

**2/7/23 Tuesday**

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Taiwan Test-Fires Cruise Missile Capable of Striking Deep Inside China, Reports Say  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The Chinese breakaway province of Taiwan has continued to develop its offensive strike abilities, including cruise missiles and other surface strike weapons that can reach far from the island's shores. The weapons are intended as a deterrent against an attack by the Chinese government.

Taiwan's National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology (NCSIST) has test-fired a new long-range cruise missile capable of reaching deep into the Chinese mainland, according to reports in the island's media.

The NCSIST, a state-owned military R&D firm, is believed to have test-fired an extended-range version of the Hsiung Sheng cruise missile from its base in Jiupeng, on the island's southern coast.

According to reports, the new surface-to-surface missile has a maximum range of 1,200 kilometers (746 miles), enabling it to strike as deep into mainland China as Wuhan and Changsha. It could also strike the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) fleet bases in Qingdao in the north and Sanya in the south, if fired from Taiwan.

It's not known if the missiles fired on Tuesday morning were the extended-range Hsiung Sheng (Brave Wind) missile, and if so, what additional properties the weapon has, such as speed, warhead size or overall weight. The original weapon carried a 450-kilogram (1,000-pound) warhead, weighed about 1,500–1,600 kilograms (3,300–3,500 pounds), and flew at high subsonic speed of about Mach 0.75 – Mach 0.85.

According to reports, the original Hsiung Sheng missile also has the ability to descend to low altitude as it enters enemy territory, then “pop up” just before it strikes its target, to land on it from above. The missile is fired from a truck-mounted transporter-erector-launcher.

This is just the latest in a series of cruise missiles and surface strike missiles developed or purchased by the Taiwanese government in recent years. That includes Tomahawk and JASSM-ER cruise missiles [bought from the United States](#), and the extended-range Yu Feng (Cloud Peak) supersonic cruise missile program, which Taipei has [claimed can strike](#) the Chinese capital of Beijing.

Taipei's possession of such offensive weapons has been [criticized by analysts](#) as inappropriate, given its claims to have a purely defensive armed force.

The Taipei government is all that remains of the former Republic of China, which ruled all of the China from 1912 until 1949. The triumph of the socialist revolution and foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing in 1949 saw the republican forces retreat to Taiwan, where they survived with the help of foreign capitalist governments, especially the United States. In the decades since, all but a handful of small states have switched their recognition of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, including the US.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a Chinese province in rebellion, and sees [US support for the government](#) in Taipei as interference in internal Chinese affairs. It has pledged to politically reunite Taiwan with the mainland, completing the process of reversing foreign attempts at dismantling China. Securing the peaceful return of Hong Kong and Macao from British and Portuguese rule, respectively, in the 1990s was part of the same process, and Beijing has offered Taipei a similar “One Country, Two Systems” arrangement to preserve its unique political and economic system as part of China.

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Pentagon Report Noted Chinese Balloon Circumnavigating Globe During Trump Admin, US Media Says

By - Fantine Gardinier

While the US has accused Beijing of sending a “spy balloon” over the continental United States last week, Beijing has denied the balloon had any military application, saying it was an escaped civilian scientific balloon. The US shot the balloon down on Sunday, saying it wants to study its technology.

After a senior US Defense Department official said over the weekend that there had been at least three prior flights of Chinese balloons over the US during former US President Donald Trump’s administration, Trump vehemently denied the claim and called it “fake disinformation.” “China had too much respect for ‘TRUMP’ for this to have happened,” the real estate mogul said on social media, seemingly referring to his name brand.

However, that doesn’t seem to be quite true, as new details have emerged on balloon-related events during Trump’s four-year tenure from 2017 to 2021.

US media reported on Monday that Chinese high-altitude balloons appeared in a US military intelligence report last year, which indicated that a Chinese balloon circumnavigated the world in 2019 - when Trump was president - and went past Hawaii and Florida. It did not say if the balloon crossed US territory or simply floated near it.

The report also noted that Beijing had deployed other high-altitude balloons capable of staying aloft for months at a time at between 65,000 feet and 328,000 feet, the latter of which is the international definition of the border between Earth’s atmosphere and outer space.

‘We Did Not Detect Those Threats’

Also on Monday, Gen. Glen VanHerck, the head of US Northern Command, which oversees US military operations in North America, revealed that the Pentagon only found out about the Trump-era flights after the fact.

“We did not detect those threats,” VanHerck told reporters. “The intel community after the fact - I believe as has been briefed already - assessed those threats from additional means of collection and made us aware of those balloons that were previously approaching North America or transited North America.”

What VanHerck described as a “domain awareness gap” was apparently plugged after Biden took office in 2021.

"Because the intelligence community made this a priority at the direction of President Biden, we enhanced our surveillance of our territorial airspace, we enhanced our capacity to be able to detect things that the Trump administration was unable to detect," White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters.

"And we were also able to go back and look at the historical patterns. And that led us to come to understand that during the Trump administration, there were multiple instances where the surveillance balloons traversed American airspace and American territory."

In addition, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the previous flights were "nothing at all" like the most recent one, adding that "from every indication that we have," the Trump-era flight had been "for brief periods of time."

Neither the 2022 report or VanHerck's comments said anything about the Chinese balloons being intelligence-gathering tools. The Biden administration has claimed it suspects the balloon shot down on Sunday of being a spy device, since it passed over a large US air base in Montana. China has denied the balloon had any military application, saying it was a civilian science balloon that its operators had lost control over.

The balloon was shot down off the coast of South Carolina on Sunday by an F-22 Raptor stealth fighter, after having transited the continental US. The US Navy is engaged in recovery efforts to study the balloon's technology.

Washington's Own Balloon Program

Ironically, the US government has repeatedly tested the use of high-altitude balloons for surveillance, both over the United States and for use over China.

A [2019 report based on](#) Federal Aviation Administration filings revealed that the defense contractor Sierra Nevada launched up to 25 unmanned solar-powered balloons to drift across hundreds of miles of US territory to "provide a persistent surveillance system to locate and deter narcotic trafficking and homeland security threats." The balloons carried high-powered radars to travel multiple vehicles through any kind of weather.

In addition, [a report from July 2022](#) revealed that the Pentagon has spent \$3.8 million already and intends to spend another \$27.1 million in fiscal year 2023 on a program to develop high-altitude balloons capable of doing everything from detecting hypersonic weapons to spying and even deploying offensive weapons.

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Video: Iranian Military Reveals New Underground Air Base  
By - Fantine Gardinier

A new air base with a network of underground facilities for its aircraft has been unveiled by the Iranian military, Iranian media reported on Tuesday.

Dubbed "Eagle 44," the base is reportedly capable of handling a variety of aircraft, both manned and unmanned, including fighter jets and strike aircraft. The Iranian Air Force doesn't have any large strategic bombers, but uses a number of ground attack jets including the Su-24, Su-22, Mirage F1, and F-4 Phantom.

The facility is also equipped with alert and command posts, aircraft hangars, maintenance facilities, navigational facilities, and fuel tanks to support air operations. Footage from Iranian media showed the air base in action, with American-made F-4s rolling through the concrete facility. It is clearly made to withstand American “bunker-buster” bombs designed to penetrate ordinary reinforced structures and those just beneath the surface. “It is one of the army’s most important air force bases, with fighters equipped with long-range cruise missiles and built in the depths of earth,” Iranian news said. However, the video makes clear that while the air base’s facilities are all underground, the runway itself is not, and aircraft must pass through a narrow gateway to access the facilities. That gateway is protected by thick blast doors.

According to Iranian media, Eagle 44 isn’t the Iranian military’s first underground air base. Tehran has long used the country’s many mountain ranges to conceal military facilities from observation and attack, dating back to the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. These have included so-called “[missile cities](#)” that are purported to be connected to a network of underground missile silos. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has even [buried ballistic missiles](#) in the ground to hide them.

Other countries use underground bases, too, including Sweden and China, both of which have [naval bases cut](#) into mountains from the sea. Switzerland, mountainous and defense-minded like Iran, has also [concealed air bases](#) underground in mountainsides.

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Washington, DC Bars Ready State of the Union-Themed Drink Specials for Presidential Address Night  
By - Fantine Gardinier

As US President Joe Biden prepares for his annual address to Congress and the nation on Tuesday, restaurants around the capital city are preparing for viewing parties by adding thematic specials to their evening menus.

Washington, DC residents are notoriously political and many stay tuned into the daily drama on Capitol Hill. That’s why many bars in the city will be spending the evening taking in [the presidential address](#) communally at a local watering hole sipping cocktails.

One bar not far from the national legislature called Union Pub is offering a \$150 “State of the Union Pub” special, which includes a series of beers, liquors and wines as part of an “exclusive” drinking game, as well as plenty of food for the inevitable munchies.

Last month, the bar also offered a gimmick special that cost \$218 as US Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) struggled to scrape together 218 votes to become House speaker - a race he eventually won. The bar is also offering regular drink specials, too.

Another popular DC watering hole, a Mexican restaurant near the city’s baseball stadium, is hosting a left-wing group’s watch party dubbed “Blue Victory 2024.” Biden hasn’t yet announced his candidacy for the 2024 elections, but his 2020 rival, former President Donald Trump, has.

However, the pomp and circumstance is rather subdued compared to some prior years - perhaps a consequence of Biden's low approval rating. Less than half of Americans think Biden is doing a good job two years into his presidency, according to recent polls, and three-quarters are against him running again in 2024. When Biden was elected in 2020, he was already the oldest US politician to win a presidential election.

If you can't make your way to a bar for the president's speech, there's also a number of drinking games circulating on the internet based on what Biden is expected to talk about - and what he's notorious for saying and doing.

[One version](#) prescribes a viewer to take a drink every time Biden mentions low unemployment, job growth, Ukraine, or the [Chinese balloon](#); two drinks for mentioning federal student loan debt, climate change, electric vehicles, COVID-19, or the Inflation Reduction Act; or three drinks if Biden drops one of several of his signature expressions or mentions Trump, Vice President Kamala Harris, or Russian President Vladimir Putin.

If a lawmaker walks out in protest at some point, if the Democrats give Biden a standing ovation while Republicans pointedly remain seated, or if Biden says "God Bless America" (as he's almost certain to do at the end), then the viewer must finish their drink.

Another game [oriented towards](#) workers in DC's massive legal field prescribes different numbers of drinks for Biden mentioning Supreme Court cases, constitutional amendments, or a Department of Justice investigation, alongside the more familiar violations.

Or perhaps one might simply be motivated to drink after hearing what Biden's political agenda is for the coming year.

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Biden: 'If China Threatens Our Sovereignty, We Will Act to Protect Our Country'

Over the last week, a Chinese weather balloon enchanted American politicians and US intelligence officials who alleged that the device was a surveillance in nature. However, Chinese Foreign Ministry repeatedly stressed it was a civilian balloon meant for meteorological research. It was ultimately down over the weekend.

US President Joe Biden remarked in his State of the Union address that should China threaten the nation, his administration will respond accordingly.

"Make no mistake: as we made clear last week, if China's threatens our sovereignty, we will act to protect our country," Biden vowed to the American public, in reference to the downed Chinese balloon that stole headlines over the last week. "And we did."

"Don't bet against America," he underscored, which prompted a chorus of "USA" chants. "It has never been a good bet to bet against America."

The American president stated that winning the competition with China should unite all Americans, and that the US is in the strongest position in decades to compete with Beijing or anyone else in the world.

Biden's comments in light of the downed Chinese weather balloon comes as US national security adviser Jake Sullivan relayed to reporters on Monday that the US has no intention of returning the instrument to the Chinese government.

Speaking during the US Global Leadership Coalition summit, Sullivan [admitted](#) that Washington intends to "exploit what we recover and learn even more than we have learned."

In the lead-up to the US' decision to shoot down the balloon, Biden received a wave of backlash as US officials blasted the commander-in-chief over their beliefs that he failed to act decisively enough. Biden later explained he chose to hold off on shooting down the balloon until it was over airspace that would cause no injuries to the wider public.

The Chinese government has stated that US' decision was a clear overreaction after authorities had informed the Biden White House that the balloon was not of a surveillance nature but of research purposes. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng on Monday reiterated that the downing was harmful for US-Chinese relations.

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Hotbed of Seismic Activity: Why Was the Turkish Earthquake So Deadly?

By - Ian DeMartino

Monday morning a 7.8 magnitude earthquake shook Turkey and surrounding countries, causing thousands of fatalities in Turkey and bordering Syria, tens of thousands of injuries, and thousands of collapsed buildings.

The earthquake in Turkey on Monday was the deadliest since at least 1999 when a 7.4 magnitude earthquake killed more than 17,000 people. The recent quake is responsible for nearly 3,000 deaths in Turkey, per figures released by the Turkish disaster and emergency management authority - but that number is expected to continue to rise exponentially.

The World Health Organization estimates the skyrocketing death toll could increase eightfold. If true, that would make it the worst natural disaster Turkey has suffered since 1939, when a similar quake killed over 33,000 people.

But what enabled this quake to be one of the deadliest in history?

It Was Powerful

A 7.8 magnitude earthquake is a very powerful earthquake, especially for one with its epicenter on land. Most powerful earthquakes occur under the ocean, away from human civilization.

Earthquakes in the ocean can be deadly by causing a tsunami, as evidenced by the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan following a 9.0 magnitude quake that shook the ocean floor nearly 45 miles off the coast, but earthquakes on land can be just as devastating.

For comparison, the costliest earthquake in US history (by the amount of damage caused) was the Northridge Earthquake in 1994. That quake registered a magnitude 6.7 on the Richter scale. Los Angeles was majorly affected by that event, which killed at least 57 people and caused up to \$20 billion in damage.

Turkey Was Not Prepared

Though, maybe it should have been. Turkey is one of the most seismically-active areas in the world, sitting on the Anatolian Plate, between two major fault lines.

The earth's surface is broken into various parts that fit together like a cosmic jigsaw puzzle. Those pieces are always rubbing against each other, shifting the ground we walk on very slowly. But sometimes the tension builds up and one or both of the plates slip, releasing an incredible amount of energy in the form of an earthquake.

Most modern cities, particularly those on significant fault lines, have strict regulations on construction, ensuring buildings don't easily collapse during an earthquake. In Turkey's capital city of Istanbul, most of the high-rise buildings are designed to withstand most earthquakes. That is not the case in Gaziantep, near the earthquake's epicenter. While a major city and a provisional capital, Gaziantep is not as modern as Istanbul and many of its high-rise apartments weren't built to the same standard, which is ultimately what caused the collapse of multiple high-rise buildings. In one video posted on social media, a building can be seen falling straight down, with the higher floors crushing the floors below it.

United States Geological Survey structural engineer Kishor Jaiswal, told the Associated Press that such "pancake" collapses are a sign that the building could not withstand the earthquake's shakes.

#### Syria's Civil War

Syria also suffered significant damage and casualties from the earthquake. Turkey's southern neighbor had at least 1,444 deaths as a result of the quake, a number that, like Turkey's, is still expected to rise.

Syria has been embroiled in a yearslong civil war. Not only were buildings damaged from the fighting, but when Syrians rebuilt, it was done rapidly and without much oversight. This, like in Gaziantep, resulted in construction that did not consider earthquake preparedness.

#### Weather Hampering Rescue Efforts

On top of everything else, the weather has not been cooperating with rescue teams. When the earthquake struck, it was already snowing in Gaziantep. By the time the sun rose, the area was covered.

This, combined with freezing rain later in the day, has made rescue efforts more difficult. Roads, already damaged by the earthquake, are now covered in ice and mud. The roads that can be driven on are packed with residents trying to leave the quake-hit cities.

Worse still, most of the cities hit by the quake are without power, and videos have been posted on social media showing large fires in the country's southern regions, thought to be caused by exploding gas lines.

All this means the death toll will likely be higher than it would have been if the earthquake occurred during the summer or a warm spell. Trapped survivors could be freezing to death, and the lack of light and electricity makes them even more difficult to find.

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Poll: Americans Across the Political Spectrum Believe State of the Union 'Not Strong'  
By - Ian DeMartino

US President Joe Biden is scheduled to give his annual State of the Union Address on Tuesday. Unfortunately, most Americans are not optimistic about the Union's current state.

Ahead of US President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech on Tuesday, Americans have grown increasingly worried about the direction the country is headed toward - including most Democrats.

According to a [Monmouth University poll](#) taken in late January, less than four in ten (39%) Americans feel the State of the Union is either "very strong" or "somewhat strong," with only 7% saying they think it is "very strong."

Meanwhile, 58% of Americans believe the state of the Union is either "not too strong" or "not strong at all." In the same poll taken in March of last year, 56% of Americans responded that the state of the Union was strong.

When asked if they thought the country was on the right or wrong track, 73% of poll respondents said it was on the wrong track. There was a strong partisan divide among the respondents (only 6% of Republicans said the country was on the right track) but a majority of Democrats, 55%, agree with the 93% of Republicans who say the country is on the wrong track. Independents, critical to any national election, are likewise pessimistic about the course the country is on: 75% say the country is headed down the wrong track.

"Fundamental faith in the American system continues to erode, even when taking into account the fact that partisan views shift depending on who occupies the White House," said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

Americans also no longer see the US government as a force of good in their lives. A majority, 59%, say that Washington has a negative impact on their lives. In 2015, when Monmouth first added that question to the poll, that number was just 50%. Only 16% said the current government has a positive impact on their lives in the most recent poll.

Biden's speech on Tuesday will be the first time he addresses Congress after the midterm elections saw Republicans take control of the House of Representatives. He is expected to tout his administration's accomplishments and lay out his goals for 2023.

The poll surveyed 805 Americans and had a margin of error of 5.7%.

How to Have Fun Watching the Address?

Biden is not known as the best orator. For anyone planning to watch the Tuesday speech and wants to spice up the viewing and lay down some action, online sportsbooks are offering prop bets. The most straightforward bet is how long the speech will be (Over/Under 59.5 minutes). Other bets include who the designated survivor will be (Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland is the odds-on favorite at +700), if House Leader Kevin McCarthy will channel his inner Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) by ripping a copy of Biden's speech and how many times the Washington Post will fact check Biden, among other options.

Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders (R-AK) will be giving the Republican response, online bookies have been offering a few prop bets for that as well.

If you prefer to risk your sobriety rather than money, State of the Union drinking games were all the rage during the Trump administration and Biden's first address. There doesn't appear that any media outlets made "official" rules this time around, but [outlines drawn](#) for Biden's 2022 speech will likely suffice for all but the most hardened drinkers.

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Multiple Ancient, Medieval Castles And Mosques Damaged by Devastating Turkish Earthquake  
By - Ian DeMartino

On Monday, a powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake originating in Turkey shook the surrounding areas, significantly damaging cities in Turkey and parts of Syria. Thousands have been killed in Syria and Turkey, with Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay saying the nation's death toll has surpassed 2,300.

The deadly earthquake that killed thousands in Turkey and Syria early Monday also damaged multiple ancient and medieval castles throughout the area.

In Turkey, the Gaziantep castle, about 20.7 miles (33.3 kilometers) from the earthquake's epicenter, suffered significant damage.

"Some of the bastions in the east, south and southeast parts of the historical Gaziantep Castle in the central Şahinbey district were destroyed by the earthquake, the debris was scattered on the road. The iron railings around the castle were scattered on the surrounding sidewalks. The retaining wall next to the castle also collapsed. In some bastions, large cracks were observed," reported Turkish state media Anadolu.

In pictures posted on social media, the castle appears to have nearly vanished from the hill it stood on for millennia.

The Gaziantep castle was built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian, also known as Justinian the Great, who reigned from 527-565 A.D.; however, the site was used as a defensive fortification long before. Archeologists believe the site originally hosted a watch tower during the Roman period as early as 200 A.D.

The nearby Şirvani Mosque, one of the oldest mosques in Gaziantep, suffered significant damage as well. According to Anadolu, its eastern wall and dome have also partially collapsed. According to Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay, roughly 1,700 buildings were damaged across 10 Turkish cities.

Meanwhile, in the ancient Syrian city of Aleppo, an even older fortification was damaged. The citadel, designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO, was already damaged by years of fighting in the city during the last decade. During the earthquake, the dome that sits on top of a minaret inside the Citadel's mosque collapsed. There is also a large crack running along the tower and the entrance to the Citadel also suffered damage.

It is believed most of the structures still standing on the site were built during the Ayyubid dynasty that controlled the area from 1169 to 1260 A.D. But the hill the citadel rests on is believed to have hosted temples and defensive fortifications since at least the third millennium B.C.

Also in Syria, the Al-Marqab Castle, which sits south of the city of Baniyas was reportedly damaged in the earthquake.

The Al-Marqab Castle served as a major stronghold for the Knights Hospitaller during the later Crusades. However, according to Arab historians, it was first fortified by Muslims in 1062, who

continued to hold it even after Christian nations controlled the surrounding area after the first Crusades.

Surveys of the area found that "some buildings" inside the castle were damaged, while parts of its walls and a tower collapsed during the earthquake. At least 156 people died in the Aleppo province alone when 46 buildings collapsed in the area.

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US CENTCOM Says Will Support Earthquake Relief Efforts in Turkey, Syria

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command (CENTCOM) has established a task force to provide support to those affected by the devastated earthquake in Turkey and Syria, commander Gen. Michael Kurilla said on Wednesday.

"On February 7th, the CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida established an Action Team to prepare to surge support to those affected in both Türkiye and Syria," Kurilla said in a statement.

The command maintains close coordination with other US agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development, as well as with the Syrian Democratic Forces, he added.

It is also working closely with US European Command on options to send support to Turkey.

A 7.8 magnitude earthquake with several powerful aftershocks, followed by another 7.6 earthquake several hours later, rattled parts of Turkey and Syria on Monday, toppling thousands of homes and killing over 10,000 people.

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Biden's SOTU Speech Fails to Address Concerns of Americans - Congressman Gosar

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's State of the Union Address failed to address the main concerns of the American people including the China "threat" and runaway government spending, Congressman Paul Gosar told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Long on liberal rhetoric, short in specifics and did little to address the concerns of Americans about inflation, rising gas prices, the threat of China or our hemorrhaging domestic spending" Gosar's spokesperson told Sputnik.

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US Consular Affairs Chief to Visit South Korea, Thailand, Qatar – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – US Assistant Secretary of State for for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter will visit South Korea, Thailand, and Qatar from February 8-17, the Department of State said on Wednesday.

"Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter will travel February 8-17 to Seoul, Bangkok, and Doha. The Assistant Secretary will meet with embassy staff and observe consular operations in all three cities," the press release said.

In Seoul, Bitter will discuss with government officials a range of consular issues, including the prevention and resolution of international parental child abduction cases.

"While in Doha, she will meet with Qatari officials and lead the consular session of the US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue," the release added.

The State Department did not provide details on Bitter's travel to Thailand, but noted that the entire trip will underscore US commitment to the protection of its citizens overseas and the facilitation of legitimate travel and immigration to the United States.

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Seymour Hersh Confirms Authoring Article on US Planting Explosives to Destroy Nord Stream

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh confirmed to Sputnik that he authored an investigative report saying that US Navy divers planted explosives to destroy the Nord Stream pipelines last year.

"Of course," Hersh told Sputnik, when asked whether he authored the article, which was published on a Substack account created shortly before its publication.

The article states that the United States decided to sabotage the pipelines following more than nine months of highly secret debate inside the US national security community.

"Last June, the Navy divers, operating under the cover of a widely publicized mid-summer NATO exercise known as BALTOPS 22, planted the remotely triggered explosives that, three months later, destroyed three of the four Nord Stream pipelines, according to a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning," the report stated.

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Unverified Account of Renowned Journalist Says US-Planted Explosives Destroyed Nord Stream

(Edits throughout, adds details in para 5)

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – An unverified account of investigate journalist Seymour Hersh alleged on Wednesday, citing a source, that US Navy divers planted explosives to destroy the Nord Stream pipelines last year.

Sputnik was not immediately able to verify whether the Substack account, which was created shortly before the publication, belongs to Hersh.

"Last June, the Navy divers, operating under the cover of a widely publicized mid-summer NATO exercise known as BALTOPS 22, planted the remotely triggered explosives that, three months later, destroyed three of the four Nord Stream pipelines, according to a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning," the account said.

The White House dismissed the claims as "false and complete fiction," according to the account. The account also claimed that the alleged decision to sabotage the pipelines followed more than nine months of highly secret debate inside US national security community.

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Biden State of The Union Speech Just 'Populist Rhetoric,' Not Reality - Experts

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech was forceful populist rhetoric but did not reflect any true reality, analysts told Sputnik.

"It was notable that Biden really tried to wrap himself in populist rhetoric," independent journalist and political analyst Sam Hussein said after Biden delivered his second State of the Union speech to a joint session of Congress on Tuesday. "Corruptions of big tech, nursing homes, drug companies, the need to tax billionaires, all figured prominently. The problem of course is that it's rhetoric, not reality."

Both major US political parties remained wedded to corporate corruption and the super wealthy, Hussein added.

"But [it is] still notable that he put out all that rhetoric. It shows they know the public is hungry for something real to be done," he said.

Husseini also observed how little time Biden spent dealing with foreign policy.

"I suspect that this reflects how the Democratic Party base is at odds with the party's establishment... Biden needs to appear to be something different to the base than what he plainly is. Or at least set up sufficient distractions such that he's not the target of the base," he said.

Financial analyst, historian and former merchant banker Martin Hutchinson said Biden's speech will have no effect on his falling approval numbers "though cheerleaders in the media will try to make it have one."

The president's rhetorical delivery, he added, was strong "only by Biden standards."

Genuinely good speeches by previous president Donald Trump, he added, never moved the "needle" of public opinion, so there was no reason to believe Tuesday's speech by Biden would have any impact.

Biden during his SOTU speech addressed tensions with China and the Ukraine conflict, and called for holding social media accountable and working to reduce drug prices. He also addressed the US economy, gun control, abortion, and urged Congress to lift the debt ceiling. Biden said he was committed to working with Beijing but would act if China threatened US sovereignty. The speech comes a week after China flew a suspected surveillance balloon, which Beijing claims was conducting scientific research, over the continental US. Republicans slammed Biden for delaying the order to shoot it down until it was flying over water on Sunday.

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Stepanov: West's Irresponsible Ukraine Policies Lead to Greater Risks to Global Stability

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov on Wednesday outlined the reasons why it was unavoidable for Russia to undertake a special military operation in Ukraine and warned that the longer Western countries continue promoting their irresponsible policies, the greater the threats to global stability.

"The longer the West continues ignoring the will of its constituents and proceeds with its irresponsible policies, the greater the risks to global stability," Stepanov said in an opinion piece published on the Russian embassy's social media accounts. "Before it is too late, the West and Europe in particular must realize that there is a way out of the crisis. Kiev will announce that it ceases hostilities, order its troops and nationalistic units to lay down their arms, voluntarily subject itself to demilitarization and denazification. This is the only way to build a healthy society in Ukraine in accordance with the interests of its people."

Stepanov said while this outcome remains the future, the conflict will be settled sooner or later.

"Russia will not retreat from ensuring its interests, whether someone likes it or not," he said. "We are realists and proceed from the interests of our own citizens, our own security and economic well-being. So, are our Western counterparts ready to meet the interests of their citizens? This is the question for their governments and voters to answer."

Stepanov emphasized that Russia reaffirms the goals of the special military operation and they all will be achieved.

"Ukrainians will live in a federal, multilingual, multicultural, democratic, stable, prosperous country free from internal conflict where every citizen feels free and safe. And Russia will provide it," he said. "This is the only finale for the current crisis. Whether it will be achieved by diplomatic or military means largely depends on the West."

The ambassador said that if the collective West continues to supply Kiev with weapons, equipment and expertise, the conflict will be protracted and result in more blood and suffering, while the final result will be the same for Ukraine and for the geopolitical balance.

"The Ukraine conflict is not a thing-in-itself core issue. It's just a symptom, a sign of ailment the current world order is striving to survive," he said. "Western leaders and thinkers have to pay utmost attention to the ontological differences in how Russia and the West look at the crisis. We comprehend it through spiritual optics, they - in a very materialistic manner."

Stepanov said the resolution of the Ukraine crisis would be based not only on striking a balance of powers and interests, but also inserting the traditional values-based multiplier in the equation.

"For the West to believe it is all only about territories, borders and military balance in Europe, would be a shortsighted error, he said.

#### SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION BECAME UNAVOIDABLE

Stepanov noted that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accords signed in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, Russia set on the path of building a federal multi-ethnic state with a Russian majority, but one that respects the rights, cultures, interests of all other nationalities.

"In all our regions people could speak not only Russian, but also their native tongue, be it in the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, Yakutia or elsewhere," he said. "Also, we provide the same rights and freedoms to vibrant diaspora communities (Armenian, Azeri, Georgian and others)."

Stepanov said Russia's hope was for its neighbors to take the same approach.

"And here Ukraine comes to the fore," he said. "What happened there during the same period? Part of Ukraine was historically under the rule of Poland, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, another part was populated by Russians. The Bolsheviks toyed with the lands and their borders, including by adding to what is now called Ukraine various regions such as Kharkov, Donetsk, Luhansk, Odessa, Crimea and others that have historically been Russian."

Independent Ukraine appeared three decades ago in that composition and Russia looked at it as a sister state in which half of the population was historically Russian, Stepanov said.

"We hoped it should become the new Switzerland, Canada or Belgium in terms of adherence to democratic and human rights norms. A democratic state where all peoples, languages and ethnicities peacefully live side by side and build common future," he said. "That was in 1992. It's 2023 now. More than 30 years passed, presidents changed in Ukraine. Despite the difference in their publicly expressed views, they were all disastrous for the domestic agenda. Regardless of political affiliation, each leader repeated the same fatal error - they acted from the ultranationalist Western Ukrainian positions in trying to create a mono-ethnic state."

Stepanov pointed out there were regions in Ukraine that did not want to be separatist and never thought of seceding but wanted to enjoy dignified democratic equality complete with television, newspapers and education in their native language.

Canada is an example of how a country managed to build a democratic society with two official languages and respectfully cherishing indigenous languages, he said.

"Canada, given its strong Ukrainian community and connections, invested heavily in building a new Ukrainian state, but inexplicably failed to share its experience of bilingualism," Stepanov said. "Had it shared, maybe there would not be a conflict."

Thee ambassador noted that another milestone was the 2014 coup in Ukraine when the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from power.

"Frenzied opposition nationalists, who violated the agreements reached with the mediation of the West, seized power and said they would 'take care' of the Russian Ukrainians," he said.

"Their first draft legislation was aimed at excluding the Russian language from Ukraine. It didn't become law, however, the intent of the new authorities was a warning to the half of the population that it would soon be discriminated against in terms of language and culture."

After this first attempt to discriminate against Russians, a significant part of Ukraine's population realized the new authorities would bring hardship and that prompted Crimea and Donbas to rebel, he said.

"The West, instead of suppressing the nationalistic sentiment in Kiev, began to play along with them, thereby igniting the conflict. This is one of the indications that the West has never been pro-Ukrainian, but always anti-Russian in order to drag us into the conflict," Stepanov said.

"Crimea unequivocally decided to rejoin Russia."

Then followed the civil war in Donbas, he said, adding that this was an inter-Ukrainian conflict between the nationalists and the regions who were eager to stay in Ukraine if their rights had been respected. However, Kiev denied them this opportunity.

"Denied were the very same rights of being bilingual that are enjoyed in Canada, but refused in Ukraine. Prime Minister Trudeau's cabinet has been silent about this as was Harper's government in 2014-2015," he said.

Stepanov emphasized that the civil war in Donbas was eventually halted by the signing of the Minsk agreements and President Vladimir Putin personally was constantly trying to convince the Kiev authorities to implement the accords.

"As it turns out now, the West did not want a win-win situation, but a zero-sum game in order to achieve not a consensus, but the defeat of Russia within a broader geopolitical game at the expense of the Russians living in Ukraine," he said.

Stepanov also noted that Russia had tried to reach a settlement with Ukraine and the West for seven years, including proposing draft security guarantee agreements at the end of 2021 that were "haughtily rejected."

"Some accused Russia of lying that there would not be military operation. Forgetting that at the same time we reminded: there would be no need for employing military if there was no provocation," he said. "Only if Kiev did not decide to arrange a blitzkrieg against Donbas. For years we have been telling our partners that any such attempt would be a disaster, primarily for Ukraine and European security. But no one listened or heard."

Between November 2021 and January 2022, there was a lot of talk in the Western media that Russia was amassing 125,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, while remaining silent that Kiev throughout 2021 was concentrating some 300,000 troops to engage in a lightning strike against Donetsk and Luhansk.

“To take over the republics, reach the borders of Russia, enlist NATO support and put us before this fact,” he added. “That is why our special military operation became inevitable.”

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Trump Says Following Biden State of Union Speech That China Respected US Most Under Him

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said following successor Joe Biden's State of the Union speech that China never respected the United States more than under the Trump administration, with the comment and speech coming after a Chinese balloon transited the US.

"China never respected America more than the Four Years that I was President, and it wasn't even close. They paid our Country Hundreds of Billions of Dollars. No President has ever gotten ten cents from them. President Xi [Jinping] is laughing at our current leadership, he wasn't laughing before," Trump said on Tuesday evening.

Trump provided live commentary to Biden's State of the Union speech via social media platform Truth.

Biden addressed topics including the US economy, gun control, abortion and China during his second State of the Union speech. The speech comes a week after China flew a suspected surveillance balloon, which Beijing claims was conducting scientific research, over the continental US, as well as amid the US-led response to the conflict in Ukraine.

Trump also took credit for NATO support for Ukraine under the Biden administration, noting that he managed to gather \$450 billion in unpaid funds for the alliance. Trump said that NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg called his administration's work one of the "most amazing" feats he had ever seen.

Additionally, Trump criticized Biden's speaking style, characterizing him as "very angry" and suggesting someone tell him to "be cool." Trump also praised the demeanor of Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who sat behind Biden during the speech.

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Republican Governor Sanders in Response to Biden's SOTU Speech Says He Has Failed America

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Republican Governor Sarah Sanders of the state of Arkansas said in response to President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech, where he praised his administration's work so far, that he and Democrats have failed the United States. "Forgive me for not believing much of anything I heard tonight from President Biden," Sanders said on Tuesday night. "From out of control inflation and violent crime, to the dangerous border crisis and threat from China, Biden and the Democrats have failed you. They know it, and you know it, and it's time for a change."

The former Trump-era White House press secretary said Biden is unfit to serve as US president. The governor also mentioned that the Trump administration provided Biden a secure US southern border, a rapidly recovering US economy, a rebuilt US military, abundant homegrown energy, and a stable world at peace.

Sanders continued to add that radical Democratic lawmakers have hijacked the Biden administration while also calling for a new generation of Republican leadership.

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US House Majority Leader Scalise Says State of Union 'Struggling' Under Biden - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a response to President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech that the United States is struggling under his leadership on a number of fronts, including inflation, crime and immigration.

"The state of the union is struggling under the weight of President Biden's extremist agenda that is causing pain to hardworking families." Scalise said in a statement Tuesday evening. "The results speak for themselves: inflation is skyrocketing, gas prices are 40 percent higher, crime is out of control, and the border is wide open."

Earlier Tuesday evening, Biden delivered his second State of the Union speech as president, addressing a number of areas including the economy, abortion and relations with China. Biden has divided the US and created a "destructive era of big government socialism," Scalise said.

Scalise highlighted a number of recent legislative initiatives by Republicans, including bills to limit the Biden administration's use of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, end COVID-19 public health measures and denounce the "horrors" of socialism.

House Republicans will continue to pass legislation that solves real problems and get the US "back on track," Scalise said.

"Our Commitment to America calls for lowering inflation, securing America's border, and restoring energy independence. This will make it easier for hardworking families to keep more of their hard-earned money and reduce our dependence on foreign countries for our energy," Scalise said.

House Republicans will pass laws to stop the flow of narcotics across the southern border, Scalise also said, noting that more than 150 young Americans are poisoned every day by illegal drugs such as fentanyl.

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Biden in State of Union Speech Says Oil Will Be Needed in US For At Least Another Decade

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his State of the Union speech said the United States will need oil for at least another ten years.

"We're going to need oil for at least another decade," Biden said on Tuesday night.

Biden pointed out that he conveyed that message to US oil and gas leaders during a meeting where he discussed the need for oil firms to increase domestic production in order to try to bring gasoline prices down in the United States.

However, Biden mentioned that the United States also has to work to curb the climate change. Prices of gasoline for US consumers fell to below \$3 a gallon at the pump in some parts of the United States by late last year from a mid-June record high of \$5 as the Strategic Petroleum Reserve releases by the Biden administration flooded the domestic marketplace for crude.

Gasoline at US pumps now averages just below \$3.50 a gallon, according to recent data from the American Automobile Association.

The Biden administration said late last year that it was preparing to wind down its dependence on the SPR and was ready to add to its inventory. The administration is negotiating purchases with US energy firms to refill the reserve, starting with a base offer of \$70 per barrel.

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McCarthy Fact Checks State of the Union Speech, Says Deficit Increased Under Biden

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy fact checked President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech to Congress, claiming the United States' deficit actually increased under the Biden administration after the president claimed he had reduced it. In his speech on Tuesday evening, Biden claimed his administration reduced the US deficit by more than \$1.7 trillion. The statement comes as Biden and McCarthy discuss raising the debt ceiling ahead of a potential US default on financial obligations.

"Fact Check: Biden has increased the deficit by \$800 billion," McCarthy said via Twitter.

McCarthy has proposed a responsible increase of the debt ceiling that also includes a plan to address government spending, while Biden has urged a raise without conditions.

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Biden Says US Lost Its Edge in Semiconductor Production Last Few Decades

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has lost its edge in semiconductor production over the last several decades, only accounting for about 10% of all microchips made around the world, President Joe Biden said during his State of the Union address.

"But in the last few decades, we lost our edge and we're down to producing only 10%," Biden said on Tuesday night.

Biden pointed out that microchips were invented in United States and the country previously provided 40% of the world's chips.

The president highlighted that during the pandemic measures-induced supply chain issues in the semiconductor industry, US automakers could not make enough cars because there were not enough microchips available.

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

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Biden Says US, NATO United, Built Global Coalition on Ukraine - State of the Union Speech

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden in his State of the Union address to Congress said on Tuesday, the United States is united with NATO and built a global coalition on Ukraine.

“We united NATO and built a global coalition. We stood against Putin’s aggression. We stood with the Ukrainian people,” Biden said.

He noted that America led the world.

Biden said that Washington is working for more freedom, more dignity, and more peace, not just in Europe, but everywhere.

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Biden Will Veto National Abortion Ban if Passed by US Congress - State of the Union Speech

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union speech that he will veto a national ban on abortion if Congress passes such legislation, following the Supreme Court’s decision last year to overturn abortion protections granted by the Roe v. Wade decision.

“Congress must restore the right the Supreme Court took away last year and codify Roe v. Wade to protect every woman’s constitutional right to choose,” Biden said Tuesday evening.

“Make no mistake; if Congress passes a national abortion ban, I will veto it.”

Last June, the US Supreme Court issued a decision overturning the Roe v. Wade ruling and returning the right to regulate abortions to state governments. A number of states enacted restrictions on abortions following the decision.

Republican lawmakers in Congress have since pushed for federal restrictions on the procedure, while Democrats have advocated for federal protections.

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Biden in SOTU Address Says Russia's Operation in Ukraine is Test For America, World

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden in his State of the Union address to the Congress said on Tuesday that Russia's military operation in Ukraine represents a test for America and for the whole world.

"Putin's invasion has been a test for the ages. A test for America. A test for the world," Biden said.

He promised to stand for sovereignty and basic principles of democracy.

"For such a defense matters to us because it keeps the peace and prevents open season for would-be aggressors to threaten our security and prosperity. One year later, we know the answer. Yes, we would. And yes, we did," he said.

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Biden Says Committed to Working With China, But Will Act if It Threatens US Sovereignty

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his State of the Union address to Congress said he is committed to working with China where it advances US interests, but will act if it threatens American security.

"I am committed to work with China where it can advance American interests and benefit the world. But make no mistake: as we made clear last week, if China... threatens our sovereignty, we will act to protect our country. And we did," Biden said on Tuesday.

Biden said winning the competition with China should unite all Americans, adding that the US is in the strongest position in decades to compete with Beijing or anyone else in the world.

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Biden Calls on Congress to Work Together to Address Migration Crisis on US Southern Border

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during his State of the Union address called on all lawmakers to work together to address the migration on the US southern border regardless of their political affiliation.

"Let's also come together on immigration and make it a bipartisan issue like it was before," Biden said in prepared remarks on Tuesday night.

Biden further said that his new border policies rolled out in January have helped drop record levels of illegal crossings on the US southern border. He explained that unlawful crossings by migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela has come down 97%.

The US president emphasized, however, that illegal migration issues on the US southern border will not be fixed until Congress takes action to resolve the crisis.

Biden urged Republicans in Congress to at least pass legislation supporting his plans to provide the equipment and officers needed to secure the border while also creating a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, migrants on temporary status, migrant farm workers, and migrants considered essential workers in the United States.

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Biden Calls on Congress in State of Union Speech to Raise Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his 2023 State of the Union speech called on Congress to raise the debt ceiling to avoid a default on the United States' financial obligations, with the statement coming amid talks with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy on the matter.

"Let us commit here tonight that the full faith and credit of the United States of America will never, ever be questioned," Biden said on Tuesday evening.

Last week, Biden met with McCarthy at the White House to talk about raising the debt ceiling. McCarthy has called for a "responsible" raise of the debt ceiling that also addresses government spending, while Biden has urged lawmakers to raise it without conditions.

Biden in his speech characterized Republicans' plan as taking the US economy "hostage." McCarthy has vowed that a default on US debt is not an option.

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Biden in SOTU Address Calls For Holding Social Media Companies Accountable

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during his State of the Union Address reaffirmed the need to hold social media companies accountable for the ways in which they use American childrens' data for profit.

"We must finally hold social media companies accountable for the experiment they are running on our children for profit. And it's time to pass bipartisan legislation to stop Big Tech from collecting personal data on kids and teenagers online, ban targeted advertising to children, and impose stricter limits on the personal data these companies collect on all of us," said Biden.

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Biden In SOTU Address Reaffirms US Support for Ukraine Will Take 'As Long As It Takes'

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during his State of the Union Address reaffirmed that the United States will continue to support Ukraine amid Russia's special operation as long as it takes.

"We will stand with you as long as it takes," Biden said in prepared remarks on Tuesday night.

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Blinken Underscores 'Unwavering' US Support for Ukraine in Call With Kuleba - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a call with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to discuss unwavering economic and security support from the United States to Ukraine, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The two discussed continued strong security and economic cooperation as Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine nears the one-year mark. The Secretary underscored the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine, including recent provisions of additional security assistance," Price said on Tuesday.

Last week, the US announced a new \$2.2 billion military aid package for Ukraine, which included armored vehicles and longer-range rockets.

Ukraine needs another \$10 billion in international finance assistance to cover its budget deficit and ensure stable economic development, Ukrainian Deputy Finance Minister Olga Zykova also said last week.

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Canada Announces \$34Bln in New Healthcare Funding for Provinces - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Canada's federal government unveiled C\$46.2 billion (\$34.4 billion) in new funding for provinces to alleviate the country's strained health system, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office said in a statement.

"Today's announcement is about strengthening our health care system to address existing challenges and provide Canadians with the safe, high-quality care they need and deserve,

including when it comes to mental health. Building on the lessons of the pandemic, we will continue to take a Team Canada approach to deliver the best results for patients, support our health care workers, and protect our health care system now and into the future," Trudeau said as quoted in the release on Tuesday.

The federal government, according to the statement, will increase health funding to provinces and territories by a total of C\$196.1 billion over 10 years.

C\$2 billion will be allocated to Canada Health Transfer (CHT) to address the pressure on the healthcare system, particularly in pediatric hospitals and emergency rooms, according to the release.

The new funds will also provide C\$25 billion to advance health priorities through bilateral agreements supporting the needs of people in each province in areas of family services, health workers and backlogs, mental health and substance abuse, and modernization of the health system, the statement added.

Additionally, the plan provides C\$1.7 billion over five years for hourly wage increases for personal support workers and similar professionals, and C\$2 billion over ten years to address the challenges indigenous people face when it comes to accessing healthcare services.

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Biden in State of Union Will Say COVID-19 Pandemic No Longer 'Controls Our Lives'

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his upcoming State of the Union speech on Tuesday evening will affirm that the COVID-19 pandemic no longer controls the lives of Americans as Congress and the Biden administration battle over when to end public health measures.

"Two years ago, COVID had shut down our businesses, closed our schools, and robbed us of so much. Today, COVID no longer controls our lives," Biden will say in the speech, according to excerpts shared by the White House.

Earlier on Tuesday, the House of Representative passed legislation that would terminate the proof-of-vaccination requirement imposed on travelers to the US. The White House's Office of Management and Budget said in response to its passage by the lower chamber that the administration opposes reversing the policy.

Earlier this month, the House also passed bills repealing the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for health care workers in facilities receiving federal funding, while also ending the national and public health emergencies declared over the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, Biden said he plans on lifting the COVID-19 emergencies in May.

Later on Tuesday, Biden will deliver his second State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress, during which he will also speak about the economy, democracy and unity between the political parties, according to the White House speech excerpts.

State of the Union speeches are traditionally delivered by the US president to Congress on an annual basis, fulfilling a constitutional requirement for the president to report to Congress on the condition of the country and deliver policy recommendations.

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Bush's Top Diplomat Warned Russia War With Ukraine 'Dangerous Possibility' - Documents

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The outbreak of war between Russia and newly independent Ukraine was a "dangerous possibility," President George H.W. Bush's outgoing Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger advised his successor Warren Christopher, who served President Bill Clinton when the latter took office in 1993, newly released US archival documents said.

Among "potential troubles" was "armed conflict between Russia and any of a number of states on its periphery, with Ukraine not the most likely but certainly the most dangerous possibility," Eagleburger warned Christopher, according to one of the documents newly released from the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

"Russia's course in the years ahead holds the key to the future configuration of power in Eurasia ... [and] will determine whether a long-term threat to US security re-emerges in that vast landmass," Eagleburger wrote in a memorandum to Christopher.

A major US policy priority in dealing with Russia was to "lock in... further stabilizing reductions of nuclear weapons" and to ensure that Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus did not renege on their nuclear non-proliferation commitments, Eagleburger wrote.

Eagleburger also urged the incoming Clinton administration to support Russia's economic reforms, since history would not judge the United States kindly if it failed to offer generous assistance, the document said.

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Pink Floyd's Roger Waters to be Present at UNSC Meeting on Ukraine - UN Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 8 (Sputnik) - Roger Waters, ex-musician from Pink Floyd, will be present at Wednesday's United Nations Security Council meeting on Ukraine which was requested by Russia, the UN Source told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Tomorrow will be present Roger Waters. The topic of the meeting will be the peaceful settlement of the crisis around Ukraine in the context of increasing Western arms deliveries to this country," the UN source said.

The UN Security Council discussed Ukraine on February 6 at the request of France and Ecuador. There will also be a meeting on February 24 held at the ministerial level, marking exactly one year since Russia's special operation began.

Pink Floyd was one of the most popular music groups in the 1980s. Waters left the group in 1985 because of differences among its members. In the past, Waters has attended protests

supporting freeing Assange. Some US politicians have also criticized Waters for accusing President Joe Biden of fueling the conflict in Ukraine.

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Yellen Stresses to French, German Economic Ministers Need to Implement IRA - US Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen during talks on implementing the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) with French and German economic ministers stressed the need to stimulate development on both sides of the Atlantic, Treasury said in a readout of the meeting.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire and German counterpart Robert Habeck were in Washington to discuss concerns over how the IRA impacts industries in Europe. Earlier in the day, Le Maire in comments to reporters, as quoted by AFP, said that both sides "agreed on the necessity of full transparency on the level of subsidies and tax credits." Habeck said it was important for the US and Europe to avoid the situation becoming a "race to subsidies," the report added.

"Secretary Yellen discussed the United States' implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act and EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan, stressing the need to stimulate innovation and technology development and deployment on both sides of the Atlantic to speed the transition to green energy and meet our collective climate goals," the readout said on Tuesday.

The IRA, signed into law by US President Joe Biden in August 2022, unlocks \$369 billion in tax credits and subsidies for US consumers and companies making green tech products. Several EU companies reportedly said they would invest in the US rather than the EU, with rising energy prices at home being a crucial factor.

During a trip to the US in January, French President Emmanuel Macron said the IRA's subsidies to US businesses threaten Europe with "deindustrialization" during difficult times amid the conflict in Ukraine.

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Bill Clinton Promised Yeltsin 'Closest Possible' US-Russia Ties - Archival Documents

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US President Bill Clinton promised his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin that he was determined to create "the closest possible partnership" between Russia and the United States, according to documents released by the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

"I am determined that, together, we can create the closest possible US-Russia partnership," Clinton told Yeltsin according to one of the released documents. "[W]e are determined to do whatever we can to help Russia's democratic reforms to succeed."

Clinton also assured Yeltsin that he would do everything he could to reduce the debt burden that Russia had inherited from the Soviet Union to the rest of the international community, the document said.

Clinton pointed out that he would work to "make our economic aid as beneficial as possible," including support for "rescheduling Russia's debt in the Paris Club," the document said.

Yeltsin had previously failed in his efforts to get Clinton's predecessor, President George H.W. Bush, to commit to such a close US-Russian relationship, the document added.

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US Delivers Mobile Gas Turbine to Ukraine, Will Power Up to 100,000 Homes - USAID

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The United States delivered a mobile gas turbine to Ukraine that will help power up to 100,000 homes or schools throughout the country, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said in a press release.

"Today, Deputy Administrator Isobel Coleman announced during her visit to Kyiv that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided the Government of Ukraine with a mobile gas turbine power plant purchased from General Electric (GE)," USAID said on Tuesday. The mobile power plant has a total output capacity of approximately 28 megawatts, enough to power at least 100,000 homes, the release said. This will help Ukraine increase its ability to provide electricity to homes, hospitals, schools, critical infrastructure providers, and other institutions, the release added.

USAID has already delivered more than 1,700 generators to 22 oblasts in Ukraine, and many more are on the way, the release said. These generators help ensure Ukraine has electricity and heating for schools, hospitals, accommodation centers for internally-displaced persons, district heating companies, and water systems if power is knocked out during the ongoing conflict.

USAID has also donated \$55 million to Ukraine to bolster its heating infrastructure this winter, benefitting some seven million Ukrainians, according to the release.

The United States has been investing in strengthening Ukraine's energy security for some two decades, the release added.

Russia began striking Ukrainian infrastructure on October 10, 2022, two days after Ukraine's terrorist attack on Russia's Crimean Bridge. The strikes have targeted power, defense industry, military command and communications facilities across Ukraine.

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Strobe Talbott Told Clinton Russia 'Most Dangerous Mess on Earth' - US Archival Documents

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Conditions in Russia and the neighboring former Soviet republics after the disintegration of the Soviet Union had caused "the most dangerous political

mess" in the world, newly appointed senior State Department official Strobe Talbott told President Bill Clinton after the latter took office in 1993, according to just-released official US archival documents.

"Talbott agrees that 'Russia and the former Soviet Union constitute the single biggest and most dangerous political mess on the face of the earth,' he envisions a bright future if there is a high level of US support for the Russian reform," one of the documents released on Tuesday from the National Security Archive at George Washington University said.

Talbott, who became Clinton's deputy secretary of state and top adviser on Russian affairs, listed three "simultaneous transformations" then occurring in Russia and described them as "nothing less than a miracle, the greatest political miracle of our era," the document said.

Talbott told Clinton that Russia's post-communist transformation had the potential of matching in positive significance the birth of the United States and of its political system, the document added.

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China Declined US Request for Defense Chiefs Call Following Balloon Incident - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The People's Republic of China (PRC) has declined the United States' request to hold a call between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and PRC Defense Minister Wei Fenghe after the US military downed a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a statement.

"On Saturday, 4 February, immediately after taking action to down the PRC balloon, the Department of Defense submitted a request for a secure call between Secretary Austin and PRC Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe," Ryder said in the statement on Tuesday.

"Unfortunately, the PRC has declined our request."

The United States believes in the importance of maintaining open lines of communication between the US and PRC to responsibly manage the relationship and remains committed to those open lines, the statement said.

Lines between the US and PRC militaries are "particularly important" in moments such as this, the statement added.

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US House Panels Hold Hearings on PRC Economic, Military Threats Following Balloon Incident

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The US House Financial Services and Armed Services committees held hearings on Tuesday to discuss the economic and military threats posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), following the transit of a Chinese balloon across the United States last week.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Financial Services Committee held its first hearing on economic threats posed to the United States by China.

"Whether it's through sanctions, export financing, international financial institutions, or our capital markets - all of which fall under this Committee's purview - we will lead this Congress' economic agenda in response to China," Committee Chairman Patrick McHenry said in a statement.

The panel heard testimony from several expert witnesses and began to weigh an array of bills, including legislation to push for the exclusion of the PRC from international banking organizations if they are determined to have posed a threat to Taiwan or US interests and requiring the Treasury Secretary to pursue "more equitable treatment" of Taiwan at global financial institutions.

The House Armed Services Committee also held a hearing Tuesday on China's alleged threats to US national defense.

"China is the most challenging national security threat America has faced in 30 years. If we fail to acknowledge that, and take immediate action to deter it, the next 30 years could be devastating for our nation," Committee Chairman Mike Rogers said in hearing remarks.

Rogers also issued a statement Tuesday calling news that the PRC has surpassed the US in the total number of land-based fixed and mobile intercontinental ballistic missile launchers a "wake-up call" for the country. The US needs new capabilities and higher numbers to adjust its nuclear force posture and deter both China and Russia, Rogers said.

The hearings come following the transit of a Chinese balloon across the continental United States last week, which culminated in the US military shooting down the airship off the coast of the US state of North Carolina. The incident sparked condemnation of China by the United States, which claims the balloon was engaged in surveillance. However, China maintains that the airship was conducting scientific research.

House Republicans also launched a select committee on strategic competition between the United States and China for the new 118th Congress. The panel, which will be led by Republican Congressman Mike Gallagher, was established by bipartisan vote in January.

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Four in 10 Americans Approve of Biden's Job as President Prepares for SOTU Speech - Poll WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – Forty-one percent of Americans approve of US President Joe Biden's job performance, which is very close to the lowest level during his presidency, a new Reuters/Ipsos poll revealed on Tuesday just hours ahead of his major annual address to Congress.

Biden's 41% approval rating is just one percent higher than it was in January, the poll read.

The survey also revealed that 65% of Americans do not agree with the course their country is currently headed. Only 58% expressed this opinion a year ago.

A majority of Americans expressed disappointment with the steps the current administration is taking on the economic front. In particular, about 55 percent opposed raising the debt ceiling, the survey added.

However, despite Biden's low rating, most people still prefer Democrats over Republicans in some areas. 37% think that Democrats are handling healthcare issues better than their political opponents, and only 18% expressed a different opinion. On the issue of gun control, 34% of Americans support Democrats, and only 23% picked Republicans.

The Reuters/Ipsos poll took place last week among 1,029 adults across the US.

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No Progress on Issues Between OPCW, Syria Since Last UNSC Meeting - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, February 8 (Sputnik) - Efforts to clarify issues between the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Syria have not moved forward since last Security Council meeting on this issue, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu told the Security Council.

"Efforts by the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team (or DAT) to clarify all outstanding issues regarding the initial declaration and subsequent declarations of the Syrian Arab Republic have not progressed since the Council last met on this matter," Nakamitsu said on Tuesday.

The OPCW team has not received answers from Syria, she added.

The Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, said that the meeting on Syria, including the briefings done by the OPCW Director General Fernando Arias, were empty. He emphasized that if something should be discussed, then it is the "decline" of the organization.

Late January, the Investigation and Identification Team of OPCW concluded in its report that the Syrian Air Force carried out the deadly chemical weapons attack in the Syrian city of Duma in April 2018.

The Investigation and Identification Team was created at a special session of the OPCW in 2018 in response to calls by the United States and its allies to find those responsible for suspected chemical attacks on civilians in Syria, which they blamed on the government of President Bashar Assad.

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

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US Senator Says Twitter Suspended, Restored Account After Posting Hunting Profile Picture

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The social media platform Twitter suspended and later reinstated the official account of US Senator Steve Daines after he changed his profile picture to a photo of him and his wife hunting a pronghorn antelope, the lawmaker said in a statement.

"I am grateful Elon Musk reached out to me to resolve this issue and am glad that he recognizes that free speech is a bedrock of our country, and acted quickly to reinstate my Twitter account after being made aware of its suspension," Daines said in the statement on Tuesday.

Daines' account was locked on Monday night after he changed his profile picture to a photo of him and his wife posing beside an antelope after a hunt, the statement said. Twitter cited "graphic violence" as reason for the suspension, the statement said.

Twitter is amending its policy against showing blood in profile pictures to clarify that the blood must be visible without clicking on the photo itself, Twitter chief Elon Musk said on Tuesday in response to the matter. The intent of the policy is to prevent forcing users to see "gruesome" profile pictures, Musk said.

"The initial ban over the profile photo of my wife and me after a successful Montana antelope hunt was disappointing given the fact that it is no different than photos Montanans share on social media every day," Daines' statement said.

The rest of the United States benefits from the acceptance of diverse thoughts and values, including Montana values, Daines added.

Twitter's free speech policies and handling of account suspensions have undergone reforms since Musk acquired the platform last year, including reactivating the account of former President Donald Trump.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) -

#### EARTHQUAKES IN TURKEY, SYRIA

\* The death toll from Monday's earthquake in Turkey has increased to 5,434 and another 31,777 people have been injured, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said on Tuesday.

\* Russian servicemen continue rescue work in Syria after the devastating earthquake, having saved 42 people and found another 57 people dead in the rubble, Maj. Gen. Oleg Egorov, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said.

\* Syria is ready to allow the delivery of aid to all regions of the country, provided that it does not fall into the hands of terrorist groups, Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told Al-Mayadeen broadcaster.

\* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan intends to visit on Wednesday the zone of the devastating earthquake, which, according to the latest data, claimed the lives of about 5,500 people, a source in Ankara told Sputnik.

\* Erdogan declared a state of emergency for three months in ten provinces affected by the devastating earthquakes.

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The United States has charged Russian national Vladimir Voronchenko, an alleged associate of Russian businessman Viktor Vekselberg, with sanctions evasion and money laundering, the US Justice Department announced on Tuesday.

\* The US Treasury Department will remove sanctions on the former subsidiary of Russia's Sberbank located in Kazakhstan because the entity is now owned by a Kazakh company, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

#### GLOBAL OIL FORECAST

\* Russia's production of petroleum and other energy liquids is expected to average 9.9 million barrels per day this year, down 1.1 million from 2022, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO) on Tuesday.

\* Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, is expected to trade about 17% lower on the average this year than in 2022, the US EIA said.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* The prospects for peace in Ukraine will be in sight when the arms buildup stops in the conflict-torn country, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

\* The German government has issued a permit for the supply of 178 Leopard 1 tanks to Ukraine, deliveries will take place in the summer and next year, the Spiegel magazine reported.

\* Russian ministry liberated Soledar, Klishchiivka, Pidhirne, Krasnopillia, Blahodatne, Lobkove and Mykolaivka in the the Donetsk People's Republic's (DPR) and Zaporizhzhia regions, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

\* Russian troops continue to destroy all the weapons supplied to Kiev, in January Ukrainian troops lost more than 6,500 military, 26 aircraft, 7 helicopters, 208 drones, 341 tanks and other armored vehicles, Shoigu said.

#### GAS EXPLOSION IN RUSSIA

\* Four people were killed in a gas explosion in a five-story residential building the city of Efremov in Russia's Tula Region, five were rescued, two more remain under the rubble, the Russian Emergencies Ministry (EMERCOM) told Sputnik on Tuesday.

\* Four people remain under the rubble after a gas explosion in a five-story residential building the city of Efremov in Russia's Tula Region, seven people were rescued, head of regional EMERCOM Alexey Pavlov said.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* Trade between the United States and Russia increased in the month of December of 2022 with US exports to the Russian Federation rising to \$112.8 million, compared to \$62.6 million the previous month, the Commerce Department said on Tuesday.

\* The US Embassy was handed a note on Tuesday demanding to stop interfering in Russia's internal affairs, a source close to the leadership of the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

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State Dept. Approves Possible \$10Bln Sale of Himars Launchers, Ammunition to Poland

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The State Department has approved a possible sale of \$10 billion worth of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers and related equipment to Poland, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said on Tuesday, "The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Poland of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$10 billion. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today," the DSCA said.

Poland has requested to buy 18 M142 HIMARS launchers, 468 HIMARS Launcher Loader Module kits; 45 M57 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS); 461 M30A2 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System Alternative Warhead (GMLRS-AW) pods with Insensitive Munitions Propulsion System (IMPS); 521 M31A2 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System Unitary (GMLRS-U) pods with Insensitive Munitions Propulsion System (IMPS); and 532 XM403 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System Extended Range Alternative Warhead (GMLRS-ER AW) pods, among other equipment.

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Biden Admin Opposes Bill to End Covid-19 Vaccination Travel Requirement - White House

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration opposes efforts by Congress to overturn a rule requiring travelers to the United States to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19, the White House's Office of Management (OMB) and Budget said in a statement on Tuesday.

"While COVID-19 is no longer the disruptive threat that it once was, the Administration opposes Congressional action to reverse the vaccination requirement for noncitizen nonimmigrants entering the United States by air," the statement said.

The US House of Representatives earlier on Tuesday advanced legislation that would terminate the proof-of-vaccination requirement, which was imposed at the height of the pandemic on the advice of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the statement from the OMB suggests that Biden could veto the legislation in the event that it passes both chambers of Congress and gets sent to his desk.

It remains unclear whether the legislation will make it through the US Senate, in which Democrats currently hold the majority.

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Fed Could Opt for Stronger Rates But Also Wants to Give Disinflation a Chance - Powell

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve might go back to stronger rate hikes if US jobs and wage growth continue to surprise, although the central bank wants to give disinflation, which has only just begun, a chance to set in, Chairman Jerome Powell said Tuesday.

"If strong labor market reports or higher inflation reports continue, the Fed may need to raise rates more than is currently priced in," Powell said during a chat on the economy hosted by the Economic Club of Washington. At the same time, the Fed chair said: "Disinflation has begun but it has a long way to go. This process is likely to take quite a bit of time, it's likely to be bumpy, not smooth."

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) grew at 6.5% per annum in December, its slowest since October 2021. Still, that was more than three times the Fed's target of 2% per annum. Prior to the slowdown, inflation hit four-decade highs in June when it expanded at 9.1% yearly from the impact of trillions of dollars of relief spending during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Fed has increased interest rates by 450 basis points over the past year, taking them to a peak of 4.75% from just 0.25% after the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

The central bank's main guide for rates has been the monthly non-farm payrolls, or NFP, report released by the Labor Department. The labor market has been the juggernaut of US economic recovery from the pandemic, with hundreds of thousands of jobs being added without fail since June 2020 to make up for the initial loss of 20 million jobs to the COVID-19 crisis.

While the Fed has tried to keep pace with the NFP reports to set rate hikes accordingly, the jobs data sometimes land after the Fed's scheduled monthly meeting on rates. Case in point was February's modest rate hike of 25 basis points — compared with December's 50-basis points — when the Labor Department belatedly reported that jobs grew to 517,000 from 260,000 in the previous month.

"The labor market is extraordinarily strong," Powell acknowledged at Tuesday's chat on the economy. "We think this will be a process that takes a significant period of time" for it to cool, he added.

Powell also said it will be well into 2024 for the Fed to get inflation back to 2% per annum — a target the central bank has held for a quarter century and which he described as a "global benchmark." "It will almost certainly take until next year to get down to 2%," he said.

The Fed's next decision on rates will be on March 16, well after the release of the February NFP report on March 3.

Should there be another round of heady jobs growth this month, then the central bank's policy-making FOMC, or Federal Open Market Committee, will almost certainly be rethinking the merits of continuing with February's 25-basis point hike, said analysts, who see a potential return to December's 50-basis point increase.

"The real risk is how many rate hikes we could have going forward, rather than the quantum of the next hike," Saira Malik, chief investment officer at asset manager Nuveen, said.

Powell, at a news conference after this month's FOMC meeting, said he expected "a couple more" hikes to get rates to what he called a "restrictive stance" to fight inflation. The Fed's next two meetings are in March and May.

Economists are, however, betting the volatile jobs market will force the central bank to raise rates at least two more times beyond what Powell anticipates. The FOMC's meetings after May are scheduled in June and July.

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Nobody Held Accountable for Crimes in Iraq, But Having Tribunal Today Unrealistic-Nebenzia

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Nobody has really been held accountable for the crimes committed in Iraq, however, having some sort of tribunal at this point is unrealistic, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"There are many things in this world left uninvestigated and of course the Iraqi hoax was never properly investigated, nobody paid real responsibility for the crimes committed in Iraq,"

Nebenzia said. "And I shall not be explaining to you why today to think that there will be something like a tribunal on the Iraqi war, would be a little bit unrealistic. People are busy with other things these days."

Sunday marked the 20th anniversary of the infamous meeting where then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell told the UNSC that he had first-hand information about the technologies for the production of biological weapons allegedly available to then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

While Powell's presentation failed to persuade the council to pass a resolution to back the US invasion of Iraq, it ended up undermining Washington's credibility, as no weapons of mass destruction were later found in the Middle Eastern country.

In March 2003, the US-led coalition invaded Iraq and overthrew the country's president, Saddam Hussein, ushering in more than a decade of instability in the country and across the region.

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US Charges Alleged Associate of Tycoon Vekselberg With Sanctions Evasion - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged Russian national Vladimir Voronchenko, an alleged associate of Russian businessman Viktor Vekselberg, with sanctions evasion and money laundering, the Justice Department announced on Tuesday.

"A federal court in New York unsealed an indictment today charging a citizen of the Russian Federation and legal permanent resident of the United States with participating in a scheme to

make over \$4 million in U.S. dollar payments to maintain four real properties in the United States that were owned by Viktor Vekselberg, a sanctioned oligarch, as well as to attempt to sell two of those properties," the press release said.

The 70-year-old is also charged with contempt of court in connection with his flight from the United States after he got a grand jury subpoena requiring his personal appearance and testimony.

"On or about May 13, 2022, federal agents served Voronchenko on Fisher Island with a Grand Jury subpoena, which called for his personal appearance for testimony and his production of documents," the release added. "Approximately nine days later, on or about May 22, 2022, Voronchenko took a flight from Miami, Florida to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and then went to Moscow, Russia. Voronchenko failed to appear before the grand jury and has not returned to the United States."

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Cross-Line Access Available for States to Send Aid to Syria After Earthquake - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - Cross-line access is available for countries wishing to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria after the devastating earthquake and the Syrian government is ready to assist them, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Bassam Sabbagh said on Tuesday.

"The cross-line is available and the Syrian government is ready to help support any countries who want to provide shelters, food supplies, medications," Sabbagh said during a press briefing. "We can help , we can support, we can work with [them]."

Sabbagh pointed out that the Aleppo airport is already receiving humanitarian assistance and the crossing point is about 40km from the airport.

The ambassador reiterated that it is possible to provide much-needed assistance and the Syrian government is committed to efficiently helping deliver the provided aid.

On Monday, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said the world body finds it more efficient to deliver aid to Syrians through the cross-border mechanism via Turkey rather than the cross-line option, which coordinates deliveries from within the country.

The United Nations will try to provide as much aid as possible through whatever way it finds available, Dujarric added.

In January, the UN Security Council unanimously extended a resolution on cross-border aid to Syria until July 10. The document allows UN aid deliveries via the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Syrian border with Turkey. Nevertheless, Russia believes aid to Syria should be provided through cross-line deliveries, which are facilitated by Damascus and the Syrian authorities.

Early on Monday, a magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck southeastern Turkey and northern Syria, causing significant material damage and casualties.

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Aftermath of Earthquake is Opportunity to Put Politics Aside, Help to Those in Need - UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - The earthquake aftermath creates an opportunity to focus on helping people instead of focusing on politics, the United Nations Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"This is an opportunity to put politics aside, and to focus on what is needed urgently to help men, women and children whose lives have been devastated by one of the most serious earthquakes we have seen in a long time," Dujarric told a briefing.

The United Nations is still calculating the estimates of how much money will be needed to help Turkey and Syria.

Earlier today, the Turkish Health Ministry reported that the earthquake death toll increased to 5,434, and another 31,777 people were injured.

A massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake, followed by several powerful aftershocks, hit Turkey and Syria on Monday, causing significant material damage and loss of life.

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Info From Syria to OPCW on Chemical Weapons Use on Its Territory Was Ignored - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - Information given to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on terrorists using chemical weapons against Syria was ignored, Syrian Ambassador Bassam Sabbagh said on Tuesday.

"We have plenty of information given to the OPCW, given to the United Nations, Security Council and 1540 committee. All this information is basically ignored. Never dealt with," the Ambassador told a briefing. "At least, to my memory, more than 100 times we sent information to the OPCW and to the UN regarding attempts by terrorist armed groups to either use or fabricate the use of chemical weapons."

Syria requested investigations on 5 incidents in which terrorists used chemical weapons against Syria, he added.

The Syrian Ambassador briefed reporters together with the Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia, who was present to support Syria in disproving the OPCW reports.

In January, the Investigation and Identification Team of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) concluded that the Syrian Air Force carried out the deadly chemical weapons attack in the Syrian city of Douma in April 2018.

Russia has voiced its dissatisfaction with the behavior of OPCW Director General Fernando Arias for a long time and does not agree with his conclusions and approach.

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#### Trump Denies Chinese Balloons Traversed US Airspace During His Tenure

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Tuesday rebuffed the Pentagon's statements that suspected spy balloons from China flew over the country undetected under his administration.

On Monday, Gen. Glen VanHerck, commander of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, admitted the country's failure to detect past Chinese balloons. It came after media reported, citing defense officials, that at least three suspected Chinese surveillance balloons had traveled over the continental US during the Trump administration and at least one previously during the Biden administration.

"No Balloons from China flew over the United States, in any way, shape, or form, while I was President. If they did we would have shot them down, immediately!" Trump wrote on Truth Social.

Last week, a high-altitude Chinese balloon, which the Pentagon says was conducting surveillance, was spotted over the United States before a fighter jet shot it down on Saturday. China argued the airship was engaged in scientific research, but the incident nevertheless sparked a diplomatic row, including the postponement of a visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Beijing.

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#### Russian Envoy to UN Says No Prospects for Ukraine Peace Until Arms Buildup Stops

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - The prospects for peace in Ukraine will be in sight when the arms buildup stops in the conflict-torn country, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"I hope that when this arms buildup and this madness about it... will stop and when those who promote it will stop their proxy war against us with the help of the poor Ukrainians who are dying for them, when they are realistic in heeding to our concerns, which we very clearly stated from day one, then I think the prospects of peace will be near," Nebenzia said. "So far, I don't see any readiness of the other side to engage in anything meaningful."

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#### US to Remove Sanctions on Former Subsidiary of Russia's Sberbank in Kazakhstan - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department will remove sanctions on the former subsidiary of Russia's Sberbank located in Kazakhstan because the entity is now owned by a Kazakh company, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

The US government sanctioned the bank, which was previously called Subsidiary Bank Sberbank of Russia Joint Stock Co., soon after Russia started its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

On September 1, the Kazakhstan government-owned company National Managing Holding Co. Baiterek purchased more than 99% of the shares in the former Sberbank subsidiary, changing the entity's name to Bereke Bank Joint Stock Co. and replacing its board, the report said.

Baiterek's chief executive then sent the US Treasury Department a petition to remove the bank from its sanctions list effective March 6 and the latter decided the former Sberbank subsidiary no longer met the criteria for sanctions after receiving assurances it would not be engaged in sanctionable activities and would release proprietary information to the US government when requested, the report added.

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US Charges 23 People in \$61.5Mln Medicare Fraud Schemes – DOJ

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – Twenty-three Michigan residents have been charged for their involvement in two illegal schemes to defraud Medicare of more than \$61.5 million by paying kickbacks and bribes and billing Medicare for unnecessary medical services that were never provided, the Justice Department said on Tuesday,

"According to court documents, Walid Jamil, 62, and Jalal Jamil, 69, both of Oakland County, owned and operated several home health agencies in the Detroit metropolitan area," the department said in a press release. "They allegedly concealed their ownership interest in these agencies using straw owners – including family members and other associates – and submitted approximately \$50 million in fraudulent home health care claims to Medicare."

Both men paid bribes to other co-conspirators to recruit patients in violation of the Federal Anti-Kickback Statute, according to the release.

"These patients did not need home health care, did not qualify for home health care under Medicare rules, and in many instances were not actually provided the care for which Medicare was billed," it said. "Walid and Jalal Jamil allegedly entered into quid pro quo relationships with physician clinics to receive the necessary information to fraudulently bill Medicare. Based on their fraudulent claims, Walid and Jalal Jamil received more than \$43 million from Medicare, which they misappropriated for their personal benefit."

Other people charged in this scheme include employees of the Jamil home health agencies and a registered nurse employed by the health agencies as well as recruiters paid by various Jamil home health agencies to refer them Medicare beneficiaries for home health services that were then billed to Medicare, even though the claims were not eligible for reimbursement.

Another scheme involves Radwan Malas, 43, of Oakland County, who operated home visiting physician company Infinity and allegedly ordered the physicians he employed to certify patients referred by Walid Jamil and Jalal Jamil for medically unnecessary home health services.

As part of this scheme, the defendants billed Medicare more than \$11.5 million in fraudulent claims and they were paid almost \$4 million, which they used for their personal use. DOJ officials alleged that Malas laundered the money gained from illegal financial transactions.

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Senior US Official to Visit Moldova, France for Talks on Ukraine, Economy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Jose Fernandez will visit Moldova and France to discuss a range of issues, including the situation in Ukraine, economic cooperation and clean energy, the State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose W. Fernandez will travel to Chisinau, Moldova, February 8-10, and Paris, France, February 12-15," the statement said.

Fernandez will meet with government, business, civil society and other "stakeholders" to discuss cooperation on some of the most pressing global challenges, including supply chain resilience, the clean energy transition and climate change, and protecting and promoting critical and emerging technologies, the statement said

While in Paris, Fernandez will also discuss issues pertaining to Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. He will also lead the US delegation to the Responsible Business Conduct ministerial of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, the statement said. In Chisinau, Fernandez will discuss the economic situation in Moldova and the negative impacts from the conflict in Ukraine as well as bilateral trade and investment and energy security, the statement added.

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Russia's Martyshev to be Transferred From US to Russia by Thursday - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – Russian national Yury Martyshev, who served more than five years in a US prison on charges of computer hacking, will be transferred from the United States and arrive back to Russia by Thursday, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Today we expect that Yuri will be transferred from the detention facility in Lumpkin, Georgia, and that he will be ultimately put to the flight to Doha, Qatar with the expected arrival to Moscow on Thursday of this week," Tarasov said.

Martyshev is then expected be transferred from the US to Doha on Wednesday, he added.

"The US government has made those decisions and purchased tickets for those flights. We do not have any input as to how it is done. I just assume that that this is the best scenario that they were able to come up with," Tarasov said.

Martyshev is very excited to come back to Russia and be reunited with his family, the lawyer added.

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Global Crude Benchmark Brent Forecast at \$83.63/Barrel in 2023 - US EIA

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, is expected to trade about 17% lower on the average this year than in 2022, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a forecast issued Tuesday.

The EIA's Short-Term Energy Outlook, or STEO, released each month, put Brent's like average price for 2023 at \$83.63 per barrel versus the actual average of \$100.94 in 2022.

For 2024, the forecast average was even lower, at \$77.57 per barrel.

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Russia Petroleum, Energy Liquids Output Seen at 9.9Mln Barrels Daily in 2023 - US EIA

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Russia's production of petroleum and other energy liquids is expected to average 9.9 million barrels per day this year, down 1.1 million from 2022, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO) on Tuesday.

"Our forecast for Russia's 2023 production is 0.4 million b/d more than in the January STEO because crude oil liftings data suggest that Russia's exports have remained higher than we expected following the EU's ban on seaborne imports of crude oil from Russia that began on December 5," the EIA said.

The EIA, which serves as the statistical arm of the US Energy Department, also said that it expected Russian oil production to taper in the later part of the year.

"We still forecast Russia's oil production to fall in the coming months, as we expect the EU's ban on seaborne petroleum products from Russia that began February 5 will cause refineries in Russia to reduce crude oil inputs, which will disrupt crude oil production," the EIA added.

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### Canada to Provide Turkey, Syria With \$7.4Mln in Immediate Disaster Relief - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Tuesday that Ottawa will provide C\$10 million (U\$7.4 million) in immediate disaster relief to Turkey and Syria and will continue as the post-earthquake situation in the two countries evolves. "After yesterday's devastating earthquakes, we're providing \$10 million in immediate aid to the people of Turkey and Syria - and we'll continue to provide support as the situation evolves. Our partners are already distributing food, emergency fuel, and shelter items," Trudeau said via Twitter.

Earlier on Tuesday, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly reported in a tweet that she had spoken with Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu to express her condolences for the loss of life, adding Ottawa was ready to provide support to Türkiye.

A massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake, followed by several powerful aftershocks, hit Turkey and Syria on Monday, causing significant material damage and loss of life. The death toll for Turkey stands at 3,703 with 22,286 people injured, while the death toll for Syria stands at 812 with 1,449 people injured.

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### US House Republicans Say Biden Must Answer for 'Failed Leadership'

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden must answer for his "failed leadership" regarding the US border crisis, runaway inflation, increasing national debt and national security failures such as the situation with the Chinese balloon over the United States, Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik said on Tuesday.

"Joe Biden must answer for his failed leadership, whether it's the border crisis continuing to rage at our southern border, crushing inflation and over \$30 trillion in national debt, or a balloon from communist China entering into United States sovereign airspace, Joe Biden has caused a crisis in America," Stefanik said during a press conference on the US House Republican Agenda. The congresswoman emphasized that families in the United States cannot further afford Biden's "failed policies" and "far left agenda."

Stefanik said the Republicans are working on providing checks and oversight on the Biden administration because they remain committed to the United States and the principles of freedom as well as the practice of government accountability and a strong economy.

US House Republicans will continue to deliver on their promises and to hold the Biden administration accountable, she added.

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### Ex-Employee of Crypto Exchange Pleads Guilty to Insider Trading - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - A former product manager at cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase has pleaded guilty to insider trading using confidential information about which crypto assets were scheduled to be listed on the cryptocurrency exchange, the Justice Department said Tuesday.

Ishan Wahi, a 32-year-old from Seattle in Washington state, pleaded guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit so-called wire fraud, which each carry, respectively, a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, a statement from the department said.

"Wahi is the first insider to admit guilt in an insider trading case involving the cryptocurrency markets," Damian Williams, US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, said in the statement, adding that the accused even revealed that he tipped others regarding Coinbase's planned token listings so that they could trade in crypto assets for a profit.

Coinbase is one of the world's largest cryptocurrency exchanges.

Wahi was arrested and charged in July 2022, the statement said.

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Fentanyl-Related Deaths in US 'Unacceptably High' Despite Recent Decrease - White House

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The number of deaths related to fentanyl use remain "unacceptably high" despite a recent decrease, the White House said on Tuesday.

"Under President [Joe] Biden's leadership, overdose deaths and poisonings have decreased for five months in a row, but these deaths remain unacceptably high and are primarily caused by fentanyl," the White House said in a news release.

Biden plans to announce possible key actions in order to tackle this issue in his upcoming State of the Union speech later on Tuesday, the release said.

Some of the actions include disrupting the trafficking, distribution and sale of fentanyl, the release said.

"In just the last year, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has seized a historic 260,000 pounds of illicit drugs primarily at ports of entry on our border, including nearly 15,000 pounds of fentanyl," the release said.

Moreover, the Drug Enforcement Administration seized more than 26,000 pounds of fentanyl in fiscal year 2022, the release added.

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US Trade Deficit at Record High of Almost \$950Bln in 2022 - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit hit a record high of almost \$950 billion in 2022 as imports surged and exports slipped, data from the Commerce Department showed Tuesday.

Imports from America's trading partners, led by consumer goods and automobiles, hit \$3.96 trillion, up \$556.1 billion from 2021.

Exports, made up largely by industrial supplies and materials, stood at \$3.01 trillion, up \$453.1 billion from the previous year.

The difference led to a trade deficit of \$948.1 billion, with the gap growing by \$103 billion from the 2021 figure of \$845 billion.

Despite the yawning deficit, analysts said trade has been a positive factor in GDP growth in 2022, as US exports improved over imports in the latter half of the year.

Real GDP, or gross domestic product, grew by a markedly slower 2.1% in 2022 after a 5.9% expansion in 2021.

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UN Experts Found No Evidence of North Korea Supplying Arms to Russia - Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - UN experts found no evidence to corroborate the United States' allegations North Korea supplied weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine, a diplomatic source familiar with the report submitted to the UN Security Council committee told Sputnik.

The experts submitted their confidential report to the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea, according to the source.

"Experts did not find any evidence that the US accusations regarding the supply of weapons from the DPRK to Russia have at least some basis," the diplomatic source said.

In an interview with Rossiya 24 and RIA Novosti last week, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia's defense industry is working fine, when asked to comment on claims North Korea and Iran were helping Moscow with weapons.

In December, North Korea dismissed the allegations as "the most absurd rumor."

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Biden to Discuss International Alliance on Ukraine in State of Union Address - White House

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden plans to discuss in his annual State of the Union address to the Congress the alliance of countries assembled "to protect and defend" Ukraine, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"The President is going to talk about the continuing that alliance, that international alliance to protect and defend Ukraine," Jean-Pierre told MSNBC.

Jean-Pierre noted that in the foreign policy part of his speech Biden plans to talk about China, including the recent situation regarding the Chinese balloon that was downed off the coast of the US state of South Carolina.

“Foreign policy, the president’s vision for the world, was always going to be part of the State of the Union address. That certainly includes how we have been moving forward with dealing with managing strategic competition with China. That is something that the President is going to talk about. Of course, we will take the latest news into account, as we prepare for the State of the Union,” she said.

Biden will emphasize in his speech the resetting of the United States’ leadership across the world, Jean-Pierre said.

Biden is set to deliver his speech on the state of the union at 9:00 p.m. EST (2:00 a.m. GMT on Wednesday).

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China Possesses More Land-Based Intercontinental-Range Missile Launchers Than US - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - China possesses more land-based intercontinental-range ballistic missile launchers than the United States, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing a report by the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) to Congress. The number of land-based fixed and mobile intercontinental ballistic missile launchers in China exceeds the number of such launchers in the United States, the report cited STRATCOM as saying to the US House and Senate Armed Services Committees.

The report also cited US officials that many of China’s land-based launchers allegedly still have empty silos.

However, STRATCOM’s report to Congress said that the United States has more intercontinental-range land-based missiles and more nuclear warheads mounted on those missiles, according to the newspaper.

US officials also said that STRATCOM’s report did not include in its calculations submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers, noting that the United States has an advantage in those kinds of weapon systems.

China is on course to achieve superiority over the United States in land-based strategic nuclear forces unless Washington invests heavily in modernizing its land-based long-range missile force, STRATCOM chief Adm. Charles Richard told Congress in March.

Richard said he had previously warned that China’s nuclear and conventional military forces had reached a new level of capability amounting to a strategic “breakout” that changed the global balance of power.

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## Canada, Taiwan Will Begin Formal Talks to Boost Foreign Investments – Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – Canada and Taiwan have agreed to begin formal talks on a deal to boost and protect foreign investments, Global Affairs Canada said on Tuesday. "Today, the Honourable Mary Ng, Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, spoke with Taiwan's Minister without Portfolio, John Deng, in the capacity of Trade Representative. The two Ministers discussed their shared ambition to strengthen trade and investment between Canada and Taiwan, and agreed to begin formal negotiations on a Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Arrangement," Global Affairs said in a statement.

The two agreed on the importance of creating greater access to investment potential for both Canadian and Taiwanese businesses, the statement said. They also committed to building on current trading relationship, particularly in the advanced manufacturing sectors and agriculture. Canada considers Taiwan a "key" trade and investment partner, and the negotiations will secure new opportunities for sustainable growth and increased collaboration, Ng was quoted as saying in the statement.