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‘Tiger in a Cage’: 80 Years Since Yugoslav Partisan Leader Tito Smashed Nazi Forces on Neretva River
By - Fantine Gardinier

Nowhere was the irregular anti-Nazi resistance more dogged or successful than in mountainous Yugoslavia, where Josip Broz Tito led a partisan army in a yearslong cat-and-mouse chase against Germans, Italians, and their Četnik and Ustaše Yugoslav collaborators.
While the Nazi war machine advanced quickly across much of Central and Eastern Europe, in many places their presence was constantly challenged by resistance groups and guerrilla fighters. Their constant harassment of the supply lines of the Germans and their allies was a significant drain on their front-line forces fighting in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, as it required hundreds of thousands of troops to be diverted to deal with the insurgents.
The steady collapse of the German and Italian position in North Africa in 1942, following a British counterattack in Egypt and American amphibious landings in Algeria, raised Axis fears of an Allied landing in the Balkans - a maneuver favored by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill - in the underbelly of Nazi-occupied Europe. Yugoslavia was vulnerable for several reasons, including the persistence of partisan forces such as the communist National Liberation Army (NLA) and the monarchist Četniks, the latter of whom were quietly playing both sides by fighting the NLA for the Nazis.

As a result of this threat, German and Italian forces launched major campaigns to disrupt the NLA base in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was largely completed by late 1942, with the NLA Partisans being forced into the west, occupying a broad space of freed territory encompassing most of western Bosnia and southeastern Croatia. However, a massive new operation was being planned for early 1943 involving four German divisions, 90,000 men, including the crack 7th Waffen-SS Division, and a broad alliance of Italian, Četnik, and Ustaše forces.
Against them, Tito had barely 20,000 troops, and would lose half of them before the battle was over.
Axis Attack
“Pacifying” an area that had once supported partisans meant the executions of captured partisans, including the wounded, and the massacres of whole villages and towns that had supported them instead of the occupiers.

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Map describing the Fourth Enemy Offensive (Operation Case White) and Partisan Counter Offensive (5 February to the end of April 1943)

© Military History Institute of the JNA

Sensing the noose tightening, Tito decided to act and sought to break out eastward and return to their old raiding grounds in eastern Yugoslavia. When the German assault, codenamed Fall Weiss (Case White), began on January 20, 1943, the Partisans held the western line fiercely, but slowly retreated to the east.

By early March, the Partisans had lost half their territory in the west and were slowly being hemmed in, using their best forces to protect a massive field hospital in Šćit, on Ramsko Lake near Prozor. Along their eastern flank were Italian and Četnik forces in the steep valley formed by the Neretva River, which flows in an upside-down U-shape around the massive Prenj mountain.

Konjic, at the top of that “U” and defended by 3,000 Četniks, was the gateway to eastern Herzegovina and the Partisans’ best route of escape. A surprise Partisan attack on Konjic on February 22 failed, but the Partisans moved into other cities along the Neretva whose Italian garrisons had been exhausted by fighting, including the western banks of Jablanica and Mostar.

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Three days later, the Axis forces launched a new phase of their operation, buttressed by new forces on all sides of the Partisans, including reinforced Italian and Četnik troops on the right bank of the Neretva. The Germans mistakenly assumed Tito's headquarters lay almost 40 miles to the west in Livno, which was well-defended but strategically unimportant by then.

The Partisans steadily gave way as the Germans advanced, withdrawing as civilians were evacuated and preserving their strength as they retreated towards the Neretva. However, with the field hospital in Šćit under threat and the noose tightening on all sides, Tito was forced to adopt a bolder strategy.

Escaping Checkmate

First, Tito had to protect the hospital by sending most of his forces northward, to Gornji Vakuf and Prozor to blunt an attack by the German "Vogel" battle group. To disguise this counteroffensive, Tito ordered all the bridges along the Neretva to be blown up. This would deceive the Axis forces into believing he intended to march northward, when instead all he was doing was buying time.

The counterattack against the Germans on February 28 was brutal, but worked. The battle happened in deep snow amid horrid weather conditions. Many soldiers suffered frostbite and other cold-related ailments.

However, to advance further north with so many German and Axis forces concentrated there would be suicide. Tito then turned his forces about-face, and most to the south again - a move absolutely nobody expected.

In his reminiscences on the subject, former Yugoslav deputy prime minister Milovan Djilas compared the Partisans' situation to that of their Chinese comrades during the Long March.

"The enemy is around us on all sides...we are caught in the valley of the Rama. In front of us is the Neretva gorge. Our only choice is to follow goat paths like the Chinese partisans who crossed the Tata river in their Long March … Tito on the Neretva was a tiger in a cage, clawing about for weak spots - among the Italians and the Četniks, of course - gauging a hole wide enough for the partisan storm to gush through."

The southward attack began on March 5 in dramatic fashion: driving captured Italian tanks, the Partisans re-entered Jablanica and the Četniks, who assumed they were allied Italian forces, came out to meet them. The Partisans surprised them with gunfire and they scattered.

Their deception was just beginning. The following evening, March 6, Tito sent a crack unit called "thunder of the tenths" to sneak across the Neretva River and surprise the Četniks on the far side, too. They clamored across the skeleton of the destroyed bridge in Jablanica under cover of darkness, ambushing the Četniks and securing the far bridgehead.

The morning after, construction started on a new temporary bridge using the skeleton of the old one. In just 18 hours, they built a wooden bridge 56 meters long and 2.5 meters wide - just big enough to get their forces across.

The complete surprise attack had folded the Četnik lines around Jablanica, creating a safe hole in the Axis lines, and the temporary bridge became a lifeline by which to evacuate the wounded from the field hospital - which is why the Battle of the Neretva is sometimes called Battle of the Wounded. Tito thus kept his word that he would never abandon his wounded men. The mountainous terrain helped protect the bridge from German air attack, and after his forces were across, Tito had that bridge blown up, too.

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Četnik-held Konjic still blocked the road east, however, so again, Tito improvised: his troops abandoned their vehicles, dumping them in the river and proceeding across the mountains on foot, eventually escaping the Axis cauldron and establishing new operation in eastern Herzegovina and Montenegro, where the weakness of the Četniks provided them with space to regroup.

Although the battle is regarded as a tactical victory for the Axis powers, who killed large numbers of partisans and pacified a huge area of formerly-liberated territory, the Yugoslav Partisans survived and were able to continue their operations against the fascists, making it a major strategic victory.

As the Axis suffered serious losses on the Soviet front and began an almost permanent retreat, their ability to attack the Partisans collapsed as well, and the NLA re-established control over large swaths of the country by the time the Soviet Red Army entered Belgrade in October 1944.

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China's PLA Reportedly Preparing for Big R&D Push as Beijing Hikes Defense Budget
By -- Fantine Gardinier

After spending several years rapidly expanding its forces with more modern weaponry, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is reportedly preparing to spend more money on research and development (R&D), according to experts. Over the weekend, the Chinese legislature announced the biggest proposed defense budget hike in four years.

In his remarks at the start of the National People's Congress (NPC) on Sunday, outgoing Chinese Premier Li Keqiang urged a "whole nation strategy" for taking the lead over the United States in basic scientific research as well as advanced technologies, including those needed for advanced intelligence and space flight. He also urged the NPC to "consolidate and enhance integration of national strategies and strategic capabilities and step up capacity-building in science, technology and industries related to national defense."

"The new system for mobilizing resources nationwide should be improved," Li said. "We should better leverage the role of the government in pooling resources to make key technological breakthroughs, and enterprises should be the principal actors in innovation."

Tan Kefei, who led the PLA and armed police delegation at the NPC, similarly said on Monday that the PLA needs "to accelerate the creation of a modern logistics support system … "It's also necessary to further expand the military reforms [of the past decades] to improve military oversight and continue to modernize."

The PLA has undergone a rapid modernization campaign for the last decade, ushering in new fighter jets, armored vehicles, firearms, and warships in a dizzying expansion of its capabilities. The efforts have brought the PLA up to what the Pentagon now considers a "near-peer" capability, prompting fears in Washington and helping to justify a strategic shift toward "great power competition" with China as well as Russia, which performed its own army restructuring.

The NPC's budget proposal includes a 7.2% increase in defense - the country's largest since 2019 - with an increased focus on funding research into new technologies.

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The R&D focus is itself nothing new, as China has long looked to build a strong technological base as a key tool for bringing the country into the 21st century. Chinese President Xi Jinping has set a series of incremental goals for turning China into a "moderately prosperous society" by 2020 and a "fully developed nation" and "a global leader in terms of comprehensive national power and international influence" by 2049. Last month, he urged a massive new funding focus on technology education at earlier ages and for research funding to ensure China has a technologically literate population on which to base such a massive "sci-tech revolution."

The composition of the Communist Party of China's new Central Committee voted in at the 20th Party Congress last year reflected that focus, with 40% of its members having tech expertise. While that effort includes military technology, it also includes those technologies with a variety of civilian and military applications, such as advanced computer chips. Late last year, Shenzhen-based tech giant Huawei had filed for a patent on EUV lithography, the technology used to make the ultra-advanced microchips that China had been blocked from getting from Taiwan and the Netherlands just months earlier - evidence that Beijing's concerns about self-sufficiency in the face of increased Western hostility go back many years.

Other experts told Chinese media on Monday that the PLA was drawing important lessons from watching Russia's year-long operation in Ukraine, where they have seen similar doctrines with similar weapons systems play out on both sides. In particular, PLA strategists are thinking about "urban operations" such as they might encounter in Taiwan, according to one expert.

Indeed, the NPC has made clear it expects to accelerate the process of reunification with Taiwan, a Chinese island governed by a republican rump state that survived the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Beijing sees Taiwan as a Chinese province in rebellion and regards US support for the Taipei government, even though informal, as meddling in internal Chinese affairs.

A panel discussion on the sidelines of the NPC with Chinese defense officials called attention to the developments.

PLA Lt. Gen. Ma Yiming, a deputy to the NPC who served as deputy chief of the Joint Staff Department at the PLA's Central Military Commission (CMC) from 2017 to 2020, said that China should "speedily improve its strategic capability" to realize national reunification and "strengthen research on specific issues such as urban operations and [logistic] support."

Zhang Youxia, who is the CMC's present vice-chairman, also said that "we should promote innovative combat tactics for information warfare, ensuring our armed forces can keep making progress in military modernization."

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White House: Biden 'Does Not Regret' Endorsing Ford EV Truck Despite Accusations of High Pollution

By - Fantine Gardinier

US President Joe Biden's spokesperson put the brakes on an attempt by US media to squeeze out a denunciation of Ford Motor Company's new electric-powered pickup truck, the F-150 Lightning.

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"There was a report last week about how Ford's F-150 Lightning, their electric EV truck, is contributing to high pollution and deforestation in the Amazon," a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre during Monday's press briefing.

"Does President Biden regret endorsing that truck back in 2021? And has anyone talked to Ford about how they should source aluminum for the frame from a different mine?"

"No, [he] does not regret that and [I] don't have any conversation to read out on that," Jean-Pierre replied.

The report referenced was published in US media on Monday and found that the aluminum used in the Lightning's lightweight frame comes from the Mineração Rio do Norte bauxite mine on the Trombetas River, a tributary of the Amazon in northern Brazil.

The report found that the massive strip mine has destroyed water quality nearby, making locals sick and killing the fish. Requests by the mine operator, which is owned by a conglomeration of Brazilian, Australian, and Norwegian interests, to expand its operations have been rejected twice by Brazilian regulators for not sufficiently consulting neighboring communities.

Moreover, the bauxite ore it produced is shipped downstream to a huge processing facility outside Belem, the Alunorte refinery, owned by Norsk Hydro ASA, one of the mine's investors. The Alunorte refinery is the largest aluminum maker outside of China and has been repeatedly caught and fined for discharging into nearby rivers. Water and medical tests have found an aluminum concentration in the water and in local residents that is dozens of times higher than is safe.

Biden visited Ford's facility in Dearborn, Michigan, when the US automaker launched the Lightning EV truck in May 2021. Video of him test-driving the truck, including testing its acceleration abilities, went viral on social media.

"This sucker's quick," Biden quipped to reporters from behind the wheel. It has a zero-to-sixty acceleration of just 4.5 seconds, according to the company.

"The future of the auto industry is electric - there's no turning back," Biden later said at a press conference. "The real question is whether we will lead or we'll fall behind in the race for the future."

Ford's Lightning recently faced a pause in its production at Dearborn after the massive lithium-ion battery on one of the trucks erupted in flamesduring a pre-delivery quality check at the facility. The automaker has set the lofty goal of selling 150,000 Lightnings this year - 10 times what it sold last year.

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Chinese FM: US Needs to 'Hit the Brakes' Before Conflict Becomes Inevitable With Beijing

By - Ian DeMartino

China and the United States have the world's third and second-largest nuclear stockpiles, respectively. Tensions have been increasing between the two countries over economic issues and the US repeated accusations that Beijing is supporting Russia, as well as matters over Taiwan.

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Newly appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said in a Tuesday media briefing that the US and China are headed towards conflict if the United States does not “hit the brake” in its dealings with Beijing.

On Tuesday, Qin, who was until recently the Chinese ambassador to the United States, said that the balloon incident was proof the US sees China as its main adversary, and that the United States acts “with the presumption of guilt” towards China.

The US contends the balloon shot down by the United States Air Force in early February was a Chinese surveillance balloon despite China maintaining it was a scientific vessel launched by a private company that had blown off-course.

Qin reiterated that China was seeking “a sound and stable relationship with the US” but that the Biden administration’s call for “guardrails” in their relationship was the US signaling “that China should not respond in word or in action when attacked,” adding: “That’s not possible.”

If the US does not draw down its aggressive position towards China, Qin warns that “conflict and confrontation” will be inevitable.

“If the US does not hit the brake but continue to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailing and there will surely be conflict and confrontation,” Qin said.

Qin also spoke about China’s relationship with Russia and pointed to it as a template that other countries could follow.

“Relations between Russia and China are characterized by non-alignment with blocs, absence of confrontation and are not directed against third parties,” Qin said, seemingly in reference to NATO which was created to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. “[The relationship between China and Russia does] not pose a threat to any country in the world.”

On the subject of sanctions, Qin questioned why his country was being threatened with sanctions by the West, while his country has provided no arms to either side of the conflict in Ukraine.

Qin also said sanctions on Russia are unlikely to solve the issue and said that dialogue to end the conflict should begin as soon as possible. Earlier this month, China proposed a plan to begin peace talks in Ukraine, but it was roundly rejected by Ukraine and its western allies.

The next day reports were leaked by the US intelligence community, accusing China of “considering” weapon shipments to Russia and US officials warned that any such shipments would be met with sanctions. While the Biden administration hinted it was considering making the intelligence reports covering China’s plans public, the US has yet to provide any evidence that China is or was considering weapon shipments to Russia.

China, Russia and other countries have begun to talk in recent years of a “multipolar” world that would no longer be subject to the whims of the hegemony of the US. "The Russia-China cooperation can become a driver for the world towards multipolarity and greater democracy in international relations," Qin said.

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Japan’s New Flagship Space Rocket H3 Fails Test Flight, Self-Destructs

By - Ian DeMartino

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The H3 rocket is designed to replace the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency's (JAXA) current workhorse, the H-IIA rocket. It has been in development by JAXA and its commercial partner, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, for more than a decade.

After an aborted attempt last month that never left the launch pad, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency tried to launch its new H3 rocket on Tuesday but the rocket again failed to reach Earth's orbit.

This second attempt was more successful than the first, as it got off the ground this time, but the Tanegashima Space Center determined the rocket had "no possibility of achieving the mission" and issued a "destruct command."

The issue seemed to arise sometime between the end of the rocket's first stage and separation and the rocket's second stage ignition. According to velocity data provided during JAXA's livestream of the event, the speed of the rocket started decreasing after shedding its first-stage engines. Had the second-stage engine performed as expected, the rocket should have continued to accelerate.

It has not been confirmed by JAXA that the second-stage engine ignition caused the rocket's failure to reach orbit, but the livestream noted that "the second stage ignition has not been confirmed yet" moments before the order was given to abort the mission.

The destruct command typically means the rocket self-destructed, which is often used for failed missions to lessen the chance of falling debris causing damage on the ground. In October, a Japanese Epsilon-6 rocket was given the destruct command after it failed to reach orbit safely. That rocket was the first Epsilon rocket to carry a commercial payload, creating an early black mark for JAXA, which is trying to develop a commercial satellite launch business. The remains of that rocket fell into the ocean east of the Philippines and reportedly caused no damage or injuries.

It is unknown at this time where the debris from the H3 rocket landed and JAXA has not commented publicly on the botched launch.

The H3's first launch was planned for February 16 but was aborted after its countdown reached zero. While the rocket's two main engines did ignite, its two solid rocket boosters did not. The rocket never left the launch pad and remained intact.

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Flying Fiascos: Five Recent Airline Incidents That Might Make You Rethink Your Travel Plans

By - Ian DeMartino

Several stories about harrowing incidents while flying made headlines over the weekend. Rather than flood your feed with short accounts of each, here's an easily digestible list that might have you thinking twice about your next travels.

Passenger Allegedly Tries to Stab Flight Attendant, Jump Out of Emergency Exit Door

During a Sunday flight from Los Angeles to Boston, a United Airlines passenger was arrested after allegedly trying to open the emergency exit door and trying to stab a flight attendant with a broken spoon.

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Francisco Severo Torres, 33, had to be subdued by fellow passengers and the flight crew after he, according to police, attempted to attack a flight attendant who confronted him about tampering with an emergency exit door.

Around 45 minutes into the flight, an alarm was set off, alerting the flight crew that the emergency exit door between the coach and first-class cabins had been disengaged.

The flight attendants re-engaged the door's lock and one of them said he saw Torres by the door and thought he may have been tampering with it. When confronted, Torres asked the flight attendant if the plane had cameras that would show him tampering with the door. He then allegedly attacked the flight attendant before being subdued by passengers and the flight crew.

Torres was arrested when the plane landed in Boston, Massachusetts, and has been charged with one count of interference and attempted interference with flight crew members and attendants using a dangerous weapon - that charge can result in a life sentence.

According to court documents, Torres told police he went to the bathroom to break the spoon and turn it into a weapon because he feared the flight attendant was going to try to kill him and he decided to kill the flight attendant first. He also allegedly told police he wanted to open the emergency exit door so he could jump out.

Passenger Arrested for Carrying Explosive in Luggage

Mark Muffley of Langford, Pennsylvania, was taken into custody by the FBI on Monday after he admitted he knew explosives were in the luggage that he tried to get through security and onto a flight heading from Lehigh Valley International Airport to Orlando, Florida.

Muffley allegedly tried to conceal his explosive by putting it in the lining of his bag, which he checked through security. During a routine screen, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) found a circular compound with two fuses and powder concealed in wax paper and plastic wrap. The powder is suspected to be a mix of flash powder and dark granules that are typically used in commercial fireworks. The criminal complaint alleges the device was susceptible to "ignite from heat" and "posed a significant risk" to the aircraft and its passengers.

After finding the device, the TSA called Muffley to the security desk but he did not answer their call. He can be seen leaving the airport on security cam footage roughly five minutes later.

Security also found a can of butane, a lighter, a pipe with a white powder residue that prosecutors alleged might have been methamphetamine and two GFCI outlets taped together in Muffley's bag.

Security experts told US media that while the device was likely flammable and explosive, it did not appear to be set to go off during flight.

Muffley's court-appointed lawyer asserted the device was modified fireworks. "Although this might be a flashy story because it involves a plane, this is not a situation where there's any reason to believe that this person had any interest in causing harm to anyone other than lighting fireworks off at a beach in Florida," Muffley's lawyer Jonathan McDonald argued in a hearing on Thursday.

However, prosecutor Sherri Stephan told the court it didn't matter if Muffley intended to use the device as a firework after arriving in Florida.

"It was an explosive. It was in his bag. He checked it into the airport," Stephan told the judge. "Knowledge of the fact this man would go to an airport with those things in his suitcase and attempt to have them placed on an aircraft is nothing short of astonishing," Stephan said.

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Southwest Flight Makes Emergency Landing in Cuba After 'Bird Strike' Causes Cabin to Fill With Smoke

A Southwest flight departing Havana, Cuba, had to turn around after its engine and nose "experienced bird strikes" shortly after take-off, Southwest said in a statement given to US media.

The flight was headed towards Fort Lauderdale, Florida, but had to return to Cuba just minutes after takeoff because smoke was filling the cabin, presumably caused by damage done to one of its engines after the "bird "strike."

Cuban air officials said that the 147 passengers were safely returned to José Martí International Airport in Havana. A video recorded by one of the passengers was shared on social media.

It shows a chaotic scene with customers struggling to breathe in the smoke-filled cabin. Oxygen masks can be seen dangling from above some seats while passengers sitting in places without deployed oxygen masks can be seen covering their faces with clothes.

Passengers Vomit, Pass Out While Landing Aborted Amid Turbulence

A Southwest flight aborted a landing at Raleigh-Durham International Airport and was diverted to Myrtle Beach because of extreme turbulence on Friday night. The plane had reportedly descended to 1,350 feet before calling off the landing and being diverted.

At least two witnesses told media outlets that they observed some of the passengers vomiting and at least one passed out from a panic attack during the botched landing.

After landing in Myrtle Beach, the passengers were held on the plane as it sat on the tarmac for over two hours, but that wasn't when the inconvenience ended. The passengers were released only to find themselves abandoned in a closed airport with no food or services available.

The airport was so empty, one witness told CBS 17, that a group from the flight decided to go behind a closed bar and started "pouring themselves drinks — because there was no security," at the airport at that time.

Around 1 a.m. local time, an empty plane arrived at the airport and brought the passengers to their original destination. But, according to at least one witness, Southwest didn't compensate its customers for the inconvenience: "They didn't offer us meal vouchers or anything."

Two United Planes Touch While Being Towed

Airline drama is not always exclusive to events in the air. On Monday, two United Airlines Boeing 757s collided on the runway at Logan International Airport near Boston, Massachusetts. The collision caused both planes to be taken out of service while the damage was evaluated, United Airlines said in a statement.

No injuries were reported, and the incident occurred while one plane was parked at a gate and the other was being towed away when its right wing struck the tail of the parked plane. Passengers on both planes had to be deboarded and their flights were rescheduled for later in the day.

The incident is under investigation and comes after several close calls with plane collisions in recent months. Last week, a JetBlue plane, also landing at Logan, nearly collided with a charter jet that was using an intersecting runway.

There have also been recent close calls at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas, and one off the coast of Hawaii that saw a United Airlines flight nearly plunge into the ocean, recovering less than 800 feet from the surface.

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Photos: Syria's Aleppo Airport Shut Down After Suspected Israeli Strike - Syrian Defense Ministry
By - Ian DeMartino

If confirmed, the attack would mark the second time Israel has carried out airstrikes in Syrian territory while the country recovers from a devastating earthquake that shook the country last month.
The Aleppo International Airport has been shut down following an explosion that Syrian state media is reporting came from an Israeli airstrike.
State-owned Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) is reporting that a missile flew over the mediterranean, west of the city of Latakia, before targeting the airport.
Unconfirmed footage from the scene has been posted on Twitter by Independent journalist Aleph.
No injuries from the attack or damage to nearby buildings have been reported. SANA is reporting that the airport has been shutdown due to the attack. The outlet called the attack a incident of "Israeli aggression," and notes that the attack was carried out at 2:07 a.m. local time.
Iran was using the Aleppo airport to provide aid to help Syria recover from the deadly earthquake that stuck Syria and neighboring Turkiye last month.
Last week, reports quoted an anonymous Israeli military official that they had intelligence indicating that Iran intended to take advantage of the earthquake to provide arms to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.
According to Asharq Al-awsat, an Arabic international newspaper headquartered in London, Iran had given the greenlight to militias in Syria to activate air defense systems in the country. The order came days after Israeli airstrikes hit targets in Damascus, the capital of Syria.
On February 6, Turkiye and Syria were hit by a massive 7.8 magnitude magnitude earthquake that killed more than 45,000 people in Turkiye and more than 6,700 in Syria.

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Biden to Host South Korean President on April 26 – White House

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will host his South Korean counterpart, Yoon Suk Yeol, for a state visit on April 26, the White House said on Tuesday.
"President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host President Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee of the Republic of Korea for a State Visit to the United States, which will include a state dinner, on April 26, 2023," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

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Boeing to Start Production of MH-139A Grey Wolf Helicopters for US Air Force - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Boeing will start production of MH-139A Grey Wolf helicopters for the US Air Force, the company said in a statement on Tuesday.
"Boeing [NYSE: BA] will begin production on the first 13 MH-139A Grey Wolf helicopters, following the award of a $285 million U.S. Air Force contract for aircraft, sustainment and support services," the statement read.
Deliveries are expected to begin in 2024, it added.
The new helicopter will replace the UH-1N Huey. It will enhance missile security "for decades," according to the statement.
"Advancing the program from testing and evaluation to production is a major step toward entering the MH-139 into service and providing the U.S. Air Force with additional missile security for decades," Boeing's MH-139 program director, Azeem Khan, said.
The MH-139A's enhanced capabilities allow it to accomplish missions more quickly, quietly and efficiently, the statement said.
Boeing will work on the project in cooperation with Leonardo, the prime contractor. Leonardo will produce the helicopter at its plant in northeast Philadelphia, while Boeing is responsible for military equipment procurement and installation, the statement added.

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US Conducts Static Fire Test of LGM-35A Sentinel ICBM - Air Force
WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States conducted its first full-scale static fire test of the Sentinel stage-one solid rocket motor at Northrop Grumman's test facility in Promontory, Utah, the Air Force said in a statement on Tuesday.
"The @usairforce Nuclear Weapons Center & @northropgrumman conducted a static fire test earlier this month of the LGM-35A Sentinel #ICBM, set to replace the Minuteman III as the land based and most responsive leg of the US Nuclear Triad," Air Force Global Strike Command said via Twitter.

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Russian Delegation to Meet UN Officials in Geneva Next Week – Source

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UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) – A Russian delegation is expected to meet with UN officials next week in Geneva amid efforts to extend the Black Sea grain deal, a UN diplomatic source told Sputnik on Tuesday.
"Next week in Geneva, we expect a Russian delegation to meet with UN officials," the source said, adding that the meeting would likely address the issue of Russian exports of grain and fertilizer.
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is en route to Kiev, where he will meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday to discuss extending the grain deal, according to a statement from his office.

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Guterres, Zelenskyy to Discuss Grain Deal Extension in Kiev on Wednesday – Office

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is en route to Kiev, where he will meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday to discuss extending the Black Sea grain deal, according to a statement from his office.
"The Secretary-General has just arrived in Poland on his way to Ukraine. On Wednesday morning he will meet President Volodymir Zelensky in Kyiv to discuss the continuation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in all its aspects, as well as other pertinent issues," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in the statement.

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RPT - No One Size Fits Solution to Replace Russian Gas in European Markets - Industry Executive
HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - There is no single solution to replace Russian gas on the European market, Petronas Chief Operating Officer Adnan Zainal Abidin told Sputnik.
"I guess it's depends. It depends on what will be the best outcome for certain countries, there is no one size fits solution," the executive said on the margins of the CERAWeek annual energy conference.
The Petronas COO added that he is unsure how high oil and gas prices will rise to by the end of the year amid the Ukraine conflict, but added that high prices are not sustainable.
After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated with a $60 price-cap imposed by G7 member states and Australia on December 5.
In response to the price cap, Moscow banned the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap, in a decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in late December.

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Moreover, the Ukraine conflict also stopped the flow of Russian gas to Europe, which led to a spike in gas prices for the energy and shortages that the United States is trying to help alleviate through liquefied natural gas exports.

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RPT - UN Hopes Issue of Denying Russian Diplomats US Visas to Be Resolved With Host Country- Haq

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) Lenka White - The United Nations hopes the issue of Russian diplomats being denied US visas to attend an event at the world body in New York City will be resolved with the host country, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.
"This is an issue that we hope to be resolved with the host country," Haq said on Monday.
The United States again refused to issue visas to a number of Russian diplomats who planned to take part in the activities of the working group on information and communication technologies at the UN headquarters in New York City.

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RPT - US Firm to Start Growing Crystals With Human DNA at ISS This Spring - Manager

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US company Space Crystals is offering a unique experience of immortalizing one’s essence by having a person's DNA grown into crystals on the International Space Station (ISS) and then launching them onto the Moon's surface with a lunar lander, Space Crystals President Kevin Heath told Sputnik.
"We send out DNA collection kits, collect the client DNA, then in the lab we take the client DNA and infuse it into two crystalline solutions per client. We then launch them to the ISS and, while in orbit, grow two totally unique crystals per client embedded with the client DNA," Heath said.
Heath explained that the crystal growth happens in the first five-to-seven days of their flight in space and after that period, they are set aside to wait until being returned back to Earth to be reunited with their owners.
"Upon their return to Earth, the client receives one of the crystals while the sister crystal is mounted in a Lunar Time Capsule (designed and built by Texas A&M University) and installed on a lunar lander with 1GB of your unique personalized data and launched to the surface of the Moon to remain for all eternity," he said.
Heath explained that he came up with the idea several years ago but could not make it happen until commercial flights to the ISS and the Commercial Lunar Payload Services missions to the Moon were made available.
"I came up with it after visiting a funeral site where they had really elaborate and expensive mausoleums that were deteriorating over time, which made me think that no matter what you do

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here on this planet it won't last," he said. "Compare that to the footprint of Neil Armstrong on the Moon, which will be there forever, and combine that with seeing Jurassic Park, where they extracted DNA from a mosquito embedded in Amber and you have the beginnings of the idea for Space Crystals."

Heath pointed out that the idea was for the crystals to be totally unique, like snowflakes, and came up with idea of growing them in space where they would not be affected by gravity.

"It is a celebration of life and a way for someone to preserve their essence forever," he said. "In the summer of 2024, our clients will be able to hold their totally unique space crystal embedded with their DNA in their hand and look up at the Moon and know that the sister crystal will be there forever - something we call the 'crystal connection."

Heath emphasized the crystal project is a totally unique and exclusive one and the company is only targeting 266 sales for the first flight.

"Which means out of the 7.8 billion people on the planet, only a handful will get this opportunity this year," he said.

Heath noted the company cannot disclose whom they are working with, but added that it has contracts to fly to the ISS and to the Moon.

Heath revealed the company performed terrestrial experiments in early 2022 to test out the concept and then flew 36 test samples in orbit on the ISS in May of 2022 to verify the process.

"We were able to achieve crystal growth in all 36 vials. The crystals that returned from space are about the size of small marbles," he said.

The company is targeting their first customer flight to the ISS late this spring and a flight to the Moon in early 2024, Heath said.

"As you know, flying things in space is very expensive. So, unfortunately, this program is not for everyone as the price is $150,000 per client," he said. "However, we are donating 3% of the net profits to STEAM education to get the kids excited about the limitless opportunities if they follow a career in science, technology, engineering, arts and/or Math."

Heath also said that the customer offers at present are not sold out yet.

"If the demand is there, we plan on flying follow on missions with other types of crystals. So, for example, this first set will be synthetic Amethysts and in the coming years we could fly Emeralds, Ruby's, etc., and our repeat customers could end up with the whole Thanos Glove," he added.

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RPT - Scouts Help Russian Emigres Maintain National Identity, Traditions Abroad - Oldest Scout

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Russian scouts have helped their countrymen in the diaspora maintain their national identity and traditions, the world's oldest Russian scout Lidia Gerich told Sputnik.

"Our scouts have helped people who are living outside of Russia to keep their roots and to maintain the Russian traditions," Gerich, who turned 103 on Monday, said.

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Gerich said she was born during the Russian civil war between the White Army and the Bolsheviks and spent her childhood in Latvia in the city of Daugavpils - which she calls by its old name, Dvinsk - with a large Russian community.

"Of course, there was a Russian church, where we spent all Sundays and celebrated all holidays. We lived in Latvia, but it felt as if we were in Russia. We had a Russian cultural center, a Russian school and even a Russian Teachers Institute, from which I graduated," she said.

Gerich said she joined the Russian scout organization almost 90 years ago at the age of 14.

"We went to scout camp, sang Russian songs, held gatherings, celebrated Orthodox Christmas - with Father Frost and the Snow Maiden," Gerich said.

The scouts took those traditions with them to other countries when they relocated after World War II, she said.

Gerich noted that Russian scouts did a lot for the renaissance of the scout movement in Western Europe, where it first appeared in the early 1900s.

"Many of the first emigrants were scouts in Russia and they brought scouting to Europe. And then, when they moved to the United States, they brought those traditions to New York, San Francisco and other cities here," she said.

Gerich explained that she settled in San Francisco in the early 1950s, as it was the only city with a Russian Center at the time.

"We had a library, a big concert hall and a Russian newspaper. We organized our meetings and performances there as well," she said.

After moving to Washington, DC in 1962, Gerich said she created a Russian scout team, which she named after the ancient Russian city of Putivl. More than 60 years later, the team remains one of the largest Russian scouts groups in the world.

"I came to the Russian school and announced creating a new scout organization. The whole class signed up and we began to work," she said.

Gerich pointed out that the organization began to grow rapidly when the children began to speak in English to one another and their parents, disappointed, tried to engage as many of them as possible. They arranged gatherings, held summer camps, but, most importantly, they helped the youth keep the Russian language, she said.

"Over time, our squad became stronger and now we see the result: the grandchildren of our first scouts are already studying with us. We have always been with our church, which has been very supportive of us," Gerich said.

In the early 1990s, Gerich said she and other like-minded people from the Russian diaspora participated in the first meeting of Russian scouts in Pavlovsk - a neighborhood of St. Petersburg, where the country's scouting movement appeared in the 1900s.

"It was amazing. Can you imagine, hundreds of people in scout uniforms, the same as ours. The leaders of the Russian scouts come up to us and said: 'Thank you for returning scouting to us.' It was so touching," Gerich added.

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RPT - 'Too Early to Tell' if Russian Oil Price Cap Working - US Energy Adviser

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"I think it's too early to tell but I think so far so good," Hochstein said on the margins of CERAWeek on Monday.
After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas.
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RPT - US-EU Not Expected to Enter Trade War Over US Anti-Inflation Act Row - Industry CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States and its European allies are not expected to enter a trade war on clean energy due to conflicting concerns over the US Inflation Reduction Act, Linde plc CEO Sanjiv Lamba told Sputnik.
"I do not think a trade war on clean energy or its components is likely to be honest," Lamba said.
Lamba explained that based on his interactions and engagements in the energy industry, he believes political bodies in the United States and the European Union will be pragmatic in dealing with the issue.
In August 2022, US President Joe Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act seeking to attract investments and reduce dependence mainly on Chinese technologies. Under the legislation, $370 billion will be spent on ensuring clean energy and achieving the set climate goals and $64 billion on reducing the cost of medicines and health insurance.
The European Commission has previously warned that the Inflation Reduction Act discriminates against EU companies and threatens the bloc's industrial base. The EU has been in talks with the US over the issue, with some European leaders calling the law unfriendly toward the bloc.
In late October 2022, the EU and the US launched a joint task force to address concerns raised by the EU as regards the IRA and establish close coordination between the sides to promote sustainable green economic development and support resilient supply chains across the Atlantic.

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US, EC, Diamond Industry Leaders Discuss Disrupting Russian Revenue Stream - State Dept.
(Adds background in paras 4-7)

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WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Top US and European Commission officials met with diamond industry leaders to discuss ways to cut-off billions in revenue to Russia, the State Department said in a press release.

"Russia continues to earn billions of dollars from the diamond trade, and the discussion centered on the most effective and impactful ways to disrupt that revenue stream," the release said on Monday.

In the talks were US Ambassador James O'Brien, EC Chief Trade Enforcement Officer Denis Redonnet, and leading diamond retailers, manufacturers, laboratories, and industry trade associations, the release added.

Last week, the Group of Seven (G7) countries agreed to further sanction the Russian diamond industry in an attempt to slash revenues amid Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. The G7 in a joint statement said they would engage key partners on further measures on Russian diamonds, including rough and polished ones.

The United States sanctioned Russia's diamond miner Alrosa in April but the impact has been limited because much of the cutting and polishing is done in India.

Last Spring, the president of India's Diamond Workers Union Gujarat, Ramesh Zilariya, told Sputnik that Western sanctions on rough diamonds have ended up devastating workers in India's polishing industry, where unemployment, wage reductions, and suicide rates are now on the rise.

Russia has the world's largest reserves of industrial diamonds and gemstones, according to the US Geological Survey's annual mineral commodity summaries.

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No One Size Fits Solution to Replace Russian Gas in European Markets - Industry Executive

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Moreover, the Ukraine conflict also stopped the flow of Russian gas to Europe, which led to a spike in gas prices for the energy and shortages that the United States is trying to help alleviate through liquefied natural gas exports.

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Hard to Predict How High Energy Prices Will Rise in 2023 Amid Ukraine Conflict - Executive

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - It is hard to predict how high oil and gas prices will rise by the end of 2023 if the conflict in Ukraine continues, Petronas COO Adnan Zainal Abidin told Sputnik.
"It's difficult because, God knows, as far as the war persists, anything can happen. We just prepare ourselves," the executive said on the margins of the CERAWeek annual energy conference on Monday.

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Major US Energy Firms to Meet OPEC This Week to Discuss Global Market - Source

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Major US energy companies will meet this week with delegations representing the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and non-OPEC countries to discuss industry-related matters, a person familiar with the matter told Sputnik.
According to the source, these meetings have become routine during CERAWeek, which is taking place this week in Houston.
The talks will circle around energy projects, supply, and other global issues, the source said.
Colombia and Brazil are also expected to take part in these meetings, according to the source.

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CERAWeek brings together global leaders to advance new ideas and solutions to the biggest challenges facing the future of energy, the environment and climate. The annual gathering includes CEOs and officials from the global energy and utilities, as well as the automotive, manufacturing, policy, financial and tech communities.

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Man Arrested for Attempting to Open Emergency Exit Mid-Flight to Boston - US Attorney

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - A resident of Massachusetts has been arrested and charged for allegedly attempting to open an emergency exit door during a flight from Los Angeles to Boston and for attempting to stab a flight attendant in the neck, the US Attorney's office for the District of Massachusetts said in a press release.
Francisco Severo Torres, 33, was arrested Sunday evening at Boston's Logan International Airport after the pilots of the United Airlines jet made an emergency landing once the flight attendants alerted them of the risk to the flight.
Torres is being charged with one count of interference and attempted interference with flight crew members with a dangerous weapon, the release said.
Court documents show that a flight attendant witnessed Torres near an aircraft door that had been disarmed and believed Torres had tampered with the locking mechanism, the release said.
Shortly after the attendant approached Torres, he allegedly attempted to stab an attendant in the neck with a broken spoon, the release also said.
A court hearing has been scheduled for March 9, the release added.
If convicted of the charges, Torres faces up to life in prison, up to five years of supervised release and a fine of $250,000, according to the release

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Trudeau to Appoint Special Rapporteur Tasked with Combating Alleged Foreign Interference

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced he will be appointing an independent special rapporteur tasked with combating interference and strengthening the country’s democracy.
Earlier, Canadian police said they initiated an investigation into violations of the Security of Information Act (SOIA) associated with recent media reports about alleged Chinese election meddling.
"Today, I'm announcing that I will be appointing an independent special rapporteur, who will have a wide mandate and make expert recommendations on combating interference and strengthening our democracy," Trudeau said during a press conference on Monday.

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Trudeau added that many state and non-state actors want to "foster instability" in Canada and other countries, noting that China, Iran and Russia amongst others have allegedly attempted to interfere in its democracy and overall internal affairs.

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Blinken, Landsbergis Agree to Boost Lithuania's Economic Ties With Taiwan - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis agreed during their meeting on Monday to keep imposing sanctions against Russia and to expand Lithuania's economic ties with Taiwan, a joint statement issued after the meeting said.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Landsbergis confirmed the unwavering support of the United States and Lithuania for Ukraine as it defends its territory and democracy from Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion," the statement said. "The two leaders committed to continue imposing strong economic costs on Russia through sanctions and pursuing accountability for those responsible for Russia's attacks."

Blinken and Landsbergis also vowed to continue to support Ukraine and called on the allies of the collective West to do the same, the statement said.

The two officials pointed out they look forward to achieving a successful NATO Summit in Lithuania in July and also committed to working together to strengthen NATO's partnership with Ukraine to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, the statement said.

Landsbergis and Blinken also reaffirmed their strong concerns about China, underscoring the need for continued US engagement in the face of economic coercion, the statement said.

"Secretary Blinken expressed appreciation for Lithuania's resolve in withstanding the PRC's [People's Republic of China] unjustified political and economic coercion. Foreign Minister Landsbergis expressed appreciation for the many actions the United States has taken to support Lithuania in withstanding PRC coercion and turning it into an economic opportunity," the statement said.

In addition, the two officials agreed on the need to closely cooperate on upholding the so-called rules-based international order, including recognizing the importance of Washington joining as a third party in the World Trade Organization's case against China for discriminatory trade practices in Lithuania, the statement said.

They officials welcomed the development of joint projects between Lithuania and Taiwan in semiconductors, lasers and other areas, the statement said.

"The leaders also seek to strengthen Lithuania's robust economic partnership with Taiwan, support Taiwan's meaningful participation in international fora, and deepen people-to-people ties with Taiwan," the statement said, noting that they also committed to advance a common vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific region and expressed support for the mutual goal of closer cooperation between NATO and its Asia-Pacific Partners.

"They also look forward to Lithuania's development of an Indo-Pacific strategy," the statement added.

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US Senate to Consider New Bipartisan Bill to Empower Biden to Act Against TikTok - Report

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Democrats aligned to Joe Biden are to table in the US Senate a bipartisan bill to give the president the authority to act against Chinese social media app TikTok, resuming an initiative pursued by his predecessor Donald Trump, CNBC reported Monday.

The highly-anticipated bill, that is expected to be unveiled Tuesday afternoon by Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner, will allow Biden to respond to threats posed by TikTok and companies like it, a committee spokeswoman was reported as telling CNBC.

Warner, a Democrat from the state of Virginia, will appear with John Thune, a senator from the rival Republican party, at a news conference to announce the bill, the spokeswoman said.

CNBC said the precise text of the legislation had not been released, but Warner's comments over the past weekend suggested the bill will not be limited simply to reining in TikTok, which is owned by Chinese tech giant ByteDance.

US lawmakers need a systemic approach toward foreign technology to "ban or prohibit it when necessary", Warner told Fox News on Sunday, adding that "TikTok is one of the potentials" that could be targeted by the bill.

Falling back on Trump's oft-repeated message, the senator accused TikTok of "taking data from Americans [and] not keeping it safe". He also said what worried him more about the Chinese social media platform was that it could be a "propaganda tool" in which "the kind of videos you see would promote ideological issues".

US executives at TikTok — a video sharing platform that allows users worldwide to film themselves dancing in their living room, lip-synching jokes, capturing animal antics and sharing other slivers of personal life — have vehemently denied charges in the past of abusing the personal data of Americans.

CNBC said Warner's bill would come nearly a week after the House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced a Republican-sponsored bill with similar aims. That House legislation passed the GOP-controlled committee 24-16 along party lines, with unanimous GOP support and no Democratic votes.

The so-called Deterring America's Technological Adversaries, or DATA, Act mandates that the president impose broad sanctions on companies based in or controlled by China that engage in the transfer of "sensitive personal data" of Americans to entities or individuals based in, or controlled by, China.

The latest action against TikTok comes nearly two years after Biden canceled in June 2021 Trump's ban on Chinese social media apps TikTok and WeChat and signed his own executive order to protect US information technology and communications supply chains from threats that include those from China.

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The ban on TikTok and WeChat were part of a long-running diplomatic and trade war waged with China by Trump during the better part of his four years in office prior to Biden's term, which began in January 2021.

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'Not Unusual' for Gen. Milley to Visit Troops –US State Dept. on General's Trip to Syria

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WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – It is “not unusual’ for Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley to visit deployed US service members around the world, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing.

Gen. Milley had reportedly made an unannounced visit to a US military base in Syria on Saturday. According to media reports, as part of his trip, Milley planned to assess the almost eight years of US efforts to combat the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia), as well as measures to protect US military personnel in the Arab Republic.

“The US Army Chief does pop up around the world to visit with US service members. That's what we did in this context. Our service members are deployed in Syria in service of a goal that we share with Turkey as well as with our other allies, as well as with all members of the world coalition to defeat ISIS,” Price said on Monday. “It's not unusual for the Chairman of Joint Chiefs to visit with US service members who are deployed.”

On Monday, US Ambassador to Ankara Jeff Flake was summoned to the Turkish Foreign Ministry in connection with the visit of Milley to Syria, a diplomatic source in Ankara told Sputnik.

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Lockheed Martin Resumes New F-35 Jet Flight Testing After December Crash - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has resumed flight acceptance testing of new F-35 Joint Strike Fighters in Fort Worth, Texas after solving an engine problem that caused one of the aircraft to crash in December, the company announced.

"We resumed F-35 production flight operations today following an [Pratt & Whitney] F135 engine mitigation action," Lockheed Martin said in a statement reported by Defense Daily on Monday. The announcement meant the company had resumed its flight acceptance testing program for the US armed forces.

There were no fatalities in the December crash in which the pilot safely ejected. The crash was determined to have been caused by a problem with the high pressure fuel delivery system for the engine that was detected following what experts described as a very alarming F-35 engine vibration mishap, according to published reports.

Deliveries of F-35 jets were put on hold at the end of December as a result of the incident. However, last month, US Air Force and Lockheed Martin engineers found a solution to the problem, according to reports.

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US Lawmakers Urge Blinken to Allow More Aid Oversight Personnel in Ukraine - Letter

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WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Congressmen Jason Crow and Michael Waltz sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging the chief diplomat to allow more oversight personnel to work in Ukraine to ensure accountability of US assistance sent there.

"As members of the House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, we want to ensure… effective inspector general (IG) oversight of the nearly $100 billion-plus of congressionally approved military support and humanitarian aid to Ukraine." the letter said on Monday.

However, the lawmakers are concerned that the State Department's cap on US personnel in Ukraine is limiting inspector general staff from traveling to the country to conduct effective oversight, the letter said.

The inspector generals from the departments of State and Defense (DOS and DOD) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have expressed the challenges in conducting audits, inspections and investigations from outside Ukraine, the letter said.

"There is precedent for IG personnel to travel to war zones to conduct their critically important oversight role," the letter said. "Likewise, we urge you to consider opportunities to allow IG personnel from DOD, DOS, and USAID to travel to Ukraine for a limited duration to carry out their essential oversight functions."

The letter requests Blinken provide answers to whether he shares the departments' view on the challenge of conducting effective oversight from outside Ukraine and whether he will consider adjusting the US personnel cap for Ukraine to allow inspector general personnel to conduct oversight activities.

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Global Energy Market Will Remain 'Volatile' Unless Ukraine Conflict Ends - PETRONAS COO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The global energy market will remain uncertain and volatile unless there is an end in sight to the Ukraine conflict, the chief operating officer of Malaysian company PETRONAS said.

"Unless we see an end in sight the market will remain uncertain and volatile," Adnan Zainal Abidin said during a panel discussion at CERAWeek on Monday.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated with a $60 oil price cap imposed by G7 member states and Australia on December 5.

In response to the price cap, Moscow banned the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap, in a decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in late December.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) -

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS
* Chevron CEO Mike Wirth said on Monday that he does not see an intention from the European Union to return to Russian gas.
* The world's leading industrial gas firm Linde plc does not plan to resume operations in Russia in the foreseeable future, CEO Sanjiv Lamba told Sputnik.
* A Russian court has blocked Linde plc from selling its assets in Russia, Lamba told Sputnik.
* Russia's oil and gas revenues in January-February 2023 decreased by 46% to 947 billion rubles ($12.5 billion), primarily due to lower oil prices and falling gas exports, the Russian Finance Ministry said.
* Russia's second-largest oil producer Lukoil announced that it was granted approval to commercialize reserves of the Iraqi oil field of Eridu.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH
* The Azerbaijani military shelled a car with law enforcement officers of Nagorno-Karabakh on March 5, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.
* After an escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Moscow expresses serious concern and calls on the parties to show restraint, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
* The European Union on Monday commented on recent clashes in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and urged Armenia and Azerbaijan to demonstrate restraint to ensure stability and security in the region.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Ukraine lost up to 225 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past day after active military actions, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.
* Some European politicians see arm supplies to Ukraine as a field in which to compete against the United States, but they forget that it is Europe that is mainly affected by the conflict, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.
* French-produced AMX-10RC armored fighting vehicles, sent by Paris to Kiev, will arrive in Ukraine within the next few days, Emmanuel Chiva, director of the General Directorate for Armament, said.
* The delivery of F-16 fighter jets for Ukraine is not on the table, and the United States' position on the issue has not changed, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

US VISAS FOR RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS IN UN
* The United Nations hopes the issue of Russian diplomats being denied US visas to attend an event at the world body in New York City will be resolved with the host country, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

RUSSIA-KAZAKHSTAN TALKS

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* Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed bilateral relations during a phone conversation with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
* Putin and Tokayev discussed trade and economic cooperation during a phone conversation on Monday, the Kremlin said.

US CITIZENS KIDNAPPED IN MEXICO
* Four Americans were kidnapped after driving across the Mexico border from Texas and being fired upon, the FBI said on Monday.
* The United States is in contact with Mexico following the kidnapping of four Americans and stands ready to provide any consular assistance to their families, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

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Canadian Police Investigating Media Reports on Alleged Chinese Election Meddling - RCMP
WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) on Monday said it began an investigation into violations of the Security of Information Act (SOIA) regarding recent media reports on the alleged Chinese interference in the country's elections.
In Mid-February, the Globe and Mail wrote a report over the alleged Chinese interference during the 2021 elections, detailing how Beijing supposedly used its diplomatic missions, diplomats, media, and other influential individuals from the local diaspora, to meddle in Canada's electoral processes.
The report based its evidence on a series of Canada Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) documents it had accessed, about the agency's "intelligence-gathering" operations on the alleged Chinese interference in the country.
"The RCMP has initiated an investigation into violations of the Security of Information Act (SOIA) associated with recent media reports. This investigation is not focused on any one security agency. As the RCMP is investigating these incidents, there will be no further comment on this matter at this time," the RCMP said in a statement of Sputnik.
The SOIA was passed by the Canadian Parliament in 1985. It addresses matters deemed to be of national security, with an aim to protect Canada from espionage, sabotage, terrorism, and other sorts of interference.
This new investigation is yet another development in the ongoing probe over alleged Chinese interference in the country's elections of 2021, one that Beijing has repeatedly denied.

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Scouts Help Russian Emigres Maintain National Identity, Traditions Abroad - Oldest Scout

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Russian scouts have helped their countrymen in the diaspora maintain their national identity and traditions, the world's oldest Russian scout Lidia Gerich told Sputnik.

"Our scouts have helped people who are living outside of Russia to keep their roots and to maintain the Russian traditions," Gerich, who turned 103 on Monday, said.

Gerich said she was born during the Russian civil war between the White Army and the Bolsheviks and spent her childhood in Latvia in the city of Daugavpils - which she calls by its old name, Dvinsk - with a large Russian community.

"Of course, there was a Russian church, where we spent all Sundays and celebrated all holidays. We lived in Latvia, but it felt as if we were in Russia. We had a Russian cultural center, a Russian school and even a Russian Teachers Institute, from which I graduated," she said.

Gerich said she joined the Russian scout organization almost 90 years ago at the age of 14.

"We went to scout camp, sang Russian songs, held gatherings, celebrated Orthodox Christmas - with Father Frost and the Snow Maiden," Gerich said.

The scouts took those traditions with them to other countries when they relocated after World War II, she said.

Gerich noted that Russian scouts did a lot for the renaissance of the scout movement in Western Europe, where it first appeared in the early 1900s.

"Many of the first emigrants were scouts in Russia and they brought scouting to Europe. And then, when they moved to the United States, they brought those traditions to New York, San Francisco and other cities here," she said.

Gerich explained that she settled in San Francisco in the early 1950s, as it was the only city with a Russian Center at the time.

"We had a library, a big concert hall and a Russian newspaper. We organized our meetings and performances there as well," she said.

After moving to Washington, DC in 1962, Gerich said she created a Russian scout team, which she named after the ancient Russian city of Putivl. More than 60 years later, the team remains one of the largest Russian scouts groups in the world.

"I came to the Russian school and announced creating a new scout organization. The whole class signed up and we began to work," she said.

Gerich pointed out that the organization began to grow rapidly when the children began to speak in English to one another and their parents, disappointed, tried to engage as many of them as possible. They arranged gatherings, held summer camps, but, most importantly, they helped the youth keep the Russian language, she said.

"Over time, our squad became stronger and now we see the result: the grandchildren of our first scouts are already studying with us. We have always been with our church, which has been very supportive of us," Gerich said.

In the early 1990s, Gerich said she and other like-minded people from the Russian diaspora participated in the first meeting of Russian scouts in Pavlovsk - a neighborhood of St. Petersburg, where the country's scouting movement appeared in the 1900s.

"It was amazing. Can you imagine, hundreds of people in scout uniforms, the same as ours. The leaders of the Russian scouts come up to us and said: 'Thank you for returning scouting to us.' It was so touching," Gerich added.

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Too Soon for New START Renewal Talks, US Focused on Russian Return to Treaty - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - It is too early to begin speaking about a potential renewal of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia due to the United States being focused on a return to compliance by Moscow after their decision to suspend participation in the treaty, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.
"Before we start talking about what happens in 2026 and a potential renewal of the New START treaty, we want to focus on bringing Moscow back into compliance with the treaty," Price said during a press briefing. "There is a very uncomplicated way for Russia to come back into compliance: it needs to take part in inspections. That's something that can happen fairly quickly."
Last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the Kremlin's decision to suspend participation in New START amid the US's support for Ukraine.

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Norfolk Southern Unveils Safety Plan After Another Train Derails in Ohio

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - US rail giant Norfolk Southern announced a series of safety measures on Monday after a train derailed in Ohio over the weekend, the second such incident in the state within a month.
Earlier in the day, the US National Transportation Safety Board said it is deploying a team of federal investigators to probe Saturday's 20-car derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train near Springfield, Ohio. The incident comes about a month after a catastrophic derailment leaked toxic chemicals into the air and water in East Palestine, Ohio.
"Norfolk Southern Corporation announced Monday a six-point plan to immediately enhance the safety of its operations. The initiatives are based on the preliminary findings of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) following the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment," the company said in a press release.
The new safety plan is largely focused on enhancing its network of hot bearing detectors. Overheated bearings were identified by investigators as one of the root causes of the East Palestine crash.
The Senate plans to convene a hearing on Thursday to grill Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw, top US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials, as well as local heads of sanitation and emergency services departments.

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On Sunday, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency Director Anne Vogel said there was no release of chemical or hazardous material to the soil, air or water after the crash in Springfield. The NTSB said it has not determined the cause of the crash.
On February 3, a train hauling 20 cars from Norfolk Southern with hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. A big fire erupted due to the derailment, leading to officials burning vinyl chloride inside five of the tanker cars to avoid a catastrophic explosion. The accident released toxic chemicals, including hydrogen chloride, phosgene, butyl acrylate, and ethylene, into the environment.
Despite repeated assurances that the air and water are safe, residents in the area told Sputnik of recent health impacts, including headaches, burning skin and irritated eyes as well as anxiety about long-term health risks such as cancer. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources told Sputnik in mid-February that approximately 3,500 fish had died in waterways near the train derailment site.

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US Gov't to Challenge JetBlue-Spirit Airline Merger With Antitrust Suit - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is expected to sue a $3.8 billion merger between airlines JetBlue and Spirit Airlines in federal court, Bloomberg reported on Monday.
The antitrust lawsuit, which is expected to be filed as soon as Tuesday, will allege that the elimination of Spirit would increase overall ticket prices and decrease options for travelers, the report said.
The suit will be joined by a Department of Transportation proceeding blocking the transfer of Spirit's airline certificate on the grounds that the transfer goes against the public interest, according to the report.
This would be the first time that the DOT has used its authority to block the certification of transfers since the airline industry was deregulated in 1978.

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NATO ‘Never Threatened’ Any Country, Expanded Due to Russian ‘Aggression’ - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The NATO alliance never threatened any country that did not threaten it and expanded due to Russian aggression, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.
“NATO has never threatened anyone that in turn doesn’t pose a threat to members of NATO. NATO has expanded as a result of Russian aggression,” Price said during a press briefing.

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It is incumbent upon NATO member states to take prudent steps in response to Russia's actions, Price said.
NATO members and other partner states have surged funding and weapons to Ukraine to support the government in Kiev amid Russia's special military operation there.
NATO was founded by 12 countries in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union and has since expanded to 30 members, with several other states moving toward accession to the alliance. The United States and other NATO member states claim the alliance is defensive in nature, while Russia claims the alliance has continued to enlarge despite Moscow's clearly expressed security concerns.

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Russian Ambassador Recently Engaged With US State Department Officials - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov recently engaged with US State Department officials, spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.
"Without going into details of these engagements, Ambassador Antonov has had contacts, including recent contacts, including in person contacts, with appropriate State Department officials," Price said during a press briefing.

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US in Contact With Mexico After Kidnapping of 4 Americans - White House

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – The United States is in contact with Mexico following the kidnapping of four Americans and stands ready to provide any consular assistance to their families, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.
"We are closely following the assault and kidnapping of four US citizens in Matamoros, Mexico. These sorts of attacks are unacceptable. Our thoughts are with the families of these individuals, and we stand ready to provide all appropriate consular assistance," Jean-Pierre told reporters.
US law enforcement agencies maintain close contacts with Mexico on the issue, she added.

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White House Says F-16s for Ukraine Not on Table, Stance Unchanged

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – The delivery of F-16 fighter jets for Ukraine is not on the table, and the United States' position on the issue has not changed, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.
"The President has already spoken to F-16s, as you all know, and nothing has changed. What the President has said, it is not on the table for now," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

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White House Says Does Not Believe Taiwan Announced Its President Will Be Visiting US

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – The White House said on Monday it does not believe that Taiwan has announced its president is going to visit the United States.
"I do not believe Taiwan has announced any travel for the President of Taiwan. Taiwan's presidents have traveled to the US in the past, so I would refer you to Taiwan for anything specific for that," White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.
Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen will visit California and New York in early April, the Financial Times reported earlier in the day.
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Norway Cannot Fully Replace Russian Gas Export Volumes For Europe - Equinor Executive

HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Norway cannot fully replace Russian gas export volumes for Europe after Russian gas stopped flowing there, Equinor Senior Vice President Eirik Warness told Sputnik on Monday.
"No, not at all," Warness said on the margins of the CERAWeek annual energy conference when asked if Norwegian gas can replace Russian supplies to Europe.
Norway became the leading gas supplier to Europe after the conflict in Ukraine prompted the collective West to disrupt Russian gas supplies to the region.

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DC Council Pulls Crime Bill Before US Congress Votes to Reject - Chairman

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Washington, DC's city council is pulling a crime reform package that was under review by the US Congress to rework in light of recent congressional comments, Chairman Phil Mendelson said on Monday.

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Under the Home Rule Act, US Congress reviews all legislation passed by DC's council before it can become law. The withdrawal comes as the US Senate was lining up to vote on a House-passed resolution that would overturn the DC Council's changes.

"Withdrawal enables the [DC] Council to work on the measure in light of Congressional comments, and to re-transmit it later," Mendelson said in the letter.

Mendelson told reporters at a presser that "it's clear" Congress is intending to override the DC council's changes to the criminal code.

A simple majority in the US senate is required to pass the Republican-drafted measure that would kill the DC bill, and several Democrats have voiced support for it. Meanwhile, President Joe Biden last week said he would not veto the bill if it came to his desk.

Critics of the DC council's reform package said the changes were too "soft on crime." DC Mayor Muriel Bowser, a Democrat, had even vetoed the bill, arguing it would not make the city safer, but the council overrode her veto.

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US Factory Orders Down in January as Aircraft Bookings Fall - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - New orders for US-made goods fell in the month of January, the Commerce Department reported on Monday, citing weakness in demand for civilian aircraft while but noting higher bookings for machinery and other merchandise that indicated manufacturing may be on the mend.

Factory orders fell 1.6% in January after growing by a revised 1.7% in December. Economists polled by US media had on the average forecast factory orders to drop 1.8% in January, making the reported number slightly better than expected. Despite the decline on the month, orders were up 4.3% for the full year to January.

While orders for passenger jets fell, the report also showed shipments for a range of manufactured goods rebounding from back-to-back declines in November and December, against unchanged inventories.

"These numbers are generally in-line with what was expected and the revisions are negligible," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum. "It looks like we've seen the worst of the bullwhip effect around the manufacturing sector."

Manufacturing accounts for 11.3% of the US economy, right after consumer spending, which makes up 70%.

The January decline in orders for US-made goods came after last week's release of the Institute for Supply Management's survey that suggested manufacturing had slowed for a fourth month in a row in February.

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US Firm to Start Growing Crystals With Human DNA at ISS This Spring - Manager

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US company Space Crystals is offering a unique experience of immortalizing one's essence by having a person's DNA grown into crystals on the International Space Station (ISS) and then launching them onto the Moon's surface with a lunar lander, Space Crystals President Kevin Heath told Sputnik.

"We send out DNA collection kits, collect the client DNA, then in the lab we take the client DNA and infuse it into two crystalline solutions per client. We then launch them to the ISS and, while in orbit, grow two totally unique crystals per client embedded with the client DNA," Heath said.

Heath explained that the crystal growth happens in the first five-to-seven days of their flight in space and after that period, they are set aside to wait until being returned back to Earth to be reunited with their owners.

"Upon their return to Earth, the client receives one of the crystals while the sister crystal is mounted in a Lunar Time Capsule (designed and built by Texas A&M University) and installed on a lunar lander with 1GB of your unique personalized data and launched to the surface of the Moon to remain for all eternity," he said.

Heath explained that he came up with the idea several years ago but could not make it happen until commercial flights to the ISS and the Commercial Lunar Payload Services missions to the Moon were made available.

"I came up with it after visiting a funeral site where they had really elaborate and expensive mausoleums that were deteriorating over time, which made me think that no matter what you do here on this planet it won't last," he said. "Compare that to the footprint of Neil Armstrong on the Moon, which will be there forever, and combine that with seeing Jurassic Park, where they extracted DNA from a mosquito embedded in Amber and you have the beginnings of the idea for Space Crystals."

Heath pointed out that the idea was for the crystals to be totally unique, like snowflakes, and came up with idea of growing them in space where they would not be affected by gravity.

"It is a celebration of life and a way for someone to preserve their essence forever," he said. "In the summer of 2024, our clients will be able to hold their totally unique space crystal embedded with their DNA in their hand and look up at the Moon and know that the sister crystal will be there forever - something we call the 'crystal connection."

Heath emphasized the crystal project is a totally unique and exclusive one and the company is only targeting 266 sales for the first flight.

"Which means out of the 7.8 billion people on the planet, only a handful will get this opportunity this year," he said.

Heath noted the company cannot disclose whom they are working with, but added that it has contracts to fly to the ISS and to the Moon.

Heath revealed the company performed terrestrial experiments in early 2022 to test out the concept and then flew 36 test samples in orbit on the ISS in May of 2022 to verify the process.

"We were able to achieve crystal growth in all 36 vials. The crystals that returned from space are about the size of small marbles," he said.

The company is targeting their first customer flight to the ISS late this spring and a flight to the Moon in early 2024, Heath said.

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"As you know, flying things in space is very expensive. So, unfortunately, this program is not for everyone as the price is $150,000 per client," he said. "However, we are donating 3% of the net profits to STEAM education to get the kids excited about the limitless opportunities if they follow a career in science, technology, engineering, arts and/or Math."
Heath also said that the customer offers at present are not sold out yet.
"If the demand is there, we plan on flying follow on missions with other types of crystals. So, for example, this first set will be synthetic Amethysts and in the coming years we could fly Emeralds, Ruby's, etc., and our repeat customers could end up with the whole Thanos Glove," he added.

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"As you know, flying things in space is very expensive. So, unfortunately, this program is not for everyone as the price is $150,000 per client," he said. "However, we are donating 3% of the net profits to STEAM education to get the kids excited about the limitless opportunities if they follow a career in science, technology, engineering, arts and/or Math."
Heath also said that the customer offers at present are not sold out yet.
"If the demand is there, we plan on flying follow on missions with other types of crystals. So, for example, this first set will be synthetic Amethysts and in the coming years we could fly Emeralds, Ruby's, etc., and our repeat customers could end up with the whole Thanos Glove," he added.

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Hundreds of Twitter Users Report Outage of TweetDeck Dashboard - Downdetector

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Several hundred Twitter users on Monday reported technical problems with the TweetDeck dashboard, according to data from the Downdetector outage tracker.
Downdetector began to receive reports from users about the TweetDeck outage starting at approximately 11:30 a.m. (16:30 GMT). The outage tracker has received more than 350 reports that users cannot access the application, according to the data.
Instead of accessing the webpage with TweetDeck, users see a JSON code page with an error message saying "Your current API plan does not include access to this endpoint, please see https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/twitter-api for more information."
"This platform is so brittle (sigh). Will be fixed shortly," Twitter owner Elon Musk said in a tweet following the outage.
This is the second major a technical issue has arisen with the Twitter platform in March. On the first of the month, Twitter users also reported problems with being unable to load new content or see replies to their posts.

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Russian Price Cap Has Created Difficulties for Operations in Energy Markets - Chevron CEO

HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The Russian price cap has created many obstacles in normal operations for global energy markets, Chevron CEO Mike Wirth said on Monday.
"There's not a lot of swing capacity, there's not a lot of inventory capacity, so a little bit and the system normally optimizes within those parameters, but there's now a lot of constraints: you can't sell to this country, you can't buy from that country, can't insure," Wirth said during a panel discussion at CERAWeek.
Moreover, Wirth said that he does not foresee Europe becoming a reliable consumer of Russian gas again.
After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated with a $60 price-cap imposed by G7 member states and Australia on December 5.
In response to the price cap, Moscow banned the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap, in a decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in late December.

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US Speaker McCarthy to Meet Taiwanese Leader in California - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy will meet with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen in California instead of Taipei in order to avoid further tensions with Beijing, The Financial Times reported on Monday.
McCarthy had said last summer that he intended to visit Taiwan if he was elected speaker, but Tsai convinced the California senator to meet in the United States instead to avoid a round of forceful demonstrations by the People's Liberation Army, which Nancy Pelosi spurred on when she visited Taiwan in August, said the report.
While in California, Tsai will speak at the Reagan Library for the second time since 2018, and also plans to visit New York, the report added.
Before Pelosi's visit last fall, Newt Gingrich was the last Speaker to visit the country in 1997. His visit sparked massive exercises by the China's military that included firing missiles over Taiwan.
Last week, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin in a letter to all Defense Department personnel vowed that the US would provide Taiwan with self-defense capabilities as the threat from China evolves.

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The US defense budget authorizes $2 billion in annual military assistance to Taiwan. However, Taiwan has expressed frustration over the delay in arms deliveries and an alleged backlog of almost $20 billion, much of which may not arrive for years, according to The Washington Post. Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province and opposes any official contacts by foreign states with Taipei as well as considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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Chevron CEO Says Sees No Intention From Europe to Return to Russian Gas

HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Chevron CEO Mike Wirth said on Monday that he does not see an intention from Europe to return to Russian gas.
"Clearly, Europe's over reliance on Russian gas is something that is very clear today, and I think that Europeans do not intend to go back," Wirth said during a panel discussion at CERAWeek.

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UN Hopes Issue of Denying Russian Diplomats US Visas to Be Resolved With Host Country-Haq

UNITED NATIONS, March 6 (Sputnik) Lenka White - The United Nations hopes the issue of Russian diplomats being denied US visas to attend an event at the world body in New York City will be resolved with the host country, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.
"This is an issue that we hope to be resolved with the host country," Haq said on Monday.
The United States again refused to issue visas to a number of Russian diplomats who planned to take part in the activities of the working group on information and communication technologies at the UN headquarters in New York City.

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US-EU Not Expected to Enter Trade War Over US Anti-Inflation Act Row - Industry CEO

HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States and its European allies are not expected to enter a trade war on clean energy due to conflicting concerns over the US Inflation Reduction Act, Linde plc CEO Sanjiv Lamba told Sputnik on Monday.
"I do not think a trade war on clean energy or its components is likely to be honest," Lamba told Sputnik during a press conference.

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Lamba explained that based on his interactions and engagements in the energy industry, he believes political bodies in the United States and the European Union will be pragmatic in dealing with the issue.
In August 2022, US President Joe Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act seeking to attract investments and reduce dependence mainly on Chinese technologies. Under the legislation, $370 billion will be spent on ensuring clean energy and achieving the set climate goals and $64 billion on reducing the cost of medicines and health insurance.
The European Commission has previously warned that the Inflation Reduction Act discriminates against EU companies and threatens the bloc's industrial base. The EU has been in talks with the US over the issue, with some European leaders calling the law unfriendly toward the bloc.
In late October 2022, the EU and the US launched a joint task force to address concerns raised by the EU as regards the IRA and establish close coordination between the sides to promote sustainable green economic development and support resilient supply chains across the Atlantic.

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Russian Court Blocks Linde Plc's Effort to Sell Its Assets in Russia - CEO

HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - A Russian court has blocked the world-leading industrial gas firm Linde plc from selling its assets in Russia, company CEO Sanjiv Lamba told Sputnik on Monday.
"We have Russian gas business that we are trying to sell, but a local court has provided an injunction on that," Lamba said.

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Linde Plc Does Not Plan to Resume Operations in Russia in 'Foreseeable Future' - CEO

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HOUSTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - World-leading industrial gas firm Linde Plc does not plan to resume operations in Russia in the foreseeable future, CEO Sanjiv Lamba told Sputnik on Monday.
"No plans to resume operation in Russia in foreseeable future, we have no further projects happening in Russia today," Lamba said.

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US Seeks USMCA Trade Dispute Talks With Mexico Amid Dispute Over GMO Corn - USTR

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeking formal trade talks with Mexico under a trilateral agreement after Mexican authorities announced plans to limit imports of US genetically modified corn, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a statement on Monday.
Mexico in February issued a decree to ban the use genetically modified corn for human consumption, while allowing some GMO corn for feed and industrial use.
"The Office of the United States Trade Representative today announced that it is requesting technical consultations with the government of Mexico under the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) Chapter of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA). These consultations regard certain Mexican measures concerning products of agricultural biotechnology," the statement said.
The USTR expressed confidence that the two countries can reach through this process an outcome that respects their sovereignty and benefits as well as the interests of agricultural producers and stakeholders.
"The United States has repeatedly conveyed our serious concerns with Mexico's biotechnology policies and the importance of adopting a science-based approach that complies with its USMCA commitments," the statement said. "Mexico's policies threaten to disrupt billions of dollars in agricultural trade and they will stifle the innovation that is necessary to tackle the

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climate crisis and food security challenges if left unaddressed. We hope these consultations will be productive as we continue to work with Mexico to address these issues."
US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack called Mexico an important partner and confirmed the United States' commitment to strengthen bilateral economic and trade ties. Vilsack also said that a robust, transparent agricultural trading relationship is vital to ensuring food security, mitigating the lingering effects of food price inflation and helping to address the climate crisis.

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CNN Prevented Coverage of COVID-19 Lab-Leak Theory in Early Stages of Pandemic - Reports
WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Former CNN President Jeff Zucker prevented the news network from covering the lab-leak theory on the origins of the novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 during the early months of the pandemic, Fox News reported on Monday.
Zucker banned the network from digging into the lab-leak theory, which alleges the COVID-19 pandemic originated from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, due to the theory's association with former US President Donald Trump, the report said, citing a CNN insider.
Zucker believed the lab-leak theory was a "Trump talking point," the report said.
Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray said the agency assesses that the pandemic most likely originated as a result of a lab incident in Wuhan.
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that although the virus may have originated in a Chinese laboratory, there is no evidence it was developed as a biological weapon. Blinken added that some intelligence agencies claim the pandemic most likely originated at a market in Wuhan.
The US Senate passed a bill last week requiring the Biden administration to declassify any intelligence related to links between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The US House of Representatives is expected to consider the legislation on Friday.

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US Supreme Court Declines to Hear Challenge by Florida City to Religious Freedom Lawsuit

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court is declining to take a case presented by the city of Ocala, Florida that challenges a lawsuit brought by atheists claiming the city violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by holding a prayer vigil in the wake of a shooting spree, Justice Neil Gorsuch said on Monday.
In 2014, the city of Ocala held a prayer vigil after three children were wounded in a shooting spree. Uniformed police chaplains appeared onstage with other community religious leaders to pray for the injured children.

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Several atheists who attended the event sued the city and several officials in response, citing violations of the US Constitution's First Amendment. Specifically, the lawsuit alleged a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which prohibits the US government from establishing a state religion.

A US District Court granted summary judgment in favor of the atheists, finding that they had standing to contest the speech under the terms of the Lemon v. Kurtzman case, which created the so-called Lemon test to judge violations of the Establishment Clause.

However, the Supreme Court effectively overturned Lemon v. Kurtzman in its 2022 Kennedy v. Bremerton School District ruling, which clarified protections for personal religious observance by government employees.

"In Kennedy, this Court put to rest any question about Lemon's vitality. We held that claims alleging an establishment of religion must be measured against the Constitution's original and historical meaning, not the sensitivities of a hypothetical reasonable observer," Gorsuch said in a statement. "The city asks us to take this case to make just this point. It is an understandable request. But I see no need for the Court's intervention at this juncture."

The case will remain remanded to the District Court to consider the implications of the Kennedy decision. Gorsuch said that although he expects lower courts will recognize the Lemon test's lack of legal standing, the city is free to seek future relief from the Supreme Court if he is mistaken.

Justice Clarence Thomas issued a dissenting opinion on the court's denial of certiorari in the case. The Supreme Court should have taken the case to clarify jurisdictional matters, Thomas said.

"Although the Eleventh Circuit was correct that Lemon is no longer good law, we should have granted certiorari to review whether respondents had standing to bring their claims," Thomas said. "I would have granted certiorari to determine whether the courts below lacked jurisdiction. I have serious doubts about the legitimacy of the 'offended observer' theory of standing applied below."

Thomas noted that the respondents voluntarily attended the vigil with full knowledge of its religious content.

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Canada's Chief of Defence Staff Wayne Eyre Visits Troops Deployed in Poland

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff Wayne Eyre said on Monday that he paid a visit to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) deployed in Poland under Operation Unifier.

"I was pleased to visit @CanadianForces members deployed in Poland, where they are providing training to Ukrainian recruits as part of #OpUNIFIER," Eyre said via twitter.

Canada has deployed over 100 CAF members to Poland, where they are providing "vital" training to Ukrainian combat engineers and Leopard tank crews, in cooperation with Warsaw, Eyre continued, noting the involvement of the UK in the processes.

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Eyre also congratulated the deployed soldiers on building Ukraine's capacity to face Russia's special military operation.
Operation Unifier was launched in 2015 at the request of Ukraine. Since then, the CAF has trained over 35,000 Ukrainian soldiers in combat operations and other skills.
Shortly after Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the mission was extended until March 2025.

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Over 850,000 Children Remain Displaced by Earthquake in Turkey, Syria - UNICEF
WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - More than 850,000 children continue to be displaced by the recent deadly earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, UNICEF said in a release on Monday.
"One month on from the two catastrophic earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye and Syria, more than 850,000 children remain displaced after being forced from their damaged or destroyed homes," the release said.
"The number of children killed and injured during the quakes and their aftermath has not yet been confirmed but is likely to be in the many thousands."
UNICEF stressed that the impact of the earthquakes on the children and families in the region has been catastrophic. The Fund explained that hundreds of thousands of people have been left in desperate conditions, while many families have lost their homes and are now living in temporary shelters.
"In Türkiye alone, over 1.9 million people are staying in temporary accommodation shelters with limited access to basic services such as water, sanitation and medical services in the affected areas," they noted. "2.5 million children in the country require urgent humanitarian assistance."
The Fund went on to say that in Syria, more than 500,000 people have been forced from their homes by the earthquakes.
"Many families' homes have been destroyed and many children are afraid to return to damaged homes as aftershocks continue," the release said. "Even before the earthquakes, Syria had the largest number of internally displaced people in the world, with 6.8 million people displaced – including nearly three million children. Across Syria, more than 3.7 million children have been affected by the quakes."
UNICEF has reached almost half a million people with lifesaving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and life saving supplies across Syria, according to the release.
"Over 294,000 people, including those taking refuge in shelters, have been reached with essential supplies and medical consultations through UNICEF-supported health centres and mobile health teams," it explained. "More than 130,000 under five-year-old children have been supported with nutrition services across the earthquake-affected areas. UNICEF has also reached more than 100,000 children and caregivers with psychological support, including psychological first aid, recreational activities, mental health psychosocial support and parenting sessions."
Meanwhile, UNICEF said, it has distributed winter clothes, electrical heaters and blankets to some 277,000 people, including over 163,000 children in Turkey.

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"Working closely with the Ministry of Health, UNICEF is procuring life-saving vaccines and cold chain storage equipment," it added. "258,000 people, including 148,000 children received hygiene supplies. UNICEF has been setting up child-friendly spaces near temporary accommodation centres and has so far provided psychosocial first aid and recreational activities to over 5,000 children."

Moreover, UNICEF has supported Türkiye's Ministry of Education to set up 87 tents to be used as temporary learning centres, the release noted.

"UNICEF has so far reached over 193,000 people with psychosocial support through trained social workers," the release went on to say. "UNICEF continues to identify unaccompanied and separated children and refer them for further support."

In February, two earthquakes of magnitudes 7.7 and 7.6 hit the south-eastern regions of Turkey at a nine-hour interval. The underground shocks followed by hundreds of aftershocks were felt in 11 Turkish provinces and in the neighboring states, with Syria being affected the most.

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US Envoy for East Asia Heads to Indonesia, Malaysia – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Kritenbrink will travel to Indonesia and Malaysia this week for meetings with ASEAN counterparts and government officials, the State Department said on Monday.

"Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink will travel to Jakarta, Indonesia, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on March 7-11. During his travel, Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink will participate in the ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue and the ASEAN East Asian Summit Senior Officials Meeting in Jakarta," the statement read.

During the first stop of the trip in Jakarta, Kritenbrink will also commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative and meet with the new Philippines Permanent Representative to ASEAN. He will also discuss the US-Indonesia Strategic Partnership and bilateral economic, security, climate, and energy initiatives with senior officials.

While in Malaysia, Kritenbrink will meet with senior Malaysian government officials to discuss strategic priorities and ways to expand bilateral partnership, the statement read. This includes cooperation in such areas as law enforcement and counterterrorism, democracy, human rights, anti-corruption, combatting trafficking in persons, refugees, cybercrime, maritime security, and initiatives related to critical minerals, it added.

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Bolton Warns US to Build Up Arms Amid Emerging Tripolar Nuclear Order

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – Former Trump national security advisor John Bolton warned Monday that the US must recognize an emerging tripolar nuclear order, arguing that it must build up its nuclear arms rather than seek arms control agreements with Russia or China.

"Given the growing strength of the Russia-China entente and China's expanding nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs, Cold War-style, U.S.-Russia arms agreements are not merely inadvisable but dangerous," Bolton wrote in an op-ed in The Washington Post.

He argued that President Vladimir Putin suspending Russia's participation in the New START pact was a wake-up call for the United States to understand that it could not rein in its nuclear rivals through arms agreements. He noted that the treaty only addressed strategic and not tactical nuclear weapons, excluding new technologies such as hypersonic missiles. He also warned that China, which has refused to sign similar agreements, was likely aiming to grow its nuclear assets beyond a point for them to be meaningfully reined in by negotiations.

Bolton warned that even if the US was victorious in a nuclear confrontation with Russia, it could face a subsequent confrontation with China. Alternatively, it could face a nuclear confrontation against an allied China and Russia.

He called for the US to "urgently recalibrate its warhead and delivery-system requirements" and boost its nuclear assets for deterrence and self-defense. He argued it was preferable to have sufficient arms on hand and limit them rather than to not have enough and allow Russia and China the upper hand.

In a state-of-the-nation address last month, President Putin said Russia is suspending its participation in New START. Putin said any Russian return to talks would require clarity about how NATO's combined nuclear strike potential would be taken into account.

The Russian president said that NATO members act as if there is no connection between the issues of New START and the Ukraine conflict as well as other hostile actions against Moscow.

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