

**3/13/23 Monday**

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Biden Unveils New Joint Nuclear Sub Program for AUKUS Following Sale of Virginia-Class Boats

By - Fantine Gardinier

In remarks at the 32nd Street Naval Station in San Diego, California, US President Joe Biden laid out the process by which Washington will deliver at least three nuclear-powered attack submarines to Australia in the coming years under the aegis of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) pact.

Appearing with Rishi Sunak and Anthony Albanese, the prime ministers of the United Kingdom and Australia, respectively, Biden referred to their countries on Monday as “two of America’s most stalwart and capable allies” that “share a common vision.”

The US “can ask for no better partners in the Indo-Pacific,” Biden said, asserting that their pact is “showing again how democracies can deliver.”

Biden said the US would begin building three Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines and sell them to Australia “beginning in the early 2030s, with the option for Canberra to buy two more boats.

“These subs are ... nuclear-powered, not nuclear-armed,” Biden quickly asserted. “These boats will not have nuclear weapons of any kind on them.”

He said the US was “deeply committed to strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime,” and that “Australia will not produce nuclear fuel” for the submarines.

Australian personnel have already begun learning from their US counterparts about how to operate and maintain the submarines, Biden said, a process which will include embedding in classes, shipyards, and the boats themselves.

Later in the decade, the US and UK will establish a rotational presence of nuclear-powered submarines in Australia to assist in maintenance training, Biden also said.

The ultimate goal, he said, is to begin construction of a new class of conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarines to be operated by both the British and Australian navies, and with some shared parts with American submarines - a program dubbed “SSN AUKUS.”

Both Albanese and Sunak noted that their participation in the program has resulted in massive new defense budgets, with Albanese saying the AUKUS agreement represents “the single biggest investment in Australia’s defense commitment in all of our history.”

“This is the first time in 65 years, and only the second time in history, that the United States has shared its nuclear propulsion technology, and we thank you for it,” Albanese said.

Sunak noted the UK would be adding “an extra 5 billion pounds” to its defense budget, increasing it to 2.5% of GDP in another breach of longstanding custom.

This, he said, would ensure the UK remains “one of the world’s leading defense powers.”

The submarine deal was first announced in September 2021 along with the foundation of the bloc itself, featuring three of the five “Five Eyes” Anglophone intelligence-sharing nations. The pact is focused on sharing military capability, including cyber, artificial intelligence, and quantum technologies, but also hypersonic weapons and the nuclear-powered attack submarines in question.

Although AUKUS claims not to be focused on any specific adversary, [it is plainly](#), by its structure and by comments from its member nations, aimed at further “containing” China in what Washington calls the “Indo-Pacific” region.

The pact’s formation resulted in Canberra canceling a deal to buy several diesel-electric submarines from France, [creating a new rift](#) in the Western alliance network. The deal was also contentious around the world because Australia is a declared nuclear-free state, without even a domestic nuclear power program, meaning all the technology will have to be imported and adapted from the United States. The Virginia-class submarines use weapons-grade uranium for fuel, further raising fears - and cries of hypocrisy - about nuclear proliferation.

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‘One Family’: Xi, Li Tell Lawmakers China to Promote ‘Peaceful Development’ of Taiwan Reunification

By - Fantine Gardinier

In a speech before the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s legislative body, Chinese President Xi Jinping said Beijing would continue to pursue reunification of Taiwan with the mainland through peaceful means.

Xi on Monday said his government would actively promote the “peaceful development” of cross-strait relations and “unswervingly” promote reunification with Taiwan. He added that external interference and separatist activities in Taiwan would be resolutely opposed - the same pledges made in an [August 2022 white paper](#) on reunification.

On Monday, the new Chinese premier, Li Qiang, emphasized that Chinese on both sides of the strait were “one family” and that the cooling of tensions and restoration of normal trade and exchange across the waterway was “the common expectation of everyone and requires joint efforts.”

Such exchanges have been suspended since Tsai Ing-wen was elected President of Taiwan in 2016, who hails from the pro-separatist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

In response to their comments, Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, which handles relations with Beijing, retorted that Beijing should face the reality that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are “not subordinate to each other.”

The department said on Monday that Beijing should “respect the Taiwanese people’s commitment to the core concepts of holding fast to the sovereignty, democracy and freedom of the Republic of China,” using the name the Taipei government claims for itself.

Xi's comments also echo the conclusions of US intelligence. Last week, Avril Haines, the US director of national intelligence, told Congress they [did not believe Beijing](#) wanted to go to war over Taiwan.

Ahead of the NPC's "Two Sessions," during which the legislature handles most of its annual business, one Chinese lawmaker [said last month](#) that reunification plans with Taiwan had been put on a "fast development track" without explaining further.

'One Country, Two Systems'

The government in Taipei is all that remains of the republican government defeated by the Communist Party of China in the civil war in 1949, when the new People's Republic of China was founded in Beijing. While the capitalist Taipei government claims it is the rightful government of all of China, the socialist Beijing government considers Taiwan to be a Chinese province in rebellion - a position endorsed by all but a handful of the world's countries. Despite the US [switching its recognition](#) of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, it has continued to informally but openly funnel weapons and other aid to Taiwan, sufficient to guarantee its safety from "Chinese attack".

Beijing regards such efforts as interference in its internal affairs, and sees it as encouraging Tsai's pro-separatist government to pursue more provocative policies, and perhaps even a declaration of independence - which would mean war.

For a peaceful reunification of Taiwan with the mainland, [Beijing has since 1979 offered](#) the island a "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement like that used to bring Hong Kong and Macau, once European colonies, back into the fold as Chinese provinces in the 1990s. Their capitalist systems and liberal democratic legal structure have been largely preserved, albeit under the aegis of China's market socialist system and a coordinated nationwide security policy. However, supporting Taiwan's autonomy from Beijing has become a keystone of Washington's "great power competition" strategy aimed at preventing the rise of China to equal-standing with - or perhaps even surpassing - the US on the world stage. US generals have regularly warned that a "[Chinese invasion of Taiwan](#)" is imminent or on the agenda, except when they are claiming that Xi is rethinking launching an attack based on lessons learned from Russia's special operation in Ukraine that began in February 2022.

Reports [circulating in Western media](#) on Monday claimed quite the opposite of Li, with the British Defense Ministry claiming Beijing was preparing for a blockade of Taiwan later this year and "adopting an actual war approach." Last August, Beijing demonstrated its ability to do so by [staging military drills](#) in the waters on all sides of the island, following a visit there by then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. However, it issued the above-mentioned white paper just weeks later, saying it prefers peaceful reunification above all else.

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Iran Pardons Over 82,000, Commutes Sentences for 34,000 for Islamic Revolution Anniversary  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The head of Iran's judiciary announced on Monday that more than 100,000 people would be either granted amnesty from charges against them or have their sentences commuted.

Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, Iran's chief justice, said a total of 82,656 people have been pardoned, including 22,628 detained in the massive protests seen in recent months following the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in police custody. In addition, Ejei said the sentences of 34,000 people had been commuted.

The mass amnesty was [previously announced](#) by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution last month, and comes ahead of the Persian New Year, Nowruz, next week.

The announcement is also the first time the Iranian government has released official numbers about how many were arrested during the protests last year. International NGOs had reportedly [widely differing claims](#) about the number of people killed or detained during the demonstrations, which the government has called "riots." Official numbers say at least 200 have died, although the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) has claimed there were at least 530 deaths.

The protests were [set off by the death](#) of Amini, 22, following a September 13, 2022, encounter with the Guidance Patrol, Iran's morality police, who said she was not wearing her hijab properly. She died three days later, officially due to a heart attack and coma caused by a prior heart ailment, but anecdotal reports claimed she died from complications caused by a severe beating by police.

The demonstrations saw peaceful protests, including women defiantly removing their hijabs, but also violent attacks on buildings, police and Guidance Patrol officers.

While Khamenei and other Iranian leaders lamented Amini's death and pledged an investigation, both Tehran and Moscow have also [alleged a Western hand](#) in the scale and violence of the mass demonstrations that followed.

The mass pardons also come as Iran is [facing down increased pressure](#) from the US and Israel over its nuclear program, which they allege is a secret nuclear weapons program, despite Tehran's fervent denials and no evidence of such a weaponization effort.

Talks to restore a 2015 deal and remove US sanctions have been [stuck for more than a year](#) on a handful of disagreements, with Tehran saying it is up to the US to return to compliance since it was the part that left the deal in the first place, and Washington demanding additional concessions from the Iranians that weren't part of the original deal.

It also comes after a [historic peace deal](#) last week with Saudi Arabia, Iran's major regional rival, to restore diplomatic relations that had been severed since 2016. The deal was brokered by China, a growing partner with both nations.

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Sen. Warren Pins Blame for Bank Collapses on Congress for 'Weakening Financial Rules'  
By - Fantine Gardinier

As the second US bank has failed in as many days and the federal government rushes to plug the breach in the financial system before it becomes a torrent, one of the most prominent US champions of financial regulation has spoken up to say: I told you so.

"No one should be mistaken about what unfolded over the past few days in the U.S. banking system," US Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) wrote in [a Monday op-ed](#) in the New York Times. "These recent bank failures are the direct result of leaders in Washington weakening the financial rules."

"In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Act to protect consumers and ensure that big banks could never again take down the economy and destroy millions of lives. Wall Street chief executives and their armies of lawyers and lobbyists hated this law. They spent millions trying to defeat it, and, when they lost, spent millions more trying to weaken it," she wrote.

"Greg Becker, the chief executive of Silicon Valley Bank, was one of the many high-powered executives who lobbied Congress to weaken the law," Warren continued. "In 2018, the big banks won. With support from both parties, President Donald Trump signed a law to roll back critical parts of Dodd-Frank. Regulators, including the Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell, then made a bad situation worse, letting financial institutions load up on risk."

At the time, SVB argued it was too small to require such strong oversight, but by the time the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) took over the bank on Friday, SVB had become the 16th largest bank in the country, with more than \$200 billion in assets.

The FDIC is a government-owned corporation used to provide deposit guarantees for member banks in order to prevent bank runs. It was created in 1933 during the Great Depression, which was set in motion by a financial collapse that began with bank runs as depositors scrambled to withdraw funds that banks had lent out to other institutions in a bid to make more money.

Warren called on Congress to repeal the 2018 bank deregulation law, which [changed the rules](#) about which banks were classified as "too big to fail," and thus requiring more government scrutiny in order to avoid another crash like that in 2008. The law raised the cap from \$200 billion to \$250 billion, meaning Silicon Valley Bank was watched less closely than it otherwise would have been.

US President Joe Biden echoed Warren on Monday, [condemning his predecessor](#) and saying he was "going to ask Congress and the banking regulators to strengthen the rules for banks." "Americans can rest assured that our banking system is safe," Biden added. "Your deposits are safe. Let me also assure you, we will not stop at this. We'll do whatever is needed."

The bank's collapse was [aided by the uncertainty](#) created by the Federal Reserve's steady increase of interest rates over the last year. The [central bank has raised](#) its Effective Federal Funds Rate, which governs how much money banks are required to keep on hand instead of lending out to other banks overnight, in an attempt to stop the depreciation of the US dollar's value - also known as inflation. The EFFF changes also changed the return value of the bonds in which SVB invested much of its capital, severely depreciating their value and creating doubts about SVB's ability to access its money. Panic did the rest.

The FDIC has announced it is guaranteeing all the deposits up to \$250,000, the amount set by the Dodd-Frank law, and paying them out to depositors over the next 90 days and dissolving SVB as an entity. Despite this, SVB's collapse has triggered a second bank's downfall as well, creating fears the instability could continue to spread.

Signature Bank's collapse on Sunday was also triggered by a bank run by depositors anxious about their accounts after SVB's collapse, but its instability was created by [risky cryptocurrency deposits](#) - one of the few banks to allow such a practice. Its assets totaled less than \$100 billion,

according to US media reports, but many of its depositors had massive accounts far above the \$250,000 insured by the FDIC, making a bank run devastating when it came. The Federal Reserve [said in a Monday statement](#) it would "make available additional funding to eligible depository institutions" to stop further anxiety-fueled bank runs.

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At Least Two Killed, Nine Injured After Driver Runs Over Pedestrians in Canada's Amqui Town

The town of Amqui sits in eastern Quebec, Canada, and has a population of just over 6,000, according to 2011 government figures.

At least two pedestrians were killed in the small Canadian town of Amqui on Monday after a truck driver plowed into multiple pedestrians. Officials have confirmed that nine others sustained varying degrees of injuries.

The two deceased persons were described as men in their 60s and 70s. Of the injured, two individuals were considered in serious condition.

Local authorities in the Quebec state informed reporters that the driver involved in the incident turned himself over to police after initially allegedly fleeing the scene. A spokesperson for the Sûreté du Québec police service confirmed the 38-year-old driver was arrested under the suspicion of committing a fatal hit-and-run.

A motive has not been issued amid the ongoing investigation.

"The driver of the pickup truck hit pedestrians who were walking along Route 132. He continued on his way for a certain distance and hit other pedestrians," local media quoted Sgt. Claude Doiron as saying.

Although police have yet to confirm whether the Monday incident was intentionally carried out, a senior government official did indicate investigators did not believe the incident was terrorism related.

Law enforcement officials received calls of the incident at about 3 p.m. local time, with dispatchers relaying that initial reports stated the incident involved a van and pedestrians. Canadian media reported that a "code orange" had been declared in the state because there were six or more victims accounted for at the scene.

The Monday collision comes just one month after a bus driver rammed his vehicle into a daycare center in Montreal, killing two children. The town of Amqui sits nearly 650 kilometers from Montreal.

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EU Reportedly Crafting Its Own Foreign Agents Bill Days After Slamming Georgian Parliament  
By - Wyatt Reed

Just days after the European Union's top diplomat threatened that Georgia's adoption of a bill requiring transparency for foreign funding "may have serious repercussions on our relations," a new report now claims the bloc is looking to adopt a similar measure of its own.

Less than one week after insisting an attempt by Georgia's parliament to ensure greater transparency in foreign influence was "a very bad development for Georgia and its people," it's being reported that Brussels is quietly working on its own version of a similar bill.

"Just as Georgia erupted in protests over a similar bill," mainstream outlet Politico wrote, "the EU was ramping up work" on a proposal which would require "both commercial and nonprofit organizations around the bloc reveal non-EU funding pertaining to transactions such as paying for academic study."

"NGOs," the outlet wrote, are already "bristling" because of a questionnaire issued by the EU Commission meant to inform an impact assessment that is expected in the coming months. The survey reportedly requests that NGOs explain their non-EU funding sources.

Nick Aiossa, the head of policy and advocacy at Transparency International, told the outlet that the question about funding "took a lot of people aback."

An anonymous official with the EU Commission reportedly conceded that "it's obviously a delicate matter" but attempted to downplay the apparent double standard, insisting the executive branch of the EU is "still in the early stages of gathering information from a wide range of stakeholders to make sure we are taking the right approach."

Meanwhile, the proposed law in Georgia, which would have required groups that received over 20% of their funding from abroad to register as foreign agents, was withdrawn last week after violent riots left dozens of police injured by rocks and molotov cocktails.

Though many countries have passed similar laws in recent years, the bill being considered by Georgia's parliament was widely pilloried as a supposed imitation of a Russian foreign influence law by mainstream media and European politicians.

"The law in its current form risks having a chilling effect on civil society and media organizations, with negative consequences for the many Georgians benefiting from their work," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell insisted, adding "this law is incompatible with EU values and standards."

What's more, the law "goes against Georgia's stated objective of joining the European Union," insisted Borrell, who threatened the country with what many interpreted as an ultimatum: "its final adoption may have serious repercussions on our relations."

As of publication, no such condemnation of the EU's proposed bill had been issued by Borrell's office.

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Report: UK's Sunak Has Electrical Grid Refitted to Accommodate His Heated Pool Amid Energy Crisis

By - Wyatt Reed

While a majority of Brits report using less energy this year because of surging prices, the electrical upgrades apparently necessitated by the prime minister's extravagant tastes show some in the country remain unaffected.

A half-million pound heated swimming pool installed on British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's manor estate uses so much energy, workers had to upgrade the local electrical grid to accommodate it, according to a [new report](#).

As residents across the United Kingdom struggle to reduce their energy consumption amid spiking prices, "extra equipment was recently installed in a remote part of North Yorkshire to provide extra capacity from the National Grid to the prime minister's constituency home," per UK media.

"Engineers had to install a substantial amount of equipment and a new connection to the National Grid that runs across open fields" following "Sunak's construction of a new heated swimming pool, gym and tennis court in the grounds of the manor house he occupies at weekends," it was reported.

Construction work on the prime minister's 40-foot swimming pool is reportedly wrapping up just as a number of local pools are being forced to cut their operating hours due to surging energy costs, which have spiked across the nation because of anti-Russian sanctions adopted by the government.

The UK's Office for National Statistics [released](#) a report this week which found that "electricity prices in the UK rose by 66.7% and gas prices by 129.4% in the 12 months to January 2023," and that "almost 6 in 10 adults are using less fuel in their homes because of the rising cost of living."

Last month, a swimming pool just a half hour's drive from the prime minister's £2 million estate in North Yorkshire [announced](#) it will be reducing or eliminating public access altogether due to the soaring cost of energy.

A House of Commons culture select committee reportedly suggested this week that "350 pools had closed or cut their hours as a result of energy costs."

Chris Porter, the regional director for an industry group called Community Leisure UK (CLUK) which represents the operators of 880 pools across the country, reportedly said that at the facility he runs, "electricity costs have gone up by £7,500 per month," adding, "that's just for one site."

"We're looking at a 200% rise in utility costs across the board," Porter told [UK media](#). "We're far from alone in facing these problems. Across the board, leisure trusts need help in dealing with them. Without Government support communities will suffer. Peoples' health and wellbeing will suffer."

"Once swimming pools close, it's incredibly difficult to ever reopen them," Porter added.

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Massive Iceberg Off Argentina's Coast Could Pose Risk to British Industry, Reports Say  
By - Wyatt Reed

Media reports of a potentially troublesome iceberg have largely downplayed the UK's continuing dominion over a highly-disputed set of islands off Argentina's coast.

An iceberg over 3,000 square kilometers in size could potentially pose a risk to British interests off the coast of South America including shipping and fishing, as well as wildlife there, a new [report](#) claims.

"Our fisheries operate during the winter months so it may impact on their operations," said the director of fisheries and environment for a British-controlled group of islands known as South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

After it broke away from Antarctica's Filchner-Ronne Ice Shelf in May 2021, iceberg A76 eventually split into three pieces which are now known as A76-a, A76-b, and A76-c. Now scientists fear that the biggest of those, A76-a, could get caught on a shallow bank between disputed islands near Argentina's shores.

At 135 kilometers long and 25 kilometers wide, it's currently the largest floating iceberg on the planet.

A biological oceanographer on a British research vessel which was deployed to the area to track the iceberg explained that the object's incredible size made it difficult to circumnavigate.

"It was directly in our path as we sailed home so we took 24 hours out to go around it," professor Geraint Tarling reportedly told a British outlet.

Despite being over 10,000 kilometers from home, British vessels – including military ships – frequently patrol the waters there due to colonial-era claims which sparked a bloody 1982 war with Argentina over islands that are known in Spanish as the Malvinas and called Falklands Islands by their current British-descended occupants.

To this day, the UK government insists its continued grip on the islands is purely in the interest of ensuring the "self-determination" of a few thousand residents who largely identify as British. But declassified documents have shown that Downing Street has long sought to extract oil from the area – including years before the war. In 1975, an official with the Department of Energy wrote: "Our ministers are very interested in the possibility of exploiting offshore oil around the Falkland Islands."

Last year, newly-unearthed documents showed the attitudes persisted well after the war's conclusion, too.

British media revealed the country's then-Chancellor Norman Lamont wrote in 1991 that he had "no doubt that in the event of a major oil find, tax revenues should accrue to the UK exchequer." Such an arrangement "seems to me only equitable given the very substantial financial as well as other sacrifices that the UK has made ... to secure the freedom of the Falkland Islands," Lamont wrote.

While the top financial official insisted "we would not want to give credence to the accusation that our Falkland Islands operation was motivated by a belief that there was oil to be found in Falklands waters," a 1991 overseas and defense policy cabinet committee paper approved by the British cabinet was explicit.

"If oil were to be found in commercially recoverable quantities, HMG [Her Majesty's Government] ... should take such measures as are necessary to ensure that HMG can secure access to a substantial share of the concomitant revenues," the paper insisted, before ultimately

asking: “should the Falkland islanders be the exclusive beneficiaries of what might be comparatively enormous wealth?”

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Nepal Bans Solo Hiking Across Country, Implements Mandatory Guide Rule  
By- Mary Manley

Is the thrill gone?

Starting April 1, Nepal will no longer allow trekkers to hike by themselves in their mountain-rich country: foreign travelers with hopes of viewing the Himalayan destination on their own will be required to hire a licensed guide or join a group before exploring the region, regardless of experience levels.

“When you are traveling solo, in case of emergencies there is no one to help you,” Mani R. Lamichhane, director of the Nepal Tourism Board, told an American [news outlet](#). “It is fine if they are traveling in the cities, but in the remote mountains, the infrastructure is not adequate.” “When tourists go missing or they are found dead, even the government cannot track them because they have taken remote routes,” he adds. “This decision has been made for the tourists’ benefit.”

The board’s decision—Trekking Information Management Systems (TIMS)—is an expansion on a [2017](#) mandate that banned solo climbing on the country’s mountains, including the famed Mount Everest.

At least eight (whole or partial) of the world’s 10 tallest mountains reside in Nepal. In 2019, about 300,000 trekkers traveled to Nepal to explore the treacherous terrain with 46,000 of those pursuing solo hikes, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal’s economy, which is one of the poorest in the world, relies on tourism which makes up nearly 7% of its GDP.

However, rescuing lost trekkers is costly. According to the US Embassy in Kathmandu, rescuing lost hikers by helicopter can cost between \$3,000 and \$10,000 per service. Lamichhane also argued that unlicensed tour guides and companies that do not pay taxes take jobs away from locals in Nepal.

“There have been some cases where the trekking association has been requesting us to stop these unauthorized trekking operations. This has been a demand from tourism associations for a long time,” he said.

Solo trekking in the country has also proved to be dangerous. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 400 tourists were reported missing every year in Nepal, according to data collected by Nepal’s government. Roughly 15 tourists are expected to have gone missing during solo hikes, local guides estimated.

[Ian Taylor](#), the owner of a guiding company, is disappointed with the with the measure, but agrees overall, explaining there has been an increase in the number of travelers, including those who are inexperienced or lacking skill, who are now flocking to the country.

“You used to see only experienced hikers and climbers in the region, many of them traveling without guides, and they were completely self-sufficient.”

“However, now, there are far greater numbers of people traveling in the region and more of them are tourists, not trekkers. They are not self-sufficient in the outdoors and therefore need the assistance of experienced guides.”

Natalia Lange, 30, an actress from Poland complained she had been saving for a year in order to do a monthlong trip to Nepal, which included a solo hike, and believes she can't afford the “extra cost” of the TIMS mandate.

“Many people already have trips planned and budgets tightened and simply cannot afford the extra cost,” she said. “I’m an advanced trekker, I don’t need a nanny.”

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Mitch McConnell Discharged, Sent to Inpatient Rehab Facility After Concussion Diagnosis  
By - Mary Manley

The 81 year-old Senate Republican leader was being treated for a concussion after he first fell at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Washington, DC, where he was attending a dinner event on Wednesday evening.

US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) was discharged from a hospital on Monday after being treated for a concussion he sustained the week prior, a spokesperson for the Republican lawmaker said.

“Leader McConnell’s concussion recovery is proceeding well and the Leader was discharged from the hospital today. At the advice of his physician, the next step will be a period of physical therapy at an inpatient rehabilitation facility before he returns home,” a [statement](#) issued by spokesperson DavidPopp read.

“Over the course of treatment this weekend, the Leader’s medical team discovered that he also suffered a minor rib fracture on Wednesday, for which he is also being treated.”

The event that McConnell fell at was held at a hotel formerly known as the Trump International Hotel. The event was for the Senate Leadership Fund, a super PAC whose mission statement is to “protect and expand the Republican Senate Majority.”

The 81-year-old politician is Kentucky’s longest-serving senator and was first elected to the Senate in 1984. McConnell is known for being a key player in the GOP, having stocked the US Supreme Court with [conservative justices](#), passed [tax breaks](#) for corporations and blocked legislative plans pushed for by Democrats.

Fellow Senators John Fetterman (D-PA) and Dianne [Feinstein](#) (D-CA) were also both hospitalized recently. A spokesperson for the Fetterman camp has detailed the Pennsylvania lawmaker was seeking treatment for clinical depression, whereas Feinstein was reported to be seeking treatment for shingles.

Democrats currently control the Senate chamber by a 51 to 49 margin.

McConnell, who was treated for [polio](#) as a child, has admitted he finds some difficulty in adulthood while climbing stairs.

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Two-Thirds of Americans Believe Risk of Deadly Pandemics is Rising - Poll

By - Mary Manley

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the US accounted for over 20% of all confirmed COVID-19 deaths around the world. At the time, data compiled by Johns Hopkins University indicated that the US was reporting some 61.09 deaths per 100,000 people. A newly released poll has determined that three years after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Americans seem to be shaken, still, by the fear of what could be lying around the corner.

The new [YouGov poll](#), revealed how many Americans are feeling about the government's ability to prepare for and tackle future disease outbreaks after three years following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey, released Monday and commissioned by the Pandemic Action Network and PAX Sapiens, found that 61% of Americans either agree or strongly agreed with the statement: "we are now in an era of increasing risk due to deadly infectious disease outbreaks and pandemic threats that can land at our doorstep in a matter of days."

Nearly 90% of the poll's respondents said the federal government should prioritize preparing for the next pandemic in their annual budget and planning, while roughly two-thirds of Americans said the White House, which was under former President Donald Trump's administration at the start of the novel coronavirus, was not prepared for the pandemic's outbreak.

According to the poll: "strong majorities support investing in pandemic preparedness at the federal (66%) and state and local (63%) levels, while a plurality (46%) support investing in global preparedness."

"Of these, a majority (53%) support strengthening global preparedness to prevent deadly outbreaks from spreading to America. Almost all (88%) respondents agreed that pandemic investment by the federal government was important to them to at least some degree," the poll finds.

According to the findings, 45% of respondents said the government was "very unprepared" for the pandemic and another 24% believed the government was somewhat unprepared.

The poll also found that Americans' concerns about pandemic preparedness is driven by their "personal experiences of loss" due to the COVID-19. About 37% of respondents said they knew someone who died due to COVID-19, while about the same percentage also reported feeling separated from family and friends.

About 28% of respondents also reported worsening health, 8% reported an increase in drinking and substance use, while 31% suffered economic loss, and 15% reported job loss.

Respondents also said government preparedness has not improved significantly, but half (49%) of respondents assume the US government has already improved their pandemic preparedness systems following COVID-19.

But Tom [Inglesby](#), director for the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, wrote on Sunday that the "collective resolve" in the nation's capital to prepare for the next pandemic has

diminished: "The promise to prepare for pandemics in fundamentally new, far more ambitious ways has rapidly faded."

"It's been a challenge ever since then to get political authorities, and even some public health authorities, to take pandemic preparedness seriously," explains [Andrew Lakoff](#), a USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences sociologist and author. "It's asking people to put resources into addressing a potential threat whose probability is impossible to calculate, so attention to it has waxed and waned."

"The actual government experts in infectious disease have been on top of what's happening, but they had trouble getting their voices heard by the political folks above them," he says.

Last week, US President Joe Biden revealed his budget proposal for the year, which includes [\\$20 billion](#) for Health and Human Services (HHS) allocated for their pandemic prevention and preparedness efforts including research and vaccine purchases. Another \$1.2 billion is also being directed towards global preparedness in response to infectious disease outbreaks.

In his recently unveiled budget, Biden has also requested \$842 for the Department of Defense.

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Prince Harry, Meghan Gain Backing From Princess Di's Siblings Despite Family Feud, Insiders Say

By - Mary Manley

While some senior royals chose to skip the event, two of Prince Harry's family members showed their support for the exiled couple.

Despite a tense relationship with the royal family, both Prince Harry and Meghan Markle have maintained a supportive backing from family members closer to the Spencer family, royal insiders have said.

In early March, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex christened their daughter, Princess Lilibet. While the couple may not have had all their royal family members in attendance, Princess Diana's older sisters, Lady Jane Fellowes and Lady Sarah McCorquodale, were present at the "intimate" ceremony and after party.

The two sisters, according to the [Daily Mail](#), were among 20 to 30 guests who joined the celebration held at the couple's mansion in Montecito. However, royal experts say they aren't surprised that Fellowes, 66, and McCorquodale, 67, accepted their invitations to celebrate the one-year-old's ceremony.

"I think there is a genuine, heartfelt desire on the part of the Spencers to maintain the late Princess of Wales' remarkable legacy — to make sure she's not forgotten as we approach the coronation," said Christopher Andersen, a royal author.

"They are also filling the void left by the royal family, whose senior members were invited but chose not to attend," he shared. "I think there's also a none-to-subtle message here — one being sent by both the Sussexes and Diana's family — that even if the royals turn their backs on them, Harry, Meghan and their children will always have Diana's family in their corner."

"In that sense, Lady Sarah and Lady Jane are really proxies for Diana," he noted. "They were at the christening because she couldn't be there. It's really quite touching when you think about it." "Harry is very close with his aunts," said royal expert Shannon Felton Spence. "In a break from tradition, the photos released from Harry and Megan's wedding, and Archie's christening, included both of Diana's sisters. It's lovely — Harry has continued a close relationship with them and made the Spencers such an important piece of Archie and Lili's lives. It's really such a touching way to keep their 'Granny Diana' present in their lives."

"I have always heard that Diana's sisters [were worried about Prince Harry](#) and felt like he was lost," added Kinsey Schofield, a royal podcast host. "Hopefully after seeing him in California... they feel some comfort in his life choices."

One source told an American news [outlet](#) that King Charles III, Queen Camilla, the Prince and Princess of Wales were also invited to the gathering in California but did not attend. Those who were in attendance included Lilibet's godfather and filmmaker Tyler Perry, as well as Meghan's mother, Doria Ragland.

News of the snub coincides with plans for King Charles III's coronation on May 6 at Westminster Abbey. Whether or not Prince Harry will attend his father's ceremony remains unknown. If he and Meghan do attend it will be the first time the King and Prince Harry will meet since the fallout from his memoir "Spare" further cut family ties.

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Almost Half of Americans Expect No Return to Pre-Pandemic Normalcy – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – Almost half of Americans doubt that their lives will ever be back to pre-pandemic normalcy, a Gallup poll showed on Tuesday.

"Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., relatively few Americans, 33%, say their lives are completely back to normal, and those who say their lives have not yet completely returned to normal are largely pessimistic about it ever happening. Nearly half of U.S. adults, 47%, think pre-pandemic normalcy is not attainable for them, but 20% think their lives will eventually get back to normal," the pollster said.

Expectations have improved slightly since last summer, when 53% believed that life would not get back to normal.

Men sound a little bit more optimistic than women, with 37% of them saying that their life has completely returned to the pre-pandemic normal, whereas only 30% of women hold this view.

As for partisan lines, half of Republicans say their life is back to normal, versus 53% of Democrats who believe that their life is not back to normal or will not return to normal.

The survey was conducted from February 21-28 among 5,167 adults.

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## US Food Program Cuts Worry Families Facing Hunger, Misery in Nation's Capital

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The end of a pandemic-era boost in nutrition benefits affecting millions of low-income families and individuals across the United States has many fearful the reductions will exacerbate hunger and poverty within the Washington metro area.

Temporary covid emergency allotments under the US Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, expired at the end of February. The program provides monthly payments to low-income individuals and families via a special debit card, which is accepted at most food stores.

The program, which includes about 42 million Americans, had provided on average about \$260 per month to individuals and \$490 per month to families, according to US Food and Nutrition Service data. With the covid boost ending, the average SNAP participant will see monthly benefits drop by \$90 and households by \$250, according to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP).

Residents in Washington, DC will lose a total of about \$14 million in monthly benefits now that the extra allotments have ceased, a gap that DC Hunger Solutions said emergency food providers are incapable of filling.

Emily, a mother of five living in the Washington metropolitan area, typifies the dilemma of the poor and middle class who must struggle with the cuts in a worsening socioeconomic situation.

"We were getting an extra \$295 dollars a month during COVID-19, which really helped especially during the lockdowns," Emily told Sputnik. "But recently, we were informed that the extra allotment would be cut. Now my [disabled] daughter is getting \$65 a month. How can anyone live on that?"

The government, Emily added, needs to focus on strengthening the safety net for the working poor and middle class because so many hardworking people and those with disabilities are "falling through the cracks."

The emergency allotments had helped keep about 4.2 million people above the poverty line during the last quarter of 2021, with Blacks and Latinos being the primary beneficiaries, according to an Urban Institute study.

Social justice activist Kymone Freeman emphasized that politicians have failed to adequately address the needs of ordinary Americans, especially Blacks.

"This sounds like more austerity to me. The fact that they are cutting anything at this time is obscene, immoral. All it means is more hardship for the poor," Freeman told Sputnik. "The cuts are contributing to hunger. Thirty percent of the children in Washington live in poverty. A budget is a moral document and this is where their morality lies."

Freeman said what is needed are deliverables from politicians with input from communities.

"When they developed the legislation, they didn't engage us. I'm not saying they won't make some progress, but it's not enough. It's never going to be enough when it comes from the top down. They'll give us just enough to stop protesting and go home," he said.

Empower DC organizing director Daniel del Pielago sees the reductions as a deliberate policy choice aimed directly at the working class, low-income households, and the poor in this country.

"It's part of the onslaught on safety net services being cut. I just heard from the city that they're cutting the Emergency Rental Program six-and-a-half months earlier than expected. Rents in

May will go up 8.9% here in Washington," he warned.

Pielago explained that Washington is "super expensive" and there are no livable wages for a certain segment of the population, which is particularly hard amid a sustained attack on low-income people.

"We have a bunch of people making these decisions which don't benefit low-income residents and Black people. They were attempting [to cut the benefits] and now they're having success," he concluded.

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US Consumer Price Growth Slows to 6% in Year to February, Smallest Advance in 17 Months

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices rose by 6% in the 12 months to February, according to Labor Department data on Tuesday that marked the slowest inflationary growth since September 2021 and signaled that the Federal Reserve's battle against price growth was working.

The Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, known in short as the CPI, also grew by a smaller 0.4% last month after a 0.5% expansion in January. Core month-on-month CPI, which strips out volatile food and energy prices, was up 5.5% in February from a 5.6% growth in January.

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Biden to Announce Executive Order on Gun Background Checks During Monterey Park Visit

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce an executive order on Tuesday to increase the number of background checks conducted before firearm sales and enforce other actions to reduce gun violence, the White House said.

President Biden will make the announcement during a visit to Monterey Park, California, a Los Angeles suburb where a 72-year-old gunman killed 11 people and injured nine others in January at a ballroom dancing studio.

"Today, in Monterey Park, California, President Biden will announce an Executive Order with the goal of increasing the number of background checks conducted before firearm sales, moving the US as close to universal background checks as possible without additional legislation," the White House said in a fact sheet.

The executive order will also increase the effective use of "red flag" laws, promote safe storage of firearms and address the loss or theft of firearms during shipping.

In addition, the order will direct the government to provide the public and policymakers with more information regarding federally licensed firearms dealers who are violating the law.

The order will also direct the Attorney General to publicly release Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,

Firearms and Explosives records from the inspection of firearms dealers cited for violation of federal firearm laws.

The White House expects the information to help the public and policymakers to better understand the problem and improve laws to hold "rogue gun dealers" accountable.

Under the order, Biden is also directing the Secretary of Defense to develop and implement principles to "further firearm and public safety practices through Department of Defense acquisition of firearms, consistent with applicable law," the fact sheet added.

President Biden is also seeking a public report by the Federal Trade Commission that will analyze how gun manufacturers market firearms to minors and to all civilians.

The executive order will also help catch shooters by accelerating federal law enforcement's reporting of ballistics data, the White House said.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Blinken to Visit Ethiopia, Niger for Talks on Peace, Partnership in Africa

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Ethiopia and Niger from March 14-17 to discuss peace in northern Ethiopia and a variety of ways to advance partnerships with the United States in Africa.

Blinken will visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on March 15 to discuss the implementation of peace agreements and transitional justice in the country's northern Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said last week.

The US top diplomat will also meet with both Ethiopian and Tigrayan officials to discuss the cessation of hostilities, but will not stop in the Tigray regional capital, Mekelle, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said during a press briefing.

While in Addis Ababa, Blinken will also meet with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat to discuss shared global and regional priorities, as well as follow up on commitments made at the US-Africa Leaders Summit regarding food security, climate and global health, Price said.

Blinken will underscore US support for African permanent representation in multilateral bodies, Price added.

He will arrive in Niger on March 16, marking the first visit to the country by a US Secretary of State. Blinken will meet with Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou in the capital city Niamey, Price said.

He will discuss ways to advance the US-Niger partnership on diplomacy, democracy, development and defense, Price said. Blinken will also engage youths from Niger's conflict zones and further US-Africa Leaders Summit collaboration on issues related to global and regional peace and security.

In December, Blinken said to expect a number of US officials, including President Joe Biden, to visit Africa in 2023. It is critical to implement commitments made during the US-Africa Leaders Summit, Blinken said.

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Trump Says Recent Closing of 2 Big US Banks 'Bad Sign' for American Economy

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump during a speech in Iowa said the closing of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank is a bad sign of possibly more economic troubles in the United States.

"Two big banks yesterday closed, that's a bad sign, that could be the beginning," Trump said on Monday evening.

Silicon Valley Bank's collapse is believed to be linked to the increase in interest rates by the Federal Reserve System, which caused the impairment of assets on the balance sheets of many financial institutions. On March 12, authorities closed the large, New York-based Signature Bank because of systemic risks.

Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) is the largest US lender to fail since Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis. Investors at the California-based bank withheld \$42 billion in deposits last week, triggering a 60% plunge in its share prices.

SVB provided financing for almost half of US venture-backed technology and health care companies. At the end of 2022, the bank said it had \$151.5 billion in uninsured deposits, \$137.6 billion of which was held by US depositors. Its total assets as of the end of last year were \$209 billion.

Earlier on Monday, President Joe Biden promised the US government would take action against reckless risk taking by financial firms. Biden said the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation protection for depositors at the SVB and Signature banks will not be extended to investors and the management at the collapsed banks.

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Biden Says Not Worried About China Viewing AUKUS as Aggressive, Will Speak to Xi Soon

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that he is not worried about China viewing the trilateral AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States as aggressive, following the alliance's plans to jointly develop nuclear-power submarines.

"No," Biden told reporters on Monday, when asked whether he is concerned about China viewing AUKUS as aggressive.

Biden added that he plans to speak to Chinese President Xi Jinping soon, although he declined to give a firm date.

The statement comes following a meeting between Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on moving forward with AUKUS' plans to deliver nuclear-powered submarines to Canberra in the coming years.

The alliance is aimed at bolstering cooperation between the three countries in the Indo-Pacific region, where the US has identified China as its pacing challenge.

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UN to Do Everything to Preserve Grain Agreement Integrity, Ensure Continuity - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will do everything possible to keep the grain exports agreement – formally known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative - going forward, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The UN notes the announcement made today by the Russian Federation regarding an extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative for 60 days. The UN Secretary-General has confirmed that he will do everything possible to preserve the integrity of the Black Sea Grain Initiative and ensure continuity," Dujarric said in a statement on Monday.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index has decreased for ten consecutive months since reaching record levels in March 2022, the statement said.

This only demonstrates the need for the grain agreement and its positive impact, the statement added.

Earlier on Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said Russia does not object to another extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative after it expired for the second time on March 18, but would agree to extend it only for 60 days.

On July 22, 2022, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations reached an agreement to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for food and fertilizer exports from Black Sea ports. Facilitating the export of Russian grain and fertilizer was part of the package deal, which Moscow repeatedly said has not been fully fulfilled.

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UK to Immediately Boost Defense Budget With Extra \$5Bln to 2.25% of GDP – Sunak

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The United Kingdom will significantly increase its defense budget by providing an additional five billion pounds over the next few years and boosting in this way the defense budget to around 2.25% of the UK's gross domestic product (GDP), Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in his remarks on a new deal as part of the AUKUS partnership.

"The UK is today announcing a significant uplift in our defense budget. We're providing an extra 5 billion pounds over the next few years, immediately increasing our defense budget to around 2.25% of GDP," Sunak said on Monday.

Sunak added that the United Kingdom has already set a new target of reaching a 2.5% share of the defense spending in the country's GDP in the future.

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AUKUS Deal Is Australia's Largest Investment in Defense Capabilities - Australian PM

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The trilateral meeting between US President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Antony Albanese, and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in San Diego on March 13 resulted in Australia's largest-ever investment in its defense capabilities, Australian Prime Minister Albanese said on Monday.

"The AUKUS agreement we confirmed here in San Diego today represents the biggest single investment in Australia's defense capability in all our history," said Albanese.

The partnership between the three nations, officially called the Australia-United Kingdom-United States partnership, is a multi-phased approach towards increasing Australia's arms capacity by providing Australia with nuclear submarines by the 2030s.

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Federal Reserve to Review SVB Collapse After Biden Said 'Important Questions' Remain

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said it is reviewing the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) - one of the 20 largest lenders in the United States - after President Joe Biden said "important questions" regarding the failure of the bank remained unanswered.

"The events surrounding Silicon Valley Bank demand a thorough, transparent and swift review by the Federal Reserve," Fed Chair Jerome Powell said in a statement on Monday.

Fed Vice Chair for Supervision Michael Barr, who will lead the US central bank's review of the supervision and regulation at SVB, said the results of the probe will be publicly released by May 1.

"We need to have humility and conduct a careful and thorough review of how we supervised and regulated this firm, and what we should learn from this experience," Barr said in the same statement.

SVB is the largest US lender to fail since Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis. Investors at the California-based bank withheld \$42 billion in deposits last week, triggering a 60% plunge in its share prices.

SVB provided financing for almost half of US venture-backed technology and health care companies. At the end of 2022, the bank said it had \$151.5 billion in uninsured deposits, \$137.6 billion of which was held by US depositors. Its total assets as of the end of last year were \$209 billion.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, or FDIC, took charge of SVB at the weekend.

The FDIC also took control of Signature, which had \$110.36 billion in assets and \$88.59 billion in deposits at the end of last year, according to New York State's Department of Financial Services.

Earlier on Monday, Biden promised the US government would take action against reckless risk taking by financial firms. Biden said the FDIC protection for depositors at the SVB and Signature banks will not be extended to investors and the management at the collapsed banks.

"The management of these banks will be fired," Biden said. "If the bank is taken over by FDIC, the people running the bank should not work there anymore. Investors in the banks will not be protected. They knowingly took a risk and when the risk didn't pay off, investors lost their money. That's how capitalism works and so forth. But there are very important questions of how these banks got into the circumstances in the first place. We must get the full accounting of what happened, and why those responsible can be held accountable. In my administration, no one is above the law."

Meanwhile, shareholders have filed a class-action lawsuit against SVB, its Chief Executive Greg Becker and Chief Financial Officer Daniel Beck in the federal court in San Jose, California. The suit was filed by a single plaintiff, identified as Chandra Vanipenta, who represents "all other persons similarly situated" by the collapse of the bank, according to court documents on the case.

The language in the class-action lawsuit accuses the SVB management of issuing misleading guidance to investors even as it knew the extent of the troubles at the bank.

SVB Chief Executive Officer Greg Becker held a conference call with the bank's clients, including venture capital investors, last week, urging them to stay calm to try and avoid a run on the bank's deposits.

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Biden Says AUKUS Working With IAEA on Standards to Develop Nuclear-Powered Submarines  
WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The trilateral AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States is working with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on verification and transparency standards for their project to develop nuclear-powered submarines for Canberra, US President Joe Biden said.

"We've undertaken this project working hand in glove with the International Atomic Energy Agency and with Director General [Rafael] Grossi," Biden said during a press conference on Monday. "We have set the highest standards with the IAEA for verification and transparency."

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Biden Says Australia's AUKUS - Developed Submarines Will Not Have Any Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The nuclear-powered submarines being developed for Australia as part of the trilateral AUKUS alliance with the United States and United Kingdom will not carry nuclear weapons of any kind, US President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"These boats will not have any nuclear weapons of any kind on them," Biden said during a

press conference.

Australia is committed to remaining a non-nuclear weapons state and will not produce nuclear fuel for the submarines, Biden added.

Earlier on Monday, the alliance announced plans to move forward with plans to develop nuclear-powered submarines for Australia in an effort to bolster cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) -

#### US BANKING CRISIS

\* The US government will ensure that Americans' bank deposits remain safe after two banks collapsed and the United States is not experiencing another financial crisis, President Joe Biden said on Monday.

\* Biden sought to assure Americans by promising to strengthen banking regulations and do "whatever is needed" to avert further collapse after the failure of the two banks.

\* The current serious banking sector problems in the United States will spill over to other countries and the Federal Reserve must end its high interest rate policy, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

#### AUKUS

\* The trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) has agreed to supply Australia with conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines much faster than originally planned, a senior Biden administration official said.

\* The United States and the United Kingdom will deploy a rotational force of their nuclear-powered submarines in Australia as early as 2027 to bolster deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, the official said.

\* The United States will announce a \$4.6 billion investment to produce and maintain its submarine industrial base over the next five years, the official said.

\* Australia will receive three Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines in the early 2030s with the possibility to buy two more, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

#### UK DEFENSE STRATEGY

\* The United Kingdom's priority in the short and medium term is to counter the threat to Europe's security from Russia, according to the country's updated defense strategy document Integrated Review Refresh 2023.

\* The United Kingdom will continue to develop the capabilities of its intelligence agencies and deploy more personnel abroad to strengthen cooperation with partners, according to the country's updated defense strategy document Integrated Review Refresh 2023.

\* The UK government announced that the country will invest additional 5 billion pounds (\$6.05

billion) in defense, replenishing shells stocks and modernizing the nuclear arsenal.

#### US DEFENSE SPENDING BILL

\* The Biden administration is seeking approval from Congress to buy 83 more F-35 Joint Strike Fighters for another \$13.6 billion as part of its proposed 2024 National Defense Appropriations Act, according to the Defense Department's published funding request on Monday.

\* Biden's defense budget for fiscal year 2024 includes \$11 billion for highly lethal precision weapons investments, including the procurement of 24 hypersonic missiles, the Pentagon said in a release.

\* Biden issued \$37.7 billion for nuclear enterprise modernization in fiscal year 2024 defense budget on Monday, according to the release.

\* The US Army has requested \$179.2 million to acquire 28 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) as part of its fiscal year 2024 budget, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense said.

#### WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The sanctions relief announced by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom for Russian food and fertilizers does not actually work, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said on Monday.

\* The EU Council extended individual anti-Russian sanctions in force since 2014 against almost 1,500 individuals and 205 organizations "for undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine" for six months, until September 15, the Council of the European Union said in a statement.

#### GRAIN EXPORTS AGREEMENT

\* Russia does not object to another extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative after the expiration of the second term on March 18, but will agree to only extend it for 60 days, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said.

\* The round of negotiations between the United Nations and Russia in Geneva on the situation with the grain agreement has been completed, Vershinin said.

\* The United Nations remains "totally committed" to the Black Sea Grain Initiative and aims to bolster Russian food and fertilizer exports, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

#### OIL MARKETS

\* Russia will base its oil cooperation with India on contracts with contracting parties and not on media reports, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

\* The US Interior Department said that it is approving three out of five drill sites proposed by ConocoPhillips as part of its Willow Master Development Plan in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

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PREVIEW - Blinken to Visit Ethiopia, Niger for Talks on Peace, Partnership in Africa

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The US top diplomat will also meet with both Ethiopian and Tigrayan officials to discuss the cessation of hostilities, but will not stop in the Tigray regional capital, Mekelle, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said during a press briefing.

While in Addis Ababa, Blinken will also meet with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat to discuss shared global and regional priorities, as well as follow up on commitments made at the US-Africa Leaders Summit regarding food security, climate and global health, Price said.

Blinken will underscore US support for African permanent representation in multilateral bodies, Price added.

He will arrive in Niger on March 16, marking the first visit to the country by a US Secretary of State. Blinken will meet with Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou in the capital city Niamey, Price said.

He will discuss ways to advance the US-Niger partnership on diplomacy, democracy, development and defense, Price said. Blinken will also engage youths from Niger's conflict zones and further US-Africa Leaders Summit collaboration on issues related to global and regional peace and security.

In December, Blinken said to expect a number of US officials, including President Joe Biden, to visit Africa in 2023. It is critical to implement commitments made during the US-Africa Leaders Summit, Blinken said.

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DOD Asks \$29.3Bn For Military Intelligence Program in Budget Request- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense has asked \$29.3 billion for its Military Intelligence Program in next year's budget request, the Pentagon announced in a release on Monday.

"On March 13, 2023 the Department of Defense released the Military Intelligence Program (MIP) top line budget request for fiscal year 2024," the release said. "The total is \$29.3 billion and is aligned to strategic priorities of the Secretary of Defense. The department determined that releasing this top line figure does not jeopardize any classified activities within the MIP."

The Pentagon underscored that no other MIP budget figures or program details will be released due to national security reasons.

Last week, the White House released Biden's budget proposal, which includes \$842 billion for

the Defense Department, \$10.5 billion for humanitarian assistance worldwide and \$1.7 billion in funding to aid Ukraine in its conflict against Russia.

Biden's budget projects \$6.888 trillion in spending and \$5.036 trillion in revenue, leading to a deficit of over \$1.8 trillion in 2024.

US House Republican Speaker Kevin McCarthy called Biden's budget proposal "completely unserious" and criticized it for suggesting trillions in new costs for taxpayers.

The budget proposal comes as the US approaches a default on its national debt, with the country currently owing \$31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.

Biden is proposing "out of control" spending despite the national debt posing one of the greatest threats to the US right now, McCarthy said in a joint statement with other House Republican leaders.

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Austin Spoke With Reznikov Ahead of Ukraine Contact Defense Group on March 15 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke by telephone with his Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov ahead of the Ukraine Contact Defense Group meeting on March 15, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov regarding priorities for the Ukraine Contact Defense Group on March 15," Ryder said.

The spokesperson explained that Austin provided during the call an update of the US security assistance efforts to Ukraine, Ryder said.

Reznikov detailed the recent developments on the ground in Ukraine, Ryder said.

The two officials agreed to remain in close contact, Ryder added.

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US to Announce \$4.6Bln Investment for Submarine Production Over Next 5 Years - Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States will announce a \$4.6 billion investment to produce and maintain its submarine industrial base over the next five years, a senior Biden administration official said.

"You will see as will be announced tomorrow, \$4.6 billion being advanced for production and for maintenance over the next five years in our submarine industrial base, and that would of course be from the United States," the official said during a press briefing.

Australia will also contribute to the US submarine industrial base and its contribution will be "substantial," the official added.

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UK to Deliver First Submarines in AUKUS in Late 2030s, Australia in 2040s - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom is planning to deliver its first submarines in the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership in the late 2030s while Australia will deliver its first domestically built submarines in the early 2040s, a senior Biden administration official said.

"The United Kingdom intends to deliver its first SSs [submarines] in AUKUS domestically in the late 2030s. Australia intends to deliver the first SS built in Australia to the Royal Australian Navy in the early 2040s," the official said during a press briefing.

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US Hopes to See Engagement Between Xi, Zelenskyy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to see an engagement between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Ukraine counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy, US State Department outgoing spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"We would certainly like to see, and hope to see, an engagement between President Xi and President Zelenskyy," Price said.

Earlier on Monday, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States has been encouraging Xi to speak with Volodymyr Zelenskyy to hear the Ukrainian side in the current conflict with Russia.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in February that Beijing maintains contacts with all parties to the Ukraine conflict in view of Zelenskyy's intention to meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

At the end of February, Zelenskyy expressed his intention to hold a meeting with Xi.

In February, China released a 12-point document dubbed "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," which promoted respect for the sovereignty of all countries, the cessation of hostilities and the resumption of peace talks between Moscow and Kiev, among other points.

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Russia 'Perplexed' By Canadian Foreign Minister's Goal to Change 'Russian Regime' - Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Moscow is baffled by Ottawa's stated aim of changing the Russian government, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov said in a statement on Monday.

"Quite perplexed to hear from Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly that her goal is "regime change" in Russia. "Is it how she instructs Embassy in Moscow?" Stepanov said via Twitter.

"And by the way, what reaction would we expect if, for example, someone in Moscow had said that Russia's goal is "regime change" in Ottawa."

Joly said during the press briefing on Friday that Russia should be isolated economically and politically and "how much we're seeing potential regime change in Russia."

The Canadian government has banned imports of Russian steel and aluminum products, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday.

Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, responding to requests by the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The countries of the collective West, including Canada, have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and provided military support to Ukraine.

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State Dept. Sees Lukashenko's Tehran Visit as Extension of Deepening Russia-Iran Ties  
WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US State Department views Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's visit to Iran as an extension of deepening ties between Moscow and Tehran, spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"We see this as in some ways an extension of the deepening relationship between Iran and Russia," Price told a briefing.

On Sunday, Lukashenko started his two-day visit to Iran to discuss cooperation in various areas, including industry, agriculture, and transportation. On Monday, the presidents of the two countries held negotiations.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said on Monday that the visit of his Belarusian counterpart would contribute to the development of the bilateral relationship, which he says has experienced a breakthrough in the past two years.

In turn, Lukashenko noted that Belarus and Iran have realized how beneficial their relationship is for each other.

In 2022, trade between Belarus and Iran topped \$100 million, which is about three times more than in 2021. Belarusian exports to Iran increased almost six-fold to \$81.3 million.

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US, UK to Rotate Nuclear-Powered Submarines Into Australia in 2027 - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The United States and the United Kingdom will deploy a rotational force of their nuclear-powered submarines in Australia as early as 2027 as part of the AUKUS partnership to bolster deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, a senior Biden administration official said during a press briefing.

"Once Australia is ready, as early as 2027 we will establish a rotational force of US and UK submarines in Australia, what we're calling 'submarine rotational forces West.' This rotational force will help build Australian stewardship. It will also bolster deterrence, with more US and UK submarines [going] forward to the Indo-Pacific," the official said on Sunday.

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AUKUS Agrees to Supply Australia With Nuclear-Powered Submarines – US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States has agreed to supply Australia with conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines much faster than originally planned, a senior Biden administration official said during a press briefing.

"We [AUKUS] will announce we have identified the optimal pathway to provide Australia with a conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarine. It's a multi-phased approach that will deliver to Australia that capability far more quickly than even we thought possible when we originally initially launched this partnership," the official said on Sunday.

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US Assessing North Korea's Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile Capabilities - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US military is still assessing the capabilities of the North Korean submarine-launched cruise missiles, two of which were test-fired in the past 24-hours, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"Over the course the past 24 hours, you've seen them announce the launch of two missiles out of a submarine. We're still studying it and making an assessment of what it means in terms of their capabilities," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

North Korea first tested their capabilities of launching missiles from their submarines in 2016, Sullivan said, noting that Pyongyang has been "refining and trying" different iterations.

Despite North Korea's attempts to deter the United States, Washington will not allow this to become a constraint from what it deems necessary for maintaining "peace and stability" in the region, Sullivan added.

Earlier on Monday, North Korea announced that it had test-fired two "strategic cruise missiles" from a submarine, just as the United States and South Korea were preparing to undertake military exercises.

The official Korean Central News Agency reported that the two missiles successfully hit targets at a distance of 932 miles in the Sea of Japan.

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New Budget to Support Cooperation With Roscosmos on ICC With 'Small Amount' - NASA

UNITED NATIONS, March 13 (Sputnik) - NASA's proposal budget allocates a "small amount" of funding to support continuous cooperation with the Russian space agency Roscosmos at the International Space Station (ISS), Associate Administrator for Space Operations Kathy Lueders said on Monday.

"There is a small amount that we support the Roscosmos with our international space station on orbit," Lueders said during a press briefing.

The funds will be used to continue to support what NASA has been approved to do by Congress, Lueders added.

On Thursday, the White House issued a document saying President Joe Biden's budget proposal for fiscal year 2024 requests \$27.7 billion in discretionary budget authority for NASA - an increase of \$1.8 billion from the 2023 enacted level.

Biden will submit the budget proposal to Congress and it will serve as a blueprint for lawmakers in crafting their own budget legislation.

The US Constitution grants Congress the power of the purse as it is up to lawmakers to approve all spending levels for government agencies and programs.

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Investors File Suit Against Failed SVB Bank, Senior Executives - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Shareholders have filed a class-action lawsuit against the Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) as the US government accuses the California-based lender of mismanagement after stepping in to rescue the depositors' money, court documents showed on Monday.

The action against SVB and its Chief Executive Officer Greg Becker and Chief Financial Officer Daniel Beck was filed in US federal court in San Jose, California, by a plaintiff identified as Chandra Vanipenta. The later represents "all other persons similarly situated" by the collapse of the bank, according to the lawsuit seen by Sputnik.

SVB was one of the top 20 commercial banks in the United States and the largest US lender to fail since Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis. Investors at the California-based bank withdrew \$42 billion in deposits last week, triggering a 60% plunge in its share prices.

SVB provided financing for almost half of US venture-backed technology and health care

companies. At the end of 2022, the bank said it had \$151.5 billion in uninsured deposits, \$137.6 billion of which was held by US depositors. Its total assets as of the end of last year equaled \$209 billion.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, or FDIC, took charge of SVB over the weekend. The FDIC also took control of Signature, which had \$110.36 billion in assets and \$88.59 billion in deposits at the end of last year, according to New York State's Department of Financial Services.

Earlier on Monday, President Joe Biden promised the government would undertake action against reckless risk taking by financial organizations. Biden said the FDIC protection for depositors at SVB and Signature will not be extended to investors and the management at the collapsed banks.

"The management of these banks will be fired," Biden said. "If the bank is taken over by FDIC, the people running the bank should not work there anymore. Investors in the banks will not be protected. They knowingly took a risk and when the risk didn't pay off, investors lost their money. That's how capitalism works and so forth. But there are very important questions of how these banks got into the circumstances in the first place. We must get the full accounting of what happened, and why those responsible can be held accountable. In my administration, no one is above the law."

The language in the class-action lawsuit accuses the SVB management of issuing misleading guidance to investors even as it knew the extent of the troubles at the bank.

SVB's Becker held a conference call with the bank's clients, including venture capital investors, last week and urged them to stay calm to try and avoid a run on the bank's **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

US Aegis Ashore Interceptors for Poland Not Meant to Target Russian Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The Aegis Ashore ballistic missile interceptor systems intended for delivery for Poland are not meant to target Russian missiles in particular, US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) Director Adm. Jon Hill said on Monday.

"This is not designed to go after Russian missiles. It is really about outside of the European sphere," Hill said during a press briefing.

Iran is one nation that could pose a missile threat to Europe, Hill said.

In 2018, Poland and the United States signed an agreement valued at nearly \$5 billion for the development of air-and-missile defense systems, with a focus on threats from Iran.

The United States expects to get to a technical capability declaration on the deal later this year, Hill added.

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## Russia, China Developing Advanced Hypersonic Rockets That Challenge US Defenses - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are developing advanced hypersonic missiles that challenge existing US missile defense systems, Missile Defense Agency (MDA) Director for Operations Michelle Atkinson said on Monday.

"Russia and the PRC are developing advanced missiles that can be launched from aircraft, ground launchers, ships and submarines, including hypersonic missile capabilities," Atkinson said during a press briefing. "Hypersonic missiles pose a new challenge to our missile defense system."

Hypersonic missiles are difficult to track due to their exceptional speed and unpredictable flight paths, Atkinson said.

The technology poses unique but surmountable challenges for missile defense, Atkinson said. The MDA's proposed fiscal year (FY) 2024 budget invests in the development of new technologies, including next-generation interceptors and regional hypersonic defense capabilities to address evolving threats, Atkinson also said.

The FY 2024 budget requests \$209 million for hypersonic defense efforts, Atkinson added. The Biden administration's proposed Defense Department budget for FY 2024 also includes funding for the procurement of 24 hypersonic missiles.

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## Sullivan Says Expects Biden, Xi to Have Talks at Some Point in Coming Period

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday that he expects President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping to hold a call soon, but there is no date set yet.

"We would expect President Biden and President Xi to have a conversation at some point in the coming period," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One. "I can't give you a date because there's no date set, but President Biden has indicated his willingness to have a telephone conversation with President Xi."

Earlier in the day, Reuters reported that Chinese President Xi may visit Russia as early as next week. After the trip, Xi plans to speak with Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the first time since the beginning of Russia's operation in Ukraine, The Wall Street Journal reported.

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## Austin Tried to Reach Out to Chinese Counterpart on 'Couple of Occasions' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has tried to reach out to his Chinese counterpart a couple of times but Beijing has not responded, State Department outgoing spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary Austin now has on a couple of occasions attempted to reach out to his counterpart. Unfortunately, it has been the PRC [People's Republic of China] that has failed to reciprocate," Price said.

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Sullivan Says US Has Been Encouraging China's Xi to Speak With Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Monday that the United States has been encouraging Chinese President Xi Jinping to speak with Volodymyr Zelenskyy to hear the Ukrainian perspective.

"We have been encouraging President Xi to reach out to President Zelenskyy because we believe that PRC [China] and President Xi himself should hear directly the Ukrainian perspective and not just the Russian perspective on this, so we have in fact advocated to Beijing that that connection take place," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One.

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Final Phase of AUKUS Deal Will See Deployment of New Nuclear Powered Sub - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The final phase of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral security pact will see the deployment of new conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"The final phase will be the not just design and development but the actual deployment of a new boat, a new conventionally armed nuclear powered submarine," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One.

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US Still Working With Russia on ISS De-Orbiting, While Developing Own Vehicle - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is still working with Russia on de-orbiting the International Space Station with Progress, while also developing its own de-orbit vehicle, Kathy Lueders, NASA's associate administrator for space operations, said during a press briefing on Monday.

"We are always looking for redundancy, and so obviously our current model is still to use - and we are continuing to work with the Russian counterparts on how to de-orbit safely with their Progress vehicle which has been in the plan, but we are also developing this US capability as a way to have redundancy and be able to better aid the targeting of the vehicle and the safe return of the vehicle especially as we are adding more modules," Lueders said.

NASA's next year budget request includes funding for the International Space Station (ISS) de-orbit vehicle, the document released on Monday said.

According to the Agency's Fact sheet, NASA requested \$180 million for the vehicle to enable the safe and responsible de-orbit of the ISS.

Last year, NASA announced the extension of its presence at the American side of the ISS through 2030. In late February, the Scientific and Technical Council of Roscosmos approved the decision to extend the operation of the Russian segment of the ISS through 2028.

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Australia to Receive 3 Virginia-Class Subs in Early 2030s - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Australia will receive three Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines in the early 2030s with the possibility to buy two more, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"In the early 2030s, the delivery of three Virginia class subs from the United States to Australia over the course of the 2030s with the possibility of going up to five if that is needed," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One.

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AUKUS Leaders to Announce Plan on Nuke-Powered Subs Over Next Few Years - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom will announce later today the multi-phase process for preparing to deploy new US-made nuclear-powered submarines to Australia in the coming years, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Monday.

"The leaders will lay out in a trilateral meeting today and then for the public is a multi-phase process that begins over the next few years and begins immediately with the training of Australian sailors, engineers, technicians, and other personnel to be able to take on the responsibility and stewardship of nuclear propulsion," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One.

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Klyushin's Legal Team Seeks Acquittal Arguing Trial in Improper Court - Documents

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Russian businessman Vladislav Klyushin's legal team is seeking to have his conviction on hacking and trade charges acquitted on the grounds that his trial was held in an improper court, court documents revealed on Monday.

"Now comes the defendant Vladislav Klyushin, by and through undersigned counsel, and hereby moves for judgment of acquittal ... on the ground that the evidence presented at trial, viewed most favorably to the government, fails to establish venue in this district as a matter of law," attorney Maksim Nemtsev said in a court document.

Nemtsev argues that the trial should not have been held in the US district court in Boston because Klyushin's crime did not take place in the city, so the verdict cannot stand.

Klyushin, the owner of the Russian information technology firm M-13, was found guilty by a jury in Boston, Massachusetts, on charges of conspiring to obtain unauthorized access to computers, wire fraud and securities fraud in connection to a \$90 million scheme.

Klyushin is currently scheduled to be sentenced on May 4.

Klyushin was arrested in Switzerland in March of 2021 and extradited to the United States later that year.

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UN Says Opposes Investment in Carbon Energy as Biden OKs Alaska Drilling Project

UNITED NATIONS, March 13 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres opposes any renewed investments in carbon energy, including in the United States, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday after the Biden administration approved an oil drilling project in Alaska.

"Renewed investment in carbon energy is something the Secretary General has stood against whether it happens in any country, including the United States and the Gulf, anywhere, anywhere you want to see," Dujarric told a daily press briefing.

Dujarric said he would not comment on whether the US, giving its economic power, was setting a good example for other countries and declined to confirm if the secretary-general would raise the topic with President Joe Biden.

"I will not predict what conversations he [Secretary-General] will have," Dujarric said, nonetheless noting that he does not believe such projects are moving the world in the right direction.

On Monday, the US Interior Department greenlighted three out of five drilling site locations proposed by ConocoPhillips under its Willow Master Development Plan in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A).

The approval was given despite strong objections from environmental activists concerned about the potential consequences of the project on climate change.

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Biden Set to Announce Nuclear Submarine Deal Alongside UK, Australian Leaders - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is expected to announce a new deal alongside UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on the development of nuclear-powered submarines, The New York Times reported on Monday.

Biden plans to make the announcement later on Monday during a meeting with Sunak and Albanese at a US naval base in San Diego, the report said.

The announcement will mark the first concrete actions taken by the so-called AUKUS alliance, formed by the United States, United Kingdom and Australia in 2021 to boost their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

The deal involves developing industrial production capacity for nuclear-powered submarines, as well as sharing technology and training between the three partner nations, the report said.

The partnership is the first time in more than six decades that the US has shared nuclear submarine technology. Currently, only six countries maintain nuclear submarines: the five permanent UN Security Council members and India.

Australia will make an initial purchase of three Virginia-class submarines, with an option to add two more, the report said. Delivery of the vessels would begin in 2032, the report said.

The AUKUS pact also includes enhanced cooperation on cyber, artificial intelligence and other military technology issues.

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US Army Requests \$179.2Mln for 28 HIMARS Systems in Fiscal Year 2024 Budget - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Army is requesting \$179.2 million to acquire 28 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) as part of its fiscal year (FY) 2024 budget, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) said on Monday.

The Biden administration's FY 2024 budget for the Department of the Army requests \$179.23 million for 28 HIMARS, the Comptroller said in budget documents.

The request comes amid the recent provision of US-produced HIMARS and other long-range fire systems for Ukrainian forces, which the Defense Department has touted as being effective on the battlefield.

Overall, the FY 2024 proposed budget requests more than \$24.47 billion for the US Army, including nearly \$5 billion dedicated to missile procurement, the documents said.

The United States is reviewing its weapons stockpiles and assessing military spending routes to address high rates of consumption of US ammunition in the Ukraine conflict, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said last month.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has said that NATO must replenish its weapons stockpiles

to strengthen deterrence and defense even as members surge equipment to Ukraine.

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US to Make Significant Investment in Patriot, Tomahawk Missiles-Army Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The United States will make a significant investment in the procurement of Patriot and Tomahawk missile quantities as part of the Pentagon budget request for 2024, Under Secretary of the Army Gabe Camarillo said on Monday.

“You'll see significant investment in the procurement of Patriot and Tomahawk missile quantities, fully taking advantage over time investments that have been made in production capacity,” Camarillo said during a press briefing.

The Pentagon plans to spend another \$942 million on Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) and \$221 million on additional 155mm ammunition, Camarillo added.

Director of the Army Budget Maj. Gen. Mark Bennett also noted that increased procurement for the financial year 2024 includes critical munitions for combatant commanders such as the precision strike missile at \$584 million and the Patriot missile segment enhanced missiles at \$1.2 billion.

Earlier in the day, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said in a statement that the FY 2024 defense budget funds \$170 billion for procurement overall, marking the largest such investment in the department's history.

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Pentagon Says Al Qaeda, IS Expanding Presence in Sahel

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS, both terrorist groups banned in Russia) are expanding their presence in the Sahel region, Special Operations Command Africa's commander, Rear Adm. Jamie Sands said on Monday.

"I am concerned about what we see as a continued expansion of violent extremist organizations in the Sahel. Most concerning is the continued expansion of Al Qaeda through the Sahel, as they move really from north to south and threaten countries in the east and west as well," Sands told reporters, adding that this is the primary issue that the US and its partners are trying to address.

The IS is continuing its activity in the east of the Sahel too, he added.

Sands also mentioned the situation in the Gulf of Guinea, citing a range of challenges — from illegal unregulated fishing to more common threats such as piracy and a lack of maritime security.

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FBI Supplemental Report Lists 10,840 Incidents, 12,411 Victims of Hate Crimes in 2021

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said on Monday that a new supplemental report on hate crimes in the United States in 2021 listed 10,840 incidents and 12,411 victims.

"While the NIBRS [National Incident-Based Reporting System] 2021 hate crime data set reported 7,262 incidents and 8,673 related offenses as being motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender and gender identity, the supplemental hate crime dataset reports involve 10,840 incidents and 12,411 related offenses," the FBI said in a press release.

Nearly 65% of the victims were targeted because of their race, ethnicity or ancestry, while nearly 16% were targeted because of the offenders' sexual orientation bias, according to the release.

More than 14% of the victims were targeted because of their religion, the release also said. Only 3.2% were targeted because of the offenders' gender identity bias, the release added. Out of the 8,327 hate crime offenses classified as "crimes against persons" in the report, 43.2% concerned intimidation, 35.5% involved simple assault and 20.1% were aggravated assault, according to the release.

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UN Remains 'Totally Committed' to Black Sea Grain Initiative - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations remains "totally committed" to the grain exports agreement it brokered with Ukraine, Russia and Turkey - formally known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative - and aims to bolster Russian food and fertilizer exports, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"I can tell you right now that the United Nations remains totally committed to the Black Sea Grain Initiative as well as our efforts to facilitate the export of Russian food and fertilizer," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

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US, 29 African Partners Hold Military Drills for Tactical Special Operations - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States and its partners from 29 African countries are holding military exercises, dubbed Flintlock, in Ghana and the Ivory Coast focused on tactical training for special operations, US Special Operations Command Africa's commander Rear Adm. Jamie Sands said on Monday.

"Flintlock has been hosted in a number of countries since 2005. This year, we are honored by our co-hosts, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire [Ivory Coast], and welcome approximately 1,300 personnel from 29 nations," Sands told reporters

Approximately 250 soldiers from Ghana and 160 soldiers from the Ivory Coast are participating in the exercises, he said.

Sands expressed confidence that the exercises will help the participating African countries to confront the extremist threats they are currently facing.

"Additionally this year, for the first time we have a site dedicated to maritime operations, providing training to better suit the requests and requirements of our African partners, as they face threats," he said.

Sands also highlighted the progress made in expanding the scale and scope of the exercises. The exercises will end on Tuesday, Sands said.

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US Bank Problems to Spread Abroad, Fed Must Stop Interest Rate Policy - Ex-US Official (Updates with additional, background info in paras 5-17)

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The current serious banking sector problems in the United States will spill over to other countries and the Federal Reserve must end its high interest rate policy, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"Because of globalist interconnections, the serious problems in the United States would spread abroad," Roberts said on Monday.

The latest US banking crisis unfolded after members of the California-based Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) withdrew \$42 billion in deposits. The SVB is one of top 20 US commercial banks, according to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC).

When asked what will happen next and if there could be more failures, Roberts said, "I think the Fed will have to discontinue its high interest rate policy as it is undermining balance sheets in the financial sector, thus raising the specter of widespread failure or of so much new money committed to rescue operations as to threaten the value of the US dollar."

The US government will ensure the bank deposits of Americans remain safe amid the collapse of two banks and that the United States does not experience another financial crisis, President Joe Biden said on Monday as he promised action against reckless risk taking by financial institutions.

"The banking system is not safe, because the 5 largest US banks have risk exposure that is two times world GDP," Roberts pointed out. "There is no possibility that the banks have capital to cover this risk."

Roberts noted that the specific causes of the two bank failures are different.

"One failed because the Federal Reserve's higher interest rates reduced the value of the bank's

bond portfolio. Seeing insolvency, depositors withdrew their deposits, causing the failure," he explained. "The other failed bank resulted from declines in crypto-currency prices."

The general problem, Roberts underscored, is that higher interest rates on US Treasuries are causing deposit withdrawals from banks where interest rates on deposits are still near zero and very negative in real terms.

"The banks have to sell financial assets to meet the withdrawals, and the sales cause a drop in prices of the assets," he said. "Also, there are many trillions of derivatives that are sensitive to interest rate changes. Higher interest rates change the values of the derivatives, thus creating a looming problem."

"The Federal Reserve has announced that all deposits are protected, not just for the insured amount, and that the Fed will make cash available to banks to cover the withdrawals," Roberts added. "This is sensible."

Biden also said on Monday he was going to request Congress to review and strengthen post-financial crisis banking laws that were loosened by the previous administration, "to make sure that the crisis we saw in 2008 would not happen again."

SVB is the largest US lender to fail since Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis.

The bank provided financing for almost half of US venture-backed technology and health care companies in the United States. At the end of 2022, SVB said it had \$151.5 billion in uninsured deposits, \$137.6 billion of which was held by US depositors. The bank's total assets at the end of 2022 equaled \$209 billion.

The FDIC also took control of Signature, which had \$110.36 billion in assets and \$88.59 billion in deposits at the end of last year, according to the New York Department of Financial Services.

Biden said the FDIC protection for depositors at SVB and Signature will not be extended to investors and the management at the collapsed banks, which he accused of excessive risk-taking.

US media reported that both, regulators and the banking industry were working to contain the crisis.

The bank that many have viewed as the likely next domino to fall - First Republic – has secured additional financing from JPMorgan Chase & Co during the weekend, resulting in \$70 billion in unused liquidity - firepower it can use to respond to potential customer withdrawals, according to the report.

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US Banking Problems to Spread Abroad, Fed Must Stop High Rate Policy - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The current serious banking sector problems in the United States will spill over to other countries and the Federal Reserve must end its high interest rate policy, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"Because of globalist interconnections, the serious problems in the United States would spread abroad," Roberts said on Monday.

The latest US banking crisis unfolded after members of the California-based Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) withdrew \$42 billion in deposits. The SVB is one of top 20 US commercial banks, according to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC).

Asked whether he expects more banks to fail and what may happen next, Roberts said, "I think the Fed will have to discontinue its high interest rate policy as it is undermining balance sheets in the financial sector, thus raising the specter of widespread failure of so much new money committed to rescue operations as to threaten the value of the US dollar."

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US Bank Problems to Spread Abroad, Fed Must Stop Interest Rate Policy - Ex-US Official (Updates with additional, background info in paras 5-17)

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Biden Issues \$6.2Bln for Ballistic Missile Submarine, \$5.3Bln for B-21 Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – US President Biden issued \$37.7 billion for nuclear enterprise modernization in the fiscal year 2024 defense budget on Monday, according to a release from the Pentagon.

"Under the concept of integrated deterrence, the budget allows "\$37.7 billion for Nuclear Enterprise Modernization, including: continued development and procurement of the B-21 program - \$5.3 billion; production of the second Columbia ballistic missile submarine - \$6.2 billion; first year advance procurement funding for the LGM-35A Sentinel program; development efforts supporting nuclear command, control, and communications systems," the release stated.

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Biden Orders 83 More F-35 Jets for \$13.6Bln in 2024 Defense Spending Bill - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is seeking approval from Congress to buy 83 more F-35 Joint Strike Fighters for another \$13.6 billion as part of its proposed 2024 National Defense Appropriations Act, according to the Defense Department published funding request said on Monday.

The request is part of a total \$621.1 billion for aircraft and related systems, comprising 19% of the military investment budget request, the budget breakdown said.

"The largest single defense program, the 5th generation Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) request of \$13.6 billion for 83 aircraft for the Navy, the Marine Corps and Air Force," the published request said.

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Pentagon Says 2024 Budget Will Use Multi-Year Procurement to Produce Variety of Missiles

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department's proposed budget for fiscal year (FY) 2024 would utilize multi-year procurement authorities to bolster the production of a variety of missiles, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

"This budget leverages unprecedented use of multi-year procurement (MYP) authorities provided by Congress to deliver critical munitions affordably, while bolstering our inventories and providing a more predictable demand signal to the industry. This strategy will facilitate industrial production efficiencies because the industry would be incentivized to organize in a more

cost-effective manner," Austin said in a statement.

MYPs in the budget request include those for Naval Strike Missiles, RIM-174 Standard Missiles, Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles, Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles and extended range Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles, the statement said.

The FY 2024 defense budget funds \$170 billion for procurement overall, marking the largest such investment in the department's history, the statement said.

The budget request allows the Pentagon to invest in capabilities that ensure a capable joint force, with a focus on China and Russia, the statement said.

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NASA's 2024 Budget Request Includes Development of ISS De-Orbit Vehicle - Document

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - NASA's next year budget request includes funding for the International Space Station (ISS) de-orbit vehicle, the document released on Monday said.

"The FY 2024 budget request includes funds for development of an ISS de-orbit vehicle included in the Space Transportation Theme, that will be competitively awarded to U.S. industry," the budget request said. "The planned transfer of work from Deep Space Exploration Systems to Space Operations will no longer begin in FY 2024."

According to the Agency's Fact sheet, NASA requested \$180 million for the vehicle to enable the safe and responsible de-orbit of the ISS.

"Following the completion of ISS operations in 2030, the ISS will be safely deorbited via a controlled reentry into an unpopulated region of the Pacific Ocean," NASA said. "The Crew and Cargo program is developing this de-orbit capability with U.S. industry through a competitive procurement."

Last year, NASA announced the extension of its presence at the American side of the ISS through 2030. In late February, the Scientific and Technical Council of Roscosmos approved the decision to extend the operation of the Russian segment of the ISS through 2028.

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Biden's 2024 Defense Dept Budget Funds Procurement of 24 Hypersonic Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's Defense Department budget for 2024 includes \$11 billion for highly lethal precision weapons investments, including the procurement of 24 hypersonic missiles, the Pentagon said in a release on Monday.

"[Investments include] procurement of 24 hypersonic missiles," the release said.

This section of the budget also provides for the continued development, testing, and procurement of other long-range fires and extensive hypersonic prototyping efforts, according to

the release.

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US Defense Budget Funds \$170Bln for Procurement, Largest in History - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department's fiscal year (FY) 2024 budget request includes \$170 billion for procurement efforts, marking the largest such investment in its history, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

"The FY 2024 president's budget allows the Defense Department to invest in capabilities that will ensure we maintain a ready, lethal and combat-credible joint force with a laser focus on China as the department's pacing challenge and addressing the acute threat posed by Russia," Austin said in a statement. "This budget also funds \$170 billion for procurement, the largest in history."

Investments include \$61.1 billion for air power development, modernization and procurement, with a focus on fighter jets such as the F-22 and F-35 aircraft, the statement said.

The Defense Department also seeks to invest \$48.1 billion in sea power through construction of nine battle force fleet ships and other projects, the statement said.

The budget also allocates \$29.8 billion to enhance missile and missile-defense projects, including the further development of hypersonic strike capabilities, the statement said.

In addition, the budget also puts \$11 billion toward a variety of "highly lethal precision weapons," including the procurement of 24 hypersonic missiles, the statement also said.

Moreover, the Defense Department is seeking \$30.6 billion for munitions - a \$5.8 billion increase from last year's request - the statement said.

The proposed budget will help position the Defense Department to best support its people and allies through this "decisive decade" and ensure the United States is prepared to meet current and future challenges, the statement added.

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House Oversight Committee Chairman Subpoenas Bank of America - Report

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer has subpoenaed Bank of America for records of three people associated with President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, CNN said on Monday, citing a letter of the committee's top Democrat Jamie Raskin.

The subpoena called for "all financial records" for the period since 2009, and Bank of America has provided "a considerable number of materials" with regard to the subpoena, it added, citing a source familiar with the matter.

Comer asked for information about US citizen John Robertson and two other associates of

Hunter Biden, who created a "joint venture" with executives of Chinese company CEFC China Energy, according to the report.

The subpoena shows that Comer, a Republican lawmaker from Kentucky, has increased his investigation of the Biden family's business activities. He noted that accessing their financial data remains his top priority, the report added.

Joe Biden has repeatedly denied his participation in his son's business dealings.

As the report stated, Raskin accused Comer of attempting to investigate "the affairs of at least one private American citizen." He also noted that Comer requested "thousands of pages" of Walker's personal financial information, including statements from his and his wife's joint checking account.

Raskin noted in a letter that such a request goes "well beyond any business deal with Hunter Biden or CEFC," according to the report.

The Maryland Democrat also expressed concerns over cooperation between ex-President Donald Trump's counsel Patrick Strawbridge and Republicans in the Oversight Committee with regards to a decision to stop pursuing information and materials relating to foreign spending at Trump-owned properties, the report added.

In April 2019, the Democrats, who ran the House Oversight Committee at the time, subpoenaed Mazars USA accounting firm for financial information relating to the Trump Organization. They investigated whether foreign governments were spending money at Trump-owned properties, the report noted. However, when the Republicans took control over the panel, Strawbridge allegedly emailed Mazars' counsel that committee members assured the Trump Organization about their desire to cease all requests for documents, the report said, citing Raskin's letter.

Raskin expressed confidence that this decision contradicts Comer's initiative to subpoena Bank of America as part of its investigation into Hunter Biden, the report added.

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Biden Administration Approves Alaska Oil Drilling Project - US Interior Dept.

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

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Interior Department said on Monday that it is approving three out of five drilling sites proposed by ConocoPhillips as part of its Willow Master Development Plan in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A).

"The Record of Decision denies two of the five drill site pads proposed by ConocoPhillips, reducing the project's drill pads by 40%," the Interior Department said in a statement. "[The actions] significantly scale-back the Willow Project within the constraints of valid existing rights under decades-old leases issued by prior administrations."

The Biden administration's decision to grant partial approval to the energy development project comes despite objections by environmental activists, who cite concerns about potential climate impacts by drilling activities.

The reduction of the plan's scope reduces its freshwater use and eliminates infrastructure that could impact caribou migration and subsistence users, the statement said. The actions also

create an additional buffer from exploration and development activities near the calving grounds and migratory routes of nearby caribou, the statement said.

In addition, President Joe Biden will take action to designate approximately 2.8 million acres in the Arctic Ocean nearshore the NPR-A as "indefinitely off limits" for future oil and gas leasing, the statement said.

"The President and the Biden-Harris administration continue to deliver on the most aggressive climate agenda in American history, including the creation of clean energy manufacturing and jobs," the statement said. "And his economic agenda has put the United States back on track to reach its climate goals for 2030 and 2050 all while reducing America's reliance on oil."

A district court had tasked the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with reviewing the Master Development Plan after it identified flaws in the Trump administration's approval of a development plan. BLM had consulted with eight cooperating agencies as well as with local and external stakeholders, consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act, the statement said.

The Wilderness Society, an environmental advocacy organization focused on preserving wilderness and public lands, released a statement calling the Biden administration's decision "disappointing and unconscionable."

The Biden administration's decision will accelerate climate change and harm local indigenous communities in opposition to its stated goals, the statement said.

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Americans' Bank Deposits Safe, Govt. Will Not Let Financial Crisis Recur Over SVB - Biden (Updates with more details, background in paras 4-11)

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US government will ensure the bank deposits of Americans remain safe amid the collapse of two banks and that the United States does not experience another financial crisis, President Joe Biden said on Monday as he promised action against reckless risk taking by financial institutions.

"No losses of a dime... No losses will be borne by the taxpayers," Biden told reporters at the White House. "The money will come from the fees that banks pay into the Federal Deposit Insurance [Corporation, or FDIC]. Because of the actions taken by regulators, every American should feel confident their deposits will be there if and when they need them."

Biden also said he was going to request Congress to review and strengthen post-financial crisis banking laws that were loosened by the previous administration, "to make sure that the crisis we saw in 2008 would not happen again."

The latest US banking crisis unfolded after investors at the California-based Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) withdrew \$42 billion in deposits. The SVB is one of top 20 US commercial banks, according to the FDIC.

SVB is the largest US lender to fail since Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 at the height of the financial crisis then.

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deposits, \$137.6 billion of which was held by US depositors. The bank's total assets at the end of 2022 equaled \$209 billion.

The FDIC also took control of Signature, which had \$110.36 billion in assets and \$88.59 billion in deposits at the end of last year, according to the New York Department of Financial Services.

Biden said the FDIC protection for depositors at SVB and Signature will not be extended to investors and the management at the collapsed banks, which he accused of excessive risk-taking.

"The management of these banks will be fired," Biden said. "If the bank is taken over by FDIC, the people running the bank should not work there anymore. Investors in the banks will not be protected. They knowingly took a risk and when the risk didn't pay off, investors lose their money. That's how capitalism works and so forth. But there are very important questions of how these banks got into the circumstances. In the first place, we must get the full accounting of what happened and why those responsible can be held accountable. In my administration, no one is above the law."

US media reported that both, regulators and the banking industry were working to contain the crisis.

The bank that many have viewed as the likely next domino to fall - First Republic – has secured additional financing from JPMorgan Chase & Co during the weekend, resulting in \$70 billion in unused liquidity - firepower it can use to respond to potential customer withdrawals, according to the report.

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NASA Requests \$8.1Bln in 2024 Budget to Return US Astronauts to Moon - Fact Sheet

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - NASA has requested more than \$8 billion in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget to return US astronauts to the Moon, according a FY 2024 Agency Fact Sheet released on Monday.

"The FY 2024 budget request for NASA is \$27.2 billion (7.1% increase over FY 2023 enacted)," the release said. "Specifically, this budget requests \$8.125 billion to return American astronauts to the Moon, including the first woman and first person of color, to establish a sustainable lunar presence and lay the groundwork for humanity's first crewed mission to Mars."

NASA seeks through the requested funding to also support continued human presence in low-Earth orbit with operations of the International Space Station through 2030, the release said.

"This includes \$228 million to collaborate with US industry on commercial space stations that will become available in the late 2020s, in order to initiate transition from ISS after its retirement; and \$180 million for a US deorbit vehicle that will enable the safe and responsible deorbit of the ISS at the end of this decade," the release said.

NASA's budget request also includes \$4.525 billion for Common Exploration Systems Development to support lunar missions, the release said.

In addition, the requested funding includes \$3.235 billion for the Artemis Campaign

Development to advance lunar exploration capabilities, the release said.

Moreover, NASA asked for \$4.535 billion to continue conducting space operations, the release added.

On Thursday, the White House issued a document saying that President Joe Biden's budget proposal for fiscal year 2024 requests \$27.7 billion in discretionary budget authority for NASA - an increase of \$1.8 billion from the 2023 enacted level.

Biden will submit his budget proposal to Congress and it will serve as a blueprint for lawmakers in crafting their own budget legislation. The US Constitution grants Congress the power of the purse as it is up to lawmakers to approve all spending levels for government agencies and programs.

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