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'Dual Containment' of Moscow, Beijing is 'Mission: Impossible' for Washington, Taiwan Expert Says

By - Fantine Gardinier

Although the US has identified "great power competition" with Russia and China as its new strategic orientation, Washington has struggled to build even regional alliances against them outside of NATO. It's no coincidence, then, that NATO is seeking to make partners out of US allies in East Asia.

Dr. Chang Ching, military expert on the People's Liberation Army and regional security and senior research fellow of the Taiwan-based Society for Strategic Studies, told Sputnik that while many commentators have accused Washington of having a "dual containment" strategy against Moscow and Beijing, based on their "very strong disagreements," Washington simply doesn't have the global clout to isolate such strong and powerful countries.

"Both Russia and China are global players in international politics and economic affairs. If the Biden administration has an aspiration to contain either Russia or China, the United States needs to forge a global consensus to mobilize an effort to contain any of these two countries on a worldwide scale," Chang said. "As for now, it is simply a 'mission: impossible' to consolidate most countries to take any negative measures towards Moscow or Beijing. Only certain Western states have joined the collective actions to hinder the freedom of actions acted by Moscow or Beijing."

"Even many of the US' traditional allies like the Philippines would have strong reluctances to take coordinated actions against Russia and China. No nation would like to take sides unconditionally nowadays. It all depends on how much Washington can commit to the alliance relationships. There is no free lunch for Americans to take from the dining tables of other countries any more. After all, the general rule of give and take is always valid in international politics," Chang noted.

Indeed, this is no small part of why NATO defines China as a "systemic challenge" rather than using the more hostile word "threat."

"To treat the People's Republic of China as a 'threat' is openly expressing hostility towards Beijing. China has explicitly reminded Japan that labeling China as a threat is equal to delivering an ultimatum of hostility to Beijing. The NATO therefore is extremely cautious on selecting terms to define Beijing. And the final descriptive term is the 'systemic challenge,' he explained. He noted that Seoul had "very skillfully declined" a request by NATO Secretary-General Jen Stoltenberg "to make any promise of committing itself to any effort causing negative consequences towards China."

"Seoul is crystal clear about the stability of the Korean Peninsula and deeply relies on Beijing's support. If the NATO leadership failed to see the role Moscow and Beijing had ever actively

played to stabilize the Korean Peninsula, then NATO is not well prepared to engage with the security matters in the Asian-Pacific region yet,” Chang observed.

Turning to the recently leaked memo by US Gen. Mike Minihan, the head of US Air Force Mobility Command, which called for the US to prepare for war with China over Taiwan as early as 2025, Chang noted that the theater is far from Minihan’s area of responsibility and his comments don’t count for much.

“A memorandum issued by the military leadership to his subordinate commanders does not actually activate any military planning process, but only a prior notice to remind certain concern,” Chang explained. “This is exactly the reason why the Pentagon confirmed the existence of this memorandum but clarified that it does not reflect any official position regarding policy.”

“Second, no military professional leadership would have a crystal ball to foresee the future. Armed conflict may occur beyond anyone’s expectation or even imagination. This leaked information may stimulate many political speculations. Nonetheless, given General Minihan’s position within the US military chain of command, its importance is obviously overstated.” Picking up the crystal ball for a moment himself, Chang noted that even the uppermost echelons of the US defense and national security apparatus don’t believe Beijing has any plans to initiate hostile action against Taiwan in the near future.

“They repeatedly addressed the fact that Beijing has still tried its greatest efforts on the ‘peaceful reunification’ policy, though it still declines to promise not using force if necessary,” he noted. And obviously, Beijing is seriously preparing [for] a war it does not intend to fight.”

“So, I do share the same conclusion with them. The pressure does exist. The tension also needs to be well managed. Yet, the hope of peace always exists. If there is a conflict across the Taiwan Strait, there is no winner, we are all losers then. Beijing knows that, Washington also knows that. Only those people who have a plot or even a conspiracy to drag Beijing down and weaken Washington through a war attrition are expecting a cross-strait conflict.”

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‘Really Silly Actions’: US Efforts to Isolate China’s Tech Sector Will Backfire, Expert Says
By - Fantine Gardinier

The US has pushed its own businesses and those of its allies to “decouple” from China as part of Washington’s effort to pursue “great power competition” with Beijing and Moscow. However, with the global economy more integrated than ever, cutting the world’s second-largest economy out from the rest is essentially impossible.

The US has expanded its efforts to isolate China’s tech sector from advanced technology used by Western firms, especially high-end semiconductors and the microchips they’re used to make. Taiwan and South Korea have faced extensive pressure to limit sales to China, but more recently Washington has pressured Tokyo and Amsterdam, too. Meanwhile, Chinese tech firms have been rushing to adapt.

Thomas W. Pauken II, author of "US vs China: From Trade War to Reciprocal Deal," a consultant on Asia-Pacific affairs and a geopolitical commentator, told Sputnik that "people become most innovative in a crisis or they have no choice but to be innovative."

"In this scenario, if Huawei cannot receive supplies from US companies, and let's say, for example, the Europeans also play ball and don't export to Huawei or other Chinese companies, this will simply require Chinese companies to become more innovative in their own market," Pauken observed.

The author noted that China is "well-positioned" to innovate as the US pressures other nations to "decouple" from China's economy.

"Of course, in the short term it will have an impact. Every type of punishment does. But in the long run, it actually hurts the US tech companies and the US economy much harder," Pauken observed.

Indeed, the White House's most recent efforts have already produced innovative fruits in Shenzhen.

Insider reports quoted in US media have said that Dutch and Japanese officials have [agreed after talks](#) with their US counterparts to abide by the US' ban on selling the most advanced semiconductor chips to Chinese companies, including Huawei, which the US moved toward a total ban on doing business with late last year. The agreement will block Chinese companies from buying from the Dutch firm ASML, presently the world's only producer of high-end microchips using extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography. However, last month, reports in Chinese media indicated Huawei had filed for a [patent on EUV lithography](#), evidently an innovation the Shenzhen-based tech giant had been working on for years.

The US' effort extends beyond Huawei, however, to China's efforts in the fields of AI, quantum, cyber, 5G, and advanced semiconductors - all fields in which Chinese companies have been making great gains and even taken the lead over their American counterparts in some cases. Chris Devonshire-Ellis, Chairman of Dezan Shira & Associates who has a 30-year-old investment and business career in China, Russia and Asia, told Sputnik that the US and China have different capabilities.

"There are differences between the two countries' capabilities: China has more total patents across the full spectrum of quantum technology, but US companies have a lead in quantum computing. It is a technical, digital race."

Devonshire-Ellis predicted that the consequences of this race would be to divide the world, with "the loser not wanting to be subject to the whims of the winner."

Could China retaliate for the US sanctions and trade bans? Pauken said they don't need to, they just need to anticipate such moves and believe they will be followed through, because "the US and Europe will end up punishing themselves more so than the Chinese."

"There really isn't a reason for the Chinese to even hit back, because this is a case of the US and Europe hurting itself, shooting itself in the foot, as the saying goes, 'cutting off the nose to spite the face,'" he said. "These are really silly actions."

Devonshire-Ellis noted that even if China did not retaliate in kind, the US' efforts have "completely disregarded" the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules regarding "fair competition."

"There is a growing feeling in the emerging world that global institutions are being shown to have a US bias or [are fit] to be cast aside as irrelevant as the US does what it wishes. That has

and is leading to a distrust of the US and of institutions that are shown to be overly influenced by Washington. This includes the World Bank, NATO, and the WTO among many others. These institutions are now being challenged and alternatives are emerging – without the presence of the US, and in many cases as well, the European Union. Both Washington and Brussels are being diminished beyond their immediate comfort zones because of this.”

That said, Pauken noted that if the US-Dutch-Japan ban does go into full effect, it would “have a huge impact.”

“Some of the countries are very upset about this and they're looking for some type of compromise or to get their names off the restrictions list from their countries. I mean they could have a verbal agreement, but it doesn't mean it's an agreement written on paper. The agreement on paper will probably look different than what apparently the newspapers are saying,” he told Sputnik.

The analyst noted that the Japanese have not totally agreed to the US' terms because of Japan's close trade relationship with China, especially their tech sectors, which “are making quite a bit of money.”

“To actually follow through on such restrictions would create tremendous harm to Japanese companies. And this was a major issue of concern also with many South Korean companies as well. They have factories, they have a lot of semiconductor plants like South Korea does here in Shiyang and, and some other places in China. Basically, they're being told that they have to stop and shut down these foundries. And OK, who's going to pay them to shut down those foundries? Is it going to be the US?”

He noted the same is likely true of an agreement with Amsterdam.

“If the Netherlands actually agree to this on paper, then that would be devastating to their economy. Recently, they changed environmental rules, so they practically destroyed their agriculture because of new environmental rules. So right now, their only real sector is either tourism or the chips industry. So obviously, if they lose a major customer from China, this will have a very deep impact on them. I really don't believe that they have a paper agreement claiming that they actually agreed to what the newspapers are saying. And this is why a lot of times these treaties and agreements are never disclosed to the public,” he observed.

Pauken accused the US of “trying to create a crisis” by pushing policies on other countries that don't “make sense business-wise.”

“I just don't see it happening with these countries actually going in ahead, signing some, the US and their country, agreement specifying exactly what they're claiming to the media. And this is very common. This is a very common occurrence. I always find it interesting that the media never ask specifically, ‘can you show us the agreement papers? Can you show us what is exactly in writing?’ The Western media doesn't do it that often. I would advise them that they should start spending more time looking at the actual documents.”

Devonshire-Ellis noted that the Dutch response follows the EU's perspective, which is to closely follow what the US says. While Japan has had some more independence from Washington, especially economically, its superiority to China in the field of robotics is undoubtedly connected to its close relationship with the US.

“But how long that lasts, is open to debate,” he said.

“Overall, it should be mentioned that many of the component parts that go into semiconductors, including precious metals, rare earths and gasses, and the technologies required, are already in

possession of Russia and China and its allies. This is also the case with energy reserves. The West, in time, will need access to these in order to continue a drive towards supremacy. The crunch time isn't now – it's when the West finds it needs to rely on Russia and China and their allies to continue to manufacture the super semi-conductors they are technically capable of designing.”

“Short-term, the US decision makes sense for Washington. But longer term it could prove to be highly damaging should Russia and China invoke reciprocity and refuse to supply the West with the core ingredients.”

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Whole Foods Asks Suppliers to Drop Prices as Farmers Slam Agribiz for 'Collusive' Egg Price Hikes

By - Fantine Gardinier

Grocery store chain Whole Foods asked its suppliers last month to lower their prices on packaged foods as inflation begins to slow, a US newspaper reported on Tuesday after viewing a recording of the meeting.

According to the report, Alyssa Vescio, Whole Foods' senior vice president of merchandising of center store, said that shoppers were increasingly scrutinizing food prices and making shrewd buying decisions as stores struggle to offer customers better deals. Industry researchers have reported that the Amazon-owned chain saw an 8% drop in store traffic in the fourth quarter of 2022 as compared to a year prior.

The most recent consumer price index (CPI) report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed the [price for US goods](#) increased by an average of 6.5% over a year prior - its sixth straight month of decrease after the Federal Reserve began increasing interest rates in early 2022. However, the rate remains higher than the Fed's goal of 2% inflation, so the central bank is likely to make further rate hikes following its meeting later this week.

According to manufacturers and shippers, the stiff price hikes have been a product of rising shipping costs, most especially the high price of fuel. However, a decline of gasoline and crude oil prices in recent months has not seen a concomitant decline in commodity prices, many of which have continued to rise despite the overall inflation statistics.

The December CPI report showed the price of eggs increased by 60% over the last year, and increased by 11.1% just from November to December 2022. Breakfast cereal, rice, and bread have also risen by 13-15%. Rent was also 8.3% higher than the same period last year - a devastating metric for working-class Americans, for whom rent is often their single largest expense.

An [April study by the Economic Policy Institute](#) found that corporate profits accounted for 54% of inflation in the US over the previous two years, meaning companies increasing their prices because consumers expected price increases has caused inflation to be twice as bad as it otherwise would have been.

Indeed, accusations were recently levied by farmers that major egg suppliers have colluded to artificially drive up prices.

Egg Prices and Avian Flu

A [letter sent earlier](#) this month to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) by Farm Action, a farmer-led advocacy group, urged the agency to investigate “concerns over apparent price gouging, price coordination, and other unfair or deceptive acts or practices by dominant producers of eggs,” most especially corporate giant Cal-Maine Foods.

Alleging that an outbreak of avian influenza among the US chicken population has had an “apparently mild impact on the industry,” Farm Action writes that “the real culprit behind this 138% hike in the price of a carton of eggs appears to be a collusive scheme among industry leaders to turn inflationary conditions and an avian flu outbreak into an opportunity to extract egregious profits reaching as high as 40%.”

“In the end, what Cal-Maine Foods and the other large egg producers did last year - and seem to be intent on doing again this year - is extort billions of dollars from the pockets of ordinary Americans through what amounts to a tax on a staple we all need: eggs,” the letter states. “They did so without any legitimate business justification. They did so because there is no ‘reasonable substitute’ for a carton of eggs. They did so because they had power and weren’t afraid to use it.”

Cal-Maine Vice President and Chief Financial Officer Max Bowman told US media in response to the allegations that the US egg market is “intensely competitive and highly volatile even under normal circumstances,” adding that the company doesn’t sell directly to consumers or set retail prices.

The US Department of [Agriculture has reported](#) the avian flu outbreak has killed 43 million egg-laying hens in the US since February 2022, resulting in a 7.5% decline in egg supplies per month.

“The average shell-egg price was 267% higher during the week leading up to Christmas than at the beginning of the year and 210% higher than the same time a year earlier,” the USDA said. “During the last week of 2022, inventory sizes started to rise, and prices fell. Going forward, wholesale prices are expected to decrease as the industry moves past the holiday season and continues rebuilding its egg-laying flocks.”

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Ice Storm Causes Thousands of Canceled, Delayed Flights Across US South
By - Fantine Gardinier

A massive winter storm in February 2021 paralyzed Texas as its electrical system crumbled under the weight of snow and high electrical demand, killing hundreds. The state government and power provider have struggled to convince Texans they have corrected their mistakes. Another winter storm has canceled or delayed thousands of flights in the United States, with most of the trouble concentrated in Texas but problems could be found on Tuesday across the South.

According to online flight tracking sites, roughly 1,200 flights have been canceled and another 1,600 delayed due to a winter storm stretching from the US-Mexico border to West Virginia. The system has brought vast amounts of ice, sleet, and freezing rain to the Great Plains and southern Appalachia, paralyzing land travel as well as air. Sleet is rain that has frozen while falling, turning it into tiny ice pellets, while freezing rain falls as liquid rain, but freezes upon contact with colder surfaces, creating a highly dangerous layer of ice on anything it touches. According to meteorologists, the storm is being strengthened by cold air moving southward from Canada, which will cause a devastating second wave of storms as the air mass moves east from Texas toward the Appalachian Mountains.

The delays come after a month of trouble with US air travel, first caused by [another winter storm](#) across the Great Plains late last month, then by a [collapse of the country's](#) flight management software that was initially blamed on foreign saboteurs before being discovered to have been human error by US staff.

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US Drydocks Close Over 'Earthquake' Risk, Calling Australian Submarine Deal Into Question
By - Wyatt Reed

With top US legislators warning that America's industrial submarine base is near a "breaking point," plans to close four drydocks at a key base near Seattle could throw a wrench into a joint US-UK plan to sell submarines to Australia.

The US Navy has abruptly halted work at four drydocks in the Pacific Northwest due to the possibility of seismic activity, a recent statement has revealed.

Citing the "possibility of a large-scale earthquake occurring," the Navy [announced](#) it will "temporarily suspend submarine docking" at three drydocks in Bremerton, Washington, and another in nearby Bangor.

A "recently conducted seismic assessment... identified potential issues associated with the remote possibility of a large-scale earthquake occurring simultaneously with a submarine maintenance availability," the Navy wrote in a statement published Friday.

Eight of the US military's 14 nuclear ballistic submarines are stationed at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor.

It's unclear exactly what was wrong with the facilities or how long they will take to repair, but the Navy says it is "working now to safely and efficiently return the docks to service with the additional upgrades in place."

The Navy claims "this action does not affect the nation's strategic deterrent capability or the ability of the fleet to continue its overall mission."

But the statement suggests the military is already foreseeing delays in planned ship maintenance, and insists "work packages for each affected availability" are currently "being evaluated and structured to continue work pier side when possible."

"The closure will still make it harder for the US Navy to field, maintain and then decommission nuclear-powered submarines," wrote Australia's ABC News, which [complained](#) "the United

States is already struggling to meet its own Navy's requirements to build two new nuclear-powered submarines every year, while more than one in three submarines in its existing fleet is currently in maintenance or waiting to undergo maintenance.”

Australian pro-government media has frequently fretted about the potential impacts the repairs could have on their plans to acquire nuclear submarines under the so-called “AUKUS” security pact, which would see the governments of the US and the UK manufacturing and selling them subs.

Earlier this month, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee warned that building nuclear submarines for Australia could [risk](#) bringing the US submarine industrial base to a “breaking point” – seemingly confirming comments by a top Navy official who [claimed](#) in August that “if we were going to add additional submarine construction to our industrial base, that would be detrimental to us right now.”

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Nearly Four Times as Many Americans Now Say US Gives ‘Too Much’ to Ukraine – Poll
By - Wyatt Reed

Growing dissatisfaction with the transatlantic elite’s insistence on pumping Ukraine full of American cash and weapons is apparently no longer confined to the right.

The number of Americans who think the US is giving “too much” to Ukraine has nearly quadrupled in less than a year, according to a [new poll](#) conducted by Pew Research.

Americans who believe the US is supplying “too much” cash and weapons to the Zelensky regime now outnumber those who believe it is providing “too little,” per the results.

Cumulatively, the percentage of Americans growing disillusioned with Washington’s latest military gambit has increased from 7% to 26% in the last 10 months.

Undoubtedly, the most significant increase was seen among those who lean Republican. Since March 2022, the share of Republicans who see the US as doing “too much” to prop up the Kiev regime has risen by over four times – from just 9% to a full 40%.

Just 24% of those surveyed responded that what the US government is giving is “about right,” while only 17% said it should send more.

There was a clear partisan divide among respondents. Just 29% of Republicans [said](#) that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” is a “direct threat to US interests” (down from 51% last March) whereas 43% of Democrats felt that way (down from 50%).

But dissatisfaction with the US proxy war against Russia is no longer limited to the right. Across the board, Americans are now far more likely to oppose further moves by Washington to pump Ukraine full of weapons.

Even Democrats are now three times as likely to agree as they were in March, with the share saying the Biden administration is giving Kiev “too much” having grown from 5% to 15%.

But it’s unclear whether the results will translate into a meaningful shift in policy. Democrats who published a letter in October calling on Biden to support “a negotiated settlement and ceasefire”

and “engage in direct talks with Russia” lasted less than 24 hours before retracting their statement under intense pressure from their superiors in Washington.

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US Charges Four Men Over Assassination of Haitian President
By - Wyatt Reed

The country where prosecutors acknowledge the plot to murder Haiti’s last president was hatched is set to oversee all of the trials of his alleged assassins.

Four more men have been charged in the 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse after they were transferred to US custody Tuesday, according to the US Department of Justice.

Colombian citizen German Alejandro Rivera Garcia and dual Haitian-American citizens James Solages and Joseph Vincent are accused of “conspiring to commit murder or kidnapping outside the United States and providing material support and resources resulting in death,” the DoJ wrote in a release published Tuesday.

A third Haitian-American, Dr. Christian Emmanuel Sanon, was charged with “conspiring to smuggle goods from the United States and cause export information not to be filed.”

The four suspects, who are expected to make their first appearance in federal court at 2:00 p.m. Wednesday in Miami, join three other men who have spent months in prison awaiting trial for their alleged role in the assassination plot against Moïse.

The DoJ claims that in early 2021, some of the suspects met in South Florida to discuss their plans to effect “regime change” in Haiti by toppling Moïse and replacing him with Sanon. Prosecutors say the suspects then plotted to acquire the “equipment and weapons needed for the regime change operation,” including “rifles, machine guns, tear gas, grenades, ammunition, bulletproof vests, and other weapons and equipment.”

According to US authorities, Sanon circumvented the law when he “conspired with others to ship 20 ballistic vests for use by his private military forces from South Florida to Haiti on June 10, 2021.”

Weeks later, the DoJ claims that “support for President Moïse’s replacement shifted” from Sanon to a former Haitian Supreme Court judge who they say “signed a document requesting assistance to further the arrest and imprisonment of President Moïse” as well as “a document purportedly signed by that Judge claimed to provide immunity in Haiti to those who participated in the operation.”

Finally, on July 6, “Solages, Vincent, Rivera and others met at a house near President Moïse’s residence, where firearms and equipment were distributed and Solages announced that the mission was to kill President Moïse,” prosecutors allege.

The next day, Moïse would ultimately be assassinated after a hit squad reportedly broke into his residence, beat him severely, and shot him multiple times.

The political chaos and dysfunction that’s plagued Haiti due to centuries of foreign interference has only worsened in the time since. After reports that the US was considering sending troops

to Haiti as part of a so-called “international intervention,” viral footage emerged showing Haitians waving tricolor flags calling on the Russian Federation to protect them from any such intervention.

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Sitting in Traffic for Just Two Hours Can Damage Your Brain, Study Finds
By - Mary Manley

In a first-ever controlled experiment to show evidence of altered brain network connectivity in humans after exposure to air pollution, signs of decreased brain function can appear in as little as two hours after exposure to traffic pollution.

A [study](#) released by a team at the University of British Columbia reveals that exposure to diesel exhaust fumes can have disastrous effects on your brain. This may be worse if you find yourself sitting in traffic during your daily commute to, or from the office.

In order to arrive at this conclusion the study focused on the brain’s functional connectivity: a measure that tests how well different parts of the brain are able to communicate or interact with one another. The team briefly exposed 25 healthy adults to either diesel exhaust or filtered air in the lab and used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to measure the participant’s brains before and after each exposure.

The study looked at the participants’ brain default mode network (DMN), which is where internal thoughts and memories are stored. They found that after the brain is exposed to diesel exhaust, the DMN has less activity than those in the study who were exposed to filtered air.

“We know that altered functional connectivity in the DMN has been associated with reduced cognitive performance and symptoms of depression, so it’s concerning to see traffic pollution interrupting these same networks,” explains Jodie Gawryluk, the study’s first author and a psychology professor at the University of Victoria.

“While more research is needed to fully understand the functional impacts of these changes, it’s possible that they may impair people’s thinking or ability to work.”

Fortunately, the participant’s brain function returned to normal after their short-term exposure, however the researchers speculate that long-term exposure (such as sitting in traffic for hours at a time) could lead to permanent brain damage.

“People may want to think twice the next time they’re stuck in traffic with the windows rolled down,” says Carlsten. “It’s important to ensure that your car’s air filter is in good working order, and if you’re walking or biking down a busy street, consider diverting to a less busy route.”

In [2008](#), a separate study done by Dutch researchers at Zuyd University also found that exposure to diesel exhaust triggers the stress response part of the brain. Those researchers also speculated that long-term exposure to diesel could have lasting, negative effects on brain health.

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US Actor Alec Baldwin Charged With Involuntary Manslaughter Over Fatal 'Rust' Shooting
By - Mary Manley

Both Baldwin and the film's set armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, who is 25-years-old, will be charged with two counts of involuntary manslaughter for the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins.

American actor [Alec Baldwin](#), 64, and lead film armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed will each be charged with two counts of involuntary manslaughter in connection to the fatal 2021 shooting on the set of the movie Rust, in which the film's 42-year-old cinematographer was accidentally shot and killed by Baldwin while filming.

The district attorney's office in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, confirmed the news to CNN on Tuesday.

"Negligent use of a deadly weapon charges were also filed against 'Rust' assistant director David Halls, who has pleaded no contest and has entered into a plea agreement that is pending approval," the DA's office said in a media statement.

"Today we have taken another important step in securing justice for Halyna Hutchins," said District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies. "In New Mexico, no one is above the law and justice will be served."

Baldwin has maintained several times that he did not pull the trigger of the gun. However, prosecutors are saying that is not true.

"The photos and videos clearly show Baldwin, multiple times, with his finger inside of the trigger guard and on the trigger, while manipulating the hammer and while drawing, pointing, and holstering the revolver," said prosecutors.

On January 19, Baldwin's attorney labeled the decision a miscarriage of justice.

"This decision distorts Halyna Hutchins' tragic death and represents a terrible miscarriage of justice. Mr. Baldwin had no reason to believe there was a live bullet in the gun – or anywhere on the movie set," Luke Nikas, an attorney for Baldwin, said in his statement.

"He relied on the professionals with whom he worked, who assured him the gun did not have live rounds. We will fight these charges, and we will win."

The gun which killed Hutchins was supposed to contain only dummy rounds, however, a live round made its way on the film set. It has not been revealed how that occurred. Gutierrez-Reed had loaded the gun, which according to affidavits was one of three she loaded and left on a cart. The movie's assistant director Dave Halls then took the gun to Baldwin for the scene and said "cold gun" before the accident, which is a term meaning the gun was not loaded with any live rounds.

The gun was then fired, killing Hutchins and injuring the film's director Joel Souza.

Halls has signed an agreement with prosecutors to plead guilty to the charge of negligent use of a deadly weapon.

This was only the second film [Gutierrez-Reed](#) had ever worked on, her first was the film The Old Way, starring Nicolas Cage which had just wrapped filming when she began work on Rust.

Reports have been made that Gutierrez-Reed behaved negligently on set, and that Cage had actually yelled at her after she fired a gun for the third time without giving any proper warning. At one point she even handed a loaded gun to a child actor without properly checking the weapon. It was only when crew members intervened and demanded she check the firearm that she did so.

"I think loading blanks was the scariest thing to me because I was like, 'oh, I don't know anything about it,'" she said in a podcast a month before the shooting.

Gutierrez-Reed is the daughter of Thell Reed, a professional armorer in Hollywood who has worked on films including Miami Vice and Django Unchained.

"We were expecting the charges but they're absolutely wrong as to Hannah---we expect that she will be found not guilty by a jury and she did not commit manslaughter," Jason Bowles, an attorney, said in early January.

"She has been emotional about the tragedy but has committed no crime."

"Gutierrez-Reed was reckless in her responsibility to ensure set safety with the firearm. She failed to correct Baldwin from committing the dangerous and reckless safety violations by pointing the weapon at/towards people and by having his finger on the trigger," wrote [prosecutors](#).

Involuntary [manslaughter](#) is a felony punishable by prison time, but it could take a while before prosecutors are able to secure a conviction, according to legal experts. Involuntary manslaughter for negligence is punishable by up to 18 months in prison plus a \$5,000 fine. But if the court finds Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed guilty of more than simple negligence they could each face five years in prison.

"It's a very aggressive charging decision, and the defense has a strong case," said Neema Rahmani, a personal injury attorney and former prosecutor who was not involved in the Rust case. "Accidents like this are not enough for criminal liability."

The actors union SAG-AFTRA instructs actors to treat guns as though they are loaded with blanks, and to rely on weapons handlers to instruct them on how to use them. The union said in a statement: "An actor's job is not to be a firearms or weapons expert," before calling the DA's charging decision of Baldwin "[uninformed](#)."

"Mr. Baldwin had no reason to believe there was a live bullet in the gun - or anywhere on the movie set. He relied on the professionals with whom he worked, who assured him the gun did not have live rounds. We will fight these charges, and we will win," his attorney Nikas said. But prosecutors [say](#) Baldwin had the option of gun-training before filming, but that he was "distracted and talking on his cellphone" during that training, which is said to have been scheduled for at least an hour but lasted about 30 minutes.

Some reports have been made that the gun had been used with live-ammo for target practice by crew members the morning before the fatal accident. One outlet reported several crew members were taking prop guns from the set for their own personal use to shoot beer cans with live ammunition.

It's believed the lax atmosphere on set was likely a result of producers choosing to hire non-union crew members to replace those who had walked out after being underpaid and mistreated.

[Producers](#) for Rust include: Baldwin, Matt DelPiano, Ryan Smith, Anjul Nigam, Nathan Klingher, and Ryan Winterstern. Executive producers include Matthew Helderman, Tyler Gould, Luke Taylor, and Hutchins' widower Matthew Hutchins.

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Home of the Bleak - Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

In a trend which has been going on for two decades, a majority of Americans continue to remain dissatisfied with the way “things are going” in the United States, according to a new Gallup poll. At least 76% of Americans are dissatisfied while 48% are “very dissatisfied.” Only 23% say they are satisfied with how “things are going” in the US.

Despite the shockingly high number of those who are “very dissatisfied” that number has actually dropped from a record-high of 66% from January of 2021 when Americans were left to grapple with the [January 6 US Capitol riot](#) as well as the deadly COVID-19 Pandemic.

For the past two decades, the most that Americans have ever been satisfied was in 2002, when 56% of Americans said they were “satisfied” with the way things were going in the US. Since then the percentage of people who are in the satisfied group has steadily declined until it hit 12% in 2011, climbed, and then hit its lowest of 11% in 2021. Satisfaction among Americans hit another low of 13% when inflation and gas prices skyrocketed.

The average satisfaction among Americans since Gallup first began conducting the survey in 1979 has been 36%.

The percentages vary among political parties, too. The poll found Democrats are “somewhat” (36%) dissatisfied with how things are going in the US compared to the 28% of Democrats who are “very” dissatisfied. Forty-six percent of Independents are “very” dissatisfied while 75% of Republicans are very dissatisfied.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden, McCarthy to Discuss US Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy will discuss the debt ceiling and potential government budgets during a meeting on Wednesday, as the two leaders square off on how to balance spending with revenue.

On Sunday, McCarthy said he plans to discuss a “responsible” debt ceiling and the “runaway” spending with Biden. The US national debt stands at approximately \$31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.

Earlier this month, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that the United States would soon reach its outstanding debt limit and pointed out that she implemented extraordinary measures to avoid a government default.

Defaulting on the national debt could lead to a "spiraling recession," Yellen said.

The United States can continue to meet its financial obligations until at least June 5.

On Tuesday, the White House issued a memorandum announcing the Biden administration's intent to release a draft budget on March 9. The memorandum also warned about the risks of default and said raising the debt ceiling is "not a negotiation."

During their upcoming meeting on Wednesday, Biden will ask McCarthy on whether he is committed to never defaulting on US financial obligations as well as when he plans on releasing the House Republicans' proposed budget, the memorandum said.

McCarthy responded by saying he is not interested in playing "political games" with Biden and that he is meeting with the president to "negotiate for the American people."

Republican lawmakers have proposed reining in government spending in order to move towards a balanced budget, as well as a federal sales tax to replace the Internal Revenue Service. Biden said he would veto any such measure passed by Republicans.

McCarthy has warned that Biden's refusal to negotiate on the debt ceiling is "irresponsible" and that a delay could increase the United States' financial risks.

A drawn-out struggle to raise the US debt ceiling in 2011 resulted in the credit agency Standard & Poors stripping the country of its top triple-A credit status.

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US, Indian Officials Agree to Expand Space, Defense Cooperation - White House

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Top US and Indian government officials during talks in Washington agreed to launch task forces to strengthen cooperation in a variety of areas including human spaceflight, weapons production, microchip supply chains, and rare earth development, the White House said in a statement.

The announcement came after the the inaugural meeting of the US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) launched by President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May of last year.

"The two sides discussed opportunities for greater cooperation in critical and emerging technologies, co-development and coproduction, and ways to deepen connectivity across our innovation ecosystems... They also identified the fields of biotechnology, advanced materials, and rare earth processing technology as areas for future cooperation," the release said on Tuesday.

The US and India, the release added, committed to developing a new bilateral Defense Industrial Cooperation Roadmap with an initial focus on exploring projects related to jet engines, munitions, and other systems.

In addition to boosting commercial space engagement, the two sides aim to build resilient semiconductor supply chains, according to the release, and supporting design and manufacturing of microchips in India.

"This task force will make recommendations... to further strengthen India's role within the global semiconductor value chain," the White House said.

The first meeting was led by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. They were joined by several senior diplomats and defense, commerce and science officials.

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US Awards \$118Mln for Anti-Air Missile Production - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US awarded a Virginia-based defense contractor more than \$118 million for production of the Common Anti-Air Modular Missile (CAMM) for combat ships, including for Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon said in a press release.

"MBDA Inc., Arlington, Virginia, is awarded a \$118,673,894 [contract]... for the production of the Common Anti-Air [Modular] Missile (CAMM) for Multi-Mission Surface Combatants (MMSC) ships," the release said on Tuesday.

The Defense Department said \$65,786,821 of the funds involve Foreign Military Sales for Saudi Arabia.

Work is expected to be completed by January 2027, the release said.

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General Dynamics Wins \$481Mln for US Army Battle Detection Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics won a more than \$480 million US Army contract to maintain Prophet Enhancement detecting systems, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Mission Systems [of] Scottsdale, Arizona was awarded a \$481,578,860 ...contract for sustainment of Prophet Enhanced detecting systems," the release stated on Tuesday.

The Prophet system is deployed with US Army brigade combat teams and provides a near real-time picture of a battlespace utilizing signals intelligence (SIGINT) sensors that have the capability to detect emitters, according to the defense contractor.

Work on the order is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of January 31, 2028. the Defense Department said.

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BAE Wins \$651Mln Deal to Integrate Software in US Air Force Missile Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems has won a more than \$650 million contract to integrate current and future new hardware with the US Air Force's Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) Minuteman and Sentinel systems, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"This contract provides for services support for both the Minuteman III and Sentinel Systems Directorates to ensure the integration of current and future hardware, software, testing, and modifications with the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Weapon Systems," the release said on Tuesday.

The contract modification awarded to BAE for sustaining engineering services is worth \$651,593,380, the release added.

Work on the project will be performed at Hill Air Force Base in the US state of Utah over the next two years and is expected to be completed by January 31, 2025, the release said.

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US Prepping \$2Bln+ Ukraine Weapons Package, Including Longer-Range Rockets - Reports (Update: adds details, background in paras 4-7, edits headline, lede)

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik/Prime) - The United States is preparing to provide Ukraine with a new weapons package valued at more than \$2 billion, which will include longer-range rockets for the first time, Reuters reported, citing two US officials familiar with the matter.

The US will provide Ukrainian forces with longer-range rockets despite previous concerns by the Biden administration about providing Kiev with systems capable of striking deep into Russian territory, the report said on Tuesday.

The package, expected to be announced as soon as later this week, will also include other weapons and munitions, the report added.

Most of the funding, \$1.725 billion, will come from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), which procures weapons for Ukraine from industry instead of pulling from existing US stocks, the report said.

The USAI funds will go toward buying Ground Launched Small Diameter Bombs (GLSDB), which can strike up to 94 miles (150km) away, the report said.

The longer range of the GLSDB could enable Ukraine to hit targets previously out of reach and help disrupt Russian forces further behind their lines, the report said.

The US continues to rebuff Ukraine's request for even longer range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), which have a range of 185 miles (297km), the report said.

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US House Passes Bill Ending Biden's COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for Health Care Workers
(Updates with more details in paras 5-6, 8)

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation ending the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for health care workers in facilities receiving federal funding.

House lawmakers passed the Freedom for Health Care Workers Act on Tuesday in a vote of 227-203.

The bill ends the COVID-19 vaccine mandate imposed on workers at health care facilities that participate in Medicare and Medicaid programs.

"No American should be forced to choose between getting the COVID vaccine or losing their job," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill. "The Biden administration's vaccine mandate exacerbated the shortage of health care workers and threatened the American people's access to quality and timely care."

The House also passed the Pandemic is Over Act on Tuesday in a vote of 220-210.

The legislation terminates the public health emergency on COVID-19, first enacted January 30, 2020.

The House passed the bills after Biden announced on Monday his intent to end the national and public health emergencies with respect to COVID-19 on May 11. The emergencies are currently set to expire on March 1 and April 11, respectively.

Scalise urged Biden via Twitter to end the emergencies now instead of waiting for May, claiming the president "caved" to House Republicans, who announced their intent to vote on the matter Friday.

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Two-Thirds of US Voters Do Not Favor Biden, Trump Candidacies in 2024 - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Two-thirds of US voters say they are either "very uncomfortable" or have some reservations with respect to President Joe Biden's or former President Donald Trump's candidacies in the 2024 elections, a new NBC News poll revealed. The poll found that more than half or 52% of US adults say they feel "very uncomfortable" about Trump running for the White House again and 14% more say they have some reservations. In the case of Biden, the disapproving numbers are 48% and 19% respectively.

Nearly the same percentage of respondents, 34% for Trump and 32% for Biden, said that they are enthusiastic or comfortable with them running for the office of president.

The poll also revealed that voters are more excited about Trump's (15%) than about Biden's (7%) candidacy in 2024.

The poll was conducted between January 20-24 among 1,000 adults and it has an overall margin of error of plus-minus 3.1 percentage points.

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Harris to Attend Tyre Nichols Funeral in Tennessee - White House

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris will travel to Memphis, Tennessee, to represent the Biden administration at the funeral services for Tyre Nichols, the White House said.

Nichols died on January 10 at the age of 29 after being beaten by five police officers during a traffic stop.

"On Wednesday, February 1, the vice president will travel to Memphis, Tennessee, to attend the funeral of Tyre Nichols," the White House said in a press release on Tuesday.

A press pool will accompany Harris on the trip and the White House said additional details will be forthcoming.

Ben Crump, the lawyer retained by the family of the deceased, released a statement about a telephone call Harris made to Tyre Nichols' parents earlier on Tuesday.

The parents invited Harris to attend the funeral and were pleased that she accepted their invitation, Crump said.

Reverend Al Sharpton will officiate the funeral after being asked by Nichols' parents to do so. More than 2,500 mourners are expected to attend the funeral.

The five officers involved in the death of Nichols were fired, indicted and charged with second-degree murder. Two other officers have been relieved of duty, and three employees from the Memphis Fire Department were fired Monday for failing to provide adequate medical aid to Nichols.

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US Prepping \$2.2Bln Ukraine Weapons Package, Including Longer-Range Rockets - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik/Prime) - The United States is preparing to provide Ukraine with a new \$2.2 billion weapons package, including longer-range rockets for the first time, Reuters reported, citing two US officials familiar with the matter.

The US will provide Ukrainian forces with longer-range rockets despite previous concerns by the Biden administration about providing Kiev with systems capable of striking deep into Russian territory, the report said on Tuesday.

The package will also include other weapons and munitions, the report added.

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Biden Says Succeeding Trump as US President 'Low Bar to Climb' - Press Pool

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in remarks at a Democratic National Committee event that succeeding his predecessor Donald Trump in the Oval office was a low bar to climb, according to a White House press pool report.

Biden said succeeding Trump was a "pretty low bar to climb" but added that there was nonetheless a lot of work to do, the press pool said on Tuesday.

Trump announced last fall that he would run for US president in the 2024 election.

Trump has repeatedly claimed that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him through election and voter fraud, however, the claims were not proven in court following the election.

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US Charges Additional 4 Men for Roles in Plot to Kill Haitian President – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – The United States charged four additional men over their role in the assassination of former Haitian president Jovenel Moise in 2021 after they were

detained in the country and transferred to the United States, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Today, U.S. federal law enforcement transferred into U.S. custody four men detained in Haiti to face criminal charges in the Southern District of Florida related to their alleged involvement in the July 7, 2021, assassination of former Haitian President Jovenel Moise," the release said on Tuesday.

In a separate criminal complaint, the United States charged dual Haitian-American citizens James Solages, 37, Joseph Vincent, 57, and Colombian citizen German Alejandro Rivera Garcia, 44, with conspiring to commit murder or kidnapping outside the United States and providing material support and resources resulting in death, among other charges, according to the release.

Another complaint charges dual Haitian-American citizen Christian Sanon, 54, with conspiracy to smuggle goods from the United States, the release said.

The defendants are scheduled to make their initial court appearances on Wednesday at 2 p.m. (19:00 GMT) in Miami, according to the release.

Between April and July 2021, the defendants along with others participated in crimes that resulted in the killing of Moise.

It is alleged that on July 6, 2021, Solages, Vincent, Rivera along with others distributed firearms and equipment near Moise's house, and Solages announced a mission to kill the president, the release noted.

It follows from the press release that there are a total of seven individuals in US custody, including the four new ones. The other men charged are Mario Antonio Palacios Palacios, 43, Rodolphe Jaar, 49, and Joseph Joel John, 51, and they were arrested last year.

If found guilty, Solages, Vincent, and Rivera face up to life imprisonment, while Sanon faces up to 20 years in prison.

Moise was mortally wounded in an attack on his residence on the night of July 7, 2021. More than 40 people have been arrested by the Haitian authorities during the investigation, including 18 Colombian citizens, five US citizens, several police officers, two presidential security officials, and the alleged organizer of the crime, doctor, and pastor Emmanuel Sanon.

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Biden to Welcome Brazil's President Lula to White House on February 10 - Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Washington next Friday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

"President Biden looks forward to welcoming President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil to the White House on Friday, February 10 to further strengthen the close relationship between the United States and Brazil," Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

Jean-Pierre explained that the two leaders will discuss how the two countries can continue to work together to promote democratic values in the region and worldwide.

"The Presidents will also discuss how the United States and Brazil can continue to work together to address common challenges, including combating climate change, safeguarding food security, encouraging economic development, strengthening peace and security, and managing regional migration," she added.

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PREVIEW - Biden, McCarthy to Discuss US Debt Ceiling on Wednesday

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy will discuss the debt ceiling and potential government budgets during a meeting on Wednesday, as the two leaders square off on how to balance spending with revenue. On Sunday, McCarthy said he plans to discuss a "responsible" debt ceiling and the "runaway" spending with Biden. The US national debt stands at approximately \$31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.

Earlier this month, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that the United States would soon reach its outstanding debt limit and pointed out that she implemented extraordinary measures to avoid a government default.

Defaulting on the national debt could lead to a "spiraling recession," Yellen said.

The United States can continue to meet its financial obligations until at least June 5.

On Tuesday, the White House issued a memorandum announcing the Biden administration's intent to release a draft budget on March 9. The memorandum also warned about the risks of default and said raising the debt ceiling is "not a negotiation."

During their upcoming meeting on Wednesday, Biden will ask McCarthy on whether he is committed to never defaulting on US financial obligations as well as when he plans on releasing the House Republicans' proposed budget, the memorandum said.

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Republican lawmakers have proposed reining in government spending in order to move towards a balanced budget, as well as a federal sales tax to replace the Internal Revenue Service. Biden said he would veto any such measure passed by Republicans.

McCarthy has warned that Biden's refusal to negotiate on the debt ceiling is "irresponsible" and that a delay could increase the United States' financial risks.

A drawn-out struggle to raise the US debt ceiling in 2011 resulted in the credit agency Standard & Poors stripping the country of its top triple-A credit status.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) -

ARMS CONTROL

- * The United States stands ready to work constructively with Russia to fully implement the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) on nuclear arms, the US State Department said in a document circulated via Twitter on Tuesday.
- * Russia violated the New START treaty on nuclear arms by blocking inspections and refusing to meet with US officials to discuss compliance concerns raised by the United States, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing a State Department report sent to Congress.
- * Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov held a meeting with the new US Ambassador in Moscow Lynne Tracy and discussed issues pertaining to arms control, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * The Ukrainian troops made an attempt to push through the Dnieper River defenses near Kherson but were repulsed, Vladimir Vasilenko, spokesman for the acting governor of the Kherson region, told Sputnik.
- * The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) is studying the alleged Ukrainian strike on a medical facility in the Luhansk People's Republic in Novoaidar given that targeting any medical facilities violates international law, OHCHR spokeswoman Elizabeth Throssell told Sputnik.
- * Ex-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Francois Hollande confirmed that the Minsk agreements were just a smokescreen for their countries to prepare for a forceful scenario in the Donbas, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

- * The White House expects that more security assistance for Ukraine will be announced "soon," Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said on Tuesday.
- * The issue of possible deliveries of fighter jets to Ukraine are "not under taboo" in France, French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said.
- * France will send 12 more self-propelled howitzers CAESAR, Lecornu said.
- * London believes that sending UK fighter jets to Ukraine is "not practical" due to the complexity of their use, the Prime Minister's official spokesman said,

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

- * Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed by telephone the implementation of the trilateral agreements on Karabakh, the press service of the Armenian government said on Tuesday.
- * Moscow is ready to organize talks between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia on a draft peace treaty, the Russian Foreign Ministry said after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Azerbaijan counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov spoke by telephone.

TURKEY DISPUTE WITH SWEDEN, FINLAND ON NATO

* The Turkish parliament will not ratify the protocol on the NATO membership of Sweden and Finland under the current conditions, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Tuesday.

* Ankara urges not to link the accession process of Sweden and Finland to NATO with Turkey's purchase of US F-16 fighter jets, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said.

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Biden Says Climate Change Greatest Existential Threat to Humanity Including Nuclear Arms

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday characterized climate change as the greatest existential danger to humanity, including nuclear weapons. "It is the single most existential threat to humanity we have ever faced, including nuclear weapons," Biden said.

The United Nations in October issued a report on carbon emissions reduction and warned the world was on track to heat up by 2.8 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century. The expected increase is from the Paris Climate Accord's agreed-on goals of limiting the rise in global temperatures to below 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels.

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New York OAG Requests Sanctions on Trump, Company Over Court Claims - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The New York Attorney General's Office (OAG) sent a letter on Tuesday to state Supreme Court Justice Arthur Engoron requesting sanctions on former US President Donald Trump, his children and company for allegedly denying previously admitted facts in answers filed with the court.

"The OAG writes to request a pre-motion conference concerning its objections to the Verified Answers filed by Defendants on Thursday, January 26, 2023," the letter said. "Defendants falsely deny facts they have admitted in other proceedings, they deny knowledge sufficient to respond to factual allegations that are plainly within their knowledge, and they propound affirmative defenses that have been repeatedly rejected by this Court as frivolous and without merit."

The OAG's letter was signed by Kevin Wallace, senior enforcement counsel for the Division of Economic Justice.

The OAG is requesting the court deem factual allegations subject to improper denials as admitted, dismiss affirmative defenses and sanction defendants, including Trump, his adult children, the Trump Organization and their lawyers.

The OAG accuses the defendants of making "demonstrably false" denials that contradict previous sworn statements, according to the letter. The defendants have also pleaded lack of

sufficient knowledge to verify or falsify allegations, despite the allegations covering information within their control, the letter said.

The OAG also dismissed accusations by Trump that he is being improperly targeted by the court as part of a political “witch hunt.”

“The Court has already admonished Defendants and their counsel for their continued invocation of meritless legal claims but exercised its discretion in not imposing such sanctions,” the letter said. “It does not appear that this point was taken, however, and OAG would ask the Court to renew the issue.”

The OAG requests a conference with the court at its earliest convenience to discuss a briefing schedule, the letter added.

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White House Refutes New Russian Reports Claiming US Had Bio Weapons In Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby on Tuesday disapproved of Russian claims that the United States had bioweapons labs in Ukraine.

On Monday, the Russian armed forces' head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense troops Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov said the Russian military has received new information about the key figures involved in US military biological projects in Ukraine, who have been "in the shadows" until now.

"There are no bio weapons labs, there is no bio weapons work being done by or with the United States with Ukraine in Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby added that the United States had been working with the Ukrainians on some pandemic prevention and research. All of those all those research facilities were vacated and safely deactivated before Russia's special military operation began, he added.

Russia believes that the United States has been researching pathogens near the Russian border for use in its biological weapons program.

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Blinken Will Seek to Restore Some Bilateral Mechanisms During China Visit – Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will seek to revive some of the bilateral mechanisms that China discontinued in response to the visit of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

Blinken is expected to visit China from February 5-6 to meet with his Chinese counterpart, Qin Gang. The trip will be a follow-up to US President Joe Biden's talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali in November.

"One of the outcomes [of Biden-Xi meeting in Bali] was that both leaders agreed to get their teams together to see if there were some of the bilateral vehicles that could either be restored..." Kirby said during a press briefing. "[O]ne of the goals of this trip is to see about getting some of those vehicles restored and/or revitalized."

In August, China suspended negotiations with the United States in a number of areas, including climate change, after Pelosi visited Taiwan. China condemned Pelosi's trip in the strongest terms, saying it was a gesture of support for separatism, and launched large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan.

In November, Biden and Xi agreed on the importance of maintaining communication and deepening "constructive efforts" on global issues. They also agreed to resume formal talks on climate change.

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Chinese Rare-Earth Production Rose 25% in 2022 - US Geological Survey

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - China's rare earths mining production increased by 25 percent last year and its share of global output by double digits, according to data released on Tuesday by the US Geological Survey (USGS).

China has a virtual monopoly on most of the 17 rare earth elements (REEs) found on the periodic table - minerals used in a wide-range of advanced industrial and military applications. The Biden administration has invested or allocated billions in a bid to break its reliance on China for rare earth elements, along with other critical materials.

China's rare-earth production increased from 168,000 metric tons in 2021 to 210,000 in 2022 while its share of world output reached 70 percent, the USGS data revealed.

China also maintained its dominant position with respect to rare-earth reserves - those materials deemed economically recoverable - boasting 44 million tons, or 30 percent of the world total.

US output, meanwhile, rose 2 percent to 43,000 tons and mineral reserves increased by 28% to 2.3 million.

Although the US has one rare-earth mine, it must send 100% of the material produced to China for processing in order to make final components.

A US State Department official in early December said the US is looking at funding about a dozen mineral projects overseas to mine resources used in low-carbon technologies. The official said the United States will need an "exponential" amount of rare earths.

In addition to the economic and supply chain impact, Washington is also worried about Chinese materials that can be found in thousands of US weapons systems.

In early 2022, the Pentagon halted delivery of F-35 jets upon discovery that a subcontractor used a Chinese-origin rare earth magnet on an engine part. In October, the Defense

Department issued a waiver allowing Lockheed Martin to resume deliveries of the jets while setting about looking for alternative sources.

Marina Zhang, an associate professor of research at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, told Sputnik the US will be hard-pressed to close this gap with China in light of structural advantages developed over the past 15 years, including lower mine permitting timelines, relatively lower labor and environmental costs, and talent and patent accumulations.

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UN Says Alleged Use of Banned Landmines by Ukraine Should Be Investigated

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United Nations would support an investigation into allegations of Ukraine using anti-personnel landmines in its eastern Kharkiv region, spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"It's clear that when there's any chance that armaments are being used that cause such casualties, this should be fully investigated. And so we would encourage that to happen," Haq told a briefing.

Earlier in the day, Human Rights Watch urged Ukraine to investigate "its military's apparent use of thousands of rocket-fired antipersonnel landmines" in and around the eastern city of Izyum when Russian forces controlled the area. The international rights group said that nearly 50 civilians have been injured.

Ukraine is a signatory to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty and stated that it has gotten rid of much of its Soviet stocks. In 2021, Ukraine said that about 3.3 million PFM mines, so called "petals" or "butterflies," were yet to be destroyed.

Earlier in January, Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) said that a group of Ukrainian officials will be taking a week-long training course on demining in Cambodia. The Southeast Asian country offered to share its experience with Ukraine to help it reduce civilian casualties from unexploded ordnance.

Cambodia sent mine cleaning experts to Ukraine in December after Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for help on the sidelines of the leaders' summit in Phnom Penh in November.

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US Condemns Pakistan Mosque Attack That Killed, Injured Hundreds - White House NSC
WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the suicide bomb attack on a mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan that killed at least 100 people and wounded hundreds more, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Tuesday.

"The United States strongly condemns the terrorist attack on a mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan with reports today that the death toll has now risen to 100 people," Watson said in a statement. "This is tragic and heartbreaking news, and we extend our deep condolences to the loved ones of those who have lost their lives."

Terrorism is indefensible and the targeting of worshipers unconscionable, Watson added.

The US stands ready to support Pakistan in efforts to recover and rebuild, Watson said.

On Monday, a suicide bomber attacked a mosque in Peshawar, killing at least 100 people and wounding 221 others, according to Pakistani media reports. Approximately 120 people were inside the mosque at the time of the attack, most of them members of the army and police, the reports said.

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (associated with al-Qaeda, banned in Russia) reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack, although conflicting reports also emerged claiming the organization denied involvement.

The Taliban movement in Afghanistan (under UN sanctions for terrorism) denies any connection with the group despite similarities in name.

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US Banks Seen on Better Footing for 2023 After Q4 Loss - Fitch Ratings

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US banks are expected to be on firmer footing in 2023 after a generally weak quarter at the end of last year as financial institutions built loan loss reserves while normalizing credit losses, Fitch Ratings said on Tuesday.

"Deposit flows and deposit costs are likely to garner more focus this year as most banks experienced a third straight quarter of net deposit outflows," the ratings agency said in a statement.

In spite of that, overall performance was expected to improve, it said. "Barring a deep recession, strong pipelines and pent up demand could support a moderate recovery in 2023," Fitch Ratings said.

Top-notch banks such as JPMorgan Chase & Co and Bank of America reported stellar profits for the fourth quarter of 2022. But the rest of the industry, made up of prominent names such as Citigroup and average hitters like Wells Fargo, had disappointing results for the final three months of last year.

JPMorgan, the largest US bank with a balance sheet total of \$3.31 trillion, saw a 6% year-on-year profit increase on an expanded revenue of \$35.57 billion, versus an estimated \$34.3 billion. Bank of America reported a 2% profit increase and 11% revenue hike to \$24.5 billion.

Citigroup, on the other hand, witnessed a 21% decline in profits year-on-year, although its \$18 billion in revenues slightly bested predictions of \$17.9 billion. Wells Fargo posted the biggest profit drop of 50% year-on-year, driven by a \$2.8 billion operating loss to resolve regulatory issues from its past. Revenues came in at \$19.66 billion, just under estimates of \$20 billion.

Despite the weaker trends, exceptionally strong net interest income growth and net interest margin expansion helped many banks to experience double-digit loan growth year-on-year, Fitch Ratings said.

"While liquidity remains strong for the US banking industry, loan to deposit ratios rose off of multi-decade lows in 2022, which should continue this year," it said.

Fitch Ratings concluded by saying that the outlook for US banks was consistent with its stable ratings for the sector in 2023, implying "sufficient headroom" to absorb weaker financial conditions typical of a moderate recession.

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Biden, King of Jordan Abdullah to Discuss Cooperation, Palestine on Feb. 2 – Embassy in US

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – Jordanian King Abdullah II will meet with US President Joe Biden at the White House on February 2 to discuss deepening cooperation and the latest international developments, the Embassy of Jordan in Washington D.C. said on Tuesday.

"His Majesty King Abdullah and United States President Joe Biden will hold talks at the White House on Thursday, as part of His Majesty's visit to Washington, DC. Talks will cover means to bolster the strategic partnership and ties of friendship between Jordan and the United States through expanding cooperation across various sectors," the embassy said in a press release. The two leaders are expected to cover the situation in Palestine and the US role in this regard, as well as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the release added.

This will be the second visit of the king to the United States in less than a year. On May 13, King Abdullah II met with Biden at the White House to discuss a range of regional security issues in the Middle East, including the ongoing tensions in Israel and the West Bank.

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US Congressman Santos' Voters Want Him Out by Huge Margin - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Newly elected Republican Congressman George Santos' constituents want him to resign by enormous margins only three months after voting him into office by a clear majority, a new poll by Newsday and Siena College revealed on Tuesday. Some 78% of registered voters say Santos should resign, with only 13% still saying he should stay in office, a margin of six-to-one, a release on the poll said.

Santos has even lost his own Republican base, with 71% of them wanting him to resign and 18% saying he should stay, the release said.

Santos defeated Democrat Robert Zimmerman 55% to 45% in the November 2022 midterm congressional elections. However, the New York Times has since reported that large areas of his claimed professional record and family history were fabricated.

The poll also found that 75% of respondents now believed Santos could not be an effective representative for his district and 16% said he could, the report said.

Sixty-three percent of those who said they voted for Santos told the pollsters they would not have done so if they knew then what they know now, according to the report.

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US Stands Ready to Work With Russia to Fully Implement New START Treaty - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States remains ready to work constructively with Russia to fully implement the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) on nuclear arms, the US State Department said in a document circulated via Twitter on Tuesday. The document said that Russia has a "clear path" for returning to full compliance with the New START treaty after it allegedly violated the accord by blocking on-site inspections and refusing to meet with US officials to discuss the United States' concerns on compliance.

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US Capitol Police Arrest Officer Impersonator Carrying Cache of Knives - Release

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) said in a press release on Tuesday that a man carrying a stash of knives who is believed to have been impersonating an officer has been arrested.

"At approximately 6:20 p.m., an officer with the USCP's Bicycle Response Team noticed a man wanted for questioning by the U.S. Secret Service, near the corner of Third Street and Madison Drive, NW," the release said.

The US Secret Service first spotted the suspect a few minutes earlier near Constitution Avenue and 15th Street and informed the USCP, the release said.

USCP officers then approached and searched the suspect and found multiple knives on him as well as a chain saw blade, the release said.

The Secret Service searched the man's suburban vehicle and found fake police equipment as well as shell casings, a smoke grenade and a gas mask, the release also said.

The man was identified as Max Eli Viner, 37, the release added.

Viner will be charged with impersonating a law enforcement officer and possession of a prohibited weapon in the District of Columbia, according to the release.

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US Consumer Confidence Dips as Sticky Inflation Eats Into Sentiment - Conference Board

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Consumer confidence, one of the pillars of the US economy, fell in January as relatively high inflation despite aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve made Americans more protective with their money, the Conference Board said on Tuesday.

While consumers started 2023 feeling better about economic and labor conditions, they had wavering confidence about what is to come in the next six months, said Ataman Ozyildirim, senior director of economics at The Conference Board, a business think-tank.

"Consumers were less upbeat about the short-term outlook for jobs," Ozyildirim said. "They also expect business conditions to worsen in the near term."

Consumer spending accounts for about 70% of US gross domestic product.

While a majority of Americans expect their incomes to remain relatively stable in the months ahead and were firm about purchasing plans for autos and appliances, Ozyildirim said "fewer consumers are planning to buy a home - new or existing."

In summation, he presented the Conference Board's numbers showing a drop in consumer confidence for January, despite aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve over the past year in trying to curb inflation.

The board's consumer confidence index - a closely watched metric gauging attitudes about the current and future strength of the economy - measured 107.1 in January. It was down from an upwardly revised 109 in December and below economists' expectations.

The Fed has added 425 basis points to rates since March via seven increases. Prior to that, rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

After executing four jumbo rate hikes of 75 basis points back-to-back from June through November, the Fed imposed a more modest 50-basis point increase in December. For its next rate decision on February 1, economists expect the central bank to announce an even smaller hike of 25 basis points. The last time the Fed had a 25 basis-point increase was in March 2022, at the start of its current rate hike cycle.

Inflation itself, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, rose by 6.5% in the 12 months to December - at least three times above the Fed's target of 2% per annum.

The CPI hit a 40-year high in June when it grew at an annual rate of 9.1%. It has slowed thereafter, with its smallest advance since October 2021, with the Fed bent on bringing it back to 2%.

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US Claims Russia Violated New START Nuclear Arms Treaty by Blocking Inspections - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Russia violated the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (new START) on nuclear arms by blocking inspections and refusing to meet with US

officials to discuss compliance concerns raised by the United States, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing a State Department report sent to Congress.

The report marks the first time the United States accuses Russia of non-compliance with the 2011 treaty, which was extended in 2021 for another five years through February 4, 2026.

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Hunter Biden Threatened to Hold Pay to Staffer Unless She Provided Sex - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden threatened to withhold pay to one of his former staffers at his law firm Owasco unless she provided sexual services, the Daily Mail reported on Tuesday, citing documents.

The report shows text messages exchanged between Biden and his former 29-year-old assistant at the time of the incident between 2018 and 2019 in which Biden asks for video sex sessions and sent her several payments via Apple Pay.

Biden also filmed video of him having sex with a part-time model and fitness instructor, the report said.

The publication also obtained suspicious activity reports filed by JP Morgan Chase Bank which show that Biden provided his former assistant \$44,500.08 in the span of four months in 2018. In 2019, the assistant complained to Biden's secretary that she had not received her pay for December totaling \$837.06 and was unable to reach Biden to sort out the issue, the report said. In addition, the assistant had complained to Biden that she was barely getting by financially and was unable to pay her rent, the report added.

The former staffer is the fourth employee that Biden is known to have had a sexual relationship with, according to the report.

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McCarthy Says Not Interested in 'Political Games' With Biden on US Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Tuesday that he is not interested in playing political games with President Joe Biden over the nation's debt ceiling, as the two are set to meet on Wednesday to discuss the situation.

"Mr. President: I received your staff's memo. I'm not interested in political games. I'm coming to negotiate for the American people," McCarthy said via Twitter.

Earlier this month, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that the US would soon reach its outstanding debt limit, with the Treasury now taking extraordinary measures to avoid a government debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed for essential programs.

The US national debt stands at approximately \$31.46 trillion, according to US Treasury Department data.

The White House on Tuesday released a memorandum announcing the Biden administration's intent to release a budget on March 9. The United States must never default on its financial obligations and raising the debt ceiling is "not a negotiation," the memo said.

Biden will ask McCarthy on Wednesday whether he is willing to commit to never defaulting on US financial obligations and when he plans on releasing the House Republican draft budget, the memo added.

Defaulting on the national debt could lead to a "spiraling recession," Yellen said. The Treasury Department can continue to meet the US' obligations until at least June 5, Yellen added.

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US Navy's Ship Operating Costs at Sea Soared by \$2.5Bln Over Past Decade - Report

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US Navy's total operation and sustainment (O&S) costs have increased by about \$2.5 billion over the past decade from fiscal years 2011 to 2020 for ten ship classes, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report on Tuesday.

"Total O&S costs increased by about \$2.5 billion from fiscal years 2011 [to] 2020 for the ten ship classes GAO examined, including a \$1.2 billion increase in maintenance costs," the report said.

"Collectively, the number of steaming hours for the ships declined over the timeframe."

The GAO reviewed key sustainment metrics for ten ship classes and found that from fiscal years 2011 through 2021, they faced persistent and worsening sustainment challenges, the report said.

"Specifically, the number of maintenance cannibalizations (working parts removed and reused elsewhere due to parts shortages), casualty reports (reports of events that impair ships' ability to do a primary mission), and days of maintenance delay (days beyond the scheduled end date for depot maintenance) have each increased," the report said.

Steaming hours (the number of hours a ship is generally in an operating or training status) have decreased and the Navy is not fully or accurately tracking other key metrics such as operational availability and materiel availability, the GAO added.

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Michigan Man Convicted for Providing Material Support to IS - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – A federal jury in a nine-day trial convicted a Michigan man on charges of providing material support to the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"A Michigan man was convicted by a federal jury today in the Eastern District of Michigan on charges of providing, attempting to provide, and conspiring to provide material support to the

Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a designated foreign terrorist organization," the press release said.

Ibraheem Izzy Musaibli, 32, was convicted for his support for IS in Syria from 2015-2018. He was also convicted of receiving military-type training from IS while in Syria.

Musaibli, originally born in Dearborn, moved to Yemen in April 2015. He then traveled to Syria in the fall of 2015 where he attended an IS-run religious training camp before undergoing military training to learn to shoot, carry and otherwise handle a machine gun, the release said.

"Upon graduation from the ISIS military training camp, Musaibli swore allegiance to ISIS and its leader and remained with ISIS for over two and half years," it added.

The Syrian Democratic Forces captured him in 2018 and turned him over to the FBI, who flew him back to the US to face terrorism-related charges.

Musaibli faces a maximum penalty of 50 years in prison.

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FBI Searched Penn Biden Center for Classified Docs in Mid-November - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The FBI searched the Penn Biden Center offices in mid-November after Biden's lawyers found approximately ten documents with classified markings originating from Biden's time as Vice President there on November 2, according to CBS, who cited sources familiar with the matter on Tuesday.

The search, which did not require a warrant and was not previously disclosed, was conducted with the cooperation of Biden's representatives, the report said. It is unclear whether the FBI found any additional classified material during the mid-November sweep.

Other searches of Biden's property, including the search of his Wilmington residence, were announced shortly after taking place.

In total, authorities have recovered around 30 classified documents from both Biden's office space and his home in Wilmington, including some materials that were labeled as top secret. Special counsel Robert Hur was appointed to investigate the matter by Merrick Garland on January 12, and is expected to start his work any day, according to the report. The Biden administration has maintained its dedication to cooperating with investigations related to classified material.

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White House Officials to Attend Tyre Nichols Funeral Wednesday - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - White House officials will travel to Memphis, Tennessee, to attend the funeral of Tyre Nichols, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton told reporters on Tuesday.

Nichols died on January 10 after being beaten and tased by a group of police officers during a traffic stop. The Memphis Police Department on Friday released four videos detailing the incident.

"As you just heard from the President last week, he was outraged and deeply pained to see the video," Dalton said during a press briefing. "Tomorrow, White House officials will also travel to Memphis, Tennessee, to attend the funeral for Mr. Nichols."

The released videos show five police officers beating the 29-year-old Nichols during the traffic stop. Nichols succumbed to the injuries he sustained during the incident three days later.

The Memphis Police Department promptly fired all five officers and then arrested and charged them in connection to Nichols' death on Thursday. All five were released on bond late on Thursday night and into Friday morning, according to Shelby County Jail records.

Nichols' mother said he was only two minutes away from home when he was stopped by police.

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US Sanctions 6 Individuals, 3 Entities on Myanmar Coup Anniversary - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted six individuals and three entities in Myanmar with sanctions to mark the second anniversary of the military coup in the country, the Treasury announced on Tuesday.

"Today, on the day before the two-year anniversary of the brutal military coup d'état that deposed Burma's democratically elected government, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating six individuals and three entities connected to Burma's military regime pursuant to Executive Order (E.O) 14014," the press release said. "This action will occur in conjunction with actions taken by both the United Kingdom and Canada."

The sanctions target the Union Election Commission (UEC), Mining Enterprise No 1 and Mining Enterprise No 2.

The Treasury noted that following the coup, Burma's military appointed new members to the UEC, including sanctioned Thein Soe, in order to invalidate the results of the November 2020 elections.

The United States has also sanctioned Union Minister of Energy Myo Myint Oo, as well as executives of the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise Aung Min and Than Min.

"Additionally, despite the international condemnation of the collateral damage caused by aerial attacks, Burma's Air Force has continued to launch airstrikes using Russia-made aircraft against pro-democracy forces that have killed civilians and caused the displacement of tens of thousands of people," the release added. "General Maung Maung Kyaw, who was previously the head of Burma's Air Force and was designated pursuant to E.O. 14014 on February 22, 2021, was replaced by Htun Aung, who was previously the Air Force's Chief of Staff, on January 12, 2022. Htun Aung is being designated pursuant to E.O. 14014 for being a leader or official of the military or security forces of Burma."

The Treasury also imposed sanctions against former military official Hla Swe and the daughter of previously designated Tay Za, Htoo Htwe Tay Za.

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Blinken Says Israel, Palestinians Provide Concrete Ideas on Peaceful Solution to Conflict

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that Israelis and Palestinians have both offered concrete ideas on the ways to establish a peaceful solution in the conflict between them.

"Across my meetings with Israel's government and Palestinian authorities, our partners in Cairo, I heard a deep concern about the current trajectory," Blinken told reporters in Jerusalem. "But, I also heard constructive ideas of practical steps that each side can take to lower the temperature, to foster greater cooperation, to bolster people security."

Blinken led a team of senior US diplomats in the region and sought to work on the implementation of steps to achieve a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The secretary of state said that he urged all sides to prevent violence and restore calm.

"That is the only way that we can [achieve] conditions in which people's sense of security will start to improve," Blinken added.

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White House Says More Security Assistance for Ukraine to Be Announced 'Soon'

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – The White House expects that more security assistance for Ukraine will be announced “soon,” Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said on Tuesday.

“I expect we're gonna have more security assistance to announce soon,” Dalton said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says Will Discuss Ukraine Weapon Requests With Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that he will discuss the weapons requests made by Ukraine with Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"We're going to talk," Biden told White House pool reporters on departure to New York City, where he plans to continue promoting his infrastructure agenda.

On Monday, Biden said "no" when asked whether the United States was considering sending F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine.

Last week, Zelenskyy called on NATO countries to unlock the supply of long-range missiles and military aircraft to Kiev after Western countries announced their intention to supply Ukraine with battle tanks.

Zelenskyy's request for fighter aircraft came after the United States said it will send 31 M1A2 Abrams battle tanks to Kiev in a major shift of the approach to military assistance to Ukraine.

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Treasury Sees 'No Indication' of Misuse of US Funds in Ukraine - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Treasury Department said it had "no indication" that US funds had been misused in Ukraine, spokesperson Megan Apper said on Tuesday.

"We have no indication that US funds have been misused in Ukraine," Apper said as reported by Reuters in the Treasury Department's first comment on the issue.

The Treasury Department welcomes the ongoing efforts by the Ukrainian authorities to ensure appropriate safeguards are in place so that US assistance reaches those for whom it is intended, Apper said in the report.

The Treasury Department would also continue to work with the World Bank to ensure that US funds were used properly in Ukraine, Apper added.

The Ukrainian government fired last week several senior officials on the grounds that they were involved in corrupt practices.

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Scalise Says Republicans Would Move to Kick Congresswoman Omar From Foreign Affairs Panel

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Republican lawmakers would move to remove Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar from the House Foreign Affairs Committee over concerns about her statements on US foreign policy, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said on Tuesday.

"Ilhan Omar, we've all seen the quotes and things that she's said over and over and over again as a member of Congress that would create major problems if she were on the Foreign Affairs Committee," Scalise said during a press conference. "If they brought [committee lists] forward – which they haven't yet, but if they did – then we would move to remove her as well."

Republican lawmakers including Speaker Kevin McCarthy have expressed concerns about Omar's potential placement on the Foreign Affairs Committee, citing alleged remarks by Omar

equating the US military to the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) and criticizing the US-Israel relationship.

However, Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz said that he is undecided on the issue of whether to remove Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee, expressing concerns about removing members from committees based solely on differences in opinion.

"The targeting and smearing of Americans because they don't politically agree with you, as being Anti-American is McCarthyism that is now being carried out by the new McCarthy. The vanguard of cancel culture," Omar said on Monday via Twitter.

Omar, who was born in Somalia but fled as a refugee to the United States as a child, announced on Tuesday the formation of a US-Africa Policy Working Group amid the uncertainty of her place on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The working group will focus on consistent engagement with experts and policymakers working with and in Africa, the congresswoman said in a statement.

"For far too long, the United States has treated Africa as a threat that needed to be contained, a series of fires that needed to be put out, or a junior partner that needed to be disciplined," Omar said. "The US-Africa Policy Working Group will be a venue for the promotion of American values and American interests in our dealings with our African partners."

The working group will be active on various urgent crises in Africa, including the conflict in Ethiopia and instability in the Sahel, Omar said. It will also learn about Africa's perspectives on global issues, such as the conflict in Ukraine and climate change, Omar added.

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GOP Rep. Santos Will Not Serve on Committees Until Probes Concluded

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Republican Congressman George Santos will refrain from serving on House committees until the investigations into his alleged campaign finance violations are completed, Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York said on Tuesday.

"We just got out of conference, and George [Santos] has voluntarily removed himself from committees as he goes through this process," Stefanik told a news conference.

Following his election to the House of Representatives in November, Santos admitted to fabricating portions of his educational and professional background. Moreover, Santos is the subject of state and federal probes related to campaign finance violations and other matters.

Earlier in January, Democratic Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Joseph Morelle sent a letter to US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, requesting that he restrict Santos' access to classified information due to concerns about his history of dishonesty.

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Trump Lacks Campaign Money After Announcing 2024 Presidential Bid - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump reportedly lacks sufficient campaign funds after announcing that he would run in the 2024 US presidential race, NBC News reported on Tuesday, citing end-of-year figures.

Trump gained some \$9.5 million over the last six weeks of 2022 through his campaign and a joint fundraising committee, the report said.

The media outlet noted that it obtained the data ahead of Trump filing the first campaign finance totals on Tuesday.

Trump can boost his campaign fundraising given that he still has not started a traditional mail-fundraising apparatus, the report said.

Trump's fundraising has been thus far limited by Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization), but it is expected that the social media platform will lift the ban it had imposed on him.

Trump announced his candidacy for the 2024 US presidential election in November. Last week, the US corporate media reported that President Joe Biden could soon indicate his plans to run for reelection.

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US Parties Split on Social Media Moderation, Censorship But Share Desire for Reform - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Republican and Democratic voters in the United States are split on the issues of content moderation and censorship on social media, although they share a desire to bolster regulation of tech companies, a Morning Consult poll released Tuesday said.

More than half of Republicans, 54%, consider social media censorship a "major threat," compared to just 28% of Democrats, the poll found.

Inversely, 54% of Democrats support social media platforms strengthening their content moderation policies, compared to 28% of Republicans, the poll found.

Nearly half of independent voters, 47%, believe censorship is a threat and 30% support strengthened content moderation policies, the poll also found.

Nevertheless, there may be space for bipartisan action to regulate social media companies, with Republicans signaling their intent to investigate federal government ties to big tech and US President Joe Biden flagging tech regulation as an area of cooperation for Democratic leadership in Congress, the official poll report said.

However, the parties have targeted different issues, as indicated by their voters' poll responses, the report said. Republicans have sought to prevent social media companies from removing certain types of content while Democrats have pushed for more effective content moderation during previous tech reform discussions, the report said.

The poll surveyed 1,986 registered voters between January 18–20 and maintains an unweighted margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points, the report said.

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Canada Unveils New Myanmar Sanctions as 2nd Coup Anniversary Looms

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – Canada has targeted six more individuals and banned the export, sale, and shipment of aviation fuel to Myanmar on the eve of the second anniversary of the military coup in the country, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) announced Tuesday.

"On the eve of the second anniversary of the coup d'état by the Myanmar military, the Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced additional sanctions under the Special Economic Measures (Burma) Regulations against six individuals and a new prohibition on the export, sale, supply or shipment of aviation fuel to the Myanmar military regime," GAC said in a statement.

GAC notes that sanctions are being imposed in coordination with international partners, including the United Kingdom and the United States, in response to "the ongoing repression of the people of Myanmar by the military."

"Canada's measures are in direct response to worsening armed conflict, in particular the increased use of aerial attacks against civilians, in contravention of international humanitarian law," the statement read. "They also respond to deeply concerning reports of serious violations of international human rights law by the military regime."

On February 1m 2021, the military took power in Myanmar using a constitutional mechanism for transferring powers in an emergency situation. The military's actions spurred major civil unrest, which resulted in multiple casualties, arrests and several hundred thousand internally displaced people.

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Former Brazilian President Bolsonaro Applying for US Visa Amid Legal Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is seeking a visitor visa for the United States amid accusations of wrongdoing in his native country, Financial Times reported, citing a Bolsonaro attorney.

US authorities received an application on Friday from Bolsonaro for a six-month visitor visa, the report said on Monday. Felipe Alexandre, a lawyer representing Bolsonaro, reportedly said that the former president is likely to stay in the US state of Florida.

Bolsonaro faces allegations of responsibility for riots in Brasilia earlier this month by supporters of the former president who rejected his defeat by new president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Bolsonaro also faces allegations of wrongdoing during his time as head of state.

Bolsonaro has been staying in the US on a visa reserved for diplomats and other top government officials, which expired on the day he left office, although it has a 30-day grace

period, the report said. Bolsonaro's presence in the US led 41 Democratic lawmakers to sign a letter urging the Biden administration to revoke his visa.

Alexandre denied any evidence of Bolsonaro committing a crime related to the Brasilia riots, the report added.

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US Blacklists 7 Iranian Entities Over Assistance to Russian Military - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – The United States has blacklisted seven Iranian entities for alleged assistance to Russia's military and defense industrial base, the Department of Commerce announced on Tuesday.

“In this rule, the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) amends the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding seven entities to the Entity List,” the document said. “These seven entities, listed under the destination of Iran, have been determined by the U.S. Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States for contributing to Russia's military and defense industrial base. They are being added to the Entity List with application of the Russia/Belarus-Military End User Foreign Direct Product rule.

DATES: This rule is effective on January 31, 2023.”

The targeted entities include Design and Manufacturing of Aircraft Engines, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization, Oje Parvaz Mado Nafar Company, Paravar Pars Company, Qods Aviation Industry, and Shahed Aviation Industries.

“These entities are designated by the Departments of State and/or the Treasury pursuant to Executive Order 13382 and other sanctions programs. They are also currently subject to restrictions set forth in part 744 of the EAR, such as those in §§ 744.8, 744.12, and 744.14,” the Commerce Department explained. “With this rule, these entities are added to the Entity List for contributing to Russia's military and defense industrial base through the production of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which are being transferred to Russia for use in Ukraine.” Western countries have repeatedly accused Iran of supplying combat drones to Russia for use in Ukraine. Moscow and Tehran reject the allegations.