

**3/17/23 Friday**

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'Kangaroo Court': What is the International Criminal Court That Just Issued 'Warrant' for Putin?  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The Kremlin has laughed off an attempt by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue an "arrest warrant" for Russian President Vladimir Putin and another Russian official for the purported "unlawful transfer" of Ukrainian children from the conflict zone over the past year. Based in the Dutch city of the Hague, the ICC purported to charge Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Putin's commissioner for children's rights in the Russian Federation, with "unlawful deportation of population and that of unlawful transfer of population" over reports that Ukrainian children were taken from parts of western Russia that had previously seceded from Ukraine and joined the Russian Federation.

Moscow has said it was transferring people away from the front lines, where Ukrainian missile attacks have killed and wounded civilians since the earliest days of the conflict. "We do our best to keep young citizens in families, and in cases of the absence or death of parents and relatives, to transfer orphans to guardianship. We are ensuring the protection of their lives and well-being," the Russian embassy in Washington, DC, said recently.

"The decisions of the International Criminal Court have no significance for our country, including from a legal point of view," [said Russian Foreign Ministry](#) spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. "Russia is not a party to the ICC's Rome Statute and bears no obligations under it. Russia is not engaged in cooperation with this body, and any possible [orders] for arrests coming from the court will be legally null and void for us."

So what is this court, anyway?

Origins of the Court

Several attempts were made over the course of the 20th century to establish an international tribunal for prosecuting such heinous international crimes as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. However, at each juncture, world politics intervened to make such a venture unrealistic.

In the meanwhile, ad hoc courts were created to prosecute the perpetrators of specific atrocities, including the Holocaust, Japan's wars of conquest across East Asia, and the Rwandan genocide.

What became the ICC gradually took shape during the 1990s, with the United Nations General Assembly tasking the International Law Commission (ILC), a body of legal experts appointed by the UNGA, to draft a framework for such a court. By June 1998, several drafts had been poured over by UN-appointed working bodies and a diplomatic conference was called in Rome, Italy, the following month.

The 1998 Rome Statute

The [Rome Statute](#) was adopted at the conference by 120 nations who voted for it. Another 21 abstained, and seven countries voted against it: China, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Qatar, the United

States, and Yemen. However, the nations that signed it then had to get it ratified by their own governments, and the treaty entered force in 2002 after 60 nations had done so.

The statute founding the ICC created four core crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression, none of which have a statute of limitations. According to the treaty, the ICC is only empowered to investigate international crimes when states are “unable” or “unwilling” to do so themselves.

Further, it only has jurisdiction if the crimes are committed in the territory of a state that is party to the treaty or committed by a state that is party to the treaty, or if the United Nations Security Council votes to give it jurisdiction, or if a state that is not party to the treaty appeals to the ICC to give it jurisdiction.

How Many Nations Are or Aren't Party to the Rome Statute?

As of March 2023, the number of nations who are party to the treaty is 123. Several nations have also rescinded their signatures over the years, including the Philippines, Burundi, Israel, the United States, Sudan, and Russia. South Africa rescinded its signature at one point, but then re-signed the treaty later on.

Another 41 nations have neither signed nor acceded to the Rome Statute, and many are actively critical of it, including China and India.

Wait, Didn't Trump Sanction the ICC?

Yes, in June 2020, the administration of then-US President Donald Trump announced it would [sanction ICC officials](#) with visa restrictions on them and their families, and would launch a counter-investigation into the ICC for alleged corruption. The precipitating factor was the court announcing it intended to investigate war crimes in the US' 20-year-long occupation war in Afghanistan.

Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, derided the ICC as a “kangaroo court,” an English-language term of slander for courts of law that are seen as “jumping over” the widely accepted standards of jurisprudence to deliver pre-decided convictions and sentences.

Washington's 'Hague Invasion Act'

The US has always had a stormy relationship with the ICC. As mentioned above, it signed the 1998 Rome Statute in 2000 but has made clear it has no intent of ratifying it and that it believes it has no legal obligations as a result of its signature.

In 2002, then-US President George W. Bush signed the American Service-Members Protection Act (ASMA), known informally as the “Hague Invasion Act” because it authorizes the president to use “all means necessary and appropriate to bring about the release of any US or allied personnel being detained or imprisoned by, on behalf of, or at the request of the International Criminal Court.”

The 2002 law also prohibits US military aid to countries that are party to the ICC, although a number of caveats exist, including for NATO members, major non-NATO allies, the Chinese autonomous region of Taiwan, and countries that have entered into “Article 98 agreements” not to hand over US nationals to the ICC.

After Bush, then-US President Barack Obama moved closer to the ICC, but made no move to accede to its jurisdiction, and Trump was much more hostile to the court in keeping with his general distrust of international institutions with power over US sovereignty. Under US President Joe Biden, who took office in 2021, the US has [dropped the Trump-era](#) sanctions but remains in a standoffish position vis-à-vis the ICC.

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YouTube Reinstates Trump's Account as Social Media Giants Retreat From Post-J6 Ban  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The social media site YouTube, which is owned by Google, announced on Friday it would reinstate the account of former US President Donald Trump more than two years after banning him. It's just the latest site to do so as the real estate mogul gears up his 2024 presidential campaign.

"Starting today, the Donald J. Trump channel is no longer restricted and can upload new content. We carefully evaluated the continued risk of real-world violence, while balancing the chance for voters to hear equally from major national candidates in the run up to an election," YouTube said on its [official press account](#) on Twitter.

"This channel will continue to be subject to our policies, just like any other channel on YouTube," it added.

Trump's account on the video hosting site was banned on January 13, 2021, six days after clashes between his supporters and police at the US Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

YouTube's move followed similar decisions by Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, motivated by allegations Trump was using them to fan the violence.

Hours before his followers fought their way past police, dispersed Congress and sacked the national legislature, Trump had held a rally outside the White House at which he urged attendees to "fight like hell" and "stop the steal," claiming Democratic rival Joe Biden had beaten him in the November 2020 election through fraudulent means.

Following the November 2022 midterm elections late last year, Trump formally launched his campaign to return to the White House in 2024, and with it [lawsuits seeking](#) to restore control over the social media accounts that had been so key to his rise to power in 2016.

Weeks earlier, Twitter had already restored Trump's account after billionaire industrialist Elon Musk bought the company and started lifting previous bans. At that time, Trump said he wouldn't come back and would continue using his own purpose-built social media app, Truth Social, to communicate with his followers.

Meta\*, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, [said in January](#) it would restore Trump's accounts, noting he remains subject to the same usage rules as other users.

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Presidents Putin and Xi Pen Articles in Each Other's Countries Ahead of Xi's Visit to Moscow  
By - Ian DeMartino

The relationship between both countries has grown as Russia and China have both found themselves at odds with the United States and NATO over Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively. The articles discussed Ukraine, NATO and global security and peace.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia is open to a diplomatic resolution in Ukraine and praised China's 12-point document laying out a path to peace in an article written by Putin and published in the Chinese newspaper People's Daily on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping penned an article for Russia's RIA Novosti and Rossiyskaya Gazeta papers, praising the relationship between Russia and China and saying that his country is ready to play an "unbiased" role in ending the crisis in Ukraine.

Both articles were published one day before Xi travels to Moscow to visit Russia, marking his first foreign trip since being reelected the leader of the country for a third five-year term earlier this month. Xi is expected to stay in Russia from March 20 to March 22.

#### The Ukraine Crisis

"Russia is open to the political and diplomatic resolution of the Ukraine crisis ... The future of the peace process depends solely on the will to engage in a meaningful discussion taking into account current geopolitical realities," said Putin in the article.

In February, China released a 12-point document titled "China Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis." The document was vehemently rejected by NATO countries and the Ukrainian government.

"China has an objective and unbiased stance based on what is actually happening," Xi wrote, "and it is making active efforts to contribute to reconciliation and peace talks."

Putin said that he welcomes China's attempts to restore peace in the region.

"We appreciate the well-balanced stance on the events in Ukraine adopted by the PRC [People's Republic of China], as well as its understanding of their historical background and root causes. We welcome China's readiness to make a meaningful contribution to the settlement of the crisis."

Xi reiterated his country's stance on the best course of action to achieve peace in the region: "It involves the necessity to follow goals and principles of the UN Charter, respect reasonable security concerns of all countries, support all the efforts aimed at peaceful settlement of the Ukrainian crisis and ensure stability of supply chains," Xi wrote.

#### Friendship Between Russia and China

In his article, Putin expressed admiration for China and Xi, calling the Chinese President his "good old friend" and said that the two enjoy a "warm relationship."

"I am convinced that our friendship and partnership based on the strategic choice of the peoples of the two countries will further grow and gain strength for the well-being and prosperity of Russia and China," Putin wrote. "This visit of the President of the PRC to Russia will undoubtedly contribute to that."

Putin also noted that trade between the two countries doubled in 2022, reaching a record \$185 billion and that he has "every reason to believe" they will reach \$200 billion this year instead of in 2024 as originally predicted. Putin said the relationship between China and Russia is stronger than it has ever been, including during the Cold War.

"The progress made in the development of bilateral ties is impressive. The Russia-China relations have reached the highest level in their history and are gaining even more strength,"

Putin wrote. “[T]hey surpass Cold War-time military-political alliances in their quality, with no one to constantly order and no one to constantly obey, without limitations or taboos. We have reached an unprecedented level of trust in our political dialogue, our strategic cooperation has become truly comprehensive in nature and is standing on the brink of a new era. President Xi Jinping and I have met about 40 times and have always found time and opportunity to talk in a variety of official formats as well as at no-tie events,”

In his article, Xi agreed with the Russian President’s assessment of where the two countries stand.

“The parties are continuously bolstering political trust, creating a new paradigm for relations between the major powers,” Xi wrote ahead of his visit to Moscow, adding that “China and Russia abide by the concept of eternal friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation.”

The relationship between China and Russia is “continuously gaining new strength and [will] serve as a benchmark for a new type of state-to-state relations,” wrote Xi.

“My first foreign trip after I was appointed the Chinese president took place in Russia 10 years ago. I have traveled to Russia eight times over the past 10 years. Thanks to these trips that always bring pleasure and results, President Putin and I have opened a new chapter in the annals of the Russian-Chinese relations,” Xi stated.

#### NATO and the Multipolar World

The Russian President also said that the West’s stance against Russia and China has become “more fierce and aggressive,” saying that the leaders of those countries are “gambling on the fates of entire states and peoples” to preserve its “vanishing dominance.”

“We are committed to the principle of the indivisibility of security, which is being grossly violated by the NATO bloc. We are deeply concerned over the irresponsible and outright dangerous actions that jeopardize nuclear security. We reject illegitimate unilateral sanctions, which must be lifted,” wrote Putin.

Russia has been under unilateral sanctions from NATO countries and the West, and China has also been threatened with sanctions stemming from unproven allegations that China is providing military support to Russia for the country’s special operation in Ukraine.

Both Russia and China have been developing their relationships with other countries, and Putin specifically pointed towards BRICS, a coalition of emerging economies Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which includes India, Tajikistan, Russia, Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan as evidence that the two countries “serve as the cornerstone of regional and global stability.”

Putin compared the organizations to NATO which he says is “persistently working to split the common Eurasian space into a network of ‘exclusive clubs’ and military blocs that would serve to contain our countries’ development and harm their interests,” noting that the plan “won’t work.”

President Putin also praised China’s Global Security Initiative, which he says is “in line with the Russian approaches in this area.”

Putin noted that both China and Russia are building literal and figurative “bridges” with other countries through the promotion of BRICS and the SCO.

On Saturday, the People’s Daily called Xi’s trip to Moscow the “Trip for peace” and noted that it would bolster ties to Russia.

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US on Anniversary of Iraq Invasion Honors 4,418 American Soldiers Killed - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The United States on the 20th anniversary of the Iraq invasion is honoring almost 4,500 American soldiers, who were killed in that war, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief General Michael Kurilla said on Monday.

“Today, 20 years after the start of Operation Iraq Freedom, we commemorate all the service members who fought during Operation Iraq Freedom. We honor the memories and legacies of the 4,418 American troops killed in that war and uplift the Families they left behind,” Kurilla said in a statement.

CENTCOM soldiers now serve in Iraq as part of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve at the invitation of the Iraqi government, he added.

Kurilla also noted that the coalition commends its Iraqi partners as they continue to build capability and capacity in the fight against the Islamic State (IS, terrorist group banned in Russia).

On March 19, 2003, then President George W. Bush in a televised address from the Oval Office said the US and coalition forces were in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq and "free its people," marking the start of an invasion and occupation that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and combatants.

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More Americans See US as World's Leading Economic Power – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – An increased number of Americans see the US as the world's leading economic power, according to a Gallup poll released Monday.

The nationwide poll, conducted February 1-23, found 44% of Americans held this view, an increase from 37% in 2021. At the same time, the poll saw a decrease from 50% to 42% of those who saw China as the leading economic power.

Democrats and independents were primarily behind the increased belief of US economic supremacy, showing an increase of 14 and 9 percentage points, respectively, from the 2021 survey. Republicans, on the other hand, remained constant, with 48% viewing China in the top place.

However, 50% of Republicans, more than Democrats (43%) and independents (41%), believe the US will be the leading economic power 20 years from now.

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Biden, Xi Call Not Scheduled, But Biden Wants to Speak to Chinese President – White House

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – A phone call between US President Joe Biden and China's President Xi Jinping is not scheduled yet, but the American leader still wants to speak to his Chinese counterpart, US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"It has not been scheduled, but the President very much wants to have another conversation with President Xi. It is really important to keep these lines of communication open," Kirby told CNN.

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PTSD, Suicides, Unhealing Trauma: War Vets Recall Iraq Invasion

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Marine Corps war veteran Lucas Gage said every single member of his unit got PTSD after being stationed in Iraq - some even took their own lives when they got home.

Gage served in the marines as a combat engineer during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and Operation Enduring Freedom in 2004. He was part of the 8th Engineer Support Battalion stationed out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

During his first tour, the actual initial invasion of Iraq from Kuwait, the unit began its convoy into the country's north.

"I witnessed the amazing and destructive power of our war machine - entire cities were laid to waste and some locals were left walking around with white flags," Gage said. "This tour was tough - we were literally living on the road, sleeping on the highways, and digging holes to go to the bathroom. It was a very humbling experience for me, an 18-year-boy from New Jersey."

His unit's mission as combat engineers was to support the 1st Marine Corps Division in their advancement to Baghdad, which they did by constructing Medium Girder Bridges and Improved Ribbon Bridges to help them cross over a destroyed bridge and get vehicles across canals.

Gage's second tour was a humanitarian one.

"My unit's mission this time around was to help 'win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people' as they would say: we blew up unexploded ordinance, mine-swept and cleared roads, and even fixed up a playground for the locals," Gage recalls. "This tour was much easier than the last, as we were stationed at Al Asad Airbase which had barracks, a 24-hour gym, a PX, and even a computer and phone center to reach home."

He said with the two tours combined, he spent a total year in Iraq, and will never forget the experience.

"Every single one of us certainly got PTSD from it, and some of our guys took their own lives when they got home. And this is why war has been something I am so fervently against; it is something I do not wish upon anyone; not even my enemies," he said.

In the years following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, thousands of American soldiers have returned home with PTSD. The disorder can cause various symptoms including flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. In addition, soldiers with PTSD can experience feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

Maj. Frank Phillips, who worked in contracting, sending equipment to troops on the ground, told Sputnik that the psychological impact of these types of war had to be acknowledged.

"I was a contractor and we had to figure out a way to deal with this quickly and protect the soldiers, so we develop the Rapid Equipping Force. We were preparing for asymmetrical war and had to come up with new strategies," Phillips said.

Phillips recalled that a lot of the people that were sent to war were not military and when they came home with the trauma they got no help from the VA.

Soldiers were used to the bombs but they would still be traumatized, Phillips said.

"If you're a soldier in the field, every day you play Russian roulette. After a while, it will affect you," he said.

Despite the prevalence of PTSD among veterans, many soldiers struggle to access the care and support they need. The stigma surrounding mental health issues in the military can make it difficult for soldiers to seek help, and some may worry that seeking treatment will hurt their career or their standing in their unit.

According to data from the Department of Defense, between 2003 and 2018, there were a total of 4,544 reported suicides among all active-duty service members, including those who served in Iraq and other conflicts.

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After Iraq, US 'Doubled' Aggression, But World is Learning to Stand Up - Anti-War Activist

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has not only learned nothing from the consequences of the Iraq invasion, it has doubled its aggression against other countries through sanctions and proxy armies, although the world is finally learning to take a stand, United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik.

On March 19, 2003, at 10:16 p.m. EST, President George W. Bush in a televised address from the Oval Office said the US and coalition forces were in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq and "free its people," marking the start of an invasion and occupation that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and combatants.

Washington's official reasons for the invasion, initially, were alleged links between Saddam Hussein and international terrorism, as well as CIA claims of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, allegations that turned out to be false. As a result of the invasion, Saddam was overthrown and executed, which was followed by years of war.

"The US has not changed and has doubled its aggression," Lombardo said. "Although the US government seems to have learned little from Iraq, the people of the US have learned that they don't want to see more wars like Iraq and Vietnam. This has helped stay the hand of the US, which has had to depend more on sanctions and proxy armies to fight their battles."

### 'WATCHED IN HORROR'

Dozens of countries took part in the Operation Iraqi Freedom at different times, including the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland and Australia. Within three weeks of the invasion Iraqi civilians and US troops pulled down a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

Although Bush declared "mission accomplished" in May of 2003, the US remained embroiled in fierce fighting that would leave over 4,400 American troops dead before combat operations ended in 2011.

Lombardo shared that he has been an antiwar activist for many years, and during the US war against Vietnam, he worked with the antiwar coalitions of the day against that war.

"And when the US invaded Iraq, I once again started organizing," he said.

Lombardo recalled that right before the United States invaded Iraq, millions of people took to the streets, all over the world, to protest, and he participated in the New York City demonstration of a half million people.

"Other actions took place all across the US and on every continent in the world, including Antarctica," he noted. "Millions took to the streets in London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and many other countries."

But the US, he added, which had gained sole hegemony and was at the time the only superpower in the world, felt it could ignore these protests and launched its invasion on Iraq.

"We watched and protested in horror as many of the things that are common place today, started happening in Iraq," he went on to say. "We saw 'black sites' and torture centers like Abu Ghraib in Iraq. The US invaded Iraq with 'Shock and Awe' and hundreds of thousands were killed."

Press coverage was limited and Western reporters were asked to 'embed' with the US military, Lombardo said.

"Those who refused found that their hotels were fired on, they were belittled in the US media and some died for their efforts," he said.

### STANDING STRONG

After the war, Lombardo pointed out, the US tried to push around other countries through sanctions and proxy armies in places like Syria, Libya, Yemen, and against Russia in Ukraine. However, Lombardo said while the US must stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, the world also needs to take a stand – and there are signs this is happening.

"The world must learn that it can stand up to the US bullying and countries that are sanctioned or attacked by the US must stand together and build alternatives to the US economic, political, and military hegemony," Lombardo said.

However, he added, today there are appearing alternatives to the US domination.

"People are looking more towards the East and options like China's Belt and Road initiative and even BRICS as an alternative to the IMF and the World Bank are now becoming available," he said.

The US is losing its hegemonic hold over the world economic structures and new strategic and economic alliances are being forged without the US, he observed.

"This will give the countries of the world a means to challenge US economic and military control of their countries and the real possibility for them begin to develop," Lombardo said.

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ANALYSIS - Twenty Years Later, US Still Struggling With Anarchy Unleashed by Iraq Invasion

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Rather than impose a Western-aligned order in the Middle East, as neoconservatives and neoliberals had hoped, the US-led invasion of Iraq ushered in a new era of international terrorism and lawlessness that is expanding across the globe and continues to threaten American interests, experts told Sputnik.

On March 19, 2003, at 10:16 p.m. EST, President George W. Bush in a televised address from the Oval Office said the US and coalition forces were in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq and "free its people," marking the start of an invasion and occupation that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and combatants.

Bush's foreign policy team, which included people like security aide Condoleezza Rice, Pentagon chief Don Rumsfeld, and Vice President Dick Cheney, who dubbed themselves the "vulcans" - a reference to the Roman god of fire - strongly believed only through military power could they transform the Middle East and install free market democracies.

On the other hand, many Democrats also backed the invasion on humanitarian grounds and the conviction that the people of Iraq needed to be liberated from living under an authoritarian ruler.

Political commentator and historian Dan Lazare believes Bush and his team and the humanitarians unlikely foresaw that their bid to democratize the region would open a power vacuum that was eventually filled by terrorist groups like the Islamic State (banned in Russia).

"The significance of the 2003 invasion is that it opened up a new era of international lawlessness, aggression, and destruction," Lazare told Sputnik. "US militarization had set the entire region ablaze, and the anarchy created by the 'vulcans' continues to grow."

#### 'CIVILIZING' MISSION CULMINATES, BACKFIRES

The head of US Central Command in testimony to a senate committee on March 16, lending credence to this notion, said the IS branch in Afghanistan is about six months away from developing the capability to conduct an external attack on Western interests abroad.

Lazare said that a direct line can be drawn from the path the US chose to take at the end of the Cold War to 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Instead of turning "swords into plowshares" following the demise of the Soviet bloc, he added, the US under both Republican and Democratic presidents began gearing up for a new age of war.

Lazare suggested that bringing Western civilization to the Middle East was simply a new cover story for meeting purely geopolitical ends.

"The Carter Doctrine, unveiled in January 1980, declared the administration's determination to reassert control over the Gulf and turn it, more or less, into an American lake," he said. "This is the essential backdrop for 'shock and awe' some 23 years later... when the center of the world trade in fossil fuels was suddenly in play."

In any case, decades of intricate Cold War maneuvering would come back to haunt the US, he said, including support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan.

"9/11 - an unexpected by-product of Afghan intervention - provided Bush II with an excuse to

topple Saddam Hussein in an attempt to impose greater US control on the Gulf than ever. Instead of influencing events from afar, America would now supervise them directly and up close," he added.

But then a Sunni insurgency erupted and the US got bogged down. Iraq, however, was simply a stepping stone for the US to destabilize the region further – from the intervention in Libya to the Washington and Saudi-backed jihadist war against Damascus, he added.

Democracy Institute Director Patrick Basham said so much Iraqi and Western blood has been spilled and trillions of dollars wasted by the US chasing the elusive dream of building a peaceful, stable, pro-Western liberal democracy throughout Iraq.

"In hindsight, the Iraq invasion was the catalyst for many tragic events, mostly within Iraq itself, but also throughout the Middle East and the West," Basham told Sputnik.

The misguided interventionist urge, he added, can be seen across the West's entire ideological spectrum.

"Astonishingly, and without either empirical foundation, logic, or country-specific understanding, neoconservatives predicted pro-Western liberal democratic nirvanas would arise in the literal and figurative democratic deserts of Iraq, Libya, and Syria," he said.

Meanwhile, he added, Western neoliberals in each case stressed humanitarian catastrophes, especially in the Syrian context.

Basham also pointed out that the US not only failed to achieve its objectives, but the governments that followed Saddam Hussein turned their backs on Washington and embraced Tehran.

"Western-initiated regime change always produces replacement governments that are even more hostile to the West's agenda and security interests than were the respective national governments deposed by Western military might and political choreography," he said.

According to California State University Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Beau Grosscup, the bid to replace a once pro-US dictator, who had decided to look after his own country's interests first, with a government friendly to Washington's, was not just a failure - it proved counter-productive.

In the long run, the invasion of Iraq ended up undermining the US establishment's two strategic "New World Order" goals of preventing the rise of a competing power and maintaining access or possession of strategic resources.

And the US during the process discovered that nationalism is a very strong sentiment for most populations, not only for America.

"Regime change is very difficult," Grosscup observed. "Even when you appear to hold most of the cards."

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West Applying Lessons Learned From Iraq War to Stifle Dissent Over Ukraine - Ex-UK Envoy WASHINGTON, March 19 (Sputnik) - Orwellian messaging and media control techniques the Western powers honed in the run up to and during the Iraq war are being applied two decades later to stifle any dissent over involvement in the Ukraine conflict, former UK ambassador Peter

Ford told Sputnik.

On March 19, 2023, the US launched the invasion of Iraq based on what turned out to be the false premise that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction. The US and Western press strongly beat the drums for war before the invasion. A FAIR watchdog group poll revealed that 70% of American sources cited in stories in the run up to the invasion were pro-war and a mere 3% were categorized as anti-war.

The war itself was accompanied by images and stories about human rights abuses, including the crimes committed by American personnel at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, although some journalists were targeted for covering such issues.

"Policymakers resolved to get better at manipulating domestic opposition to military adventurism, notably by tighter control over corporate media," Ford said about lessons learned from the Iraq war. "The Ukraine crisis is the perfect illustration of how these lessons have been applied. Dissent over involvement in Ukraine is stifled to an Orwellian degree, while the US shows a limitless capacity for enduring Ukrainian casualties."

Polls in recent weeks and months have shown that voters in US and Western countries are growing weary of supporting and providing arms to Ukraine in the conflict with Russia - with many calling for negotiations to commence.

There has been criticism, particularly in the United States, about the near complete lack of debate or opposition to using billions of taxpayer dollars to fund a foreign war. Even the anti-war Democratic progressive bloc in Congress has so far backed sending military aid to Kiev.

Ford observed that despite the fallout over the Iraq invasion the US government, amplified once again by the mainstream media, continues to lecture others about respecting a "rules-based order."

"That a country which invaded and occupied another country thousands of miles away representing zero threat to itself should now pose as a beacon of virtue invites derision not respect," Ford concluded.

Dozens of countries took part in the Operation Iraqi Freedom at different times, including the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland and Australia. Within three weeks of the invasion Iraqi civilians and US troops pulled down a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

Although Bush declared "mission accomplished" in May of 2003, the US remained embroiled in fierce fighting that would leave over 4,400 American troops dead before combat operations ended in 2011.

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Biden Says ICC Warrant for Putin 'Justified'

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for Russian President Vladimir Putin is justified.

"I think it's justified," Biden said on Friday as quoted in a pool report.

Biden also noted that although the ICC is not recognized by the United States, the organization makes a good argument for the warrant.

On Friday, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Putin as well as Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova on the grounds of alleged "unlawful deportation" of Ukrainian children to Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has repeatedly stated that Russia is not a party to the ICC and its jurisdiction is not recognized by Moscow so any of its decisions against the country are null from the legal point of view.

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Black Sea Grain Deal Should Run At Its Full Potential - EU Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Black Sea Grain deal should run at its full potential, Olof Skoog, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the UN said on Friday.

"The black sea grain initiative has been instrumental in bringing down global food prices and it needs to run at its full potential," Skoog said.

Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during the same meeting that if the United States and the European Union sincerely want the Black Sea Grain Initiative to be further extended, they have two months to lift the sanctions regime imposed on Russia's agricultural sector.

The grain deal was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey between Russia and Ukraine in July 2022 to facilitate exports of grain and fertilizer from Black Sea ports amid hostilities. It was renewed for 120 days in November 2022 and would be due to automatically renew for another 120 days on March 18 unless either of the signatories object. Russia said on Monday it did not mind extending the deal but only for 60 days, which was confirmed by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday.

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US Special Operations Command Orders \$53Mln More in Munitions - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Ultimate Training Munitions has won a \$53.7 million contract to supply munitions to the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Ultimate Training Munitions [of] Somerville, New Jersey, was awarded a [SOCOM] contract with a period of performance of five years with a value of \$53,733,000," the Defense Department said in the release on Friday.

The munitions are being purchased in support of SOCOM special operations forces acquisition, technology and logistics, the release said.

"The majority of the work will be performed in Somerville, New Jersey. As cited in Justification and Approval for Other than Full and Open Competition for Force-on-Force Ammunition executed by SOCOM's Director of Procurement," the release added.

The US Special Operations Command based at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida will supervise execution of the contract, according to the release.

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Sullivan, Milley Discuss US Support for Ukraine With Top Kiev Officials - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley spoke with Ukrainian officials about continued US support for Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation, the White House said in a statement.

The two US officials spoke with Ukrainian Head of the Office of the President Andriy Yermak, Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov and armed forces chief Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the statement said on Friday.

"The Ukrainian officials provided an update on battlefield conditions and expressed appreciation for the continued provision of US security assistance. The US officials reaffirmed the unwavering support of the United States for Ukraine as it defends its sovereignty and territorial integrity," the statement said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy joined the call at its conclusion, the statement added. On Thursday, US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said the Biden administration will announce another drawdown of military assistance for Ukraine very soon.

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Boeing Wins \$1.9Bln Contract to Build More Army Apache Combat Helicopters - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Boeing has received an almost \$2 billion US Army contract to produce more Apache AH-64E ground support combat helicopters over the next five years, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] Mesa, Arizona was awarded a \$1,946,212,323 modification contract for the Apache AH-64E full-rate production," the release said on Friday.

Work on the contract extension will be performed in Mesa in the US state of Arizona over the next four and three quarter years with an estimated completion date of December 31, 2027, the Defense Department said.

Production work on the contract will be overseen by the US Army Contracting Command based at Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama, the Defense Department said.

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Russia Regrets West's Decision to Block DNR Ombudsman From Briefing UNSC - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russia regrets that Western states blocked the participation of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Human Rights Ombudsman Daria Morozova from briefing the UN Security Council, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

"We regret the fact that a number of delegations today voted against having an invitation extended to the briefer," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Friday. "We see in this a manifestation of egregious hypocrisy and double standards."

Russia proposed inviting Morozova to brief the UN Security Council but the Western states and its allies voted 8-4 against it, with three states abstaining.

The meeting was requested by France and Ecuador to brief the UN Security Council member states on the humanitarian situation of Ukraine.

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US Plans to Provide \$7.4Bln to Ukraine Via World Bank Through September - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States intends to allocate an additional \$7.4 billion directly to the Ukrainian government via World Bank mechanisms through September, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting.

"For our part, since the invasion the United States has provided nearly \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance to those in need in Ukraine and the region and we have provided nearly \$15.5 billion in direct budget support to the government of Ukraine through World Bank mechanisms. We plan to provide an additional \$7.4 billion through September," Thomas-Greenfield said on Friday.

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Russia Considers ICC Warrants Illegitimate as it Lacks Jurisdiction - Russia's Envoy to UN  
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russia considers any warrants by the International Criminal Court illegitimate as it does not have any jurisdiction over Russia, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during the UN Security Council session on Friday.

"This is a prejudiced politically biased non-competent international body which has once again demonstrated how damaging and invalid it is. The ICC is a puppet in the hands of the collective West which is always willing to carry out pseudo jurisdiction based on their orders," Nebenzia

said. "The Russian Federation is not party to the Rome Statute. The ICC lacks jurisdiction vis-à-vis the Russian Federation, its citizens. We consider any warrants from this body as illegitimate and invalid."

Nebenzia also underscored that today's move was particularly cynical as the warrants were announced on the eve of the Iraq invasion where the ICC had the jurisdiction but did absolutely nothing to bring the perpetrators to account.

"All indicators ICC has really taken a path towards self-liquidation first and foremost with respect to its authority and international recognition," he added.

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White House Says Supports Accountability in Light of ICC's Arrest Warrant for Putin

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - A National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson said in a statement that the Biden administration supports accountability for those responsible for alleged war crimes in Ukraine following the issuance of an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague.

"There is no doubt that Russia is committing war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine, and we have been clear that those responsible must be held accountable. The ICC Prosecutor is an independent actor and makes his own prosecutorial decisions based on the evidence before him. We support accountability for perpetrators of war crimes," the statement said on Friday.

Later in the day, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby refused to answer the question of whether the United States will arrest Putin if he comes to a session of the United Nation's General Assembly in New York since Washington is not a signatory to the Rome Statute that established the ICC.

On Friday, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Putin as well as Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova on the grounds of alleged "unlawful deportation" of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the ICC warrants to arrest Putin and Lvova-Belova are legally null and void as Russia is not a party to the Rome Statute and has no obligations under it nor does it cooperate with the ICC.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has repeatedly stated that Russia is not a party to the ICC and its jurisdiction is not recognized by Moscow so any of its decisions against the country are null from the legal point of view.

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Russian Agriculture Must Be Exempt From Sanctions for Grain Deal to Be Extended - Nebenzia  
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - If the United States and the European Union sincerely want the Black Sea Grain Initiative to be further extended, they have two months to lift the

sanctions regime imposed on Russia's agricultural sector, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

"If Brussels, Washington and London are genuinely interested to continue the export of food from Ukraine through the maritime humanitarian corridor then they have two months to exempt from their sanctions the entire chain of operations which accompany the Russian agricultural sector," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council on Friday.

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Russia Preparing to Launch International Tribunal on Ukraine - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russia is preparing to launch an international tribunal on Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

"In Russia, there is already an international communal tribunal that is in operation and is collecting witnesses, taking testimony and documenting this," Nebenzia said on Friday. "Their preparations to establish and launch an international tribunal that is rooted in international law and not in a 'rules based order,' which the collective West devised to advance its own interests."

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Nebenzia Says Vote Against DPR Ombudsman Speaking Before UNSC 'Egregious Hypocrisy'

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The members of the UN Security Council demonstrated "egregious hypocrisy" by voting against allowing Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) Human Rights Ombudsman Daria Morozova to speak before it, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said in a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The UN Security Council members on Friday voted 8-4, with three countries abstaining, against Morozova speaking before them.

"We regret the fact that a number of nations today voted against having the invitation extended to the briefer," Nebenzia said. "We see in this a manifestation of egregious hypocrisy and double standards, when a representative of the Donbas, which has been suffering for nine years as a result of the war unleashed by Kiev against it, has been refused under trumped up pretexts to enjoy the right to speak before the Security Council."

The Russian ambassador also said that the vote confirms the deniers do not view the residents of Donbas as people and do not care about their suffering.

"Our Western colleagues are afraid that if the voices of truth pave the way, all of their efforts to whitewash their subordinates in Kiev will collapse," he said.

Nebenzia also noted that Russia has never stooped down to this level to deny representatives

the right to speak.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) -

#### ICC WARRANT TO ARREST PUTIN

\* The decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue a warrant for the arrest of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova has no importance for Russia in legal terms, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Friday.

\* The ICC formulation about an "arrest warrant" for Putin is unacceptable; Russia does not recognize the ICC jurisdiction and any of its decisions are legally null and void, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

\* ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan said despite the court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Putin, the ICC intends to seek cooperation with Moscow on the situation in Ukraine.

#### XI-PUTIN TALKS

\* Chinese President Xi Jinping will hold a meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin on March 21, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said on Friday.

\* Putin and Xi will discuss the conflict in Ukraine, among other issues, Ushakov said.

\* Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and other senior government officials will take part in the first round of talks between Putin and Xi Jinping in Moscow, Ushakov said.

#### US BANKING SYSTEM

\* President Joe Biden plans to seek approval from Congress to expand the authority of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to fine executives responsible for the failure of the banks under their control, the White House said on Friday.

\* Silicon Valley Bank's former parent company SVB Financial Group said that it has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the state of New York in a bid to preserve value as it auctions off its assets.

#### FINLAND'S ACCESSION TO NATO

\* The ratification of Finland's application to join NATO will likely be completed before the presidential elections in Turkey scheduled for May 14, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday.

\* NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he supports Turkey's decision to begin the ratification process of the Finland's application to join the alliance.

\* The Hungarian Parliament will vote on Finland's membership in NATO on March 27, Sweden's membership will be decided later, said the head of the ruling faction Fidesz, Mate

Kocsis, said.

#### UKRAINE CONFLICT

\* The United States will announce very soon another drawdown of military assistance for Ukraine, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

\* China's calls for a ceasefire and peace talks regarding the Ukraine conflict would put Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a disadvantage at the negotiating table if implemented now, Kirby said.

\* The Slovak government has approved the transfer of MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine, Prime Minister Eduard Heger said.

\* The supply of fighter jets by Poland and Slovakia to Ukraine will not have any effect on Russia's special military operation in that country, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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#### Nearly 200 US Banks May Be in Trouble - Economists' Study

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Nearly 200 US banks may have troubled finances that have not been reported yet, according to a study by economists, suggesting that the banking crisis discovered a week ago in the world's largest economy may be bigger than thought.

"We find that there are 186 banks with a negative insured deposit coverage ratio," economists Erica Jiang, Gregor Matvos, Tomasz Piskorski, and Amit Seru said in their study. "Our calculations suggest these banks are certainly at a potential risk of a run, absent other government intervention or recapitalization."

The US banking crisis erupted a week ago with the takeover of two mid-sized lenders — Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank — by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp, or FDIC, as depositors yanked billions of dollars from them after fearing for their solvency.

On Friday, Silicon Valley filed for bankruptcy protection despite the rescue by FDIC. A third bank, First Republic, is also in trouble despite receiving a \$30 billion cash infusion from a consortium of banks.

The study released on Friday showed that the banks with troubled balanced sheets had an exposure to \$300 billion worth of insured deposits.

"The losses to the deposit insurance fund would total approximately \$10 billion," the economists said. "If the FDIC shut these banks following a run, there would be no funds left for the remaining uninsured depositors. In other words, the decision [by depositors] to run would have been a rational one."

The White House announced on Friday that President Joe Biden intended to seek approval from Congress to expand the FDIC's authority to fine executives responsible for the failure of the banks under their control.

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Former US President Donald Trump Returns to Facebook for First Post Since 2021

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Friday published his first post on Facebook (banned in Russia) since being removed from the platform after the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot.

"I'M BACK!" Trump said in a post.

Last month, Facebook reinstated Trump's account after a two-year suspension. Trump's account was restored due to the risk of Trump's online activity to public safety receding, the company said.

However, Trump now faces heightened penalties for violations on the platform, Facebook also said.

Trump's last post prior to suspension, made on January 6, urged demonstrators at the US Capitol to "remain peaceful" and respect law enforcement.

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Progress Has Been Made on Russian Fertilizer Exports, Yet Impediments Remain - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes it has made 'meaningful progress' in terms of Russian fertilizers exports but impediments remain in the payment systems, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Friday.

"We have made meaningful progress. But impediments remain, notably with regard to payment systems. There is more to do and our efforts to overcome them will continue unabated," Griffiths told the Security Council members.

Today's briefing was requested by France and Ecuador. The topic of the briefing is the humanitarian situation of Ukraine.

The grain deal was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey between Russia and Ukraine in July 2022 to facilitate exports of grain and fertilizer from Black Sea ports amid hostilities. It was renewed for 120 days in November 2022 and was supposed to automatically renew for another 120 days on March 18 unless either of the signatories objected.

Moscow has repeatedly raised concerns that the part of the deal concerning Russian exports on a par with Ukraine was not duly fulfilled. Russia and the United Nations held talks in Geneva on Monday to discuss the deal's extension. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said after the talks that Russia did not object to the extension as long as it was for 60 days and further extension would depend on real progress in lifting restrictions on the country's agricultural exports.

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Biden Discusses Cooperation on Ukraine, Other Issues With Irish Taoiseach - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar discussed continuing support for Ukraine and cooperation on other global issues during a meeting in Washington, the White House said on Friday.

"[Biden and Varadkar] discussed their countries' shared commitment to continue supporting Ukraine," the White House said in a statement. "They also talked about their cooperation on a range of other global issues."

Biden praised Ireland's decision to host approximately 80,000 people who have fled the conflict in Ukraine, the statement said.

Biden and Varadkar also reaffirmed their support for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and welcomed the Windsor Framework as an important step in preserving the deal's peace dividend, the statement said.

Additionally, the two leaders discussed trade and investment between the United States and Ireland, as well as steps to strengthen their economic resilience, the statement said.

The meeting occurred on St. Patrick's Day, a holiday widely celebrated in Ireland and Irish-American communities.

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Blinken, Borrell Discuss Serbia-Kosovo Normalizing Relations - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell discussed their support for normalizing ties between Serbia and Kosovo as well as the importance of the so-called Western Balkan nations' accession to the European Union, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"The Secretary and High Representative discussed their strong support for normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo in the run-up to the upcoming leaders' meeting in... Macedonia," Price said. "They also noted the importance of advancing merited EU accession of countries throughout the Western Balkans and the enduring strength of transatlantic unity in support of Ukraine."

On March 18, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo leader Albin Kurti are scheduled to meet in Macedonia with the participation of Borrell and EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajcak.

The leaders will discuss issues regarding the political settlement between the two sides, involving the program for the implementation of the European-US plan for a settlement in Kosovo and Metohija.

On February 27, Borrell published the full text of the European Union's proposal that contains

clauses on mutual recognition of documents and state symbols and Belgrade's consent not to prevent Pristina from joining international organizations.

The EU and US leaders insist that Kosovo Albanian authorities form a Community of Serb Municipalities complete with autonomy rights - in accordance with the 2013 Brussels Agreement.

US Ambassador to Kosovo Jeffrey Hovenier has said there is no better plan than the European Union's proposal for a Serbia-Kosovo settlement, which Washington fully supports.

However, Vucic has insisted that Serbia has fulfilled its part of the Brussels Agreement, while Kosovo, the independence of which Belgrade has never recognized, only started to develop the charter of the Community of Serbian Municipalities and then suspended the process.

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US Approves \$268M In Possible Sale of 76 Assault Amphibious Vehicles to Greece - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has approved a possible \$268 million sale of 76 assault amphibious vehicles (AAVs) and related equipment to Greece, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Greece of Amphibious Vehicles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$268 million," DSCA said in a press release.

The Greek government has requested to buy 63 AAVs of the personnel variant, nine AAVs of the command variant and four AAVs of the recovery variant, the release said.

The request also includes 63 50-caliber machine guns and MK-19 grenade launchers, thermal sighting systems as well as other equipment and training, the release added.

In February, US State Secretary Antony Blinken said that Washington and Athens have been strengthening their relations since 2021 and Greece has become a "strategic hub" in the region for expanding US military units and for those of NATO allies.

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Biden Plans to Host India's Modi for State Dinner in US This Summer - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden intends to host Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a state dinner in Washington later this year, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

Biden plans to hold a state dinner with Modi this summer, potentially in June, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter.

Modi would be the third foreign leader Biden hosts at the White House for a state dinner, preceded by French President Emmanuel Macron and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

India will host the Group of Twenty (G20) summit in September and the conflict in Ukraine will be a central issue of discussion. It is unclear whether Russian President Vladimir Putin will attend the summit.

Modi's visit to the United States is a sign of deepening US-India relations as Washington seeks to advance its interests and influence in the Indo-Pacific region as a counter to China, the report said.

Biden may also meet with Modi ahead of the state dinner during the summit of the so-called Quad group of countries in Australia in May, the report added.

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### Gold Hits 11-Month High, Nears \$2,000 Per Ounce Amid US Banking Crisis

NEW YORK, March 17 (Sputnik) - Gold prices hit 11-month highs on Friday, breaking from the clutches of mid-\$1,900 per ounce to head for bullion bulls' long-term target of \$2,000, as the US banking crisis drives more investors toward safe havens.

"The return of bank angst is sending gold prices sharply higher," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Many gold investors are looking at the short-term macro risks and it seems that a wide range of expectations should mostly be positive for bullion."

Gold rallied as oil prices fell 13% on the week for one of their worst weekly losses since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic three years ago. Stock prices on Wall Street were also weaker.

Benchmark April gold futures on New York's Comex settled at \$1,973.50 an ounce, up \$50.50, or 2.6%, on the day. For the week, April gold was up by \$106.30, or 5.7%. Friday's session high was \$1,980.50, a peak not seen in Comex gold since its \$1,985.10 high registered on April 19, 2022.

The spot price of bullion, more closely followed than futures by some traders, was at \$1,973.92 by 1:55 p.m. ET (17:55 GMT), up \$54.37 or 2.8% on the day. The session high for spot gold was \$1,975.24, also marking an 11-month peak.

Spot gold's charts indicated that a test of the \$2,000 level was possible so long as the current momentum holds, chartist Sunil Kumar Dixit said.

"Today's insane rally in gold shows that more people are turning to gold as a safe haven and store for value as the banking credit crisis continues to grow and spread," Dixit, chief technical strategist at SKCharting, said. "From this point on, so long as prices sustain above \$1,960, we can witness a continuation of the momentum reaching for the psychological barrier of \$2,000."

The last time spot gold peaked at above \$2,000 was in March 2022 when it hit \$2,070.29, almost matching its record high of 2,072.90 from August 2020.

Gold prices have been on a tear since the US banking crisis erupted a week ago with the takeover of two mid-sized lenders - Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank - by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp as depositors yanked billions of dollars from them after fearing for their solvency. Silicon Valley Bank filed for bankruptcy protection over the past 24 hours. A third bank, First Republic, is also in trouble despite receiving a \$30 billion cash infusion from a

consortium of banks.

Elsewhere, the banking crisis has spread to Europe, with Credit Suisse Group, one of the world's preeminent names in investment banking, seeking help from Switzerland's central bank.

Persistent interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve have also exacerbated fears that the US economy could end up in a deep recession.

Whichever way the US central bank leans now could be a boon for gold, senior market analyst Ed Moya said.

"If the Fed is done with rate hikes, that should be bullish for gold as it puts a short-term cap on the dollar," Moya said. "If inflation proves to be stickier and the Fed has to resume tightening, that would deliver a major blow to the economy and trigger many safe-haven flows for gold."

Gold could hover at around \$1,950 leading up to the Fed's next rate decision on March 22 and Wall Street might have a better handle after that on how bad a recession the United States may be facing. Moya said.

"Safe-haven flows into gold should be steady as the economy enters a recession," he added.

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US Law Enforcement Prepare for Possible Indictment of Trump - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Different US law enforcement and security agencies are preparing for a possible indictment of former President Donald Trump, NBC News reported on Friday.

The indictment could happen next week, the report said, citing five senior officials familiar with the matter.

The New York Police Department, the US Secret Service, the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office are taking preliminary measures, the report said.

The law enforcement and security agencies are assessing possible security plans inside and near the Manhattan Criminal Court, the report added.

Trump may be charged in connection with alleged payments to pornography actress Stormy Daniels, but officials have said no charges have so far been filed and all planning is preliminary at this time.

US prosecutors began an investigation when Trump's former personal attorney Michael Cohen said he paid Daniels \$130,000 before the 2016 presidential election to buy her silence about an alleged sexual encounter with Trump years before, according to the report.

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US Air Carriers Complain About Foreign Rivals Being Able to Fly Over Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US airlines have complained to the Biden administration and Congress that they are losing profit on routes to Asia because they cannot fly over Russia as a result of sanctions on the country imposed by the collective West, the New York Times reported on Friday.

Due to the inability to fly the so-called polar routes to Asia, US airlines are losing profits and passengers, struggling to find the most profitable routes in the changed conditions, the report said.

A range of carriers, including Air India, Emirates and China Eastern Airlines, are having an unfair advantage by being able to fly the shortest and more fuel-efficient routes, the report said, citing an industry lobbying group Airlines for America presentation to Congress.

Foreign airlines using Russian airspace on flights to and from the United States are gaining a significant competitive advantage over US carriers in major markets, including China and India, the report cited the presentation as saying.

Airlines for America estimates that US air carriers lose about \$2 billion per year as a result of the situation brought about by Western sanctions on Russia.

The US airlines have asked the Biden administration and Congress to make foreign carriers fly the same routes, the report also said.

According to Airlines for America spokeswoman Marli Collier, the lobbying group wants the Biden administration to take action to ensure that foreign carriers overflying Russia do not depart, land or transit through US airports, the report added.

Russian airspace became inaccessible to airlines from a number of countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and the EU member states after they imposed a ban on flights of Russian air carriers over their territory.

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US Welcomes Erdogan Announcement on Finland NATO Application - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's announcement to start the ratification process for Finland's accession to NATO, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The United States welcomes President Erdogan's announcement that he will send Finland's NATO accession protocols to the Turkish Parliament and looks forward to the prompt conclusion of that process," Sullivan said in a statement. "We encourage Turkey to quickly ratify Sweden's accession protocols as well.

Sullivan said the United States is also calling on Hungary to conclude its ratification process for both Finland and Sweden without delay.

"Sweden and Finland are both strong, capable partners that share NATO's values and will strengthen the alliance and contribute to European security," he said. "The United States believes that both countries should become members of NATO as soon as possible."

Earlier on Friday, Erdogan said the Turkish parliament had started the ratification process of Finland's NATO membership. As for Sweden's application to NATO, Ankara is still not ready to

give its approval, Erdogan added.

Finland and Sweden applied to become NATO members last May, three months after Russia started its special military operation in Ukraine. By the end of 2022, 28 out of 30 NATO member states ratified the applications with the exception of Hungary and Turkey.

Ankara said it was delaying its approval due to the relations Sweden and Finland have with entities affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Turkey views as a terrorist organization.

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ICC Independent Body of Secretariat, UN Has No Comments on Its Actions - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The International Criminal Court (ICC) is an independent body and the United Nations does not comment on their actions, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The International Criminal Court is independent of the Secretariat. We do not comment on their actions," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Friday, the ICC issued warrants to arrest Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, who is Russia's commissioner for children's rights.

The ICC said the arrest warrants were issued over the Russian officials' alleged responsibility for the war crime of unlawful deportation of children and that of unlawful transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the ICC warrants to arrest Putin and Lvova-Belova are legally null and void as Russia is not a party to the Rome Statute and has no obligations under it nor does it cooperate with the ICC.

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Oil Markets Headed for One of Worst Weeks Since Pandemic Amid Festering Banking Crisis

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Crude prices are headed for one of their worst weekly losses since the coronavirus pandemic, as a festering crisis in US banking creates fears about liquidity in the financial system to fund oil trades.

The US West Texas Intermediate and the London Brent crude benchmarks both showed double-digit losses for the week as trading entered late afternoon hours on Friday. The two benchmarks lost as much as 20% back-to-back during the first two weeks of April 2020 during the height of the demand destruction brought on by the COVID-19 measures.

The oil markets' slump this time, however, has little to do with supply-demand but is revolving more around the crisis of confidence in banks, which provide the liquidity for trading in crude and all other commodities. Persistent interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve have also led to

fears that the US economy could end up in a deep recession.

"Crude prices remain heavy as banking turmoil won't be going away anytime soon and over fears that the Fed's rate hiking cycle is starting to take down the economy," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate was down \$3, or 4.4%, to \$65.35 per barrel by 11:30 am ET (15:30 GMT). For the week, the US crude benchmark was down more than 15%. The last time it lost more than that in a week was during the week to April 10, when it fell almost 20%.

The London-traded Brent was down \$3.20, or 4.3%, to \$71.50 - down 13% on the week.

Moya said energy traders are not sure what could be a catalyst to raise oil prices given all the doom and gloom happening with short-term crude demand outlooks.

"It seems that the oil bump that we got earlier in the month from China's reopening was premature," he said. "Clearly China's recovery still needs more support. The Fed's forecasts will closely be watched as that will signal if we are at a greater risk of a policy mistake. For now oil will remain heavy as traders try to figure out what type of recession policymakers will trigger in the United States."

The US banking crisis began after two mid-sized lenders - Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank - were rescued by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp last week as depositors withheld billions of dollars after fears spread about their solvency. SVB eventually filed for bankruptcy protection. A third bank, First Republic, is also in trouble despite receiving a \$30 billion cash infusion from a consortium of banks.

The banking crisis has spread to Europe, with Credit Suisse, one of the preeminent names in global investment banking, having to seek help from Switzerland's central bank.

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Guterres Will Speak to 'Whomever He Needs To' in Advancing UN Issues - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will speak to whomever he needs to in order to advance, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, in order to advance issues on his agenda, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The Secretary General will speak to whomever he needs to speak to advance the issues that are on their desk," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Friday.

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UNGA President Remains Willing to Speak With Putin 'Should He Want That' - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - UN General Assembly President Czaba Korosi is still willing to meet and talk with Russian President Putin if the later wants that despite the

International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant issued against him, spokesperson Polina Kubiak said on Friday.

"President Korosi would have and, I think, remains willing to speak to President Putin, should he want that," Kubiak said.

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Serbia Women Basketball Coaches to Visit US as Part of State Dept Efforts to Empower Girls

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Serbia's junior women basketball coaches will visit the United States to engage with their US counterparts and civil society as part of the US government's broader efforts to empower women and girls through sports, the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) said in a statement on Friday.

"[F]ourteen club and federation basketball coaches from Serbia will travel to Louisville, Kentucky and Dallas, Texas from March 21 - April 4 to engage with their American counterparts, civil society, the University of Louisville, and the Women's Basketball Coaches Association Conference, which is hosted on the margins of the NCAA Women's Final Four," the statement said.

During the visit, the Serbian coaches will participate in training and roundtable discussions on women's and girls' civil rights in the United States, the statement said.

The ECA chose the timeframe to coincide with "March Madness" - the annual collegiate basketball tournament that crowns a national champion in the United States, the statement said.

The US government considers sports diplomacy to be a useful tool that enables it to communicate with other peoples beyond the reaches of government-to-government relations, the statement added.

As part of its current sports diplomacy efforts, the State Department brings non-elite youth athletes, their coaches and administrators from different countries to the United States and pairs them with their US counterparts, on the court and in the community, according to the statement.

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Biden Seeks Congressional Approval for FDIC to Fine Executives of Failed US Banks

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden plans to seek approval from Congress to expand the authority of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to fine executives responsible for the failure of the banks under their control, the White House said on Friday.

"Under current law, the FDIC may seek monetary penalties from bank executives who 'recklessly' engage in a pattern of 'unsafe or unsound' practices, regardless of whether that bank enters receivership," the White House said in a statement. "To help the agency fully

address executive misconduct, Congress should expand the FDIC's authority to seek fines from negligent executives of failed banks when their actions contribute to the failure of their firms."

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#### US Consumer Sentiment Down First Time in 4 Months as Banking Crisis Rocks Markets

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - US consumer sentiment fell month-on-month for the first time since December and could worsen as fears of inflation and a crisis of confidence in the country's banks rock financial markets, the University of Michigan said Friday in its closely-followed consumer sentiment poll.

The so-called Umich indexes on consumer sentiment, economic conditions and consumer expectations each fell between 3.0 and 3.5 points, with interviews of Americans polled by the university suggesting growing concerns over price pressures and the economy even before the banking crisis broke out last week.

Consumer sentiment for March itself was down 5% from February, in the first decline of its kind in four months, Umich Surveys of Consumers Director Joanne Hsu said.

"Sentiment declines were concentrated among lower-income, less-educated, and younger consumers, as well as consumers with the top tertile of stock holdings," Hsu said in her polling report. "Overall, all components of the index worsened relatively evenly, primarily on the basis of persistently high prices, creating downward momentum for sentiment leading into the financial turmoil that began last week."

Two mid-sized US lenders — Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank — had to be rescued by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp last week as depositors yanked billions of dollars from them after fearing about their solvency. SVB eventually filed for bankruptcy protection over the past 24 hours. A third US bank, First Republic, is also in trouble despite receiving a \$30 billion cash infusion from a consortium of banks.

Elsewhere, the US banking crisis has spread to Europe, with Credit Suisse, one of the preeminent names in global investment banking, having to seek help from Switzerland's central bank.

And while consumer sentiment was still 7% above year-ago levels, long-run inflation expectations remain elevated, Hsu said.

"With ongoing turbulence in the financial sector and uncertainty over the Fed's possible policy response, inflation expectations are likely to be volatile in the months ahead," she added.

In a bid to control surging prices, the Fed, or Federal Reserve, has added 475 basis points to interest rates since March via eight rate hikes.

Prior to the Fed's rate hikes, interest rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The Fed is expected to add another 25 basis points in a rate decision due on March 22.

Economists have said in recent days that while the central bank has brought inflation down from a four-decade high of 9% in June to 6% in February with its rate hikes, it has also raised the cost of funds immensely for some banks, jeopardizing their finances. The Fed has, however,

given no signs of retreating from its rate hikes to get inflation back to its annual target of 2%.

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Blinken Announces Over \$140Mln in Humanitarian Aid,\$31Mln in Development Aid for Venezuela

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik ) - The United States has allocated over \$140 million in humanitarian aid and \$31 million in development assistance for Venezuela, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Friday.

"The United States announced today more than \$140 million in additional humanitarian assistance and more than \$31 million in development assistance to respond to the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans in Venezuela, Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and their generous host communities across the region," Blinken said. "This assistance includes more than \$56 million through the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and more than \$115million through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)."

Blinken underscored that Washington works with trusted organizations to deliver funds and to ensure they are not acquired by the government.

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Russia to Raise US Invasion of Iraq Under False Pretext at UNSC Meeting March 20 - Source

UNITED NATIONS, March 17 (Sputnik) - The Russian mission to the United Nations will raise the issue of the United States' invasion of Iraq under false pretext in 2003 during consultations on the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) on March 20, a source told Sputnik on Friday.

"As you know, March 20th marks 20 years since the invasion of Iraq by the United States under false WMD [weapons of mass destruction] allegations," the source said. "The delegation intends to raise this issue under an AOB [any other business] at the consultations on UNITAMS on Tuesday."

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Trudeau Defends 'Integrity' of Election Interference Rapporteur Linked to His Family

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau defended the integrity of the appointed rapporteur on alleged Chinese electoral interference David Johnston who has links to his family.

On Wednesday, Trudeau appointed former Governor General David Johnston as special rapporteur on the alleged Chinese interference in the Canadian elections of 2019 and 2021.

The Prime Minister's decision has raised many questions amongst opposition parties and civil society around Johnston's integrity, as the rapporteur has links with Trudeau's family and is a member of the Pierre Trudeau Foundation.

"David Johnston has served this country in many many different ways through a long and unimpeachable career. He served as governor general, he has served in many capacities and the integrity and the character that he has demonstrated every step of the way, is absolutely unimpeachable," Trudeau said during a press conference.

The Prime Minister said there's no better option than Johnston for the role of rapporteur since he's consistently "put the country first", and Canadians' interests are at the core of his work.

Trudeau rejected what he labeled as "unfounded partisan attacks" on Johnston from the Conservative party and their leader Pierre Poilievre, noting they're only trying to discredit him.

Additionally, Trudeau assured Canadians that attempted interference by China in the outcomes of the 2019 and 2021 failed.

"That's something Canadians can be absolutely reassured by," Trudeau said.

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Latest Twitter File Reveals US Government Ties to COVID-19 Censorship Online - Taibbi

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The US government helped drive an effort to censor COVID-19 information online in coordination with Big Tech companies and other third-party entities, journalist Matt Taibbi said on Friday in the latest release of the so-called Twitter Files.

The Virality Project was a cross-platform effort to monitor social media posts for alleged disinformation related to COVID-19, driven by federal agencies, state-funded non-governmental organizations and Stanford University, Taibbi said.

The project was first pitched to Twitter by Stanford in February 2021, shortly after US President Joe Biden took office, Taibbi said.

"We've since learned the Virality Project in 2021 worked with government to launch a pan-industry monitoring plan for COVID-related content," Taibbi said in a Twitter thread.

"Government, academia and an oligopoly of would-be corporate competitors organized quickly behind a secret, unified effort to control political messaging."

The Virality Project reviewed content on a mass scale for sites including Twitter, Google, Medium and TikTok, Taibbi said. The project knowingly targeted true material and legitimate political opinion, while often being factually wrong itself, he said.

Taibbi noted that Twitter's policy on COVID-19 misinformation through July 2020 required a story be "demonstrably false" or an "assertion of fact" to be actioned. However, the Virality Project asserted that true stories that could "fuel hesitancy" should be considered misinformation, he said.

Stories of "true vaccine side effects" or countries banning certain vaccines could be considered misinformation under the Virality Project's guidance, Taibbi said, citing an email from the project to Twitter.

"The Virality Project was specifically not based on 'assertions of fact,' but public submission to authority, acceptance of narrative, and pronouncements by figures like [former chief presidential medical advisor] Anthony Fauci," Taibbi said.

On April 26, 2022, the Virality Project issued a report calling for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to establish a center focused on mis- and disinformation. The next day, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced the creation of a Disinformation Governance Board, which was later dissolved following widespread criticism of the board and its chief, Nina Jankowitz.

The Virality Project's federal partners also included the Office of the Surgeon General and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Taibbi said.

The latest Twitter File release comes following testimony by Taibbi to Congress last week on collusion between Twitter and the federal government on moderation decisions. Taibbi dubbed the network of tech companies, government agencies and private organizations involved in moderating online content the "Censorship-Industrial Complex."

The network would flag posts deemed misinformation, such as those related to COVID-19 origins or the Hunter Biden laptop story. The Twitter Files have also revealed cooperation between Twitter and the US military to boost psychological operations accounts.

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#### Hunter Biden Countersues Computer Repair Shop Owner - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, has filed a countersuit against the owner of the computer repair shop in Delaware who provided information from Biden's abandoned laptop about potential influence on the US elections and improper business dealings, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

Biden filed the suit in the US District Court in Delaware, saying the store owner, John Paul Mac Isaac, had no legal right to copy and distribute his private information, the report said.

Biden accused Mac Isaac and other persons of six counts of invasion of privacy, including conspiracy to obtain and distribute the private information, the report said.

As a result of Mac Isaac's unlawful agreement and his conspiracy with others, Biden's personal data was made available to third parties and then ultimately to the public at large, which is highly offensive, causing harm to Biden and his reputation, the report cited the suit as saying.

The suit argues that the object of allegedly invading Biden's privacy and disseminating his data was not for any legitimate purpose but to cause harm and embarrassment, the report said.

Mac Isaac filed a lawsuit last year and amended it several times. He said that Hunter Biden defamed him by stating that he received access to the laptop's data illegally. The suit also targeted corporate-owned media outlets like CNN and Politico as well as the Joe Biden campaign.

The suit insists on a trial by jury and urges the court to oblige Mac Isaac and others to return any materials belonging to the president's son.

Hunter Biden has been the subject of scrutiny since the release of materials from a laptop abandoned by him at Mac Isaac's computer repair shop in Delaware. The materials, which were suppressed by social media companies ahead of the 2020 US presidential election, indicated potential influence peddling and improper foreign business dealings by the Biden family.

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White House Says Won't Speculate About China's Intention for Xi's Trip to Moscow

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday that he will not speculate about China's intention for President Xi Jinping's upcoming trip to Moscow, but that it may be to lay the groundwork for a peace proposal on the Ukraine conflict.

"It would be irresponsible for me to try to speculate what exactly China's motives are here going into this particular meeting," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We just know that there's a possibility they might raise this idea of a ceasefire and try to couch themselves as peacemakers."

Xi will visit Moscow from March 20-22 to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In addition to the Ukraine conflict, the two leaders are expected to discuss issues of military and technical cooperation, the Kremlin said on Friday.

The United States has dismissed Chinese calls for a ceasefire or peace talks in the Ukraine conflict, claiming that peace at this time would put Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a distinct disadvantage during negotiations.

The US is also working to set up talks between Xi and US President Joe Biden in the near future, Kirby said.

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US to Announce Another Drawdown of Military Aid for Ukraine 'Very Soon' - Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will announce "very soon" another drawdown of military assistance for Ukraine, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"I think you're gonna see us with another PA [presidential drawdown authority for Ukraine] announcement here very, very soon," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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YouTube Lifts Restrictions on Trump's Channel – Company

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) – YouTube announced Friday that it had lifted restrictions on former US President Donald Trump's channel.

“Starting today, the Donald J. Trump channel is no longer restricted and can upload new content. We carefully evaluated the continued risk of real-world violence, while balancing the chance for voters to hear equally from major national candidates in the run up to an election,” according to the YouTubeInsider Twitter account.

It added that “this channel will continue to be subject to our policies, just like any other channel on YouTube.”

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US Will Work to Set Up Talks Between Biden, Xi - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will work to set up talks between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in the near future, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"The president has said he wants to talk to President Xi in the near future. We will work to set that up, but to my knowledge, there's been no outreach to the Chinese to work on the logistics," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Xi is set to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow next week, where the two presidents are expected to discuss the conflict in Ukraine and other issues of mutual interest.

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China's Ukraine Peace Plan Would Put Zelenskyy at 'Distinct Disadvantage' - White House

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - China's calls for a ceasefire and peace talks regarding the Ukraine conflict would put Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a disadvantage at the negotiating table if implemented now, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

“The reason why the rest of the world is not calling for [an end to fighting] right now, is because it would effectively ratify Russia's geographic gains inside Ukraine, and it would put Mr. Zelenskyy at a distinct disadvantage,” Kirby said during a press briefing.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to visit Moscow from March 20-22 at the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two leaders are expected to discuss the conflict in

Ukraine among other topics of joint interest, the Kremlin said.