines the week of May 16, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said on Friday.
"Canada will be receiving 4.5 million vaccine doses, in total, next week," Anand told reporters.
Canada will receive a shipment of 2 million doses early in the week, followed by the arrival of 1.4 million doses on May 20, the minister said. The Pfizer deliveries will be augmented by an anticipated shipment of 1.1 million Moderna doses.

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US Envoy on Israel-Palestine Arrives in Tel Aviv on Deescalation Mission - Embassy

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US diplomatic envoy for Israeli and Palestinian Affairs Hady Amr arrived in Tel Aviv on Friday to help deescalating an ongoing military conflict between Washington's chief ally in the Middle East and the Palestinians, US Embassy in Jerusalem said.
"Dep Asst Secretary for Israel and Palestinian Affairs Hady Amr arrived to TLV [Tel Aviv] today to reinforce the need to work toward a sustainable calm, recognizing Israel's right to self-defense," the Embassy tweeted.
At least 122 Palestinians in Gaza and eight Israelis were killed in an exchange of hundreds of rocket salvos and airstrikes that have been underway for five straight days. The fiercest flareup since 2014 has sparked communal violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities and spilled over to the West Bank where 10 Palestinians were reportedly killed on Friday alone.

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US Discusses Patent Waiver on COVID Vaccines With WHO Chief - Trade Office

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - United States Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai has discussed a patent waiver on COVID-19 vaccines in a virtual meeting with World Health Organization (WHO) Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the USTR said on Friday.
"...Tai today met virtually with ... Director General of the WHO to discuss increasing vaccine production, and the proposed waiver to certain provisions of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for the COVID-19 pandemic," the USTR said in a readout.
Tai explained the Biden administration's support for the waiver of intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines and the administration's comprehensive effort to expand vaccine manufacturing and distribution around the world, the USTR said.
Tai and Adhanom Ghebreyesus also agreed to stay in regular communication in the days ahead, the USTR added.

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Canadian Officials Say Ottawa's COVID-19 Approach on Vaccines, Reopening Different to US

TORONTO, May 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian officials on Friday said Ottawa is doing things differently when it comes to vaccinating citizens against the coronavirus disease and making plans for a post-pandemic reopening compared to the United States.
Canadian health officials have drawn considerable criticism for delaying the time between vaccinations for up to four months, in spite of the manufacturers' recommended timelines between shots - 21 days for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 28 for the Moderna vaccine.
"The science is finding that that delay is actually helping people mount an even stronger immune response, this was the underpinning of [the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations'] NACI's recommendation," Health Minister Patty Hajdu said during a press briefing. "I want to say thank you to the Canadians, who have come along with us on this approach, that, yes, does differ from our American cousins."
In contrast, the United States has adhered to the manufacturers' recommended timelines between shots and in March, Cole Pinnow, the president of Pfizer Canada, told a parliamentary committee that Pfizer was not consulted before the decision to delay the time between doses was made and that the company sticks by its directions label.
Canada's chief medical officer said that Ottawa is also taking its time with its post-pandemic reopening plans.
"We are taking a bit of a different approach to the United States and maybe a little more similar to that of the United Kingdom," Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said during a press briefing, noting that further guidance and decisions on public health measures would be governed by ongoing modeling and projections at Canada's health authorities.

Canada's Public Health Agency released its guidance for lifting restrictions in the short-term, the summer and the fall on Friday. According to the agency, if Canadians hit the government's target of having 75 percent of Canadians vaccinated with the first dose and 25 percent vaccinated fully by the summer, then citizens would be able to enjoy outdoor recreational activities including, camping, hiking and picnics.
Notably, comparisons show that the guidelines for this summer are not significantly different from those in place last summer, despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's vow that Canadians will be able to enjoy a "one dose summer" while the United Kingdom is well on its way along the government's roadmap out of the COVID-19 lockdown.
By contrast, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its COVID-19 guidance for fully vaccinated people on Thursday, allowing indoor and outdoor activities of any size without wearing a face mask.
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US Expects Azerbaijan to Pull Back Forces From Armenian Territory - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) – The US is closely monitoring the situation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and expects Baku to withdraw its military forces from the bordering region, the State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.
"We are closely monitoring the situation along the demarcated border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Military movements in disputed territories are irresponsible and they're also unnecessarily provocative. We've seen the reports of some withdrawal and would welcome if it confirms that we expect that Azerbaijan to pull back all forces... We've also urged both sides to approach demarcation issues through discussion as well as negotiation," Porter said during a briefing.

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US Warns Extremists May Seek to Exploit Easing of COVID-19-Related Restrictions - Advisory

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) National Terrorism Advisory System issued a bulletin on Friday that indicated a heightened threat environment due to the potential for violent extremists to exploit the lifting of COVID-19-related restrictions.
"Violent extremists may seek to exploit the easing of COVID-19-related restrictions across the United States to conduct attacks against a broader range of targets after previous public capacity limits reduced opportunities for lethal attacks," the DHS said.
However, the DHS pointed out that they do not have information about any specific, credible threat.

The DHS said the restrictive measures such as lockdowns in response to the coronavirus pandemic had previously limited the number of large public gatherings for extremists to target. The ongoing easing of restrictions reintroduces opportunities for extremists to carry out attacks. Social media and malign foreign influences play a significant role in creating the heightened threat environment in the United States, the DHS said, reminding the public that terror groups like the Islamic State (banned in Russia) have been working to inspire homegrown violent extremists.

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US Troubled by Reports of Russia Blocking RFE/RL Accounts - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The US is troubled by the recent reports of the Russian authorities blocking the bank accounts of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) operating in the country, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday. "We are deeply troubled by reports that Russian authorities have frozen Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's bank accounts, and Russia's latest attempt to suppress independent media and deny the Russian people access to objective news. We will continue to unequivocally support RFE/RL and its affiliates, and to stand up for freedom of expression, including for members of the press," Porter said during a briefing.

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UNSC Unlikely to Adopt Any Statement on Gaza After Meeting on Sunday - Sources

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will unlikely produce any statement on the situation in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem after it convenes for an emergency open meeting on Sunday, diplomatic sources at the Security Council told Sputnik on Friday.

"It is unlikely that any document will be adopted. But public speeches by the UN Security Council members are already worth a lot," said one of the sources, adding that initially, the United States generally opposed holding open meetings on the topic of the escalation between Israel and Palestine.

After holding two closed consultations on the renewed Israeli-Palestinian conflict this week, the UN Security Council could not agree to produce any unified statement. According to a diplomatic source at the council, the United States was the only member state that voiced its opposition to adopting a statement.

On Wednesday, the EU countries at the Security Council- Estonia, France, Ireland and Norway - issued a statement which condemned violence perpetrated on both sides of the conflict.

Later that day, China, Norway and Tunisia requested to gather for a third Security Council meeting on May 14; however, Washington did not agree to hold consultations, citing the diplomatic efforts if was undertaking that might be affected by such a meeting.

At the same time, the United States proposed to organize a meeting on May 18 and the UN Security Council agreed to compromise and meet two days earlier.

None of the sources also expected that any resolution would be adopted to help calm the situation in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

"Not at this stage," said one of the sources when asked whether any member state planned to submit a draft of a relevant resolution.

"At least we have an open meeting," the diplomat added.

Another source at the Security Council said people will obviously be most interested in the attitude of the Americans.

"I guess it remains to be confirmed whether or not Israel and Palestine will participate, but I expect that they will," the source said.

According to the diplomat, not a single member state is currently working on a draft of a possible resolution that potentially could be adopted on Sunday.

"There's a long time between now and Sunday, so let's see what happens on the ground, but there's no product on the table [and] I don't expect [anything] to be adopted either," the source said.

The US Permanent Mission to the United Nations did not immediately reply when asked whether it expects any concrete results from the Sunday meeting.

The situation on the border between Israel and Palestine's Gaza Strip escalated on Monday evening. Since then, around 1,750 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. Israel has responded by launching multiple strikes against Hamas. Over 130 Palestinians and seven Israelis have been killed in the conflict escalation.

The conflict has garnered international attention, with regional and international mediators such as Egypt, Qatar, the United States, Russia, proposing to step in to negotiate a truce.

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USTR Talks With Indian Counterpart on Increasing Vaccine Production, WTO Waiver

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai talked with her Indian counterpart about the Biden administration's plan to increase coronavirus vaccine production to help India deal with the surge of cases and issues pertaining to intellectual property rights regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of USTR said in a statement on Friday.
"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met virtually with India's Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal to discuss increasing vaccine production and the proposed waiver to certain provisions of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for the COVID-19 pandemic," the statement said.
India has reported a significant increase of people who have tested positive for the coronavirus and healthcare facilities stretched thin with frontline workers scrambling for resources.
Tai expressed deep sympathies to the Indian people given the number of cases and subsequent deaths, the release said.
The two officials also discussed the idea of waiving intellectual property right protections for coronavirus vaccines, an issue that has been recently discussed by WTO members, the release added.
Tai welcomed Goyal's effort to resubmit the waiver proposal to the organization, according to the release.

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ANALYSIS - Soaring US Inflation? The Fed is Razor-Focused on Employment

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Spiking US inflation and trillion-dollar budget deficits from COVID-19 may scare many economists but the Federal Reserve is virtually ignoring these as it focuses on getting laid-off Americans back to work.
The Fed has a dual mandate of ensuring maximum employment and sustainable inflation, and it is no secret which of the two the central bank is prioritizing, analysts told Sputnik.
The Consumer Price Index (CPI), the world's most popular inflation gauge, rose 4.2 percent in the United States in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years. The Producer Price Index (PPI), a measure of what wholesalers pay for goods, meanwhile, grew 6.2 percent in the year to April, the most in a decade.
The US budget deficit already stands at $1.93 trillion in the first seven months of fiscal 2021, versus $3.13 trillion in 2020 and $984 billion in 2019. Since March last year, nearly $6 trillion in

coronavirus relief payments have been distributed by the Treasury and added to the country's balance sheet, severely distorting the deficit.

The succession of government stimulus packages to combat the pandemic has increased the broad supply of money in the United States from $15.5 trillion in February 2020 to $19.4 trillion in January — a record one-year increase.

While policymakers at the Fed are well aware of these figures, they aren't expressing as much worry about them as they do with figures on unemployment.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell and his retinue of senior central bankers routinely remind the nation that more than 8 million of those jobs have not returned.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020 and the Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent growth for 2021. Since the pandemic broke out, the central bank has kept interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent to stimulate growth, and has made monetary policy as accommodative as possible.

BY BEING BLIND TO INFLATION, FED 'PLAYING WITH FIRE'

Powell says he'll be comfortable raising interest rates when there's 'full employment' — which will be marked by the rate of joblessness falling from the current 6.1 percent to 4.0 percent — or there were signs that employment was growing apace with inflation.

His timeline for that? Not before 2023.

"Jerome Powell doesn't care about a 4 percent headline increase in the CPI. He cares about seeing a 4 percent unemployment rate which is maximum employment," said Ramesh Mohan, Professor of Economics at Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island. "Under him, the Fed is turning a blind eye to inflation, and is playing with fire."

Many economists attribute the rising costs reflected by the CPI and PPI to record growth in money supply, saying the two will not stop expanding as long as the Treasury continues to dole out trillion-dollar stimulus payouts on top of the Fed's accommodative policy.

"The consequence of this can be bubbles in the equity and housing markets," said Mohan. "People unaffected by the pandemic have been borrowing money cheaply to buy stocks and houses, pushing prices for both to record highs. Once these bubbles burst, the economy can crater worse than it did at the height of the COVID-19. This time, the recovery might take a lot longer than it did after the Great Recession of 2008/2009."

Bond traders have been selling off US Treasury notes since last year to demonstrate their inflation expectations, pushing yields attached to the benchmark 10-year note to 14 month-highs at one point in March.

Despite this, the Fed remains unperturbed. Powell and various policymakers at the central bank say inflation readings now are distorted by price pressures arising from bottlenecks in supply chains struggling to cope with demand from an economy reopening after months of pandemic-suppression.

The Fed officially measures inflation via the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index that strips out volatile energy and food prices. It has forecast an inflation rate that will average 2.4 percent in 2021 and 2.1 percent in 2023.

The Fed has been using a 2 percent target for inflation since 2012 as its benchmark for raising interest rates. The trouble is the central bank has never achieved that inflation goal from the

time the target was set. Prior to the 2008/09 financial crisis, there have been only four years when US inflation exceeded the target, from 2004 through 2007.

SHORTAGE IN CHIPS TO SPIKE IN GASOLINE

Critics also argue that the Fed is missing more obvious examples of rising costs across the economy.

Among these is the chronic short supply of semiconductors for automobile circuitry that has forced companies like General Motors to idle production at several plants. CPI data shows that the crisis in microchips has indirectly boosted demand for used vehicles, pushing up prices for second-hand cars and trucks by 10 percent in April, the most in a month since 1953.

The average price for a single home in the United States is up by almost 30 percent, or $36,000, over the past year while the price of lumber has increased about 30 percent — reaching a record high above $1,700 per 1,000 board feet. For context, lumber has historically fluctuated between $200 to $400.

Prices of other building-related raw materials such as copper and iron ore have hit all-time highs too from a broader boom in commodities from oil to even soybeans. Gasoline prices are up almost 50 percent over a six-month period.

Powell and his coterie of Fed bankers say these price pressures are "transitory" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from the pandemic.

Reinforcing the central bank's point, retail sales for April were flat after a buoyant 10.7 percent jump in March, as most Americans appeared to have finished spending their latest round of government stimulus checks. Retail sales are closely watched as a gauge of consumer mindset.

Despite this, few outside Powell's circle are convinced that inflation will just go away without intervention.

"The problem is that investors do not buy it," economist, fund manager and author Daniel Lacalle said, referring to the Fed's mantra of "transient inflation".

"We know that central banks do not change course even if inflation is high and persistent because we have seen it in numerous countries," Lacalle added. "Governments always justify printing more money with the excuse that there is no inflation. When inflation rises, they say it is transitory. And when inflation soars, governments blame businesses and shop owners, presenting themselves as the solution with 'price controls.'"

As a fund manager, Lacalle said his obligation was to protect his clients' money from inflation. But he had an even bigger concern — stagflation, which is identified as persistently high inflation combined with high unemployment and stagnant economic demand.

"A rising number of funds are looking at a highly likely risk of stagnation after the chain of stimuli but with rising prices," Lacalle added. "CPI may not reflect the rise in healthcare, education, fresh food prices and rent, but citizens feel it."

IN POWELL'S CORNER: THE 'PHILLIPS CURVE'

Mohan said from a central bankers' perspective, Powell has history on his side in prioritizing employment over inflation. He cited the "Phillips Curve" — a global recipe central bankers the world over relied on for post-recession recovery. The theory states that with economic growth comes inflation, which in turn should lead to more jobs and less unemployment.

"In a recession, the clear trade-off for boosting recovery and employment is inflation," said Mohan. "Yet, sometimes, in those situations, there are some who might feel that a rate hike is also necessary to maintain balance."

Such a situation occurred in the United States earlier this month, when Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen candidly observed that interest rates may "have to rise somewhat to make sure our economy doesn't overheat." She quickly recanted the position after US stock prices fell as much as 2 percent on her comments.
Some fund managers argue that Powell is acting conscientiously, with one eye on Wall Street. By keeping rates where they are, the Fed chief, they say, is providing indirect support to the stock market, given that a hike at this point would set off alarm bells for investors worried about a broad tapering — or pullback — in the accommodative policy of the pandemic-era.
Steven Keller, investment manager at New York-based Wexler Capital, told Sputnik that Powell's action was warranted, given the impact that turbulence on Wall Street has on the rest of the economy.
"It's easy for anyone not associated with the stock market to say 'to hell with what Wall Street wants or thinks!'," said Steven Keller, investment manager at New York-based Wexler Capital. "But don't forget, here's where the shares of America's biggest corporations are. If their stock prices crash, what do you think that will do to the country's employment? It's like what Sherlock Holmes famously tells his partner all the time: 'Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary'."

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US Sentences Professor to 3 Years for Grant Fraud Scheme Involving China - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Ohio professor Song Guo Zheng has been sentenced to three years and one month in prison for making misleading statements on multi-million grant applications in an effort to conceal his ties to China while benefitting that country with US research in the areas of rheumatology and immunology, the Justice Department said on Friday.
"An Ohio man and rheumatology professor and researcher with strong ties to China was sentenced to 37 months in prison for making false statements to federal authorities as part of an immunology research fraud scheme," the Justice Department said in a release.
As part of his sentence, Zheng was also ordered to pay more than $3.4 million in restitution to the National Institute of Health (NIH) and approximately $413,000 to the Ohio State University," the release said.
"Zheng pleaded guilty last November and admitted he lied on applications in order to use approximately $4.1 million in grants from NIH to develop China's expertise in the areas of rheumatology and immunology," the release said.
The Justice Department said in the release that Zheng made materially false and misleading statements on NIH grant applications in order to hide his participation in Chinese Talent Plans and his affiliation and collaboration with a Chinese state university.
Since 2013, Zheng was benefiting China by using research conducted in the United States while failing to disclose his foreign commitments to his US employers and NIH, the release said.
The Chinese Talent Plan is a program established by the Chinese government to recruit researchers with knowledge or access to foreign technology intellectual property, the release added.

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US-Based Medical Group Conducts 10 Surgeries in Russia for First Time Since Pandemic

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - An international group of pediatric cardiologists from the US-based Novick Cardiac Alliance has resumed trips to Russia's city of Kemerovo to perform surgeries there after they were temporarily suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, the head of the organization Bill Novick told Sputnik.
"Our team operated on ten patients ranging from infants to mid-age children. The diagnoses were from moderate to complex," Novick said about the two-week trip.
Novick noted that one of the children had a cardiac arrest and the doctors put the child on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) - a small by-pass machine - to support the heart and blood pressure, after which the medical staff took the child back to the operating room.
"The team did the absolute right things for this child," Novick said. "They were able to take the child off the ECMO machine a couple of days later, close the chest and localize the infection in the nasal sinuses, drained both of those sinuses, and the child got better."
The next trip is scheduled for late August - early September, he added.
Novick and his colleagues have conducted more than 400 surgeries in Russia since 2008. The Novick Cardiac Alliance comprises a group of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in different "hot spots" around the world. Previously, the group has performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including in Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

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UN Says Some 10,000 Palestinians Flee Homes Due to Fighting in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - Some 10,000 Palestinians have already fled their homes in the Gaza Strip as the result of the ongoing fighting, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Jerusalem Lynn Hastings said in a statement on Friday.
"The United Nations estimates that some 10,000 Palestinians have had to leave their homes in Gaza due to the ongoing hostilities," Hastings said. "They are sheltering in schools, mosques and other places during a global COVID-19 pandemic with limited access to water, food, hygiene, and health services."

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US Consumer Confidence Dips in May on Worries of Inflation - Survey

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence in early May is in decline in May as Americans are worried about rising inflation and its impact on their income, the University of Michigan said on Friday about the results of its survey that is closely followed by economists.
"Consumer confidence in early May tumbled due to higher inflation - the highest expected year-ahead inflation rate as well as the highest long term inflation rate in the past decade," the University of Michigan said, reporting a reading of 77.6 versus 82.7 in April.
The University of Michigan said rising inflation also meant that real income expectations were the weakest in five years.
"The average of net price mentions for buying conditions for homes, vehicles, and household durables were more negative than any time since the end of the last inflationary era in 1980," it said.
The survey was another affirmation of what economists have been warning for months - that an economy rebounding rapidly from the coronavirus pandemic could see historic price pressures. This week alone, the indexes tracking consumer and producer prices reported multi-year highs in the 12 months to April.
The US Consumer Price Index grew by 4.2 percent in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years, while the Producer Price Index expanded by 6.2 percent last month over a one-year period, for its biggest expansion in a decade.

The average price for a single home in the United States is up by almost 30 percent, or $36,000, over the past year while the price of lumber has also increased about 30 percent - reaching a record high above $1,700 per 1,000 board foot. For context, lumber has historically fluctuated between $200 to $400.
Prices of other construction-related raw materials such as copper and iron ore have hit all-time highs too from a broader boom in commodities from oil to even soybeans. Gasoline prices are up almost 50 percent over a six-month period.

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UN Chief Calls on All Parties in Gaza to Immediately Cease Fighting - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appealed to all parties in the ongoing military escalation in the Gaza Strip to immediately end the ongoing hostilities, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.
"The Secretary-General appeals to all parties to immediately cease the fighting in Gaza and Israel," Dujarric said. "The ongoing military escalation has caused great suffering and destruction. It has claimed scores of civilian lives, including, tragically, many children."

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Paul Whelan's Sister Meets US Ambassador to Russia, Special Envoy for Hostages - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Elizabeth Whelan, sister of US citizen Paul Whelan who serves a prison sentence in Russia for espionage, met in Washington with US ambassador John Sullivan and representatives of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) office earlier this week, the Whelan family said in a statement on Friday.
"Elizabeth... was able to meet with Ambassador John Sullivan... [She] was also able to have other meetings, including with the (SPEHA office," the statement, obtained by Sputnik, said.
The Whelan family appreciates the attention the US government and elected representatives are giving to this case, the statement added.
Paul Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, was arrested in Russia in December 2018. A court in Moscow sentenced him to 16 years in prison for espionage last June.
Whelan has denied the charges and insisted he came to Russia for a friend's wedding. Court papers have revealed that he has frequented Russia since 2007.

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Washington to Host Canada, Mexico for First NAFTA-Successor Trade Summit - USTR

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The US Trade Representative's (USTR) office said on Friday that it will host Canadian and Mexican counterparts in Washington for the inaugural North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) successor summit beginning on May 17.
"Ambassador Katherine Tai will host the inaugural Free Trade Commission (FTC) of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) on May 17-18, 2021," the US Trade Representative's office said in a statement.
Mexican Secretary of Economy Tatiana Clouthier and Canada's Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade, Mary Ng, will attend the meeting virtually, the statement said.
The trade envoys will discuss the labor and environmental responsibilities each country has committed to, under the new continental trade agreement, the statement said.
The USMCA came into being as a result of former US President Donald Trump's demands to re-negotiate NAFTA, which he repeatedly called a "disaster" for the United States.

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US Industrial Production Up 0.7% in April - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US industrial production increased 0.7 percent in April, slowing by a third from March, as carmakers idled some plants after a shortage in auto-circuitry microchips, the Federal Reserve reported on Friday.
"Total industrial production increased 0.7 percent in April. The indexes for mining and utilities increased 0.7 percent and 2.6 percent, respectively," the Federal Reserve said in a statement.
"The index for manufacturing rose 0.4 percent despite a drop in motor vehicle assemblies that principally resulted from shortages of semiconductors."
The US central bank said industrial production for April was also helped by a resumption of work at plants damaged and kept offline until March by a snowstorm that hit the south-central parts of the United States in February.
Economists are closely watching industrial production and other macroeconomic data such as consumer prices and producer prices for signs of blowout inflation in an economy rebounding rapidly from the coronavirus pandemic.
The US Consumer Price Index grew by 4.2 percent in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years, while the Producer Price Index expanded by 6.2 percent last month over a one-year period, for its biggest expansion in a decade.

From: Barani Krishnan - barani.krishnan@gmail.com
Subject: US Industrial Production up 0.7% in April; Miners Make up Lost Automobile Output - Fed

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Blinken Conveys 'Steadfast' US Support for Afghan Forces After School Attack - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a telephone conversation with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during which he conveyed the United States' commitment to supporting the Afghan security forces after the recent attack on a girls' school, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a release on Friday.
"Secretary Blinken conveyed Eid greetings and expressed his deepest condolences to the families of those lost in recent violence in Afghanistan, including in the horrific attack on a girls' school in Kabul last week," Price said. "The Secretary conveyed America's steadfast support for the US-Afghan partnership and for Afghanistan's security forces."
Blinken and Ghani also discusses the importance of national unity in the country as well as regional efforts to advance the peace process, Price added.
On Sunday, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani called the bombing of a girls' school in Kabul an act of terrorism and a crime against humanity and called on the Taliban to stop killing innocent Afghans.
Price said the Taliban has denied responsibility for the attack.
On Saturday, a car bomb went off outside the Sayed-ul-Shuhada school in a Shia-majority neighborhood in western Kabul followed by two more blasts. The attack claimed at least 63 lives and left more than 150 wounded.
Despite the ongoing peace talks, the Afghan government and the Taliban continue fighting each other on the ground. The confrontation unfolds on the backdrop of the withdrawal of US-led foreign troops, which is expected to complete on September 11.

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Ransomware Group DarkSide Disbanding After Colonial Pipeline Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The DarkSide hacking group blamed for fuel disruptions in the United States is disbanding after losing access to its infrastructure, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing the security research firm FireEye.
"DarkSide has told associates it has lost access to the infrastructure it uses to run its operation and would be shutting down, citing pressure from law enforcement and from the US," the report quoted FireEye.
Security experts warned that it is not uncommon for ransomware groups to disband only to pop up later under a different name.
The US administration said that DarkSide operates from Russia, but refrained from blaming the country's authorities for the cyberattack on Colonial Pipeline.

Collonial Pipeline halted its fuel shipments to the East Coast for several days with panic buying exacerbating shortages.
The company reportedly paid DarkSide a $5 million ransom in exchange for a decryption key and the return of their hacked information.

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US Sentences Ex-Army Green Beret to 15 Years for Spying for Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has sentenced a former US Army Green Beret Peter Dzibinski Debbins to 15 years and 8 months in prison for spying for Russia, the Associated Press reported on Friday.
The sentence was close to the 17-year sentence the prosecutors sought while the defense sought a five-year sentence, the report said.
Debbins apologized for his actions during the court hearing, the report added.

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Biggest Swiss Insurance Firm, Subsidiaries Admit Tax Plot Against US - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Switzerland's largest insurance company and three subsidiaries have admitted to conspiring with US taxpayers to hide assets and income in offshore accounts and have agreed to pay more than $77 million in a deferred prosecution agreement, the Department of Justice said on Friday.

"Swiss Life Holding AG, Swiss Life (Liechtenstein) AG, Swiss Life (Singapore) and Swiss Life (Luxembourg) enter into [a] deferred prosecution agreement for criminal misconduct; agree to pay more than $77 million," the Justice Department said in a press release. "The Swiss Life Entities agreed to pay ... $77.3 million to the US Treasury."
The companies were charged with conspiring with US taxpayers and others to conceal from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) more than $1.452 billion in offshore insurance policies, including more than 1,600 insurance wrapper policies, and related policy investment accounts in banks around the world, the release said.
The US government has agreed to "a deferred prosecution agreement with the Swiss Life Entities under which they agreed to accept responsibility for their criminal conduct by stipulating to the accuracy of the Statement of Facts ... to refrain from all future criminal conduct [and] enhance remedial measures," the Justice Department said.
The agreement also requires the Swiss company and its subsidiaries to continue to cooperate fully with further investigations into hidden insurance policies and related policy investment accounts, the Justice Department added.

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No State at UN General Assembly Requesting Emergency Meeting on Gaza - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 14 (Sputnik) - No member state at the UN General Assembly has so far requested holding an emergency meeting on the ongoing escalation between Israel and Palestine, the spokesperson for the President of the UN General Assembly told Sputnik on Friday.
"We have not received a request for a General Assembly meeting on Israel and Gaza," the spokesperson said.
Earlier, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said he would request an emergency meeting of the General Assembly on the situation in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.
The confrontation on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip escalated earlier this week. About 1,750 rockets have since been fired from the Palestinian enclave toward Israel, which responded with airstrikes. More than 130 Palestinians and seven Israelis have been killed in the conflict escalation.
The conflict has garnered international attention, with regional and international mediators such as Egypt, Qatar, Russia and the United States, others having proposed to step in to negotiate a truce.

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US Retail Sales Turn Flat in April, Taking Some Heat Off Inflation - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US retail sales turned flat in April after an increase of nearly 11 percent in March, according to data from the Commerce Department on Friday that took some heat off inflationary expectations in an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for April 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were $619.9 billion, virtually unchanged from the previous month," the US Census Bureau, a unit of the Commerce Department, said in a statement.

Economists polled by US media had expected a 1 percent growth in retail sales for last month, sharply revising down their estimates from March, which saw an untoward jump in spending by Americans empowered by COVID-19 relief checks of $1,400 per person sent out by the Biden administration.

"The numbers are very close to expectations," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive, commenting on the April data.

Notwithstanding the flat change month-on-month, the Census Bureau reported a 51.2 percent growth in retail sales in the 12-month period since April 2020, when the pandemic first broke out.

That was in line with the double-digit annual increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Producer Price Index (PPI) for April reported earlier this week by the Labor Department. The CPI grew by 4.2 percent over 12 months for its largest increase in almost 13 years, while the PPI expanded by 6.2 percent over the year, its most in a decade.

The spike came amid price pressures arising from bottlenecks in supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of pandemic-suppression.

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent. The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021.

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Biden Energy Policies Wrecking US, Boosting Rise of Russia - Republican Whip

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's energy policies were wrecking the US economy, impoverishing the American people and boosting the rise of Russia by making the United States much more dependent on oil imports, Republican House Whip Steve Scalise said on Friday.

"Russia is on the move in Eastern Europe: Russia is attacking America's pipelines," Scalise told reporters on Capitol Hill after the election of Congresswoman Elaine Stefanik to the No. 3 Republican leadership post as conference chair. President Joe Biden has admitted there is no evidence that Russia attacked the East Coast Colonial pipeline.

Biden's anti-oil and pro-Green, environmentalist policies were weakening the US economy and boosting gasoline prices, inflicting suffering on ordinary Americans, Scalise said.

"He [Biden] has not only canceled Keystone [XL pipeline], he has canceled leases on federal lines: [There are] lines at the pump not seen since the 1970s," Scalise said.
Gasoline prices had already exceeded $7 a gallon in the state of Virginia and the temporary closing of the East Coast Colonial Pipeline had been followed by long waiting lines at gasoline stations unseen in more than 40 years, Scalise added.

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Cheney Replacement in House of Representatives Stefanik Says Party United Behind Trump

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The newly-elected Conference Chair of the Republican Party Elaine Stefanik said, following her election to the post on Friday, that the party's minority in the House of Representatives was united, loyal to former President Donald Trump and was launching all-out opposition to the policies of the Biden administration.
"My focus is on unity: President Trump is a critical part of our Republican team. I want to thank him for his support," Stefanik told reporters. "We are going on the offensive. [House Speaker] Nancy Pelosi has the smallest majority in a generation. We are going to win back the House in 2022."
Stefanik won a decisive 134 votes to succeed Congresswoman Liz Cheney in the Number Three position among House Republicans after Cheney, who had been publicly critical of Trump, was deposed on Wednesday. Only 46 House Republicans voted against Stefanik.
Stefanik said Biden and Pelosi had shown no bipartisanship at all towards Republicans and so they were going to oppose the administration's policies all-out.
"There has been no bipartisan outreach: It has been partisan votes ... In just over 100 days, we have a border crisis, an economic crisis [and] the worst job report in over 20 years," she said.
Liz Cheney remained part of the Republican conference and House Republicans were united in their focus to fight on behalf of the American people, Stefanik said.

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DarkSide Hacking Group Infrastrucutre Shut Down Following Biden Administration Threat
WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The DarkSide hacking group, which was responsible for the recent ransomware attack that shut down Colonial Pipeline, has lost access to some of its online infrastructure on Friday, the cybersecurity firm Recorded Future reported.
“A few hours ago, we lost access to the public part of our infrastructure, namely: Blog. Payment server. DOS servers,” the report cited the group's operator Darksupp as saying.
The fuel shortages caused by the ransomware attack led to panic buying in certain parts of the United States. Colonial Pipeline, against the advise of the FBI, reportedly paid DarkSide a $5 million ransom in exchange for a decryption key and the return of their hacked information.

The Biden administration has said after the ransomware incident that it would be coming after the hacking group to disrupt its operations.
President Joe Biden has also said that Russia, where DarkSide is allegedly operating from, is not involved in the cyberwear attack.

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Blinken to Join Christchurch Call Leaders' Summit Against Terrorist Internet Content

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to take part on Friday in the Christchurch Call to Action Leaders' Summit to eradicate terrorist and extremist use of the internet a week after Washington announced it was joining the effort.
Initiated by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in 2019 in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings, the summit aims to bring together governments and tech companies to end the ability for extremists and terrorists to use the internet. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said last week in a statement that the US will be joining the Christchurch Call.
"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will participate virtually in the Christchurch Call to Action Leaders' Summit today, representing the United States as the newest signatory to the pledge," a State Department press release said. "Secretary Blinken will discuss U.S. efforts to prevent the misuse of the internet for terrorist purposes while upholding the freedoms and protections afforded by the Constitution."
Brenton Tarrant received a life sentence without parole - the first ever in New Zealand's history - for killing 51 people and injuring 40 others during an attack on a mosque and Islamic center in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019. The shooter live-streamed the attack on social media and he had posted a racist manifesto online shortly before committing the crime.

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UPDATE - US to Work With International Allies to Secure Ceasefire in Tigray - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) – The United States will work with international partners to secure a ceasefire in Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray, the State Department said in a statement on Friday.
"The United States will work with our international allies and partners to secure a ceasefire, end this brutal conflict, provide the life-saving assistance that is so urgently needed, and hold those responsible for human rights abuses and violations accountable," the statement read.
Washington considers unacceptable the atrocities and the scale of the humanitarian emergency in Tigray, it added.

US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman had completed his first trip to the region, visiting Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, and Ethiopia, the State Department noted, adding that he plans to return to the region in short order to continue diplomatic efforts.
The US expressed commitment to a sovereign and united Ethiopia, and voiced deep concerns over increasing political and ethnic polarization throughout the country, the statement read.
Armed conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government started last November after the TPLF attacked and stole weapons from an Ethiopia military base in order to arm an anti-government militia in the region. The conflict has since caused much displacement and food insecurity in the Tigray, while also making it more difficult for international organizations to provide aid to people affected by the crises.

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US Democratic Congressman Introduces Bill For Bipartisan Probe Into Jan 6 Capital Attack

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the US Congressional Committee on Homeland Security, Mississippi Democrat Bennie Thompson, has introduced legislation to create a 10-person bipartisan commission that will investigate the events of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, the Committee announced on Friday.
"Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) announced that he has reached an agreement with Ranking Member John Katko (R-NY) to introduce legislation to form a bipartisan, independent Commission to investigate the January 6 domestic terrorism attack on the United States Capitol and recommend changes to further protect the Capitol, the citadel of our democracy," the Committee said in a release.
The new legislation will be introduced by Thomson and Ranking Member John Katko today and is expected to be considered on the House floor next week, the release said.
The commission is expected to issue a report with findings on the attack along with recommendations to help prevent such incidents in the future.
On January 6, supporters of the former US President Donald Trump stormed Capitol Hill in a bid to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's election victory. In the four months since the January 6 events, about 440 individuals have been arrested on charges related to the Capitol breach, including over 125 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement as investigations remain ongoing

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UPDATE- US Approves Second Jones Act Waiver to Meet Fuel Needs After Colonial Pipeline Hack - DHS

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has approved a temporary Jones Act waiver for a second company to meet fuel demand following the shutdown of a major pipeline in a cyberattack last week, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spokesperson announced in a statement on Friday.
"Today, Secretary Mayorkas approved a temporary and targeted Jones Act waiver request for a second company," the spokesperson said. "This decision was made after careful consideration and consultation with interagency partners across the federal government as part of the whole-of-government response President Biden directed to address the impacts of the Colonial Pipeline shut down."
The spokesperson added that on Thursday night, Mayorkas, approved an initial temporary and targeted waiver request over eastern seaboard oil supply constraints.
"The Departments of Transportation, Energy, and Defense were consulted in order to assess the justification for the waiver requests and ensure approval of the waivers is in the interest of national defense," the spokesperson said.
The Jones Act requires that goods shipped to US ports be transported on vessels that are built, owned, and operated by US citizens or permanent residents.
The Colonial Pipeline company announced on Thursday that it has fully restored operations after a shutdown caused by a ransomware attack and is supplying the markets it serves.
Colonial Pipeline, which supplies roughly half of the fuel to the East Coast of the United States, suspended operations after being hit with a ransomware attack by the DarkSide hacking group allegedly based in Russia.
The shutdown has caused fuel shortages and panic-buying in 12 US states and the District of Columbia.

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IMF Director, Argentine President Discuss Fund's Surcharges Policy, Post-Pandemic Recovery

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) – The managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kristalina Georgieva and the President of Argentina Alberto Fernandez have discussed post-COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery and surcharges policy reforms, the director said on Friday.
"I had a very positive meeting with President Alberto Fernandez of Argentina today," Georgieva said in a statement. "We discussed the importance of global cooperation in helping to ensure a more equitable and durable economic recovery, especially to support vulnerable countries. I also took note of President Fernandez's request for a reform of the IMF's surcharges policy, and I will consult with the membership on this issue."
The statement added that Georgieva and Fernandez were committed to working together on an IMF-sponsored program to overcome challenges posed by the pandemic to ensure a more equitable and durable economic recovery.
According to IMF, the surcharge a tool to discourage large and prolonged use of the fund resources; their size is dependent on the amount and time credit is being provided for. The

surcharges are paid by a borrower on top of interest and other fees and in some cases can significantly increase the sum of debt.

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Blinken to Push For Regional Peace at Upcoming Arctic Council Meeting - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will aim to promote peace at the upcoming May 19-20 Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Iceland's capital city of Reykjavik, State Department spokesperson Ned Price revealed in a statement on Friday.
"During the meeting, the Secretary will advance efforts to sustain the Arctic as a region of peace, free of conflict, where Arctic Council members collaborate on shared priorities to protect the wellbeing of Arctic communities and address the ever-growing threat and impacts of the climate crisis," Price said.
Price pointed out that Blinken will have bilateral meetings with counterparts from other Arctic states.
The Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday after a phone conversation between Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Blinken that the two leaders agreed to hold a separate meeting on the sidelines of the session on May 20.
Price noted that Blinken will travel to Reykjavik May 17 and will meet with President Gudni Johannesson, Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, and Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thordarson. Besides, Blinken will tour Keflavik Air Station, the spokesperson said.
Blinken's Iceland visit will be flanked on either side by visits to Denmark and Greenland where he is set to meet with the leadership of the nation and its autonomous territory.

The US anticipates the Arctic Council will lay out a 10-year strategic vision for managing resources at next week's council meeting, State Department regional coordinator James DeHart said on Wednesday.
The Arctic Council was established in 1996 in accordance with the Ottawa Declaration as a high-level intergovernmental forum that promotes cooperation in the region. The Arctic Council especially promotes cooperation in the field of environmental protection.
The Arctic Council is comprised of Denmark - including Greenland and the Faroe Islands - Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Finland and the United States.

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