

12/8/21 Wednesday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pentagon Chief Austin Rejects 'Red Lines' in Ukraine, Taiwan as US Draws its Own
By - Morgan Artyukhina

As Washington postures as "standing up" to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he rejects "red lines" in the situations surrounding Ukraine and Taiwan. However, his comments came as his commander-in-chief was drawing new ones.

Speaking to online news outlet [Defense One on Tuesday](#), Austin said he prefers a flexible approach to the tense situation in Eastern Europe, where Kiev and NATO have alleged the Russian Army is massing for an invasion of Ukraine.

"I think in situations like this, I think conveying red lines only exacerbates the problem. I think we need to focus on finding ways to de-escalate and reduce tensions," Austin told the outlet, adding that it isn't "helpful for us to draw a line in the sand at this point."

Austin had similar words about Taiwan, which the US openly supports despite formal agreements with Beijing acknowledging its longstanding claim that the island is part of China. "We don't want to see change in the status quo, especially, certainly a unilateral change in the status quo," he said. "We think that all tensions in that area should be resolved diplomatically first." High-profile US [visits and weapons sales](#) to the autonomous island have infuriated Beijing in recent years, which has begun performing regular military drills in international waters off the coast that Western media incorrectly [describes as "incursions"](#) of Taiwanese airspace.

However, the same day as Austin's remarks, US President Joe Biden was doing just that: [during a phone call](#) with Putin, he laid out severe economic consequences if Russia did launch an invasion of its western neighbor, which has grown increasingly close to the US and NATO since the US-backed coup in 2014 that brought a right-wing nationalist government to power in Kiev. "[Biden] told President Putin directly that if Russia further invades Ukraine, the United States and our European allies would respond with strong economic measures," White House national security adviser Jake [Sullivan told reporters](#) at a presser after the phone call.

"We would provide additional defensive material to the Ukrainians above and beyond that which we are already provided," he added. "And we would fortify our NATO allies on the eastern flank with additional capabilities in response to such an escalation."

Four days earlier, Biden put it even more plainly: "I don't accept anybody's red lines," he [told a Polish reporter](#) in Washington.

Putin's red lines being repudiated include the further eastward expansion of the NATO alliance, which presently includes a number of countries on or near Russia's borders, and the positioning of offensive weapons in Ukraine by the alliance. He has repeatedly sought security guarantees from the West, seeing NATO - which began as an anti-Soviet defensive pact in the late 1940s - as an existential threat to Russia.

"We're constantly voicing our concerns about this, talking about red lines, but we understand our partners - how shall I put it mildly - have a very superficial attitude to all our warnings and talk of red lines," [Putin said in a televised](#) speech last month. He added that the US had flown bomber aircraft carrying "very serious weapons" just a dozen miles from Russian territory.

NATO's Steady March East

After the Cold War ended and NATO's socialist counterpart in Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact, collapsed, NATO began taking in a slew of former Soviet allies and even three former Soviet republics: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. This was in direct [contradiction to promises](#) made to Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet premier, by Western leaders at the time like US President George H.W. Bush, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French President Francois Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that NATO would not extend "one inch eastward" beyond a reunified Germany.

NATO began a rapid expansion of its forces in Eastern Europe after Ukrainian nationalists seized power in Kiev in 2014 with US backing and began laying out a political program for reducing the country's sizable Russian-speaking minority to second-class status. The alliance established an Enhanced Forward Presence of four battalion battle groups in four countries on Russia's western border: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and built [new military installations](#) in Romania, which NATO claimed were purely defensive but which proved, as Moscow feared, to be easily capable of being [converted to offensive use](#).

Within weeks of the coup, the predominantly Russian-speaking Crimea had declared independence from Ukraine and voted to rejoin Russia. Several Russian-speaking cities in the eastern Donbas region declared themselves independent republics, taking up arms against Kiev in a still-ongoing conflict that has claimed more than 14,000 lives.

The West has rejected Crimea's referendum on rejoining Russia, and continues to claim the peninsula is part of Ukraine being occupied by Russian forces, and claims Russia is backing the rebellious Donbas republics, which Moscow has repeatedly denied.

After Russian troops carried out drills in southern Russia in April, which NATO similarly fretted was a prelude to an invasion of Ukraine, Kiev began to press more strongly for [membership in the alliance](#), saying that being protected by NATO's collective defense clause was the only way to guarantee Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and end the war in the Donbas. Around the same time, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy released a [political framework](#) for regaining control over the Crimea from Russia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

MBS' Pre-GCC Summit Tour Takes Him to Doha for First Time Since Lifting Qatar Boycott
By - Morgan Artyukhina

As part of his tour of the other Persian Gulf states this week, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) touched down in Doha, Qatar, on Wednesday, marking the leader's first visit since a four-year boycott by other Arab states against the country was lifted in January.

The de facto Saudi leader arrived in Doha on Wednesday, where he was greeted on the tarmac by the Qatari emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Saudi Press Agency reported. The two men exchanged seemingly warm greetings that gave little hint of the hostilities only barely paved over by a January reconciliation deal.

“The relations of brotherhood and cooperation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia are based on solid foundations of a common history and destiny,” al-Thani [wrote on Twitter](#) after their meeting. “Today, I discussed with my brother, Prince Muhammad bin Salman, ways to enhance this cooperation between our two countries. I also affirmed with him our common concern to support security and stability in our region and the region,” he added.

Salman’s visit comes as part of a tour of five Gulf states, beginning with Oman, ahead of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) annual summit in Riyadh on December 14.

Gulf State Analytics CEO Giorgio Cafiero, [writing in TRT World](#) on Wednesday, argued the crown prince’s tour aimed to unite the Gulf states against Iran, which has [long been speculated](#) as the goal since the rapprochement was announced on January 5. With then-US President Donald Trump leaving office and his “maximum pressure” sanctions expected to follow him, regional rival Riyadh needed to find new methods to pressure Tehran.

Today, the concerns are much the same, except that the motivating factor, in Cafiero’s view, is the likely [collapse of Vienna](#) talks aimed at reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 deal that limited the quality and quantity of uranium Iran could refine in exchange for removing economic sanctions. Trump pulled out of the deal unilaterally in 2018, setting in motion the current crisis.

“No matter what comes out of the nuclear talks in Vienna, the Saudi Crown Prince will want to see the GCC members enhance coordination on Iran-related issues,” Cafiero wrote. “If the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is revived, Saudi Arabia and others in the Gulf would still have serious concerns about non-nuclear issues that the JCPOA does not address. These include Iran’s support for certain non-state actors in the Arab world like Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthi rebels, plus Tehran’s ballistic missile activity. Iranian drones in the Middle East are also a growing concern in Gulf Arab capitals.”

“At the same time, if the Vienna talks fail to reconstitute the 2015 nuclear accord, the risks of a military confrontation are higher. Any war in the Gulf involving the US and Iran would inevitably leave all the Gulf Arab states vulnerable to extremely dangerous scenarios,” he added.

Doha has always occupied a middling position toward Iran because it shares the [North Dome/South Pars](#) gas condensate field, the world’s largest and the basis of Qatar’s economy, with Iran. However, the 3.5 years of the Arab boycott, motivated in part by Doha’s perceived closeness to Tehran, ironically only drove them closer together economically.

However, Qatar is also host to the massive Al-Udeid Air Base, the home of 10,000 US troops and the forward headquarters of US Central Command, meaning the gulf emirate isn’t likely to become overly friendly with Tehran, either.

Other issues motivated the boycott, too, including the perceived closeness between Doha and the Muslim Brotherhood, which Riyadh outlawed as a terrorist organization in the wake of Mohammad Morsi, leader of the Brethren-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, winning Egypt’s first-ever democratic elections in 2012.

Salman also visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on his trip, which despite being a longstanding Saudi ally and partner in the [coalition war](#) against the rebel Houthi movement in Yemen, sent its security chief to Tehran earlier this week.

Emirati National Security Adviser Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed met with Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, as well as Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Monday

According to Iran's [Tasnim News Agency](#), Shamkhani said developing "warm and friendly" ties with its neighbors is Iran's top foreign policy goal, adding that he hoped bin Zayed's visit would "mark the beginning of a new chapter of relations and create the grounds for expansion of all ties."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Houthis Claim 'Major Collapse' of Coalition Forces Defending Ma'rib, Predict City's Capture in Days

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After more than ten months of fighting, Yemen's Houthi movement may be poised to capture the final pockets of Ma'rib still defended by forces loyal to Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Amid the latest offensive, Riyadh has launched a new air blitz, bombing targets in Ma'rib, Jouf, and Sana'a.

Houthi forces have captured Jabal al-Balaq al-Awsat, a mountain range with a commanding view over the southeastern approach to Ma'rib, "field sources" told [Al-Mayadeen on Wednesday](#).

Muhammad Bukhaiti, a member of the political council for Ansarallah, the Houthis' formal name, confirmed to the Lebanese outlet the peak's capture, saying the "decisive hours are close in Marib."

"The defeat of the forces of aggression in Ma'rib means their defeat on the rest of the fronts," Buhkaiti added, referring to the Saudi-led coalition that has fought tooth and nail to hold onto Ma'rib, its last stronghold in northern Yemen. The city is home to an [estimated 3 million people](#), one-third of whom fled there as refugees during an earlier part of the war, when the front lines were far away.

In turn, the Deputy Foreign Minister in the Sana'a government, Hussein Al-Azi, [said on Twitter](#) on Wednesday that mercenary camps in the region were accelerating in their collapse and "their great leaders have begun to communicate with us." He called on Yemenis to unite against "external aggression."

"The issue of settling al-Qaeda* in our country or appointing corrupt rulers over Yemen by an external will is no longer acceptable," [Azi added](#).

"Peace, brothers, is a logical process that necessarily requires respect for the sacrifices of peoples for their security and freedom and for the independence and sovereignty of their countries," he said. "Undoubtedly, Sana'a is ready to make all sincere commitments with respect

to the sovereignty, security and interests of all those who exchange it with the same commitment and respect.”

On Tuesday, the [Saudi-led coalition said](#) it had carried out "precision strikes on legitimate military targets in Sana'a" over the previous 24 hours, striking targets in Ma'rib and Jouf, as well. A military official told the Sana'a-based [Yemen News Agency \(Saba\)](#) that 38 Saudi airstrikes had been counted.

The attacks were claimed to be in response to a [volley of ballistic missiles](#) fired by the Houthis at the Saudi Aramco oil facility in Jeddah and at the Saudi Defense Ministry headquarters in Riyadh.

However, Riyadh has waged a monthslong bombing campaign in Ma'rib and Shabwa governorates aimed at blunting the Houthi offensive, which fanned out in the countryside around Ma'rib after fighting in the city [got bogged down](#) in the spring. According to Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree, the ballistic missile attack was itself motivated by recent Saudi attacks.

According to a [November 20 estimate](#) by Muammar Al-Eryani, the Houthi information minister, 15,000 Houthi fighters have fallen in Ma'rib since March. If the Houthis are able to totally evict coalition forces from Ma'rib, Hadi's government in the west will be limited to a strip along the southern coast between 40 and 70 miles deep. East of Ma'rib lies the vast Rub' al-Khali desert, which is sparsely populated.

US Rushes to Rearm Saudis

The Saudi air blitz, and the furious response it's provoked from the Houthis, whose [missiles have reached deeper](#) into Saudi territory in recent years, has come close to exhausting the Saudi arms supply. According to a Tuesday report by the [Wall Street Journal](#), "its arsenal of interceptors - missiles used to shoot down airborne weapons - has fallen dangerously low." In February, after US President Joe Biden took office, the US [pledged to stop selling](#) the Saudi alliance offensive weapons that could be used in Yemen. However, it has continued to supply the kingdom with defensive weapons, including [a \\$650 million sale](#) of Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) approved by the Pentagon in October.

On Wednesday, an effort by a handful of anti-war senators to block the sale was defeated, paving the way for the deal to be completed.

"Exporting more missiles to Saudi Arabia does nothing but further this conflict and pour gasoline on already raging fires," said US Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) in a [speech on the Senate floor](#). "We could stop this war if we really had the will to do it," US Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) added. "All of America should be appalled at the humanitarian disaster caused by the Saudi blockade of Yemen."

Worst Humanitarian Crisis

The war started in 2015 after Hadi fled from Sana'a to Riyadh seeking Saudi help returning to power. The rising Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shiite community from the northern area near the Saudi border, appeared at the head of a mass movement furious over austerity measures implemented by Hadi's government and a proposed federalization plan the Houthis said would amplify poverty instead of alleviating it.

The Saudi coalition, which includes the United Arab Emirates and the United States and in the past also included Sudan, Morocco, has implemented a near-total blockade of the country while waging an extensive bombing campaign inside it. They have also supported a wide array of

rebel groups with weapons and money, and [Western-made weapons](#) sold to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi [have been spotted](#) in many in their employ, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The combined effect has created what the [United Nations referred to](#) as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. UN [estimates from late November](#) put the war's death toll at 377,000, the majority of whom have died from noncombat causes such as famine, diseases like cholera and COVID-19, a lack of access to adequate food, water, or medicine, and other infrastructure-related causes.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Announces Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal at Democracy Summit

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced a Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, worth nearly half a billion dollars, as he opened the first virtual Summit for Democracy in Thursday.

"Today, I am proud to launch the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, which will focus efforts across our diplomacy and foreign assistance programs to bolster democratic resilience and human rights globally," Biden said.

Washington is planning to commit as much as \$424.4 million next year toward the initiative, according to the Fact Sheet sent by the White House.

Biden stated that the initiative's efforts will focus on five areas vital to transparent and accountable governance, "including supporting media freedom, fighting international corruption, standing with democratic reformers, promoting technology that advances democracy, and defining and defending what a fair election is."

The two-day summit brings together government officials, civil society and private sector representatives from more than 110 countries. The list of guests does not include China, Hungary, Russia, Saudi Arabia or Turkey, among a dozen other nations.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has criticized the US-led summit for trying to designate on their criteria which country is democratic and which not, especially in light of a decay of democracy in the West.

Beijing has said that the summit provokes a split and confrontation in the world, while Budapest stated that it does not need a "judge" that would assess the state of their democracy.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ex-NATO Chief Says US Democracy Summit May Give Rise to New 'D11' Alliance

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A new 11-strong alliance may come into being after the-US led Summit for Democracy, which is being hosted by President Joe Biden amid rising

tensions with Russia and China regarding Ukraine and Taiwan, former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told Newsweek in an interview.

President Joe Biden opened a two-day virtual Summit for Democracy earlier on Thursday, bringing together government officials, civil society and private sector representatives from more than 110 countries. The list of guests does not include China, Hungary, Russia, Saudi Arabia or Turkey, among a dozen other nations.

"It is high time that the world's democracies rally around certain principles ... My long-term vision for this project is to create an alliance of democracies," Rasmussen said, noting that it could be overseen by a permanent secretariat.

The former NATO chief suggested that the alliance could be led by a "D11" group of democracies, including G7 members, as well as Australia, India, and South Korea.

"We don't have an international organization based on freedom and democracy," Rasmussen said. "So we need that, not as an alternative to the United Nations, but as a forum that can coordinate our views on how to reform other multilateral national organizations and—first and foremost—to counter advancing autocracies."

The purpose of such an alliance, Rasmussen went on to say, is to be a driving force for setting global norms and standards for the use of emerging technology, such as AI and social media. He also believes that the democratic alliance should create an "economic Article 5" inspired by NATO's Article 5.

"We should adopt free trade agreements with Australia, we should increase our economic relations with Australia. Now the same goes for Lithuania ... of course we should help Lithuania," Rasmussen said. "Once democracy is attacked by China or another autocratic regime, then we should help, we should consider it an attack on all and we should unite and help that country."

The Russian Foreign Ministry has criticized the US summit for trying to designate on their criteria which country is democratic and which not, especially in light of a decay of democracy in the West.

Beijing has said that the summit provokes a split and confrontation in the world, while Budapest stated that it does not need a "judge" that would assess the state of their democracy.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Weekly Jobless Claims Hit 1969 Low - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims came in at 184,000 for last week, the lowest since 1969, as the employment market resumed its dynamic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending December 4, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 184,000, a decrease of 43,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a release. "This is the lowest level for initial claims since September 6, 1969 when it was 182,000."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT: PREVIEW - Biden's Ambitious Summit on Democracy Opens, Yet Not Everyone Invited

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Biden opens the first-ever Summit for Democracy on Thursday, which will focus on boosting democracy, fighting corruption and promoting human rights, yet not all nations - including its allies - have received the invitation. The Summit for Democracy will be hosted by Biden on December 9-10 virtually and will bring together government officials, civil society and private sector representatives from more than 110 countries. The Biden administration has said the summit will allow the participants to discover the prospects for democratic renewal and measures to be undertaken against autocratic upsurge.

"For the United States, the summit will offer an opportunity to listen, learn, and engage with a diverse range of actors whose support and commitment is critical for global democratic renewal. It will also showcase one of democracy's unique strengths: the ability to acknowledge its imperfections and confront them openly and transparently, so that we may, as the United States Constitution puts it, 'form a more perfect union,'" the statement from the State Department said on the summit.

Speaking on the summit, US administration officials told journalists on Tuesday at the briefing that Washington's intention in organizing the event is to provide a forum for world leaders to discuss challenges as well as opportunities facing democratic governments.

"Our intention for the Summit is to provide leaders a forum to engage and to speak honestly about the challenges and opportunities facing democratic governments," the officials said during a briefing.

NOT EVERYONE INVITED

Meanwhile, a dozen other states, including Russia and China, have not been invited to participate in the Summit for Democracy. Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Gulf countries are among the most prominent nations not to make the cut, among a number of adversarial states from the so-called global south, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Many former Soviet states, on the contrary, were invited to take part in the summit, including Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. Missing from the invite list are Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The Kremlin reacted to the summit in a negative way, saying that this is an attempt to divide nations.

"We have a negative attitude, of course, to this upcoming event. This is nothing more than, you know, some kind of attempt to draw some new dividing lines. We fought in the early 1990s to remove these dividing lines. But now the United States, unfortunately, prefers to create new dividing lines and divide countries into good, in their mind, and bad, also in their mind," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

CHINA BLASTING SUMMIT

The United States, however, did place Taiwan on the list of invited countries. Beijing has criticized the move saying it violates the One China policy and reiterated that it considers Taiwan to be a breakaway province.

US President Joe Biden noted on several occasions that the US was ready to help Taiwan defend itself in case of a potential Chinese invasion. Days ahead of the much-anticipated summit, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a report underlining the dysfunction of US democracy.

"Over the years, democracy in the US has become alienated and degenerated, and it has increasingly deviated from the essence of democracy and its original design. Problems like money politics, identity politics, wrangling between political parties, political polarization, social division, racial tension and wealth gap have become more acute. All this has weakened the functioning of democracy in the US," the ministry's report said.

The report underlined that US democracy has three main ills which include the system being fraught with deep-seated problems, the practices of US democracy being messy and chaotic and the disastrous consequences of the US democratic model when applied in other countries. According to China, the biggest problem that the US faces with its own democratic model is that it often uses democracy as a justification to interfere with other countries' internal affairs which leads to even more problems. The ministry stressed the international community must unite as one and battle other more significant problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis.

CRACKDOWN ON ALLEGED CORRUPT GOVERNMENTS

Meanwhile, a week ahead of the summit, reports emerged that the Biden administration is planning to impose sanctions on alleged corrupted foreign government officials in the run-up to the summit. The US sanctions will become a part of the existing Global Magnitsky Act and are part of the Biden administration's effort to run democratic renewal around the world, the Wall Street Journal claims.

"Over the course of the week, Treasury will take a series of actions to designate individuals who are engaged in malign activities that undermine democracy and democratic institutions around the world including corruption, repression, organized crime, and serious human rights abuse," the report quoted the official as saying.

At present, it is not known who exactly will be targeted by the new US sanctions though a number of lawmakers and Biden administration officials have repeatedly spoken out in favor of imposing sanctions against key officials in Russia and China.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - Kiev Provocation Unlikely to Draw US Into Confrontation With Russia - Ex-Pentagon Analyst

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A lack of political will and the confused nature of US policy in Europe will likely prevent Kiev from successfully provoking a confrontation between the United States and Russia, although prospects are also dim that the virtual presidential talks will improve relations, former Pentagon analyst Karen Kwiatkowski told Sputnik.

President Joe Biden during virtual talks on Tuesday warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that Moscow would face consequences, including more sanctions, if Ukraine is invaded. Putin, for his part, told Biden that Moscow's red lines include NATO's further eastern expansion and a military buildup in Ukraine. Putin also complained about Kiev's failure to abide the Minsk agreements.

Last month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Ukraine of going for provocations in Donbas, commenting on reports about Kiev using the US Javelin missile system. The Pentagon on Wednesday said Ukraine should only use the Javelins for self-defensive purposes. "Ukraine, with or without the help of US factions, could attempt some sort of border incident, but the political will, and the confused and complex nature of US policy in Europe, would likely allow for diffusion rather than escalation of any such provocation," Kwiatkowski, a retired US Air Force lieutenant colonel, said.

On Wednesday, the White House said the United States does not plan to send troops to Ukraine but the US administration is prepared for all contingencies including a robust response to counter a potential Russian offensive if necessary.

Kwiatkowski said she does not see the situation exploding into a crisis for two reasons. First of all, she argued, Russia was unlikely to attempt any full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the first place despite widely expressed fears by US leaders. The 175,000 troops that, according to Washington, are currently amassed on the Russian side were not an invasion force, even on a modern battlefield, Kwiatkowski said.

"Secondly, the United States and a mission-less NATO [are] not in any kind of military position to deliver the kind of defenses that Ukraine would need to repel a Russian invasion force anytime soon, and certainly not this winter," she said.

Germany, the main US ally in continental Europe, remained dependent on supplies of Russian natural gas for its winter heating needs and would not want that supply disrupted by any major crisis, Kwiatkowski explained.

"What will happen is that gas will flow through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline - this is politically and economically necessary for Germany. US policy makers are well aware of this," she said.

"Winter arrived last month, and Washington DC environmental sloganeering does not heat Germany. Reality is already trumping Biden's European agenda."

LOST OPPORTUNITY

However, Kwiatkowski also cautioned that Biden's two-hour virtual summit with Putin on Tuesday was unlikely to result in any real improvement in relations between the two nuclear superpowers.

Biden, unfortunately, had ignored the opportunity during the call with Putin to genuinely try to improve the tone of the dialogue, Kwiatkowski said. The video conference seemed to be about US demands - with few concessions - like the one Biden had with Chinese President Xi Jinping a few weeks ago

Instead, Biden gave the impression that he was allowing himself to be boxed in by his own hardliners whom he had appointed to run US foreign and national security policy, Kwiatkowski said.

"Biden was accompanied throughout [his] two hour call by the aggressive neoconservatives and Russophobes, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan,

setting the tone and limiting any progress that might have been made in a more authentic heart-to-heart discussion," she said.

US policy on NATO's eastward expansion was now anachronistic and followed by four years of American demands that NATO countries pay their own share, something no NATO country either welcomed, or did, Kwiatkowski commented.

"It is doubtful the American people would support paying for even more NATO growth, given the financial situation of the US government and their own households. Putin's ...request for limits on NATO expansion are perfectly in line with the well-documented political interests of the American people," she said.

It was clear that Biden and his advisers were out of touch with both US interests, and US capabilities, Kwiatkowski cautioned.

And Biden's warnings, she added, were unlikely to lead to any improvement in Russian policies. The threats Biden delivered were relatively weak and largely recycled, especially regarding disconnection from SWIFT, she said.

In addition, the fact that Congress is being heavily influenced by Ukraine's elite will also prevent much progress going forward.

"Ukraine's kleptocracy has had a grip on US politicians for nearly a decade, since the heady days of the late Senator John McCain's adventurism, and enthusiastic profiteering by the Biden family prior to his election as President," she said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kiev Provocation Unlikely to Draw US Into Confrontation With Russia - Ex-Pentagon Analyst

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A lack of political will and the confused nature of US policy in Europe will likely prevent Kiev from successfully provoking a confrontation between the United States and Russia, although prospects are also dim that the virtual presidential talks will improve relations, former Pentagon analyst Karen Kwiatkowski told Sputnik.

President Joe Biden during virtual talks on Tuesday warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that Moscow would face consequences, including more sanctions, if Ukraine is invaded. Putin, for his part, told Biden that Moscow's red lines include NATO's further eastern expansion and a military buildup in Ukraine. Putin also complained about Kiev's failure to abide the Minsk agreements.

Last month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Ukraine of going for provocations in Donbas, commenting on reports about Kiev using the US Javelin missile system. The Pentagon on Wednesday said Ukraine should only use the Javelins for self-defensive purposes. "Ukraine, with or without the help of US factions, could attempt some sort of border incident, but the political will, and the confused and complex nature of US policy in Europe, would likely allow for diffusion rather than escalation of any such provocation," Kwiatkowski, a retired US Air Force lieutenant colonel, said.

On Wednesday, the White House said the United States does not plan to send troops to Ukraine but the US administration is prepared for all contingencies including a robust response to counter a potential Russian offensive if necessary.

Kwiatkowski said she does not see the situation exploding into a crisis for two reasons. First of all, she argued, Russia was unlikely to attempt any full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the first place despite widely expressed fears by US leaders. The 175,000 troops that, according to Washington, are currently amassed on the Russian side were not an invasion force, even on a modern battlefield, Kwiatkowski said.

"Secondly, the United States and a mission-less NATO [are] not in any kind of military position to deliver the kind of defenses that Ukraine would need to repel a Russian invasion force anytime soon, and certainly not this winter," she said.

Germany, the main US ally in continental Europe, remained dependent on supplies of Russian natural gas for its winter heating needs and would not want that supply disrupted by any major crisis, Kwiatkowski explained.

"What will happen is that gas will flow through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline - this is politically and economically necessary for Germany. US policy makers are well aware of this," she said.

"Winter arrived last month, and Washington DC environmental sloganeering does not heat Germany. Reality is already trumping Biden's European agenda."

LOST OPPORTUNITY

However, Kwiatkowski also cautioned that Biden's two-hour virtual summit with Putin on Tuesday was unlikely to result in any real improvement in relations between the two nuclear superpowers.

Biden, unfortunately, had ignored the opportunity during the call with Putin to genuinely try to improve the tone of the dialogue, Kwiatkowski said. The video conference seemed to be about US demands - with few concessions - like the one Biden had with Chinese President Xi Jinping a few weeks ago

Instead, Biden gave the impression that he was allowing himself to be boxed in by his own hardliners whom he had appointed to run US foreign and national security policy, Kwiatkowski said.

"Biden was accompanied throughout [his] two hour call by the aggressive neoconservatives and Russophobes, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, setting the tone and limiting any progress that might have been made in a more authentic heart-to-heart discussion," she said.

US policy on NATO's eastward expansion was now anachronistic and followed by four years of American demands that NATO countries pay their own share, something no NATO country either welcomed, or did, Kwiatkowski commented.

"It is doubtful the American people would support paying for even more NATO growth, given the financial situation of the US government and their own households. Putin's ...request for limits on NATO expansion are perfectly in line with the well-documented political interests of the American people," she said.

It was clear that Biden and his advisors were out of touch with both US interests, and US capabilities, Kwiatkowski cautioned.

And Biden's warnings, she added, were unlikely to lead to any improvement in Russian policies. The threats Biden delivered were relatively weak and largely recycled, especially regarding disconnection from SWIFT, she said.

In addition, the fact that Congress is being heavily influenced by Ukraine's elite will also prevent much progress going forward.

"Ukraine's kleptocracy has had a grip on US politicians for nearly a decade, since the heady days of the late Senator John McCain's adventurism, and enthusiastic profiteering by the Biden family prior to his election as President," she said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pro-Choice Coalition Unveils Plan to Expand Abortion Access in California

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A coalition of California lawmakers and advocacy groups unveiled recommendations to protect abortion rights and expand access to services that could be taken away by the US Supreme Court.

"The new report includes 45 policy recommendations across seven focus areas that are intended to be used in California, and as a blueprint for other state legislatures looking to protect and expand access to abortion, countering the efforts by extreme politicians in many states to ban and restrict abortion care," the California Future of Abortion Council (FAB) said in a statement on Wednesday.

The council, which has California Senator Pro Tempore Toni Atkins on its steering committee, convened in September because they fear the US Supreme Court will severely weaken or overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a 1973 ruling that protected abortion rights. A decision on the case that could significantly change US abortion law is expected next year.

Atkins, in the release, said the FAB and state lawmakers will ensure Californians "and people from every state" can get the reproductive health services they need in a safe and timely way. Earlier on Wednesday, the Associated Press reported that Governor Gavin Newsom, who supports FAB, said California will be a "sanctuary" for abortion patients coming from other states.

The report warns lawmakers that California must prepare for an influx of women seeking abortions if the court ends the constitutional right to the procedure. The report states that 27 states are certain or likely to ban abortion if the Supreme Court weakens or overturns *Roe v. Wade*.

According to data in the report from the Guttmacher Institute, if the conservative-dominated Supreme Court hands down a total ban, it is likely that an increasing number of women of reproductive age (15-49) may drive to California for abortion care. Observers anticipate a jump from 46,000 to 1.4 million women and girls representing a 2,923 percent increase.

To prepare for that, the council produced 45 recommendations, including calls to invest in abortion funds and infrastructure to support those seeking abortion care. In addition it calls for investing in a diverse California abortion provider workforce, increasing training opportunities for Blacks and People of Color and others historically excluded from health care professions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Aerospace Firm Stratolaunch Joins Pentagon to Research Hypersonic Missile Defense

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US aerospace company Stratolaunch said it is partnering with the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency to research defense capabilities against hypersonic missiles.

"We are excited to announce a research contract with the Missile Defense Agency," the company said in a statement on Wednesday. "The study will utilize our test service to augment [Defense Department] flight test resources in order to understand how to engage and intercept hypersonic threats."

Stratolaunch's carrier aircraft, which is designed to carry hypersonic vehicles, will provide a threat-representative and threat-replicating target that will allow the Department of Defense an opportunity to understand how to defend against hypersonic missiles, the company said.

Stratolaunch has already partnered with aerospace research development company Calspan Systems to build and test two reusable hypersonic prototype vehicles called Talon-A. The company expects to begin hypersonic flight testing in 2022.

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

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US, Israel Defense Chiefs to Discuss Possible Plans to Target Iran Nuclear Sites - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz during a meeting at the Pentagon on Thursday will discuss plans to conduct military drills to prepare for the possibility of an attack to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities should diplomacy fail with Tehran, Reuters reported citing a senior US official.

The US Department of Defense did not immediately respond to a request from Sputnik for comment on the matter.

Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said earlier on Wednesday that Austin and his Israeli counterpart will discuss Iran's nuclear provocations but he did not provide further details about the upcoming talks.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Measure Condemning IOC Over China Human Rights Issues

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives unanimously approved a resolution that expresses a sense that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) failed to adhere to its own human rights commitments on China-related issues.

The House passed the measure with a 428-0 vote on Wednesday evening.

The resolution urges the IOC to call on the Chinese government to open an independent and transparent probe into allegations from Chinese tennis player and Olympian Peng Shuai accusing former Vice Premier of the Chinese Communist Party Zhang Gaoli of sexually assaulting her and forcing her into a sexual relationship.

The resolution also urges the IOC to call on China to cease any censorship of reporting of Peng's case and publicly commit to hold sexual violence abusers accountable.

Moreover, the resolution calls on the IOC to press China to let Peng leave the country if she wishes to do so and not retaliate against her family members that remain behind.

The IOC said last week that it had held a video call with Peng and she confirmed that she is safe and in good condition.

Following the publication of the claim of the sexual assault, the tennis player disappeared from public for several weeks, which prompted international concerns for her safety. However, Peng Shuai appeared at a teenage tennis match in Beijing on November 21. Nonetheless, the controversy about alleged Chinese propaganda regarding the pressure on the tennis star from Beijing is ongoing.

The House passed another measure condemning China for alleged genocide.

Chinese officials have repeatedly refuted all accusations of human rights violations.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Measure Condemning IOC Over China Human Rights Issues

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives unanimously approved a resolution that expresses a sense that the International Olympic Committee failed to adhere to its own human rights commitments on China-related issues.

The House passed the measure with a 428-0 vote on Wednesday evening.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Bill to Ban Imports From China's Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill by a vote of 428 to 1 banning imports from China's Xinjiang made with forced labor and threatening

sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for allegedly persecuting the Muslim minority of the region.

The goal of the bill, passed on Wednesday, is to ensure that "goods made with forced labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China do not enter the United States market."

The legislation targets "goods, wares, articles, and merchandise imported directly from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or made by Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tibetans, or members of other persecuted groups in China."

In addition, the bill requires the American president to impose sanctions on officials responsible for persecuting minorities and facilitating the use of involuntary labor.

The legislative text accuses China of arbitrarily imprisoning as many as 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and members of other Muslim minority groups in a system of extrajudicial mass internment camps.

The prisoners are forced to produce "textiles, electronics, food products, shoes, tea, and handicrafts" at a network of government-subsidized factories in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, the legislation says.

In July, the Senate passed its version of the bill with a unanimous vote.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Bill to Ban Imports From China's Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill by a vote of 428 to 1 banning imports from China's Xinjiang made with forced labor and threatening sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for allegedly persecuting the Muslim minority of the region.

The goal of the bill, passed on Wednesday, is to ensure that "goods made with forced labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China do not enter the United States market."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Ex-Chief of Staff Facing Contempt Charge Sues US House Speaker Pelosi - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Mark Meadows, former chief of staff to President Donald Trump, has filed charges against US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as the Select Committee she set up to probe the January 6 events at the US Capitol prepares contempt charges against him, media reported said.

Meadows has filed his charges against 81-year-old Pelosi according to court records, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Trump's right hand man refused to testify before the US House Select Committee claiming he could not discuss issues covered by executive privilege. In response, the panel is preparing charges of criminal contempt against him, the report said.

The House Select Committee has rejected Meadows' argument about executive privilege. It said President Joe Biden did not try to use any power of executive privilege to protect Meadows from having to testify, the report said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Seeks Public Advice on New Rules for Registering Foreign Agents - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice published a 12-page public questionnaire soliciting advice before it publishes a new regulations for the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), a law that gained prominence in prosecutions of Trump administration officials and allies for not disclosing work on behalf of foreign governments.

"The Department of Justice is issuing an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) in the Federal Register to seek public comment to help inform the Department's decision-making prior to its issuance of a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM). Through this process, the Department is seeking preliminary input from the public on the regulations as a whole and in response to 19 specific questions set forth in the ANPRM," a press release said on Wednesday. The Justice Department plans a new set of FARA regulations to expand the scope of the law, in part by revising exemptions for lawyers, for some commercial activities and for individuals engaged in religious, scholastic or scientific research, the release said.

The Justice Department is also looking to modernize regulations to accommodate technological changes since the rules were last amended a decade ago, before an explosion of social media and online news outlets, the release added.

The 1938 law requires that people acting as agents of foreign governments register with the Justice Department and make periodic public disclosures of their activities, as well as their receipts and disbursements in support of these activities, according to the release.

The law was rarely enforced until Special Council Robert Mueller's investigation of alleged ties between former President Donald Trump and Russia - a probe that resulted in charges against more than a half dozen Trump aides and associates including Paul Manafort and Rick Gates for failing to register.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Authorities Charge Michigan Man With Assaulting Capitol Police on January 6

WASHINGTON December 8 (Sputnik) - The US authorities issued a statement that they have charged Michigan resident Tim Boughner with assaulting law enforcement with a dangerous weapon during the events at the US Capitol on January 6.

"Video footage depicts Tim Levon Boughner among a crowd of rioters at the Capitol," the statement said. "At approximately 2:33 p.m., he used a chemical spray against the officers. Around this time, people in the crowd were throwing objects and deploying multiple chemical sprays against law enforcement officers who were attempting to secure the building. One minute later, Boughner again used the chemical spray against the officers."

Boughner then went on social media to discuss what he did, saying he "started spraying" at the Capitol Police officers. In another post on February 17 he said: "I have to share. My life has not been the same since this day ... I still don't know how I ended up on the Capitol steps having a pepper spray fight with the Capitol Police."

Boughner was arrested on December 7 in Michigan and made his initial court appearance on Wednesday in the Eastern District of Michigan. He remains in detention pending a December 9 hearing.

The US authorities have arrested more than 700 men and women in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on January 6.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

FDA Gives Emergency Use Authorization to AstraZeneca's COVID-19 Antibody Cocktail

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it has issued emergency use authorization for the AstraZeneca's Evusheld antibody cocktail to help prevent COVID-19 infection in immuno-compromised people who have adverse reactions to vaccines and need alternative treatments.

"Vaccines have proven to be the best defense available against COVID-19. However, there are certain immune compromised individuals who may not mount an adequate immune response to COVID-19 vaccination, or those who have a history of severe adverse reactions to a COVID-19 vaccine and therefore cannot receive one and need an alternative prevention," FDA Center for Drug Evaluation and Research Director Patrizia Cavazzoni said in a statement.

The FDA explained that the move authorizes the use of the combination of two monoclonal antibodies to reduce the risk of developing COVID-19 in the immuno-compromised individuals. The antibody cocktail was authorized only for people with moderately to severely compromised immune systems who may not mount an adequate immune response to vaccination or have a history of severe adverse reactions to a COVID-19 vaccine and cannot receive one, the statement said.

One dose of Evusheld administered as two separate consecutive intramuscular injections - one injection per monoclonal antibody, given in immediate succession - may be effective for pre-exposure prevention for six months, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Iran Delegation to World Oil Forum Did Not Attend Due to COVID-19 Measures - Organizer

HOUSTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The delegation of Iran to the World Petroleum Congress did not come to the forum due to the COVID-19-related travel restrictions, the organizers of the event told Sputnik.

"Indeed, the whole Iranian delegation including the Deputy Minister of Oil had to reconsider their plans of visiting WPC due to COVID travel restrictions. This decision has nothing to do with the political aspect of the US-Iranian relationships," the organizers said on Wednesday.

Iranian Deputy Oil Minister Amir Hossein Zamaninia was supposed to speak along with other members of the delegation at the ministerial meeting, which was canceled due to Zamaninia's absence.

The World Petroleum Congress - a premier forum for the world's national oil and gas companies and agencies - is taking place in Houston, Texas, amid ongoing fluctuations in the global energy market.

The next World Petroleum Congress will be held in Calgary, Canada from September 12-21, 2023, event organizers said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Signs Executive Order Directing US Government to Achieve Net-Zero Emissions by 2050

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he signed an executive order directing the US federal government to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

"Today, I signed an executive order directing the federal government to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050," Biden said in a statement on Wednesday.

Biden said the goal of his administration is to put the US federal government on a path to achieve a carbon pollution-free electricity sector by 2035 and net-zero emissions across the economy by no later than 2050.

US government agencies will be required to achieve net-zero emissions in federal buildings, campuses and installations by 2045 and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent from buildings, campuses and installations by 2032, eventually eliminating on-site fossil fuel use, according to the executive order.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has been struggling to keep gasoline prices down for US consumers after OPEC+ rejected his request to increase oil production thereby resulting in the president's decision to release oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Taiwan Urgently Needs to Develop Asymmetric Defense Capabilities to Deter China - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Taiwan's ability to protect itself from Chinese military threats requires the island to quickly develop asymmetric defenses that could include deployments of cruise missiles and naval mines, Assistant Defense Secretary for the Indo-Pacific region Ely Ratner said in a congressional testimony.

"Without question, bolstering Taiwan's self-defenses is an urgent task and an essential feature of deterrence," Ratner told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday. "We therefore appreciate that President Tsai has prioritized the development of asymmetric capabilities for Taiwan's self-defense that are credible, resilient, mobile, distributed, and cost effective."

As examples of asymmetric defenses, Ratner cited defensive cruise missiles, short- and mid-range air defenses, defensive naval mines and advanced command, control, intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities.

While many details of Taiwan's military plans are classified, Ratner said the United States is taking a more proactive approach in supporting Taiwan's efforts by working with officials on defense concepts and doctrines.

Ratner also emphasized the importance of US allies and partners in the region such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, which he said provides Washington with "perhaps the biggest strategic advantage" in military competition with Beijing.

Tensions across the Taiwan Strait have surged in recent months, with China sending military aircraft on sorties into Taiwan's air-defense zone.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden to Brief Bucharest 9 on Putin Talks After Briefing Zelenskyy Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will brief members of the Bucharest Nine group about his recent talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin after first calling Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday, a White House pool report said. "Tomorrow, President Biden will speak with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to discuss Russia's military build-up on Ukraine's borders. He will then convene a call with the leaders of the Bucharest Nine group of our eastern flank NATO allies to brief them on his call with President Putin, hear their perspectives on the current security situation, and underscore the United States' commitment to Transatlantic security," the White House said on Wednesday.

The Bucharest Nine group is composed of countries from Central and Eastern Europe and includes Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

PREVIEW - Biden's Ambitious Summit on Democracy Opens, Yet Not Everyone Invited

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Biden opens the first-ever Summit for Democracy on Thursday, which will focus on boosting democracy, fighting corruption and promoting human rights, yet not all nations - including its allies - have received the invitation. The Summit for Democracy will be hosted by Biden on December 9-10 virtually and will bring together government officials, civil society and private sector representatives from more than 110 countries. The Biden administration has said the summit will allow the participants to discover the prospects for democratic renewal and measures to be undertaken against autocratic upsurge.

"For the United States, the summit will offer an opportunity to listen, learn, and engage with a diverse range of actors whose support and commitment is critical for global democratic renewal. It will also showcase one of democracy's unique strengths: the ability to acknowledge its imperfections and confront them openly and transparently, so that we may, as the United States Constitution puts it, 'form a more perfect union,'" the statement from the State Department said on the summit.

Speaking on the summit, US administration officials told journalists on Tuesday at the briefing that Washington's intention in organizing the event is to provide a forum for world leaders to discuss challenges as well as opportunities facing democratic governments.

"Our intention for the Summit is to provide leaders a forum to engage and to speak honestly about the challenges and opportunities facing democratic governments," the officials said during a briefing.

NOT EVERYONE INVITED

Meanwhile, a dozen other states, including Russia and China, have not been invited to participate in the Summit for Democracy. Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Gulf countries are among the most prominent nations not to make the cut, among a number of adversarial states from the so-called global south, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Many former Soviet states, on the contrary, were invited to take part in the summit, including Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. Missing from the invite list are Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The Kremlin reacted to the summit in a negative way, saying that this is an attempt to divide nations.

"We have a negative attitude, of course, to this upcoming event. This is nothing more than, you know, some kind of attempt to draw some new dividing lines. We fought in the early 1990s to remove these dividing lines. But now the United States, unfortunately, prefers to create new dividing lines and divide countries into good, in their mind, and bad, also in their mind," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

CHINA BLASTING SUMMIT

The United States, however, did place Taiwan on the list of invited countries. Beijing has criticized the move saying it violates the One China policy and reiterated that it considers Taiwan to be a breakaway province.

US President Joe Biden noted on several occasions that the US was ready to help Taiwan defend itself in case of a potential Chinese invasion. Days ahead of the much-anticipated summit, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a report underlining the dysfunction of US democracy.

"Over the years, democracy in the US has become alienated and degenerated, and it has increasingly deviated from the essence of democracy and its original design. Problems like money politics, identity politics, wrangling between political parties, political polarization, social division, racial tension and wealth gap have become more acute. All this has weakened the functioning of democracy in the US," the ministry's report said.

The report underlined that US democracy has three main ills which include the system being fraught with deep-seated problems, the practices of US democracy being messy and chaotic and the disastrous consequences of the US democratic model when applied in other countries. According to China, the biggest problem that the US faces with its own democratic model is that it often uses democracy as a justification to interfere with other countries' internal affairs which leads to even more problems. The ministry stressed the international community must unite as one and battle other more significant problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis.

CRACKDOWN ON ALLEGED CORRUPT GOVERNMENTS

Meanwhile, a week ahead of the summit, reports emerged that the Biden administration is planning to impose sanctions on alleged corrupted foreign government officials in the run-up to the summit. The US sanctions will become a part of the existing Global Magnitsky Act and are part of the Biden administration's effort to run democratic renewal around the world, the Wall Street Journal claims.

"Over the course of the week, Treasury will take a series of actions to designate individuals who are engaged in malign activities that undermine democracy and democratic institutions around the world including corruption, repression, organized crime, and serious human rights abuse," the report quoted the official as saying.

At present, it is not known who exactly will be targeted by the new US sanctions though a number of lawmakers and Biden administration officials have repeatedly spoken out in favor of imposing sanctions against key officials in Russia and China.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Australia Deputy Prime Minister Confirms Tested Positive for COVID-19 During US Trip

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce issued a statement confirming that he had tested positive for the novel coronavirus during his trip to the US capital of Washington, DC.

"The Deputy Prime Minister has confirmed he has tested positive for COVID-19 while in Washington, DC," the statement, posted on Twitter, said on Wednesday. The other members of the Australian delegation visiting the United States have not been infected with the novel coronavirus and remain healthy, the statement also said. Joyce noted that he had mild symptoms and expects to be quarantined until further advice, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Picks Ex-CEO for Envoy to Kenya, Career Diplomat for Envoy to Iraq - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden nominated career diplomat Alina Romanowski to be the next US Ambassador to Iraq and picked business executive Margaret Whitman to be the next US Ambassador to Kenya, the White House said.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals to serve in key roles: Alina L. Romanowski, Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Iraq...Margaret C. Whitman, Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Kenya," the White House said in a press release on Wednesday.

Romanowski currently serves as the US Ambassador to Kuwait and has more than 40 years of service in US government, especially on Middle East affairs, the release said.

Romanowski began her government career as an analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency, the release said.

Whitman is a member of the Board of Procter and Gamble and General Motors, and National Board Chair at Teach for America, the release said. However, she's held executive positions at companies like Hewlett Packard and eBay.

Whitman has also held senior leadership positions at companies such as the Walt Disney Corporation and Hasbro, the release said.

Romanowski and Whitman need to be confirmed by the US Senate.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US, Iraq to Issue Statement on Thursday as US Combat Role Deadline Approaches - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iraq will issue a joint statement on Thursday following the final meeting of the Iraqi Military Technical Committee on the eve of the end of the US combat role in the country, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said.

"There will be a joint statement issued at the end of the meeting, so I would stay tuned for that. What I can tell you is that the United States will uphold our commitments, the commitments we made back in July, including that there will be no US forces with a combat role by the end of the year," Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in November confirmed that the United States will remove all forces with a combat role from Iraq by the end of the year.

US forces will remain in Iraq at the invitation of the government of Iraq in an advising, assisting, enabling and intelligence-sharing role to support the Iraqi security forces and their fight against the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), Kirby added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Special Envoy Malley to Join Iran Nuclear Talks in Vienna Over Weekend - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley will join the Iran nuclear agreement talks in Vienna later this week, the United State expresses willing to go back to indirect negotiations with Tehran, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"The seventh round of talks will resume tomorrow in Vienna... Special Envoy Malley and his interagency delegation will plan to join the talks over the weekend," Price said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

The United States encourages Iran to return to the negotiation table in good faith and prepares to build-up the progress that the 5+1 group of countries was able to achieve over the course of six rounds, he said.

"We have a good base from which to operate, and certainly our hope that Iran will return willing and able to operate from that base," Price added.

The seventh round of the talks began on Monday, November 29, with US-initiated break for consultations on Friday, December 3. The main topic of the negotiations is the issue of lifting US sanctions against Iran.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN TALKS

* White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that there is nothing to share at present regarding the possible in-person summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden.

* Jean-Pierre said Russia and the United States have managed to have talks both at the height of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era and the Biden administration is confident the two countries can do that going forward.

* Putin said that his recent online meeting with Biden was "open and constructive."

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that he positively assesses the recent online meeting between presidents of Russia and the United States, adding that he will be ready to say more after his own conversation with the US leader.

* The United Nations welcomes the recent virtual talks between Putin and Biden as well as a potential expansion of these discussions to NATO countries to defuse tensions, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

EUROPEAN GAS MARKETS

* Poland would like to increase the supply of natural gas from Russian energy giant Gazprom to Europe to maintain its energy security in winter, the countries of the region are waiting for it, Przemyslaw Waclawski, the vice president of Polish energy company PGNiG for finance, told Sputnik.

* Natural gas prices in Europe will remain very high through March-April 2022, after which they will decrease and stabilize, Waclawski told Sputnik.

* Moldovagaz pays Gazprom for Russian gas every day so that the situation with a delay in the transfer to payment does not repeat itself, Moldovagaz CEO Vadim Ceban told Sputnik.

* Gas futures in Europe increased by 9% and are now above \$1,200 per thousand cubic meters, according to ICE Futures data.

NEW GERMAN CHANCELLOR

* German lawmakers on Wednesday Elected Olaf Scholz, a candidate from the Social Democratic party, as a new German chancellor, according to N24 TV Channel.

* US President Joe Biden looks forward to speaking with Scholz but there is currently no call to preview between the two leaders, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has sent a congratulatory message to Scholz, the Kremlin said.

* Scholz will travel to Paris and Brussels on Friday to visit headquarters of the European Union and NATO, the German Cabinet of Ministers said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and European Council President Charles Michel during a phone call on Wednesday discussed the need to impose severe consequences on Russia should it invade Ukraine, the State Department said.

* The United Kingdom will allocate additional 1 billion British pounds (\$1.32 billion) in support for Ukraine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

* New German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, commenting on the situation around Ukraine, said that everyone must observe the principle of inviolability of borders, or face "consequences."

* President Joe Biden said the United States does not currently plan to unilaterally use force against Russia should it invade Ukraine.

RUSSIA-GREECE TALKS

* Russia-Greece trade increased by 56% year-on-year in the first nine months of 2021, almost reaching pre-pandemic level, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

* Russia supports a viable resolution of the Cyprus problem within the framework of international law, Putin said.

* Russia is a stable and beneficial partner for Greece in the energy sector, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said.

COVID-19

* Three doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine will be able to neutralize the new coronavirus Omicron variant while two doses may be not enough to develop immunity, the Pfizer drugmaker said on Wednesday.

* The new coronavirus Omicron variant may become dominant in Europe by early January, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in its weekly report.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Navy Investigating Contaminated Water From Fuel Leak on Base in Hawaii - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US navy is investigating a petroleum leak that contaminated the water system that services Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickman, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Wednesday.

Last week, the navy said petroleum from a fuel reservoir leaked into a water well that serves the navy water system on the base, which required more than 700 military families to be housed in hotels.

"They [navy] have just launched an investigation into this and I think that will greatly inform whether there needs to be something additional done to look at other bases across the force," Kirby told a press briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Special Envoy to Head to UAE, Turkey, Egypt Thursday to Discuss Ethiopia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will head to the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Egypt on Thursday to discuss Ethiopia, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Special Envoy Feltman will depart tomorrow for the UAE, Turkey and Egypt, and he'll meet with counterparts there to discuss what it is that the international community seeks when it comes to Ethiopia," Price said. "And that is chiefly a negotiated resolution to the conflict."

Price stressed that the US goal is to support diplomacy.

The Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have been locked in conflict over control of the north of the country since November 2020, when the central

authorities accused the Tigray rebels of attacking a military base. The Ethiopian government launched an operation in Tigray with the support of neighboring Eritrea.

In the spring of 2021, Ethiopian authorities announced the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray. In November, Ethiopia declared a six-month state of emergency as the TPLF forces together with eight other factions, some of which are considered terrorist by Addis Ababa, advanced toward the Ethiopian capital.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Expects Ukraine to Use Javelin Anti-Tank Missiles for Self-Defense Purposes - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States expects Ukraine's military to use Javelin anti-tank missiles responsibly for self-defense purpose but there are no restrictions on where they can be used, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Our expectation for use of the Javelins are that they're to be used in a self-defensive mode, for self-defense purposes, but there's no geographical restriction on where they can be used inside Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We expect them to use them responsibly and for purposes of self-defense."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken, NATO Chief Discuss Biden-Putin Call, Response to Possible 'Russian Aggression'

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg have discussed the recent video call between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin as well as the alliance's options to respond to any Russian "aggression" against Ukraine, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a readout on Wednesday.

"They discussed the December 7 call between President Biden and Russian President Putin and NATO's options in response to further Russian aggression against Ukraine," Price said.

"The Secretary praised the Secretary General's ongoing efforts to increase awareness and unity within the Alliance, as well as for his organization of a successful NATO foreign ministerial meeting November 30-December 1 in Riga, Latvia."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Envoy for Iran Says Had 'Good Conversation' With Russia's Ryabkov, China's Ma on JCPOA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley said on Wednesday he had "good conversation" with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxu during which the officials agreed to continue close trilateral coordination to reach full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran.

"Another good conversation with [Deputy Foreign Minister] Ryabkov and [Vice Foreign Minister] Ma this morning," Malley said via Twitter. "As we agreed before the 7th round of talks, we will continue close trilateral coordination to achieve our common goal of mutual full JCPOA compliance based on the progress made over the first six rounds."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

No Announcements on More Security Aid for Ukraine, Prior Aid Coming This Week - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - There are no new announcements about additional security assistance to Ukraine, but last elements of President Joe Biden's \$60 million security aid package will arrive in the country later this week, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday during a press briefing.

"We have no new announcements or decisions to make with respect to any additional assistance with Ukraine. I think you know we did approve, President Biden approved, a \$60 million security assistance package. The final elements of that will be arriving in Ukraine this week," Kirby said.

Small arms and ammunition will be the latest form of security assistance to be provided to Ukrainian defense forces, Kirby added.

12/8/2021 3:06:04 PM -05:00

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Defense Chief, Israeli Counterpart to Discuss Iran Provocations on Thursday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet with his Israeli counterpart, Benny Gantz, on Thursday to discuss Iran's nuclear provocations and destabilizing actions, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"The Secretary will meet tomorrow with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz here at the Pentagon. As you can imagine, they plan to discuss the United States' commitment to Israel's security and shared concerns regarding Iran's nuclear provocations and destabilizing actions in the region," Kirby told a press briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Wants Fully Functioning Embassy in Moscow, Russia Seeks Same in US - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to have a fully functioning embassy in Russia, and understands Moscow's desire to have a full embassy in Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We want a fully functioning embassy in Moscow. We fully understand the Russian desire to have a fully functioning embassy here in Washington, and we prioritize that," Price said. "We value these open lines of communication and dialogue."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US State Dept. Reports Progress in Talks on Russia's Seized Diplomatic Property

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia have advanced in their negotiations regarding restrictions on respective embassies and the seized Russian diplomatic property, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

A reporter asked Price whether the US was considering Moscow's proposal to mutually lift all restrictions on the embassies, adding: "I assume they want their dachas back."

"We have made progress as you've heard on these issues in recent days," Price said. "There have been discussions in recent weeks. Those have achieved some degree of progress, and I understand those discussions are set to resume."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden to Sign Executive Order on Carbon-Free US Electricity, Govt. Vehicles - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will sign an executive order on Wednesday committing the United States to carbon-free electricity by 2030 and emission-free federal vehicles by 2035, the White House announced.

"Today, President Biden will sign an executive order that demonstrates how the United States will leverage its scale and procurement power to lead by example in tackling the climate crisis," a fact sheet, released by the White House listing five key targets for the energy transition, said. Chief among the targets was a "100 percent carbon pollution-free electricity (CFE) by 2030," with at least half of that power being locally supplied clean energy sources to meet demand round-the-clock, the White House said.

The US federal government will work with utilities, developers, technology firms, financiers and others to purchase electricity produced from resources that generate no carbon emissions, including solar and wind, for all its operations by 2030, the White House also said.

"The federal government's real-time demand for electricity will be met with clean energy every hour, every day, and produced within the same regional grid where the electricity is consumed," it added. "With the scope and scale of this electricity demand, the federal government expects it will catalyze the development of at least 10 gigawatts of new American clean electricity production by 2030."

Another key goal was to transition to the acquisition of only zero-emission vehicles by 2035 for the federal vehicle fleet. The government owns about 600,000 vehicles and Biden's executive order pledges 100% zero-emission light duty vehicle acquisitions by 2027, according to the White House.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Top US General, Polish Counterpart Discuss Eastern European Security - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley met with Polish Chief of the General Staff Gen. Rajmund Andrzejczak at the Pentagon on Wednesday to discuss security in Eastern Europe, Joint Staff Spokesperson Col. Dave Butler said in a readout.

"The military leaders discussed items of mutual interest and shared assessments of the current security environment in Eastern Europe. Poland is a stalwart ally in Central Europe committed to NATO deterrence and defense efforts in Europe and cooperative security efforts around the world," Butler said.

The US and Poland continue to share a strong defense relationship and cooperate on an array of programs, Butler added. The statement comes amid rising tensions over the buildup of Russian forces near Ukraine, which has sparked concern among NATO countries and others in the region.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Fuel Stocks up Heavily for 2nd Week, Coinciding With Omicron Scare - EIA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US fuel stockpiles increased heavily for a second week in a row in line with seasonal trends and as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus impacted the confidence of energy traders, weekly supply-demand data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday.

Inventories of gasoline, the most popular fuel for automobiles, were up by 3.88 million barrels for the week ended December 3, adding to the previous week's 4.03 million, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report said.

Stockpiles of distillates, commonly turned into the diesel used by trucks, buses, trains and ships and as jet fuel, grew by 2.73 million barrels on top of the previous 2.16 million.

Consumption of fuels typically falls at this time of year due to seasonally-low autumn-winter driving by Americans.

The Omicron scare had also contributed to the negative psyche of the energy market over the past two weeks, driving oil prices down by more than 20% as the West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark for US crude hit four-month lows of under \$63 a barrel. The WTI benchmark has since rebounded to above \$70 this week.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Unaware of Reports That Ex-President Bush Was Victim of Havana Syndrome

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday she is not aware of reports that former US President George W. Bush may have been the target of a possible Havana syndrome type attack.

"I can't speak to anything that's speculated, this is the first time I'm hearing about this report, I would have to go back and check with our team," Jean-Pierre said when asked about reports about a possible Havana syndrome type attack against Bush.

The Washington Examiner reported on Tuesday that Bush, his wife Laura Bush and other members of a US delegation may have been the victims of a Havana syndrome type attack in June 2007 when they attended the G8 summit at the Grand Hotel in Heiligendamm, Germany. The report cites a first-hand account from Laura Bush mentioned in her 2010 book, "Spoken from the Heart," where she explains that she, her husband and nearly a dozen members of the US delegation became ill at the summit. Laura Bush said she felt dizzy, nauseous, while a US military aide had difficulty walking and a White House staffer lost all hearing in one ear. Laura Bush also said President George W. Bush felt so ill that he did not stand up to greet then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with the Havana Syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. US diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported experiencing Havana Syndrome symptoms, including nausea and dizziness.

The US government initially blamed Russia for the alleged acoustic attacks, but Moscow dismissed the allegations as groundless and absurd. In July, CIA Director William Burns said Russia may be responsible for the incidents but added the US government lacks proof to make a final determination.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Expects to Discuss Russia at Upcoming G7 Ministerial in UK - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States expects that Russia will be discussed during the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' meeting in the United Kingdom later this week, State Department Bureau of International Organization Affairs senior official Erica Barks-Ruggles told reporters on Wednesday.

"We do expect that Russia will be discussed," Barks-Ruggles said in a telephonic press briefing. There is a great deal of unity among G7 members when it comes to Russia and the concerns about its activities, she added.

Barks-Ruggles reiterated the United States' position on the importance of predictable and stable relations with Russia. However, she said the United States has been very clear-eyed about Russia's aggressive behavior toward its neighbors/

"We are working with our partners to be very clear that when Russia's behavior crosses boundaries, that will be cost to that," she said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the State Department announced that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit the United Kingdom on December 10-12 to attend the G7 Ministerial meeting and discuss Russia's military buildup on the border with Ukraine.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken to Reaffirm US Commitment to Indo-Pacific During Trip to Region - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will discuss Indo-Pacific security and reaffirm the United States' commitment to the region during his upcoming trip there, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said on Wednesday.

"I think it would be natural on any trip to the region to talk about the larger security context, of course. I anticipate that the Secretary will again reiterate our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific... We're interested in promoting peace, security and stability in the region, and we oppose any action by the People's Republic of China or any other actor designed to destabilize the region and undermine that rules-based order that I have described," Kritenbrink said during a briefing.

Blinken will arrive in Liverpool, United Kingdom, on Friday to attend G7 meetings, some of which will be focused on Indo-Pacific issues, State Department senior official Erica Barks-Ruggles said during the briefing. After the meetings in the United Kingdom, Blinken will head to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Kritenbrink said the three countries are central components of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Blinken is expected to discuss issues including security, health, economy, people-to-people ties, democracy, human rights, and the situation in Burma during meetings with leaders on the trip, Kritenbrink added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Indicts Fraudster, Partner in Scheme to Steal \$7Mln in COVID-19 Relief - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A man who pleaded guilty earlier this year to loan fraud faces a new set of charges, along with a co-defendant, in a similar scheme targeting \$7 million in COVID-19 relief from the US Small Business Administration (SBA), the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

An indictment filed in US federal court in New York City charges Adedayo Ilori and Chris Recamier over attempts to obtain more than \$7 million in government loans intended to provide relief to small businesses during the pandemic, the department said in a press release.

"Adedayo Ilori has made quite a habit of committing loan fraud. While previously facing similar charges in a separate case involving loan and identity fraud - to which Ilori pled guilty in April of this year - he is once again alleged to have committed similar conduct to defraud the SBA and private lenders in an attempt to steal much-needed COVID-19 financial relief," US Attorney Damian Williams said in the release.

Ilori and Recamier allegedly stole the identities of individuals and companies and fraudulently obtained over a million dollars, presumably before getting caught, the release said.

The 2020 CARES Act provided hundreds of billions of dollars in forgivable loans through the SBA under the Paycheck Protection Program. A separate SBA program provided low interest loans of up to \$2 million to help businesses compensate for pandemic related lost revenue.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Prepared for All Contingencies, Robust Response Against Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States does not plan to send troops to Ukraine but the US administration is prepared for all contingencies including a robust response to counter a potential Russian offensive if necessary, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"What the President said is the United States is not currently considering using unilateral force to confront Russia... that's not our current focus but we are preparing for all contingencies as we have been doing for weeks now including preparing specific robust responses to Russian escalation should they be required," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One.

Jean-Pierre declined to get into details about the United States' contingency plans.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Looks Forward to Speaking With New German Chancellor - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden looks forward to speaking with new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz but there is currently no call to preview between the two leaders, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"The President looks forward to speaking with the Chancellor, but I don't have any specific call to review," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Says Confident US Can Communicate With Russia Going Forward

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that Russia and the United States have managed to have talks both at the height of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era and the Biden administration is confident the two countries can do that going forward.

"We have found a way to have discussions at the height of the Cold War and we've done this in the post-Cold War era through the NATO-Russia Council, the OSCE and other mechanisms. We can do that going forward," Jean-Pierre said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Says Has Nothing to Share on Possible in-Person Biden-Putin Meeting

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that there is nothing to share at present regarding the possible in-person summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden.

"I don't have anything else to share on that," Jean-Pierre said when asked whether a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders should be expected after their video conversation on Tuesday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Chief Strongly Condemns 'Heinous' Attack Killing 7 Peacekeepers in Mali - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the "heinous" attack on United Nations peacekeepers in Mali that resulted in the

deaths of seven blue helmets, and urged the country to spare no effort to find the perpetrators, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) said a logistic convoy hit an improvised explosive device en route from Douentza to Sevare in central Mali.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns this heinous attack," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "The Secretary-General also calls on the Malian authorities to spare no effort in order to find the perpetrators of the attack so they can be brought to justice."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Household Expenses, Inflation Top COVID-19 as Leading Concerns Facing US Adults - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Three in ten Americans either cite difficulty paying monthly bills or inflation as their main concerns, outpacing worries over the pandemic, a Monmouth University poll said on Wednesday.

"Concerns about inflation have taken center stage in discussions around America's kitchen tables. And, as one would expect, many are placing the blame squarely on Washington," Monmouth Polling Director Patrick Murray said in a press release.

A 29 percent plurality either cited a general difficulty paying household bills or inflation specifically as main worries, compared with 18 percent who named COVID-19, the release said. Regardless of which of 20 problems survey participants cited - ranging from the pandemic to gun violence - nearly half (46%) said federal government actions since the beginning of the year had made the problem worse. The percentage is higher than at any point during the Trump presidency (37-to-42 percent), the release added.

The largest jump in those saying they have been hurt by government actions has been among Republicans (up 24 points to 82 percent), while there has been less movement among independents (up 6 points to 47%) and Democrats (up 3 points to 10%), according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Congratulates German Chancellor Scholz on Taking Office - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United Nations congratulates Olaf Scholz, who was voted in on Wednesday to take over as German chancellor, and looks forward to continuing its engagement with the country, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"We want to congratulate the new Chancellor on taking up his post and leading the German government," Dujarric said. "Germany is a critical and pivotal partner of the UN in peace and

security, in development, in climate, and we really look forward to continuing to engage with Germany on all those files, and we look forward to Germany's leadership on those files as well." The spokesman also expressed gratitude to former Chancellor Angela Merkel for her leadership on a number of issues of mutual interest of the United Nations and Germany.

"The empathy and the leadership she showed during a number of refugee and migrant crises in Europe is something that Antonio Guterres [UN Secretary-General] personally admired," Dujarric added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canada Will Not Send Diplomatic Representation to China Olympics - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Canada will not send diplomatic representation to the 2022 Winter Olympic games in Beijing due to concerns of human rights violation in China, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We are extremely concerned about the repeated human rights violations by the Chinese government, that is why we are announcing today that we will not be sending any diplomatic representation to the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic games this winter," Trudeau said during a press conference.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Welcomes US-Russia Dialogue, Its Expansion to NATO to Defuse Tensions - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the recent virtual talks between presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden as well as a potential expansion of these discussions to NATO countries to defuse tensions, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the leaders held a two-hour virtual conference amid tensions on the Ukrainian border. On Wednesday, Biden said he expects to announce by Friday a high-level meeting between Russia, the United States and four other key NATO countries to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance's activities in eastern Europe.

"We do welcome dialogue as we saw between the Russian Federation and the US," Dujarric said. "That it is expanded to NATO countries - we welcome that as well. Dialogue, we hope, will lead to a de-escalation of the tensions that we are seeing."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken, Michel Agree on Need for Severe Costs to Russia If Invades Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and European Council President Charles Michel during a phone call on Wednesday discussed the need to impose severe consequences on Russia should it invade Ukraine, the State Department said. "Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with President of the European Council Charles Michel today," spokesman Ned Price said in a press release. "They also agreed on the need to impose swift and severe costs on Russia if it escalates its aggression in Ukraine."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Says Will Announce by Friday Russia-NATO Meeting to Discuss Moscow's Concerns

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he expects to announce by the end of this week a high-level meeting between Russia, the United States and four other key NATO countries to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance's activities in eastern Europe.

"We hope by Friday we're going to be able to announce to you that we're having a meeting at a higher level, not just with us, but at least with four of our major NATO allies and Russia to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to NATO," Biden said.

Biden pointed out that the meeting will be focused on whether an accommodation can be worked out to bring down tensions along NATO's eastern front.

On Tuesday, the Kremlin said Russian President Vladimir Putin conveyed to Biden that NATO was making dangerous attempts to conquer Ukrainian territory and was building up its military potential near Russia's border. Putin also said that Moscow was interested in obtaining reliable, legally fixed guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward and would not deploy offensive weapons in countries bordering Russia.

Biden said he warned Putin on Tuesday that there would be severe economic consequences should Russia invade Ukraine.

In addition, Biden said the United States would also be required to reinforce its presence in NATO countries and would provide a defensive capability to Ukraine in the event of an invasion. However, Biden said the United States does not currently plan to deploy US troops to Ukraine or to use unilateral force to counter a potential Russian offensive.

US and Russian diplomatic teams have been in constant contact to discuss these pressing issues, Biden added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Targets Individuals in Kosovo, El Salvador, Serbia in New Global Magnitsky Sanctions

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted several people in Kosovo, Serbia and El Salvador, as well as entities in Serbia, Croatia and Bulgaria in a new round of Global Magnitsky Sanctions, the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is targeting 16 individuals and 24 entities across several countries in Europe and the Western Hemisphere," the release said. "Today's actions are taken pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and targets perpetrators of corruption and serious human rights abuse," the statement said. The sanctioned individuals include Andrija Zheljko Bojic of Kosovo, Zeljko Bojic of Kosovo, Osiris Luna Meza of El Salvador, Carlos Amilcar Marroquin Chica of El Salvador, Alma Yanira Meza Olivares of El Salvador, Milan Mihajlovic of Kosovo, Sinisa Nedeljkovic of Kosovo, and Radovan Radic of Kosovo among others.

Among those sanctioned is also Zvonko Veselinovic, described by the Treasury as the leader of the Zvonko Veselinovic Organized Crime Group (OCG), which is engaged in a massive bribery scheme with Kosovar and Serbian security officials to facilitate the group's illicit trafficking of goods, money, narcotics, and weapons between Kosovo and Serbia, according to the release. In addition, Washington introduced sanctions against entities based in Serbia, Croatia and Bulgaria linked to the blacklisted individuals.

The latest round of sanctions also targets three individuals from El Salvador.

"An investigation into officials of the Government of El Salvador and incarcerated leaders of gangs, such as Treasury-designated Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13), has revealed covert negotiations between government officials and the criminal organization," the treasury said.

"Osiris Luna Meza (Luna) and Carlos Amilcar Marroquin Chica (Marroquin) led, facilitated, and organized a number of secret meetings involving incarcerated gang leaders, in which known gang members were allowed to enter prison facilities and meet with senior gang leadership. These meetings were part of the Government of El Salvador's efforts to negotiate a secret truce with gang leadership."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Metals Demand From Clean-Energy Transition Threaten to Top Global Supply - IMF

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The global availability of metals such as lithium and cobalt that are needed for batteries, solar panels and other equipment to reduce climate warming emissions will unleash an unprecedented surge in demand that could outstrip supplies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned in a report on Wednesday.

"Replacing fossil fuels with low-carbon technologies would require an eightfold increase in renewable energy investments and cause a strong increase in demand for metals. However, developing mines is a process that takes a very long time - often a decade or more - and presents various challenges, at both the company and country level," the report said.

The report noted that a typical electric vehicle battery pack needs around 8 kilograms (18 pounds) of lithium, 35 kilograms of nickel, 20 kilograms of manganese and 14 kilograms of

cobalt, while charging stations require substantial amounts of copper. For green power, solar panels use large quantities of copper, silicon, silver and zinc, while wind turbines require iron ore, copper and aluminum.

Given the projected increase in metals consumption through 2050 under a net zero emissions scenario, current production rates of graphite, cobalt, vanadium and nickel appear inadequate, showing a more than two-thirds gap versus the demand. Current copper, lithium and platinum supplies also are inadequate to satisfy future needs, with a 30 percent to 40 percent gap versus demand, the report said.

The report also examined whether production can be scaled up. For some minerals, existing reserves would allow greater production through more investment in extraction, such as for graphite and vanadium. But with other minerals, current reserves could be a constraint on future demand - especially lithium and lead, as well as zinc, silver and silicon.

Another issue examined in the report concerns the concentration of supplies for certain metals. For example the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) accounts for about 70 percent of cobalt output and half of reserves, the report said. The role is so dominant that the energy transition could become more difficult if the country cannot expand mining operations, it added. Similar risks apply to China, Chile and South Africa, which are all top producers for some of the metals most crucial to the energy transition, according to the report.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Says US Would Not Use Unilateral Force Against Russia in Case of Ukraine Invasion

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday the United States does not currently plan to unilaterally use force against Russia should it invade Ukraine. "The idea the United States is going to unilaterally use force to confront Russia invading Ukraine is not in the cards right now," Biden told reporters outside the White House.

12/8/2021 11:38:09 AM -05:00

US Jobs Quitting Rate in October Down From Record Highs - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans quitting their jobs fell from a record high in October while employment opportunities rose, diffusing the tight labor market situation in an expanding economy, the Labor Department said on Wednesday.

"The number of job openings increased to 11 million on the last business day of October," the Labor Department said in its monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary (JOLTS). Hires in October were little changed at 6.5 million and total separations edged down to 5.9 million, the JOLTS report for the month said.

"Within separations, the quits rate decreased to 2.8 percent following a series high in September," the report added.

The JOLTS report is a key indicator of labor market tightness or slack, and is closely watched by the Federal Reserve as criteria for raising and dropping interest rates.

After staggering unemployment initially triggered by the measures to address COVID-19, the US labor market has steadily picked up this year, showing a jobless rate of just 4.2% in November from a high of 14.8% in April 2020.

Analysts estimate that between 3 million and 5 million of the nearly 20 million jobs lost during the pandemic have not returned. Economists generally see the exodus as a greater opportunity in a pandemic-era market where workers could demand higher wages and prioritize child-care and health concerns.

November's jobless rate of 4.2%, interestingly, comes just above the 4% mark that the Federal Reserve defines as maximum employment in the United States.

The US central bank needs maximum employment, inflation at 2% or more per annum and steady economic growth to hike interest rates, which it has kept at between zero and 0.25% since the onset of the pandemic nearly two years ago.

The economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to COVID-19 measures. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the central bank though is inflation running at more than 30-year highs as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Government Should Regulate Digital Assets, Crypto Under New Framework - Coinbase CEO

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US government should regulate digital assets such as cryptocurrencies and stablecoins under a new framework that fits the emerging technology's unique nature, Coinbase CEO Alesia Jeanne Haas said on Wednesday

"First, we believe the government should regulate digital assets under a new framework. Our existing regulatory system does not work effectively for the open, decentralized networks that crypto has created," Haas said during testimony before the US House Financial Services Committee.

Responsibility for the new regulatory framework should be assigned to a single federal regulator, Haas said. A dedicated self-regulatory organization should be established to strengthen oversight and provide greater supervision of digital asset marketplaces, Haas added. Coinbase – the largest US digital asset exchange with the highest daily spot trading volume of Bitcoin – agrees with the goal of American tax authorities to ensure individuals and businesses pay the taxes they owe on digital assets, Haas said. However, provisions of the recently passed infrastructure bill could run counter to efforts to achieve parity with traditional finance and contain language that fails to recognize the technology's capabilities and limitations, she noted.

As it relates to concerns over the use of digital assets by criminal actors, Haas said that although there is a very real problem of criminals using a small group of non-compliant foreign exchanges to cash out illicit gains, they generally avoid larger exchanges like Coinbase that actively identify suspicious activity. Cryptocurrency technologies are tools that can actually help law enforcement identify and prevent criminal activities, Haas added.

Lawmakers on the House Financial Services Committee heard testimony from witnesses including Haas and other digital asset executives about the challenges and benefits of using digital assets. They also questioned the executives about the technology and expressed their concerns about it, including its use in cyber and financial crimes.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US to Continue Using Sanctions Against Syria for Alleged Chemical Weapons Use- Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue applying sanctions against the Syrian government to promote accountability for its alleged use of chemical weapons, US Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills said on Wednesday.

"Both the Assad regime and its enablers, notably, Russia, who tried to shield Syria from scrutiny, should know that the United States will continue to use all available tools, including sanctions, to promote accountability for chemical weapons use," Mills told the UN Security Council.

The United States estimates that chemical weapons have been used against the Syrian people at least 50 times since the conflict began in 2011, Mills said.

"The use of these weapons is a serious threat not only to the people of Syria, but to international security," he said.

Mills added that as long as the Syrian government continues to "perpetrate atrocities" against its people, peace will be out of reach in the country.

Throughout the Syrian conflict over the past ten years, Western countries and their allies have accused the Syrian government of using chemical weapons against the country's civilian population.

During the 25th Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in April, France presented a draft resolution, which provides for the suspension of the rights and privileges of Syria in the organization over alleged violation of the CWC. Members of the organization adopted the resolution by a majority vote.

Syria has denied the charges saying it has destroyed its chemical weapons stockpile under OPCW supervision.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Will Announce by Friday a Russia-NATO Meeting to Discuss Moscow's Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday that he expects to announce soon a meeting between Russian and NATO officials to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance, Reuters reported. Biden noted that he will make the announcement by Friday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US State Dept. Counselor Travels to Asia for Talks on Stability, Maritime Order- Statement

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said in a statement on Wednesday that Counselor Derek Chollet will travel to Cambodia and Indonesia on December 8-13 to hold discussions on key regional issues, including the burgeoning crisis in Myanmar, the State.

"Counselor Chollet's trip will reinforce ASEAN centrality and the role ASEAN plays in regional stability, economic growth, and preserving the rules-based maritime order, especially in the South China Sea," the statement said.

In Phnom Penh, the Counselor will discuss Cambodia's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN and will also reinforce the United States' support for civil society and the Cambodian people, the release said.

While in Jakarta, Chollet will concentrate on expanding the US-Indonesia strategic partnership and then join the secretary as he travels to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, the release added.

Throughout the trip, Chollet will underscore the importance of strengthening US-ASEAN cooperation as a way to press the Myanmar military regime to end the violence; free every who has been detained without cause; allow humanitarian access to occur without interference; and reestablish Myanmar's path to an inclusive democracy, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Budgets \$82M In to Expand Home Healthcare to Families Hit by COVID-19 – Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) – Home visitation for healthcare and related services for low-income families affected by the pandemic will be funded with \$82 million in grants from the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Wednesday.

"This funding builds upon an initial investment of \$40 million in ARP funds in May. The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports the delivery of high

quality, voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services to children and families living in communities at risk for poor maternal and child health outcomes," HHS said in a press release. The \$82 million for 56 states, jurisdictions and non-profit groups will help families in communities where it is particularly tough for mothers and children to access quality healthcare, the release said.

Home visitors help support families by providing pregnancy education, parenting skill-building, and even offer supplies such as diapers, wipes and hand sanitizers. The new funds will also provide technology to families who need it to participate in virtual home visits, and support home visitor hazard pay and other staff costs, the release added.

Over the past nine years, home visitors have serviced nearly 7 million homes. In fiscal year 2020, almost three-fourths of families participating in the program had household incomes at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, and 78% of adults and children relied on Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

At Least 7 UN Peacekeepers Killed, 3 Injured by Explosive Device in Mali - MINUSMA

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - At least seven peacekeepers from the United Nations mission in Mali (MINUSMA) were killed and three more seriously injured on Wednesday when their convoy struck an improvised explosive device, MINUSMA said in a statement. "This morning, the MINUSMA logistic convoy en route from Douentza to Sevare struck an improvised explosive device on the RN16 [highway], in the region of Bandiagara. A preliminary report indicates that seven blue helmets were killed and three are gravely injured," the mission said via Twitter.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Convicted Felon Faces Charges For Trying to Bring Handgun on Plane - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A man caught attempting to board a plane with a loaded firearm in his carry-on bag made his initial appearance in court to face two counts, including possession of a gun by a convicted felon, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said on Wednesday.

"Desmond Herring, 48, is charged by complaint with one count of carrying a weapon on an aircraft and one count of possession of a firearm and ammunition by a convicted felon. He appeared by video conference this afternoon before U.S. Magistrate Judge Michael A. Hammer in Newark federal court and was released on \$100,000 unsecured bond, with home confinement and GPS monitoring," TSA said in a press release.

On Nov. 29, 2021, Herring submitted a carry-on bag for inspection at Newark Liberty International Airport in the state of New Jersey. During the x-ray screening, a TSA screener a suspected firearm and contacted police, the release said.

Upon seeing that his bag had attracted additional attention, Herring left the security checkpoint area without his bag and walked to a departure gate for his flight to Atlanta, Georgia, the release also said.

The bag contained a 9-millimeter handgun, 10 rounds ammunition loaded into a magazine, and three boxes of ammunition that each contained 50 rounds of ammunition, the release added.

Herring was prohibited from possessing a firearm due to a 2010 federal conviction for conspiracy to distribute controlled substances. Both charges in the complaint carry a maximum penalty of ten years in prison, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Targets Individuals in Kosovo, El Salvador, Serbia in New Global Magnitsky Sanctions

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted several persons and entities in Kosovo, Serbia and El Salvador in a new round of Global Magnitsky Sanctions, the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

The sanctioned individuals include Andrija Zheljko Bojic of Kosovo, Zeljko Bojic of Kosovo, Osiris Luna Meza of El Salvador, Carlos Amilcar Marroquin Chica of El Salvador, Alma Yanira Meza Olivares of El Salvador, Milan Mihajlovic of Kosovo, Sinisa Nedeljkovic of Kosovo, and Radovan Radic of Kosovo among others.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Imposes Arms Embargo on Cambodia Over Human Rights Abuses - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced a trade embargo on "sensitive items" against Cambodia over the country's human rights violations, corruption and the increasing influence of China in the country, the US Department of Commerce said on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of Commerce (Commerce) announced new restrictions to address human rights abuses and and corruption by Cambodian government actors, including the military, as well as the growing influence of the People's Republic of China's military in Cambodia," the release said.

The Commerce Department placed new restrictions, including end-use and end-user restrictions, on exports and reexports to Cambodia, and in-country transfers of sensitive items subject to the Export Administration Regulations, the release said.

Meanwhile, the US State Department imposed an arms embargo on Cambodia, the release also said.

"Together, these actions will restrict access to dual-use items, as well as certain less-sensitive military items, under Commerce [Department]'s jurisdiction, and defense articles and defense services under State [Department]'s jurisdiction, to the Cambodian military, military-intelligence services, and related entities and individuals," the release added.

Moreover, the Bureau of Industry and Security imposed a more restrictive review policy for license applications which include items controlled for national security, regardless of the end-user, according to the release.