

5/20/22 Friday

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US Judge Blocks Biden White House From Ending Title 42 Immigration Rule

A US federal judge has blocked the Biden administration from rescinding a rule that allows immigration authorities to summarily expel or reject entry to undocumented immigrants in the United States.

US President Joe Biden's plans to end a controversial immigration practice left over from the Donald Trump administration have hit another snag after a federal judge in Louisiana blocked its termination.

US District Judge Robert Summerhays of the Western District of Louisiana said on Friday that removing the order, known as Title 42, would burden the police, health care and education systems of several border states if it were removed.

Title 42 is part of the Public Health Service Act of 1944 and allows the US government to expel people from the country who have been in a country where a communicable disease is present. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, then-US President Donald Trump issued an order under the rule allowing the rapid expulsion of people who illegally crossed the US border, arguing they could become a vector of COVID-19 infection.

In April, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the policy would be rescinded on May 23, calling it "no longer necessary" due to the availability of COVID-19 vaccines.

However, [a total of 23 states](#) have since brought a suit against the CDC, which Summerhays on Friday ruled in favor of.

Shortly after the judge's ruling was aired, the Biden administration issued a release indicating the US Department of Justice would be filing an appeal on the matter.

It's just the latest battle the Biden administration has waged in trying to depart from Trump-era immigration practices, which were widely reviled by liberals and which Biden began reversing on the first day of his administration.

Biden's attempt last summer to [scrap Trump's "remain in Mexico" policy](#), which required asylum applicants to wait out their application's navigation of a massive application backlog south of the border instead of inside the United States, was similarly greeted with lawsuits arguing the Department of Homeland Security had improperly ended it. Last month, the case [went before the US Supreme Court](#). However, the conservative-dominated high court hasn't yet delivered its ruling on the case.

Republicans in border states have similarly fought to [restore funding for the construction](#) of a massive border fence on the US-Mexico border, which served as the most visible piece of Trump's domestic policy and which Biden ended early in his administration.

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US Refusing Weapons Sales to Taiwan 'Outside Their Definition of Asymmetric Defense', Reports Say

US defense leaders have warned that comparing Ukraine and Taiwan is a mistake, but in practice, Washington is pressuring Taipei to adopt an asymmetric warfare policy modeled on its support for Ukraine since Russia's special operation began there in February.

The US has rebuffed several recent requests from Taiwan to buy weapons it doesn't see as likely to help it rebuff a Chinese invasion, according to Taiwanese business leaders.

The decisive shift in policy happened at a March meeting between Mira Resnick, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional Security in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, and members of the US-Taiwan Business Council (USTBC).

"They stated that the Biden Administration will no longer support arms sales programs for Taiwan outside their definition of 'asymmetric' defense," the USTBC said in a [Tuesday news release](#). "Additionally, they were looking for suggestions on ways to improve the process to expedite the delivery of already purchased weapons to Taiwan."

Some of the refused weapons include MH-60R Seahawk submarine hunter helicopters, E-2D Hawkeye advanced early warning aircraft, and M109 Paladin self-propelled artillery pieces. Instead, the US reportedly wants the Taiwanese military to focus on small, more mobile systems, such as shoulder-launched Stinger anti-air missiles and Javelin anti-tank missiles, as well as low-cost weapons like naval mines and standoff weapons like coastal-fired anti-ship missiles. It has also pushed Taipei to [increase its reserve training](#), increase cooperation between the reserves and the military, and build a civilian defense force capable of mobilizing the population quickly.

"We are leaning on them in a way that we've not done in the past, in a way in fact that we've gone out of our way not to do," Aaron Friedberg, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University, [told Politico](#). "The decision [to] turn down the Taiwanese request for the MH-60 helicopters, what that says to me is that OK, we are really deadly serious about this." Days before the State Department's USTBC briefing in March, Mara Karlin, assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Pentagon's advice to Taiwan was to be more like Ukraine, where Western-supplied man-portable systems have been pumped into the country to offset Russia's advanced air and armor forces.

"I think the situation we're seeing in Ukraine right now is a very worthwhile case study for them about why Taiwan needs to do all it can to build asymmetric capabilities, to get its population ready, so that it can be as prickly as possible should China choose to violate its sovereignty," [Karlin told lawmakers](#).

Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, [similarly suggested earlier](#) this month that both the US and China could learn "some very interesting lessons from the Ukrainian conflict."

However, Karlin's boss, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has cautioned against making such "direct comparisons," [telling lawmakers in April](#) that Russia's special operation in Ukraine and a prospective Chinese invasion of Taiwan "are two completely different scenarios, two different theaters."

Beijing has made similar interjections, noting that while Ukraine is internationally recognized as a sovereign nation, almost every country on the planet agrees that Taiwan is a part of China - including the United States, incidentally.

The government in Taiwan is all that remains of the Republic of China, a government that once ruled all of China after the last emperor abdicated the throne in 1912. However, that government lost control over the mainland in the civil war, and in 1949, the victorious communist forces established the People's Republic of China in Beijing. In the decades since, all but a handful of small, US-dominated nations have switched their recognition of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing.

Despite [making the switch in 1979](#), the US has continued to [informally support Taiwan](#), and in strategy documents published early in the Trump administration, the autonomous island was identified as a key thorn in the side of China, which the US now regards as its primary adversary. In parallel, a new independence-minded government came to power in Taiwan in 2016, bringing Washington and Taipei even closer.

Beijing asserts that reunification of Taiwan with the mainland is a historic inevitability, but has been ambiguous about whether that would be accomplished via force. Similarly, the US has practiced a "strategic ambiguity" as to whether it would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack. For USTBC President Rupert Hammond-Chambers, that ambiguity, combined with its recent insistence on Taiwan shifting toward asymmetric warfare preparation, could "create new vulnerabilities and do tremendous damage to the island's self-assurance and its practical defense."

"If the Biden Administration intends to dictate specific arms sales to Taiwan, USTBC recommends consideration of a change in US policy from strict strategic ambiguity to at least some clarity on when and where the US would be willing to step in and fill the news gaps created by the new policy," Hammond-Chambers added. "This would permit Taiwan to focus on a narrower defensive ability, with the clear expectation that the US would fill any resulting gaps if necessary."

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China Faulted for Stepping Up Coal Consumption, But US & Europe Follow Suit

Consumption of coal in China has increased since last summer when blackouts hit four industry-heavy provinces. The socialist country has set ambitious goals for cutting carbon emissions but continues to struggle with its antiquated electrical sources, half of which come from coal.

China's coal consumption has [continued to rise](#) in 2022, with imports from its northern neighbor Russia doubling between March and April, [according to CNN](#). As a result, Russia is now China's

second-largest coal supplier, displacing Australia; it still imports the most coal from Indonesia, but produces most of its coal domestically.

According to Chinese [news reports](#), Beijing aims to increase its coal production this year by 7%, or 300 million tons, to ensure a steady supply of electricity after its attempts to cut back last year [led to power losses](#) in the northeast and southeast. In addition, revised economic plans due to COVID-19 lockdowns mean Beijing is looking to [buttress economic growth](#) by lowering electrical costs for businesses.

China is the world's largest consumer of coal and the largest emitter of greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change, so its change in policy will be widely felt. In 2020, Chinese President [Xi Jinping said](#) that according to the socialist country's economic plans, its carbon dioxide emissions will peak before 2030, then sharply drop off. More recently, Beijing has pledged to end its investment in coal-fired power plants abroad, which it has [funded in developing countries](#) like Zimbabwe and Bangladesh, that struggle to keep the lights on. Headlines in the West have cast China's move as a betrayal of climate change mitigation pledges: "[China pivots to boost coal output, putting climate goal at risk](#)," Nikkei Asia said on Friday, while US National Public Radio (NPR) said, "[China promotes coal in setback for efforts to cut emissions](#)." Last month, the [Washington Post said](#) that "With coal surge, China puts energy security and growth before climate," and on Friday, [CNN portrayed China's](#) imports from Russia as a "friendly gesture to Moscow" amid the West's rejection of Russian energy exports. However, China isn't alone in turning to coal for answers: the European Commission [said on Friday](#) it would need to increase coal consumption in order to offset its anticipated reductions in Russian gas consumption. According to the [Financial Times](#), the EU will burn 5% more coal than previously expected over the next five to 10 years, but noted that EU officials still claim the bloc will hit its emissions reduction targets by 2030.

The US, too, is ramping up coal production. According to a [report earlier this month](#) by the US Energy Information Administration, US coal production is expected to increase by 3% this year as the country struggles with its own boycott of Russian energy exports announced in early March. However, like the EU, the US says its coal use will continue to decline.

Increased coal production is also [both cause and consequence](#) of increased coal prices. In October 2021, international coal prices spiked to \$280 per metric ton, then after declining somewhat, [jumped to an all-time high](#) price of \$440 per metric ton after Russia's special operation in Ukraine began in February 2022. In the US, coal companies have seen their share value explode, too, with one hitting a 986% increase in a single year, [according to S&P Global](#).

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Watch: Explosions, Massive Fire Break Out Near Switzerland's Geneva Airport

Several explosions were reported on Friday afternoon at a refugee reception center construction site in Geneva, Switzerland, amid a massive fire pouring black smoke into the sky.

At least one explosion was reported just beyond the perimeter fence at Geneva Airport, Switzerland's second-busiest airport, on Friday afternoon. The building where it happened is reportedly a welcome center for refugees.

According to [local news reports](#), the fire started on the top floor of the building under construction, where insulation was being installed. At least five explosions have been reported, the result of the fire setting of gas cylinders. According to reports, there are five more that have yet to go off.

Flights to the airport are being diverted, while takeoffs are being left to the pilots' discretion.

The US State Department [issued a travel alert](#), saying "avoid the area and seek shelter if in vicinity."

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How to Get A Head in Life: Scientists Unveil When Humans' Ancestors Developed Noggins

Scientists in Australia discovered in 2018 the existence of a string of brain cells existing in the human colon, which they called a "second brain" operating independently of the rest of the central nervous system to push waste out. However, it's likely it evolved first, they said, before the actual brain.

A research team led by the University of Oxford has revealed how vertebrates developed heads. Their study was [published on Wednesday](#) in Nature.

It might seem like common sense to us since we have heads, but animals didn't always have them, we had to evolve them, and that process took an immensely long time. The scientists' study looked at just how that process happened in vertebrates, including developing a superior head to that of invertebrates, which allowed their evolution to take off.

According to [Science Alert](#), heads give us a lot of advantages, including a place where concentrated sensory nerve nodes can be located, which in their very first stages were clusters of cells called Cranial Sensory Ganglia; today we call them ears, nose, and eyes. To study how vertebrates went from having no definitive head to having one, the scientists looked at vertebrates' closest invertebrate relative: tunicates, also known as sea squirts.

"Tunicates are like an evolutionary prototype for vertebrates," explained Ute Rothbacher of the University of Innsbruck's Institute of Zoology [in a news release](#).

"There is a large anatomical gap between the adults of these subphyla, as they are adapted to ecological niches. This complicates research on their evolution. Common structures and mechanisms can only be identified at the embryonic stage," he explained, adding that "our common ancestor was probably very similar to a tunicate larva."

As a comparison, they looked at the DNA of a lamprey, a boneless fish that hasn't changed much in 360 million years - only about 200 million years after vertebrates first developed [something of an eye](#).

Using the gene technology CRISPR-Cas9, the researchers isolated the gene that develops Bipolar Tail Neurons in tunicates, called "Hmx," finding that it's almost the same gene that causes Cranial Sensory Ganglia to form in vertebrates.

"Hmx has been shown to be a central gene that has been conserved across evolution," University of Innsbruck zoologist Alessandro Pennati said in the release. "It has retained its original function and structure and was probably found in this form in the common ancestor of vertebrates and tunicates."

In other words, the gene that tells lampreys to grow heads is the same gene that tells sea squirts to grow tails.

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Clinton OK'd Dissemination of Trump-Russian Bank Narrative to Media, Campaign Manager Testifies

By - Evan Craighead

Mook and other senior officials from Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign have been called to testify in the federal trial of Michael Sussmann, an ex-federal prosecutor accused of lying to the FBI about the capacity in which he was providing uncorroborated allegations of a backchannel linking Russia's Alfa Bank and the Trump Organization.

Former Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook testified Friday that, back in 2016, then-Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton personally authorized the campaign's release of materials alleging that the Trump Organization possessed a backchannel to communicate with two servers registered to Alfa Bank.

Mook was called to the stand by Michael Sussman's defense.

During his testimony, Mook disclosed that he and other senior Clinton campaign officials were in a meeting when they first learned of the so-called cyber link between Trump and the Moscow-based bank.

The narrative, based on the work of a group of computer scientists, was discussed among the senior-most staffers, including campaign chairman John Podesta, communications director Jennifer Palmieri, and [senior policy adviser Jake Sullivan, who currently serves as national security adviser for the Biden White House.](#)

While officials were not entirely confident with the legitimacy of the claims raised by the malware hunters' data, they hoped a reporter could "run it down" and verify whether it was "accurate" or "substantive."

Mook ran it by Clinton—although he "can't recall the exact sequence of events" regarding whether it was already released to the media. "All I remember is that she agreed with the decision," he said.

"I discussed it with Hillary as well," Mook testified, noting that he could not recall "the substance of the conversation, but notionally, the discussion was, 'hey, we have this and we want to share it with a reporter.'"

During cross-examination, assistant special counsel Andrew DeFilippis asked if Clinton specifically approved of the idea of releasing the report.

"She agreed," Mook said.

Sussman, who was paid for work as legal counsel on the 2016 Clinton campaign, is accused of lying to federal investigators on September 19, 2016, about the capacity in which he was bringing materials to FBI General Counsel James Baker.

"I have something time sensitive (and sensitive) I need to discuss," Sussmann said in a message to Baker on Sept. 18, 2016, per the prosecution. "Do you have availability for a short meeting tomorrow. I'm coming on my own—not on behalf of a client or company—want to help the Bureau. Thanks."

Sussman also testified to congressional investigators in December 2017 that he met with the FBI on behalf of a prominent cybersecurity researcher.

"The defendant provided the FBI General Counsel with purported data and 'white papers' that allegedly demonstrated a covert communications channel between the Trump Organization and a Russia-based bank (Russian Bank-1)," [the federal government claimed in a filing](#) last month. Special counsel John Durham's team has asserted that Sussman was working for both the Clinton campaign and cybersecurity expert Rodney Joffe. The prosecution has characterized the dissemination of the Trump-Alfa Bank allegations as a Clinton campaign plot to orchestrate an "October surprise" against then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

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Boeing's Starliner Successfully Docks With ISS for First Time

By - Evan Craighead

The unmanned astronaut capsule docked at the International Space Station (ISS) for the first time on Friday, 26 hours and 34 minutes after separating from a United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket and advancing an unscrewed mission dubbed Orbital Flight Test 2 (OFT-2).

Boeing's second shot at docking its crew capsule proved to be a success as the unscrewed spacecraft successfully docked with the ISS at 8:28 p.m. ET (00:28 UTC) on Friday, per NASA.

"The Boeing Starliner spacecraft completes its historic first docking to the International Space Station," the NASA announcer said during the live feed.

The partially reusable spacecraft is designed to transport crew members to the ISS and other low-Earth orbit destinations. Boeing has been NASA's primary contractor for the ISS since the early 90s.

Rosie the Rocketeer, Boeing's anthropometric test device, was equipped with 15 sensors to collect data and serve as a simulation of what astronauts could expect on the journey.

The CST-100 Starliner will be accessed by ISS crew members as early as tomorrow morning, and remain docked for about four or five days total. The spacecraft is expected to use thrusters to force itself out of orbit and back down to Earth. The freefalling pod is said to be landing in one of four predetermined locations.

The thrusters used in the deorbit maneuver will be of the same set that partially malfunctioned during separation from the Atlas V rocket.

Boeing and NASA revealed on Thursday that at two of the twelve rocket engines cut off early during the procedure. Despite its off-course start, the Starliner was able to achieve a stable orbit after its flight control system was enabled and rerouted to a different thruster.

Boeing insists the occurrence "does not pose a risk to the rest of the flight test," [per The Verge](#). At the same time, it has since linked the early cutoffs to a drop in chamber pressure and also disclosed that it would be investigating the spacecraft's "thermal cooling loop."

OFT-2 comes as Boeing's second attempt at demonstrating that its new passenger spacecraft is a viable option to transport both humans and cargo to the ISS in the future.

OFT, the first mission, proved to be a dud in 2019 due to a software glitch that made the spacecraft veer off course for the ISS, prompting Boeing to collect the vehicle after it landed at White Sands Space Harbor on 22 December 2019.

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'That's the Real World': Fmr. US Ambassador to Russia Says US Was Lying to Ukraine About NATO Bid

By - Evan Craighead

Despite the fanfare surrounding US President Joe Biden's endorsement of Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the fate of the Nordic countries' applications remains to be seen. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to veto the bids, slamming the applicants as hosts of "terrorist centers" contrary to a security alliance.

As Finland and Sweden seek approval from NATO's 30 member-states, questions and concerns have arisen about Ukraine being afforded a similar opportunity within the coming years in an effort to expand the alliance's influence amid heightened regional tensions with Russia, which has been vocal about its security needs.

During the most recent iteration of the semi-annual Munk Debates, Harvard international affairs professor Stephen Walt highlighted that throughout 2021, the US was cheerleading for Ukraine to join NATO, despite Russia's longstanding opposition to NATO expansion.

"In 2021 we kept reiterating that Ukraine was gonna join [NATO]. We kept saying that, over and over again," Walt noted.

"Did you believe that?" asked Michael Anthony McFaul, who served as US ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014.

As the crowd erupted with laughter, Walt took things a step further and inquired whether this was common practice for diplomats like McFaul.

"So our diplomats are lying?" Walt asked.

"Yes. Yes! That's the real world, guys! Come on," McFaul said, waving his hands for emphasis.

"That's the real world."

"Our diplomats are lying all the time, yet the Russians should trust them when they're offered assurances," Walt laid out, eliciting claps from the audience.

Speaking to reporters in Copenhagen, Denmark, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said he was “confident that we will come to a quick decision to welcome both Sweden and Finland to join the NATO family.”

“We are addressing the concerns that Turkey has expressed, because when an important ally [like] Turkey raises security concerns, raises issues, then of course the only way to deal with that is to sit down and find common ground,” the NATO secretary-general told reporters.

The Turkish president maintains that Stockholm and Helsinki’s applications will be blocked due to their [harboring of independence- and autonomy-seeking Turkish Kurdish groups that Ankara classifies as terrorists](#)—such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and those who follow Fethullah Gulen.

“NATO is a security organization,” Erdogan pointed out. “We cannot accept the presence of terrorist organizations in it.”

Additionally, both Nordic nations have maintained their 2019 arms embargo on Ankara. While the Kremlin remains opposed to the expansion of military infrastructure via NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that Finland and Sweden’s decision to join the alliance was not a direct threat (although it could trigger a response all the same).

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'Ici c'est Paris': Kylian Mbappe Announces New Deal With PSG After Real Madrid Transfer Talks
By - Evan Craighead

ESPN sources said that Kylian Mbappe has discussed his contract decision with Real Madrid President Florentino Perez, who reportedly hoped to sign the French forward as a free agent after a series of bids in the €200 million range failed to entice PSG.

After much uncertainty, Kylian Mbappe, 23, has announced that he will remain at Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG) until June 30, 2025. The decision ends longstanding speculation concerning whether Mbappe would switch things up and transfer to Spain's Real Madrid, or remain with France's PSG, where he is reportedly situated to make more money.

"I wanted to announce that I have chosen to extend my contract at Paris Saint-Germain, and of course I am very happy about it. I am convinced that here I can continue to grow within a club which gives itself all the means to perform at the highest level," Mbappe said in a quoted statement. "I am also very happy to be able to continue to evolve in France, the country where I was born, grew up and flourished."

PSG celebrated its retention of the French forward, whose previous contract with the club was due to expire on June 30.

"Our history is written here," PSG said in a translated tweet. "Ici c'est Paris."

"The extension of Kylian's contract marks an exceptional moment in the history of our Club and is great news for all our fans around the world," touted Nasser Al-Khelaifi, chairman and CEO of PSG.

"I would like to thank the President, Nasser Al-Khelaïfi, for his confidence, his understanding and his patience," Mbappe said on Saturday. "I also have a thought for all the supporters of

Paris Saint-Germain, in France and around the world, for their countless expressions of affection, especially in recent months. It is together, united and ambitious, that we will take up the most magical bets."

In his previous PSG deal, Mbappe notably fetched a world-record fee of €180 million, the most offered to a teenager at the time.

At the same time, Mbappe has expressed that he would like to one day play for Real Madrid, which had been in contact with his entourage for the entire season and even offered the PSG a massive transfer fee.

Mbappe has certainly made a name for himself since donning PSG's red and blue jersey, as the 23-year-old has already won four French Championships ('18, '19, '20, and '22), three French Cups ('18, '20, '21), two League Cups ('18, '20), and two Champions Trophies ('19, '20).

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Beijing Calls on 'Whistleblowers' to Identify Aviation Safety Oversights in Wake of Major Accidents

By - Evan Craighead

Beijing's civil aviation authority released a preliminary report last month detailing that no explosives were found at the site of a China Eastern Airlines Boeing 737-800 that crashed in the mountains of Guangxi earlier this year, killing all 132 individuals on board. The crash is regarded as China's largest aviation disaster in more than a decade.

As the government continues to probe the deadly China Eastern crash, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) is also urging frontline and grass-root management officials to promptly report any potential safety oversights in an expanded effort to reign in apparent lapses in aviation safety.

"It is of great necessity that we fully mobilize the vast number of frontline personnel—for them to be willing and dare to be a safety 'whistle blower', which would also be crucial in reversing the current unfavorable situation and maintain the stable operations of the industry safety," read a May 19 issuance from the CAAC, [as reported by Reuters](#).

Whistleblowers who choose to report such concerns will be rewarded and provided confidentiality agreements to protect their identity, according to China's civil aviation authority. China's three major carriers—Air China, China Eastern Airlines and China Southern Airlines—are under the watch of the country's state council.

The document was released exactly a week after 36 individuals were injured evacuating Tibet Airlines A319, from Chongqing to Nyingchi, after the aircraft endured a catastrophic runway episode that ended in the plane catching fire on the tarmac.

All 113 passengers and nine crew members were confirmed safe following the May 12 incident. The aborted Tibet Airlines flight, particularly when coupled with the China Eastern Airlines tragedy, reminds some of China's unfavorable aviation safety record back in the late 1980s and early 2000s, when Beijing moved to reform its aviation industry and overhaul associated regulations.

Boeing and the US Federal Aviation Administration notably assisted with the overhaul of related regulations.

China initially responded to the fatal March 21 flight by ordering sector-wide inspections to better identify potential safety lapses. The latest move by the CAAC seeks to expand on this by allowing more individuals to have their aviation security concerns heard first-hand.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday that black box data recovered from the downed 737 suggests that the aircraft did not malfunction when it began to nosedive at 29,000 feet (8,839 meters), as it was controlled by human input orders before crashing into the mountains.

“The plane did what it was told to do by someone in the cockpit,” one source said to be familiar with the US’ preliminary assessment of information derived from the jet’s flight-data recorder and cockpit voice recorder.

Both devices were recovered from the Guangxi crash site and transported to Washington, DC, for analysis.

China Eastern Airlines has denounced unofficial speculation, highlighting that rushed determinations could hinder the full investigation. “Any unofficial speculation may interfere with the accident investigation and affect the real progress of the global air transport industry,” the government-run airline told the WSJ.

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China Far Outspending Others to Aid Favored Industries, Study Finds Ahead of Biden’s IPEF Rollout

By - Evan Craighead

The Biden administration has been working for months to investigate Chinese subsidies and formulate a strategic initiative that seeks to strengthen the US’ technological edge and recommit the country’s economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific after withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) back in 2017.

A new study set to be published Monday by Center for Strategic and International Studies determined that China’s spending on favored industries with state-directed funds, low- to no-interest loans, and other government-led incentives was higher than any other major economy studied.

The Washington-based think tank’s analysis, [first revealed Sunday in the Wall Street Journal](#), found that Beijing’s spending on its companies amounted to at least 1.73% of China’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019, the most recent year with comprehensive value.

Over the years, China’s industrial initiatives have shifted from the goal of technologically “catching up” to the West, to honing in on specific industries driving modern-day innovation, such as artificial intelligence and electric vehicles, the study notes.

Analysts value China’s spending on industrial subsidies to amount to more than \$240 billion when based on market exchange rates, and \$407 billion when based on internationally adjusted exchange rates. This exceeds the nation’s reported military spending.

The nation's spending—whether measured by GDP or in dollar terms—is higher than that of the other seven major economies analyzed in the report, including Brazil, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States.

Per the report, South Korea ranked second, spending 0.67% share of its 2019 GDP on industrial support, while the US spent 0.39% of its GDP during the same period.

“China is a large outlier,” said report author Scott Kennedy, an expert on China's economy at CSIS. “It spends an enormous amount on industrial policy and also uses more tools for such spending than anybody else.”

Kennedy and the other two authors, Gerard DiPippo and Ilaria Mazzocco, told the outlet that the study is intended to be a catalyst for more substantive discussion among policymakers, business leaders, and academics, regarding the worldwide impact of China's industrial spending.

It also appears the CSIS report is coming in lockstep with the Biden administration's plans to expand US economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific and further attempt to counter Beijing's influence in the region via a new economic framework targeting East Asia and Southeast Asia.

China Says IPEF Opposes Free Trade, is Destined to Fail

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), set to be unveiled by US President Joe Biden in Japan on Monday, seeks to renew the US Indo-Pacific economic engagement through the establishment of common standards in areas such as clean energy, infrastructure, digital trade, and supply-chain resilience.

The IPEF has endured vocal opposition from Beijing, which views the plan as an avenue to clique up and divide countries in the Indo-Pacific, rather than allow them to work together to create a shared future.

On Sunday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that while China is receptive to initiatives seeking to strengthen regional cooperation, it also opposes attempts to create confrontation and division.

The framework will come as the US' first economic arm of Indo-Pacific engagement since then-US President Donald Trump withdrew the US signature from the TPP.

Wang went on to assert that the US' 2017 withdrawal from the TPP, when coupled with the new agreement, proves that Washington is not pursuing free trade.

“The US 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' is causing more and more vigilance and concern in the international community, especially in the Asia-Pacific region,” [Wang said in a statement](#).

The Chinese foreign minister also warned that the US' undermining of existing regional cooperation architecture could further complicate supply chains and lead to industrial disruptions that could further hinder economic recovery from the pandemic.

Biden's fanfare surrounding the framework rollout was notably criticized by CSIS trade expert Matthew Goodman, who told Reuters that the US needs to realize that they have to come to the table with more “tangible benefits” for those in the region.

“It seems the White House has decided to make the IPEF launch more like a party with an open bar that all are invited to, with the real work to start on Monday morning,” the trade expert said.

A Japanese Finance Ministry official told the outlet that while some Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries may attend the launch ceremony, others were reluctant to the idea due to the lack of practical incentives, such as tariff reductions or the creation of jobs—which Biden has reportedly opposed to maintain roles in the US.

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Pentagon Seizes Foreign Reporter's Phone Over 'Miscommunication' on International Flight
By - Evan Craighead

The flight in question was traveling to Oslo, Norway, the first destination in US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks' multi-nation European visit to meet with government leaders and senior military officials, including the heads of US European Command and US Africa Command.

Pentagon officials seized the cellphone of a foreign reporter and blocked them from using electronic devices during the first leg of a series of international flights bound for Norway, the United Kingdom and Germany, according to a report from POLITICO that was later confirmed by official press statements.

According to the source, a public affairs officer approached the foreign correspondent about 10 minutes after takeoff and "very apologetically" told them to "physically" hand over their cellphone. The individual was also prohibited from opening their laptop or using their AirPods. The other reporter, who is a US citizen, was not asked to hand over their phone.

"It's not only impossible to do my job without a phone and laptop, it's also a bit insulting that after doing dozens of trips over the past six years (many to more sensitive locations) my phone was taken and there isn't enough trust to be able to get some sort of exemption so I can continue to write stories on the plane," the foreign reporter said in an email addressed to Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, per POLITICO.

The reporter, who has previously traveled with top US officials to secure locations in Iraq and Afghanistan, told the outlet that the Pentagon said a few days prior that "there might be a problem" on the flight, but also assured the reporter that the department was "working through it and they were hopeful they could figure something out."

However, that workaround never came to fruition, as the pilot reportedly came out of the cockpit multiple times to inform the public affairs officers that they were not allowed to use their cellphones because Deputy Secretary Hicks was on standby for a phone call.

The Pentagon has proclaimed the incident was merely a "miscommunication" in an attempt to protect classified information.

"In accordance with a new policy, the aircrew in this case applied a more restrictive approach to communication security, which led to a miscommunication about the reporter's use of personal electronic devices on the aircraft," Air Force spokesperson Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told the outlet.

The so-called policy implemented on the first leg will not be used for the remainder of the international flights, according to Ryder.

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Joe Biden's Approval Rating Maintains Fall, Hitting the Lowest Level of His Presidency By - Ian DeMartino

US President Joe Biden's approval rating has been dropping consistently since its high water mark this time last year when it was at 53%, now a new poll has him at record lows and dropping across the board.

Only [39% of adults](#) approve of US President Joe Biden's job performance, according to a recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Research poll.

This poll comes hot off the heels of a Quinnipiac University poll [Wednesday](#) that said Biden's approval rating among Hispanics specifically is down to 26%, a demographic he won with 61% of the vote in 2020.

For all Americans, the issue is unsurprisingly that they believe the country is going in the wrong direction. Only 2 in 10 adults say that the US is on the right track.

Even among Democrats, Biden is becoming increasingly less popular. At the start of his presidency, his approval rating among members of his party was 97%. That is not too surprising, considering they likely voted for him, but midway through his second year, that support has dropped significantly, to only 73%.

Among Republicans, his support understandably started low, only 23% of Republicans supported Biden when he took office, but now it has dropped to a paltry 5%.

This is even lower than former US President Donald Trump's approval rating at the same time during his presidency. Trump had an approval rating of 42% on May 21, 2018, according to FiveThirtyEight's poll averaging from that time.

Comparing apples to apples helps Biden a bit, but he still falls short of Trump. FiveThirtyEight's poll averaging currently has Biden's approval rating at 40.7%. Trump did have a period of time when his approval was below Biden's current rating. From May 17, 2017 to February 2, 2018, Trump's approval was below 40%, according to FiveThirtyEight. It never fell below 39.8% again until after the January 6, 2021 riots.

Recent polling has shown that inflation is the problem that [most worries Americans](#), and that has played out again in this poll. Only 18% of Americans say Biden has done more to help the economy than hurt it. A slim majority, 51%, say his policies have hurt the economy, while another 30% say they haven't made much difference.

Immigration is also hurting the president: only 36% of respondents approve of his handling of the situation on the southern border.

With midterm elections coming up in November, the Democrats will be in trouble if the president cannot turn around his approval rating. Midterm elections are notoriously tough on the party that holds the White House.

To make matters worse, primary [exit polling indicates](#) that Republican turnout has been much higher than for Democrats, a trend likely to continue in the midterms.

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Scientists Are Freezing Endangered Animals for Future Cloning to Sidestep Extinction By - Ian DeMartino

Scientists say we are in the middle of a mass extinction event, which isn't entirely unheard of for our planet, especially considering it has been through a few before -most famously 65 million years ago when an asteroid took out the dinosaurs along with 75% of the planet's species. Unlike past mass extinction events, what makes this event different is that it is in large part caused by humans. But scientists in the UK are making sure we have a backup plan if we are unable to halt the destruction of Earth's natural biodiversity: they are freezing samples for later cloning.

Already scientists at Nature Safe have stored the living tissue of [100 different species](#) in nutrient-rich, cell-friendly antifreeze and are keeping them at -321F (-196C), cold enough to stop all-natural chemical processes.

The idea is that if the species go extinct, future scientists could revive them through cloning. Their plan won't be the answer to our rapidly declining biodiversity, but it at least gives a future chance to some endangered species.

In practical terms, it is not that far removed from what John Hammond did with dinosaurs in the film and book "Jurassic Park," only instead of DNA being preserved in amber for millions of years, it is live tissue stored in a freezer for decades.

Speaking to the BBC, Nature Safe founder Dr. Tullis Matson showcased the revival of cheetah skin cells taken from an animal that died in 2019.

"We woke up those cells a few days ago - and you can see now, they're all over the screen," Tullis explained. "They've multiplied and multiplied."

Cloning, of course, is not new. Famously, Scottish scientists cloned a sheep named Dolly in 1996. Since then, scientists have cloned 20 different species, including endangered ones like the black-footed ferret.

Besides reviving completely extinct animals, the frozen tissue could bring more biodiversity to struggling species. If in the future the only surviving members of a species are related, living tissue from decades earlier could be used to prevent inbreeding, giving the species a much better chance at survival.

Of course, the better solution is to simply protect the diversity we have now, rather than freeze what we can and use it when most of that diversity has been wiped out. One reason conservation is a better solution than Nature Safe's freezing is that they can only gather tissue from dead and dying animals. It would not be helpful to capture living, wild, endangered animals and then cut pieces of them off before releasing them.

"It would be wonderful to get tissue from 20 snow leopards from 20 different locations, but that would be really difficult," Professor Bill Sutherland, a conservation biologist from the University of Cambridge told the BBC.

Instead, Nature Safe works closely with zoos around Europe, taking samples from recently deceased animals and preserving them in their labs. They are also working on techniques that would enable them to generate sperm and egg cells from reproductive tissues.

"We are in the 6th mass extinction; the largest predicted loss of living biodiversity in 65 million years," Tullis said in an article published on the [Oxford University website](#) in 2021. "More than

one million of the world's species are threatened with extinction; largely as a result of the actions of humanity.”

Our goal should be to halt the extinction event humans are causing, but if all else fails, biodiversity preservation labs like Nature Safe will provide the last hope for hundreds of species at risk of being lost forever.

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Abbott Prioritized Enriching Stockholders Over Formula Safety - Report
By - Ian DeMartino

In February, the FDA and Abbott Nutrition recalled a batch of baby formula linked to illness and possible death in some infants. While Abbott has denied their formula was the cause, it shut down its Sturgis, Michigan plant, resulting in nationwide shortages.

Baby formula company Abbott ignored warnings about deteriorating equipment and detected bacteria in formula eight times between 2019 and 2021 while their profits soared 94%, [according to The Guardian](#).

During that same time period, Abbott also increased their stockholder dividends by over 25% and announced a stock buyback program costing \$5 billion.

While Abbott denies that the stock buyback hurt their product safety, the tainted baby formula led to a February recall and according to the FDA and CDC may have led to the deaths of two infants and caused at least another four babies to become ill.

The babies [were infected with](#) *Chronobacter sakazakii*, a bacteria that thrives in dry places, such as powdered baby formula.

Abbott, who is responsible for 43% of all baby formula created in the United States, has denied responsibility for the infant deaths, stating “there is no evidence to link our formulas to these infant illnesses.”

A federal whistleblower complaint, sent [to the FDA in October](#) months before the outbreak, alleged that plant officials at the Sturgis factory knowingly falsified records on numerous occasions, and had issues sealing cans of formula. The complaint also alleges that after the formula was found to contain unspecified microorganisms, the company only destroyed part of the batch it felt was the most contaminated and then neglected to test the remaining product, sending it to store shelves instead.

Also according to the complaint, several product flow pipes were “pitting” resulting in tiny pinholes that could have allowed bacteria to enter the system and prevent proper cleaning of equipment.

Pitting is a term used to describe when pipes begin to corrode from the inside, eventually creating small holes and leaking. While the damage may appear minor, it is usually indicative of larger damage. The pinholes are comparable to the tips of an iceberg, with something much larger looming just under the surface.

Responding to reports of the whistleblower, Abbott claims he was “dismissed due to serious violations of Abbott’s food safety policies.”

Meanwhile, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, who is the Senate Finance committee chair, has requested information about Abbott's stock buyback plan. Stock buybacks were illegal because they were seen as a tool for market manipulation, until 1982.

To address the shortage caused by the Abbott recall, President Biden has invoked the defense production act to increase production and the FDA has indicated that it may temporarily allow the importation of baby formula from overseas. Currently, 98% of baby formula on American shelves is domestically produced.

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Evo Morales Urges Bolivia to Withdraw From OAS As More Presidents Look to Skip Latin American Summit
By - Wyatt Reed

The Organization of American States (OAS) is looking increasingly marginalized as Bolivia's former president calls for the country to become the latest to leave and more presidents ponder missing Biden's Summit Of the Americas

Bolivian ex-President Evo Morales suggested Sunday that his country should leave the Organization of American States, the international organization that Morales says "provoked" the 2019 coup d'etat against him.

"In the face of US' exclusion of the countries freed from their hegemony, how great would it be for Bolivia to withdraw from [the OAS]," Morales [asked on Twitter](#). Such a move, Morales noted, would be a 'ratification' of not only Bolivia's "anti-imperialist position" and "the sovereignty, and independence of the State, but also the identity, dignity and freedom of the Bolivian people." Morales' denunciation of the international body comes as a growing number of Latin American Presidents have vowed to skip June's upcoming OAS-organized Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles if the US refuses to allow the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to participate.

The organization has long been [criticized as a vehicle](#) for the imperialist foreign policy of the US, which provides nearly half of its total budget. After Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador [said last week](#) he would decline to attend if other nations were 'excluded,' Bolivian President Luis Arce quickly [followed suit](#). And Reuters reported that Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is [also considering skipping the summit](#) in an apparent snub to US President Joe Biden.

In April, regional efforts to transcend the OAS got a big boost when Nicaragua expelled the group from the country and seized their office, announcing plans to use the building to house a future "museum of infamy" dedicated to imperialist intervention in the country. Morales previously praised their decision to leave the OAS as a "dignified act."

The former Bolivian head of state—the country's first indigenous president—has been one of the organization's fiercest critics since the deadly 2019 coup d'etat in which he was overthrown by the country's extremist opposition. Independent experts have [since confirmed](#) the OAS played a "major, decisive role" in facilitating that putsch, but neither the OAS nor its Secretary, Luis

Almagro, have taken responsibility for those actions, despite repeated attempts by US Congress members to “finally see accountability and transparency from OAS” and the House of Representatives passing language directing the State Department to investigate its role.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, a number of US lawmakers wrote a letter asking whether the OAS’ Electoral Observation Mission in Bolivia considered “the potential effect on political violence of stability of putting forth what appears to be a hypothesis of fraud, without any evidence?” But they reportedly never heard back.

In December, Argentine President Alberto Fernandez denounced the OAS’ ‘[endorsement](#)’ of the coup, and last June Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard accused the group of “practically fomenting a coup.” Since then, Morales’ base of support since then has come to extend well beyond the government’s traditional left-leaning allies.

Last year, El Salvador’s Vice President criticized the “factious” conduct of current OAS Secretary Luis Almagro in a speech before the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), before urging other states to look beyond the OAS for regional cooperation moving forward.

“The CELAC can and must be an alternative mechanism that allows us to seek that dialogue with other regions of the world,” he said.

Within the US establishment, worries about just such an eventuality appear to be growing. As an article published in Foreign Policy in early May [noted with more than a hint of alarm](#), “the threat is not simply that this year’s summit will be a flop—yet another example of feckless US policy toward Latin America. Rather, the real risk is that—after nearly three decades of summitry—this year’s event may be interpreted as a gravestone on US influence in the region.”

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Brother of Slain Palestinian-American Reporter Refutes Israel’s Justification For Funeral Attack
By - Wyatt Reed

Israeli backpedaling over their apparent killing of widely-beloved Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh—and their assault on her funeral—has led to massive international condemnation. Days after Israeli security forces drew international outcry for tear gassing and beating the pallbearers carrying the body of widely-beloved Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, her brother, Anton Abu Akleh, [slammed Israel’s official justification for the attack](#) as “illogical and untrue.”

In an interview with the Times of Israel, Abu Akleh also condemned the “extreme, vicious and brutal force” used by Israeli forces at his sister’s funeral Friday, when horrifying footage of heavily-armed Israeli police assaulting unarmed mourners went viral across the globe.

Israeli police subsequently claimed they planned and coordinated the funeral procession with Abu Akleh’s family and insisted that “about 300 rioters” had “prevented the family members from loading the coffin onto the hearse.”

Describing the funeral procession as a “mob,” they said Friday night that mourners “threatened the driver of the hearse and then proceeded to carry the coffin on an unplanned procession... against the wishes of the Abu Akleh family and the security coordination.”

But Abu Akleh dismissed these claims in no uncertain terms Sunday:

“Everyone who was there was there to mourn Shireen. What’s this mob they’re talking about? And even if there were one or two, how many police do you need to deal with it? The whole story here is illogical and untrue.”

As for the “coordination” Israel claims to have undertaken with the family, Abu Akleh said that too was false.

“There was no agreement. I told them our arrangements and that was it,” explained Abu Akleh, who says the night before the funeral he was required to go to an Israeli police station, where officers demanded that attendees not repeat Palestinian chants or wave Palestinian flags—a crime under Israeli law.

“I told them that I could not control such a funeral,” Abu Akleh said. “This is a mass funeral for all Palestine.”

While Israeli culpability in the killing of widely-beloved Shireen Abu Akleh hasn’t yet been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, [a number of groups investigating the matter](#) say it’s looking increasingly likely the IDF is to blame.

Across the globe, condemnation of Israeli conduct has been fierce. US President Joe Biden’s Spokeswoman Jen Psaki declared images of Akleh’s funeral to be “very disturbing,” and the European Union issued a statement saying it was “deeply shocked... such disproportionate behavior only fuels further tensions.”

The representative of the Vatican in Jerusalem [said the incident showed Israel](#) is “brutally violating” a longstanding agreement to uphold religious freedom for Christians.

After initially denying it was responsible for Abu Akleh’s death, Israel later conceded it was “possible” she was killed by Israeli occupation forces, but claimed that her death would have been the result of “errant” fire if so. Their offer to conduct a ‘joint investigation’ into the matter was quickly rejected by the Palestinian Authority.

As Anton Abu Akleh explained, “We support the involvement of any party in the investigation — except for the Israelis. If you’re accused of a crime, it makes no sense that you would investigate it.”

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EU Caves on Gas Ban, Says Companies Can Open Russian Accounts to Keep Supply Flowing - Report

By - Wyatt Reed

US Economist Dr. Jack Rasmus tells Sputnik News that the move reflects a recent acknowledgment that European economies simply “can’t find alternative sources for Russian gas.”

The EU has “softened its stance” on Russian natural gas imports in new guidelines issued by the EU Commission, according to a report in Bloomberg News Monday.

According to the outlet, [the new regulations pave the way](#) for the dozens of European companies who’ve opened accounts with Gazprombank in recent weeks to continue doing

business with the Russian company, marking a major departure from the EU's previous insistence that any payments made via such a mechanism would violate new anti-Russia sanctions.

The new guidelines reportedly state that EU sanctions "do not prevent economic operators from opening a bank account in a designated bank for payments due under contracts for the supply of natural gas in a gaseous state, in the currency specified in those contracts," but stipulate that "operators should make a clear statement that they intend to fulfill their obligations under existing contracts and consider their contractual obligations regarding the payment already fulfilled by paying in euros or dollars, in line with the existing contracts."

The language implies Europe intends to leave up to Russia the conversion from euros or dollars to rubles required by new Russian regulations implemented in response to Western economic sanctions.

Italian energy giant Eni SpA reportedly expressed intentions to open accounts in both rubles and euros with Gazprombank by Wednesday to keep supplies flowing. Germany's Uniper SE and Austria's OMV AG reportedly echoed the sentiment.

According to economist Dr. Jack Rasmus, the decision boils down to pure European desperation: "Unlike Russian oil, they can't find alternative sources for Russian gas."

Citing a shortage of modern Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) ships and a lack of deepwater ports in Europe necessary to accommodate them, Rasmus told Sputnik News Monday that currently, "there just isn't any way to increase the flow of gas. According to Lloyd's Register, "There are currently only four yards across the world building full-size LNG carriers in any number," and the Times reported Sunday that British "energy companies expect further reductions at the country's three LNG terminals in the coming months, even as oil and gas-rich countries offer to ramp up supplies."

And with Europe's LNG supply already stretched thin due to what [analysts have described](#) as a "perfect storm," the Telegraph reported Sunday that "critical shipments of natural gas are being turned away from British ports" because the UK's "National Grid fears it will be overwhelmed by supplies intended to tackle the European energy crisis" and has "dramatically reduced the amount of capacity offered" at its Milford Haven terminals.

While European nations "could wean themselves off [Russian] oil, probably by next winter," Rasmus says they're still "2-5 years" away from removing Russian natural gas from their supply. "In the Middle East, Qatar and others say it's gonna take them two years to build up their output to be able to satisfy the natural gas needs of Europe if they cut off natural gas. So they're not gonna do it." For now, Rasmus says, the plan is to "keep the flow going of natural gas."

Regarding long-term efforts to marginalize Russia, Rasmus says "the elites in Western Europe are pretty much united except for a few exceptions there—Hungary, Serbia, Croatia."

"Maybe Italy's wavering a little bit," Rasmus notes, but by and large, he says the rest of the European ruling class "is very much in lockstep with the US," and what he describes as the US foreign policy establishment's "Brzezinski 2.0" strategy to "debilitate Russia economically and militarily."

"The US, I'm sure, has quietly made them some very large concessions, in supplying them and providing them with rebates and so forth. Who knows—we'll find out later. But they're all in lockstep with the US in terms of the sanctions, particularly with regard to oil."

The energy shortage has already proved to be enormously profitable for massive energy corporations. The Wall Street Journal explained in early May that one of the biggest “winners” in the crisis is British oil giant BP, whose “four European refineries,” they say, “are minting money.” In the US, energy industry lobbyists have used skyrocketing prices to push for new permits to be issued for gas and oil drilling. But Rasmus says the talking points merely mask a push for higher profits:

“Before COVID, Big Oil was pumping 13.4 million barrels/day in the US. Now it’s barely 11. They don’t want to increase it at all, you see. What they want to do is to open up more drilling. They’re bargaining for that.”

Though elites on both sides of the Atlantic may be willing to take advantage of Russian energy for now, there seems to be little doubt about the long-term direction of the West.

“I don’t think the US wants an end” to the Ukrainian crisis, Rasmus says. “There’s a lot to be gained by just dragging it out... There’s too much to be gained in Western Europe, geopolitically and economically,” he says, “for the US” to do otherwise.

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As New Somali President Welcomes US Troops, Analyst Believes the West Is Likely Pulling Strings

By - Wyatt Reed

US boots on the ground, regional independence, and a sketchy oil deal—what’s behind America’s renewed interest in the Horn of Africa?

Less than 24 hours had passed since Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was announced as the new president of Somalia when US President Joe Biden declared he was sending in troops. They hadn’t been gone long—a little over a year has passed since most of the roughly 700 US Special Operations troops based in Somalia at the end of 2020 were withdrawn as part of former President Trump’s efforts to end America’s “forever wars.”

Now, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council says the US plans to establish “a persistent presence” in Somalia so as to “maximize the safety and effectiveness of [US] forces” there.

Last year, the US and the European Union threatened to sanction Somalia if its parliament moved ahead with plans to extend by two years the term of now ex-President Mohamed Farmaajo, and incoming President Mohamud repeatedly [accused him of attempting](#) to carry out a “coup.”

Under the complex clan-based power-sharing agreement currently in place, only members of parliament are permitted to vote for president, so Mohamud is now set to serve his presidential term after reportedly winning just [214 votes](#) in an election closed to the public. One of his first actions since assuming the presidency was to issue a statement on Twitter indicating he “thanks and appreciates” US President Joe Biden “for authorizing the deployment of American troops to #Somalia.”

“The #US,” he went on to claim, “has always been a reliable partner in our quest to stability and fight against terrorism.”

This characterization, however, was heavily disputed by a number of journalists, including Abayomi Azikiwe, editor of the Pan-African News Wire, who told Sputnik News that “based upon its historical legacy, the [US] government cannot be trusted in its proclamations about assisting African states to fight terrorism.”

The US has a “long and sordid history” in Somalia, he notes, explaining that “what has transpired in regard to US foreign policy in Somalia, Libya, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and other countries can only be characterized as terrorism.”

The recent “restoration of direct US military involvement in Somalia” isn’t actually aimed at stabilizing Africa. In fact, he says, it’s quite the opposite:

“The US plans for Somalia are the same as the rest of Africa. Washington and Wall Street are only interested in seeking political and economic domination over African territories and their resources.”

Somalia remains heavily-divided, with political divisions sometimes boiling over. Last year, firefights reportedly [erupted in April](#) between forces representing Farmaajo and opposition figures, including the new president. But the primary source of violence remains a small jihadist militia known as Al-Shabaab. The group, whose supposed threat to US troops was used to justify the recent deployment, has been described by Joint Chiefs of Staff chair Mark Milley as “an extension of Al-Qaeda*.”

Al-Shabaab “grew out of the Islamic Courts Unions, and a lot of the people who constituted the Islamic Courts at some point did join the federal government structures that were established in Somalia,” according to Azikiwe.

In 2014, a UN monitoring group accused recently-elected President Mohamud’s advisor, Musa Haji Mohamed “Ganjab,” of smuggling weapons to Al-Shabaab. With an estimated strength of 5,000 - 10,000 militants, the group has carried out numerous deadly acts of violence in Somalia and throughout the East African region over the past 15 years and seemingly gotten caught up in a low-intensity proxy war between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates for regional influence. Although “increasing attacks by jihadist armed groups” have been a serious problem on their own, Azikiwe notes that they “also provides a rationale for continued Pentagon and AMISOM [African Union Mission] and other outside military forces to maintain their forces in Somalia.” Much like how “Al Qaeda came out of the US struggle against the former socialist-oriented government in Afghanistan during the late ‘70s and the 1980s—and ISIS grew out of the efforts by the US to minimize Iranian influence in Iraq—the US has created these organizations. They’ve utilized them in Libya, in Syria, in Yemen, and other countries to carry out US foreign policy. However, at the same time, they can deem them as being terrorists and also use them as a justification for military interventions like they’ve done in Syria and other countries.”

Azikiwe is far from the only observer to see a pattern emerge in the history of the groups which supposedly inspired Al-Shabaab.

Colonel Richard Black, a retired Virginia state senator who’s been an outspoken critic of US foreign policy towards Syria and was reportedly [added to a list of ‘official enemies’](#) published by an ISIS magazine in 2015, told the Schiller Institute in April that the war in Syria “didn’t exist” until the US “sent the CIA to coordinate with Al Qaeda elements.”

“The war began in 2011 when the United States landed Central Intelligence operatives to begin coordinating with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. And we had been unwavering supporters of Al Qaeda since before the war formally began. We are supporters of Al Qaeda today, where they’re bottled up in Idlib province. The CIA supplied them under secret Operation Timber Sycamore. We gave them all of their anti-tank weapons, all of their anti-air-missiles. And Al Qaeda has always been our proxy force on the ground. They, together with ISIS, have carried out the mission of the United States.”

The current National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, indicated a common cause shared between the notorious international terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and the US government in a [leaked 2012 email](#) to his then-boss, Hillary Clinton: “AQ [Al Qaeda] is on our side in Syria.” Other [theories](#) for the uptick in US involvement in Somalia have emerged in the aftermath of Mohamud’s election as well. In April, Somalia’s minister of petroleum and minerals was summoned by the country’s auditor general over a February oil exploration deal with Texas-based Coastline Exploration Ltd, which was immediately dismissed by the president and prime minister as “illegal.”

The company’s founder rejected suggestions of any dishonest dealings, insisting Coastline’s leaders “don’t need to be corrupt”—though they acknowledged they’d paid for Somali regulators’ flights and accommodations when they brought them to Turkey to ink the agreement. But there’s been little movement on the case, and questions remain about who authorized the secretive deal and what role it could have played in behind-the-scenes political negotiations.

While Coastline was the first such project to (briefly) get off the ground in years, Azikiwe says, “US oil companies and even Canadian oil companies have been involved in exploration for Somali oil for many years. They even, at one point possibly thirty years ago, allocated concessions for the drilling of oil.”

Indeed, as a 1993 Los Angeles Times article noted, “nearly two-thirds of Somalia was allocated to the American oil giants Conoco, Amoco, Chevron, and Phillips,” who could potentially “reap big rewards... if the US-led military mission [could] restore peace to the impoverished African nation.”

But it’s not just Somalia’s oil that’s of interest to the foreign states who’ve long called the shots in the region. Since 2018, the country’s implementation of a three-way security agreement with neighboring Ethiopia and Eritrea has symbolized a growing regional solidarity that [a Soros-funded political commentator claimed](#) was “destabilizing the Horn of Africa.”

The Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea, or “Tripartite Agreement,” as it’s more commonly known, established a framework for state-to-state collaboration, especially in defense, where all three nations have historically faced similar threats from both jihadists and US-backed Tigray separatists. According to Azikiwe, the situation in Somalia is “undoubtedly” related to this emerging cooperation in the Horn of Africa. “In the Ethiopian situation, the US has taken a pretty firm position against the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and has sided with the TPLF, who have been historic allies of the United States going back at least until the early 1990s. So yeah, any initiative by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments in any regional conflict in East Africa would undoubtedly be opposed by Washington at this stage.”

Describing the deal in February, noted Eritrean-American political analyst Simon Tesfamariam told Black Agenda Report that “US policymakers will make every effort to shatter the peace,” but

“there are now special relationships growing in the Horn of Africa, and it's not just governments—it's entire peoples.” Whether efforts to destabilize them will succeed remains to be seen.

*A terrorist organization banned in Russia

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WATCH: Paraguayan Mayor Clings to Life After Audacious Assassination Attempt
By - Wyatt Reed

Local officials and bishops are calling for peace after the mayor of a notoriously lawless border city was shot seven times Wednesday.

The mayor of Paraguayan border city Pedro Juan Caballero is reportedly in critical condition after being shot seven times in a brazen daytime assassination attempt.

Shocking surveillance footage from the scene shows three hooded suspects leap from a car and repeatedly fire at Mayor José Carlos Acevedo before driving away. According to reports, the mayor was shot four times in the neck, twice in the right arm and once in the left arm, and subsequently suffered a heart attack.

The latest reports from Paraguayan media paint a grim portrait of Acevedo's odds of survival, with [doctors saying](#) that the victim's body is “shutting down” and [no longer responding](#) to medical treatment.

Paraguayan police reportedly [say they've made](#) “important advances” in the case, and “have important information [they're] evaluating which could implicate those responsible,” but reportedly declined to give more details.

The city of Pedro Juan Caballero, perched on the border of Brazil, has long been a hub of organized crime and drug trafficking. In 2020, the city's regional jail was the site of what Reuters called “one of the [most audacious jailbreaks](#) in Paraguay's history.”

For years, locals have suffered from the violence which has spilled over from gang-related disputes. Late last year, Mayor Acevedo's niece was allegedly killed in a similar brazen attack. Other family members aren't optimistic about the situation. Regarding the fight back against organized crime, Acevedo's brother—and the governor of the Ambay province—reportedly told local outlet ABC “[the war is lost](#).”

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Argentina Increasingly Likely to Join BRICS As Bloc Meets to Deepen Cooperation & Look Beyond Dollar
By - Wyatt Reed

A realignment would be a big change for the bloc, which hasn't admitted any new states since the inclusion of South Africa in 2009.

China is looking to expand the BRICS bloc beyond its traditional five members of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [reportedly told](#) the group's other representatives Thursday. For now, the most likely candidate is Argentina, and according to national media, their bid to join the bloc could pay off as soon as next year.

"BRICS contains 40 percent of the world population and 20% of the world's GDP," the Argentinian foreign minister reportedly [told a local outlet](#) Wednesday.

"Argentina has the possibility of participating with a growing agenda. That is the task that we have set for ourselves last year, and the president has set it with Xi Jinping."

Amid serious questions about how food and fertilizer shortages could impact the developing world, the Chinese government outlet Global Times [reports](#) this year's summit aims "to counter the US' increasingly reckless abuses of its dollar hegemony [which] hurt the bloc and the broader developing world." BRICS nations would "naturally" have to discuss potential precautions in light of "the US and its allies' sanctions on Russia," according to Cao Yuanzheng, chairman of the Bank of China's International Research.

"Freezing the country's \$300 billion in gold and foreign exchange reserves, which account for nearly half of Russia's total foreign exchange reserves," means US authorities have "made the US dollar lose its neutrality," Global Times explained.

Monday's virtual meeting between foreign ministers of the usual BRICS nations was reportedly followed by a broader "BRICS Plus" discussion which included representatives of Argentina, Kazakhstan, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Thailand. The group includes a number of countries that have expressed interest in joining the bloc's New Development Bank, which was established in 2014 as a kind of counterweight to the IMF and the World Bank. The bank has already brought Bangladesh and the UAE on board, and Egypt and Uruguay are [set to join](#) the financial institution soon.

But Argentina is the only nation with a clear path to joining the bloc. A series of high-level visits and discussions between Argentinian and Chinese officials in recent months culminated in an official invitation for Argentinian Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero to join in on the meeting Thursday, reportedly at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Thursday morning, after ceremonies opened with an address by President Xi, Argentine ambassador to China Sabino Vaca Narvaja read aloud a letter penned by Argentinian President Alberto Fernandez, in which the South American head of state [described BRICS](#) as an "an excellent alternative for cooperation in the face of a world order that has been working for the benefit of a few."

"The New Development Bank of the BRICS, in which my country could participate, is, for me, the institutionalization of a new world order focused on development—far from the financial speculation that has caused so much damage to our countries," Fernandez explained.

Argentina's likely ascension to the group had previously faced pushback from at least one other BRICS member. In February, when Fernandez made an official visit to Beijing and expressed his interest in joining the group, Brazil's foreign ministry was vocally opposed, [citing the lack of](#) an "officially established process for the entry of new members." But now Brazilian Foreign Minister Paulo Guedes has promised to push for the group's integration into the New Development Bank as well:

"Argentina has many fertilizers and the capacity to multiply current production" tenfold, he's quoted as saying. "The most important objective is the integration of our economies." Further strengthening Argentina's bid, India reportedly [gave its blessing](#) to the country's inclusion as well.

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Nicaraguan President 'Not Interested' in Attending Summit of the Americas 'Spectacle' - Report By - Wyatt Reed

President Ortega's repudiation of the OAS event highlights growing anti-imperialist tendencies pushing Latin America away from the US and towards regional integration.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said his country isn't interested in participating in the upcoming Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles as the OAS-sponsored event in June draws closer.

"We are not interested in being at that summit," Ortega [reportedly said](#) on Wednesday. "This summit does not dignify anyone—rather, it dirties them, it sullies them," the president noted, describing the "spectacle" being put on by the "Yankees" as "a disgrace."

"We Latin Americans have to defend ourselves so that they respect us... Let's not forget that we have CELAC," Ortega argued, describing the Community of American and Caribbean States as "a powerful instrument" to assert the region's independence outside the purview of "the European Union, the United States and Canada."

Who, exactly, will attend the summit remains an open question, after Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador announced last month that he would skip the event if Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba were excluded. After Bolivian President Luis Arce and Honduran President Xiomara Castro quickly signaled their agreement, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro indicated he would skip the event as well, the US was forced to send a presidential envoy to Mexico to attempt to salvage the upcoming summit, [according to US government-sponsored outlet NPR](#).

This week, US President Joe Biden has made several moves widely understood to be an effort to push AMLO to reconsider his pledge to stand in solidarity with neighboring countries. After moving to undo some of the anti-Cuba sanctions imposed by his predecessor on Monday, Biden removed a number of sanctions on Venezuela which have prevented the Caribbean nation from processing and selling oil.

Regarding his concerns about "excluding" other Latin American nations, AMLO reportedly said Thursday that he expects to hear back from the US sometime this week. But with a number of observers noting that it's unlikely Biden would be willing to back down after being publicly challenged by the Mexican president, it looks increasingly likely that President Ortega won't be the only one skipping the show.

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US East Coast Braces for Record-Shattering Heat Wave This Weekend

By - Mary Manley

The US' National Weather Service (NWS) has cautioned those in areas of the East Coast to reschedule outdoor activities this weekend due to extreme heat reaching the mid-90s and approaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

The blistering heat—which is heading for the US [East Coast](#) more than a month before the summer solstice—is an ominous indicator of the dangerous effects of human-caused climate change. The surging temperatures will surpass the heat wave of last summer, and break some records that have stood for 100 years.

On Saturday, the temperatures will exceed 90 degrees Fahrenheit for the millions of residents who live along the I-95 corridor between Richmond, Virginia, and Boston, Massachusetts. The humidity for some of these areas will also be moderately higher than normal, which, when in combination with the boiling heat, could have negative health effects on those with heat-related illnesses.

The [Philadelphia](#), Newark, sections of the New York City metropolitan area, Hartford, Connecticut, Providence, Rhode Island and Boston region will be under heat advisories due to a heat index of 100 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit that will bear down on those areas.

Forecasters are predicting record temperatures throughout the region. Philadelphia is expected to beat its 1934 record on Saturday, with scorching heat climbing over 95 degrees. The New York City metro area will break its record of 91 degrees, while Raleigh, North Carolina and upstate Albany may break their highest ever recorded temperatures since 1938. Boston will see temperatures of 91 and 94 degrees for Saturday and Sunday, respectively.

Richmond, which set a new heat record last year in June and July of 2021 with a blistering 96 degrees, is expected to see temperatures soar to 99 degrees on Saturday.

Unfortunately, [climate change](#) is now making heat a deadly norm. Humidity combined with extreme heat creates “wet-bulb temperatures” and can lead to deadly temps. This tragic phenomenon has already occurred in India, leaving dozens of people dead and causing hundreds of birds to be medically treated after dropping from the [sky](#).

“The abrupt beginning of hot temperatures early in the season after a relatively cool spring brings an increased risk of heat illnesses unless proper precautions are taken,” warned the [NWS](#). “Reschedule strenuous activities to early morning or evening. Plan to wear lightweight and loose fitting clothing, and seek shade from the sun. Schedule frequent rest breaks in shaded or air-conditioned environments and stay hydrated with non-alcoholic beverages.”

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Climate Change is Causing Worldwide Sleep Loss, Study Finds

By - Mary Manley

Human-induced climate change is heating up the globe at a speed that mankind and the natural world are not prepared for. The Western United States is experiencing a megadrought and wildfires, as heat wave warnings have scorched the Eastern US and deadly temperatures in India have caused birds to literally drop from the sky.

On Friday, researchers released a study in the journal [One Earth](#) illustrating the negative impact of rising temperatures on our health, such as decreased sleep.

According to the study, if temperatures continue to soar, each person across the world will see their sleep cut back by 50 to 58 hours a year by the end of the century. Those who are particularly vulnerable to sleep loss due to rising heat are the elderly, women, and those in low-income countries, as well as hotter regions.

Those who don't have access to air conditioning or other tools to control the rising temperature of their home or residence will suffer the most, further dividing inequalities caused by climate change across the globe.

"The impact of shifting weather patterns, droughts, flooding, and storms hits poor and marginalized communities first and worst, causing unpredictable growing seasons, crop failures, and sharp increases in food prices," writes the global organization [Oxfam](#). "[...] long standing gender, racial and economic inequalities mean that historically marginalized communities are the hardest hit and most impacted by the climate crisis."

[Sleep](#) is a necessary function that affects both a person's physical and mental health. Sleep helps support a healthy immune system, cognition, attention, and mood/behavior. But a lack of sleep will deteriorate a person's mental and physical health causing cardiovascular issues, depression, anger and can even result in early death.

Mental health issues linked to [sleep](#) loss include sleep deprivation psychosis, causing a person to hallucinate or be prone to delusional thinking. According to the driver's education-focused National Highway Safety Administration falling asleep at the wheel is linked to at least 100,000 crashes, 71,000 injuries, and 1,550 deaths each year in the United States.

[Researchers](#) of Friday's study found warmer nighttime temperatures have an adverse effect on a person's sleep, negatively impacting sleep quality. Officials conducted their study by tracking 7 million sleep records from more than 47,000 adults across 68 countries.

The researchers discovered that those sleeping in temperatures of 86 degrees Fahrenheit lost 14 minutes from their sleep schedule.

"In order to make informed climate policy decisions moving forward, we need to better account for the full spectrum of plausible future climate impacts extending from today's societal greenhouse gas emissions choices," said lead author [Kelton Minor](#) of the University of Copenhagen.

"Our bodies are highly adapted to maintain a stable core body temperature, something that our lives depend on," Minor said.

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Video: Catastrophic Tornado Hits Northern Michigan, Kills One and Injures 44 Others
By - Mary Manley

A rare and destructive tornado ripped through Gaylord, Michigan on Friday, killing at least one individual and injuring 44 others. Because extreme winds are uncommon in the state, which borders the Great Lakes, the destructive twister caused surprise and panic among the residents of the town.

At about 3:48 p.m. on Friday, a tornado ripped through Michigan's Gaylord, a town of approximately 4,200 people, flipping over cars, knocking down trees, and destroying businesses including a Goodwill and a Marathon gas station, as well as warehouses and other buildings, leaving behind a wave of destruction.

At least 23 injured people were taken to Otsego Memorial Hospital while 12 others were taken to Grayling Hospital, according to Munson Healthcare spokesperson Brian [Lawson](#). Michigan State Police also reported to CNN that at least 44 individuals were injured in the wake of the tornado.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," Mayor Todd Sharrard said. "I'm numb."

The twister is extremely rare for the city known colloquially as the "Alpine Village," as the last time they had any extreme weather like this was a severe windstorm in 1998, when winds reached 100 mph. The Great Lakes usually evaporate extreme winds because they're so cold. Jim Keysor, a National Weather Service meteorologist from Gaylord, explained that the twister's origin was a cold front moving in from Wisconsin that confronted hot and humid air over the city. Turning winds in the lower part of the atmosphere created the twister that the city experienced on Friday.

"Many kids and young adults would have never experienced any direct severe weather if they had lived in Gaylord their entire lives," said Keysor.

Because this weather is so uncommon in northern Michigan, the city wasn't prepared for its impact, Lieutenant Jim Gorno of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources explained.

"It is a busy downtown area, and it went right through it," Gorno said. "We aren't used to it up here. We don't have sirens like in other parts of the country."

Eyewitness Eddie Thrasher, 55, said he was sitting inside his car outside an auto parts store when the tornado blew into his sight.

"There are roofs ripped off businesses, a row of industrial-type warehouses," he said. "RVs were flipped upside down and destroyed. There were a lot of emergency vehicles heading from the east side of town."

Thrasher added that his adrenaline was "going like crazy" but that in less than five minutes, the storm ended.

Eyewitness Brandie Slough, 42, was with her teenaged daughter when the tornado came in.

The two hid inside the restroom of Culver's and when the storm calmed and they came out of the building, they discovered that the windows of Culver's had been blown out. Slough's pickup truck had also been flipped upside down.

"We shook our heads in disbelief but are thankful to be safe. At that point, who cares about the truck," Slough said.

The city of Gaylord is currently under curfew until 8 a.m., according to officials.

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Newly Discovered Virus May Wipe Out Global Bee Population, Scientists Warn

By - Mary Manley

The new virus variant is spread by varroa mites or “varroa destructors”, a devastating pest which feeds on the hemolymph (blood) of the Western honey bee population. The mites invade honeybee hives and can eat honey bee pupa as well as spread viruses.

A newly discovered variant of the Deformed Wing [Virus](#) (DWV) is threatening to wipe out the global bee population.

The bee population is already vulnerable due to human-inflicted [causes](#) including pesticides, drought, habitat destruction prompted by construction sites, air pollution and global warming. A common bee pest, the varroa mite, now poses an additional threat to the bee’s population.

“The Deformed Wing Virus is arguably the biggest threat to honey bees right now. Our lab research has shown that the new, highly contagious variant is killing bees faster,” says Dr. Robert Paxton who teaches at the Martin Luther University Halle Wittenberg (MLU).

DWV is responsible for causing severe damage to a bee’s wing before eventually killing them. The new variant was discovered by a scientist collective across the globe who have been studying DWV for two decades. The new variant is being spread by varroa mites, a common honey bee pest.

According to researchers at MLU who used 3,000 different sets of data to track down the new variant’s location, the new variant has already spread throughout Europe and has already reached every other continent with the exception of Australia.

“Our analysis confirms that the new variant is already the dominating force in Europe. We fear that it’s just a matter of time before it will have forced its way all over the world,” warns Dr. Paxton.

Scientists warn beekeepers that basic, general hygiene measures are a key preventive measure against the destructive pests.

“Basic, general hygiene measures for the hive are paramount for beekeepers when it comes to protecting their colonies from the varroa mite,” says [Dr. Paxton](#).

They add that discovering the mites in their early stages of infestation will also help save the hive they are tending.

“Bees are the most important creature for mankind and the environment,” adds Dr. Paxton. Indeed, bees are a vital part of the planet— responsible for 80% of all pollination globally— they are the farmers who help support and grow fruits, nuts, and vegetables within 70/100 top human food crops that are responsible for 90% of the world’s nutrition.

Bees are so essential that if they die: we don’t eat.

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Powerful Magnitude 6.1 Earthquake Rattles Philippines - EMSC

By - Mary Manley

On Saturday, a magnitude 6.1 earthquake struck the region of Luzon, Philippines, at 5:50 local time. Authorities have not yet reported any fatalities or injuries caused by the quake.

A magnitude 6.1 earthquake was felt in the Philippines' Luzon region, the most populous and largest island in the island nation and is the fourth most populous island in the world. The earthquake hit at approximately 14.02 N; 120.67 E at a depth of 175 kilometers.

The European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre [reported](#) that the earthquake struck just 39 km (24.2 miles) southwest from the city of Silang, where roughly 295,644 people live and 7 km (4.3 miles) southeast of Nasugbu, where an estimated 136,524 residents live.

Injuries, fatalities, and further damage caused by the earthquake have yet to be reported.

Testimonies collected by the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre account for the earthquake's effect on the local region.

"It was quite strong," said one resident in Mendez-Nunez who was 28 km away from where the earthquake's recorded epicenter. "The earthquake woke me up as if I'm shaking from chills and feeling dizzy."

Another witness in Janopol - about 45 km from the epicenter - detailed that the quake had lasted for about a minute.

One witness located 128 km away from the earthquake's epicenter reported a "small to medium" movement of their two-story cement townhouse. "But it was noticeable," they added. "I went outside and saw the power lines swaying a little."

A magnitude 6.1 [earthquake](#) is considerably powerful; however, with roughly 100 such events occurring every year, they are not common. The earthquake magnitude scale measures from 2.5 or less to 8.0 or greater. A 6.1 magnitude earthquake has the capability of wrecking havoc in populated areas.

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'Complete Shock': Skull Estimated to be 8,000 Years Old Found in Minnesota River

By - Mary Manley

The long withstanding megadrought in Nevada and much of the Western United States revealed two bodies in Lake Mead after the drought depleted its water levels. Minnesota experienced its own drought last fall when 93% of the state was abnormally dry - now, the state is getting the chance to explore their own hidden treasures.

A roughly 8,000-year-old skull was discovered last summer in the [Minnesota](#) River during an unusual drought felt by 93% of the state. About 110 miles west of Minneapolis, two kayakers made the discovery and turned it over to a medical examiner, according to Renville County Sheriff Scott Hable.

The skull then made its way, eventually, to the FBI where a forensic anthropologist used carbon dating - a tool which can measure the age of an object that contains carbon - to estimate its age.

The skull belonged to a young man who lived in the area between 5,500 and 6,000 B.C.E., authorities have since determined.

"It was a complete shock to us that the bone was that old," said Hable.

"There's probably not that many people at that time wandering around Minnesota 8,000 years ago, because, like I said, the glaciers have only retreated a few thousands years before that," said [Kathleen Blue](#), a professor of anthropology at Minnesota State University, who says the skull most likely belongs to a tribe that was living in what is now known as Minnesota. "That period, we don't know much about it."

Hable and his office made a social media post regarding the news, but removed the post after complaints were made by several Native Americans who said it's offensive to Native American culture to display images of their ancestors without first notifying them.

Minnesota Indian Affairs Council Cultural Resources Specialist Dylan Goetsch said in a statement that the council was not told about the finding as they were required to per state law. According to official, Hable's social media post "showed a complete lack of cultural sensitivity" by referring to the ancestral remains as a "little piece of history," and not an individual Native American.

Minnesota has recently recovered from the harshest aspects of the drought, but its lingering effects are still being felt by locals.

Farmers and ranchers in [Minnesota](#), for example, have had to request government assistance in order to feed their livestock after food sources were dried out. Last summer's discovery mirrors recent finds made in Nevada's [Lake Mead](#) this spring, when a body stuffed in a barrel was found after the lake's water levels were depleted due to the West's ongoing megadrought. The remains discovered last summer will be turned over to Upper Sioux Community tribal officials.

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Major SNL Stars Pete Davidson, Kate McKinnon, Aidy Bryant & Kyle Mooney Expected to Quit
By - Mary Manley

The American sketch comedy show has been running since 1975 and plans to end its 47th season on May 21. With that news comes the departure of four members of its line of star comedians.

Comedians Pete Davidson, Kate McKinnon, Aidy Bryant and Kyle Mooney will be saying adieu to hit sketch show Saturday Night Live, marking one of the show's biggest cast changes in history.

[Davidson](#), 28, already announced his departure in a sentimental Saturday message through his friend's Instagram account as the comedian does not have his own social media account for mental health reasons.

The Staten Island native recalled first joining the sketch show in 2014, at the age of 20. "It's crazy to think that today I'll be doing my last [show]," he wrote.

Davidson has worked on other projects including the 2020 film "The King of Staten Island" and stand-ups for [Netflix](#). He is also gaining media attention as the new beau of Kim [Kardashian](#).

On Friday, it was announced that Kate McKinnon, Aidy Bryant, and Kyle Mooney will also be leaving the show after their long-running careers, though the longest tenured cast member remains Kenan Thompson, who has been a part of the cast for 19 seasons.

McKinnon is the longest-running female cast member of [SNL](#) and is loved for her spot-on impersonations of celebrities and cultural figures like Hillary Clinton, Ellen DeGeneres, and even Justin Bieber. McKinnon has also been focused on other projects like Peacock's "Joe vs. Carole."

Bryant has also been working on her own career, developing her Hulu show "Shrill." She's leaving SNL after first signing up ten years ago in 2012. Bryant's impressions of Ted Cruz and Sarah Huckabee Sanders caught the attention of audiences, and her work for the show saw her nominated for three Emmys.

Mooney, who began his career with sketches on YouTube, brought off-the-wall ideas to the show with sketches that took place "behind the scenes" of SNL, depicting a fictional relationship with his former castmate Leslie Jones.

The stars are exiting after their careers began in the wake of their predecessors' departures - Andy Samberg, Abby Elliott, Jason Sudeikis, and Kristen Wiig - stars who left the show to pursue other gigs, like TV shows and films.

SNL's show on May 21, hosted by Natasha Lyonne, will be the last show ever for these four stars.

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Study: Dream-Enactment Behavior Spiked Fourfold During COVID-19 Pandemic

By - Mary Manley

Dream-enactment behavior is a phenomena in which an individual will physically act out vivid, unpleasant dreams with vocal sounds and unexpected, oftentimes violent movements of the limbs during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is the deepest stage of a person's sleep. A group of researchers recently detected a two to fourfold increase in the pervasiveness of dream-enactment behavior - or rapid eye movement sleep behavior disorder (RBD) - during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers of the study underlined that long-term consequences of COVID-19 can lead to neuropsychiatric symptoms/disorders in COVID-19 patients.

While the muscles are supposed to be paralyzed during REM sleep, a person with RBD will lack the muscle paralysis needed to get a good night's sleep and actually re-enact whatever they're dreaming about.

“They may punch or flail their arms in the air, make running movements, or even jump out of bed, sometimes resulting in injuries to themselves or their partner,” said lead author Prof Yaping Liu at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Official made their findings after examining data from the International COVID-19 Sleep Study (ICOSS), which was conducted during the pandemic between May and August of 2020. The online survey compiled data from 15 different countries across the globe and asked survey takers if they had experienced RBD during the pandemic. Approximately 26,539 individuals participated in the survey.

“We found that the prevalence of dream-enactment behavior was two to four times higher than previous studies that have been conducted in the general population during non-pandemic times,” said Liu. “Moreover, in those subjects who reported a Covid-19 diagnosis, it was two or three times higher, compared with subjects without infection.”

Researchers found that RBD was more common during the pandemic in the global population, and was also found to be commonly associated with those experiencing olfactory impairment, mood, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obstructive sleep apnea symptoms. Those who were diagnosed with COVID-19 were two to three times more likely to experience RBD or dream enactment behavior (DEB).

Adam [Zeman](#), a professor and expert in sleep disorders at the University of Exeter, explained there may be other contributing factors linked to COVID-19 and DEB, such as the stress, anxiety, and breathing issues. Additionally, Liu admitted their findings are just a peek at the link between the pandemic and RBD.

“Dream-enactment behaviors can also occur as a result of other sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, and have also been reported by people with post-traumatic stress disorder, or who are experiencing nightmares,” Liu said. “They may be intermittent and fade away if other problems, such as nightmares, PTSD, stress, and negative emotions are improved.”

The team's findings were [published](#) in the Journal of Sleep Research.

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'Brainwashed A**hole': Rudy Giuliani Blasts Heckler, Says He's 'Probably as Demented as Biden'

By - Mary Manley

On Sunday, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani decided to grace the city with his presence during the Israel Day Parade, a celebration of Jewish Pride in New York City first organized in 1964.

Armed with his miniature Israeli flag while tottering through New York City's 5th Avenue and 62nd Street, Giuliani was filmed confronting a heckler who appeared to be shouting at the former mayor of New York.

Video appears to show the heckler initially telling the 77-year-old former mayor that he should be ashamed of himself, which then prompts Giuliani to lean over a metal barricade and repeatedly jab his finger as he lectured the heckler.

"Crime was down 55% under me, it's up 40% under him," shouted Giuliani, who once served as Trump's lawyer and recently testified to the January 6 House Select Committee regarding the Capitol riot. Giuliani was a major proponent of Trump's 'Big Lie', and even had his law license [suspended](#) by a New York court for the false claim.

In the video from Sunday's parade, an associate or family member of Giuliani appears to be holding him back as he hurls insults at the bystander.

"I reduced crime you jacka**! You are a brainwashed a**hole!" yelled Giuliani, before adding, "And you're probably as demented as Biden!"

The former mayor then waddled from the scene, and went back to smiling and waving his flag. Giuliani often touts the idea that he was solely responsible for reducing crime in New York City during the 1990s, and while the statistics he brags are true, Giuliani alone was not the sole reason why organized crime and mayhem dropped off in the Big Apple. Crime rates were already dropping three years before he took office in 1994.

"It's hard to imagine policing, no matter how smart and effective it is, giving the kind of leverage... to move a macro force like crime," said Jeffrey [Fagan](#), co-director of the Center for Crime, Community and Law at the Columbia Law School in New York.

Experts also attribute the decline in crime to demographics, including the break in the crack cocaine epidemic and an improving economy.

Giuliani is better known to a younger generation as a man who throws fits on the [internet](#) and was duped in a Sacha Baron Cohen skit for his film "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm."

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WHO Chief Warns COVID-19 Pandemic is 'Most Certainly Not Over'

By - Mary Manley

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus spoke at the United Nations in Geneva on Sunday during the first day of the 75th World Health Assembly. Despite declining numbers of COVID-19, the World Health Organization chief has warned that the pandemic is "most certainly not over".

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on Sunday that the COVID-19 pandemic is "most certainly not over," underscoring that governments will put themselves and their people in jeopardy if they begin to slack off.

Ghebreyesus dangled a silver lining for those at the meeting, however, saying the acute phase of the pandemic could still end this year if certain goals are reached. "Ending the acute phase of the pandemic must remain our collective priority," he added, emphasizing that care must be taken to watch and address any evolutions of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

"Learning to live with COVID cannot mean that we give this virus a free ride. It cannot mean that we accept almost 50,000 deaths a week from a preventable and treatable disease," cautioned Ghebreyesus.

"There are different scenarios for how the pandemic could play out and how the acute phase could end. But it's dangerous to assume that omicron will be the last variant or that we are in the

endgame,” [Ghebreyesus](#) said at the start of a WHO executive board meeting this week. “On the contrary, globally, the conditions are ideal for more variants to emerge.”

The WHO chief underlined that almost 1 [billion](#) people in lower-income nations have yet to be vaccinated, and that just 60% of the world’s population has been vaccinated. Africa, he added, has reported rising death rates due to the virus and is the continent with the lowest vaccination coverage.

Only 57 wealthy countries have vaccinated 70% of their people, says Ghebreyesus, a percentage goal set by the World Health Organization for every country by the end of the year. “In all, we see vaccine hesitancy driven by misinformation and disinformation,” he continued. “The pandemic will not magically disappear, but we can end it.”

During the meeting the WHO chief also blamed “insufficient political commitment to roll out vaccines,” as well as issues with “operational or financial capacity” as a cause of the low vaccination rates in certain countries.

“Let me put it plainly: If the current funding model continues, WHO is being set up to fail,” he said. “The paradigm shift in world health that is needed now must be matched by a paradigm shift in funding the world’s health organization.”

Ghebreyesus is expected to begin a second five-year term this week.

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Starbucks to Permanently Quit, Terminate Brand Presence in Russian Market - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US coffee-shop giant Starbucks on Monday announced its decision to permanently quit the Russian market and terminate brand presence in the country in light of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine.

“Starbucks has made the decision to exit and no longer have a brand presence in the market. We will continue to support the nearly 2,000 green apron partners in Russia, including pay for six months and assistance for partners to transition to new opportunities outside of Starbucks.”

Starbucks suspended all business operations in Russia in March, including halting shipments of all company products, in response to Moscow’s special operation in Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions. Numerous foreign companies have decided to leave Russia altogether.

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Biden LNG Task Force Secretly Developing Plan to Boost Gas Supplies to Europe - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration task force on liquefied natural gas (LNG) has been covertly developing a plan to wean Europe off Russian energy products by increasing supplies of LNG to the region by at least 15 billion cubic meters this year, Bloomberg reported on Monday.

The task force started its work in late March after US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula Von de Leyen charged it with a task to diversify Europe gas supplies in light of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, according to the report. Environmental activists have accused the task force for lacking transparency and engaging representatives of large gas companies. In addition, the secret nature of the task force's activities violates federal advisory committee law, according to a letter the anti-corruption group Global Witness sent to Biden earlier on Monday.

The Biden administration does not believe the group's activity falls under the Federal Advisory Committee Act because formally only government officials from the European Union and the United States are on the task force, the report said.

The task force is being headed by former energy executive Amos Hochstein, who previously worked for the LNG company Tellurian Inc., and by the head of cabinet of the European Commission president Bjorn Siebert, the report added.

The group members have already met with LNG industry representatives, community advocates and the manufacturers of smart thermostats, heat pumps and other technologies that could possibly be deployed to help Europe reduce energy demand, according to the report.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian forces. The United States and its allies responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia. The European Union has also announced its intention to reduce dependence on Russian energy supplies in the foreseeable future.

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Biden Admin. Considering Using Special Forces to Protect US Embassy in Kiev - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering the possibility of using special operations forces to protect the United States' embassy in Kiev, CNN reported on Monday.

The idea to send special operations forces to protect the US embassy in Kiev is in the preliminary stages of consideration and has yet to be brought to President Joe Biden for a final decision, the report said citing administration officials familiar with the matter.

The United States does not believe that Russia would overtly attack the embassy, but fears the possibility of missiles or air defense systems inadvertently hitting the facility, the report said. While embassies are normally guarded by Marine Corps personnel, there is a consensus that the security situation in Ukraine necessitates additional troops suitable to address the security challenges, the report added.

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Blinken, Japan Foreign Minister Discuss Maintaining Peace in Taiwan Strait - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Japanese counterpart Hayashi Yoshimasa in Tokyo and discussed maintaining peace in the Taiwan strait among other issues, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Hayashi discussed their shared interest in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," Price said. "The Secretary underscored the importance of US-Japan-ROK [South Korea] cooperation, which reinforces a free, open, interconnected, prosperous, resilient and secure Indo-Pacific region."

Price also said Blinken and Hayashi welcomed the launching of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and condemned Pyongyang's ballistic missile tests.

"They reaffirmed their resolute support for Ukraine's sovereignty and independence and committed to holding the Kremlin accountable for its war of aggression in Ukraine," Price said. Earlier on Friday, US President Joe Biden, who is also visiting Japan, said the United States is ready to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan in the event of an invasion.

China has urged the United States to be careful in what it says and does regarding the Taiwan issue and Beijing will take strong action to protect its sovereignty and security interests, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said on Monday.

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IMF Sees Tepid Recovery in Germany, Warns of Downside Risks Including Russian Gas Shutoff

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund on Monday said it expects a "tepid recovery" in Germany but warned of possible downside risks, including a potential shutoff of gas from Russia, since the country would need two full years to find alternative supplies.

"The baseline scenario is for a tepid recovery, but risks are skewed downward," the IMF said in a statement on its 2022 Article IV mission. "The greatest threat is a persistent and complete shut-off of Russia's gas exports to Germany and Europe more broadly, as it would take at least two years to fully replace the missing supplies in Germany."

Other risks to Germany's economy include tighter sanctions on Russia, as well as supply disruptions caused by the conflict in Ukraine, or by new COVID restrictions in the country or abroad, the IMF said.

The IMF expects Germany's economic growth to slow to about 2% in 2022 from 2.9% the previous year, before picking up in 2023 to slightly above 2% if energy prices subside and supply chain issues ease.

"Growth would then decline toward potential after 2024," the IMF said.

In the medium-term, the IMF expects that output will remain below the pre-pandemic levels due to elevated energy prices, weaker external demand and other factors directly or indirectly related to the conflict in Ukraine.

"Inflation is expected to stay elevated at about 6½ percent in 2022 and moderate to about 3½ percent in 2023. However, growth could prove weaker and inflation higher than in the baseline," the statement said.

The IMF also noted that persistently high inflation could prompt major central banks to tighten their monetary policies faster than expected. Such a situation could lead to a sharp tightening in financial conditions and corrections in asset prices, the statement said.

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Austin at 2nd Defense Contact Group Meeting Says Efforts to Help Ukraine Must Intensify (Updates with additional details in paras 3-4, provides background in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Monday urged allies and partners to intensify efforts to help Ukraine as he opened the second virtual meeting of the Defense Contact Group with 44 countries participating.

"Today, we are honored to have defense leaders from 44 countries with us, as well as representatives from NATO and the EU [European Union]," Austin said during his opening remarks at the meeting. "Now, as Ukraine's fight continues, our efforts must intensify and we must all plan for the challenges ahead. Ukrainian armed forces will need our sustained support." Austin said he was especially pleased to see new countries taking part in the meeting, including Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Ireland and Kosovo.

The Pentagon chief underscored that a bill to provide \$40 billion in aid to Ukraine, signed by US President Joe Biden last week, would provide for an uninterrupted supply of military aid to the country amid Russia's ongoing special military operation.

The first meeting of the contact group of more than 40 countries took place at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, last month and was soon followed by Austin's promise to organize such meetings on a monthly basis.

The latest \$100 million US aid package for Ukraine was announced by Biden on May 19 and includes 18 155mm howitzers, 18 tactical vehicles and three AN/TPQ-36 anti-artillery radars. On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Launch of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Help to Expand US Position in Region - Raimondo
WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The newly unveiled Indo-Pacific Framework will allow Washington to expand its economic leadership and help counter China's influence in the region, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Monday.

Earlier in Tokyo on Monday, US President Joe Biden launched a new regional economic initiative together with 12 Indo-Pacific countries with a view toward tackling global inflation and containing China's economic influence.

"This framework will enable the United States to expand its economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific (IPEF) and work with our allies and partners in the region to secure our supply chains, increase clean energy production, and cooperate on the development and regulation of emerging technologies," Raimondo said.

Raimondo also said the trade pact would help reduce dependence on China among Indo-Pacific countries.

The pact "marks an important turning point in restoring US economic leadership in the region and presenting Indo-Pacific countries an alternative to China's approach to these critical issue," Raimondo told reporters during a press briefing.

The US commerce secretary noted that nearly 1 billion people in the Indo-Pacific will join the middle class over the next decade.

"Deepening our ties to the region is good for American workers and businesses and that of our partners in the region, and it is crucial to our ability to stay competitive," she said.

Washington regards the IPEF as a model for meeting modern challenges ranging from setting rules of the digital economy to ensuring sustainable supply chains. At the same time, some Indo-Pacific leaders see the new US initiative as an attempt to replace the existing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), from which Washington withdrew during the presidency of Donald Trump. After the Biden administration came to power in the US in 2021, Japan renewed its efforts to bring the US back to the TPP. However, due to the creation of the new structure, Tokyo later announced its intention to work together with Washington for the creation of an economic order favorable to the region.

Biden arrived in Tokyo on Sunday to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and take part in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit — an informal strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia and India — scheduled to be held on Tuesday.

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Pentagon Spokesman to Become US National Security Council Communications Coordinator - WH

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby will leave his current post to transfer to the White House to serve as the coordinator for strategic communications for the National Security Council, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, President Biden announced that John Kirby, who is currently the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, will be the new National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the White House," the release said on Friday. "In this role, Kirby will coordinate interagency efforts to explain United States policy and will serve as a senior administration voice on related matters, including as appropriate at the White House podium." Kirby will report to US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, the release said.

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Biden to Appeal Judge Ruling to Keep Migrant Expulsion Policy in Place - WH

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will appeal a federal judge's ruling that prevented plans to lift the Trump-era public health policy that authorized the immediate expulsion of migrants on the US southern border, the White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a press release.

"The Administration disagrees with the court's ruling, and the Department of Justice has announced that it will appeal this decision," the Jean-Pierre said in the release on Friday. "The authority to set public health policy nationally should rest with the Centers for Disease Control, not with a single district court."

The Biden administration will comply with the court order and continue to enforce the coronavirus-related public health policy, formally known as Title 42, Jean-Pierre said.

Earlier on Friday, US Judge Robert Summerhays blocked the Biden administration's plans to lift the policy on Monday.

The public health rule allows US border authorities to immediately reject the entry and stay of illegal immigrants on the basis of posing a potential threat to public health and expel them out of the United States.

Summerhays noted that a brief filed in this case on behalf of migrant asylum applicants in Mexico requested the injunction only apply to the 24 US states seeking to block it. However, the judge ruled that a partial injunction would only shift border crossings to other US states. Summerhays added that the nationwide injunction will avoid further complicating the Department of Homeland Security's operations and provides uniformity in immigration enforcement.

US Customs and Border Protection said earlier this week that it made some 234,088 apprehensions of undocumented migrants on the US southern border in April, maintaining the Biden administration's trend to reach a second consecutive all-time high yearly record for the number of illegal migrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

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BAE Systems Delivers Four Rebuilt CV90 Combat Vehicles to Norwegian Forces - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems announced it has delivered the first four of 20 modernized and rebuilt originally Swedish-built Ritek CV90 combat engineering vehicles to the Norwegian armed forces.

"The four vehicles are the first of 20 modernized CV90 engineering vehicles BAE Systems will deliver, in partnership with Ritek and the Norwegian Defense Materiel Agency," the company said in press release on Friday.

BAE Systems serves as the main supplier while Ritek plays a central role in purchasing, logistics, final assembly and integration in the project, the release said.

About 20 Norwegian companies are now qualified suppliers of products and components for the CV90 vehicles, and an integral part of BAE Systems' Norwegian supply chain, the release added.

The CV90 Stridsforden is a family of Swedish-manufactured tracked combat vehicles designed during the mid-1980s to early 1990s. Export versions are fitted with Hagglunds E-series turrets, armed with either a 30mm Mark 44 or a 35mm Bushmaster auto-cannon.

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Judge Blocks Plans to End Policy That Mitigated Migration on US Southern Border - Governor (Updates with more details, background in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge blocked the Biden administration's plans to lift a Trump-era health policy rule, formally known as Title 42, that has helped mitigate the

surge of illegal immigrants arriving through the US border with Mexico, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement.

The Biden administration said it planned to end Title 42 on Monday. The rule allows US border authorities to immediately reject the entry and stay of illegal immigrants on the basis of posing a potential threat to public health and expel them out of the United States.

"Federal Court stops Biden from ending Title 42," Abbott said on Friday. "The court granted a nationwide injunction to keep Title 42 in place."

US Judge Robert Summerhays said the Biden administration did not appear to challenge the states' entry of a nation-wide preliminary injunction.

Summerhays noted that a brief filed in this case on behalf of migrant asylum applicants in Mexico requested the injunction only apply to the 24 US states seeking to block it. However, the judge ruled that a partial injunction would only shift border crossings to other US states.

Summerhays added that the nationwide injunction will avoid further complicating the Department of Homeland Security's operations and provides uniformity in immigration enforcement.

US Customs and Border Protection said earlier this week that it made some 234,088 apprehensions of undocumented migrants on the US southern border in April, setting the Biden administration on a trend to reach a second consecutive all-time high yearly record for the number of illegal migrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

Roughly 1.3 million illegal immigrants have been apprehended on the US southern border this fiscal year, CBP data shows. Last fiscal year, 1.7 million illegal migrants were apprehended and the outcome has been widely blamed on President Joe Biden's lax immigration policy.

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Blinken to Visit Japan May 21-24 for Quad Leaders Summit, Bilateral Talks - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Japan over the weekend to participate in the Quad Leaders Summit and in bilateral meetings with Japanese government officials, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Tokyo, Japan, May 21-24 to accompany President Biden on his first official trip to Asia as President to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and attend the Quad Leaders' Summit," Price said in a press release on Friday.

Blinken will meet with Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and other senior Japanese officials to discuss the conflict in Ukraine, North Korea's recent missile test launches, bilateral trade and security in the Indo-Pacific, Price added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Fifteen Gepard tanks will be delivered to Ukraine from Germany in July, the DPA news agency reported on Friday.

* Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said Belarus is not going to be a part of the Ukraine conflict.

* Ukraine needs to determine the conditions for a ceasefire with Russia, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said when commenting on Italy's conflict resolution plan.

* As many as 1,908 Ukrainian militants from the Azov neo-Nazi battalion (under criminal investigation in Russia), who had been blocked in the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol for the past weeks, have surrendered, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* G7 finance ministers discussed strengthening sanctions against Russia and introducing an embargo on its oil and gas during a meeting in Bonn on Friday, Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said.

* Canada has imposed new Russia sanctions on 14 individuals and banned exports and imports of luxury goods from and to Russia, the Canadian government said.

* The finance ministers of the G7 countries have not discussed the issue of an embargo on Russian oil, German Finance Minister Christian Lindner said.

* Global oil market adjustments caused by US sanctions against Russia contributed to the spike in energy prices, White House Economic Adviser Cecilia Rouse said.

RUSSIA'S CYBERSECURITY

* Cyberaggression against Russia failed, Moscow was ready for these attacks, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

* After the start of the special operation in Ukraine, a real war was unleashed against Russia the cyberspace, the number of cyberattacks increased multifold, Putin said.

* NATO uses electronic and computer intelligence to obtain data on how Russia is protecting critical information infrastructure, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev told reporters.

RUSSIA GAS SUPPLIES TO FINLAND

* Gas supplies from Russia to Finland will stop at 7 a.m. on Saturday, Finland's Gasum said on Friday.

* Gazprom Export has not received payment in rubles from the Finnish Gasum company for gas supplied in April and stops delivering starting from Saturday, the Russian company said.

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday, commenting on reports about a possible shutdown of gas in Finland, that no one will deliver anything for free.

MONKEYPOX OUTBREAK

* The World Health Organization (WHO) has decided to convene an emergency meeting of experts to discuss the outbreak of monkeypox in light of rapidly rising cases, The Telegraph reported on Friday.

* Portugal's Directorate General of Health has confirmed 23 cases of monkeypox, an infectious disease endemic in Africa that has recently spread to Europe and North America.

* Lab testing has confirmed two cases of monkeypox in Belgium, Marc Van Ranst, a professor of virology at the Catholic University of Leuven, said.

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Wall St. Down 7th Week in Row in Longest Losing Spell Since Mid-1990s Dotcom Bust

NEW YORK, May 20 (Sputnik) - Wall Street fell for a seventh straight week, suffering its longest losing spell since the dotcom bust of the mid-1990s, as fears of an economic slowdown continued to hammer investor sentiment although the key S&P 500 index rebounded slightly after hitting bear-market territory on Friday.

The S&P 500, which tracks the top 500 US stocks, settled near flat on the day at 3,901. Earlier in the session, it fell to 3,810, marking a loss of 20% on the year. In general market terminology, any asset down 20% from its most recent high is defined as having entered a bear market. While the S&P 500 rebounded from Friday's intraday low, it still finished the week down 3%, and registered a cumulative loss of 14% over the past seven weeks. Year-to-date, it is down over 18%.

Wall Street's selloff, which began right after the week ended March 25, has sent the S&P 500 deeper into a seventh weekly decline that would make it the longest losing streak since the dotcom bust of more than two decades ago, according to Bespoke Investment Group.

It also will be the fourth streak of seven or more weekly losses in the post-World War II period, the firm said.

"It's a small sample size, but these types of streaks haven't occurred during particularly positive periods for the equity market," Bespoke's strategists said in a note. "The root causes of the weakness have been the hawkish FOMC and increasing concerns over the potential for a recession."

The Federal Reserve has said it will raise interest rates non-stop and even slow the US economy if necessary to bring inflation down from 40-year highs.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the coronavirus pandemic, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982. But inflation has grown just as fast as the economy, or maybe quicker, with some price gauges showing growth of as much as 8.5% on the year.

Since this year began, US growth has been on a weaker trajectory, coming in at a negative 1.4% in the first quarter as the Russia-Ukraine crisis led to runaway inflation in food and energy prices.

If the economy does not return to positive territory in the second quarter, the United States will technically be in recession going by the definition that it takes just two negative quarters in a row to make up a recession.

Aside from the S&P 500, two other major US equity indexes — the Nasdaq Composite and the Dow Jones Industrial Average — also finished with unbroken weekly losses since late March. Nasdaq, which includes top technology stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished down 0.3% on Friday at 11,355. It lost 3.8% on the week and was down 27% on the year.

The Dow, a broad-based blue-chip indicator, was flat at 31,261. For the week, it lost 2.9% while the year, it was down almost 14%.

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US Probing Single Confirmed Case of Monkeypox, Person Does Not Pose Risk to Public - CDC

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The single confirmed case of monkeypox in the United States is being investigated and the person in question does not present risk to the public, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a release on Friday.

"The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are investigating a confirmed case of monkeypox in the United States," the release said. "The patient is currently isolated and does not pose a risk to the public."

On May 17, the CDC said in a release a Massachusetts resident showed skin lesions that had several features suspicious for monkeypox, which prompted specialized Laboratory Response Network testing of swab specimens collected from the person. The test confirmed the patient was infected with a West African strain of monkeypox virus. The CDC issued a health advisory to ask clinicians in the United States to be vigilant to the characteristic rash associated with monkeypox.

CDC also issued the recommendations for clinicians, saying that in case of identifying patients with a characteristic rash, monkeypox should be considered as a possible diagnosis.

"Appropriately collected samples can be sent to CDC or an appropriate Laboratory Response Network laboratory for testing by PCR," she said. "After diagnosis of monkeypox, begin contact tracing of individuals who may have been exposed to the patient while the patient was symptomatic. Contacts should be monitored for 21 days after their last date of contact with the patient."

CDC also said in its release that based on the information currently available, risk to the public appears low.

Monkeypox is a rare viral disease, which is usually transmitted to people from wild animals, but also can be transmitted from human to human through body fluids, respiratory droplets and other contaminated materials. The disease fatality rate is ranging from 1% to 10%.

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Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby Refuses to Comment on His Possible Move to White House

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby on Friday did not confirm nor deny recent reports about his move to a senior position at the White House.

"I've seen the stories out there. I don't have any personal announcements to make. Certainly not about me. We all serve at the pleasure of the [US] President [Joe Biden]. I will tell you that. I am just so proud to be able to come back into public service and to be back here with you guys. I'm focused on that," Kirby said during a press briefing.

According to multiple media reports on Thursday, Kirby is expected to take a senior communications position at the White House that will also entail working with the National Security Council. However, Kirby's potential new role and responsibilities remain unclear. Earlier in May, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki left and was replaced by her colleague Karine Jean-Pierre on May 13.

US media reports have speculated that Psaki plans on switching sides from government spokesperson to a member of the corporate-owned media, with the MSNBC network thought to be a potential new home for her.

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Biden Names Envoys to Tunisia, Uzbekistan Plus Intelligence Official - White House

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has announced five new nominations for senior positions in his administration, including his choices as ambassadors to Tunisia and Uzbekistan, the White House announced on Friday.

"President Biden announces his intent to nominate the following individuals to serve as key leaders in his administration ...Joey Hood, nominee for ambassador extraordinary and

Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Tunisia [and] Jonathan Henick, nominee for ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the Republic of Uzbekistan," the White House said in a press release.

Biden has also announced Richard Glick as his choice to chair of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and Milancy Harris as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Security and Intelligence, the release added.

The president has also named Amy Solomon as Assistant Attorney General running Justice Programs at the Department of Justice, according to the release.

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Musk Seeks Answers From Twitter CEO for Allowing Clinton to Spread 'Hoax' on Trump

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk on Friday called on Twitter executives to address why they allowed the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign to spread misinformation on the social media platform in 2016 about an alleged secret line of communication between former President Donald Trump and Russia.

"That tweet is a Clinton campaign hoax for which their campaign lawyer is undergoing a criminal trial," Musk wrote on Twitter. "[CEO Parag Agrawal] and [Legal, Policy and Trust Lead Vijaya Gadde], what say you?"

Musk said he donated to and voted for Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election, but is upset his funds were being used for lying.

Former Clinton campaign lawyer Michael Sussmann is in the middle of a criminal trial for making a false statement to the FBI about allegations in which he is accused of lying about not working on behalf of any clients.

In 2016, Sussmann told the FBI that there was a backdoor communications channel between the Trump Organization and Alfa Bank, which is reportedly linked to the Russian government. A probe conducted by Special Counsel John Durham alleges that Sussmann was actually working for the campaign of Hillary Clinton, as well as for tech executive Rodney Joffe.

The FBI found no evidence of a covert communications channel between former US President Donald Trump and Russia's Alfa Bank, according to testimony during the trial from former FBI General Counsel James Baker.

Former Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook testified in Sussmann's trial that Clinton approved the spreading of rumors to the media alleging a secret communications channel between the Trump Organization and a Russian bank despite concerns from campaign officials about the claims' legitimacy.

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Hyundai Says Agreed With US State of Georgia to Build \$5.54Bln Electric Vehicle Plant

WASHINGTON, May 20(Sputnik) - South Korea-based automotive manufacturer Hyundai made a deal with the US state of Georgia to construct a \$5.54 billion electric vehicle and battery manufacturing facility near the city of Savannah, Hyundai said on Friday in a press release. "Hyundai Motor Group today announced it has entered into an agreement with the State of Georgia to build its first dedicated full electric vehicle and battery manufacturing facilities in the U.S.," the press release said. "The new EV plant and battery manufacturing facilities represent an investment of approximately USD 5.54 billion."

The new plant will break ground in early 2023 and is expected to begin commercial production in the first half of 2025, according to the press release. The facility will have an annual capacity of 300,000 units, consisting of a wide range of electric vehicles, the press release said.

The plant will be located in Bryan County on an almost 3,000-acre site less than 50 kilometers (about 30 miles) from the Port of Savannah, the press release also said.

The project is expected to create approximately 8,100 new jobs. The investment is part of Hyundai's plan to put \$7.4 billion toward future mobility and electric vehicle production, the press release added.

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Harris, Macron Discuss Support for Ukraine, Global Food Security - White House

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris discussed by telephone with French President Emmanuel Macron the ongoing efforts to support Ukraine amid Russia's special operation there and other security challenges, the White House said on Friday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris today spoke with President Emmanuel Macron of France," the White House said in a press release. "Vice President Harris and President Macron discussed their determination to continue to support the people of Ukraine in the wake of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion, as well as the global food and security challenges exacerbated by the conflict."

The two leaders also touched upon the need to fight "the epidemic of hate, violence and racism in both countries" after the mass shootings such as the one in Buffalo, New York, last week, the release said.

The conflict in Ukraine has raised concerns about the possible risks of food shortages in world markets that could significantly affect the prices of grains, given that Russia and Ukraine account of a third of the world supply.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation solely targets Ukraine's military infrastructure and aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify the country.

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Trump Pays \$110,000 in Fines to Court to Lift Contempt Findings - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump paid \$110,000 in fines to the court as a condition of getting a civil contempt finding against him lifted stemming from his failure to cooperate with a state probe into Trump Organization finances by New York Attorney General Letitia James, Law360 reported on Friday.

Trump has until midnight local time to submit additional documents needed to have the contempt finding fully lifted, the report said, citing New York Judge Arthur Engoron.

Engoron in April found Trump in contempt of court after the former president ignored an earlier ruling that he and his two adult children could not refuse subpoenas by James to question them over her probe into the Trump Organization, which represents the family's business interests.

Engoron in May then ordered Trump to pay \$110,000 in fines, provide a description of the Trump Organization's document retention and destruction policy, and review the remaining documents tied to him by May 20 as conditions of lifting the contempt finding.

The fine money will be placed by the court in an escrow account pending Trump's appeal of the contempt ruling, the judge said.

Trump and his company have denied any wrongdoing. The former president had previously called James' probe "a continuation of the greatest Witch Hunt of all time."

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US Sees No Indication of Russia Using Weaponized Lasers in Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see any indication that Russia is using weaponized lasers in Ukraine amid its special military operation there, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"No, we don't have any indication of the use of ... weaponized lasers in Ukraine, nothing to confirm on that," Kirby said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, the Defense Department said the United States had not seen any evidence that the Russian forces have been using a new laser weapon system to destroy drones in Ukraine after Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov said on the same day that Russia had successfully tested a laser capable of burning drones at a distance of five kilometers (3.1 miles).

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Current, Former US Drug Enforcement Agents Charged in Bribery Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors have charged a currently serving and a former agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in a bribery scheme, the Department of Justice announced on Friday.

"...John Costanzo, a DEA Special Agent, and Manuel Recio, a former DEA Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge were indicted in Manhattan federal court with conspiracy to bribe a public official, conspiracy to commit honest services wire fraud and honest services wire fraud," the press release said.

In the scheme, Recio funneled tens of thousands of dollars to Costanzo in exchange for Costanzo providing sensitive law enforcement information to assist Recio in recruiting clients for defense lawyers. Costanzo was also charged with accepting a bribe from Recio and Recio with giving a bribe to Costanzo, the Justice Department said.

"Costanzo and Recio were arrested today and presented before Magistrate Judge Barbara Moses," the release said.

The two men are each charged with one count of conspiracy to commit bribery, which carries a maximum term of five years in prison, and one count of receiving or paying a bribe, respectively, which carries a maximum term of 15 years in prison, according to the Justice Department.

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US Temporarily Denies Export Privileges to Rossiya Airlines Over 'Export Violations'
(Adds details, background in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States issued an order to temporarily deny export privileges to Rossiya Airlines due to alleged ongoing export violations the company is committing, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

"Today, Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) Assistant Secretary for Export Enforcement Matthew S. Axelrod issued an order denying the export privileges of a fifth Russian airline – Rossiya Airlines – due to ongoing export violations related to comprehensive export controls on Russia imposed by the Commerce Department," the US Bureau of Industry and Security said in a press release.

This order terminates the right of Rossiya Airlines to engage in transactions subject to the Export Administration Regulations (EAR), including exports and reexports from the United States, the release said, adding that the denial order is effective for 180 days and may be renewed.

The Commerce Department also said it identified a second aircraft owned by Russian businessman Roman Abramovich that likely violated US export controls, which means US

businesses need to seek authorization from the US government before providing any services to the aircraft.

The United States has blacklisted nearly 200 aircraft, including from Aeroflot, AirBridgeCargo, Azur Air, and Pobeda, for allegedly violating US export controls put in place as part of the Biden administration's sanctions campaign against Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine.

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US to Keep Troops in Europe at 100,000 Unless Security Situation Escalates – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) – The United States will keep the current number of troops in Europe at 100,000 unless Russia escalates the security situation in the region by threatening Sweden and Finland or NATO members, CNN reported on Friday, citing multiple US officials. The US is ready to establish more bases in Europe if the security environment changes, and can also temporarily increase the number of troops if NATO decides to conduct more military exercises, the report said.

The future plans are being considered by US military commanders after a meeting of NATO's military chiefs in Brussels on Thursday, the officials said. The chiefs are expected to pass their recommendations about the security posture in Europe to a NATO defense ministerial scheduled for June as well as to NATO leaders, including President Joe Biden.

Since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February, the United States has increased the number of troops stationed in Europe from about 60,000 to 100,000. On Wednesday, the ambassadors of Sweden and Finland handed over their countries' applications for NATO membership to the alliance's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg. Their membership hinges on unanimous approval by NATO member states, but Turkey and Croatia seem to hold back the accession process.

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Clinton Campaign Chief Says Hillary Approved Spread of Trump-Russia Allegations to Media
WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton approved the spread of rumors to the media alleging a secret communications channel between the Trump Organization and a Russian bank despite concerns from campaign officials about the claims' legitimacy, former Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook said on Friday,

"I don't remember the substance of the conversation, but notionally, the discussion was, hey, we have this and we want to share it with a reporter," Mook was quoted by Fox News as saying during court testimony when asked about dissemination of the allegations to the media. "All I remember is that she agreed with the decision."

Mook was testifying as part of the trial of Clinton lawyer Michael Sussmann, who is being charged with making a false statement to the FBI in connection with a meeting about the allegations in which he is accused of lying about not working on behalf of any clients. Sussmann told the FBI in 2016 that there was a backdoor communications channel between the Trump Organization and Alfa Bank, which is reportedly linked to the Russian government. A probe conducted by Special Counsel John Durham alleges that Sussmann was actually working for the campaign of Hillary Clinton, as well as for tech executive Rodney Joffe. The FBI found no evidence of a covert communications channel between former US President Donald Trump and Russia's Alfa Bank, according to testimony during the trial from former FBI General Counsel James Baker. Mook during the trial also said that the campaign was not confident in the allegations' veracity, but hoped that the reporter to whom they spoke would further determine whether they were accurate, according to the report.

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US Consular Officer Visited Basketball Player Griner in Russian Jail - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - A US consular officer visited American professional women's basketball player Brittney Griner this week at a Russian jail, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

Griner, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, was detained at a Moscow airport on February 18 after a police dog alerted officers to vape cartridges containing cannabis oil in her luggage.

"I can confirm that a consular officer visited Brittney Griner in detention yesterday, on Thursday, May 19," Price said during a conference call. "The counselor officer found her continuing to do as well as could be expected under these exceedingly challenging circumstances."

Earlier this month, a Russian court ruled to extend Griner's arrest until June 18.

Griner was playing for the Russian basketball club UMMC Yekaterinburg during the off-season of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the United States.

The WNBA said in a statement to Sputnik that it is optimistic about Griner's chances to return home.

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Senator Says Russia May Be Holding Back Cyber Activity Due to Risk of US Response

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Russia may be holding back on engaging in widespread cyber operations against Europe and the United States due to concerns about a US response, Sen. Angus King said on Friday during a conference panel on tech and national security.

"I don't think there's much doubt that the Russians have held back to some extent," King said at the TruCon2022 conference. "This isn't based on intelligence, this is just based on my awareness over the years of how the Russians think. I think they know that we have some pretty potent capabilities ourselves and that they better be careful. And I have to believe that's been part of why we haven't seen the widespread cyber attacks in Europe or in the United States that everyone, including me, was expecting."

The US thinks about responses to possible cyber attacks in terms of integrated deterrence, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Cyber Policy Mieke Eoyang also said during the panel discussion. There are multiple ways to impose costs on Russia depending on what is appropriate, and it may not always be cyber for cyber, Eoyang said.

There are different hypotheses about why Russia may not be engaging in the levels of cyber activity anticipated by the West following the launch of the special military operation in Ukraine, Eoyang also said. The hypotheses included that Russia may be holding back, that cyber operations are more difficult than previously believed, or that Ukraine's cyber defenses are better than expected, according to Eoyang.

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Pentagon Denies Ukrainian Reports of US Planning to Destroy Russia's Black Sea Fleet

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon on Friday denied Ukrainian reports that the United States is planning to destroy Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

"I can tell you definitely that that's not true," spokesman John Kirby told a briefing.

Earlier in the day, Ukrainian ministry of internal affairs adviser Anton Gerashchenko said that the US is "preparing a plan to destroy the Black Sea Fleet." He added that deliveries of anti-ship weapons, including Harpoon and Naval Strike Missile with a range of 250-300 km, are being discussed.

Gerashchenko said that Ukrainians' alleged effective fight against Russian warships convinced the United States to prepare a plan to unblock Ukrainian ports.

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Blinken Hosts Kazakh Foreign Minister for Ukraine, Energy, Trade Talks

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi on Friday for discussions on Ukraine, trade and energy issues.

"We have a lot to talk about today in terms of the region, security," Blinken said before the meeting. "What we're seeing among other things from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine are profound impacts beyond Ukraine, including in Central Asia – food, energy, trade." The Biden administration continued to support the political and economic reform initiatives undertaken by the government of Kazakhstan, Blinken stated.

"We very much support as well the important efforts at political and economic reform that are taking place now in Kazakhstan," the secretary of state said.

The United States has been strategic partners with Kazakhstan for 30 years and Washington remains strongly committed to Kazakhstan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, he said.

In February, Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine with the goal of demilitarizing and denazifying Ukraine in defense of those living in the breakaway region of Donbas.

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US Welcomes Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Talks, Ready to Support Process - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and is ready to support the peace process, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We welcome peace [talks] between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ready to support the process," Price said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev said Baku is willing to sign a peace agreement and normalize relations with Yerevan.

Aliyev held a meeting with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda in Baku on the sidelines of the Azerbaijan-Lithuania business forum that kicked off earlier on Friday.

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia flared up in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, marking the most serious escalation of a protracted conflict in years, with thousands of casualties on both sides. The hostilities ended with a Russia-brokered ceasefire in November 2020, with the parties agreeing on the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to oversee the truce.

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State Department Says Not Time for Engagement Between US, Russian Officials

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday that now is not the appropriate time for diplomatic talks between senior State Department officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and their Russian counterparts.

"It is our assessment it is not the time at the moment for a high-level call between Secretary Blinken, or other seniors at the [State Department], precisely because we have seen no indication just yet that the Russians are serious about engaging in a constructive dialogue that could help to advance the prospects for the diminution of the violence or ultimately putting this conflict to an end," Price said during a conference call with reporters.

Moscow requested certain security guarantees from the United States regarding NATO's eastward expansion prior to the Ukraine conflict, however, the Biden administration rejected it.

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Senior US Official to Visit UK, Norway for Meetings With Military Leaders - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks will visit the United Kingdom, Germany and Norway to meet with military and government leaders, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Dr. Hicks will depart for an overseas trip on Sunday to meet with senior military and government leaders in Norway, the United Kingdom as well as the US European command, and US Africa Command leaders in Germany," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby noted that during her visit, Hicks will work to boost ties and reinforce the importance of having closer ties with allies and partners to counter strategic competitors like Russia and China.

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US Defense Secretary Austin to Speak With Ukraine's Reznikov Today - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin will speak with Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov later today, spokesman John Kirby said on Friday. "Later this afternoon the Secretary will have a chance to speak again with the Ukrainian minister of defense, Oleksii Reznikov, to discuss Ukraine's military requirements in advance of the US hosted first iteration and the second meeting of the Ukrainian defense contact group," Kirby said. "That will be held on Monday, it's gonna be held virtually. The secretary will participate from the Pentagon,"

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UN Deputy Secretary General Criticizes Proposals to 'Markedly Cut' Development Assistance

UNITED NATIONS, May 20 (Sputnik) - The proposals to "markedly cut" the Official Development Assistance to address the impacts on refugees in Ukraine are very troubling, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed said on Friday. "I am deeply troubled over the recent decisions and proposals to markedly cut Official Development Assistance (ODA) to service the impacts of the war in Ukraine on refugees," Mohammed, who chairs the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, said. Muhhamad noted that the conflict in Ukraine is having an impact on the world economy that was already affected by the COVID-19 pandemic measures and climate change. "Global food prices have reached an all-time high. A global energy crisis is already in motion. Overstretched public finances in the aftermath of the pandemic have left many developing countries with little capacity to cope," she said. Muhhamad pointed out that this is why now is the time for United Nations member states to respond to the humanitarian crisis. "They should respond by] bringing additional resources needed to meet Member State ODA pledges, thus investing in humanity's resilience and preventing the current crisis from cascading into many others. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary efforts," she said. According to the UN World Food Program, the situation in Ukraine may result in higher food prices and global hunger given that the Black Sea basin is one of the most important regions for production of grain and agricultural products. Ukraine and Russia account for 30% of global exports of wheat, 20% of global exports of maize and 76% of sunflower oil.

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US to Discuss NATO Force Posture in Europe With Allies in Weeks Ahead - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will discuss matters related to NATO force posture in Europe with allies in the weeks ahead leading up to the military alliance's summit in Madrid next month, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"We will continue to speak to questions of force posture, both in terms of NATO forces and in terms of US deployment, as an alliance bilaterally and multilaterally with our allies and partners in Europe in the weeks ahead, especially as we look towards the summit in June," Price said during a conference call with reporters.

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UN Confirms Guterres Received Message From Lukashenko, Has No Further Comment - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has received a personal message from Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, however, the United Nations will not comment on its content, United spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Friday.

"The Secretary General did receive a message from President Lukashenko during his meeting with the Ambassador," Dujarric said. "We will not comment on the content of the message." Earlier in the day, the Belarus Foreign Ministry revealed that the country's Ambassador to the United Nations, Valentin Rybakov, met with Guterres and passed to him a personal message from Lukashenko.

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Wall Street Enters Bear Market With S&P 500 Down 20% on Year, Nasdaq Off Nearly 30%
NEW YORK, May 20 (Sputnik) - Wall Street entered bear market territory on Friday, with the S&P 500 index for the top 500 US stocks falling 20% on the year while Nasdaq Composite, the technology stocks barometer, showed a loss of nearly 30% for 2022.

In general market terminology, any asset down 20% from its most recent high or from a particular period like a quarter or year-end is defined as having entered a bear market. The S&P 500 was hovering at around 3,810 on Friday afternoon, down 20% from its December finish of 4,767. Nasdaq, which includes top technology names such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, was at 11,042, down 29.2% from last year's close of 15,645.

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US Granting Work Licenses in Rebels-Controlled Areas Violates Syria's Sovereignty - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 20 (Sputnik) - The US government's decision to grant a license for certain economic activities in parts of Syria under control of terrorists and separatists is in violation the country's sovereignty, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Bassam al-Sabbagh told the UN Security Council on Friday.

"The recent decision by the US administration to grant a license for economic activities in specific areas in the northeastern and northwestern parts of Syria controlled by separatists militias and terrorist organizations represents direct support by the US administration to these entities and a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic, its independence," al-Sabbagh said.

Last week, the US Treasury Department issued a General License that authorizes specific economic activities in the northeastern and northwestern areas of Syria.

Al-Sabbagh said the move is a "grave breach" of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions concerning Syria.

The ambassador also accused the United States of a discriminatory approach toward the population in different parts of Syria.

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Friday Marks 11 Straight Days of Record Breaking Gas Prices in US - McConnell

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has experienced 11 straight days of record-breaking fuel prices that is putting a significant financial strain on the daily lives of Americans, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday.

"Today marks 11 straight days of record-breaking gas prices," McConnell wrote on Twitter. Americans are paying 88% more for gasoline than it cost when President Biden Joe took office on January 2021, McConnell added.

The average price for a gallon of regular gasoline in the United States costs \$4.59, according to the American Automobile Association, marking the eleventh straight day the national average price has hit a new all-time record high.

The average national price for a gallon of regular gasoline the week of January 19, 2021, the last week of the Trump administration, was \$2.38, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

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Austin, Colombia Counterpart Discuss Deepening Cooperation on Strategic Issues - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Colombian National Defense Minister Diego Molano met and discussed deepening their cooperation on a range of strategic issues, the Defense Department said in a readout of the conversation on Friday.

"The leaders discussed their shared interest in deepening cooperation on strategic issues, including countering illegal armed groups, cooperation on cyber, managing climate change and other trans-boundary threats and ensuring that Colombian defense institutions uphold a strong commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and protection of human rights, including accountability for human rights abuses," the readout said.

Austin congratulated Colombia on its recent designation by US President Joe Biden as a major non-NATO ally, the readout said.

The two officials also discussed the upcoming Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas that is set to be held in July, the readout added.

Austin reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a strong US-Colombia defense relationship and expressed his appreciation for Bogota's contributions to regional and international security, according to the readout.

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Biden's Popularity Falls to Lowest Point so Far as Midterm Elections Approach - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's public approval ratings have fallen to their lowest point of his presidency as the midterm general elections in November draw closer, a new Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Research (AP-NORC CPR) poll revealed on Friday.

The president's personal approval rating among US adults has dropped to 39%, AP-NORC CPR said in a release on the poll.

Only about 20% of adults now believe the United States is heading in the right direction and that its economy is in good shape, the results of the poll showed. Both figures showed a sharp decline from 30% approval ratings only a month before in April.

Biden's popularity was already very low among Republicans and weak with Independents but now it is falling significantly among his own Democrats too, the release said. Just 33% in Biden's own party said the United States was going in the right direction, a fall of 16% from 49% in April, it added.

Throughout Biden's first year in office in 2021 his approval rating never dropped below 82%. it has now declined to 73%, according to the poll results.

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UN Says Guterres Met With Italian Foreign Minister to Discuss Ukraine Peace Plan

UNITED NATIONS, May 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has held a meeting with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio this week but there are no further comments at present on the proposed road map for peace, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Secretary-General did meet this week with the Foreign Minister but we have no further comment at this time," Dujarric said.

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Syrian Constitutional Committee to Convene in Geneva on May 30 for 8th Meeting - UN

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The Syrian Constitutional Committee small body will convene in Geneva for its eighth meeting from May 30-June 3, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, that's Geir Pedersen's office, announced today the eighth session of the Constitutional Committee small body will convene in Geneva from May 30 to June 3," Dujarric told a briefing. "The Constitutional Committee will be meeting in closed sessions."

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Former New York City Mayor de Blasio Says to Run for Congress

NEW YORK, May 20 (Sputnik) - Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Friday he has decided to run for Congress, throwing his hat into the November election for the House of Representatives as a member of President Joe Biden's Democratic Party.

"The only way to save our democracy is to be a part of it. That is why I am running for Congress in New York's new 10th Congressional District," de Blasio said on his website. He urged public support for his campaign by telling people that "I cannot do this alone. Please join me."

The New York Times reported that de Blasio, who left office with low approval ratings in December after two terms, had been publicly mulling a campaign this week after a state court released a slate of new proposed congressional districts that would open up a "safely blue" seat in the heart of New York City.

De Blasio, who came to office in January 2014 and was replaced earlier this year by Eric Adams, was known throughout his term for controversy as well as clashes with the New York City police force, whose many members have visibly shown disdain toward him. He had been open about the bitter end of his tenure, admitting to mistakes that he said cost him his connection with voters.

A few other Democrats have shown interest in the same Congress seat eyed by de Blasio and could become rivals to his run, media reports said.

President Biden's party itself is expected to face a tough fight in the November election from Republicans who might have an advantage from Americans' disillusionment with record high fuel and food price increases that have led to the worst US inflation in 40 years. Biden's approval rating dipped to the lowest point of his presidency in May, with deepening pessimism emerging among Democrats, a poll released on Friday by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Research showed.

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US Revokes Terrorist Designation of Aum Shinrikyo, 4 Other Organizations - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has revoked terrorist designation of five foreign organizations, including Aum Shinrikyo in Japan and the Basque Fatherland and Liberty in Spain, the US Department of State said in a press release on Friday.

"Today, the Department of State is announcing the revocation of five Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designations under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA): Basque Fatherland and Liberty, Aum Shinrikyo, Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, Kahane Chai, and Gama'a al-Islamiyya," the release said.

However, all five organizations will remain on the US government's list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists entities in order to support law enforcement actions or ensure frozen assets are not released to still active individual terrorists, the release said.

The US government believes the five organizations are no longer engaged in terrorism or terrorist activities and do not have the capability and intent to do so, the release added.

The State Department has also revoked the terrorist designation it had imposed on six now deceased individuals: Abu al-Wardah, Mohad Moalim, Farah Mohamed Shirdon, Musa Abu Dawud, Aliaskhab Kebekov and Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, according to the release.

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US Unveils New Measures to Fight Hate Crimes After Deadly Buffalo Shooting - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced on Friday that he has unveiled three new measures to combat hates crimes in the United States following the deadly mass shooting in Buffalo last week.

"Today, I want to announce three important steps we are taking that reflect our holistic approach," Garland said. "First, along with our partners at the Department of Health and Human Services, we are issuing a new guidance aimed at raising awareness of hate crimes during the pandemic. This guidance includes several steps that community-based organizations, law enforcement, government officials and others can take to raise awareness of hate crimes and

hate incidents and how that increased awareness can be used as a tool for prevention and response.”

Garland pointed out that the guidance focuses on both hate crimes and hate incidents and was created with the input of many community-based stakeholders and public health professionals. “Second, I am pleased to announce that the Department has hired Ana Paula Noguez Mercado as our first-ever full-time Language Access Coordinator,” Garland said. “We know that language access is a major barrier to the reporting of hate crimes and hate incidents. Ana will join our Office of Access to Justice. She will work to improve knowledge, use and expansion of the Department’s language access resources.”

Moreover, Garland announced that the Department is releasing \$10 million grant solicitations for new programs to address hate crimes.

On Saturday, a shooting in a supermarket in the US city of Buffalo resulted in ten people dead and three injured. The FBI qualified the incident as a racially motivated hate crime, while Biden called for every effort to end “hate-fueled domestic terrorism.” The 18-year-old perpetrator, a mentally disturbed individual known to the authorities, was charged with first-degree murder.

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Oil Market Adjustment Caused by US Sanctions Contributed to Price Spike - Biden's Adviser

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Global oil market adjustments caused by US sanctions against Russia contributed to the spike in energy prices, White House Economic Adviser Cecilia Rouse said on Friday.

“As we put sanctions on the Russian banks, etc., oil markets have adjusted, we know that the price of oil has really skyrocketed and it has had some consequences for the supply of oil in terms of our refinery capacity and that is largely the reason why we’ve seen the spike in oil prices over the last two to three months,” Rouse said during a virtual panel discussion with think-tank Center for American Progress.

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Chevron Continues to Work in Venezuela in Compliance With US License Framework - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Chevron continues to work in Venezuela in compliance with the current license framework established by the US government, company spokesperson Ray Fohr told Sputnik on Friday.

“We continue to conduct our business in compliance with the current license framework provided by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC),” Fohr said, referring to the office at the Treasury Department.

On Tuesday, a senior Biden administration official told reporters that the Treasury Department has issued a narrow license to allow Chevron to negotiate future potential activities in Venezuela.

Fohr noted that Chevron continue maintaining "a constructive presence" in Venezuela, where the company has investments and a large workforce.

"We remain committed to the safety and well-being of our employees and their families, the integrity of our joint venture assets and the company's social and humanitarian programs during these challenging times," he said.

As a result of US sanctions imposed on Venezuela from 2014 to 2020, the country lost 98.6 percent of all external foreign exchange revenues and payments by the its PDVSA oil company to the country's central bank decreased from \$56.609 billion to \$73.4 million a year, or more than by 99 percent.

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Ukraine Needs More High-Precision Rockets, Drone Systems – Zelenskyy's Aide

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) – Ukraine still needs heavy military equipment, high-precision rockets, drone systems, air defense munition and other weaponry to counter Russia's special military operation, head of the Ukrainian presidential office Andriy Yermak said on Friday.

"We still need heavy military equipment, heavy arms. We need high precision rockets and missiles, drone systems, some of air defense munition and ammunition and many other things," Yermak said during a virtual conversation organized by the Atlantic Council.

Since the beginning of Russia's special operation, the Ukrainian military has been receiving an unprecedented amount of military equipment from about 14 countries with the United States being the largest contributor.

Among a wide range of military equipment being supplied there are more than 1,400 Stinger anti-aircraft systems, 5,500 Javelin anti-armor systems, 700 Switchblade drones, and 90 M777 155mm howitzers.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden authorized an additional \$100 million in military aid for Ukraine, using his presidential drawdown authority for the 10th time. The package will include 18 M777 howitzers and three AN/TPQ-36 radar systems among other pieces of equipment. On the same day, the US Senate passed a \$40 billion Ukraine aid bill.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, and the civilian population is not in danger.