

**12/15/22 Thursday**

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'Don't Bother Me With a Question Like That': Pelosi Snaps at Reporter About Serving Full Term  
By - Fantine Gardinier

When US Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) became House speaker in 2019, she did so on a pledge to serve in the office for just two terms, or four years. Accordingly, after the midterm elections last month, the 82-year-old lawmaker said she'd step back from leadership in the coming term. Pelosi showed her temper on Thursday after a reporter asked her a question she found annoying: would the 82-year-old lawmaker commit to serving the full two-year term to which she was just elected?

"What is this? What is this? Don't bother me with a question like that," Pelosi let fly. "Really, really, OK. I said what I'm gonna do. You know, those kinds of questions are such a waste of my time."

Pelosi represents California's 12th Congressional District, which in the 2022 elections included most of the city of San Francisco. Thanks to redistricting, in the coming 2024 elections it will instead represent several East Bay cities, including Oakland and Alameda.

Pelosi said last month, following the 2022 midterm elections, that she would not seek to return to the speaker's post when the new Congress takes office in January. This is in keeping with a [2019 deal she struck](#) with several hesitant lawmakers, who only voted for her if she agreed to their stipulations, one of which was term limits for top Democratic leaders. The House Democrats, now in the minority, instead elected Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) to be minority leader.

Accordingly, Pelosi's official portrait that will hang in the US Capitol was unveiled on Wednesday. The artist, Ronald Sherr, had completed the portrait in 2014 and it had been held in storage ever since. Sherr died a week before its unveiling.

However, Pelosi also said she was not stepping back from her elected office, and would serve her complete term.

That said, she [has also clarified](#) that one of her daughters, Christine Pelosi, might look to replace her mother as the 12th District's representative. However, if she dies while in office, California Governor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, will be tasked with appointing a replacement to serve the rest of her term.

Pelosi has served in Congress since June 1987, and led the Democrats in the House since 2003. In addition to her 2019-2023 term as speaker, she also served in the role from 2007 until 2011, becoming the first woman to do so.

Speaking at the unveiling ceremony for Pelosi's portrait on Thursday, her once-bitter rival, former House Speaker John Boehner, fought off tears as he praised her, saying there was "no other speaker of the House in the modern era, Republican or Democrat, who has wielded the gavel with such authority or with such consistent results."

"Needless to say, you're one tough cookie," he added.

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House Committee Bemoans Lack of US Spying on Chinese Health Figures During Covid's Earliest Days

By - Fantine Gardinier

A new report by the House Intelligence Committee says the US should have done more to gather "harder to obtain information" during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. However, it seems to fault the IC for then-US President Donald Trump's lackluster response, while basing its conclusion on a presumed duplicity by Beijing.

If the US had spied on Chinese health officials more in January and February 2020, it might have been able to convince Trump to take the novel coronavirus outbreak more seriously, House Intelligence Committee chair Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) argues in [a new report](#).

"At the outset, it is important to note that the first warning signs of an emerging novel disease will almost always come from public health authorities and their unclassified reporting," the report says.

"At that point, intelligence can be a necessary and valuable complement, providing additional context about the potential threat once health authorities have detected it. The unique capabilities of the IC can be trained to focus on gaining specific insights unavailable to the broader public, especially when a host government wishes to conceal the true extent of the danger to its own citizens or the rest of the world. But while the IC is capable of doing so, our committee found that the IC was poorly positioned to collect uniquely valuable intelligence in support of a crisis response."

US leaders have [repeatedly accused](#) or implied that the Chinese government tried to conceal information about the COVID-19 outbreak, up to and including baseless claims that the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, either as a bioweapon or careless handling of a wild virus under study. Especially as the outbreak in the US worsened and the death toll rose, US leaders, including US President Donald Trump and his successor, Joe Biden, doubled down on the claims in an effort to redirect popular fury elsewhere.

However, not only did the World Health Organization (WHO) [all but reject the lab leak theory](#) after sharing data with Chinese researchers, but so did Biden's own Intelligence Community. In August 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) [published a report](#) commissioned by Biden earlier that year containing its conclusions about the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the COVID-19 illness. That probe said the virus was naturally occurring and not a bioweapon.

The WHO research team that traveled to Wuhan has also [repeatedly fought back](#) against claims China had withheld data from them, saying that while not all data was shared, that which was withheld contained personal information and there wasn't time to go through the necessary procedures to get its release approved, which they found reasonable.

It's not clear what additional information the House Intel Committee hoped US spies would obtain. Chinese medical authorities were forthcoming with their information about the handful of cases of a mysterious flu-like disease in Wuhan in late December 2019 and early January 2020. The WHO put itself on emergency footing on January 1, 2020, a day after being notified by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission of the outbreak, according to [a WHO timeline](#). On January 11, China [publicly released](#) the genetic sequence of the virus, confirming it was not SARS CoV-1, but a new kind of coronavirus, which was dubbed 2019-nCoV before being renamed SARS CoV-2, or simply COVID-19, several weeks later.

Of course, the Trump administration also repeatedly claimed the WHO was under China's control, and complicit in the supposed "coverup," and began pulling the US out of the organization.

Indeed, the House committee report acknowledges the "myriad policy failures" by the Trump administration, and points out that while Trump's daily briefings contained regular warnings about the outbreak's severity, he continued to downplay the dangers.

"The IC's alarms to the White House and the former president were clear and unmistakable," it says. "And yet, in public messaging and in preparation for the impending impact, COVID was downplayed and steps that could have been taken to save lives were ignored."

Indeed, the only intelligence agency that did provide "unique insights" was the National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI), which is part of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and had no direct avenue to the ODNI or the National Security Council.

US espionage efforts in China have struggled for years, ever since their spy network was decimated by a highly effective counterintelligence operation in the years after 2009. After Iranian experts discovered a [network of websites](#) used by the CIA to contact informants, it shared the data with Beijing, and the two nations successfully hounded out and killed dozens of US operatives.

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Balancing Act: US, China Vie for Jakarta's Friendship, But West Offers Little More Than Guns  
By - Fantine Gardinier

With the US now regarding China and Russia as global rivals in "great power competition," Washington has sought to turn regional powers in Asia against Beijing in order to isolate it. However, China's massive trading capacity has made it an indispensable friend for smaller nations.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation with the 16th-largest economy on the planet, sits astride key trade routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans and borders key waterways, including the South China Sea. There, Washington has cried foul over Chinese territorial claims and sought to rally nations against Beijing that have overlapping claims. While no Indonesian territory is claimed by China, a small part of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), a 200-mile-wide band extending off the coast, near the Riau Islands is

overlapped in one area by China's so-called Nine-Dash Line, the imprecise delineation of Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

In recent years there have been several incidents in which Chinese fishing boats ventured into these waters and Indonesian authorities complained to Beijing about it, with both sides upping the ante by dispatching military or coast guard vessels there to fly the flag. At the same time, Indonesia has made a number of deals to buy military equipment from Western makers, including in the US and France.

One American news outlet recently characterized the situation as Indonesia seeking to "stave off" the People's Liberation Army. However, in reality Jakarta's relationship with Beijing is stronger than ever, and the island nation has expressed its greatest worry not about Chinese naval vessels, but Australian ones - in particular, Australia's deal to buy nuclear-powered attack submarines from the United States.

#### AUKUS Anxieties

When the US, Australia and UK shocked the world by announcing the AUKUS bloc in September 2021, Indonesia denounced Canberra's move, saying it "takes note cautiously" of the decision and asked its southern neighbor to ensure it respects its Nuclear Non-Proliferation obligations.

"Indonesia is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region," [the statement said](#). "Indonesia calls on Australia to maintain its commitment towards regional peace, stability and security in accordance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation." Indeed, earlier this year Jakarta moved to buy two Scorpene-class attack [submarines from France](#), and later also decided to buy 42 Dassault Rafale fighter jets. Last month, Jakarta also announced a deal to buy F-15 Eagle jets from the US, too. At the same time, the country's joint effort with South Korea to develop the KF-21 "Boramae" fighter jet, an F-35 lookalike, [quite literally took off](#) this year.

However, Jakarta's ambitious military expansion has raised many eyebrows, with observers questioning its commitment to the KF-21 program as the Indonesian economy has been kept aloft mostly by increased commodity demand amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In other respects, its economy is struggling, and the central bank has adopted a tighter monetary policy aimed at reining in inflation.

In October, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a hawkish think tank set up by the Australian government, [opined that Indonesian](#) President Joko Widodo's defense binge "won't give Indonesia the force it needs." Ironically, the ASPI demanded far more spending from Jakarta, saying the increase "represents no effective change" to the country's situation and remains inferior in terms of GDP percentage, to other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

That bloc has been a key ideological battleground between the US and China, since most of its members have overlapping sea claims with China and the US has a history of supporting anti-communist governments in many of those same states. However, Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure megaproject and its steady insistence on multilateral talks between equals to settle disputes have so far rebuffed Washington's advances.

#### Troubled History

China and Indonesia have a long and troubled history. The two nations emerged from under the boot of Euro-Japanese colonialism in the aftermath of World War II and became strong leaders

of the Non-Aligned Movement, which rejected Cold War dichotomies and sought to build themselves up after centuries of colonial underdevelopment. The Communist Party of China was even closer with the Indonesian Communist Party, and suffered a devastating blow when the Indonesian military mounted a coup d'etat in 1965 and massacred nearly 1 million communists.

With a US hand in the killings, the self-styled "New Order" grew closer to Washington, and passed laws discriminating against the archipelago's ethnic Chinese population. A mob burned down the Chinese embassy in Jakarta in 1967 and Beijing severed relations for 23 years, only restoring them in 1990. However, that didn't stop the discrimination, and another anti-Chinese riot in 1998 killed more than one thousand people, with hundreds of Chinese-Indonesian women being raped by the rioters. However, those same riots led to the fall of the New Order government and the restoration of Indonesian democracy.

#### Burgeoning Friendship

The past year has seen several high-profile Sino-Indonesian meetings, including between Widodo and Chinese President Xi Jinping in December, when Bali hosted the Group of 20 summit. The two leaders [issued a joint statement](#) hailing their growing friendship and economic cooperation across multiple sectors, including the opening of a prestigious new high-speed rail line between Bali and Jakarta.

"The two sides reaffirmed commitment to uphold the principle of non-interference into internal affairs of each other and continuing to firmly support each other on issues concerning such core interests as national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity," the statement said. "Indonesia reiterated its firm adherence to the one-China policy, its continued support for the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations and China's peaceful reunification. China reiterated its firm support for Indonesia's efforts to secure its national unity and territorial integrity."

Today, China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade last year exceeding \$114 billion. The US, by comparison, trades just \$37 billion with Indonesia, according to International Monetary Fund data. So far, all the Americans can offer people is more guns.

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Ready for My Close-Up: NASA's Juno Probe to Fly Just 932 Miles Over Jupiter's Volcanic Moon Io

By - Fantine Gardinier

Since arriving in Jovian orbit in 2016, NASA's Juno space probe has investigated the massive planet as well as several of its most prominent moons. Once its mission is completed, the probe will plunge into the gas giant's atmosphere on one final deadly mission.

Juno is going to Io, NASA said on Wednesday.

The space agency's Joint Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) said in [a news release](#) that Juno would photograph Io (pronounced "eye-oh") as it zips past on Thursday, part of a new effort to study the mysterious volcanic moon.

“The team is really excited to have Juno’s extended mission include the study of Jupiter’s moons. With each close flyby, we have been able to obtain a wealth of new information,” Juno Principal Investigator Scott Bolton, of the Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio, said in the release. “Juno sensors are designed to study Jupiter, but we’ve been thrilled at how well they can perform double duty by observing Jupiter’s moons.”

In July, Juno passed about [50,000 miles from Io](#), but as it focuses more on the tortured world over the next year, Juno will eventually make its closest pass at just 932 miles above its surface. Jupiter’s third-largest moon, Io is bigger than Earth’s moon and the most dense of any moon in the solar system. Its surface is dotted with dozens of volcanoes belching sulfur and sulfur dioxide, which have painted the surface yellow and are driven by the constant pulling on its interior by Jupiter and several of its other large moons. Much of this information was gathered from prior probes, including the Voyager and Galileo missions, in the 1970s and 1980s. Juno has previously made close passes over Callisto, Ganymede and Europa, three other Jovian moons.

Along with Io, the four are known as the Galilean Moons, because they were the first to be observed by Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei in 1610. Indeed, they were the first moons observed around any planet other than Earth, helping to trigger contentious debates about the structure of the solar system.

In the present day, Jupiter is known to have at least 80 natural satellites, of which the Galilean Moons are by far the most massive.

Juno’s mission is set to last until 2025, when it will begin its final task: a one-way plunge into the heart of the gas giant.

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Christmas Poll: 21% of US Adults Still Believe in Santa Claus

By - Mary Manley

Just in time for the holidays: a recent Ipsos poll surveyed a sample of 1,023 US adults and asked them various questions about Christmas decorations, songs, gifts and even the “real meaning” of the major holiday. Christians are more likely (84%) to say Americans have forgotten the real meaning of Christmas than nonreligious Americans (60%).

Put down your shopping bags and turn off that annoying Mariah Carey song: a new Ipsos poll is revealing what American adults really think about Christmas.

According to the [poll](#), when it comes to Christmas songs most Americans (87%) say they wait until at least after Thanksgiving to start tuning into their favorite carols and jingles. When asked which song was the most “annoying and/or overplayed,” 12% said Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas is You,” 6% said “Jingle Bells,” 5% said “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” and 2% said “Santa Baby.”

Another 23% of Americans said “none/don’t know.”

Inflation in the US is causing Americans to tighten their budgets this year, with parents having to ask their children to narrow down their Christmas lists to Santa. At least 42% of [Americans](#) plan

to spend less on gifts this holiday season compared to a year ago. As the highest inflation since the 1980s batters US adults, some of them may be thinking: "Should Christmas be so focused on shopping?"

A total of 75% of those surveyed believe "most Americans have forgotten the real meaning of Christmas," while 84% of Christians agreed with that same statement. Some 88% of Republicans compared to 66% of Democrats agreed with the statement, whereas 81% of those aged 50 and older agreed and 66% of those aged 25 to 34 agreed that other Americans have forgotten "the real meaning" of Christmas.

Christmas is a sacred, religious holiday for Christians and celebrates the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and has been a federal holiday in the United States since 1870. But long before the birth of Jesus, early Europeans celebrated the winter solstice in recognition of longer days of sunlight to come.

Pope Julius I chose December 25 as the birth date of Jesus in the fourth century, though his true birthdate remains unknown. The date was chosen, [historians](#) believe, in an effort to adopt the traditions of the ancient Roman festival Saturnalia, to increase the popularity of the holiday. Despite the fact that a majority of Americans believe the meaning of the holiday has been forgotten, around half of US children believe in Santa Claus while more than a fifth of American adults also believe in St. Nick.

Another 70% of Americans said they would be comfortable attending a holiday party for a religion other than their own.

As for the debate on when to start decorating for Christmas, nearly 85% of Americans say they decorate for the holiday, with 41% saying they start to take their decorations down in the first week of January. Almost half (48%) think holiday decorations should be left up in the first week of January and even less (23%) think those decorations should come down by late January.

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Elon Musk: A Free Speech Fake - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

Billionaire Elon Musk has touted his identity of being a "free speech absolutist" since taking over the social media giant Twitter as the company's new CEO, but Musk's opinion of what does or does not constitute as "free speech" seems to only be regulated by Musk himself: according to Musk, a 20-year-old college student is the last straw.

On November 6, Elon Musk [tweeted](#) that he is so "committed" to free speech he would not ban an account tracking his private plane, called @elonjet - even if it was a "direct personal safety risk" to himself.

However, that promise has been broken with Musk not only banning the Twitter account of university student Jack Sweeney, who was using publicly available tracking information for his Twitter account, but has announced he is taking "legal action" against Sweeney and "organizations who supported harm to my family."

What [Musk](#) is referring to, and what prompted him to ban Sweeney from Twitter, was an incident involving a stalker who followed a car carrying his baby whom he shares with musical artist Grimes (he also has seven other children with various partners).

The [stalker](#), Musk claims, blocked the car from moving and then jumped on its hood. Musk apparently blames Sweeney for the actions of a separate person, and has used the incident as an excuse to ban the 20-year-old's account.

"By 'free speech', I simply mean that which matches the law," Musk [tweeted](#) a little over a month ago. "I am against censorship that goes far beyond the law."

But what Sweeney did isn't illegal. And what's more: Sweeney had been told by an anonymous Twitter employee that his account had been shadow-banned earlier this month, long before Musk decided to suspend Sweeney's account.

So was the "stalker" incident a moment which genuinely threatens a wide variety of people (not just the uber-rich who can afford the luxury of [private jet airfare](#)), or was it an opportune moment to shut down a pesky Twitter user who the billionaire has long held a grudge against?

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Peru's Pedro Castillo to Remain in Pre-Trial Detention for 18 Months, Court Rules  
By - Mary Manley

On Wednesday Peru announced a nationwide state of emergency granting police special powers to control protests which have left at least eight people dead. The protests began after leftist leader Pedro Castillo, who took office last year, was impeached by Congress after trying to dissolve and replace it. He has remained in police custody.

A judicial panel within Peru's Supreme Court ruled on Thursday to extend the pre-trial detention of former Peruvian President Pedro Castillo, 53, who will now remain behind bars for 18 months.

The former president was impeached on December 7 and arrested on rebellion charges hours after he attempted to dissolve Congress before members held their third impeachment vote against the ousted head of state.

At present former Vice President Boluarte, 60, is serving at the country's interim president for the remainder of Castillo's presidential term.

Congress' decision to detain Castillo for 18 months was influenced by whether or not he can be held in jail while prosecutors investigate his alleged crimes, rather than the accusations against him. Their reasoning for the former president's detention is out of fear that he will attempt to flee the country, with the court claiming Castillo has been discussing political asylum with Mexico.

The Thursday decision comes a day after Peruvian Supreme Prosecutor Uriel Teran requested 18 months of preventive detention for Castillo and former Prime Minister Anibal Torres, who have been accused of mutiny and abuse of authority.

Supporters of Castillo began protesting shortly after he was taken into custody. Protesters have called for an immediate presidential election and are asking for the Peru's Congress to be dissolved as well as call for Castillo's freedom.

In the days since Castillo's removal, protesters have burned police stations, taken over an armed forces airstrip, and have caused disruption to the country's tourism industry. At least eight people have died due to the protests, including two minors.

Castillo has denied allegations of conspiracy and rebellion.

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Twitter Chaos: Multiple Journalists Axed From Platform Without Cause

By - Mary Manley

Musk is proud to be a free speech absolutist unless, of course, that speech is a criticism against Musk himself, it seems. The CEO earlier decided to ban the ElonJet account, which tracked the movements of his private plane using public information. The account was created by a 20-year-old college student who Musk vowed "legal action" against.

Twitter CEO Elon Musk appeared to backtrack on his promise of being a "free speech absolutist" late Thursday after suspending the accounts of multiple journalists who produced reports on Twitter and its billionaire owner.

The South African entrepreneur officially acquired Twitter in October for some \$40 billion. Since then, however, things at the company have appeared to spiral out of control - such as the sacking of about half the company staff and the loss of advertisers.

Musk has taken a sharp turn on what he promised to be a free speech utopia, which he said he envisioned as a "town square" which would police speech in accordance with US laws—but what Musk is now implying is that the site will be moderated based on his laws.

Among the suspended Twitter accounts are: Ryan Mac of The New York Times, Donie O'Sullivan of CNN, Drew Harwell of The Washington Post, Matt Binder from Mashable, Micah Lee of The Intercept and independent journalists Aaron Rugar, Keith Olbermann and Tony Webster. Twitter also suspended the account of [Mastadon](#), a company which rivaled Twitter.

"We hope that all of the journalists' accounts are reinstated and that Twitter provides a satisfying explanation for this action," said Charlie Stadtlander, communications director for the Times.

A similar statement was also issued by Sally Buzbee, the executive editor of the Washington Post, who noted that Harwell's suspension "directly undermines Elon Musk's claim that he intends to run Twitter as a platform dedicated to free speech."

It wasn't made clear why Twitter decided to suspend these accounts. However, Musk's open attacks on the account of @ElonJet on Wednesday have given the public, including site users, a better idea of how Musk actually wants the platform to operate.

While the mogul has had no issue in allowing accounts associated with [QAnon](#) and far-right conspiracy theorists to run rampant on his site, journalists who are critical of the richest man in the world are not welcome, and neither are 20-year-olds promoting information which is already public knowledge.

Other accounts that ElonJet owner Jack [Sweeney](#) managed also included pages that track planes belonging billionaires Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates. All of them have been suspended.

[Sweeney](#) says he was not given a specific reason as to why the accounts were suspended and said the suspension felt arbitrary. Of Musk, Sweeney said: "He's doing the exact opposite of what he said."

Musk has also been allowing the publication of the "[Twitter Files](#)," which allows select journalists (two so far) to use insider information from Twitter before Musk's takeover to criticize the site for its decision to protect Hunter Biden during the 2020 election, while claiming that the suspension of former President Donald Trump after the 2021 insurrection was done without proper merit. Twitter users took to the platform and unloaded their contempt for Musk, calling him "insecure," a "fascist" and "unhinged."

"Elon Musk is determined to show us all why billionaires must not be given control of the public square. They will always suppress actual free speech to serve themselves and we must forge a path to public ownership of these spaces," tweeted [@JoshuaPHill](#).

Twitter user and BuzzFeed staff member Charlie Warzel tweeted a link to a critical BuzzFeed [article](#) from 2018 co-written by Ryan Mac, a journalist whom Musk had suspended, saying: "Anyhow: this is the pattern: a thin-skinned spoiled child whose only real desire is to be at the top of every possible social and economic hierarchy and revered like Edison. And when he doesn't get that, he lashes out."

"Elon Musk just suspended a bunch of journalists, including Aaron Rugar, who cover him — without any reason. By silencing journalists, it's clear that Elon Musk doesn't care about free speech or democracy," wrote Twitter user [@Victorshi2020](#).

"He only cares about himself. We should all be outraged."

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Next Military Aid Package for Kiev to Include Additional Air Defense Capabilities - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The next military aid package for Ukraine is expected to include additional air defense capabilities, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"I think you could expect to see additional air defense capabilities in this," Kirby told a briefing.

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NEXT MILITARY AID PACKAGE FOR UKRAINE IS EXPECTED TO INCLUDE ADDITIONAL AIR DEFENSE CAPABILITIES - WHITE HOUSE'S KIRBY

Sputnik

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Biden to Welcome Ecuador's President Lasso to Washington on December 19 - White House

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will welcome Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso to Washington, D.C. next week to discuss a range of global and regional issues, including economic and security cooperation, and regional migration, the White House said on Friday.

"President Biden looks forward to welcoming President Guillermo Lasso of Ecuador to the White House on December 19, 2022," the White House said in a press release. "During the meeting, the leaders plan to underscore the importance of strengthening democratic institutions and discuss regional economic integration initiatives, including the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, economic and security cooperation, and Ecuador's leadership on regional migration."

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US National Security Advisor Praises Japan's New National Security, Defense Strategies

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan praised Japan's new national security and defense strategies on Friday, saying they will also support the US-Japan alliance.

"Today, Japan has taken a bold and historic step to strengthen and defend the free and open Indo-Pacific with the adoption of its new National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Program," Sullivan said in a release. "Japan's goal to significantly increase defense investments will also strengthen and modernize the US-Japan Alliance."

The new strategies outlined in three defense and security documents approved by Japan's cabinet on Friday are a marked departure from post-WWII norms. Most notably, they involve doubling defense spending over the next five years to 2% of GDP, dispensing with the informal 1% cap since 1976. Tokyo also plans to build its "counterstrike capacity" and acquire long-range cruise missiles that can reach well inside North Korea and China. It will also reorganize its military, establishing a permanent joint command for its armed forces, enhancing its coast guard, and doubling its core army troops in the southwestern islands.

Sullivan also praised Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's commitment to international peace and nuclear nonproliferation and leadership, including support for Ukraine.

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RPT - Keystone Spill Poses No Public Health Issues, But There's Long Term Concern - Commissioner

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Keystone pipeline oil spill in the state of Kansas does not currently pose a public health issue and has only caused minimal damage to land, but

there is a concern about potential long-term consequences the leak may cause, Washington County Commissioner David Willbrant told Sputnik.

On December 7, approximately 14,000 barrels of oil leaked from the Keystone pipeline in Washington County, Kansas, according to the pipeline's developer TC Energy.

"No public health issues at this point that I am aware of, minimal damage to land and TC Energy is making impressive effort to correct as quickly as possible," Willbrant said. "I'm sure there is long-term concern, but I think everything that can be done is being done at this point."

TC Energy said in an update on Thursday that it has recovered 3,035 barrels of oil from Mill Creek, a small river stream that runs through rural farmland in northeast Kansas. The company added that it restarted the section of the pipeline that carries oil from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in the state of Illinois.

The cause of the leak is unknown, but the company continues to investigate and repair the damaged portion of the pipeline.

Washington County Emergency Management Coordinator Randy Hubbard also told Sputnik that public health has not been impacted by the oil spill as the creek does not connect to a source of drinking water for the community.

The US Environmental Protection Agency said in a press release on Thursday that oil leaked from the ruptured pipeline was diluted bitumen, a heavy crude oil, which may be harder to recover because it tends to sink in water rather than float on the surface. Incoming colder weather may also impact recovery efforts, the agency said.

Several EPA officials remain on the scene of the incident to oversee recovery efforts, according to the agency.

At least four deceased animals have been recovered, along with 71 fish, from the site of the leak, the EPA said, adding that officials continue to assess the impact the leak has on wildlife. The Keystone pipeline transports 622,000 barrels of oil per day from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in Illinois, Oklahoma, and Texas.

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RPT - US Export Restrictions May Force China to 'Indigenize' Microchip Value Chain - Expert

#WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US denying Beijing access to advanced semiconductor equipment will likely accelerate China's efforts to close the high-end microchip technology gap and control the entire value chain, Professor Sunitha Raju of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi told Sputnik.

The US on Thursday escalated efforts to undermine China's tech sector by blacklisting more than 30 entities, citing national security concerns. Among the company's added to the US export restrictions list is a Japanese subsidiary of YMTC - China's top flash memory chipmaker. In October, the Biden administration expanded controls on the export of US semiconductor technology going to China to restrict Beijing's ability to make certain high-end microchips used in military applications. Beijing, meanwhile, took the matter to the World Trade Organization (WTO) earlier this week, filing a lawsuit challenging the US export controls.

Taiwan and South Korea have long dominated the advanced manufacturing of microchips, while the US still leads in certain critical technology and design.

Raju thinks, however, the restrictions may afford Beijing an opportunity to advance in these areas. The expert said Beijing in response could indigenize its semiconductor supply chain with a stronger thrust on research and development while increasing government control and forging a conducive domestic ecosystem.

"With indigenization of supply chain in design, fabrication, assembling and testing and manufacturing equipment, China may reduce the current technology gap and emerge as an important challenger to the US," Raju said. "These positions gain credence especially with China's efforts to reduce dependence on the US."

Though China lags behind in technology and scale in the industry as compared to the United States, efforts to bridge the gap through indigenization would be possible for several reasons, Raju said. For one, China's expertise in developing new super conductive materials and dominance in Outsourced Semiconductor Assembly and Test (OSAT) can lead to advanced chip packaging, new transistor architectures and new carbon based materials, which together can emerge as a "game-changer," she said.

China can also collaborate more closely with firms like ZTE, Lenovo, and Huawei on chip design. Moreover, the diversified global market players in semiconductor manufacturing equipment and memory devices will aid China in accelerating its progress, Raju added. Meanwhile, Beijing, she said, is also making a strong push to develop skilled personnel to support its advances.

The expert also said the US move will drive Beijing to consolidate its dominant position in the lower node chips domain.

China, by the end of 2024, will have 31 new chip factories established for making mature and low process nodes that could result in high price competition, she added.

"With global prices going down, it will be difficult for other suppliers to compete with China resulting in Chinese foundries dominating this market segment," Raju said.

In addition, the expert cautioned, the push by the US and China - along with Japan and Europe - to develop local semiconductor production, strongly supported by government aid, could slow technology advances and result in higher costs.

#### POTENTIAL RESISTANCE

Raju said implementing the restrictions will depend on US cooperation with countries like Europe, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. However, considering China is such a major consumer market, many foreign microchip equipment manufacturers might find it difficult to forego this revenue.

For example, the expert noted that China accounts for more than 30% of US-based Lam Research sales - amounting to about \$2.5 billion annually. China also accounts for 33% of Applied Material revenue and 27 percent of Intel's.

Raju also underscored that the "China factor" in various sub segments of the semiconductor supply chain cannot be undermined, pointing out that global majors in chip manufacturing, such as TSMC, Samsung and Intel, all have their production facilities located in China.

Although many countries may resist US restrictions, Raju warned that Beijing could leverage its edge in critical minerals, including rare earth elements.

Chinese dominance of the rare earths market has left the US and several of its allies heavily dependent on China across a range of critical applications.

"If China weaponizes rare earths material which is used for chip manufacturing then this conflict could take an ugly turn," Raju said.

In the meantime, Raju doubts Beijing's WTO challenge will be effective, largely because a key settlement mechanism has been defunct for three years.

Hence, the US will likely be successful in getting WTO rules waived by citing national security concerns.

"The WTO's dispute settlement mechanism is virtually non-functional since 2019. The term of the judges on the appellate body has ended and new judges have not been appointed. US has been blocking this since 2019," Raju added. "So China raising a dispute at WTO may not affect US as of now."

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US Senate Passes Stopgap Government Funding Bill to Delay Shutdown, Negotiate Omnibus (Adds background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a continuing resolution to temporarily fund the government, avoid a shutdown and grant lawmakers another week to negotiate a longer-term omnibus spending bill.

Senators passed the continuing resolution on Thursday in a vote of 71-19, averting a government shutdown that was set to begin at the end of the day Friday.

The resolution, which continues appropriations levels from the prior year through December 23, buys lawmakers more time to negotiate a full-year omnibus spending bill.

Biden administration officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have called for hasty passage of an omnibus in order to launch new projects and programs and pursue US competition with China unimpeded.

However, some Republicans have opposed passing an omnibus spending bill until the new Congress takes over in January, when they will have control of the House of Representatives. The Republican lawmakers have instead called for a longer-term continuing resolution into the new year.

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US Senate Passes \$850B In Defense Spending Bill, Sending Legislation to Biden's Desk (Updates vote count in para 2, adds details in paras 5,6)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a defense spending bill for 2023 valued at nearly \$850 billion, including \$10 billion in security aid for Taiwan and \$800 million for Ukraine.

Senators overwhelmingly passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Thursday, sending the bill to US President Joe Biden to be signed into law. The final vote count was 83-11. Lawmakers included the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act in the NDAA, which would authorize up to \$10 billion in security assistance to modernize Taiwan's security capabilities. The legislation also includes \$800 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative - \$500 million more than requested by Biden for Ukraine.

The NDAA also includes a number of other measures, including repealing the military's COVID-19 vaccine mandate, raising military pay and imposing restrictions on engagement with Russia.

This includes engagement with any individuals involved in significant transactions of gold with Russia.

The NDAA extends a ban on military-to-military cooperation with Russia for five years and prohibits funds from being used to recognize Russia's sovereignty over Crimea and other territories separated from Ukraine.

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Lithuania to Purchase Eight HIMARS Launchers From US - Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Lithuania will purchase eight High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers from the United States, Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas said during a meeting with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon.

"Today we have signed the contract with the US to procure eight HIMARS launchers," Anusauskas said on Thursday.

Anusauskas said the HIMARS will enhance Lithuanian's national and regional capabilities. There has been a surge in demand for HIMARS launchers after they received publicity through their combat deployment in Ukraine.

Estonia, Poland, Latvia, and Australia are several other countries that have announced their intention to purchase this type of weaponry from the United States.

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US Export Restrictions May Force China to 'Indigenize' Microchip Value Chain - Expert

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US denying Beijing access to advanced semiconductor equipment will likely accelerate China's efforts to close the high-end microchip technology gap and control the entire value chain, Professor Sunitha Raju of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi told Sputnik.

The US on Thursday escalated efforts to undermine China's tech sector by blacklisting more than 30 entities, citing national security concerns. Among the company's added to the US export restrictions list is a Japanese subsidiary of YMTC - China's top flash memory chipmaker.

In October, the Biden administration expanded controls on the export of US semiconductor technology going to China to restrict Beijing's ability to make certain high-end microchips used in military applications. Beijing, meanwhile, took the matter to the World Trade Organization (WTO) earlier this week, filing a lawsuit challenging the US export controls.

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Blinken Says Expects Biden, Other US Officials to Visit Africa Next Year

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during remarks at the closing of the US-Africa Leaders Summit that he expects a number of US officials, including President Joe Biden, to visit the continent next year.

"I think, you're going to see a lot of us [US officials] in Africa next year, including the president," Blinken said on Thursday.

Blinken praised the progress made at the US-Africa Leaders Summit, but emphasized that it is critical to implement over the coming months the commitments made during the event.

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Keystone Spill Poses No Public Health Issues, But There's Long Term Concern-Commissioner

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Keystone pipeline oil spill in the state of Kansas does not currently pose a public health issue and has only caused minimal damage to land, but there is a concern about potential long-term consequences the leak may cause, Washington County Commissioner David Willbrant told Sputnik.

On December 7, approximately 14,000 barrels of oil leaked from the Keystone pipeline in Washington County, Kansas, according to the pipeline's developer TC Energy.

"No public health issues at this point that I am aware of, minimal damage to land and TC Energy is making impressive effort to correct as quickly as possible," Willbrant said. "I'm sure there is long-term concern, but I think everything that can be done is being done at this point."

TC Energy said in an update on Thursday that it has recovered 3,035 barrels of oil from Mill Creek, a small river stream that runs through rural farmland in northeast Kansas. The company added that it restarted the section of the pipeline that carries oil from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in the state of Illinois.

The cause of the leak is unknown, but the company continues to investigate and repair the damaged portion of the pipeline.

Washington County Emergency Management Coordinator Randy Hubbard also told Sputnik that public health has not been impacted by the oil spill as the creek does not connect to a source of drinking water for the community.

The US Environmental Protection Agency said in a press release on Thursday that oil leaked from the ruptured pipeline was diluted bitumen, a heavy crude oil, which may be harder to recover because it tends to sink in water rather than float on the surface. Incoming colder weather may also impact recovery efforts, the agency said.

Several EPA officials remain on the scene of the incident to oversee recovery efforts, according to the agency.

At least four deceased animals have been recovered, along with 71 fish, from the site of the leak, the EPA said, adding that officials continue to assess the impact the leak has on wildlife. The Keystone pipeline transports 622,000 barrels of oil per day from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in Illinois, Oklahoma, and Texas.

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EPA Says 233,000 Gallon Oil Pipeline Leak in Kansas 'Diluted Bitumen'

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The oil that was discharged as a result of the Keystone pipeline rupture in Washington, Kansas, on Wednesday is diluted bitumen, a heavy crude, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said.

"The material discharged from the ruptured pipeline was diluted bitumen, a heavy crude oil," the EPA said in a press release on Thursday. "Response crews have recovered 233,814 gallons (5,567 barrels) of oil-water mixture from Mill Creek; 5,000 cubic yards of oil-contaminated soil; and nine cubic yards of oily solids."

On-scene coordinators and a public information officer from EPA Region 7 continue to remain at the place where the pipeline ruptured, the release said.

"A total of 414 personnel reported to the scene on Wednesday. This number includes personnel from EPA, US Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), state and local agencies, TC Energy, and TC Energy contractors," the release added.

Response crews were focusing on cleanup and recovery operations in Mill Creek and additional equipment such as heated skimmers and diaphragm pumps are en route to the scene, according to the release.

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Wall Street Stock Indices Tumble as Much as 3% as Fed, Economic Data Raise Fears

NEW YORK, December 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's stock indices fell as much as 3% Thursday as US data raised fresh concerns about the economy while the Federal Reserve ratcheted up talk of higher for longer interest rates.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator with stocks of 30 large US corporations, closed down 764 points, or 2.3%, at 33,202. It was the sharpest one-day drop on the Dow since September 13.

The S&P 500 Index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, fell 100 points, or 2.5%, to finish at 3,896. It was the S&P's biggest one-day drop since October 7.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, tumbled 360 points, or 3.2%, to settle at 10,810. It was the Nasdaq's biggest losing day since November 2.

"US stocks didn't stand a chance today after digesting a hawkish [Fed] decision and a round of data/surveys that support the argument that the economy is recession bound," said Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA.

Stocks tumbled after US retail sales fell the most in nearly a year in November, sounding a warning bell for merchandisers as the annual shopping season gets underway. Sales at US retail stores, online sellers and restaurants fell by 0.6% last month, the Commerce Department said. That was a hefty drop from October's robust 1.3% sales increase.

US weekly jobless claims, meanwhile, hit a 11-week low after the fewest filings for unemployment benefits by Americans since September. The data from the Labor Department suggested renewed challenges to the Fed's aim of seeing the labor market soften in order to keep a lid on demand in the economy.

Weekly jobless claims are among the statistics watched by the Fed, which says it wants a convincing drop in inflation before scaling back further on rate hikes. The central bank identifies a strong job market and wage growth as among the drivers of inflation.

The Fed on Wednesday slowed rate hikes for the first time this year, imposing a 50-basis increase for December after four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points between June and November. But it also indicated that rate hikes will follow throughout 2023. So far for 2022, the Fed has added 425 basis points to rates, the most in a year since the 1980s.

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Biden Say US Supports Extending UN-Brokered Grain Deal to Benefit Africa, World

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during remarks on the final day of the US-Africa summit said the United States supports extending the United Nations-brokered grain deal to benefit Africans and the global community.

"We also continue to support extending the UN-brokered deal to facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain, which will benefit not only Africa, but people around the globe," Biden said on Thursday.

On July 22, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations struck a deal to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for ships with food and fertilizer exports from Ukrainian Black

Sea ports. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that most of the ships carrying Ukrainian grain did not make it to the world's poorest countries and ended up in Europe. Putin has also voiced his concerns that Russian products are not entering the global markets as promised by the agreement.

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US Providing \$2.5Bln in Emergency Aid, Food Security Assistance to Africa - White House

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is giving African nations \$2.5 billion in new emergency aid and food security assistance as the continents' leaders meet in Washington for the US-Africa Leaders Summit, the White House said in a fact sheet.

"President [Joe] Biden announced an additional \$2.5 billion in emergency aid and medium to long-term food security assistance for resilient African food systems and supply markets, which builds upon over \$11 billion in US humanitarian and food security assistance for this year alone," the White House said on Thursday.

Biden also announced a new strategic partnership on food security between the US and African Union, the White House said.

Biden reaffirmed the US' commitment to working with the African Union and other African partners toward achieving food security, diversifying supply chains and expanding access to agricultural markets, the White House added.

The announcement came amid the US-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, which took place from Tuesday to Thursday, where nearly 50 African heads of states met to discuss an array of shared interests.

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Georgia Bans TikTok From State Government-Issued Phones, Computers - Directive

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Georgia Governor Brian Kemp issued an order banning the video sharing social media platform TikTok on all state government-issued telephones and computers due to national security concerns China may be able to access sensitive information.

"Accordingly, effective immediately every executive branch agency, department, division, bureau, board, authority, and commission in Georgia shall prohibit the use of TikTok, WeChat, and Telegram on all systems and devices (including laptops and mobile devices) that are issued, owned, leased, or otherwise controlled by the state or used for state business," Kemp said in the order on Thursday.

Kemp said his decision is due to concerns Chinese intelligence is able to access data of American users through the social media app.

New Hampshire, Alabama, Texas, and North Dakota have also banned the use of TikTok on state government-issued devices as well.

On Tuesday, US Senator Marco Rubio introduced bipartisan legislation to ban TikTok from operating in the United States. Rubio has claimed that ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, is required by Chinese law to make the application's data available to the Chinese Communist Party, which allegedly poses a risk of the social media platform being used as a spying tool.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) -

#### US SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

- \* The United States targeted Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belousov, businessman Vladimir Potanin and his family and companies, as well as a number of Russian governors in a new round of sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.
- \* The US Office of Foreign Assets Control is sanctioning 17 subsidiaries of Russia's VTB Bank as part of a new sanctions package targeting the country's financial services sector, the Treasury Department said.
- \* The United States imposed sanctions against five senior Russian officials who are serving as members of the board of directors of state-owned company Russian Railways, the State Department said.
- \* The United States seeks to minimize the harm caused by sanctions on Russia and does not intend to blockade the whole Russian financial system at once, Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination at the US Department of State James O'Brien said.

#### US-AFRICA SUMMIT

- \* US President Joe Biden in Thursday called on the African Union to join the G20 as a permanent member.
- \* Biden said that his administration plans to commit \$55 billion in Africa over the next three years.
- \* Biden also said he is eager to travel to Africa and may show up on the continent after being invited to visit by African leaders.

#### PRICE CAP ON RUSSIAN OIL

- \* The United States expects that China, India and Turkey will negotiate very good prices on Russian oil for themselves but they will fall under the Western-imposed price cap, Office of Sanction Coordination head James O'Brien said on Friday.
- \* The United States believes that the sanctions it has imposed on Russia will not result in price spikes or the restriction of key commodity supplies, O'Brien said.

#### NORD STREAM PIPELINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* No decision has been made so far regarding the launch of the intact string of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
- \* Canada's decision to reimpose sanctions on the turbine of the Nord Stream gas pipeline will hit European consumers, Peskov said.
- \* Canada's announcement about revoking the sanctions waiver on Nord Stream 1 turbines is about their exports, not their maintenance, a Siemens spokesperson told Sputnik.

#### RUSSIAN ENERGY EXPORTS

- \* Russia will increase liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies by 70 billion cubic meters, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
- \* Russia will develop port and pipeline systems in Asia, and intends to increase gas supplies to the East to 88 billion cubic meters by 2030, Putin said.
- \* Russian energy giant Gazprom said that its exports to non-CIS countries decreased by 45.1% year-on-year to 97.8 billion cubic meters of gas over 11.5 months.
- \* Gazprom said that it has reduced gas production by 19.6% in 11.5 months of 2022 compared to the same period last year to 394.1 billion cubic meters.

#### SOYUZ SPACECRAFT LEAK

- \* The crew of the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft confirmed a leak in the cooling system after a visual inspection, Russian space agency Roscosmos said on Thursday.
- \* The leak on the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft, which is docked to the International Space Station, did not affect the technical condition of the station, and the possible consequences for the heat balance of the spacecraft are being assessed, Sergey Krikalev, executive director for Roscosmos manned programs, said.

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NASA Says Will Continue to Coordinate With Roscosmos to Aid in Evaluating Soyuz Leak  
WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - NASA will continue to coordinate with Roscosmos on external imagery and inspection plans to assist in evaluating the ongoing Soyuz leak, the US space agency said on Thursday.

"NASA and Roscosmos continue to coordinate external imagery and inspection plans to aid in evaluating the external leak location," NASA said in a press release.

Plans for an additional inspection of the Soyuz exterior using the station's Canadarm2 robotic are underway, the release said.

A leak from the cooling system of the Soyuz MS-22 occurred on Thursday due to damage to the spacecraft's outer skin. The cosmonauts reported to ground control that the diagnostic system of Soyuz had been triggered, and also confirmed that they were visually observing the leak. Due to the incident, the spacewalk of Russian cosmonauts Sergey Prokopyev and Dmitry Petelin had to be canceled. The NASA broadcast showed how fountains of technical liquid were being shot from the Soyuz.

Roscosmos noted that all systems of the spacecraft and the ISS were working normally, the crew were safe, and that experts would determine what to do next after analyzing the situation.

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UN General Assembly Adopts Russian Resolution on Combating Glorification of Nazism

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly adopted on Thursday a Russian resolution to combat the glorification of Nazism, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The document entitled "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance" was adopted in a 120-50 vote, with 10 abstentions.

The United States, EU member states and Ukraine voted against. Israel, India, China and Serbia were among those countries that supported the Russian-drafted resolution. Turkey, South Korea, Switzerland and Afghanistan abstained.

This resolution is adopted by the UN General Assembly annually.

The document urges states to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination by all appropriate means, including, if circumstances require so, by legislation.

In addition, the resolution strongly condemns the use of educational materials, as well as rhetoric in the course of training, that promotes racism, discrimination, hatred and violence based on ethnicity, nationality, religion or belief.

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White House Backs Congress Resolution to Oust Russia From UNSC, But Sees No Path to Do It

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration supports a congressional resolution to suspend Russia from the United Nations Security Council but does not see a path to implement it under current UN rules, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"If there were a path to suspend Russia from the UN Security Council, we would pursue it immediately," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "Unfortunately, we don't see the UN rules changing and so we are focused on continuing to take actions to isolate Russia."

US Congressmen Joe Wilson and Steve Cohen introduced a resolution this week that aims to suspend Russia from the UN Security Council over its military operation in Ukraine.

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## US Surging Federal Resources to Border Ahead of Expected Spike in Migrants - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is surging resources to the US southern border ahead of an expected spike in numbers once a health-related policy deterring most migrants from coming is suspended next week, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"DHS is surging resources to the border. As you've seen it, you're probably seeing it in El Paso," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, adding that more details will be announced before the policy is suspended on December 21.

A Sputnik correspondent reported on Wednesday that there were more than a thousand migrants getting in line each day to enter the United States in El Paso, Texas, since Sunday.

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UPDATE - US F-35 Fighter Aircraft Crashes During Test Flight at Texas Base - Lockheed  
(Updates with details from Pentagon in para 5)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A US F-35B fifth-generation fighter jet crashed during a test flight at a base in the state of Texas, a Lockheed Martin spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"We are aware of the F-35B crash on the shared runway at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base in Fort Worth and understand that the pilot ejected successfully," the spokesperson said. Lockheed will follow appropriate investigation protocol in this incident, the spokesperson added. Media reported that the F-35B aircraft was conducting a test flight.

Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said in later remarks that the Defense Department is aware of the F-35 crash in Texas. He added that the aircraft has not been transferred to the federal government, but noted that the pilot is with the US government. In October, a F-35A crashed in the state of Utah at Hill Air Force Base near Salt Lake City. The F-35 is the most expensive military system ever recorded and its overall cost rose in 2021 to \$412 billion from \$398 billion, a Department of Defense report said in September 2022.

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Pentagon Says Expanded US-Led Training to Include About 500 Ukrainians Per Month  
(Adds details in para 3)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The expanded US-led training for Ukrainians will include about 500 troops per month, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"This expanded training will provide training to approximately 500 Ukrainians per month, essentially focused at the battalion level," Ryder told a press conference.

It is expected to begin in January with live-fire exercises and battalion-level maneuver training, the spokesman added.

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Pentagon Says Expanded US-Led Training to Include About 500 Ukrainians Per Month

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The expanded US-led training for Ukrainians will include about 500 troops per month, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday. "This expanded training will provide training to approximately 500 Ukrainians per month, essentially focused at the battalion level," Ryder told a press conference.

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Pentagon Announces New US-Led Training for Ukrainian Forces

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon announces new US-led training for Ukrainian forces, Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Thursday. "Training is a logical next step in our ongoing efforts which began in 2014 to build the Ukrainian armed forces' capacity," Ryder during a press conference.

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US F-35 Fighter Aircraft Crashes During Test Flight at Texas Base - Lockheed

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A US F-35B fifth-generation fighter jet crashed during a test flight at a base in the state of Texas, a Lockheed Martin spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"We are aware of the F-35B crash on the shared runway at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base in Fort Worth and understand that the pilot ejected successfully," the spokesperson said. Lockheed will follow appropriate investigation protocol in this incident, the spokesperson added. Media reported that the F-35B aircraft was conducting a test flight.

In October, a F-35A crashed in the state of Utah at Hill Air Force Base near Salt Lake City.

The F-35 is the most expensive military system ever recorded and its overall cost rose in 2021 to \$412 billion from \$398 billion, a Department of Defense report said in September 2022.

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## Pakistan Top Diplomat Says Time to Move Away From September 11 Islamophobic Narrative

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The world has to move away from the Islamophobic rhetoric that started following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said on Thursday.

"I believe it is time that we move away from some of the Islamophobic narrative framing this issue that took place after the awful attacks of September 11, 2001," Zardari said during a press briefing.

The Pakistan foreign minister also said that terrorism knows no religion and urged the international community to "work together."

Zardari made the comment over a question regarding potential cooperation with India against terrorism.

Earlier on Thursday, Indian External Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar called Pakistan a "bed for terrorism."

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Russian Embassy on Partial Mobilization 'Fact-Check': Canada Seeks to Unite Dissenters  
WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Canada is stepping up its foreign policy activities with regard to Russia and trying to lead in uniting dissenters, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik after the Canadian government issued a "fact-check" on the partial mobilization in Russia.

Earlier on Thursday, Foreign Affairs Canada's Twitter account published a "fact-check" saying that the mobilization effort "disproportionately" targeted men "from poor and remote areas of Russia with large ethnic minority populations," sparked protests in ethnic republics, and prompted at least 200,000 Russians to flee the country since the military call-up.

According to Stepanov, the "fact-checking" indicates that the Trudeau government is stepping up its social media activity on Russia. Russia will respond in kind, he said.

Canada's Twitter posts on Russia are also a message to Russian expats, the ambassador said. "It's no secret that Canada is at the frontline of those in the West pursuing a kind of project on Russia to unite dissenters. All those nourished by Soros, Khodorkovsky, intelligence agencies of Western countries, all these fugitives who are trying to create a united opposition outside of Russia - I don't even want to list all these names - they are known to everyone," Stepanov added.

On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree calling up 300,000 reservists to support the military operation in Ukraine. In late October, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the country had completed the mobilization.

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## Biden Says US Government Releasing Thousands of Unredacted Files on Kennedy Assassination

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday said the US government is releasing thousands of records related to the 1963 assassination of former president John F. Kennedy, which has been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories. "Pursuant to my direction, agencies have undertaken a comprehensive effort to review the full set of almost 16,000 records that had previously been released in redacted form and determined that more than 70 percent of those records may now be released in full," Biden said in a memorandum.

The disclosure reflects the administration's commitment to transparency and will provide the public with greater insight and understanding of the government's investigation into the assassination, Biden said.

The need to protect records concerning the assassination has weakened over time, Biden said. However, agencies have identified a limited number of records containing information for continued postponement of public disclosure, Biden also said.

Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963 while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. The president was shot by US Marine Corp veteran Lee Harvey Oswald, according to the official Warren Commission report released in 1964.

The Warren Commission's report was initially sealed until 2039 before Congress passed the JFK Records Act in 1992, which directed the National Archives and Records Administration to develop a collection on the assassination.

The official narrative has been the subject of criticism and scrutiny for decades, producing a number of alternative conspiracy theories to explain the assassination.

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## US Sentences Former Twitter Employee to 42 Months in Prison for Acting as Foreign Agent

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Former Twitter Employee Ahmad Abouammo has been sentenced to 42 months in federal prison for acting as an unregistered foreign agent, the US Attorney's office for the Northern District of California said on Thursday.

"This case revealed that foreign governments will bribe insiders to obtain the user information that is collected and stored by our Silicon Valley social media companies," US Attorney Stephanie Hinds said in a statement.

Abouammo is alleged to have accessed, monitored and conveyed confidential and sensitive information that could be used to identify and locate Twitter users of interest to the Saudi Royal Family, the statement said.

According to court documents, Abouammo began receiving bribes through a Lebanese bank account totaling at least \$200,000 from a Saudi Arabian official as early as December 2014, while Abouammo was employed by Twitter.

Abouammo was arrested on November 5, 2019 and was subsequently charged with acting as an agent of a foreign government without providing notice to the US Attorney General, as well as with money laundering and several counts of honest services fraud, the release said. The authorities also sentenced Abouammo to a term of three years of supervision following his release and was issued a judgment for forfeiture of \$242,000, the release added. Abouammo will begin serving his prison sentence on March 31, 2023, according to the release.

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Vinnik's Lawyer Says Hopes His Client Still Being Considered for US-Russia Prisoner Swap

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - David Rizk, US Assistant Federal Public Defender in the Northern District of California, told Sputnik on Thursday that Russian citizen Alexander Vinnik was under serious consideration for the latest US-Russia prisoner swap earlier this month and hopes his client is still being considered as talks renew for the release of imprisoned US citizen Paul Whelan.

"We hope he remains under consideration. He was under serious consideration in the last round of negotiations," Rizk said when asked if Vinnik is being considered for a US-Russia prisoner swap.

Vinnik was detained in Greece in 2017 at the request of the US government. However, Vinnik was initially extradited to France, where he was sentenced to five years in prison and fined \$119,433. He was later returned to Greece before being brought to the United States in August of this year. Vinnik is accused of financial crimes by US authorities, including money laundering through his cryptocurrency trading platform BTC-e.

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Four Persons Residing in US, Canada Face Charges of Aiding Islamic State - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Four individuals residing in the United States and Canada are facing charges of aiding and abetting the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A criminal complaint was unsealed yesterday in federal court in Brooklyn charging Mohammad David Hashimi, 35, of Potomac Falls, Virginia; Abdullah At Taqi, 23, of East Elmhurst, Queens, New York; Khalilullah Yousuf, 34, of Ontario, Canada; and Seema Rahman, 25, of Edison, New Jersey, with conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (IS)," the Justice Department said in a press release.

On December 14, the authorities arrested Hashimi, Taqi and Rahman in the US states of Virginia, New York and New Jersey, while Yousuf was arrested on the same day in Canada pursuant to a provisional arrest request by the US government, the release said.

"Taqi and Rahman made their initial appearances in federal court in Brooklyn before Chief US Magistrate Judge Cheryl Pollak. Hashimi made his initial appearance in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, before US Magistrate Judge Ivan Davis and was ordered detained pending trial," the release added.

According to court documents, Hashimi and Yousuf were members of a group chat on an encrypted social media and mobile messaging electronic communication service that facilitated communication between and among supporters of the Islamic State and other extremist groups. Yousuf provided a link to a specific Bitcoin address while another member of the chat group posted a link to a PayPal campaign.

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US House Checking With White House Before Moving on Senate TikTok Legislation - Pelosi WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives has not decided whether to take up the Senate bill to ban the China-based social media platform TikTok on US government electronic devices, but is checking with the White House on its language first, outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"I don't know if that will be on the agenda next week but let's see," Pelosi said during told a press conference on Capitol Hill. "There's not going to be anything happening in this Congress as we go out."

Earlier on Thursday, the Senate unanimously enacted a bill banning the download and usage of TikTok on any device issued by the United States or a government corporation, citing security concerns.

On Tuesday, US Senator Marco Rubio introduced bipartisan legislation to ban TikTok from operating in the United States. Rubio has claimed that ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, is required by Chinese law to make the application's data available to the Chinese Communist Party, which allegedly poses a risk of the social media platform being used as a spying tool.

Pelosi said the priority in the closing session of the year before she steps down as speaker was to push through a year-long funding bill to ensure the US government stays open and operating.

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US Jobless Claims Hit 11-Week Low, Suggesting New Challenge to Fed's Inflation Fight

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims have hit a 11-week low after the lowest number of Americans filed for unemployment benefits since September, according to

Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a new challenge to the Federal Reserve's aim of seeing the labor market soften in order to keep a lid on demand in the economy. Initial jobless claims stood at 211,000 for the week ended December 3, versus the 231,000 during the previous week to November 26. The last time unemployment benefits claims dropped as much was during the week to September 23, when they were at 193,000.

There is "no weakening in the initial jobless claims as the number moves back to the downside," economist Adam Button wrote on ForexLive platform.

Weekly jobless claims are among the statistics watched by the Fed which says it wants a convincing drop in inflation before scaling back further on rate hikes. The US central bank identifies a strong job market and wage growth as among the drivers of inflation.

The labor market has been the juggernaut of the US economy over the past two years, spearheading its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic measures.

Joblessness among Americans reached an all-time high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs after the COVID-19 breakout. Since June 2020, however, the Labor Department's non-farm payrolls report has reported hundreds of thousands of job additions every month, with earnings growth keeping up a steady upbeat momentum too.

The Fed on Wednesday slowed rate hikes for the first time this year, imposing a 50-basis increase after four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points between June and November. So far for 2022, the Fed has added 425 basis points to rates, the most since the 1980s.

The rate hikes have been designed to be somewhat commensurate with the pace of inflation, which itself hit 40-year highs earlier this year before slowing.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) grew by 7.1% in the year to November. That compared with a peak of 9.1% for the CPI in June. The US Labor Department said the November inflation rate represented "the smallest 12-month increase since the period ending December 2021."

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UN Chief Expresses Condolences to Family of Irish Peacekeeper Killed in Lebanon

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has expressed condolences to the family of an Irish peacekeeper who was killed in Lebanon, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General is deeply saddened by the death of an Irish peacekeeper from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) who was killed in an incident that took place on 14 December in the area of Al-Aqbieh, outside UNIFIL's area of operations in South Lebanon," Dujarric said.

The United Nations spokesperson also said that three others were injured in the incident, of whom one remains in critical condition.

Dujarric said Guterres expresses his deepest condolences to the family of the peacekeeper who died and to the people and the government of Ireland.

In addition, Guterres urges a swift investigation by relevant authorities to determine the facts related to the incident and the need for accountability, Dujarric added.

On Wednesday night, two UNIFIL patrols took routes different than usual while going along the old seaside road near the city of Tyre, where local residents threw stones at the patrol car, according to reports.

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US Calls on UNSC Council to Add All Islamic State Affiliates to Sanctions List - Nuland

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) -The UN Security Council should add all affiliates of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda terror groups (outlawed in Russia) on its sanctions list, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"One way the Council can help is by doing more on the current sanctions list to ensure it accurately reflects realities on the ground. UN sanctions are an essential tool in our counter-terrorism toolkit," Nuland said. "The Council should support listing all ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates as well as their leaders and key supporters so that they face global asset freezes, travel bans and arms embargo."

Nuland noted that the United Nations committees have designated only one entity and one individual this year and this lack of action undermines their mandate.

The latest United Nations report said that terrorism has become more widespread and present around the world despite the loss of leadership among the leading terror organizations like al-Qaeda. In particular, terrorism has become more prevalent in West Africa and the Sahel, as well as in Afghanistan, while it has contributed to the already bad situation in Central and Southern Africa.

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US Retail Sales Down Most in Nearly a Year in Nov, as Holiday Shopping Gets Underway

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US retail sales fell the most in nearly a year in November, according to data from the UN Commerce Department on Thursday that sounded the warning bell for merchandisers as the annual shopping season gets underway.

Sales at US retail stores, online sellers and restaurants fell by 0.6% last month, the Commerce Department said. That was a significant drop from October's robust 1.3% sales increase.

The last time retail sales fell more was in December 2021, when it dropped 1.9% on the month. A drill-down of last month's retail sales showed shoppers spent less on holiday categories including electronics, clothing, and sporting goods - both online and in stores. Spending, however, rose on everyday staples such as food and at health-care stores as well as on restaurant meals.

As a caveat to the data, unlike many government reports, retail sales are not adjusted for inflation and can reflect price differences in addition to purchase totals.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) grew by 7.1% in the year to November. That compared with a peak of 9.1% for the CPI in June. The US Labor Department said the November inflation rate represented the smallest 12-month increase since the period ending December 2021.

"The soft reading on the control group along with a negative revision is a sign that the consumer isn't as strong as thought," economist Adam Button wrote on the ForexLive forum. "We heard from airlines this week as well that bookings aren't as brisk as hoped for. That said, I wonder if in 2021 consumers were Christmas shopping earlier due to delivery delays and that spending will creep into December this year. Note that these numbers aren't adjusted for inflation and sales were up 6.5%, which is slower than the pace of prices rises."

The US economy itself is on uncertain footing with the Federal Reserve saying it will not back off on rate hikes until it was certain that inflation was coming under control. The central bank's target for inflation is 2% per year, versus the CPI level, which is some three-and-a-half times higher.

The economy sputtered in the first two quarters of 2022, with back-to-back negative growths of 1.6% and 0.6% in gross domestic product, or GDP, that technically placed the nation in a recession. Third-quarter GDP, however, came in at a resilient 2.6%, raising questions of whether another economic slowdown was likely or a soft landing was possible instead.

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Yellen Meets China's Envoy to Exchange Views on Macroeconomic Developments - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen on Thursday met with China's ambassador to the United States Qin Gang to discuss global macroeconomic and financial developments, the Treasury Department said.

"Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen today met with the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang. They exchanged views on global macroeconomic and financial developments as part of efforts to maintain communication and work together on transnational challenges," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

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Biden Says 'Eager' to Visit Africa After Being Invited by African Leaders

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is eager to travel to Africa and may show up on the continent after being invited to visit by African leaders.

"I'm eager to visit your continent because I told some of you who invited me to your countries," Biden said at the opening ceremony of the US-Africa summit in Washington. "I said, Be careful what you wish for because I may show up. The poor relatives always show up. Wealthy was never showed up the poor calm and they eat your food stay longer than they should. Well, I'm looking forward to seeing many of you in your home."

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Biden Says US Plans to Commit \$55Bln in Africa Over Next 3 Years to Advance UN Agenda 2063

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik)- US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration plans to commit \$55 billion in Africa over the next three years.

"Over the next three years, working in close cooperation with US Congress, we plan to commit \$55 billion in Africa to advance the priorities we share and to support the agenda 2063," Biden said at the opening ceremony of the US-Africa summit in Washington, DC.

The US president explained that the number represents the comprehensive commitment from the United States to invest in Africa's people, infrastructure, agriculture, health system, and security.

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US Expects China, India to Negotiate 'Very Good' Prices on Russian Oil But Under Price Cap

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States expects that China, India and Turkey will negotiate very good prices on Russian oil for themselves but they will fall under the Western-imposed price cap, Office of Sanction Coordination head James O'Brien said on Friday.

"We expect that China, India and Turkey, as major buyers of Russian oil, will negotiate very good prices for themselves and the prices will come under the price cap. Which would be in compliance even if the countries don't formally join the price cap coalition," O'Brien said during a press conference.

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Biden Calls For African Union to Join G20 as Permanent Member

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik)- US President Joe Biden called for the African Union to join the G20 as a permanent member.

"Today I am calling for the African Union to join the G20 as a permanent member of the G20," Biden said at the opening ceremony of the US-Africa summit in Washington, DC.

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US Believes Russia Sanctions Will Not Produce Price Spikes of Key Commodities- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that the sanctions it has imposed on Russia will not result in price spikes or the restriction of key commodity supplies, Office of Sanctions Coordination head James O'Brien said on Thursday.

"We're very comfortable that it will not produce a spike in prices or restriction and supplies on any of the key commodities that companies provide," O'Brien said during a press conference.

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US Does Not Seek to Blockade Whole Russian Financial System at Once – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States seeks to minimize the harm caused by sanctions on Russia and does not intend to blockade the whole Russian financial system at once, Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination at the US Department of State James O'Brien said on Thursday.

"We take a careful look at each set of banks and try to avoid or mitigate the harm that will come if the bank can't carry out its transactions. So we view this as moving a step at a time, rather than one sort of full effort to blockade the whole Russian financial system all at once because we think that is vital to allowing the global markets to function," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

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Trump's 'Major Announcement' Turns Out to Be Own Brand of Trading Cards

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump revealed on Thursday that the "major announcement" he teased the day before is the sale of his own collection of digital trading cards.

"MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT! My official Donald Trump Digital Trading Card collection is here! These limited edition cards feature amazing ART of my Life and Career! Collect all of your

favorite Trump Digital Trading Cards, very much like a baseball card, but hopefully much more exciting," Trump said in a statement.

Trump said these digital trading cards will make a great Christmas gift and are on sale for \$99. Last month, Trump announced his bid to run for a second term to become US president in the 2024 presidential election.

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US House Intel Panel Says Trump Administration Downplayed COVID-19 Despite Clear Warnings

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The administration of former US President Donald Trump downplayed the threat of COVID-19 and failed to implement life-saving measures in the early days of the pandemic despite receiving clear warnings from officials, the House Intelligence Committee said on Thursday.

"The Intelligence Community's alarms to the White House and the former president were clear and unmistakable. And yet, in public messaging and in preparation for the impending impact, COVID was downplayed and steps that could have been taken to save lives were ignored," the panel said in a report on pandemic response.

By the end of January 2020, US intelligence was warning of a possible pandemic, including a classified briefing to the Intelligence Committee in mid-February, the panel said.

Government officials were tracking and warning of the pandemic threat well in advance of Trump's declaration of a national emergency on March 13, the panel said.

The panel in its report recommended investments in open source intelligence collection efforts, better integration of the intelligence community into public health agencies and the creation of a dedicated center for global health security at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The panel's report did not cover the origins of the novel coronavirus, but noted that future pandemics could emerge from either a lab accident or natural transmission.

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US Treasury Says Nornickel Not Blocked as Part of New Sanctions on Potanin – Guidance

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday that sanctions on Russian businessman Vladimir Potanin do not affect mining giant Nornickel.

"No. OFAC [the Office of Foreign Assets Control] has not designated Norilsk Nickel and, based on information available to OFAC as of December 15, 2022, Norilsk Nickel is not owned 50% or more by blocked persons or otherwise considered the blocked property of Vladimir Potanin," the department said in a new guidance.

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US Designates Members of Board of Directors of Russian Railways - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik)- The United States imposed sanctions against five senior Russian officials who are serving as members of the board of directors of state-owned company Russian Railways, the State Department said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is designating five members of the Board of Directors of Russian Railways, a major Russian State-owned enterprise, pursuant to section 1(a)(iii)(A) of E.O. 14024 for being or having been leaders, officials, senior executive officers, or members of the board of directors of the Government of the Russian Federation," the statement read.

Restrictions imposed against First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko, as well as Sergey Frank, Oleg Belozyorov, and Aleksey Sazanov, it added.

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US Authorizes Transactions Related to Energy With Sanctioned Russian Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States issued a general license authorizing certain transactions related to energy with sanctioned Russian entities through May 16, 2023, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 14024 involving one or more of the following entities that are related to energy are authorized, through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, May 16, 2023," the license read.

The list of entities includes State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, Public Joint Stock Company Bank Financial Corporation Otkritie, Sovcombank Open Joint Stock Company, Public Joint Stock Company Sberbank of Russia, VTB Bank Public Joint Stock Company, Joint Stock Company Alfa-Bank, Public Joint Stock Company Rosbank, and the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the release said.

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US Sanctions 17 Subsidiaries of Russia's VTB Bank - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Office of Foreign Assets Control is sanctioning 17 subsidiaries of Russia's VTB Bank as part of a new sanctions package targeting the country's financial services sector, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"OFAC is also adding 17 subsidiaries of VTB Bank Public Joint Stock Company (VTB Bank), Russia's second largest bank, to the SDN [Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons] List. VTB Bank was designated in February 2022 and all entities owned 50 percent or more, directly or indirectly, by VTB Bank are blocked by operation of law... even if not designated by OFAC," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The action will help strengthen compliance with existing sanctions, the statement added.

The new sanctions on VTB subsidiaries come alongside other new measures against Rosbank and Russian businessman Vladimir Potanin, whose Interros conglomerate is tied to Rosbank.

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US Targets Russian Officials, Potanin, His Companies in New Batch of Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States targeted Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belousov, tycoon Vladimir Potanin, his family and companies, as well as a number of Russian governors in a fresh batch of sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The sanctions include Interros, an investment company Potanin controls, and Rosbank, which Interros bought from Societe Generale earlier this year.

The sanctions also target Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko and a number of Russian governors, including Moscow Region governor Andrey Vorobyov.

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Pelosi Attacker Planned to Target Hunter Biden, Gavin Newsom, Tom Hanks - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - David DePape, the man who is accused of attacking House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband, also planned to target President Joe Biden's son Hunter, California Governor Gavin Newsom and actor Tom Hanks, CNN affiliate KPIX reported, citing a San Francisco Police Department official.

"There is evil in Washington, what they did went so far beyond the campaign. It originates with Hillary [Clinton]" DePape reportedly told the San Francisco Police Department.

On October 28, San Francisco police responded to a wellbeing check at the Pelosi residence, where they found Paul Pelosi, 82, and DePape, 42, struggling over a hammer. DePape reportedly took the hammer and beat Pelosi with it before being apprehended by police.

Pelosi's husband suffered a skull fracture and serious injuries to his right arm and hands during the attack and had to undergo surgery to treat his injuries. Doctors said that they expected his full recovery soon.