2/24/22 Thursday

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Putin Tells Russian Industrial Leaders Nation Has Prepared for Sanctions
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Early on Thursday morning, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a military action to "demilitarise" Ukraine, calling the situation "life and death" for Russia after years of NATO encirclement.

Putin reiterated that point on Thursday afternoon, saying there was "no other way" to defend Russia other than to launch the operation.

Speaking to leading representatives of Russia's business community on Thursday, Putin said that although the meeting had been planned in advance, it was still taking place "under non-standard conditions".

"What is happening is a forced measure", Putin said of the military operations in Ukraine. "They left us no chance to do otherwise. Security risks created such that it was impossible to respond by other means".

Putin said that the Kremlin had analysed the geopolitical risks of new sanctions by the West, but could not forecast all potential impacts.

"We all, and you too, understand the world we live in, and prepared in one way or another for what is happening now in terms of restrictions and sanctions policy", Putin said.

The Moscow Stock Exchange has already announced that Friday morning sessions for stock and futures trading had been cancelled.

"Of course, the current geopolitical situation leads to the fact that Russian business will have to work in difficult conditions, taking into account restrictions of various kinds. But I would like to confirm that not only the state, the economy as a whole has learned to survive crises, but also that since 2014, Russian business has learned to adapt to crisis phenomena and, moreover, has learned to solve development problems", Alexander Shokhin, head of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE), said at the meeting.

"We understand that the new sanctions will be much tougher than all previous restrictions, they will affect many sectors", Shokhin added, noting that "Russian companies will have to work even more energetically and efficiently, ensure the smooth operation of their enterprises, avoiding job cuts, shortages, price hikes".

"It will be necessary to implement an import substitution strategy, look for new partners in those countries that are ready to continue cooperation, but of course, a lot also depends on the timeliness and success of the government's activities", the RUIE head added.

The US has threatened Russia with sanctions able to crush the Russian economy if it were to take military action inside Ukraine. Following Putin's recognition of the two Donbass republics on Monday, the US, the UK, and Australia imposed a "first tranche of sanctions" targeting Russian state development banks and dealings in Russia's sovereign debt, as well as leading Russian government and social figures.
Speaking separately on Thursday, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky both urged that Russia be cut off from the Brussels-based SWIFT bank wire system. However, US President Joe Biden has previously rejected such calls.

Biden Authorises New Sanctions on Russia
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian industry leaders on Thursday afternoon, saying that the government and Russian companies had both prepared for the eventuality of sanctions.

US President Joe Biden on Thursday announced a slew of new sanctions that would "impose severe costs on the Russian economy, both immediately and over time". "We have purposefully designed these sanctions to maximise a long-term impact on Russia and to minimise the impact on the United States and our allies", he said.

The sanctions are intended to harm Russia's tech sector, including cutting off more than half its tech imports, as well as its space, aerospace, and military industries. However, he dismissed cutting Russia off from the SWIFT international bank wire system, as some European allies have suggested, saying that the sanctions would have an equal or greater effect.

"We will limit Russia's ability to do business in dollars, euros, pounds, and yen - to be part of the global economy", Biden said. "We are going to stunt the ability to finance and grow the Russian military. We're going to impose major - and we're going to impair their ability to compete in a high-tech 21st century economy".

He announced four more Russian banks that hold more than $1 trillion in assets would be sanctioned and their assets in the United States frozen, and that Russian "elites" and their families would be sanctioned as well. He said sanctioning Russian President Vladimir Putin is also "on the table".

The targeted banks include Otkritie FC Bank, Sovcombank OJSC, Novikombank, and VTB Bank, as well as 34 of their subsidiaries. The US Treasury also imposed restrictions on all transactions in, provision of financing for, and other dealings in new debt of greater than 14 days maturity and new equity issued by 13 Russian state-owned enterprises and entities: Sberbank, AlfaBank, Credit Bank of Moscow, Gazprombank, Russian Agricultural Bank, Gazprom, Gazprom Neft, Transneft, Rostelecom, RusHydro, Alrosa, Sovcomflot, and Russian Railways.

The US Treasury also sanctioned several leading Russian politicians and their family members, including Sergey Ivanov, the special representative for environmental activities, ecology, and transport; Andrey Patrushev, the general director of offshore gas projects for Gazprom Neft; Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft; Andrey Puchkov, a leading VTB Bank executive; Yuriy Soloviev, chairman of VTB Bank; Galina Ulyutina, Soloviev's wife; and Alexander Vedyakhin, an executive at Sberbank.
"These are people who personally gained from the Kremlin's policies and they should share in the pain", Biden said of those sanctioned. "We will keep up this drumbeat of those designations against corrupt billionaires in the days ahead".

The US Commerce Department also implemented export control measures on sensitive items, including semiconductors, aircraft components, computers, lasers, and telecommunications equipment.

The Treasury additionally sanctioned 24 Belarusian individuals and entities, including Belinvestbank and Bank Dabrabyt, as well as close affiliates of President Alexander Lukashenko.

Biden reiterated that US forces would not fight in Ukraine, but was deploying more American forces to NATO and that NATO was committed to its collective defence. He also said the US was prepared to respond to any Russian cyberattacks.

The US president also said he would release petroleum from America's strategic reserve to counteract the effects on oil markets by the sanctions.

Early on Thursday morning, Putin announced the beginning of a military operation in Ukraine to end the constant attacks on the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, which his government recognised earlier this week. However, Biden has claimed that the operation is the "full-scale invasion" that his government has predicted was imminent for several months.

The conflict has come after months of failed negotiations in which Russian security concerns in the region were roundly ignored by NATO, whose increasingly close relationship with Ukraine was a primary concern for Moscow. Putin said the operation in Ukraine was intended to "neutralise" the country so that NATO could not use it as a base from which to attack Russia.

Following Putin's recognition of the Donbass republics, which split from Ukraine in 2014, and his dispatching of peacekeeping troops there, Biden announced a "first tranche" of sanctions on Tuesday that targeted Russia's sovereign debt and several leading state development banks.

Since 2017, US military strategy documents have described Russia as a "malign actor" alongside China, against both of which the US must engage in "great power competition", abandoning its two-decade War on Terror.

On Thursday afternoon, Putin met with leading Russian businessmen to discuss the impending onset of sanctions and how the Russian economy would cope with them.

"We understand that the new sanctions will be much tougher than all previous restrictions, they will affect many sectors", Alexander Shokhin, head of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE), told Putin at the meeting. He added that "Russian companies will have to work even more energetically and efficiently, ensure the smooth operation of their enterprises, avoiding job cuts, shortages, price hikes".

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US deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea in 2017 aroused protest from China due to the system’s powerful radar, which can reportedly scan across nearly all of China from the peninsula.

South Korea’s Agency for Defense Development test-fired a new high-altitude air defense system on Wednesday, according to Yonhap News Agency.

The long-range surface-to-air missile (L-SAM) was launched for the first time from the Anheung Comprehensive Test Site in Taean-gun, southwest of Seoul. According to Korea News, the rocket flew along a preset path and did not attempt to engage a target. However, it performed as expected.

The L-SAM, built by South Korea’s Hanwha Group and LIG Nex 1, is intended to intercept high-altitude aircraft, as well as ballistic missiles in their terminal phase, up to an altitude of 60 kilometers. In South Korea’s air defense network, that role is presently performed by THAAD.

However, THAAD has been criticized by China since it was first deployed to South Korea in 2017, because one of the settings on its powerful X-band AN/TPY-2 radar allows it to track an object “the size of a baseball from about 2,900 miles (4,600 kilometers) away,” according to US officials. Locals have also fought the deployment of THAAD to their districts, saying it makes them targets.

Yoon Suk-yeol, the candidate from the right-wing People Power Party who is presently leading the polls ahead of the March 9 elections, said that if he wins, he intends to buy THAAD from Washington. The US has never sold THAAD to anyone before and it’s unclear if they would approve.

Other air defenses developed by South Korea in recent years include the KM-SAM or Cheolmae-2 system, built using technology borrowed from Russian arms makers Almaz-Antey and Fakel, which produce the 9696 missile used on the S-350E and S-400 air defense systems. South Korea has also worked to develop its own analogue to Israel’s Iron Dome system, which LIG Nex1 unveiled in October as the low-altitude missile defense system (LAMD).

The bevy of weapons are intended to form a layered defense against the ballistic missile and rocket artillery systems fielded by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), which are considerable. According to defense experts, the DPRK’s newest road-mobile rocket artillery are designed to evade South Korea’s air defense net, which, along with Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons, have prompted Seoul to completely revisit its entire defense strategy.

The two nations have been at war since 1950, when cross-border incursions by both sides erupted into an all-out conflict. As the North appeared close to victory, the United States organized an international intervention force and joined the war on South Korea’s side; later, Chinese volunteer forces supplemented North Korean soldiers and pushed the Americans southward. The shooting war ended in 1953 in a stalemate and a ceasefire, but no permanent peace treaty. Several attempts at rapprochement have ultimately failed, as 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea have ensured that Seoul does not stray too close to peace.

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Three Officers Involved in George Floyd’s Murder Found Guilty of Civil Rights Violations
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A Minnesota jury found three Minneapolis police officers guilty of violating the civil rights of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man whose murder at the hands of white police officers in May 2020 helped spark the largest uprising in the US in half a century.

J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas K. Lane and Tou Thao, three former Minneapolis officers, were found guilty on Thursday of depriving Floyd of his civil rights by showing deliberate indifference to his medical needs. Thao and Kueng were also found guilty of failing to intervene to stop officer Derek Chauvin as he kneeling on Floyd’s neck during the May 25, 2020, encounter. Chauvin was found guilty last year of murdering Floyd in the incident and sentenced to 22.5 years in prison.

Violating a person’s civil rights carries a wide variety of punishments, including up to a life sentence or even the death penalty, depending upon the circumstances, according to the US Department of Justice. However, federal sentencing guidelines mean the former officers are likely to receive a lesser sentence.

“These defendants knew what was happening, and contrary to their training, contrary to common sense, contrary to basic human decency, they did nothing to stop Derek Chauvin, did nothing to help George Floyd. You know it because you’ve seen it,” prosecutor Manda Sertich told jurors during closing arguments Tuesday.

In the trial, the trio claimed they had deferred to Chauvin during the police stop, unsure if the force he was using was unreasonable. They also claimed the Minneapolis Police Department had not adequately trained them for the situation, leading to their confusion.

Two of them, Keung and Lane, had been full-time officers for less than a week when the incident happened. They were the first to respond that night to the call from a local market about a counterfeit $20 bill, and according to body camera video of the incident, Lane pulled a gun on Floyd within 15 seconds of encountering him in a parked car.

Chauvin arrived a few minutes later with Thao, and after attempting to arrest Floyd and put him in the police cruiser, they held him face-down on the street, with Chauvin’s knees pressed onto Floyd’s neck and upper back. As Floyd cried out that he couldn’t breathe, the other officers helped hold him down or control the crowd.

Footage of Floyd’s death aroused fury across the United States, setting off a series of Black Lives Matter protests that police violently put down, sparking even greater protests. The movement swelled for several weeks into June and July, drawing millions of people into the streets and forcing state governments to mobilize tens of thousands of National Guard soldiers to control the demonstrations.

While the protests are largely credited with forcing the judicial system to take seriously the accusations against Chauvin, which protesters complained happened far too infrequently when white police officers kill Black people, they ultimately failed to effect a change in police behavior.

During Chauvin’s trial in April 2021, another officer on the same force, Kim Potter, shot and killed a 20-year-old Black man named Daunte Wright after claiming to have grabbed her pistol instead of her taser. Last week, she was sentenced to two years in custody for Wright’s death, some of which could be spent in house arrest.
More recently, Lauren Smith-Fields, a Black woman from Bridgeport, Connecticut, died under mysterious circumstances in December 2021, but police mishandling of her case aroused protests in the community that claimed police had not taken her death seriously because of her race.

Canada's Trudeau Revokes Emergencies Act, Says Existing Laws Sufficient to Handle Protests

By - Evan Craighead

The House of Commons, Canada's lower chamber, passed a motion on Monday in favor of extending the use of special emergency powers invoked last week to quell the ongoing trucker convoy blockade and related COVID-19 vaccine mandate protests around the country. The Senate had only debated the matter.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Wednesday that his government has moved to lift the Emergencies Act, as the "situation is no longer an emergency."

"We are confident that existing laws and bylaws are now sufficient to keep people safe," Trudeau added. "Of course, we will continue to be there to support provincial and local authorities."

He asserted that law enforcement officials are equipped and prepared to deal with those "engaging in unlawful or dangerous activities."

The act, passed in 1988 and never used until February 14, grants the Canadian government a 30-day period of extraordinary powers, including the authority to prohibit public assembly, movement, as well as the use of particular property.

The legislation allowed Trudeau's government to declare areas around Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada, as 'no-protest' zones, effectively prohibiting 'Freedom Convoy' demonstrators from congregating in the vicinity.

Additionally, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was granted permission to share Canadian protesters' information with financial institutions that could freeze accounts.

Authorities met protesters with a historic presence of law enforcement between February 17 and February 20, when the final demonstrations died down in Ottawa. Close to 200 individuals have been arrested and are facing a combined total of nearly 400 charges.

'There Will Be a Price to Pay': Pelosi Slams Putin as 'Tyrant,' Warns of Further Sanctions

By - Evan Craighead

On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden announced that Washington would impose sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 LNG pipeline, and its corporate officers, over Moscow's recognition of the
Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. The move comes as part of a series of penalties leveled against Russia this week by the US and its allies.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), during a Wednesday news conference, proclaimed that Russian aggression toward Ukraine amounts to "an attack on democracy" that the US, along with its allies, will continue to oppose via defensive support of Ukraine and swift sanctions against Russia.

"I think that one thing that we've all agreed upon is an attack on Ukraine by the Russians is an attack on democracy," she said, claiming Putin does not want the Russian people to see what democracy looks like.

"There will be a price to pay for Vladimir Putin," Pelosi added during her speech, highlighting the Russian president's past affiliation with the KGB.

Pelosi noted that the world has yet to see the "depth" of the new sanctions.

"It's stunning to see, in this day and age, a tyrant roll into a country. This is the same tyrant who attacked our democracy in 2016," referring to allegations regarding the 2016 US presidential election.

Those penalizing Russia for the decision to recognize the DPR and LPR include the US, United Kingdom, European Union, Australia, Japan, and Canada.

Prior to Pelosi's address, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, acknowledged that US sanctions on Russia will "continue to increase and will have an ultimately crippling effect on many sectors of the Russian economy."

Schiff claimed that the goal is to ensure the costs continue and that the Russian people see "the cost of their dictator's aggression."

The House speaker's weekly news conference came as the US president moved to place further sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG, and its corporate officers, as part of the "initial tranche of sanctions" regarding the situation in the breakaway DPR and LPR.

Washington's move was accompanied by Berlin halting the certification of the $11 billion liquefied natural gas pipeline that, if it entered service, would be capable of doubling the delivery of Russian fuel to Germany.

Denis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik, heads of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, have called on the Russian president to help avoid civilian casualties in the states by providing military assistance in repelling Ukrainian forces, according to Wednesday comments from Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Russia is, at present, carrying out peacekeeping efforts in the Donbass republics.

"The actions of the Kiev regime testify to the unwillingness to end the war in the Donbass," their letter, quoted by Peskov, reads. According to the leaders, "the Kiev regime aims to solve the conflict by force."

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At Least 3 Syrian Soldiers Killed After Air Defenses Engage Israeli Strikes - State Media
By - Evan Craighead
Several explosions were reportedly heard in Damascus, Syria, early Thursday morning as air defense systems of the Syrian Arab Army forces engaged hostile targets over the capital city. The Syrian Arab News Agency and other local outlets have confirmed fighter jet activity and several explosions over Damascus.
At least three Syrian soldiers were reportedly killed in the strike, per Syrian state television. Material losses have also been reported.
A military source has since disclosed that the SAA's engagement began around 1:10 a.m., local time, in response to Israeli military aggression targeting a direction north of Lake Tiberias. Most of the missiles were downed by air defenses.
Early reports immediately tied alleged airstrikes to Israeli forces.
As of 1:32 a.m., local time, the strikes had reportedly concluded.
Additional footage reportedly shows different perspectives of SAA air defenses engaging targets early Thursday morning.
Israeli missiles may have been targeting Zakiyah or Al-Kiswa, two areas in the Syrian Governate of Rif Dimashq, according to initial reports.
The town of Zakiyah was recently targeted by Tel Aviv in a nighttime surface-to-surface missile strike approximately one week ago, according to the Syrian government. Although material damage was reported, no injuries or deaths accompanied what is thought to be an Israeli missile strike.
The Israeli missile strike came hours after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Russia's defense minister in Damascus.
Prior to that, approximately four F-16 Israeli fighter jets fired missiles at targets near the city of Al-Kiswa, just 8 miles (13 kilometers) from Damascus. One Syrian soldier was killed and another five were injured in the February 9 missile attack.
According to Rear Adm. Oleg Zhuravlev, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, Israeli forces fired at least 10 surface-to-surface missiles from the Golan Heights, targeting SAA defense units.

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Putin Authorises Special Military Operation in Donbass, Vows Immediate Response to External Threats
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics after a new spike in violence by Kiev's forces. Russian President Vladimir Putin has addressed the nation early Thursday, directing Russian forces to conduct a special operation in the Donbass region to protect people who have been facing genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime for eight years now.
"To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation".
Read the full text of his speech:

Dear citizens of Russia, friends,
I consider it necessary today to speak again about the tragic events in Donbass and the key aspects of ensuring the security of Russia.
I will begin with what I said in my address on February 21, 2022. I spoke about our biggest concerns and worries, and about the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year. I am referring to the eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border.
It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe.
In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border.
Why is this happening? Where did this insolent manner of talking down from the height of their exceptionalism, infallibility and all-permissiveness come from? What is the explanation for this contemptuous and disdainful attitude to our interests and absolutely legitimate demands. The answer is simple. Everything is clear and obvious. In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union grew weaker and subsequently broke apart. That experience should serve as a good lesson for us, because it has shown us that the paralysis of power and will is the first step towards complete degradation and oblivion. We lost confidence for only one moment, but it was enough to disrupt the balance of forces in the world.
As a result, the old treaties and agreements are no longer effective. Entreaties and requests do not help. Anything that does not suit the dominant state, the powers that be, is denounced as archaic, obsolete and useless. At the same time, everything it regards as useful is presented as the ultimate truth and forced on others regardless of the cost, abusively and by any means available. Those who refuse to comply are subjected to strong-arm tactics.
What I am saying now does not concern only Russia, and Russia is not the only country that is worried about this. This has to do with the entire system of international relations, and sometimes even US allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a redivision of the world, and the norms of international law that developed by that time – and the most important of them, the fundamental norms that were adopted following WWII and largely formalised its outcome – came in the way of those who declared themselves the winners of the Cold War.
Of course, practice, international relations and the rules regulating them had to take into account the changes that took place in the world and in the balance of forces. However, this should have been done professionally, smoothly, patiently, and with due regard and respect for the interests of all states and one's own responsibility. Instead, we saw a state of euphoria created by the feeling of absolute superiority, a kind of modern absolutism, coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves. The situation took a different turn.
There are many examples of this. First a bloody military operation was waged against Belgrade, without the UN Security Council's sanction but with combat aircraft and missiles used in the
heart of Europe. The bombing of peaceful cities and vital infrastructure went on for several weeks. I have to recall these facts, because some Western colleagues prefer to forget them, and when we mentioned the event, they prefer to avoid speaking about international law, instead emphasising the circumstances which they interpret as they think necessary.

Then came the turn of Iraq, Libya and Syria. The illegal use of military power against Libya and the distortion of all the UN Security Council decisions on Libya ruined the state, created a huge seat of international terrorism, and pushed the country towards a humanitarian catastrophe, into the vortex of a civil war, which has continued there for years. The tragedy, which was created for hundreds of thousands and even millions of people not only in Libya but in the whole region, has led to a large-scale exodus from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe.

A similar fate was also prepared for Syria. The combat operations conducted by the Western coalition in that country without the Syrian government's approval or UN Security Council's sanction can only be defined as aggression and intervention.

But the example that stands apart from the above events is, of course, the invasion of Iraq without any legal grounds. They used the pretext of allegedly reliable information available in the United States about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To prove that allegation, the US Secretary of State held up a vial with white power, publicly, for the whole world to see, assuring the international community that it was a chemical warfare agent created in Iraq. It later turned out that all of that was a fake and a sham, and that Iraq did not have any chemical weapons. Incredible and shocking but true. We witnessed lies made at the highest state level and voiced from the high UN rostrum. As a result we see a tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism.

Overall, it appears that nearly everywhere, in many regions of the world where the United States brought its law and order, this created bloody, non-healing wounds and the curse of international terrorism and extremism. I have only mentioned the most glaring but far from only examples of disregard for international law.

This array includes promises not to expand NATO eastwards even by an inch. To reiterate: they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us. Sure, one often hears that politics is a dirty business. It could be, but it shouldn't be as dirty as it is now, not to such an extent. This type of con-artist behaviour is contrary not only to the principles of international relations but also and above all to the generally accepted norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around.

Incidentally, US politicians, political scientists and journalists write and say that a veritable "empire of lies" has been created inside the United States in recent years. It is hard to disagree with this – it is really so. But one should not be modest about it: the United States is still a great country and a system-forming power. All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it at the slightest pretext but also imitate its behaviour and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them. Therefore, one can say with good reason and confidence that the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same "empire of lies".

As for our country, after the disintegration of the USSR, given the entire unprecedented openness of the new, modern Russia, its readiness to work honestly with the United States and other Western partners, and its practically unilateral disarmament, they immediately tried to put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us. This is how it was in the 1990s and
the early 2000s, when the so-called collective West was actively supporting separatism and gangs of mercenaries in southern Russia. What victims, what losses we had to sustain and what trials we had to go through at that time before we broke the back of international terrorism in the Caucasus! We remember this and will never forget.

Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen. No one has ever succeeded in doing this, nor will they succeed now.

Despite all that, in December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO's non-expansion. Our efforts were in vain. The United States has not changed its position. It does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia on a matter that is critical for us. The United States is pursuing its own objectives, while neglecting our interests.

Of course, this situation begs a question: what next, what are we to expect? If history is any guide, we know that in 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak. To this end, the USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by refraining or postponing the most urgent and obvious preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late.

As a result, the country was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on June 22, 1941, without declaring war. The country stopped the enemy and went on to defeat it, but this came at a tremendous cost. The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake which came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after the hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake the second time. We have no right to do so.

Those who aspire to global dominance have publicly designated Russia as their enemy. They did so with impunity. Make no mistake, they had no reason to act this way. It is true that they have considerable financial, scientific, technological, and military capabilities. We are aware of this and have an objective view of the economic threats we have been hearing, just as our ability to counter this brash and never-ending blackmail. Let me reiterate that we have no illusions in this regard and are extremely realistic in our assessments.

As for military affairs, even after the dissolution of the USSR and losing a considerable part of its capabilities, today's Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country.

At the same time, technology, including in the defence sector, is changing rapidly. One day there is one leader, and tomorrow another, but a military presence in territories bordering on Russia, if we permit it to go ahead, will stay for decades to come or maybe forever, creating an ever mounting and totally unacceptable threat for Russia.
Even now, with NATO’s eastward expansion the situation for Russia has been becoming worse and more dangerous by the year. Moreover, these past days NATO leadership has been blunt in its statements that they need to accelerate and step up efforts to bring the alliance’s infrastructure closer to Russia’s borders. In other words, they have been toughening their position. We cannot stay idle and passively observe these developments. This would be an absolutely irresponsible thing to do for us.

Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance’s infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile “anti-Russia” is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons.

For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration; this is a fact. It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it.

This brings me to the situation in Donbass. We can see that the forces that staged the coup in Ukraine in 2014 have seized power, are keeping it with the help of ornamental election procedures and have abandoned the path of a peaceful conflict settlement.

For eight years, for eight endless years we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means. Everything was in vain.

As I said in my previous address, you cannot look without compassion at what is happening there. It became impossible to tolerate it. We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us. It is their aspirations, the feelings and pain of these people that were the main motivating force behind our decision to recognise the independence of the Donbass people’s republics.

I would like to additionally emphasise the following. Focused on their own goals, the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of Crimea and Sevastopol for freely making a choice to reunite with Russia.

They will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbass, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War. They have also openly laid claim to several other Russian regions.

If we look at the sequence of events and the incoming reports, the showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided. It is only a matter of time. They are getting ready and waiting for the right moment. Moreover, they went as far as aspire to acquire nuclear weapons. We will not let this happen.

I have already said that Russia accepted the new geopolitical reality after the dissolution of the USSR. We have been treating all new post-Soviet states with respect and will continue to act this way. We respect and will respect their sovereignty, as proven by the assistance we provided to Kazakhstan when it faced tragic events and a challenge in terms of its statehood and
integrity. However, Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today’s Ukraine.

Let me remind you that in 2000–2005 we used our military to push back against terrorists in the Caucasus and stood up for the integrity of our state. We preserved Russia. In 2014, we supported the people of Crimea and Sevastopol. In 2015, we used our Armed Forces to create a reliable shield that prevented terrorists from Syria from penetrating Russia. This was a matter of defending ourselves. We had no other choice.

The same is happening today. They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action. The people’s republics of Donbass have asked Russia for help. In this context, in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia’s Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.

The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation. It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force. At the same time, we have been hearing an increasing number of statements coming from the West that there is no need any more to abide by the documents setting forth the outcomes of World War II, as signed by the totalitarian Soviet regime. How can we respond to that?

The outcomes of World War II and the sacrifices our people had to make to defeat Nazism are sacred. This does not contradict the high values of human rights and freedoms in the reality that emerged over the post-war decades. This does not mean that nations cannot enjoy the right to self-determination, which is enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter.

Let me remind you that the people living in territories which are part of today’s Ukraine were not asked how they want to build their lives when the USSR was created or after World War II. Freedom guides our policy, the freedom to choose independently our future and the future of our children. We believe that all the peoples living in today’s Ukraine, anyone who want to do this, must be able to enjoy this right to make a free choice.

In this context I would like to address the citizens of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia was obliged to protect the people of Crimea and Sevastopol from those who you yourself call “nats”. The people of Crimea and Sevastopol made their choice in favour of being with their historical homeland, Russia, and we supported their choice. As I said, we could not act otherwise.

The current events have nothing to do with a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. They are connected with the defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people. I reiterate: we are acting to defend ourselves from the threats created for us and from a worse peril than what is happening now. I am asking you, however hard this may be, to understand this and to work together with us so as to turn this tragic page as soon as possible and to move forward together, without allowing anyone to interfere in our affairs and our relations but developing them independently, so as to create favourable conditions for overcoming all these
problems and to strengthen us from within as a single whole, despite the existence of state borders. I believe in this, in our common future.
I would also like to address the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.
Comrade officers,
Your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people’s adversary which is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people.
I urge you to refuse to carry out their criminal orders. I urge you to immediately lay down arms and go home. I will explain what this means: the military personnel of the Ukrainian army who do this will be able to freely leave the zone of hostilities and return to their families.
I want to emphasise again that all responsibility for the possible bloodshed will lie fully and wholly with the ruling Ukrainian regime.
I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.
No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken. I hope that my words will be heard.
Citizens of Russia,
The culture and values, experience and traditions of our ancestors invariably provided a powerful underpinning for the wellbeing and the very existence of entire states and nations, their success and viability. Of course, this directly depends on the ability to quickly adapt to constant change, maintain social cohesion, and readiness to consolidate and summon all the available forces in order to move forward.
We always need to be strong, but this strength can take on different forms. The "empire of lies," which I mentioned in the beginning of my speech, proceeds in its policy primarily from rough, direct force. This is when our saying on being "all brawn and no brains" applies.
We all know that having justice and truth on our side is what makes us truly strong. If this is the case, it would be hard to disagree with the fact that it is our strength and our readiness to fight that are the bedrock of independence and sovereignty and provide the necessary foundation for building a reliable future for your home, your family, and your Motherland.

Dear compatriots,
I am certain that devoted soldiers and officers of Russia's Armed Forces will perform their duty with professionalism and courage. I have no doubt that the government institutions at all levels and specialists will work effectively to guarantee the stability of our economy, financial system and social wellbeing, and the same applies to corporate executives and the entire business community. I hope that all parliamentary parties and civil society take a consolidated, patriotic position.
At the end of the day, the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland. I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland.
California Farmers Will Not Receive Water From Government Amid Megadrought
By - Mary Manley

On Wednesday, the federal government told California farmers it would not be giving them any water despite an unrelenting megadrought that has been ravaging the West for 22 years. This marks the fourth time in the past decade that California’s farmers have been denied water from the Central Valley Project.
Ernest Conant, the regional director for the US Bureau of Reclamation, admitted that the decision to allocate 0% of water towards farmers is devastating, but “unfortunately, we can’t make it rain,” he said.
California is responsible for a quarter of food in the U.S.
There are two major systems that California relies on for water. One is state-owned, the other is owned by the federal government. The Central Valley project is federally operated, and will not be providing water for those who farm south of the San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta. However, the federal government has allocated 25% of the available water for drinking and “industrial uses” for its cities and some parts of the Bay Area.
“Conditions are very dry. And as a result we have to be very cautious with these allocations,” Conant says. He points out that the months of January and February are on track for being the driest months the region has experienced on record thus far.
Last year, the Bureau of Reclamation had allocated 5% of water for agricultural purposes, and 55% for cities. Those numbers have since been cut to 0% and 25%, respectively, as the megadrought shows no sign of relief for the region. Conant warns that if it doesn’t rain this March, things will only get worse in terms of water resources.
The state of California is experiencing its worst megadrought in 1,200 years. A megadrought refers to a drought that lasts two decades or longer. California’s drought is in its 22nd year, surpassing the longest megadrought on record, which was in the late 1500s.
“These events have rarely been seen and were once considered a worst-case scenario in modern times,” said Park Williams, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles.
Previous megadroughts were caused by random ocean conditions, like La Nina weather events in the tropical Pacific. But researchers say human-caused global warming is responsible for 42% of the current megadrought. Temperatures will only get worse as people continue to burn fossil fuels, according to climate scientists. The megadrought could last for as long as 30 years.
A 2021 study has shown that covering all 4,000 miles of California’s water canals with solar panels would prevent the evaporation of water, saving more than 65 billion gallons of water annually, with the added bonus of electrical energy supplied by the solar panels.
The Turlock Irrigation District (TID), which is a California-based utility company, is teaming up with the state’s Department of Water Resources (DWR) to begin a project that will test this study in a state whose goal is to be decarbonized by the year 2030.
“Using water canals for solar infrastructure conserves water while producing renewable electricity and avoids converting large tracts of land to solar development,” says researcher Brandi McKuin.

“The cooler microclimate next to the canal mitigates panel heating, which enhances PV efficiency, and shade from the panels mitigates aquatic weed growth, which is a major maintenance issue,” McKuin added.

The only problem the project faces includes cost of solar infrastructure, the need to access the canals for maintenance, and the maintenance and delivery of the electricity.

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Yikes! Man Struggling to Breathe Finds a Tooth Growing Out of his Nose
By - Mary Manley

Mount Sinai surgeons were stunned when they discovered a half-inch-long tooth growing out of a man’s right nostril. The 38-year-old went to doctors for help because he had trouble breathing—apparently. At first, doctors saw what was a deviated septum, as well as calcified septal spurs, and then they discovered something else.

This surprised and confused doctors because the man didn’t have a history of facial trauma or any other abnormalities corresponding to these growths, based on a report in The New England Journal of Medicine.

Surgeons Sagar Khanna and Michael Turner performed a rhinoscopy, which uses a light and a lens so that doctors can see inside a patient’s nasal passages. This is when they discovered “a hard, non-tender, white mass was observed in the floor of the right nostril.”

Using x-rays or an ultrasound, the doctors could confirm their finding to be an “ectopic tooth in the nasal cavity.” An ectopic tooth is similar to impacted teeth, the only difference being that ectopic teeth show up where they shouldn’t, like a man’s nose, for instance.

It’s extremely rare though, for something like this to occur. Ectopic intranasal teeth occur for 0.1% to 1% of the population. They are more common among those with cleft lips. It is not evident in this case what was responsible for the growth of the tooth.

According to the National Health Service (NHS) Queen Victoria Hospital in Grinstead, England, ectopic teeth are when “one or more teeth develop in the wrong position, end up getting stuck and remain buried in the jawbone under the gum. The most common ectopic teeth are the canine teeth in the upper jaw.”

“The main risk of this is that the tooth can bump into the roots of other adult teeth and cause damage. Sometimes this can make them feel wobbly and eventually need to be removed. A cyst can also form around the buried tooth,” says the NHS.

Some people have a baby tooth left in their mouth, which has not been naturally pushed out by the buried adult tooth. This baby tooth over time may eventually be lost, leaving a gap or require further dental treatment to replace it.
When the surgeons removed the New Yorker's tooth from his naval cavity, they discovered that it measured at 14 mm in length. Thankfully, the man did not suffer any complications after the surgery and is no longer having trouble breathing.

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Elon Musk, His Brother Under Investigation Over Alleged Insider Trading - Reports
By - Mary Manley

The investigation into the Musk brothers’ stock sales was prompted by Kimbal Musk’s decision to sell shares of Tesla for $108 million, just a day before Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla, asked his Twitter followers if he should sell 10% of his Tesla shares. The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is investigating whether recent stock sales by Elon Musk and his brother Kimbal Musk violated insider-trading rules, The Wall Street Journal reported Thursday.

“Much is made lately of unrealized gains being a means of tax avoidance, so I propose selling 10% of my Tesla stock,” Musk’s tweet from November of last year reads. A majority of followers voted “yes.”

Musk’s efforts to sell his shares have little to do with a fun social media interaction with followers, and more so to do with a threatening $11 billion tax bill Musk is responsible for paying. A day before the tweet from Elon Musk, his brother Kimbal Musk reportedly sold 88,500 shares of Tesla stock.

This had led investigators to question whether or not Elon Musk told his brother about the timing of his sales before Kimbal traded on November 5. Kimbal Musk serves on the board of directors at Tesla and SpaceX, but his main focus for business is in the restaurant industry as a restaurateur and chef.

His trading could potentially violate restrictions that do not allow employees or board members to trade information that is not available to the public. “Material nonpublic information” is any information that may change or impact the price of a company’s stocks. The consequences for this crime can include a jail sentence.

According to securities filings, Kimbal has avoided any consequences for insider trading thus far by using a plan known as 10b5-1, under which individuals in the stock market may sell a predetermined number of shares at predetermined times.

Since 2011, Kimbal Musk has made more than 40 sales under the 10b5-1 plan, according to regulatory filings. But the SEC did not receive any reports that Musk used such a plan for his sales in November. It did, however, say that he sold 88,500 shares, donated 25,000 to charity, and still owns 511,240 shares.

The SEC issued a subpoena ten days after Musk’s bizarre Twitter poll, seeking information in regards to financial data. The price of Tesla’s shares have fallen 33% since he began selling in November.

This is not the first time Musk has gone to battle with the SEC. In a similar incident in 2018, Musk wrote a tweet in which he said he had secured funding to make Tesla a private company.
The SEC said that Musk never disclosed that information prior to his tweet, and the resulting increase in his company's stock prices constituted fraud. Musk and the SEC settled the lawsuit, with Musk having to pay $20 million and agreeing to step down as chairman of the company. Since then, Musk has continued to have an antagonistic relationship with the SEC. A lawyer for Tesla wrote in a letter last week that the SEC was "harassing" Musk and his company with their investigations.

House Panel Seeks Additional Documents in Probe of Trump's Handing of White House Records

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Oversight and Reform said on Friday it is trying to obtain more documents and information from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) about former President Donald Trump removing classified documents and presidential records from the White House and allegedly destroying certain papers.

"The Committee needs additional documents and information uniquely available from NARA to investigate the full extent of this conduct and determine what additional steps, including potential legislative reforms, may be needed to ensure the preservation of presidential records for the American people," Chairwoman Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney said in a letter to Archivist David S. Ferriero.

The chair expressed "deep" concerns that Trump "may have violated the law through his intentional efforts to remove and destroy records that belong to the American people."

"This Committee plans to get to the bottom of what happened and assess whether further action is needed to prevent the destruction of additional presidential records and recover those records that are still missing," she said.

In response to the committee's February 9 letter, Ferriero sent what Maloney described as a partial response, which she says indicated "significant potential violations" of the Presidential Records Act and other federal laws pertaining to the preservation of federal records.

NARA has confirmed that staff "identified items marked as classified national security information within the boxes" recovered at Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence, and that it has been in communication with the Department of Justice about this.

NARA has still to provide answers to more of the information the committee requested, according to Maloney.

Earlier in February, Trump pushed back against allegations of mishandling White House records, saying that he has a "collaborative and respectful" relationship with the National Archives.
Western Intelligence Watching Russian Activity Beyond Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US and Western intelligence services are closely monitoring Russia's activity beyond Ukraine, CNN reported on Friday, citing a source in the know. They are said to be particularly watching any potential Russian activity in the Western Balkans and Moldova.

So far, the intelligence agencies have seen "nothing out of the ordinary," according to the report. On Thursday, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from attacks by Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

UNICEF Seeking $66.4Mln in Assistance for Children in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - UNICEF needs $66.4 million to provide access to basic services, healthcare, education and cash assistance to children inside Ukraine, Afshan Khan, UNICEF regional director for Europe and Central Asia, said on Friday.

"UNICEF is seeking US$66.4 million to provide access to basic services including water and sanitation, immunization and health care, schooling and learning, psychosocial support, and emergency cash assistance for up to 7.5 million children inside Ukraine," Khan said.

The fund will be working with the UNHCR and other UN agencies in the coming days for a Flash Appeal for the surrounding countries.

"UNICEF - along with the rest of the UN family - calls on all parties to protect all children at all times and to ensure that humanitarian actors can safely and quickly reach children in need, wherever they are," Khan said. "UNICEF also calls on all parties to refrain from attacking essential infrastructure on which children depend - including water and sanitation systems, health facilities and schools. Already we have reports of grave shortages, along with a fast-rising number of requests for psychological support, and care for children."

UNICEF has been working for the past eight years in and across eastern Ukraine to shore up life-saving programs for children, and has staff in the country in more than five locations, according to Khan.

"But clearly, in the last few days, the needs of children and families are escalating in line with the conflict," she added.
Donbas, an area with a predominantly Russian-speaking population, has been engulfed by conflict since 2014, when the Ukrainian authorities unleashed a military operation against the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, which refused to recognize the new government in Kiev, which came to power after what they considered to be a coup. In recent months, the situation on the line of contact between Ukrainian forces and the two republics has worsened. On Thursday, Russia launched a military operation after the Donbas republics appealed for help. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

Fed Inflation Indicator Grows 6.1% in January, Fastest in 40 Years - US Commerce Dept

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, grew again at its fastest pace in four decades in the year to January, data from the Commerce Department showed on Friday. The so-called PCE Index rose by 6.1% in the 12 months to January after a 5.8% growth in the year to December, the data showed. Both readings indicated the fastest growth since 1982.

Biden to Announce Supreme Court Nominee on Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce on Friday his Supreme Court nominee, who is expected to be the first black woman to hold the post, CNN reported, citing people in the know. Biden has already made his decision, and even if the announcement is delayed due to the Ukraine crisis, it will take place no later than Monday, the report said. The president is said to have met with at least three potential nominees, including Ketanji Brown Jackson, Leondra Kruger, and J. Michelle Childs. During a 2020 presidential debate, Biden pledged to nominate a black female jurist to the country's highest court.

US, UAE Sign Bilateral Agreement Focused on Law Enforcement Cooperation - Statement
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) that regulates evidence sharing, judicial cooperation and assistance in criminal investigations and prosecutions, the US Justice Department said.

"The new agreement enhances bilateral relations by affording both nations with improved information-sharing and creates a regularized and streamlined channel for obtaining law enforcement assistance," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday. The Justice Department said in the release that MLAT will enable prosecutors to exchange information facilitating the prevention, investigation and prosecution of crime.

"It will improve cooperation in the fight against terrorism, cybercrime, drug trafficking, bulk cash smuggling, money laundering, fraud and other serious transnational criminal offenses," the release said.

The treaty removes onerous procedural obstacles to cooperation while ensuring adherence to the protections of the US Constitution and other laws, the release added.

Officials from the departments of Justice and State, US Embassy in Abu Dhabi, FBI and the UAE's ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs were present at the signing ceremony.

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Blinken Urges India Foreign Minister to Condemn Russia on Ukraine - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with India's Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar urged and urged a strong international collective condemnation of Russia over Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar today to discuss Russia's premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine," Price said on Thursday.

Blinken called for the condemnation to be accompanied by calls for a ceasefire and immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from the two secessionist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, Price said.

"Secretary Blinken stressed the importance of a strong collective response to condemn Russia's invasion and call for an immediate withdrawal and ceasefire," Price added.

Earlier on Thursday, Russia launched a military operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and civilians are not in danger. Moscow says that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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Parents Charged in Connection With Michigan School Shooting Ordered to Stand Trial - Judge

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The parents of Michigan school shooting suspect Ethan Crumbley will stand trial for charges for being allegedly responsible for the incident, Judge Julie Nicholson said during a court hearing.

Ethan Crumbley, 15, is charged with murder and terrorism, while his parents James and Jennifer Crumbley are charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter each for their alleged role in obtaining the gun for Ethan and failing to prevent the shooting.

"There is extensive testimony that Ethan Crumbley was certainly a troubled young man, and that the defendants had knowledge of that situation, but they purchased a gun, which he believed was his and that he was free to use. Therefore, the court is binding the defendants over as charged," Nicholson said during the hearing on Thursday.

The couple purchased the firearm used in the attack just days before the shooting and did not take seriously concerning reports from school staff about their son’s behavior, the prosecutors in the case said.

Ethan Crumbley will plead insanity as a defense in the case brought against him, according to court documents. He is currently being held at an adult detention facility despite objections from his defense due to the threat he could potentially pose to other juveniles, in accordance with a previous decision by Judge Nancy Carniak.

US Says China Cannot Compensate Russia for Losses Caused By Western Sanctions

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - China cannot compensate Russia for the losses caused by newly-announced US and European sanctions, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"[China] they cannot cover what the impact of the sanctions that have been announced in coordination with Europe would, how they would impact Russia," Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday.

White House Says in Contact With Ukraine’s Zelenskyy, Ready to Provide Support

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration remains in contact Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensyy amid an ongoing Russian special military operation and is ready to provide support, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"We are in touch with President Zelenskyy and we are working to provide him a range of support," Psaki told a press briefing on Thursday.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

US Sees No Increased Threat of Russia Using Nuclear Weapons - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see a heightened threat of Russia using nuclear weapons amid the Donbas military operation, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said. "We don't see any increased threat in that regard at this point in time," Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday, when asked if there's a threat of Russia using nuclear weapons.

US Prepared to Accept Ukrainian Refugees - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to accept Ukrainian refugees even though it expects most to stay in Europe, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing. When asked by a reporter on Thursday whether the US was prepared to accept refugees from Ukraine, Psaki said, "We are, but we certainly expect that most, if not the majority, will want to go to Europe in neighboring countries."

US Says Road to Diplomacy Always Open, But Not in Immediate Aftermath of Russian Operation

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States believes the path to diplomacy is always open, but not in the immediate aftermath of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine, senior White House adviser Daldeep Singh said. "The road to diplomacy is always open - diplomacy is never dead. But, in this circumstance, in the immediate aftermath of an invasion, that option is not available," Singh told a press conference on Thursday.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

White House Says in Talks With Congress About Providing Additional Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is in talks with the US Congress about providing further aid to Ukraine amid ongoing conflict with Russia, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing.

"We are in conversations with Congress, and I mentioned the President spoke with leaders just earlier this afternoon. I don't have an exact number, but those are ongoing conversations about what needs the Ukrainians have on the ground in a variety of categories: security, humanitarian, other economic assistance," Psaki said on Thursday.

US Sanctions Not to Cause Any Disruption of Energy Flow From Russia to World - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The latest US sanctions against Russia have been designed in such a way so as not to cause any disruption to the current flow of energy from Russia to the world, Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh said during a press briefing.

"Our sanctions are not designed to cause any disruption to the current flow of energy from Russia to the world. We've carved out energy payments on a time bound basis to allow for an orderly transition of these flows away from sanction institutions. And we provided other licenses to provide for an orderly wind down of business," Singh said on Thursday.


WASHINGTON, February 24, (Sputnik) - A corrections officer with the Washington, DC Department of Corrections has been arrested on charges that he accepted bribes to allow drugs, weapons and other restricted items to get into the Central Detention Facility (CDF), the US Justice Department said.
“Johnson Ayuk, 31, of Bowie, Maryland, is charged in a criminal complaint filed in the US District Court for the District of Columbia with bribery and providing or possessing contraband in prison, both federal offenses,” the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The Justice Department said Ayuk was arrested at the Central Detention Facility and made his initial appearance before Magistrate Judge Robin Meriweather, the release said.

The judge released Ayuk on high-intensity supervision pending a preliminary hearing set for March 10, the release said.

Ayuk has been an officer with Department of Corrections since April of 2021 and was assigned to the Central Detention Facility to help maintain the order and security of people in the facility, the release added.

Ayuk is charged with participating in a smuggling operation where he was paid by the girlfriend of an inmate so that she could bring knives, drugs, and cellular telephones for incarcerated individuals in the facility, according to the release.

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Russian Ambassador to Ottawa on Visit to Foreign Ministry: Disagreements Run Deep

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik after visiting Canada’s Foreign Ministry that the disagreements between the two countries are deep.

Stepanov visited Global Affairs Canada earlier on Thursday on the invitation of Foreign Minister Melanie Joly after Russia began its military operation in Ukraine.

“It was a political demarche at the level of the Minister of Foreign Affairs,” Stepanov said. “I was invited, Minister Joly outlined in detail the Canadian position regarding what is happening in and around Ukraine, this position was predictably critical and did not coincide with our assessments of the situation. As a result of the conversation, I can state the existence of deep disagreements between Canadian and Russian assessments of this story.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that Canada is imposing a second round of sanctions against Russia, targeting 58 individuals and entities.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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Canada’s Sanctions Against Russia ‘Useless,’ Moscow Reserves Right to Respond - Envoy
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Canada’s sanctions against Russia are pointless and Moscow reserves the right to respond both symmetrically and asymmetrically, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

“We have already said everything about the sanctions, it is pointless to comment on them. The Russian side has repeatedly said that Western sanctions are completely useless in this situation, they will not have an impact on either Russia or on resolving a wider crisis within the framework of the European security,” Stepanov said. “We perceive them with regret, and reserve the right to react both symmetrically and asymmetrically with regard to both personal and economic sanctions.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that Canada is imposing a second round of sanctions against Moscow, targeting 58 individuals and entities, after President Vladimir Putin approved a special military operation in the Donbas region.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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Canada-Russia Ties in ‘Serious Crisis,’ But Diplomatic Channels Open - Ambassador Stepanov

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Relations between Ottawa and Moscow are currently in a state of severe crisis, but diplomatic channels remain open, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

“I believe that our relations are in a serious crisis, and it’s not Russia’s fault,” Stepanov said. “However, the channels of interstate communication, primarily through the foreign ministries of the two countries, remain open.”

Stepanov stressed that the Russian side believes that diplomatic contacts should be maintained in all circumstances.

“Because in the absence of diplomacy it is impossible to resolve any issues - even those on which we have seemingly insurmountable differences,” the envoy said. “The embassy along with our consular institutions will continue to work professionally and rhythmically, ensuring diplomatic channels of communication with the official Ottawa, and continuing the normal consular service to our citizens.”

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Jury Finds 3 Officers Involved in George Floyd Murder Guilty on Civil Rights Charges
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - A US jury found three former Minneapolis police officers involved in the murder of George Floyd guilty on civil rights violation charges, the Star Tribune reported on Thursday.
The jury found Tou Thao, Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane guilty on civil rights charges, including failure to render medical aid to Floyd and failure to intervene to stop fellow former officer Derek Chauvin from kneeling on his neck, the report said.
The jury also found that the officers’ actions resulted in Floyd’s death, which could lead to them receiving significantly higher sentences. The jury delivered its verdict after approximately 13 hours of deliberation.

World Bank Ready to Provide Immediate Support to Ukraine - President
(Updates with additional details in para 3, background in para 4)
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group is ready to provide Ukraine with immediate financial support amid the conflict with Russia, President David Malpass said.
"We stand ready to provide immediate support to Ukraine and are preparing options for such support, including fast-disbursing financing. Alongside development partners, the World Bank Group will use all our financing and technical support tools for rapid response," Malpas said in a statement on Thursday.
The World Bank is currently engaged in “active dialogue” with Ukraine’s neighbors to also support them as well and make additional resources available, Malpass added.
Earlier on Thursday, Russia launched a military operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and civilians are not in danger. Moscow says that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

World Bank Ready to Provide Immediate Support to Ukraine - President
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group is ready to provide Ukraine with immediate financial support amid the conflict with Russia, President David Malpass said.
"We stand ready to provide immediate support to Ukraine and are preparing options for such support, including fast-disbursing financing. Alongside development partners, the World Bank Group will use all our financing and technical support tools for rapid response," Malpas said in a statement on Thursday.
US Providing Ukraine With $600Mln in Lethal Defense Weapons - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said she wants to provide Ukraine with $600 million worth of lethal defense weapons to use against Russian forces.

"What we’re doing with Ukraine is making sure that we have humanitarian assistance to help the people, that we have lethal defense weapons going into Ukraine to the tune of $600 million dollars for them to fight their own fight," Pelosi said during a press briefing on Thursday.

Wall Street Up 1st Time in 6 Days After Early Plunge Based on Russia-Ukraine Worries

NEW YORK, February 24 (Sputnik) - US stocks closed up on Thursday for the first time in six days as Wall Street recovered from an early plunge triggered by worries related to Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

Wall Street's three major stock indices - the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq Composite - finished between flat and 3% higher.

The indices began the day between 2% and 3% lower after Russia announced on Wednesday it was undertaking a special military action aimed to achieve a "demilitarization" and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine.

Stocks rebounded as investors expected the Federal Reserve to take a more cautious approach with impending US interest rate hikes amid the potential for heightened geopolitical fallout from the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

"As the Russia-Ukraine conflict intensifies, expectations for Fed rate hikes will vary as some traders anticipate inflation shock to trigger aggressive tightening, while others focus on the downside risks to the economy," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

In expanded sanctions against Russia, President Joe Biden restricted the international access for five major Russian banks; froze Russian assets in the United States and curtailed Russia's ability to import key technology needed for military and industrial upgrades.

But Biden avoided hurting Russia's oil and gas exports, which analysts have said are critical, especially to Europe. Investors took that positively and also viewed the remaining sanctions as potential flashpoints for more Russia-Western troubles that might discourage the Fed from pursuing excessively high interest rates for the United States.

Earlier on Thursday, Senior Federal Reserve officials Tom Barkin and Raphael Bostic said the Russia-Ukraine crisis might not alter the central bank's planned course of interest rate hikes this year, although the US economy is in "uncharted territory" due to the crisis.
Even prior to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Wall Street has been falling on concerns about runaway US inflation as the economy recovered strongly from the 2020 coronavirus outbreak. After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 measures, the US economy grew 5.7% in 2021. But inflation grew even faster, expanding by 5.8% in the year to December, its most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department.

To counter that inflation, the Federal Reserve plans to shift from a policy of near-zero rates to one where there could be a maximum of seven rate hikes this year, with a hike of a quarter-to-half percentage point in each round.

In Thursday’s trade, The Dow Jones Industrial Average index, made up mostly of industrial stocks, closed up 0.3%. For February though, the Dow was down 5.4%, and for the year, it slid 8.6%.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, rose nearly 1.5% on the day. For the month, it was down 5%, and for the year, it showed a 10% loss.

Nasdaq, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq and Google, jumped 3.3% for Thursday. It was down 5.4% for February and 13.9% for 2022.

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US Congress Would Support 'Devastating' Sanctions Against Kremlin - Senate Minority Leader

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Congress would support "devastating sanctions" against Russia for conducting a military operation in Ukraine, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said.

"Congress would support truly devastating sanctions against the Kremlin and its enablers," McConnell said in a statement on Thursday.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

The US Senate reconvenes for legislative business on Monday afternoon.

McConnell said the upcoming defense spending legislation that lawmakers will craft should be an opportunity to include measures to redouble material support for Ukraine, bolster energy independence and invest in the capabilities for long-term competition with Russia and China.

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NASA Delays Artemis 1 Lunar Mission Test Launch Until at Least May - Officials
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - NASA's unmanned first trial launch of its giant Space Launch System (SLS) space rocket with the Orion 1 lunar spacecraft integrated on it has been delayed for at least one month and will not now take place until May at the earliest and possibly June, US space agency officials told a press conference.

"[The] launch date will not be set till after the Wet Test," NASA Deputy Associate Administrator for Exploration Systems Development Tom Whitmeyer said on Thursday. "[There is] no launch commitment date as yet. We are looking at a May launch window."

The May launch window extends from May 7 to May 21, NASA officials said. However, on February 2, Lead Flight Director Mike Serafin told an earlier press conference that NASA was looking at the April 8 to April 23 time window for the launch and that information on it then looked "pretty solid."

"[The] June launch period opens on June 6 and closes on June 16. ... [The next one] opens on June 29 and it will close on July 12," Serafin told reporters on Thursday.

Serafin said the integrated SLS, the largest rocket ever built with the Orion 1 spacecraft on it, was scheduled to be rolled out on its launch pad at the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida on March 17 and was likely to stay there going through its wet dress rehearsal checks for the next month.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN'S REMARKS ON RUSSIA, UKRAINE
* The United States and its allies and partners in Europe will provide Ukraine with humanitarian relief amid the conflict with Russia, US President Joe Biden said during remarks about the Russia-Ukraine situation on Thursday.
* Biden said on Thursday that removing Russia from the SWIFT international financial system is always an option but not one Europe wishes to take now.
* The US government will take appropriate steps, including releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), to prevent increases in gas prices for US consumers amid concerns about the global energy supply due to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Biden said.
* US forces are not and will not be engaged in Ukraine to fight against Russia in the ongoing military conflict there, Biden said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* The Russian military has disabled 74 ground facilities of the Ukrainian military infrastructure, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said on Thursday.
* Volodymyr Zelenskyy submitted a bill on general mobilization to the Ukrainian Parliament, the Ukrainian news agency UNIAN reported.
* Kiev is terminating diplomatic relations with Moscow amid Russia’s military operation, Zelenskyy said.
* Russia did not receive any notifications from Ukraine on severance of diplomatic relations yet, a diplomatic source told Sputnik.
* Ukraine’s severance of diplomatic relations with Russia was not Moscow’s choice, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik, adding that Kiev’s move was the logical end to its “Russophobic policy.”
* Kiev Mayor Vitali Klitschko enforced curfew in the city from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. (20:00 - 05:00 GMT) and urged all citizens to carry identification documents and return home on time.

**ATTACKS ON DONBAS**
* Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region are deploying military equipment in civilian areas in order to use civilians as human shields, Lt. Col. of the People’s Militia of the Luhansk People’s Republic Andrei Marochko said on Thursday.
* The RT Arabic film crew came under fire from the Ukrainian troops on the line of contact in Donbas, the broadcaster said.
* Ukrainian troops are preparing a series of explosions at enterprises in Kiev-controlled Mariupol, Avdiivka and other large cities, the territorial defense task force of the Donetsk People’s Republic said.

**SACTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA**
* Vladimir Zelenskyy said on Thursday that he has discussed additional "tough sanctions" against Russia with French President Emmanuel Macron, including disconnecting Moscow from the SWIFT financial system.
* Zelenskyy said he also discussed sanctions against Russia and military assistance to Ukraine with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, French President Emmanuel Macron, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
* Switzerland has imposed sanctions on three Russian banks and travel restrictions on 361 Russian lawmakers, Swiss President Ignazio Cassis said.
* Czech President Milos Zeman criticized Russia’s actions in Ukraine and called for disconnecting Russia from the SWIFT system.
* The United States is introducing sanctions against Russia’s Sberbank and ordered all US financial institutions to close any Sberbank correspondent or payable-through accounts within a month, the Treasury announced.
* The United States is imposing export control sanctions targeting Russia’s defense, aerospace, and maritime sectors over a military operation in Ukraine, the Commerce Department said.

**US TROOPS IN EUROPE**
* The Biden administration is considering sending more American troops already in Europe to countries further east after Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday, citing an unnamed US official.
* The US F-35 warplanes have arrived in Lithuania on Thursday, the Lithuanian Defense Ministry said.
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin authorized the deployment of additional 7,000 troops to Germany to reassure NATO allies amid tensions in Ukraine, a senior Defense Department official.

EU VISAS FOR RUSSIAN CITIZENS
* The European Union cannot yet comment on a ban on visas for Russians to enter EU member states as all measures will be discussed at the summit on Thursday, a EU foreign policy service source told Sputnik.
* The Czech Republic is suspending the issuance of visas to Russian citizens, except for humanitarian cases, Prime Minister Petr Fiala said.
* Latvia is recalling its ambassador from Moscow and is suspending the issuance of visas to Russian citizens, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said.

Canada Bans Flights in Airspace of Ukraine, Surrounding Areas – Ministry
TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Canada has issued a ban on flights in the airspace of Ukraine and surrounding areas in light of Russia's military operation, Transport Canada said on Thursday.
"In response to the unfolding conflict targeting Ukraine, we've issued a [Notice to Airmen] NOTAM prohibiting Canadian air operators and owners of Canadian-registered aircraft from entering Ukrainian airspace," Transport Canada said in a statement via Twitter.
The ban also applies to the airspace within 100 miles of Ukraine's borders, including the Russian cities of Moscow and Rostov, Belarus' Minsk and Chisinau, Moldova, the ministry said.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 24 Belarusian Individuals, Entities - Treasury Dept.
(Updates with details in paras 4-8)
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions against 24 Belarusian individuals and entities following Russia's military operation in the Donbas, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.
"As part of the United States' serious and expansive response to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning 24 Belarusian individuals and entities due to Belarus's support for, and facilitation of, the invasion," the Treasury Department said in a press release.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the
The newly-announced sanctions target Belinvestbank, Limited Liability Company Belinvest-Engineering, CJSC Belbizneslizing and Bank Dabrabyt, the release said. Belarus' defense and security industries are also targeted, including the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant and its senior executives Aliaksei Ivanavich Rymasheuski and Aliaksandr Piatrovich Vetsianevich, the release said.

The State Authority for Military Industry of the Republic of Belarus and its Chairman Dmitry Aleksandrovich Pantus and Deputy Chairman Viachaslau Yevgenyevich Rassalai have also been designated, the release said. Other sanctioned firms include Belspetsneshotechnika, OJSC KB Radar-Managing Company Holding Radar System, JSC 558 Aircraft Repair Plant, Public Joint Stock Company Integral, Industrial-Commercial Private Unitary Enterprise Minotor-Service, OOO Oboronnye Initsiativy, OKB TSP Scientific Production Limited Liability Company, LLC Synesis, among others, the release added.

The United States also sanctioned Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Gennadievich Khrenin, the Belarusian State Secretary of the Security Council Aleksandr Grigorievich Volfovich, according to the release.

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Canadian Diplomats Suspend Operations in Ukraine, Evacuate to Poland – Global Affairs

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) – Canada has suspended the operations of its diplomatic corps in Ukraine and evacuated them to Poland, Global Affairs Canada said on Thursday. "The situation in Ukraine has rapidly deteriorated and poses serious challenges. As a result, we are temporarily suspending operations at both our embassy and our consulate in Ukraine. Canadian personnel are now safely in Poland," Global Affairs said in a statement.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Confirms Expelling No. 2 Diplomat at Russian Embassy - State Dept.
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States informed the Russian Embassy in Washington that it is expelling its Minister Counselor in a tit-for-tat move, a State Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik on Thursday.

"We can confirm that the United States informed the Russian Embassy that we are expelling its Minister Counselor," the spokesperson said. "The Russian Deputy Chief of Mission previously departed as part of a normal rotation. The Minister Counselor is the next most senior official at the Russian Embassy."

The spokesperson said the decision is in response to the Russian expulsion of the Deputy Chief of the US Mission in Moscow.

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US Sanctions Ivanov, Patrushev, Sechin and Their Adult Children Over Ukraine - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Russia’s Sergei Ivanov, Nikolai Patrushev, Igor Sechin and their adult children in response to Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"The following designations target influential Russians in [President Vladimir] Putin’s inner circle and in elite positions of power within the Russian state," the statement said.

The Treasury sanctions the son of the member of the Russian Security Council, Sergei B. Ivanov. Sergei S. Ivanov is the CEO of state-owned diamond mining company Alrosa and a board member of Gazprombank.

Andrey Patrushev, the son of Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, was also designated by the United States, with his property or interests in property blocked, the Treasury said.

In addition, Ivan Sechin, son of Rosneft chief Igor Sechin, was also added to the sanctions list.

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New US Sanctions Target Nearly 80% of All Banking Assets in Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - New sanctions over Ukraine target almost 80% of all banking assets in Russia and will have a long-lasting effect on the Russian economy, the Treasury said on Thursday.

"The U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today imposed expansive economic measures, in partnership with allies and partners, that target the core infrastructure of the Russian financial system — including all of Russia’s largest financial institutions and the ability of state-owned and private entities to raise capital — and further bars Russia from the global financial system," the release said. "The actions also target nearly 80 percent of all banking assets in Russia and will have a deep and long-lasting effect on the Russian economy and financial system."
The sanctions target Sberbank, VTB, Russian Agricultural Bank, Gazprombank, Otkritie, Novikombank, and Sovcombank.

US FAA Expands Area in E. Europe, Russia Where American Airlines, Pilots Cannot Operate

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Thursday it expanded the area in Eastern Europe and Russia where American airlines and pilots cannot operate.
"The FAA issued Notices to Air Missions (NOTAMs) expanding the area in Eastern Europe and Russia where US airlines and US pilots cannot operate," the FAA said in a statement. "The expanded NOTAMs now cover the entire country of Ukraine, the entire country of Belarus and a western portion of Russia."

The FAA said that before today's restrictions, the FAA prohibited operations in an eastern region of Ukraine. Moreover, these restrictions do not apply to military operations.

US Sanctions Sberbank, Orders Closure of Its Correspondent, Payable-Through Accounts

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is introducing sanctions against Russia's Sberbank and ordered all US financial institutions to close any Sberbank correspondent or payable-through accounts within a month, the Treasury announced on Thursday.
"Today Treasury is imposing correspondent and payable-through account sanctions on Sberbank. Sberbank is uniquely important to the Russian economy, holding about a third of all bank assets in Russia," the release said. "Within 30 days, OFAC is requiring all U.S. financial institutions to close any Sberbank correspondent or payable-through accounts and to reject any future transactions involving Sberbank or its foreign financial institution subsidiaries. Payments that Sberbank attempts to process in U.S. dollars for its clients — with examples ranging from technology to transportation — will be disrupted and rejected once the payment hits a U.S. financial institution."

New US Home Sales Down More Than 19% in Year to January - Commerce Dept.
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Sales of new US single-family homes fell more than 19% in January from a year ago, the Commerce Department said on Thursday as record high property prices appeared to thwart buyers as much as concerns about rising lending rates attracted them.

"Sales of new single-family houses in January 2022 were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 801,000, " the Commerce Department said in a press release. "This is 4.5 percent... below the revised December rate of 839,000 and is 19.3 percent... below the January 2021 estimate of 993,000."
The drop was in line with the expectations of economists polled by US media.

"The market is struggling to balance the demand equation with rising rates," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive platform.

Dire housing shortages since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and last year’s coronavirus outbreak have led to a scramble among first-time home buyers, triggering record high prices. Sales of existing homes hit 6.5 million in January, up from 6.18 million in December. The Commerce Department said the median selling price for a new home in December was $377,700 while the average was $457,300. In November, the median was at $416,900 while the average was $481,700 - both at a record high.

The high prices have deterred some potential buyers. US mortgage applications have fallen to their lowest in more than two years as rising lending rates impact both first-time buyers of homes well as those refinancing their properties, the Mortgage Bankers Association said Wednesday.

Mortgage bankers have raised their lending rates in anticipation of the first interest rate hikes in two years due from the Federal Reserve, which is fighting one of the worst periods of inflation in the United States.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19, the US economy grew 5.7% in 2021. But inflation grew faster, expanding by 5.8% in the year to December, its most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department. To compound the mad rush for homes, the Federal Reserve is expected to raise interest rates by as many as five to seven times this year. That has worsened the race among first-time buyers of homes eager to lock in before even higher mortgage rates kick in.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 24 Belarusian Individuals, Entities - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions against 24 Belarusian individuals and entities following Russia's military operation in the Donbas, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"As part of the United States’ serious and expansive response to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning 24 Belarusian individuals and entities due to Belarus’s support for, and facilitation of, the invasion," the Treasury Department said in a press release.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Puts Export Controls on Russia’s Defense, Aerospace, Maritime Sectors – Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing export control sanctions targeting Russia’s defense, aerospace, and maritime sectors over a military operation in Ukraine, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Commerce Department, through its Bureau of Industry and Security, responded to Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine by implementing a sweeping series of stringent export controls that will severely restrict Russia’s access to technologies ... These controls primarily target Russia’s defense, aerospace, and maritime sectors and will cut off Russia’s access to vital technological inputs, atrophy key sectors of its industrial base, and undercut its strategic ambitions to exert influence on the world stage," the Commerce Department said in a press release.

From now on, Moscow will be prohibited from purchasing an array of high-tech items, including semiconductors, computers, telecommunications, information security equipment, lasers, and sensors, the department added.

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US Defense Secretary Authorizes Deploying 7,000 Additional Troops to Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin authorized the deployment of additional 7,000 troops to Germany to reassure NATO allies amid tensions in Ukraine, a senior Defense Department official said on Thursday.

"At the direction of the President, Secretary of Defense Austin has ordered the deployment to Europe of approximately 7,000 additional Service Members. This would comprise an armored brigade combat team with associated capabilities and enablers," the official said.

The additional troops will deploy to Germany in the coming days to reassure NATO allies, the official added.

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Biden Speaks of 'Complete Rupture' in US-Russia Relations If They Continue This Way

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that there is a "complete rupture" right now in US-Russian relations if they continue this way. "There is a complete rupture right now in US-Russia relations if they continue on path that they're on," Biden said.

Biden Says US, European Partners Will Provide Ukraine With Humanitarian Relief

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies and partners in Europe will provide Ukraine with humanitarian relief amid the conflict with Russia, US President Joe Biden said during remarks about the Russia-Ukraine situation on Thursday. "I spoke last night to President [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy of Ukraine, and I assured him that the United States together with our allies and partners in Europe will support the Ukrainian people as they defend their country. We'll provide humanitarian relief to ease their suffering," Biden said.

Biden Says Putin Wants Go Beyond Ukraine, Re-Establish Soviet Union

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he believes Russian President Vladimir Putin will go beyond Ukraine because he wants to re-establish the former Soviet Union. "Yes, "Biden said during a press briefing when asked if he thinks Putin will go beyond Ukraine. "He has much larger ambitions in Ukraine. He wants to in fact to reestablish the former Soviet Union. That's what this is about and I think that his ambitions are completely contrary to the place where the rest of the world has arrived."

Biden Says Has No Plans to Speak With Putin at This Point

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he has no plans to speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
Earlier in the day, Russia began a military operation in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics for help in countering Ukrainian aggression.

"I have no plans to talk with Putin," Biden said during a press conference, as he announced new sanctions on Moscow.

Biden Says SWIFT Sanctions Always Option, Not One Europe Wishes to Take Now
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that removing Russia from the SWIFT international financial system is always an option but not one Europe wishes to take now.

"It is always an option, but right now, that's not the position that the rest of Europe wishes to take," Biden said during a press conference at the White House.

Biden Says Working to Prevent Rising Gas Prices, Will Release Reserve Oil as Needed
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US government will take appropriate steps, including releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), to prevent increases in gas prices for US consumers amid concerns about the global energy supply due to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"As we respond, my administration is using every tool at its disposal to protect American families and businesses from rising prices at the gas pump... And the United States will release additional barrels of oil [from strategic reserves] as conditions warrant," Biden said during remarks on the Russia-Ukraine situation.

Biden Says Sanctioning Putin Is On The Table
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that sanctioning Russian President Vladimir Putin is on the table.

"It is on the table," Biden said, when asked whether it's a step that he is prepared to take.
Biden Says US Prepared to Respond if Russia Conducts Cyber Attacks

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration is prepared to respond if Russia conducts cyber attacks against the United States. "If Russia pursues cyber attacks against our companies, our critical infrastructure, we are prepared to respond," Biden said during remarks on the Russia-Ukraine situation at the White House.

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Biden Says Authorized Deployment of Additional US Forces to Germany to Aid NATO

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The deployment of additional US forces to Germany to reinforce NATO's presence on its eastern flank has been authorized, President Joe Biden said during remarks on the Ukraine-Russia situation on Thursday. "Today, within hours of Russia unleashing its assault, NATO came together and authorized an activation response plan. This will enable NATO's high-readiness forces to deploy when and where they're needed to protect our NATO allies on the eastern boundaries of Europe. And now I'm authorizing additional US force capabilities to deploy to Germany as part of NATO's response, including some US-based forces that the Department of Defense placed on standby weeks ago," Biden said.

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Biden Says US Sanctions Will Prevent Russia From Financing, Growing Military

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - New US sanctions will prevent Russia from financing and growing their military, President Joe Biden said on Thursday. "We're going to stop their ability to finance and grow the Russian military," Biden said.

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Biden Says US Forces Not to Be Engaged in Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US forces are not and will not be engaged in Ukraine to fight against Russia in the ongoing military conflict there, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"Our forces are not and will not be engaged in a conflict with Russia in Ukraine. Our forces are not going to Europe to fight in Ukraine, but to defend our NATO allies and reassure those allies in the east, "Biden said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says US Sanctioning 4 More Russian Banks, Will Cut Off Half of High-Tech Imports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the United States is targeting for sanctions four more major Russian banks, including the second largest VTB Bank.
"Today, we are blocking four more major banks. That means every asset they have in America will be frozen. This includes VTB, the second largest bank in Russia," Biden said.
Biden added that the US government estimates it will cut off more than half of Russia's high-tech imports.

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Biden Says New Sanctions to Hit Russia's Aerospace Industry

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - New US sanctions on Russia in response to a military operation in Ukraine will "degrade" its aerospace industry and ability to build ships, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"It [sanctions] will degrade their aerospace industry, including their space program, hurt their ability to build ships, reducing their ability to complete economically. And it will be a major hit to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's long term strategic ambitions, and we are preparing to do more," Biden said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says US Will Limit Russian Ability to Do Business in Dollars, Euro, Yen

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - New sanctions will limit Russia's ability to do business in dollars, euros and yen, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"We will limit Russia's ability to do business in dollars, euros, pounds, and yen, to be part of the global economy, we will limit their ability to do that," Biden said.
New Sanctions Maximize Long-Term Impact on Russia, Minimize Harm to US - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has purposely designed new sanctions to maximize a long-term impact on Russia while minimizing effect on America and its allies, President Joe Biden said on Thursday. "We have purposely designed these sanctions to maximize a long-term impact on Russia and to minimize the impact on the United States and our allies," Biden said.

Biden Says Authorizing New Sanctions, Restrictions on Exports to Russia

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is authorizing new sanctions and restrictions on exports to Russia over the Ukraine crisis. "Today I am authorizing additional strong sanctions and new limitations on what can be exported to Russia," Biden said.

Biden Says Putin Rejected Every Good Faith Effort for Diplomacy by US, Allies

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that Russian President Vladimir Putin has refused all sincere efforts by the United States and its allies and partners for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crises. "He [Putin] moved blood supplies into position and build a field hospital, which tells you all you need to know about his intentions all along, rejected every good faith effort the United States and our allies and partners made to address our mutual security concerns through dialogue to avoid needless conflict and avert human suffering," Biden said.

US Says Reports of Biden Mulling Cyberattack on Russia Do Not Reflect Reality - Reports
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - A White House National Security Council spokesperson said the NBC report about President Joe Biden weighing cyberattacks against Russia "does not reflect what is actually being discussed," Reuters reported on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, NBC News, citing unnamed sources, said the Biden administration is considering the option of disrupting internet connectivity across Russia, shutting off the country's electrical power and tampering with railroad switches in order to interfere with Moscow's ability to resupply its forces.

UN Chief Calls on Putin to Stop Military Operation in Ukraine, Bring Troops Home

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to stop the military operation in Ukraine and bring all troops back to Russia.

"We are seeing Russian military operations inside the sovereign territory of Ukraine on a scale that Europe has not seen in decades," Guterres said in a statement. "I repeat my appeal from last night to President Putin: Stop the military operation. Bring the troops back to Russia. We know the toll of war."

Trudeau Says Arranged Safe Passage for Canadians in Ukraine to Neighboring States

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Canadian citizens and permanent residents in Ukraine have a safe passage corridor available to them to neighboring Eastern European countries, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"We've arranged for safe passage for [Canadian citizens and permanent] residents and their families at the land borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova," Trudeau told a news conference in Ottawa.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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UN Allocates $20Mln to Provide Aid to People in Ukraine - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is allocating $20 million from its emergency humanitarian fund to support the people of Ukraine, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday.

"We are seeing images of fear, anguish and terror in every corner of Ukraine. People, every day, innocent people always pay the highest price. That is why the United Nations is scaling up our humanitarian operations in and around Ukraine. Today, I'm announcing that we will immediately okay 20 million US dollars from the Central Emergency Response Fund to meet urgent needs," Guterres said.

The United Nations and humanitarian partners are committed to supporting people in Ukraine after Russia announced a military operation in the country, he added.

Canada Targets 58 Individuals, Entities in 'Further, Severe Sanctions' on Russia – Trudeau

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) – Canada is imposing a second round of sanctions against Moscow after President Vladimir Putin approved a special military operation in the Donbas region, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"We are imposing further, severe sanctions. These sanctions will target 58 individuals and entities, including members of the Russian elite and their family members," Trudeau told a news conference in Ottawa.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Weighs Proposals to Disrupt Internet Across Russia, Shut Off Electrical Power - Reports (Updates with more details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering the option of disrupting internet connectivity across Russia, shutting off the country's electrical power and tampering with railroad switches in order to interfere with Moscow's ability to resupply its forces, NBC News reported on Thursday.

Sources familiar with the matter said President Joe Biden has been presented with a range of cyberattack options available to use against Russia but no final decision has been made, the report said.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from the ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.
US officials are divided over whether to conduct cyberattacks against Russia because of fear that such a course of action could escalate as Russia would be expected to retaliate with disruptions to US infrastructure, the report said.
The sources said the cyber options presented to Biden are designed to disrupt but not destroy Russia's infrastructure. US officials are currently debating the legal authorities to carry out such activity, the report said.
The United States will not publicly acknowledge carrying out such cyber operations if it decides to go through with the proposed plan, the report added.
Should the United States conducts cyberattacks against Russia, it is certain that the CIA, National Security Agency and the US Cyber Command among other US government agencies, will contribute to the operation, according to the report.

Canada Seizes All Export Permits for Russia, Cancels Existing Permits – Trudeau

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Canada is seizing all export permits for Russia and canceling existing permits as part of a sanctions package over Ukraine, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.
"Effective immediately, we are seizing all export permits for Russia and canceling existing permits," Trudeau said during a press briefing.

Rosneft Not Expected to Be Target of New US Sanctions Against Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Russian energy giant Rosneft is not expected to be a target of the new US sanctions package after Moscow started a special military operation in Ukraine, Poltico reported on Thursday citing sources.
As the Biden administration prepares to announce a new package of sanctions against Russia, Rosneft will not be on the list of sanctioned companies, the report quoted two sources familiar with the discussions on sanctions.
The main focus of the new US sanctions package will be on Russia's financial institutions, the report said.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has failed to supply proper cost estimates for the maintenance and upkeep of its new fleet of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) for close-to-land and amphibious support operations, the Government Accountability Office said in a report on Thursday.

"The Navy's operating and support (O&S) cost estimates for the LCS do not account for the cost implications of its revised maintenance approach," the report said. "Specifically, the Navy has not assessed the cost implications of its revised maintenance approach, and thus lacks a clear picture of its impact on O&S costs."

Some of the actual operating and support cost data are also incomplete and inaccurate because the Navy has not updated its cost estimates to reflect its revised operational and sustainment concepts and has not incorporated actual cost data into some of its estimates, the report said.

"Without complete information on the cost of implementing the revised operational and sustainment concepts, and the use of actual cost data, the Navy will not be able to analyze the differences between estimates and actual costs - important elements for identifying and mitigating critical risks to the LCS," the report added.

The Navy estimates it will cost more than $60 billion to operate and support the 35 LCS it plans to build, including the 17 ships it has already delivered, according to the report.

US to Sanction Russian Banks, Oil Companies, Putin Personally - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The new US sanctions set to be announced later on Thursday will target Russian banks, oil companies and President Vladimir Putin himself, Bloomberg reported.

In the early hours of Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

US Weighs Proposals to Disrupt Internet Across Russia, Shut Off Electrical Power - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering the option to disrupt internet connectivity across Russia, shut off the country's electrical power and tamper with railroad switches, NBC News reported on Thursday.
Sources familiar with the matter said President Joe Biden has been presented with a range of cyberattack options available to use against Russia but no final decision has been made, the report said.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Business Community Supports Measures Against Russia Following Operation in Ukraine—CEO

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US business community supports that actions the Biden administration, Congress and US allies are taking to respond to Russia's military operation in Ukraine, US Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Suzanne Clark said on Thursday.
"The business community will continue to support the administration, Congress and our allies to ensure a swift and meaningful response to Russia's aggression," Clark said in a press release.
In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.
The Biden administration said it will announce a new set of sanctions against Russia on Thursday afternoon. President Joe Biden announced sanctions earlier this week against Russia's sovereign debt, Russian elites and their families as well as against two major banks. In addition, the US government also sanctioned the Nord Stream 2 AG pipeline operator and its corporate officers.

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Biden Says G7 Agreed to Move Forward With 'Devastating Sanctions' on Russia Over Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Group of Seven (G7) countries have agreed to impose "devastating sanctions" against Russia following Moscow's decision to begin a military operation in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"This morning, I met with my G7 counterparts to discuss President [Vladimir] Putin’s unjustified attack on Ukraine and we agreed to move forward on devastating packages of sanctions and other economic measures to hold Russia to account," Biden said via Twitter.

The G7 is a political forum comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

UN Security Council Plans to Vote on Resolution on Ukraine Friday - Source
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-7)
UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to vote on a resolution prepared by Western countries regarding the situation in Ukraine on Friday, a diplomatic source in the United Nations told Sputnik.
"It is expected tomorrow," the source said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security Council the United States will deliver a resolution after Russia began a special military operation to protect Donbas.

The draft resolution condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia’s alleged aggression against Ukraine in violation of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter, the source said.

Article 2 requires all UN member states to refrain from the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state.

The draft also "decides that the Russian Federation shall immediately cease its use of force" and "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw" all its forces from Ukraine.

In the early hours of Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend from Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry says the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow has said it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

Whelan’s Family Hopes Ukraine Tensions Will Not Impede US-Russia Discussions of His Case
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The family of American citizen Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16 year jail sentence for espionage in Russia, hopes that Moscow and Washington will continue contact regarding his case despite the current situation in Ukraine, his brother David Whelan told Sputnik on Thursday.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the start of a military operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk asked for help in countering aggression from Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only. US President Joe Biden is scheduled to
announce more sanctions later in the day, on top of those imposed for Moscow's recognition of 
the two Russian-speaking republics as independent. 
"The US and Russian Federation governments have always been able to discuss multiple 
issues: cybersecurity, nuclear weapons, and so on. To that extent, they have always discussed 
other things while also discussing Paul's case," David Whelan said. 
However, he did not rule out that the current situation may make those discussions more 
difficult. In addition, the family is concerned that sanctions against Russia could impede their 
ability to support Paul, for example, the transfer of money from the US to his prison account or 
phone card. They still hope the situation would not reach that point, his brother said. 

Asked about updates concerning his brother's case, David Whelan noted that Paul has been 
able to speak with his parents by phone. 
Whelan, who holds American, British, Canadian and Irish citizenship, is serving a sentence in 
Russia after a Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in prison in June 2020 on charges of 
espionage. He denies the charges, but did not challenge the verdict in hopes of being part of a 
prisoner exchange between the two countries.

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US Littoral Combat Ships Unproven to Operate in Planned Environment - Report

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The new US Navy fleet of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) 
may be unable to carry out their missions as they still have not been adequately tested and 
have key equipment and defense systems failings, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) 
said in a report on Thursday. 
"The Navy hasn't demonstrated that this type of ship can perform its intended missions," the 
report said. "For example, operational testing found challenges in the ship's defenses. ... Also, 
some key equipment has failed, and the Navy is behind schedule in developing capabilities 
such as mine countermeasures." 
The Navy is taking steps to address these and other issues, but it still does not have a 
comprehensive plan to resolve them, the report said. 
Until these problems are comprehensively addressed "the LCS will remain at risk of being 
unable to operate in its intended environment," the report said. 
Operational testing has found several significant challenges, including the ships' ability to 
defend themselves if attacked and failure rates of mission-essential equipment, the report 
added. 
The Navy estimates it will cost over $60 billion to operate and support the 35 LCS it plans to 
build, including the 17 it has already delivered, according to the report. 

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Biden's Remarks on Ukraine Moved to 18:30 GMT - White House
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has moved the time of his remarks on the Russia-Ukraine situation to 1:30 p.m. EST (18:30 GMT), the White House said on Thursday in a pool report.
The White House earlier said that the president will deliver his speech at 12:30 p.m. EST.
Biden during his remarks is expected to roll out more sanctions against Russia, cutting the country off from advanced technology and restricting large Russian financial entities, according to a CNN report.

US Transportation Safety Agency Launches Probe Into Faulty Brakes in Honda Vehicles
WASHINGTON, February 24, (Sputnik) - An investigation has been launched into late model Honda CR-V and Honda Accord vehicles after users lodged 278 complaints about defective emergency braking systems, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) said in a statement on Thursday.
"The complaints allege braking incidents, some with large speed changes, occurring with nothing obstructing the vehicle's path of travel. Of the 278 complaints, 6 allege a collision with minor injuries," the statement said.
The NHTSA explained its Office of Defects Investigation received 107 complaints about Honda Accord and 171 complaints about Honda CR-V breaking systems problems as well as several Early Warning Reports alleging inadvertent activation of the collision mitigation braking system in 2017-2019 Honda CR-V and 2018-2019 Honda Accord vehicles.
The problem could potentially affect the automatic emergency braking systems on more than 1.7 million newer model Honda vehicles that can cause them to stop for no reason. Automatic emergency braking systems can avoid crashes or slow down a vehicle if a driver is distracted or impaired while approaching an object. The systems can avert crashes or diminish their severity by applying the brakes for a driver.
NHTSA said the probe will determine the number of vehicles affected and the extent of the problem. Depending on what the investigators will find, the NHTSA may suggest issuing a recall of the vehicles.
Honda issued a statement saying it is cooperating with the NHTSA investigation and is conducting its own review. Consumers who experience any problems should contact their dealership, Honda added.

UNSC Plans to Vote on Resolution on Ukraine Friday - Source
UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to vote on a resolution prepared by Western countries in response to the situation in Ukraine on February 25, a diplomatic source in the UN told Sputnik on Thursday.

"It is expected tomorrow," the source said.

Earlier, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council that Washington will deliver to the UN Security Council a resolution after Russia began a military operation to protect Donbas.

Major Russian Icon to Be Sent to Europe for 1st Time Since Pandemic - Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The major Christian Orthodox relic of the Russian diaspora - the Kursk Root icon of the Mother of God - will leave North America on the way to Europe for the first time since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, but plans to send it to Russia remain uncertain, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) Synod of Bishops Vice President Mark (Arndt) told Sputnik.

"During the Great Lent, which begins on March 7 for Russian Orthodox Christians, the Kursk icon will visit ROCOR's Western European Diocese, then it will return to the Synod in New York for the Holy Week and Easter. After Easter, the icon will visit Germany," Mark, who is Metropolitan of Berlin and Germany, said.

The hierarch noted that ROCOR usually brings the Kursk icon, which is one of the oldest relics of the Orthodox church, back to Russia every year upon the request of the Kursk diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church.

However, Metropolitan Mark added that this year the Metropolitan of Kursk did not make such a request.

"I think the situation there is precarious now, including the events that are taking place nearby, in Ukraine," he said.

The icon dates back to 1295 when a hunter from the city of Rylsk near Kursk came across it at a root of a tree. Legend has it that the hunter picked up the icon and a spring of pure water gushed from the place where it lay upon. The hunter built a chapel near the site.

After the Act of Canonical Communion was signed in 2007, ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate agreed that the icon would be sent every September to Russia, including to the city of Kursk.

Christians have attributed numerous miracles to the icon. In the 14th century, the Tartars - descendants of the turkic tribes called Bulgars - came to raid the Kursk region and cut the icon in two, but the two halves grew together only leaving a small trace that is still observable. Many Russian saints, including St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, prayed in front of the Kursk icon.

In 1920, the icon was taken out of Russia as many Christians fled the country following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. The icon was then moved to different places, including in Serbia and Germany, and was finally taken to the United States.
US Companies in Ukraine Have Contingency Plans - Business Council

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - American companies in Ukraine have contingency plans and are waiting for more specific actions from the West as Russia begins a military operation, US-Ukraine Business Council (USUBC) President and CEO Morgan Williams told Sputnik on Thursday.

"All businesses have contingency/crisis plans. We have seen some of those. We know those were to be further implemented from what has already been done," Williams said.

Some US companies have decided to suspend operations in areas near the borders of Russia and Belarus, top non-Ukrainian personnel have left the country, and some Ukrainian employees have been moved to the country’s western regions, he added.

Williams noted that USUBC would like to see more concrete action from the US and the EU.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics. On Thursday, Putin declared the start of a military operation after the two republics asked for help in countering aggression from Ukrainian forces.

The move has elicited condemnation from Western leaders and the start of still more sanctions.

The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only.

US Rate Hikes May Not Be Altered by Ukraine Crisis, But Wait-and-See Needed- Fed Officials

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Russia-Ukraine crisis might not alter the Federal Reserve’s planned course of action to increase US interest rates this year, although the central bank is in “uncharted territory” depending on the fallout from the crisis, senior Federal Reserve officials said on Thursday.

"We will have to see if [the] Russian incursion changes the arguments for policy normalization,” Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond President Tom Barkin said in a live-streamed speech.

Barkin’s comments came after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on Wednesday a special military operation to achieve “demilitarization” and “de-Nazification” of Ukraine.

The Federal reserve plans to shift from a policy of near-zero interest rates to one where there could be a maximum of seven rate hikes this year, with an increase of a quarter-to-half percentage point in each round.
The Federal Reserve should hike rates because "underlying demand is strong; the labor market is tight; [and] Inflation is high and broadening," Barkin said. "I don't think you are going to see much change to the underlying logic. But this is uncharted territory, so we will have to see where the world goes."

Barkin said the Russian economy did not have much impact on the US economy itself, as evidenced by the minimal effect from Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea. But the impact from a disruption in Russia's oil and gas exports could be different, with US energy prices already at seven-year highs, he said.

"The Fed will need to monitor how this affects energy markets and whether or not the conflict escalates," Barkin said. "We'll have to wait and watch if Ukraine's narrative shifts."

Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta President Raphael Bostic also said the Russia-Ukraine crisis needed to be closely watched for its impact on the US economy and how that might affect central bank policy-making.

"We will be closely monitoring events in Ukraine to assess economic and financial consequences," Bostic said.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 measures, the US economy grew 5.7% in 2021. But inflation grew even faster, expanding by 5.8% in the year to December, the most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department.

Russian Envoy Says Canada’s Foreign Minister Invites Him to Meet Over Ukraine Operation

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik that Canada’s Foreign Minister Melanie Joly has invited him to come to Global Affairs Canada at noon EST (17:00 GMT) after Russian began a military operation in Ukraine.

"Minister Joly personally invited me to come 12:00 EST," Stepanov said.

Joly said earlier in the day that Canada will impose "severe" sanctions on Russia in coordination with Europe and Ukraine after President Vladimir Putin approved a special military operation to protect Donbas. She vowed that Moscow "will not go unpunished."

Russia announced the operation in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics for help in countering Ukrainian aggression. The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only.

US Intel Agencies Say Iran-Backed ‘MuddyWater’ Group Conducting Malicious Cyber Activities
WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US cyber intelligence authorities issued an advisory against an Iran-backed group alleged to be conducting malicious cyber activities across a range of private and governmental sectors, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said on Thursday.

"[Intelligence agencies] have observed a group of Iranian government-sponsored advanced persistent threat (APT) actors, known as MuddyWater, conducting cyber espionage and other malicious cyber operations targeting a range of government and private-sector organizations across sectors – including telecommunications, defense, local government, and oil and natural gas – in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America," the advisory said.

MuddyWater is a subordinate element within Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the advisory said. The group is positioned to provide stolen data and access to both the Iranian government and other malicious cyber actors, the advisory added.

The advisory also provided organizations with observed tactics, techniques and procedures associated with MuddyWater in order to aid them in the identification of malicious activity against sensitive networks. US Cyber Command in January identified and disclosed multiple open-source tools used by the group in networks around the world.

More US Military Assets on Way to Eastern Europe Amid Conflict in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - More US military assets, including F-35 aircraft and Apache helicopters, are on their way to Estonia, Lithuania and Romania amid Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday citing a senior US defense official.

At least six F-35 fighter jets will arrive in Estonia, Lithuania and Romania later in the day. Each country will host two aircraft, the report said.

Bad weather conditions have delayed the delivery of the helicopters, but they are still due to arrive at their sites on Thursday.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden announced his intention to strengthen NATO’s eastern flank in Europe by moving up to eight F-35 jets from Germany, 20 AH-64 helicopters from Germany to the Baltic region and 12 AH-64 helicopters from Greece to Poland.

The movement of the assets came as Russia launched a military operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and civilians are not in danger. Moscow says that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

Canada Authorizes First Domestic Vaccine Against COVID-19 - Health Ministry
TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Canada has approved Medicago’s vaccine against COVID-19, the first domestic vaccine to receive authorization, the country’s Health Ministry said on Thursday.

"Today, Health Canada authorized Medicago’s Covifenz COVID-19 vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19 in adults 18 to 64 years of age," Health Canada said in a statement. "This is the first authorized COVID-19 vaccine developed by a Canadian-based company, and the first that uses a plant-based protein technology."

Clinical trials show the vaccine to be 71 percent effective against symptomatic infection and fully protects against severe illness, the statement said.

To date, Canada has approved six vaccines against COVID-19, including the ones produced by Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen and Novavax.

Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Urges Peace in Ukraine, Never Distinguishes Among Peoples

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) regrets the current situation in Ukraine and urges politicians to resolve it peacefully, Vice President of ROCOR’s Synod of Bishops Metropolitan of Berlin and Germany Mark (Arndt) told Sputnik.

"We treat this situation in Ukraine with great sadness and call on our believers to pray. We also urge those in power to settle down and try to resolve issues through negotiations, and not by military means," the metropolitan said.

The hierarch underscored that many ROCOR parishioners are of Ukrainian heritage, and the church has never made a difference between them and Russians. He also noted that many of the first ROCOR leaders had Ukrainian roots.

"We have never separated Russia and Ukraine, it never even crossed our minds," Mark said.

"Such issues began arising only after World War II, particularly in Munich, when a group of Ukrainians founded their own 'church.'" However, he added that this has never been a case within the ROCOR.

The metropolitan expressed regret that a few ROCOR parishioners, particularly those who recently arrived from Ukraine, have joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, supported by the Constantinople Patriarchate as opposed to the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Those people made their choice on a nationalist basis, he added.

In a separate statement, European hierarchs of the ROCOR, including Metropolitan Mark, urged politicians and believers to remember ongoing Great Lent when Orthodox Christians should maintain deep prayer.

"Armed conflicts always lead to great suffering of innocent people - especially children and the elderly," the statement read.
The ROCOR unites Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and other peoples regardless of political systems, it added.
Hierarchs declined to take the role of judges but said they could not agree with what they call the extremely one-sided description of the situation by Western media.
"We fervently prayed and pray for the appeasement of human souls in the lands of Ukraine - for the softening of hearts and for the wisdom of all those who are now directly responsible for the fate of people in Europe, embracing Ukraine, [and] Russia with Belarus," the hierarchs said.
The situation in Donbas has escalated in recent days, with the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics (DPR and LPR) reporting increased shelling by the Ukrainian government forces and ordering general mobilization in anticipation of an offensive by the Ukrainian army. The evacuation of Donbas citizens, first of all women, children and the elderly, to Russia began late last week.
On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics. On Thursday, Putin declared the start of a military operation after the two republics asked for help in countering aggression from the Ukrainian government forces. The move has elicited condemnation from Western leaders and the start of still more sanctions. The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only.

UN Relocating Some Staff From Ukraine But All Personnel Safe, Accounted For - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations staff in Ukraine are safe and accounted for, but the organization is nevertheless relocating some personnel from the country after Russia launched a military operation there, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Thursday.
"All UN staff in Ukraine are safe and accounted for (approx. 1500). We are relocating some personnel and have instructed staff to take necessary precautions. A core group of mission-critical staff remains working in the areas around the line of contact," Dujarric said.

US Jobless Claims Down Last Week, Resuming Downtrend - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims fell last week, resuming their downtrend in a labor market showing steady growth in an economy rebounding from the effects of the coronavirus measures, the US Labor Department said on Thursday.
"In the week ending February 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 232,000, a decrease of 17,000 from the previous week’s revised level,” the Labor Department said in a statement.

Jobless claims rose in the prior week to February 12, the first time in four weeks, posing some concern to policymakers banking on a steady growth of the labor market as the economy continued to pull away from the effects of the pandemic measures.

Economists polled by US media had expected jobless claims to average 235,000 during the week to February 19, just slightly above what the Labor Department reported.

"The data is consistent with a strong employment market,” economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive platform.

US unemployment reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, following the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Since then, jobs have picked up on most months, with unemployment declining to 3.9% last month, just below the 4% that the Federal Reserve defines as "maximum employment."

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Georgieva Says Ukraine Situation Adds Economic Risks, IMF Ready to Help Members

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The situation in Ukraine adds significant economic risks for the world, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stands ready to help members who need it, IMF Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"I am deeply concerned about what is happening in Ukraine and, first & foremost, impact on innocent people. This adds significant economic risk for the region & the world. We are assessing the implications & stand ready to support our members as needed," Georgieva said via Twitter.

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Western States at UNSC Discussing Resolution on Ukraine Thursday - UK Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - Western countries at the UN Security Council will discuss on Thursday a resolution on Ukraine after Russia announced the start of a military operation, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Kariuki told reporters.

"We get to work with our partners in the UN to bring a resolution which condemns the Russian action. We are discussing the resolution today. I can't tell you the exact timing, but this is an important moment. For member states to stand up," he said.

Earlier, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council that Washington will present to the UN Security Council a resolution regarding Russia’s decision to launch a special operation to protect Donbas.