

**2/15/23 Wednesday**

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China's Wang Yi Embarks on Trip to Mend Rift With Europe Amid US 'Decoupling' Attempts  
By - Fantine Gardinier

Wang Yi, the Communist Party of China's chief diplomatic official, is touring several countries in Europe over the next week as part of an attempt to shore up relations with a continent composed primarily of US allies waging a proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, with which China has a "no-limits" relationship.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said Wang was invited to visit France, Italy, Hungary, and Russia on a trip lasting from February 14 until February 22. Several of those days will also be spent at the Munich Security Conference in southern Germany, where unconfirmed rumors have [indicated he may meet](#) with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"At the security conference, which a Chinese official hasn't attended since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, Wang will "communicate the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security advocated by President Xi Jinping, make clear China's abiding commitment to peaceful development and share China's position on major international issues in light of the theme of the Conference," [the ministry said](#).

Analysts speaking with Chinese media noted that [the Munich conference](#) is significant because it comes as Russia's special operation in Ukraine nears its one-year mark, but also because the US has significantly ramped up tensions across the Taiwan Strait by supporting the rebel movement in Taiwan.

"The world wishes to hear China's voice and know more about China's stance on these issues and questions," Cui Hongjian, director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, was quoted as saying.

Wang is also expected to discuss trade ties with members of the 16+1 trade group, a group of Central and Eastern European nations with which Beijing has worked to improve trade ties since 2012. However, several states have left the group in recent years in protest over [what they claim](#) are human rights violations in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, China's westernmost province and the home of the Uyghur people.

However, Wang's trip will only be a shadow of what was intended, since a parallel delegation of Xinjiang officials intended to soothe European anxieties about doing business in Xinjiang suddenly postponed their trip on Monday. According to news reports, their explanation gave few details, only referencing "scheduling reasons" and "an important domestic agenda."

Analysts have noted that Beijing occupies a precarious political position: it wants to trade and have friendly relations with the West as well as countries that, like China itself, the US and its allies have declared a threat to the "rules-based international order," such as Iran and Russia. Beijing cannot afford to become "decoupled" from either group, which is a major reason it has not taken sides in the year-long conflict in Ukraine between Russia and NATO-armed Ukrainian forces operating largely as a Western proxy army.

However, Beijing hasn't backed down from its increasingly close friendship with Moscow, either, and Wang is expected to discuss further deepening that partnership during his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two nations held joint naval drills in the East China Sea in December and they often drill their armies together at Russia's annual Vostok war games in Siberia.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Wang Wenbin told reporters](#) earlier this week that the two nations "are comprehensive strategic partners of coordination for a new era" and have "maintained the momentum of sound and steady development and cooperation in various areas has yielded fruitful outcomes" in recent years.

"During the visit, Wang Yi will have an in-depth exchange of views on the growth of China-Russia relations going forward and international and regional hotspot issues of shared interest," Wang Wenbin explained.

"China is ready to take this visit as an opportunity and work with Russia to promote steady growth of bilateral relations in the direction identified by the two heads of state, defend the legitimate rights and interests of both sides, and play an active role for world peace."

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American Actress Raquel Welch Dead at 82

By - Fantine Gardinier

Sex symbol and actress Jo Raquel Welch, who was best known for her role in One Million Years BC, has died at the age of 82.

Welch's family told US media that the star had died on Wednesday morning following a brief illness.

Born in Chicago in 1940 to English and Bolivian parents, Welch pursued public performance from an early age, including ballet dancing, beauty pageantry, and theater. After winning a number of smaller roles on television, Welch's big Hollywood break came in 1966 in Fantastic Voyage, in which she played Cora Peterson, a medical professional who was shrunk down small enough to fit inside a tiny submarine that would travel through the blood vessels of a sick patient's body to perform micro-surgery.

She also starred in One Million Years BC later that year, a film in which she had only three lines of dialogue, but nonetheless propelled the film to success thanks to the film posters on which she posed in a deerskin bikini. Welch became an instant sex symbol.

Welch later said that she nearly died during production of the film after contracting tonsillitis, which she attributed to wearing the revealing outfit in harsh weather conditions.

"I had already so much penicillin when I was wearing the fur bikini that I almost died," she said.

"I had to rush, turn my car around and head right back to the doctor's office, just run upstairs, jump in the elevator and all that. And I barely got there. They had to shoot me with an antidote. Otherwise, I would have died. It was really rough shoot, man. Really rough."

She later starred in films such as Fathom (1967); Lady in Cement (1967); The Three Musketeers (1973) and The Four Musketeers (1974), the latter of which won her a Golden

Globe for Best Actress; *Mother, Jugs and Speed* (1976); and a Broadway adaptation of *Woman of the Year* (1981).

She was named one of the "100 Sexiest Stars in Film History" in a 1995 issue of *Empire* magazine and was also ranked third in *Playboy's* "100 Sexiest Stars of the 20th Century." Welch was married four times throughout her life: to James Welch (1959-1964), Patrick Curtis (1967-1972), Andre Weinfeld (1980-1990), and Richard Palmer (1999-2004). She is survived by two children: daughter Tahnee and son Damon Welch.

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Snakes Can Hear You Scream, Scientists Say  
By - Fantine Gardinier

Previously, it was widely held that snakes could not hear sound waves carried through the air in any significant capacity, although some ability was known.

I scream, you scream, we all scream - when we see a snake! According to new research that debunks long-held assumptions about snake senses, the slithery serpents can actually hear you when you scream.

The research, printed in the Public Library of Science's peer-reviewed publication [PLOS ONE](#) on Tuesday, describes numerous snake responses to sound across a range of frequencies that did not produce ground vibrations, which snakes are already known to use to navigate.

"We conducted 304 controlled experiment trials on 19 snakes across five genera in a sound-proof room (4.9 x 4.9 m) at 27°C, observing the effects of three sounds on individual snake behavior, compared to controls," the scientists wrote, who were all based in Queensland, Australia. The sounds were played at 85 decibels, or roughly as loud as a person screaming. At different frequencies, the scientists observed eight different snake behaviors, including body movement, body freezing, head-flicks, tongue-flicks, hissing, periscoping (when a curious snake lifts up to one-third of its body off the ground), head fixation, and dropping of their lower jaw, in response to three sounds.

The responses were highly genus-dependent, with *Woma* Pythons significantly increasing their movement in response, and *Death Adders*, *Taipans*, and *Australian Brown Snakes* all moving away from the sound. They also noted that *Taipans* took up defensive postures, while three of the five genera showed a variety of other dispositions.

The python was notably the only nonvenomous snake tested, and the only one not to flee from the sound. The *Death Adder*, an ambush predator, also showed inferior hearing ability to the *Taipans* and *Australian Brown Snakes*, both of which are active hunters.

"Our results highlight potential heritable behavioral responses of snakes to sound, clustered within genera," they concluded. "Our study illustrates the behavioral variability among different snake genera, and across sound frequencies, which contributes to our limited understanding of hearing and behavior in snakes."

Snakes don't have external ears like humans do, but they do possess all the internal workings of an ear, allowing them to feel vibrations in their skull and make sense of them. The experiment

proves that this doesn't just help them feel ground vibrations, it lets them detect some sounds traveling through the air, too.

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Rare Footage From 1986 Exploration of Titanic Wreck Released on Blockbuster Film's 25th Anniversary

By - Fantine Gardinier

Never-before-seen footage from the 1986 expedition to the wreck of the RMS Titanic on the Atlantic seafloor was released on Wednesday, timed to coincide with the re-release of the Hollywood film about the disaster on the 25th anniversary of it entering theaters.

The new footage, filmed by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute (WHOI) in Massachusetts in conjunction with the French oceanographic research group IFREMER, was captured during a 1986 expedition. It totals more than 80 minutes and is in both black-and-white and full color. A short preview was given to US media ahead of the full release on Wednesday night.

Much of it has never been seen by the public before.

The wreck was found in 1985, more than 73 years after the Titanic sank on a cold night in April 1912, about 400 miles east of Newfoundland. The massive passenger liner, which had been boasted to have a high-tech compartmentalized design that rendered her "unsinkable," [struck an iceberg](#) during its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City.

The gash in the ship's hull was more than the design could handle, and the ship rapidly filled with water, snapping in two before sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

Roughly 1,600 people died in the disaster and more than 700 survived, although the exact numbers are unknown due to inconsistencies in the passenger manifest and the chaotic way in which the ship was evacuated as it sank. More than 300 bodies were recovered from the sub-freezing seas, so most are assumed to have been trapped inside the ship.

The survivors were found by the passenger liner RMS Carpathia at about 4 a.m., which had steamed at recklessly high speed after receiving Titanic's distress call. It was roughly 4.5 hours after the Titanic had struck the iceberg and about two hours after the last of the Titanic had disappeared beneath the waves.

For more than half a century, the wreck's location remained a mystery, and several attempts to locate it using radar and sonar technology had failed. However, the US Navy agreed to sponsor a major expedition in 1985 after realizing that the technology needed to find the Titanic could be used to find other wrecks, too, such as the sunk submarines USS Scorpion and USS Thresher, the latter of which had been lost off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, not far from where Titanic sank.

Titanic was found in two pieces, having snapped in half likely due to hull stress as it sank unevenly, in more than 12,000 feet of water. The debris field was scattered for miles around the wreck, and was how Woods Hole oceanographer Robert Ballard and French explorer

Jean-Louis Michel spotted it. After exploring it with an underwater drone, Ballard descended to view the wreck in-person in a deep-sea submersible called ALVIN.

Subsequent missions produced a detailed account of how the ship sank and crashed into the seafloor, and even yielded the details of the iceberg impact. Film director [James Cameron](#) sponsored a dozen such trips, using the information gathered to produce his 1997 blockbuster film about a love story aboard the ship during its fateful 1912 journey. The film was widely hailed for its incredible attention to detail in recreating the ship's appearance. It won 11 Oscars.

The wreck is steadily deteriorating in the salt water, with about 1 ton of iron turning to rust every day. Eventually, it will collapse on itself and become a pile of oxidized iron on the seafloor.

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Police: At Least One Person Killed, Three Injured After Texas Mall Shooting

The city of El Paso, Texas, was previously the site of the August 2019 mass shooting at a local area Walmart. The incident was described as the deadliest anti-Latino attack after the gunman killed 23 individuals and injured 23 others.

At least one person was killed on Wednesday after shots were fired at the Cielo Vista Mall in El Paso, Texas, law enforcement officials have confirmed.

Three other individuals sustained injuries. Their condition is unknown.

The El Paso Police Department has stated that the scene is presently secured after having taken one person into custody; however, the department's Sgt. Robert Gomez has stated authorities are carrying out a search to ensure there was only one perpetrator.

"We do believe there could be one outstanding," Gomez told reporters, but fell short of offering a description of the second suspect. He underscored there was no longer an active shooter situation.

Officials have yet to determine a possible motive for the shooting.

The sergeant described the scene to the media as "chaotic" as shoppers fled the scene and sought out shelter. "They were scared," Gomez recalled.

Report of a shooting came in at about 5 p.m. local time after dispatch received calls of shots fired at the mall's food court area.

Footage from the scene has noted a heavy police presence at the mall, with some estimates of over 50 police cruisers responding to the incident.

A wide array of officials from the El Paso Police Department, SWAT teams and authorities with other agencies responded to the scene. Dozens of officers armed with rifles have remained on the scene.

The Cielo Vista Mall is situated next to the same Walmart store where a Texas gunman with white supremacist beliefs gunned down shoppers in the store's parking lot and inside the grocery store. In total, 23 people were killed as another 23 sustained injuries. The gunman later surrendered to police and admitted the shooting was rooted in his anti-immigrant stance.

The shooting also comes just days after a gunman at [Michigan State University](#) killed three students and injured five other individuals. The suspect was later found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

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'Reckless Spending': Republicans Sound Alarm After CBO Report Warns of Debt Ceiling Catastrophe

By - Ian DeMartino

On Wednesday, the Congressional Budget Office issued its financial forecast that warned the US government would be unable to meet its financial obligations if Congress fails to not raise the debt ceiling by this summer.

Republicans and Democrats have been battling and debating if the debt ceiling should be raised without a corresponding cut in spending. Republicans want cuts to social services before the ceiling is raised, while President Joe Biden says he will not negotiate on whether the United States will pay its obligations.

Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen has warned that if the government defaults on its debt, it could lead to a recession.

While both parties are responsible for the debt, and the debt ceiling has been raised under Republican presidents far more often than under Democratic ones, Republican politicians wasted no time in placing the blame directly on Biden and the Democrats.

“Even without the debt ceiling being raised, every month the federal tax revenues that the federal government receives significantly exceeds the cost of paying interest on the debt,” Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) said in an interview with CBS News. “And Joe Biden could prioritize and say ‘we will not default.’ That would be the responsible thing to do. The person threatening default is Joe Biden.”

While it is true that tax revenues do exceed the cost of interest on the debt, all of those dollars have been allocated by Congress already. Paying the debt interest with only tax revenue would take significant cuts to spending, which is mostly earmarked for military spending and so-called “mandatory spending” for programs like Social Security that have been funded by taxpayers with the understanding the government has an obligation to pay them back.

Representative and chairman of the House Budget Committee Jody Arrington (R-TX) released a statement saying that the “damage of Democrat spending on the national debt is worse than we thought.”

“The new Congressional Budget Office report is a clear indication that Biden’s socialist policies and single-party Democrat rule has caused an unprecedented explosion in federal spending over the last two years – 21% higher than projected when Biden took office,” Arrington’s statement reads. “Biden’s numerous bailouts and massive government expansion disguised as COVID relief has blown out spending and exacerbated our debt disaster. As a result, the federal debt will grow by over \$22 trillion over the next 10 years.”

“House Republicans must rein-in the unbridled spending and restore fiscal sanity in Washington before it’s too late,” he added.

While Biden has been quick to point out that the deficit (the gap between annual government spending and tax revenues) has decreased during his tenure, it is significantly higher than the CBO predicted it would be if Biden had stuck with Trump-era spending.

Most of the reduction in the deficit was due to expiring COVID-19 relief spending and a growing economy for much of 2022. With the economy cooling, that is not expected to continue, and the deficit is expected to grow to 5.4% of the nation's gross domestic product, as Arrington contends.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) took to Twitter to express his frustrations with government spending.

“Democrats' reckless spending is plunging our country into deeper debt & jeopardizing our economy. A blank check for more spending will destroy our country,” McCarthy’s tweet read. “That's why we must negotiate a responsible debt limit increase that gets our fiscal house back in order.”

McCarthy would issue a dire warning in a later tweet.

“Unless we change course, we will spend \$10.45 trillion just on interest over the next 10 years. That is more than we will spend on defense, 3.5 times what we will spend on veterans programs, 1.5 times what we spend on Medicaid, and over 2/3 of what we will spend on Medicare.”

It is debatable if we will spend less than \$10.45 trillion on the military over the next ten years, not only because the military budget has been consistently increased over the past two decades, but because multiple things associated with the military aren’t included in the base Defense Department budget.

The Overseas Contingency Operation account, ostensibly designed to fund the “war on terror” but now used for a variety of Pentagon pet projects, is not included in the military budget. Neither is the Department of Energy, which makes sense until you realize the National Nuclear Security Administration, which secures US nuclear weapons and researches new ones, falls under the Department Of Energy’s budget and not the military budget.

Veteran Affairs, responsible for providing current and former soldiers with health care and support after service, is also a separate expenditure. As is the Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, and the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, among other programs. Likewise, with the CIA, National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and other foreign-focused agencies.

In 2019, The Nation [calculated](#) all the extra spending related to war but not a part of the official military budget and determined that the true cost of military spending was over \$1.25 trillion annually. At that time, the official military budget was only \$554.1 billion. For the fiscal 2023, that same budget is \$816.7 billion, not counting the aforementioned war-related programs.

While the rest of McCarthy’s statement could be called hyperbolic, the spirit of his warning rings largely true.

Meanwhile, the Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, Patrick McHenry (R-NC) called for compromise in a statement.

“Republicans have been and will continue to be reasonable in calling for discussions about how to lift the debt ceiling responsibly,” said McHenry. “No one is saying we won’t raise the debt ceiling. But Congress must use this as an opportunity to take stock of the federal government’s spending, which has been unsustainably high for far too long. As policymakers, we have a responsibility to get our fiscal house in order. Democrats must be willing to come to the table to sensibly rein in excessive spending and bring fiscal sanity back to Washington.”

If the debt ceiling is not raised, the CBO predicts that the US government will have to delay payments, default on debt or both between June and September of this year.

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Poll: Half of Americans Believe the Media Intentionally Misleads Them  
By - Ian DeMartino

Trust in the ‘Fourth Estate’ has been dropping among Americans since the poll started in 2017. A [survey](#) released by Gallup and the Knight Foundation on Wednesday has revealed that 50% of Americans disagreed with the statement that “news organizations do not intend to mislead” them. By comparison, only 25% agreed with the statement.

Slightly more, 52%, said they do not believe the national news cares about what is in the best interests of their audience.

More Democrats trust the national news compared to Republicans, which has been a consistent trend since the Knight Foundation started the survey in 2017. However, even among Democrats, the trust level is lower than it has been in previous years.

Only 45% of Democrats say they have an overall favorable view of the US media, compared to 54% who said the same in 2017. Independents have seen the sharpest increase during that same timeframe, with 66% of them saying they hold an unfavorable view of the media, compared to only 16% who say they have a favorable view. In 2017, 48% of Independents had an unfavorable view of the media.

Across all three political categories, the number of Americans holding a favorable view of the media is the lowest it has been since at least when the survey began, conversely, those holding an unfavorable view is the highest it has ever been.

The overwhelming majority of Americans, including Democrats and Independents, believe there is a political bias in news reporting, with 83% of Democrats and 94% of Republicans saying they see either “a great deal” or a “fair amount” of political bias.

Americans also don’t believe a lack of resources is the root cause of their unfavorable views of the media. Nearly three-fourths, 72%, believe that most national news outlets have the resources they need to accurately and fairly report the news, but only 35% believe the outlets can be relied on to deliver the information people need.

Local media fared better, with 52% of Americans believing they can be relied on to provide the news their audience needs.

The distrust of the national media reflects distrust in the government. Seventy-three percent of Americans say that while we live in a democracy “a few people will always run things anyway” and 57% believe the people who “really” run the country are not known to voters.

Last year, multiple outlets, including CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and others, finally but quietly admitted the infamous Hunter Biden laptop was legitimate and not Russian disinformation. When the New York Post first ran its story on the laptop, national outlets brought on “intelligence experts” either currently or formerly from the government, with most of them insisting the laptop was a fake created by “the Kremlin” to smear then-presidential candidate Joe Biden.

While the outlets started referring to the laptop as legitimate, they never publicly retracted their original stories.

The NY Post’s article was released two weeks before the 2020 presidential election and included, among other things, shady business dealings with foreign entities, Hunter Biden smoking what appears to be crack cocaine on camera, and the first son having sex with alleged prostitutes.

But most of the mainstream media ignored and disparaged the story, choosing instead to mimic comments coming out of the intelligence community with little to no pushback. While not directly related to mistrust of national media outlets, the story was also heavily censored on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook\* at the behest of the FBI, according to the “Twitter files” released over the last two months and an interview with Meta\* CEO Mark Zuckerberg on the Joe Rogan podcast.

The Knight Foundation study looks at trends of who mistrusts the media the most and attempts to figure out why. They suggest that journalists “go beyond emphasizing their transparency and accuracy,” and show their audience they “care” about their audience and how their reporting affects society.

But with the majority of Americans saying they cannot trust official government sources, perhaps the mainstream media should look within and question how viable it is to continually parrot government sources that the majority of their audience believes have no credibility.

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Video: US Black Hawk Military Chopper Crashes in Alabama, No Survivors Reported  
By - Ian DeMartino

The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency confirmed that the helicopter was a UH-60 "Black Hawk" military helicopter. The Federal Aviation Administration also confirmed that a military helicopter was "involved" in a crash but declined to provide details on its origin or destination, referring questions to the military.

A Black Hawk military helicopter crashed on Wednesday in Madison County, Alabama, officials have confirmed. Huntsville Emergency Medical Services confirmed to local media that there were no survivors of the crash.

A [release](#) issued by the Tennessee National Guard confirmed that the UH-60 Black Hawk belonged to the service, and had crashed during a training flight. Two crew members were aboard the chopper.

The crash took place just before 3 p.m. CST (21:00 GMT) just off of Highway 53 near an intersection with Burwell road, just north of Huntsville, Alabama. Local media reported no cars were hit by the falling helicopter.

Earlier, Redstone Arsenal, aka Team Redstone, a nearby Army logistics center, base and airfield, [confirmed](#) the military helicopter did not come from their facilities. Redstone Arsenal is roughly 11 miles away from the crash site.

Video of the crash was captured by a doorbell security camera. The helicopter is seen dropping from the sky vertically while slowly spinning. It falls behind some houses and out of sight.

Moments later, a black cloud can be seen rising on the horizon.

A video shared by a Twitter user shows authorities on the scene while motorists wait in their cars. A massive black cloud can be seen at the wreckage site.

Both Highway 53 and Barnwell road are closed while officials investigate and clear the scene. Drivers are being asked to use alternative routes until further notice.

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CBO: US Faces Catastrophic Default Between July, September if Debt Ceiling Fails to Be Raised

By - Ian DeMartino

The debt ceiling was established to limit the amount of debt the Government could hold. However, virtually every time the government reached that limit, it has been raised. Since 1960, Congress has acted 78 times to raise, extend or change the definition of the debt ceiling to allow the government to incur more debt.

The Congressional Budget Office warned on Wednesday that if the US does not raise its debt ceiling, it can expect to default on payments between July and September.

The debt ceiling was reached again on January 19, forcing the Treasury Department to move funds around in what the [CBO calls](#) "extraordinary measures" in order to meet the government's obligation. This new projection from the CBO estimates that the Treasury's bandaid measures will no longer be viable this summer and if Congress does not raise the ceiling once again, the government will "have to delay making payments for some activities, default on its debt obligations, or both."

If the US Government defaults on its debts, there could be a cascade effect resulting in a recession or even a depression. Borrowing would become more expensive, inflation would rise even faster than it has been, international trade would be stifled and large companies holding the debt could have their balance sheets upended when US debt payments stop.

The Republican party has been steadfast in its refusal to raise the debt ceiling unless it comes with corresponding spending cuts, mostly to domestic social spending, focusing on healthcare, labor, and education.

Both parties are responsible for the debt, which now sits at \$31.4 trillion. Of the 78 times it has been raised, 49 came under Republican presidents, including three times under former President Donald Trump.

The massive military budget, which officially sits at \$858 billion but is actually [much higher](#), appears to be off the table for both parties.

At the heart of the problem is that tax revenue is not keeping up with spending, and the gap between the two is getting worse. The annual budget imbalance is expected to reach \$1.4 trillion in 2023, and is expected to increase to \$2 trillion from 2024 to 2033 according to the CBO.

Currently, the deficit equates to 5.3% of the country's total GDP, and that number is expected to rise to 6.9% by 2033. As the CBO points out, that is significantly higher than the 3.6% that the deficit has averaged over the last 50 years.

The projections from the CBO exceed its previous expectations from May of last year by \$3 trillion, mainly due to new spending legislation and an economic forecast that predicts increased interest rates and mandatory spending increases.

The CBO further notes that the September to July projection is only an estimation and the funds could last longer or dry up faster than they expect. If tax revenues or capital gains are lower than they expect, funds could potentially run out before July.

CBO Director Phillip L. Swagel is set to meet with the press Wednesday afternoon. Prior to the press conference, the CBO released the transcript of his speech. In addition to the debt ceiling, he also has grim predictions for the US economy over the coming year.

"In response to the sharp increase in interest rates that occurred in 2022, the growth of real GDP (that is, GDP adjusted to remove the effects of inflation) comes to a halt in our projections in 2023," said Swagel.

Eventually, as unemployment rises and inflation lessens, Swagel predicts that the Federal Reserve will ease interest rates and the GDP may start growing again, but he does not expect that to happen until 2024 at the earliest.

President Biden and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) have met to discuss the issue, but Biden is adamant that he will not negotiate on if the government will pay its debts. Neither Biden nor the Republicans have released a budget proposal, though Biden is expected to release his next month. It is expected that it will include tax increases on wealthy individuals and corporations but few if any spending cuts.

With the House under the control of Republicans, a compromise will have to be reached before any budget can pass. In 2011, during a similar fight over the debt ceiling, while Barack Obama was President, the inaction caused the United States debt rating to be reduced by credit rating agency Standard & Poor's from AAA to AA+.

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Canada's Top Diplomat Travels to Ukraine to Reaffirm Support – Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly traveled to Ukraine to reaffirm Ottawa's commitment to supporting the country in its conflict with Russia, the ministry said on Thursday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, travelled to Ukraine to reaffirm Canada's steadfast support for the people of Ukraine and to discuss Canada's role in the path toward peace with Ukrainian officials, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko, and the President's Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak," Global Affairs said in a statement. They also discussed ways for Canada to better support Ukraine, the statement added. During Joly's visit, Zelenskyy thanked Canada for its recent donations of Leopard 2 battle tanks and a National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System, according to Global Affairs. In addition, the top Canadian diplomat met with Zelensky's wife Olena Zelenska to discuss the impact of the armed conflict on children and women. Joly also addressed the needs for reconstruction during talks with Kiev Mayor Vitali Klitschko and reaffirmed "Canada's unwavering pursuit of accountability for the crimes inflicted on the Ukrainian people, including the crime of aggression" during a meeting with Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin. Joly also announced the allocation of C\$21.2 million (\$15.6 million) to support organizations involved in responding to conflict-related sexual violence and in demining efforts.

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Massive Fire Breaks Out Near Kissimmee, Florida Nursery – County

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – Firefighters are working to put out a massive fire extending over five acres behind a nursery in Kissimmee, Florida that broke out overnight, county authorities said on Thursday.

"We've slowed the forward progress of that fire but due to the area that it's consuming and the product, it's just given us a lot of challenges," Deputy Chief Jon Haskett of Osceola County Fire said at a press briefing.

He noted that thousands of empty plastic pots stacked on pallets are engulfed in the blaze behind Nursery Supplies on 2050 Avenue A.

Haskett said about 75 firefighters with Orange County, Osceola County, and Kissimmee are working to put the fire out with water and foam, and hazmat teams of Orange County and Osceola County are monitoring the downrange air from the fire. There are currently no indications that an evacuation is necessary.

There have been no civilian or firefighter injuries so far, Haskett added. It is unclear what the cause of the fire is.

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### Biden to Meet With German Chancellor in Washington on March 3 – White House

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – US President Biden will host German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the White House on March 3 to reaffirm their cooperation on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and other global security issues, the White House said on Thursday.

"The Chancellor's visit is an opportunity to reaffirm the deep bonds of friendship between the United States and our NATO Ally Germany," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. "At the one-year mark of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, the leaders will discuss our ongoing efforts to support Ukraine, impose costs on Russia for its aggression, and strengthen transatlantic security. They will also review our continued cooperation on a range of regional and global security issues, including working together on shared challenges posed by China and our cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

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### Kirby Says Nothing to Announce on Possible Biden-Zelenskyy Meeting During Poland Trip

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The White House has nothing to announce about a possible meeting between President Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the former's trip to Poland next week, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday. "I do not have any additional meetings to speak to with respect to the President's trip to Poland," Kirby told reporters, adding the White House will have more to say about the trip in the next day or so.

No additional stops outside of Poland are planned for this trip, he added.

Biden is looking forward to meeting with President Andrzej Duda to thank Warsaw for its support for Ukraine, Kirby said.

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### Young People Can Lose 10% of Future Earnings Because of COVID-19 Measures - World Bank

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Young people could lose up to 10% of their earnings in the future because of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic measures, the World Bank said in a new report on Thursday.

"The new World Bank report, 'Collapse and Recovery: How COVID-19 Eroded Human Capital and What to Do About It,' analyzes global data on the pandemic's impacts on young people at key developmental stages: early childhood (0-5 years), school age (6-14 years), and youth (15-24 years)," it said. "It found that today's students could lose up to 10% of their future earnings due to COVID-19-induced education shocks. And the cognitive deficit in today's toddlers could translate into a 25% decline in earnings when these children are adults."

The pandemic significantly restricted the ability to acquire knowledge and to maintain healthcare, as many education-related, job training and maternal services were disrupted in numerous countries, the report said.

World Bank President David Malpass warned in the report that the COVID-19 pandemic measures, especially school closures, threatened to wipe out decades of progress in building human capital. Malpass pointed out the importance of targeted measures to reverse the losses in foundational learning, health and skills.

"Countries need to chart a new course for greater human capital investments to help citizens become more resilient to the overlapping threats of health shocks, conflict, slow growth and climate change and also lay a solid foundation for faster, more inclusive growth," Malpass said. The World Bank warned in the report that preschool-age children in different countries have lost about 30% of their learning in early language and literacy as well as in mathematics as compared to pre-pandemic cohorts.

"Among school-age children, on average, for every 30 days of school closures, students lost about 32 days of learning," the report said.

Such a situation happened because of school closures and ineffective remote learning measures. At the same time, nearly 1 billion children in low- and middle-income countries missed out on at least a full year of in-person schooling due to school closures, and more than 700 million missed one and a half years, the report said.

"As a result, learning poverty - already 57% before the pandemic - has increased further in these countries, with an estimated 70% of 10-year-olds unable to understand a basic written text," the report said.

The international community should take urgent actions to improve the situation, the report said. In the short term, that means targeted campaigns for vaccinations and nutritional supplementation, increasing access to pre-primary education, and support for adapted training, job intermediation, entrepreneurship programs, and new workforce-oriented initiatives are crucial, the report said.

"In the longer term, countries need to build agile, resilient, and adaptive health, education, and social protection systems that can better prepare for and respond to current and future shocks," the report added.

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Sullivan to Meet With EU Allies on February 22 to Discuss New Russia Sanctions - Reports WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will meet with EU ambassadors in Brussels on February 22 to discuss new sanctions against Russia, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

The European Commission is currently preparing its tenth round of sanctions, scheduled to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the February 24 start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

The new package includes what the commission calls "the toughest sanctions ever introduced by the European Union." It includes further export bans worth more than 11 billion euros (\$11.7

billion) on critical technology and industrial goods, particularly vital goods like spare parts that Russia cannot obtain through third countries. It also includes further export restrictions on dual use goods and advanced tech goods to ban all tech products Russia uses on the battlefield. The sanctions will extend to third country entities, such as Iranian ones, to ban them from selling sensitive items to Russia.

In addition, the package targets Russia's media, as well as officials and military leaders. It will also review all frozen assets of the Russian central bank in the EU, according to the European Commission.

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Rate of Ukraine Ammunition Use Makes US Review Stockpiles, Weigh Up Spending Hike - Milley

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The United States is reviewing its weapons stockpiles and may have to increase military spending after seeing the high rate at which ammunition has been used in the Ukraine conflict, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told the Financial Times.

"One of the lessons of this war is the very high consumption rates of conventional munitions, and we are re-examining our own stockages and our own plans to make sure that we got it right," Milley said in an interview published on Thursday.

Ammunition is "very expensive," the top general noted.

"We're trying to do the analysis so that we can then estimate what we think the true requirement would be. And then we have to put that in the budget," he added.

Milley also reaffirmed his belief that the conflict would end at the negotiating table, with neither side likely to achieve their military aims.

Both parties to the conflict are unwilling to negotiate at the moment, the top US general said, adding that such an opportunity can appear anytime.

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RPT - Haley Presidential Bid May Get 'Shot Down' Early, Unlikely to Secure Trump Base - Experts

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Former US ambassador Nikki Haley has little chance in the 2024 presidential race, although could grab a number two spot on the Republican ticket, as she struggles to appeal to supporters of ex-president Donald Trump, analysts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Haley in her first speech as a presidential candidate said she was running for a "strong and proud America." The former South Carolina governor and UN envoy's speech came

a day after first announcing in a video clip that she would join the race for the Republican nomination.

Trump has already declared his candidacy while many expect Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former vice president Mike Pence to join the race as well.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner, using the recent tensions between the US and China over balloons as an analogy, thinks Haley and the other potential challengers will see an early exit.

"The mystery of the 'benign' floating objects has been resolved. A highly placed reliable source has told me that they are 'trial balloons' sent aloft by would-be candidates for the Presidency," Brenner said. "There is the Pence balloon, the DeSantis balloon and the Nikki Haley. All have been shot down shortly after lift-off."

Brenner suggested Haley's real goal appeared to be lining herself up in position to be the most likely choice as vice president on the Republican ticket.

Christian political activist Reverend Graylan Scott Hagler predicted that Haley would make the most of her gender, her relative youth, her attractiveness and her unconventional background in US political terms.

However, Hagler advised that those factors were unlikely to attract the mass of party supporters she would need to gain the Republican nomination.

"The issue is does that secure her a rabidly racist base that DeSantis is playing to and Trump already commands," Hagler said. "The answer is no."

In the latest Reuters/Ipsos poll, Haley secured only 4% of the vote among registered Republicans, with Trump leading the field at 43% followed by DeSantis with 31% and Pence 7%. However, the poll was conducted from February 6-13, and Haley did not announce her run until February 14. Moreover, DeSantis and Pence have yet to officially declare their candidacies.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Blinken Visiting Germany, Turkey for Talks on Security, Earthquake Recovery - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Germany, Turkey and Greece from February 16-22 for talks on the Ukraine conflict at the Munich Security Conference, earthquake recovery efforts after the catastrophic earthquakes in Turkey and cooperation with Greece, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said. Blinken will first visit Germany to attend the Munich Security Conference, where he will hold bilateral and multilateral meetings on continued support for Ukraine, Price said in a statement on Wednesday.

The secretary of state will also hold a joint meeting with UK, French and German colleagues while in Munich, as well as participate in a Group of Seven (G7) meeting focused on Ukraine, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said during a press briefing.

Blinken is not expected to announce any major aid packages for Ukraine while in Munich, Donfried added.

On February 19, Blinken will visit the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey to witness US efforts to assist in the recovery efforts from the deadly earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria earlier this month, Price said in the statement.

Blinken will then travel to Ankara for a meeting and joint press availability with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Donfried said. Earthquakes will be at the forefront of Blinken's discussions in Turkey, although the top US diplomat will also discuss ways to strengthen Turkey's role as a NATO ally, Donfried said.

Moreover, Blinken will thank the Turkish government for its support of cross-border aid efforts for neighboring Syria, Price said.

Blinken will then visit Greece for talks with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and other top government officials on defense cooperation, energy security and democracy, Price said. On February 21, Blinken will launch the fourth round of the US-Greece Strategic Dialogue, Price added.

Blinken's trip to Europe overlaps with a trip to the continent by US President Joe Biden, who will visit Poland from February 20-22 to deliver remarks ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Biden is also expected to publicly address the recent downing of balloons in US airspace and meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy while in Poland, US and Polish media reported on Wednesday.

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Police Respond to Shooting at Texas Food Court Amid Reports of 1 Dead

EL PASO, Texas, February 16 (Sputnik) - Multiple government agencies responded to shots fired at the Cielo Visa Mall in Texas, the El Paso Police Department said in a statement.

Cielo Vista Mall is next to the Walmart where a gunman killed 23 people in 2019.

"Police are responding to shots fired in the food court of Cielo Vista Mall, scene still active.

Avoid the area," the police said in a tweet on Wednesday.

A half hour later the police tweeted that more agencies were en route.

"Mall scene is still active please avoid the area. Multiple agencies responding to the area," the tweet said.

BNO News, citing officials and witnesses, reported one dead among four shot.

The shooting took place around around 5:00 p.m. local time.

The El Paso Times said there was a large police presence at the mall searching for the shooter. Some customers and mall employees, the report added, are taking shelter inside the mall.

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### FBI Searches for Biden Secret Docs at University of Delaware - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The FBI searched for potentially sensitive government documents President Joe Biden may have in his possession at the University of Delaware that were taken from his time as vice president, CNN reported citing a source familiar with the investigation.

The report said on Wednesday that the FBI conducted two searches in recent weeks and recovered material from two separate locations at the university, however, the documents did not appear to have classified markings.

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Texas Sues Biden, Says Unlawfully Signed Spending Bill Passed With No Quorum Present (Updates with details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas filed a lawsuit against the Biden administration after the US president allegedly unlawfully signed and implemented the \$1.7 trillion spending bill for 2023 after the House of Representatives violated the law by passing the bill without a quorum present, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office said in a press release.

"Attorney General Paxton is suing President Biden and members of his Administration over the unlawful signing and implementation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, which was the latest omnibus spending bill," Paxton said in the release on Wednesday.

The US Constitution requires that a quorum of members of the House be present for the lower chamber of Congress to conduct business, and, according to the release, when the House passed the 2023 omnibus bill in December 2022, fewer than half of its members were present and more than half voted by proxy.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's office could not be reached for comment on this matter, but he previously acknowledged the violation.

McCarthy said in late December that House Republicans would look into the legality of the matter once they become the majority in the lower chamber.

The \$1.7 trillion spending bill included billions in new funding for Ukraine.

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### Austin Says Won't Stop Asking China to Reopen Communication Lines Despite Balloon Incident

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said in an interview he would not stop asking the Chinese to reopen lines of communication after the US

military shot down a Chinese balloon allegedly conducting surveillance across the United States earlier this month.

"When something happens, [China] they somehow tend to shut down their military channels of communication," Austin told NBC News in an interview that aired on Wednesday. "I think that's dangerous, but it won't stop me from continuing to encourage them to open up the lines of communication. I think that's the right thing to do."

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UPDATE - US Orders Nearly \$1Bln in Heavy Artillery Ammunition as Ukraine Burns Through Aid

(Updates headline, adds background on Ukraine aid in paras 2,3)

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US Army is going to order almost \$1 billion worth of 155 mm heavy artillery howitzer ammunition, the Defense Department announced.

The move comes as the US scrambles to boost its own output of 155mm shells as Ukraine burns through one million-plus sent by Washington and its allies, Politico reported this week.

The US pledged to triple its monthly output of shells from the prewar total of about 14,000/month, the report said.

Earlier in February the Pentagon said it provided Ukraine with 160 155mm Howitzers and up to 1,094,000 artillery rounds.

"General Dynamics-Ordnance & Tactical Systems [of] Niceville, Florida and American Ordnance [of] Middletown, Iowa will compete for each order of the \$993,790,373 ... contract to produce 155mm rounds," the Defense Department said on Wednesday.

The two bids from GD-OTS and American ordnance were the only ones received by the Army, the release said.

Work on fulfilling the full order will be carried out over the next five years with an estimated completion date of February 14, 2028, the release added.

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US Army to Order \$993Mln Worth of Heavy Artillery Ammunition - Pentagon

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UN Security Council to Discuss Report on Sanctions Against N. Korea on Thursday Afternoon

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will discuss North Korea and the Sanctions Committee Experts' report on Thursday afternoon, according to the United Nations program.

On January 20, the United States shared information with the UN Security Council about sanctions violations committed by North Korea by allegedly providing arms to the Wagner private military company amid Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

Earlier in February, United Nations experts told Sputnik that no evidence has been found to corroborate the United States' allegations that North Korea has supplied weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine.

In an interview with Rossiya 24 and RIA Novosti last week, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia's defense industry is working fine. Lavrov made the statement when asked to comment on the United States' claims that North Korea as well as Iran have been helping Russia by providing weapons.

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US Army's Redstone Arsenal Base Says Tracking Reports of Helicopter Incident in Alabama

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US Army's Redstone Arsenal base in Alabama is tracking reports of a helicopter incident in the state, although initial reports show the aircraft did not come from the installation, a base spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We're tracking reports of a helicopter incident, but the initial investigation shows it wasn't anything that came out of Redstone Arsenal," the spokesperson said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, US media reported a crash involving a military helicopter in Madison County, Alabama.

The Federal Aviation Administration was not able to provide details to Sputnik, instead referring to nearby military bases.

A representative of the Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama could not be reached prior to publication of this story.

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Helicopter Crashes in US State of Alabama – Sheriff Office

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – A helicopter crashed near Huntsville in the US state of Alabama, the Madison County Sheriff's Office said in a tweet.

"Madison County Sheriff's deputies are on the scene of a helicopter crash. The area affected is Highway 53 near Burwell Road. We anticipate evening traffic to experience heavy delays in this area throughout the evening," the Madison County Sheriff's Office said on Wednesday.

According to multiple media reports, the accident took place just before 3 p.m. (20:00 GMT) on Wednesday when the helicopter went down near the town of Harvest.

No cars have been reported hit as a result of the crash so far.

BNO News, citing a spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), reported that it was a military helicopter.

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Haley Presidential Bid May Get 'Shot Down' Early, Unlikely to Secure Trump Base - Experts

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Former US ambassador Nikki Haley has little chance in the 2024 presidential race, although could grab a number two spot on the Republican ticket, as she struggles to appeal to supporters of ex-president Donald Trump, analysts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Haley in her first speech as a presidential candidate said she was running for a "strong and proud America." The former South Carolina governor and UN envoy's speech came a day after first announcing in a video clip that she would join the race for the Republican nomination.

Trump has already declared his candidacy while many expect Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former vice president Mike Pence to join the race as well.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner, using the recent tensions between the US and China over balloons as an analogy, thinks Haley and the other potential challengers will see an early exit.

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PREVIEW - Blinken Visiting Germany, Turkey for Talks on Security, Earthquake Recovery - State Dept.

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Blinken is not expected to announce any major aid packages for Ukraine while in Munich, Donfried added.

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Blinken will then travel to Ankara for a meeting and joint press availability with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Donfried said. Earthquakes will be at the forefront of Blinken's discussions in Turkey, although the top US diplomat will also discuss ways to strengthen Turkey's role as a NATO ally, Donfried said.

Moreover, Blinken will thank the Turkish government for its support of cross-border aid efforts for neighboring Syria, Price said.

Blinken will then visit Greece for talks with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and other top government officials on defense cooperation, energy security and democracy, Price said. On February 21, Blinken will launch the fourth round of the US-Greece Strategic Dialogue, Price added.

Blinken's trip to Europe overlaps with a trip to the continent by US President Joe Biden, who will visit Poland from February 20-22 to deliver remarks ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Biden is also expected to publicly address the recent downing of balloons in US airspace and meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy while in Poland, US and Polish media reported on Wednesday.

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US House Panel Subpoenas Big Tech For Info on US Efforts to Suppress Free Speech

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US House Judiciary Committee said it issued subpoenas to the chief executive officers at Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta(banned organization in Russia), and Microsoft requesting records related to any action the US government may have initiated with big tech companies to attempt to suppress free speech. "Today, House Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan (R-OH) subpoenaed the chief executive officers of Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft for documents and communications relating to the federal government's reported collusion with Big Tech to suppress free speech," the committee said in the release on Wednesday.

The committee asks all the chief executive officers of the big tech firms to provide the panel with all requested documents and communications by March 23, the release said.

Several Republican lawmakers allege that big tech companies colluded with political and government officials to censor reporting on potential influence peddling by the Biden family. The Oversight Committee is conducting a probe into the matter amid the release of so-called Twitter files, which revealed the extent of engagement between Twitter personnel and US government officials on content moderation and censorship decisions.

Reforms to Twitter's speech and account suspension policies have since begun under new CEO Elon Musk, who acquired the company last year.

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Ohio Governor Says Drinking Water Safe After New Test Following Toxic Train Derailment

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Ohio Governor Mike DeWine said in a statement that drinking water in the city of East Palestine is safe to drink after a new test detected no contaminants following the train derailment earlier this month that led to the release of toxic chemicals into the surrounding environment.

"East Palestine: New water testing results show no detection of contaminants in East Palestine's municipal water system," DeWine said on Wednesday.

DeWine added that these test results show that municipal water is safe to drink.

Three days after the derailment on February 3, authorities burned vinyl chloride inside five tanker cars, which released hydrogen chloride and phosgene, according to media reports. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said tests indicate the surrounding air and water are safe for residents, however, more tests are conducted daily to ensure public health safety.

State health officials said they are confident the municipal water supply is safe for drinking water, but suggested that anyone who gets their water supply from a private well should test it for any contaminants following the train derailment.

However, some 3,500 fish died in waterways near the derailment and several residents have complained about feeling nauseous and experiencing headaches after toxic chemicals were released into the air following the derailment.

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Blinken Not Expected to Announce More Ukraine Aid at Munich Conference - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is not expected to announce additional aid for Ukraine during his upcoming trip to the Munich Security Conference, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said during a press briefing.

"I wouldn't be anticipating any major announcement at the Munich Security Conference,"

Donfried said on Wednesday, when asked whether a security assistance announcement could be expected.

On February 16, Blinken will travel to Germany to attend the Munich Security Conference, where he will participate in a series of bilateral and multilateral meetings to discuss continued support for Ukraine, Donfried said.

Blinken will also hold a joint meeting with UK, French and German colleagues, as well as a Group of Seven meeting with a focus on Ukraine, Donfried added.

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Trump Says He Is 'Glad' Ex-UN Nikki Haley is Running for President

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump welcomed former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley's decision to enter the US presidential contest, saying she should "not be bound" by her previous promises not to run against him.

"The more the merrier," Trump told Fox News in an exclusive interview when asked about Haley's announcement that she would challenge him for the Republican nomination in the 2024 election campaign.

Haley officially launched her candidacy on Wednesday, saying in her first speech as a presidential candidate that said she is running for a "strong and proud America."

"I'm glad she's running," Trump said. "I want her to follow her heart — even though she made a commitment that she would never run against who she called the greatest president of her lifetime ... She should do what she wants to do and not be bound by the fact that she said she would never do it."

Trump also pointed out that recent polls conducted by both Democrats and Republicans have shown that he is the favored candidate to clinch the Republican nomination.

He also said he was not worried about any possible Republican competition, including his former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

"I know them all. I put them all there," Trump told Fox.

A new poll released by Reuters/Ipsos on Tuesday found that Trump is the favored candidate among Republican voters, with 43% of registered voters in that party saying they wanted him to be their candidate.

The same poll found that DeSantis comes in second place with 31% favoring him for the nomination, while both Pence and Haley only received single-digit support.

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State Dept. on Possible UN Probe: Up To Countries Where Nord Stream Blasts Occurred

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The decision on how to investigate the Nord Stream blasts rests with the countries on whose soil the incidents occurred, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said, when asked whether the United Nations should play a role in probing the suspected sabotage.

When asked whether the UN should play any role in the investigation, Price said: "This blast did not occur on US soil."

"I would leave it to our partners on whose territory, on whose soil ... this blast occurred to speak to the appropriate investigative mechanisms," Price said at a press briefing on Wednesday. UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday that the United Nations would need a mandate from its legislative body to investigate last year's blasts.

On September 26, three of the four strings of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines were damaged after underwater blasts.

Last week, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published a report detailing how US Navy divers had allegedly planted explosives under the pipelines, which Norway activated three months later.

US President Joe Biden allegedly decided to sabotage the Nord Stream pipelines after more than nine months of secret discussions with his national security team, the report based on insider information from a source said.

The US government has repeatedly denied involvement in the blowing up of the Russian pipelines, while the Russian government has demanded an open investigation and called an emergency Security Council meeting next week.

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

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- \* Switzerland will impose a price cap on Russian oil products starting on Wednesday, the Swiss Ministry of Economy said.
- \* The United States is assessing how to best utilize seized Russian assets in its effort to provide additional aid to Ukraine, US State Department Office of Foreign Assistance Director Dafna Rand said.
- \* There are no legal grounds to transfer Russia's frozen assets to Ukraine, the Swiss Federal Council said.
- \* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that he proposed including an additional 100 individuals and entities in the tenth sanctions package against Russia.

#### NATO DEFENSE MINISTERS MEETING

- \* NATO defense ministers have agreed on the need to work with the defense industry to increase the production of ammunition, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Wednesday.
- \* NATO is creating a coordination group for the protection of critical underwater infrastructure, Stoltenberg said.
- \* NATO member states have agreed to intensify support for the defense potential of partners at risk, including Georgia and Moldova, Stoltenberg said.

#### US BUDGET DEFICIT

\* The US government risks defaulting on its debt between July and September if Congress does not raise the debt ceiling by then, the Congressional Budget Office said in its latest projections on Wednesday.

\* The US budget deficit is projected to reach \$1.4 trillion by 2023 if current spending levels are maintained, with the shortfall expected to reach \$2.7 trillion by 2033, the Congressional Budget Office said.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* The United States expects to provide another \$9.9 billion in budget support to Ukraine, the director of the Office of Foreign Assistance at the State Department said on Wednesday.

\* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that the US and its allies intend to provide Ukraine with the weapons capability and support for those systems to be decisive on the battlefield during the upcoming offensive.

\* At the initiative of Hungary and Romania, the Council of Europe decided to address the situation with the oppression of national minorities in Ukraine and appeal to the Venice Commission on this issue, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto said.

\* The United Kingdom, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark agreed to send ammunition, intelligence equipment, and tank spare parts to Kiev under the International Fund for Ukraine, UK Defense Ministry said.

#### GLOBAL ENERGY

\* The Russian Mission to the UN is planning to organize a UN Security Council meeting on the blast of the Nord Stream pipeline on February 22, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

\* The European Union does not rule out the possibility of joint gas purchases, including through long-term contracts, European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic said.

\* Voluntary reduction of oil production in Russia by 500,000 barrels per day in March, which Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak announced, was factored in when adjusting oil taxation, Russian Deputy Finance Minister Alexey Sazanov said.

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#### World Bank President Malpass to Step Down a Year Before Schedule

(Adds US Treasury's bid to name a candidate in Malpass' replacement, details, paragraphs 4-6)  
WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - World Bank President David Malpass told his staff in a letter that he plans to leave his job by the end of the bank's current fiscal year and about a year before his term expires.

"Dear colleagues. I'm writing to notify you that I informed the Board of my decision of my intention to step down from my role as World Bank Group President by the end of our fiscal year," the letter said.

Bloomberg reported that he will step down in about a year. The bank's fiscal year ends on June 30, 2023 while Malpass' term was supposed to expire on April 9, 2024.

The World Bank presidency is typically held by an American, and the US Treasury Department said it will nominate a candidate to replace Malpass.

"The United States looks forward to the Executive Board running a transparent, merit-based and swift nomination process for the next World Bank President," US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said. "We will put forward a candidate to lead the World Bank and build on the Bank's longstanding work."

Under Malpass' leadership, the World Bank had "measurably improved" on its agenda of raising the livelihood of people around the world, Yellen said, noting particularly his strong support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia and work in alleviating Afghanistan's crisis.

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Key Biden Adviser on China Leaves White House Amid Balloon Scandal - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's key adviser on China, Laura Rosenberger, is leaving the White House amid growing tensions between Beijing and Washington over the shooting down of a Chinese balloon, Bloomberg said on Wednesday. Rosenberger, who currently serves as the National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director for China and Taiwan, is leaving office in March, the report said, citing White House officials. Rosenberger's exit was planned well before the situation with the balloon and other aerial objects escalated and is not related to it, the report also said.

Sarah Beran from the State Department will replace Rosenberger, and Rush Doshi, who currently works at the NSC will serve as Beran's deputy, the report added.

Last week, the US military shot down four unidentified aircraft in its airspace, including what it claimed to be a Chinese surveillance balloon, despite Beijing's insistence that it was a civilian aircraft carrying out scientific research.

On Tuesday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said US high-altitude balloons had violated Chinese airspace at least ten times since last year - a statement US National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson rejected as false.

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Schumer to Visit Israel Next Week to Meet Netanyahu Amid Judicial Reform Crisis - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Sen. Chuck Schumer will visit Israel next week to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior officials, Axios reported on Wednesday citing the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

The report said Schumer will visit Israel February 23 to 25 amid fears that plans to overhaul the country's judicial system could lead to clashes between the right-wing government and opposition.

Schumer will also meet with Israeli President Isaac Herzog, Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid, and US Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides.

It is unclear, according to the report, if Schumer will visit the occupied West Bank to meet with Palestinian officials and his office did not respond to requests for comment on the travel.

On January 4, Israeli Justice Minister Yariv Levin rolled out a legal reform package that would limit the authority of the Supreme Court by giving the cabinet control over the selection of new judges, as well as allowing the Knesset to override the court's rulings with an absolute majority, among other points. The planned overhaul sparked public criticism and prompted a wave of mass protests.

Under the Israeli judicial system, the Supreme Court plays the role of a constitutional supervisory body, since there is no constitution and constitutional court in the country.

Government decisions are largely controlled by the court, which can overturn them if necessary.

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Whelan's Sister Says Has Seen Much Improvement in Gov't Response to His Case

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The family of Paul Whelan, who has been held by Russia on spying charges since 2018, has seen much progress in the way the US government has been tackling his case, his sister Elizabeth Whelan said on Wednesday.

"I think we've seen a lot of improvement in how the US government has been responding to Paul Whelan's case," Elizabeth Whelan said during an Atlantic Council event. "It's just taken four years and that is a shame but I think collectively there's good work that's being done. We need to keep at it. We need to keep the pressure on."

One valuable outcome over the past years is a really intense effort to separate discussions about wrongful detainees from all the other issues on the bilateral agenda with any country, she noted.

"With Russia in particular there has been a good separation," Whelan added.

Paul Whelan was arrested in Moscow in December 2018 and a court later sentenced him to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained that he is innocent and insisted that he arrived in Russia for a friend's wedding.

Whelan's family previously criticized the Biden administration for allegedly not doing enough to secure the release of the former Marine. After the United States swapped Russian businessman Viktor Bout for basketball star Brittney Griner in December, the family said they were "devastated" about yet another prisoner swap that left Paul behind.

The Biden administration said that Russia treated Whelan's and Griner's situations differently due to the espionage charges against the former.

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Blinken to Travel to Germany, Turkey, Greece February 16-22 - State Department

(Adds details in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday will embark on a trip to Germany, Turkey and Greece, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Germany, Turkiye, and Greece February 16-22, 2023," Price said on Wednesday. "On February 16, he will travel to Germany to attend the Munich Security Conference, where he will participate in a series of bilateral and multilateral meetings to discuss continued support for Ukraine, assistance to Turkiye and the Syrian people, and our commitment to transatlantic security and a rules-based international order."

February 19, he added, Blinken will visit Incirlik Air Base in Turkey to see US efforts to help Turkey respond to the earthquakes before heading to Greece for talks with top officials and a strategic dialogue.

"He will then travel to Ankara, where he will meet with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and other senior Turkish officials to discuss continued U.S. support to Turkiye and the Turkish people after the devastating earthquakes, as well as ways to further strengthen our partnership with Turkiye as a valued NATO Ally," Price said. "Secretary Blinken will also thank the Government of Turkiye for its support for cross-border aid to affected areas of Syria."

Blinken will conclude his trip in Athens, where he will meet with Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis, Foreign Minister Niko Dendias, and Leader of the Opposition Alexis Tsipras as well as will launch the fourth round of the US-Greece Strategic Dialogue on February 21, according to the spokesman.

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Blinken to Travel to Germany, Turkey, Greece February 16-22 - State Department

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US Budget Deficit to Reach \$1.4Tln in 2023, Shortfall to Reach \$2.7Trln in 2033 - CBO

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US budget deficit is projected to reach \$1.4 trillion by 2023 if current spending levels are maintained, with the shortfall expected to reach \$2.7 trillion by 2033, the Congressional Budget Office said on Wednesday in a new report on the economic outlook in the country.

"CBO projects a federal budget deficit of \$1.4 trillion for 2023. (Deficits and spending have been adjusted to exclude the effects of shifts that occur in the timing of certain payments when October 1 falls on a weekend.) In the agency's projections, deficits generally increase over the coming years; the shortfall in 2033 is \$2.7 trillion," the report said.

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US Senator Murkowski Says Ukraine Conflict Should Not Inhibit Arctic Council's Work

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The work of the Arctic Council must not be interrupted by Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, US Senator for Alaska Lisa Murkowski said on Wednesday.

"It is so important that the good work that the Arctic Council has done, that we don't see that slip back. You cannot put the Arctic on pause because of a war in Ukraine," Murkowski said during an interview with the Wilson Center.

However, work on the council will be "a little rocky" moving forward, Murkowski added.

Countries cannot simply resume cooperation with Russia on the council in light of the conflict in Ukraine, Murkowski said.

US State Department Counselor Derek Chollet during the event also said that Russia is an important Arctic nation, but the conflict in Ukraine makes cooperation with Moscow in the region virtually impossible for the foreseeable future.

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US Government Risks Default Between July-September if Debt Ceiling Not Raised - CBO

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US government risks defaulting on its debt between July and September if Congress does not raise the debt ceiling by then, the Congressional Budget Office said on Wednesday in its latest projections.

"The Congressional Budget Office projects that, if the debt limit remains unchanged, the government's ability to borrow using extraordinary measures will be exhausted between July and September 2023," the CBO said.

The projection comes amid a standoff between the White House and congressional Republicans over the need to raise the country's official debt ceiling from its current limit of almost \$31.4 trillion.

The Treasury Department announced last month that it began "extraordinary measures" to avoid a debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed by federal retirement, disability and health benefit funds and channeling the money instead to other urgent services needed to keep the government running until June at least.

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Russia Important Arctic Nation, But Cooperation 'Impossible' in Near Future - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is an important Arctic nation, but cooperation on issues concerning the region has been made impossible by their special military operation in Ukraine, US State Department Counselor Derek Chollet said on Wednesday.

"Russia has the most territory and population north of the Arctic Circle. It is an important Arctic nation, but Moscow's decision to invade its neighbor ... makes cooperation virtually impossible for the foreseeable future," Chollet said during remarks to the Wilson Center.

China's ambitions in the Arctic and cooperation with Russia in the region compound problems for the US, Chollet added.

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Buffalo Mass Shooter Sentenced to Life Without Parole

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The young white man who launched a racist attack on a Buffalo, New York grocery store on May 14, 2022 and killed 11 African Americans, was sentenced to life in prison without parole on Wednesday.

"There is no place for you and your ignorant, hateful and evil ideologies in a civilized society. There can be no mercy for you, no understanding, no second chances," Erie County Court Judge Susan Egan told Payton Gendron during a livestreamed hearing. "The damage you have caused is too great. And the people you have hurt are too valuable to this community. You will never see the light of day as a free man ever again."

The sentencing was tense and emotional particularly as family members of the deceased and survivors made impact statements detailing the tremendous destruction the May 14 attack had on their loved ones before Egan was sentenced.

Gendron still faces 27 felony charges in federal court, including several counts of hate crimes that resulted in death. He has pleaded not guilty.

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US Assessing How to Best Use Seized Russian Assets for Ukraine Aid - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is assessing how to best utilize seized Russian assets in its effort to provide additional aid to Ukraine, the director of the Office of Foreign Assistance at the Department of State said on Wednesday.

"We are trying to see what is the best use of this money. We've seized it, and it [the money] was used to fuel the war and the bellicosity. Now we want to return it to support the Ukrainian people in their time of need," Dafna Rand told a press briefing.

Earlier this month, Attorney General Merrick Garland announced he had authorized the US to begin using seized Russian money to aid Ukraine. The first-ever transfer of forfeited funds, \$5.4 million, came from assets confiscated from Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeyev after his April indictment for alleged sanctions evasions.

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US Sets Up Air Traffic Safety Review After Near Collision Crises - FAA Chief

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has created a safety review panel to study the entire US air traffic control system after several near collisions that could have taken hundreds of lives were narrowly averted in recent weeks in New York, Texas and near Hawaii, FAA Acting Administrator Billy Nolen told a Senate panel on Wednesday.

"I have formed a safety review team to examine the US aerospace system structure, culture, processes, systems and integration of safety efforts," Nolen told a hearing of the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Nolen said the panel would focus on organizing a broad safety summit in which stakeholders from different concerned organizations, agencies and commercial companies would examine what additional actions the US aviation community needed to take to maintain the nation's air safety record.

A group of commercial and general aviation leaders, labor partners and others will examine what mitigations are working and why others do not appear to be as effective, Nolen added. During the hearing, Nolen came under fire over near-collisions in New York, Texas and around Hawaii that Senator Ted Cruz said were deeply concerning and nearly killed hundreds of people.

Cruz also said Nolen's "self-regulating and flailing agency" is still stuck in the 20th century despite Congress fully funding modernization since 2013.

Nolen in response to the grilling tried to reassure that it was still safe to travel.

"Can I say to the American public that we are safe? The answer is that we are," Nolen said. "If the question is can we be better? The answer is absolutely. And that's the piece we're working on."

However, Nolen told the hearing that the current transition to an integrated air traffic control system would not be completed until some time in 2025.

In January, an air traffic control systems breakdown forced the FAA to order the first national shutdown of all domestic aviation traffic since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

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US Plans to Provide Additional \$9.9Bln in Budget Support to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to provide another \$9.9 billion in budget support to Ukraine, the director of the Office of Foreign Assistance at the State Department said on Wednesday.

"The US has provided \$13 billion in budget support to the Government of Ukraine, and working with Congress in the coming months, we plan on providing \$9.9 billion. And we remain committed to working with the Government of Ukraine to maintain its operational capacity and to provide additional budget support as necessary," Dafna Rand said during a press briefing.

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Ohio AG Dismisses Charges Filed Against Journalist Covering Train Derailment - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost's office said on Wednesday it dismissed charges against NewsNation reporter Evan Lambert, who was arrested while covering a train derailment earlier this month that led to the release of several toxic chemicals into the environment.

"Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost today announced that the criminal charges filed against NewsNation reporter Evan Lambert have been dismissed," the attorney general's office said in a press release.

Yost said his office reviewed evidence and found that there was insufficient evidence to support the charges the Columbiana County Prosecuting Attorney filed against Lambert.

Yost added that Lambert was lawfully present at the press conference where he was arrested and his conduct was consistent with the purpose of the event and his role as a reporter.

Lambert was charged with resisting arrest and criminal trespass while covering a press conference about the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

Three days after the derailment on February 3, authorities burned vinyl chloride inside five tanker cars, which released hydrogen chloride and phosgene, according to media reports. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said tests indicate the surrounding air and water are safe for residents, however, more tests are conducted daily to ensure public health safety. State health officials said they are confident the municipal water supply is safe for drinking water, but suggested that anyone who gets their water supply from a private well should test it for any contaminants following the train derailment.

However, some 3,500 fish died in waterways near the derailment and several residents have complained about feeling nauseous and experiencing headaches after toxic chemicals were released into the air following the derailment.

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Nikki Haley Says She's Running for US President to Achieve 'Strong, Proud America'

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-9)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said in her first speech as a presidential candidate that she is running for a "strong and proud America."

"For a strong America, for a proud America, I am running for president of the United States of America," Haley said on Wednesday.

Haley laid out some of her key campaign points, including that US businesses must hire Americans and not illegal immigrants; implement term limits for Congress; require mandatory mental competency tests for US politicians older than 75; increase domestic energy production; and prevent wars, among others.

Haley said the United States today is on a path of "doubt, division and self-destruction, a path of fading patriotism and weakening power," adding that the stakes of the next presidential campaign are nothing less than the nation's very survival.

Haley also promised that the United States under her leadership will pump more oil and gas and stop buying "dirty" oil from Venezuela.

In a jab at incumbent President Joe Biden, Haley said her team will seek mandatory mental competency tests for politicians over 75 years old.

With respect to the international arena, Haley vowed to stay true to the US-Israel alliance and continue to stand up to what she termed are US enemies, including Iran and Russia.

She also said that China, like the Soviet Union, "will end up on the ash heap of history."

In November 2022, former President Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the 2024 presidential race. Haley is the first Republican to join the presidential race in 2023, facing Trump as the only competitor from the party so far.

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Sherman Says Hopes US Not on 'Inevitable' Path to Conflict With China Over Taiwan

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday that she hopes the United States is not on an inevitable path toward conflict with China over tensions around the Taiwan Strait.

"I certainly hope we're not on an inevitable path to conflict," Sherman said. "If there is conflict in the Taiwan Strait, it is not just a matter of security for Asia, it is a matter of economic security for the entire world."

Sherman also said that countries have learned through the situation in Ukraine that conflicts create impacts all around the world.

The United States will continue assisting Taiwan in maintaining a "sufficient" self-defense capability, Sherman added.

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US Senators Reintroduce Bipartisan Act to List Russia's Wagner a Terrorist Organization

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – US senators have reintroduced on Wednesday in a bipartisan initiative the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act, in a bid to designate Russia's Private Military Company Wagner as a terrorist organization.

"U.S. Senators Roger Wicker, R-Miss., and Ben Cardin, D-Md., today announced they have reintroduced the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act, bipartisan legislation that would require the Secretary of State to designate the Russian-based Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Wicker and Cardin were joined by U.S. Senators Lindsey

Graham, R-S.C., Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., Thom Tillis, R-N.C., Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I.," the senators' joint statement reads. According to Wicker, the Wagner PMC should be listed as a terrorist organization since it operates as a "vicious tool" in Russia's Special Military Operation in Eastern Ukraine. The senator continued, saying that all those cooperating with them should be held equally accountable.

Moreover, Cardin who also is the Co-Chair for the US Helsinki Commission, a governmental agency which "promotes," amongst other things, cooperation on human rights, said that listing Wagner as a terrorist organization would be a step in holding the company and Russia accountable.

In addition, the designation would allow for stronger sanctions on Wagner, Senator Graham continued, adding he hoped the company and its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin would be prosecuted for their alleged crimes.

The Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act was first introduced on December 1, 2022.

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Investigative Journalist Seymour Hersh Says No Chance Putin Wants to Take Over Europe

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh said on Wednesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin does not aim to take over Europe.

"I don't think that there is any chance that Putin wants to take over Europe... he wants to have Ukraine tamed," Hersh said in an interview with Democracy Now!

Last week, Hersh published an investigative report describing in detail how US deep-water divers had planted explosives under Russia's Nord Stream gas pipelines. Hersh said he wrote the text based on insider information from a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning of the attacks. The explosives were detonated remotely on September 26, 2022, on the order of President Joe Biden, Hersh added.

On Tuesday, Hersh said in an interview that Biden decided to sabotage the pipelines out of fear that Germany could lift sanctions imposed on Russia for undertaking the special military operation in Ukraine.

The US government has repeatedly denied involvement in the blowing up of the Russian Nord Stream pipelines. The Russian government has said the United States should explain itself and called for an open investigation into the blast.

Three of the four strings of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines were damaged in the underwater blast. Operator Nord Stream AG reported that the damage was unprecedented and it was impossible to estimate the time frame for potential repairs.

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### Nikki Haley Says She Is Running for President for 'A Strong, Proud America'

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### Ex-UN Envoy Haley in First Campaign Speech Says Biden Failing US, Not Leading At All

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said during her first presidential campaign speech on Wednesday that President Joe Biden is failing the United States and is not leading the country at all.

"Now America is falling behind, our future is flipping, our leaders are failing us and no one embodies that failure more than Joe Biden," Haley said.

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### CIA Flew Decompression Chamber to Ship Allegedly Involved in Nord Stream Blast -Journalist

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The CIA has flown a decompression chamber to the Norwegian ship allegedly engaged in the Nord Stream pipeline blasts, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh said on Wednesday.

"Not only did that ship have, was in operation, it also had a decompression chamber that had been flown by the CIA," Hersh said. "The Norwegians found the lowest level."

Seymour Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who blew the whistle on US atrocities in Vietnam War and more recently on prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, wrote in a blog post last week that American deep-water divers had planted explosives under three of the four Nord Stream pipelines that were detonated remotely last September at the order of President Joe Biden.

Sweden, Denmark along with Germany, the main beneficiary of Russian gas, opened separate probes into the blasts.

Hersh wrote that cheap Russian gas had been a boon for the German economy, fueling its post-war rise to prosperity while diminishing Europe's dependence on the United States. He cited a source with direct knowledge of the US operational planning as saying that Norway played a key role in helping the US organize the attack and keep the Swedish and Danish navies in the dark.

Both the United States and Norway dismissed the allegations as lies. Russia said it was no surprise that Hersh's report was largely overlooked by Western mainstream media despite Biden and Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland outright warning Russia months before the attack that the pipeline would be dealt with if it launched a military operation in Ukraine. On September 26, 2022, three of the four strings of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines were damaged after an underwater blast.

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#### US Weekly Crude Oil Stocks Up 16Mln Barrels in 4th Largest Build Ever

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil rose 16 million barrels last week in the fourth largest build ever, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Wednesday.

Crude stocks rose by 16.238 million barrels during the week ended February 10, the EIA, which serves as the statistical arm of the US Energy Department, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

US commercial crude inventories have grown by 50.75 million barrels so far this year.

The climb came as most US refineries entered seasonal maintenance that foresaw less processing of crude.

US crude oil refinery inputs averaged 15 million barrels per day during the week ending February 10, which was 383,000 barrels per day less than the previous week's average, the EIA said.

Refineries operated at 86.5% of their operable capacity last week, the agency added. Typically, inventory runs at this time of the year are about 90% or more.

Last week's crude build was the fourth-largest ever in the history of the EIA's reporting, data showed. It was also the third largest in eight straight weeks of builds.

"That's a gigantic build," analyst Adam Button said on the ForexLive platform, referring to the 16.3 million barrels. "It's not entirely shocking as the API data late yesterday also showed a large build, but not that large."

Trade group API, or the American Petroleum Institute, using its own count, on Tuesday reported a crude build of 10.507 million barrels for the week to February 10.

Aside from crude, the EIA reported a build in stockpiles of gasoline while noting a dip in distillate inventories.

On the gasoline inventory side, the EIA reported a build of 2.317 million, against a forecast rise of 1.542 million and the prior week's 5.008 million. Gasoline inventories have gone up by more

than 19 million barrels since the start of the year. The automotive fuel is the primary US fuel product.

The EIA said US gasoline demand over the past four weeks fell 3.2% from a year ago, to 8.334 million barrels per day.

Distillate stockpiles resumed their drop after rising last week for the first time in five weeks.

Distillate inventories fell by 1.285 million versus an expected build of 0.447 million. In the previous week, distillate stocks rose by 2.932 million.

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Biden Plans Public Address on Balloon Downing Prior to Poland Trip - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is planning a public address about the balloon downing in the United States ahead of his upcoming visit to Poland, Bloomberg said on Wednesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Biden is scheduled to visit Poland on February 20.

If he does speak, that would be Biden's first official remarks on the issue, the report read.

According to the report, he is going to reassure Americans that there are no reasons for concern over the downed objects.

However, one of the sources mentioned that those plans are fluid and can be changed at any time. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment, according to the report.

Last week, the US military shot down four unidentified aircraft in its airspace, including what it claimed to be a Chinese surveillance balloon, despite Beijing's insistence that it was a civilian aircraft carrying out scientific research. On Tuesday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said US high-altitude balloons had violated Chinese airspace at least 10 times since last year, a statement US National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson rejected as false.

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Journalist Seymour Hersh Says Nord Stream Blasts to Have Consequences for US in Long Term

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh said on Wednesday that the Biden administration's sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines will have political consequences for the United States in the long term, including the possibility that some nations may leave NATO.

"I think the consequences politically for us are enormous... looking even at the potential of countries walking out of NATO," Hersh said.

Last week, Hersh published an investigative report describing in detail how US deep-water divers had planted explosives under Russia's Nord Stream pipelines. Hersh said he wrote the text based on insider information from a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning of the attacks. The explosives were detonated remotely on September 26, 2022, on the order of President Joe Biden, Hersh added.

Earlier on Wednesday, Hersh wrote an article in which he said that US administrations have repeatedly tried over the years to obstruct or denigrate his investigative pieces, labeling him a fabricator and dismissing his stories.

Hersh is known for exposing the mass murder of unarmed civilians by US troops during the Vietnam War and for exposing the US military torturing prisoners at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, among others.

The earlier texts eventually found their way to the mainstream media in the United States and around the world, he said.

The White House, Defense and State departments have denied any US involvement in sabotaging the Nord Stream pipelines.

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US Urges China to Cooperate on Narcotics, Beijing Does Not Engage - Drug Policy Chief

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States urges China to cooperate on addressing the illicit flow of narcotics, but Beijing chooses not to engage on the issue, Office of National Drug Control Policy Director Rahul Gupta said on Wednesday.

"The bilateral relationship between the United States and the PRC is complex and characterized by competition, yet, there are areas in which we can cooperate, and counternarcotics is one. We're urging the PRC to join us in this action," Gupta said during testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "But rather than demonstrate global leadership ... the PRC is instead choosing to not engage."

Chinese suppliers provide drug precursor chemicals to cartels in Mexico, who then traffic narcotics into the US, Gupta said.

Two cartels in Mexico – the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels – are responsible for the majority of the fentanyl trafficked into the US, Drug Enforcement Administration head Anne Milgram also said during testimony to the committee.

Drug traffickers also often use Chinese money laundering operations to channel illicit funds back to Mexico, Milgram said.

The US continues to press China to take concrete action on the shipment of drug precursor chemicals, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Todd Robinson said.

Fentanyl is the deadliest threat facing the US today, Milgram added.

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Russia Says It Requested UNSC Meeting on Feb 22 on Nord Stream Pipeline Blast

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Russian Mission to the UN is planning to organize a UN Security Council meeting on the blast of the Nord Stream pipeline on February 22, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday. "In the light of new information regarding the undermining of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, we requested a meeting of the UN Security Council on February 22 at 15.00 New York time (23.00 Moscow time)," Polyanskiy wrote in his Telegram account.

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US Must Pay Attention to BRICS, Other Alliances Involving Russia - Hill

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States must pay attention to the BRICS group of countries and other alliances in which Russia participates, former deputy assistant to the US president, Fiona Hill, said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday. "We should pay attention to the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)," Hill, who works as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. Hill noted the recent joint military exercise involving South Africa, Russia and China, adding that South Africa being part of such drills is "not acceptable." "And other countries should not be doing that too," she also said. Hill emphasized that Russia is trying to create its own alliances and is one of the few close partners of China. "Russia has emphasized a great deal in terms of partnership building in Middle East, for example, and the parts of East Asia, Latin and South America, trying to revitalize old Soviet ties," Hill said. The deepening of Russia's already close relations with Iran is also a problem, Hill added.

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US Should Seek Non-Western Diplomatic Initiative on Ukraine - EX-NSC Russia Director

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - A diplomatic initiative on resolving the Ukraine conflict needs to be undertaken by countries that are outside of the group of states comprising the

collective West, US National Security Council (NSC) former Russia Director Fiona Hill said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We need to have a diplomatic initiative," Hill told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "It may very well take countries like China pushing Russia for there to be any break in [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's resolve."

Hill explained she is proposing such an initiative to demonstrate to Putin either behind the scenes or directly that the conflict in Ukraine is not in Russia's interest and there is a need to move to the negotiating table.

Hill noted that Putin had made it clear he was interested in reacquiring territory of the former Russia Empire, leading to great anxiety not only in Ukraine but also in countries such as Moldova and Kazakhstan.

However, reaching a settlement would likely be insufficient to prevent Putin from pushing beyond the settlement lines, Hill said.

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US Must Offer Alternative as China, Russia 'Seek to Change Int'l Order' - Senator

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – The United States must offer the world an alternative, as China and Russia allegedly attempt to change the international order, and the world enters a new era of trilateral nuclear competition, US Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Jack Reed said Wednesday.

"We have to recognize that America faces an existential struggle between democracy and autocracy. Beijing and Moscow seek to change the international order by exploiting vulnerable nations through coercive economic and military pressure," Reed said during a committee hearing. "America must offer an alternative to this kind of foreign policy."

Reed also warned that the world had shifted from a bilateral rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War to "entering an era of trilateral nuclear competition" given China's "growing nuclear arsenal."

He said that strategic competition in the long term was not only a matter of military or economic power, but of "ideas."

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US, Iran Discuss Possible Prisoner Release With Help of Qatar, UK – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – The United States and Iran are engaged in indirect discussions on a possible prisoner exchange with the United Kingdom and Qatar playing an intermediary role in the talks, NBC News reported on Wednesday, citing four sources in the know.

According to the sources, the talks have resulted in some progress made, but it still remains to be seen whether any agreement will be reached.

Negotiators are leaning towards a 2021 formula whereby the United States would commit to unlocking billions of dollars in Iranian accounts in South Korea in exchange for the release of imprisoned Americans, the report said.

At the same time, Iran will have the right to use the unlocked funds only within the framework of the existing sanctions regime, that is, for purposes related to the purchase of food, medicine, or other humanitarian needs, the report added.

During the discussions, the United States and Iran discussed the possible role of Qatar in overseeing the transfer of funds to Tehran, the sources said.

Earlier in the month, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani met his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, to convey "messages from the United States to the Iranians which included points on the prisoner release," according to the sources.

The news comes amid repeated statements by Biden administration officials that Washington has now completely abandoned the idea of reaching an agreement on the so-called Iranian nuclear program, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after Tehran allegedly began supplying Russia with unmanned aerial vehicles amid its conflict with Ukraine.