

5/4/23 Thursday

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Western Alliance Rejects 'Shameful' Report It's Looking to Sell Amid US Banking Crisis

Reports that the Arizona-based bank was exploring a potential sale arose earlier Thursday after insiders leaked to US media that the firm had hired advisers to explore its options in selling. Western Alliance denied on Thursday the “shameful and irresponsible” US [report](#) that it was considering a potential sale amid a raging banking crisis that has rattled the financial sector. Claims that Western Alliance was weighing its options came not long after shares of the regional bank fell by 36% (bringing shares down 68% for the year) and contributed to a trade of \$19 per share.

“There is not a single element of the article that is true. Western Alliance is not exploring a sale, nor has it hired an advisor to explore strategic options. It is shameful and irresponsible that the Financial Times has allowed itself to be used as an instrument of short sellers and as a conduit for spreading false narratives about a financially sound and profitable bank,” a spokesperson told an American [news](#) outlet in an email.

The bank, which has \$65 billion in assets, said they are presently exploring legal options against the offending outlet. The since-rejected report earlier caused the Dow Jones Industrial Index to fall 400 points, or 1.2%, and the S&P 500 to tumble 0.9%.

The report came after Kenneth A. Vecchione, Western Alliance’s chief executive officer, had attempted to reassure investors that Alliance’s deposit levels had started climbing in recent weeks.

Investor fears have yet to be calmed even after the First Republic Bank was acquired by JPMorgan Chase earlier this week after an auction by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). First Republic’s failure came as a result of a dominion effect that started with the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, which marked the second largest bank failure in US history.

Western [Alliance](#) on Wednesday said total deposits were \$48.8 billion as of Tuesday, up from \$48.2 billion on Monday.

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has assured the public that the American banking system remains “strong and resilient” but admitted on Wednesday that the US may be facing a potential recession. Moments after news broke that the Fed would be conducting its tenth interest rate hike, Powell underscored that officials would “continue to closely monitor” that banking crisis.

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Astronomers Capture Rarely-Seen Moment of Dying Star Eating Jupiter-Sized Planet

Astronomers say that similar to the demise of ZTF SLRN-2020, the Earth too will face the same fatal fate - however, the end won't be claiming civilization for another roughly 5 billion years. Newly published findings revealed the moment in which astronomers witnessed the stunning celestial act of a dying star being completely engulfed by a nearby planet thousands of light-years away.

Officials spotted the cosmic act in May of 2020 during observations in the constellation Aquila, which sits about 12,000 light-years away. Researchers had been investigating stellar mergers when they came upon the find.

"Planets with short orbital periods (roughly under 10 days) are common around stars like the sun. Stars expand as they evolve and thus we expect their close planetary companions to be engulfed, possibly powering luminous mass ejections from the host star," write the study authors, who are from MIT, Harvard University, and Caltech.

"However, this phase has never been directly observed. Here we report observations of ZTF SLRN-2020, a short-lived optical outburst in the Galactic disk accompanied by bright and long-lived infrared emission."

As the star was dying, it became 100 times brighter than it was during an earlier span of just 10 days before eventually slowly fading. The planet that was engulfed by the dying star is believed to have been a hot, Jupiter-sized planet which either spiraled too close to the dying star, or was pulled in by its atmosphere.

"We were seeing the end-stage of the swallowing," says lead author Kishalay De, of a separate study by [MIT](#). De explains that his attention was first brought to the phenomenon by the star's fast-growing light. His discovery was an accident as he was initially watching for signs of eruptions of binary star systems.

"What we were missing was catching the star in the act, where you have a planet undergoing this fate in real-time. That's what makes this discovery really exciting."

"We are seeing the future of the Earth," De adds. "If some other civilization was observing us from 10,000 light-years away while the sun was engulfing the Earth, they would see the sun suddenly brighten as it ejects some material, then form dust around it, before settling back to what it was."

Astrophysicist Enrico Ramirez-Ruiz, who was not involved in the study, congratulated the study as "groundbreaking" but argued it may not be relevant to understanding Earth's potential fate.

"It continues to be an open question as to whether the Earth could be engulfed or not based on its current orbital position," said [Ramirez-Ruiz](#), a professor at the University of California Santa Cruz.

But Ramirez-Ruiz says he believes the technique could help scientists understand the demographics of planetary engulfment and the "ultimate fate of planets around other solar systems."

The study was published Wednesday in the journal [Nature](#).

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The Carlson-After-Fox Show - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

Tucker Carlson was handed the pink slip from his job at the Fox network as of last week, just when he was at the height of his fame at the broadcaster. The conservative talk show host's firing came as a shock, and while the media speculates on why he was fired, the network has yet to offer an explanation.

A Thursday report has revealed that former Fox News host Tucker Carlson is contemplating a new job: hosting an alternative debate for Republican candidates of the 2024 presidential election.

US media reported that hosting such a debate would require Carlson to sacrifice millions of dollars from his former employer, which is reportedly contractually obligated to pay out the remainder of his contract. It's said Carlson's contract ran through 2024.

Fox News is hosting the first official GOP debate, which former President Donald [Trump](#) has said he would not attend because he is ahead in the polls, and as such he shouldn't bother debating. Carlson reportedly discussed the idea of an alternative debate with Trump, who is said to be interested in the idea.

Carlson's next endeavor presently remains uncertain; however, he has reportedly been approached by several interested parties looking to add his name to their lineup of news hosts. But whatever route Carlson ventures down, how much political influence he's allowed to have will play a major role in his final decision.

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US Adds 253,000 Jobs in April, Unemployment Rate at 3.4%

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US employers added 253,000 jobs in April, way above economists' expectations, while the jobless rate moved a notch lower to 3.4% from a previous 3.5%, according to Labor Department data on Friday that conceivably made it harder for the Federal Reserve to stop raising interest rates.

Economists polled by US media had expected a jobs growth of just around 180,000 for April, from a previously published 263,000 for March which the Labor Department now revised down to just 165,000. Fed officials have said employment and wage growth have to cool significantly to effectively restrain the worst inflation the United States has encountered in four decades.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) hit 40-year highs in June 2022, expanding at an annual rate of 9.1%. Since then, it has slowed, growing at just 5% per annum in March, for its slowest expansion since October 2021. The Fed's favorite price indicator, the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index, grew by just 4.2% in March. Even so, that was more than double the Fed's 2% tolerance for inflation annually.

The Fed, in response to runaway inflation since the end of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2022, has raised interest rates by 10 times, adding a total of 5% to the previous 0.25%. Until Friday's overwhelmingly strong jobs data for April, there had been speculation that the central

bank could pause on rate hikes from June onwards.

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UN is Victim to Global Crisis, But Still Embodies Multilateralism - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - The UN takes a loss from the current geopolitical crisis but it undoubtedly represents individual countries worldwide through its Charter and embodies multilateralism, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told Sputnik.

"The UN is to some extent a victim of the kind of global crisis in international relations that we are witnessing today. But the fact that we live in a UN-centric model of the world, and the UN, through its Charter, embodies this multilateralism, is something we do not doubt," Nebenzia said.

Nebenzia recalled the words of former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius who said that the world we have today has more and more multipolarity, but less and less multilateralism.

The ambassador also said there is "false multilateralism" in which countries create non-inclusive formats, make decisions, and then try to apply them universally onto everyone.

Russia took over the rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council for the month of April.

Last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who was at the UN presiding over Security Council meetings, discussed with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres the importance of further strengthening the central coordinating role of the UN in global politics and promoting "true" multilateralism based on fundamental international legal norms, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Lavrov during remarks at the UN said a multilateral approach is required to resolve the crisis in the Middle East instead of what he called the "destructive" one-sided actions of the US and EU.

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Nebenzia Says UN Must Be Preserved No Matter How Much It Changes

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The United Nations should be saved regardless of how it got altered since the 1990s, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told Sputnik.

"Earlier, in the 1990s, it seems to me, there was more multilateralism in the sense that the process of agreeing on decisions was of a collective nature. Now the situation has changed. There are attempts to blur the interstate foundations of the UN - because the UN is an interstate organization, not an NGO," Nebenzia said. "But I think that no matter the changes, we must

preserve the organization."

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Nebenzia Says US Dollar Cannot Be Reliable Global Currency if Used as Coercive Measure

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - The world community cannot have the American dollar as the only currency because the US uses it as a weapon, Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia told Sputnik.

"The process of switching to local currencies in mutual settlements reflects the desire of countries to get rid of dollar dependence. Especially since you heard from the minister [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov] at a press conference that the Americans said that the dollar is the common property of the whole world, and then they took and turned off the switch, introducing a variety of coercive measures not only against us," Nebenzia said. "Therefore, of course, under these conditions we cannot rely on the dollar as a world currency."

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US Will Never Agree to Relocate UN Headquarters and Lose Host Country Powers - Nebenzia

(Updates with additional info, background in paras 3-7)

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US will never agree to relocating the UN because it would lose the opportunity to abuse host country privileges and a significant amount of money, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told Sputnik.

"First, to do this, the consent of at least two-thirds of the UN member states is required. Due to a number of circumstances, it is very difficult to achieve such a number of those who support the relocation of the headquarters," Nebenzia said. "Besides, the Americans themselves will never agree to this, because for them it is both prestige, and, particularly, the opportunity to abuse their duties as the host country of the organization, as well as a lot of money."

Nebenzia said New York, according to the most conservative estimates, receives some \$5 billion a year from the fact that the headquarters is located there and from the fact that diplomats from 193 countries live here.

The Russian presidency of the United Nations Security Council was overshadowed by delays in the issuance of visas to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his press pool by the United States, which is home to the permanent UN headquarters. This led the top Russian diplomat to suggest that the UN office be moved elsewhere from New York.

"During my previous stay here on a long business trip - it was the second half of the 1990s, this topic was actively discussed. Many countries - not even just us- at that moment demanded from the Americans that they fulfill the duties of the host country and talked about whether we should move the organization to another place," Nebenzia said.

Nebenizia said he remembers how the deputy envoy of the US mission at that time, responding to these calls, said he would welcome going to the New York Pier to wave at delegations to the UN leaving from New York to Europe.

Moscow slammed Washington's decision not to issue visas to the Russian reporters who were supposed to accompany Lavrov to the UN Security Council, adding that the United States breached its pledges to protect freedom of speech.

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US Will Never Agree to Relocate UN Headquarters and Give Up Host Country Powers - Nebenizia

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Sullivan Says He Will Be in Saudi Arabia This Weekend to Meet Saudi Leaders

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said he will be in Saudi Arabia this weekend to meet with Saudi leaders.

"This weekend, I'll be in Saudi Arabia, for meetings with its leadership," Sullivan said during remarks at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on Thursday.

The war in Yemen will be a significant topic of conversation during the visit, Sullivan added.

Sullivan further said that his UAE and Indian counterparts will come to Saudi Arabia as well for meetings so that they can discuss new areas of cooperation between New Delhi and the Gulf as well as the United States in the rest of the region, fueled in part by the Comprehensive Economic Partnership signed last year between India and the UAE.

According to US media, Sullivan will meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Sullivan's meeting will be the first between the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and India, and discussions are set to cover issues such as diversifying supply chains and investments in strategic infrastructure projects, including ports, rail, and minerals, said the report.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will follow Sullivan's visit later in June when he will visit Saudi Arabia for a meeting of the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State (a terrorist group

banned in Russia), the report added.

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Accusing Russia of Abusing UNSC Presidency Violated Every Conceivable Rule - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - The attempts to accuse Russia of abusing its presidency at the UN Security Council violated every conceivable rule, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told Sputnik.

"The main thing is that there were no incidents during [Russia's UNSC] presidency, despite ridiculous attempts of some countries to accuse us that we can abuse the presidency and that someone else should preside instead of us, because, they say, Russia does not deserve to chair the Security Council," Nebenzia said. "It goes against every conceivable rule."

Most importantly, Nebenzia added, no one questioned either the British or the American presidencies in October and November 2003 after the coalition carried out an obvious aggression in Iraq.

Nebenzia also pointed out that the Russian mission has succeeded in everything they planned. "Everything went smoothly, all the planned events of the month were completed," he said. "We have held open debates three times on the topic of arms transfers, on the issue of effective multilateralism and on the Middle East. The last two were chaired by [Russian Foreign] Minister Sergey Lavrov."

Nebenzia concluded by saying that the chairmanship of the Americans in May of 2022 was quite professional, unlike their predecessors - the UK - who violated the rules of the game at least four times.

Russia took over the rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council for the month of April. The Russian presidency was overshadowed by delays in the issuance of visas to Lavrov and his press pool by the United States, which is home to the permanent UN headquarters. This led the top Russian diplomat to suggest that the UN office be relocated from New York.

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Chinese Ambassador to Canada 'Strongly Protested' Threat to Expel Its Diplomats - Embassy

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu in a meeting with Canadian officials strongly protested Ottawa's threat to expel some of its diplomatic and consular staff, Beijing's embassy in Canada said in a statement.

Earlier today, Canada summoned Cong after media reports informed that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) allegedly said Conservative lawmaker Michael Chong and his family were targeted by the Chinese government after he sponsored a motion to accuse China of genocide against Uighurs.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly then said that Canada was assessing all available options, including the expulsion of diplomats.

"On May 4, Chinese Ambassador to Canada, H.E. Cong Peiwu met with the senior official of the Global Affairs Canada. Ambassador Cong set forth China's stern position and protested strongly on the Canadian side's threat to expel the relevant Chinese diplomatic and consular personnel based on rumors of the so-called 'China Interference' hyped up by some Canadian politicians and media," the embassy said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

The diplomatic mission lamented attempts by Canadian lawmakers to make political gains by capitalizing on the current media portrayal of China-related issues, notably on the alleged interference in Canada's elections of 2019 and 2021, which seeks to smear Beijing.

Cong said China has and always will adhere to the non-interference principle in a country's internal affairs, and noted the embassy's firm rejection of statements implying otherwise, according to the release.

"China strongly deplores and firmly rejects this," the statement said.

The statement said in accordance with the Consular Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the People's Republic of China, and other international conventions on diplomacy, both consular and diplomatic officials fulfill their duties.

Cong emphasized the necessity of respecting embassy and consular officials in the fulfillment of their regular duties, the statement said, and avoid trying to discredit them.

"Should the Canadian side continue to make provocations, China will play along every step of the way until the very end," the statement said.

Beijing recommended that Canada immediately stop the "political farce", the statement continued, which is leading relations between the two countries down a dangerous path.

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New York, California Attorneys General to Probe NFL Sexual Harassment Claims - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The New York and California attorneys general issued a press release announcing that they have launched an investigation into the workplace practices and culture within the National Football League (NFL) after women employees alleged employment and gender discrimination.

"No person should ever have to endure harassment, discrimination or abuse in the workplace. No matter how powerful or influential, no institution is above the law and we will ensure the NFL is held accountable," New York Attorney General Letitia James said in the release on Thursday.

James' California colleague Rob Bonta also promised to hold NFL executives, team owners and staff accountable given that the state does not tolerate any form of discrimination.

"We have serious concerns about the NFL's role in creating an extremely hostile and detrimental work environment. No company is too big or popular to avoid being held responsible for their actions," Bonta said in the release.

US media reported earlier that some women have complained of discrimination in the NFL and 30 of them who consented to interviews characterized the NFL as a stifling, deeply ingrained

corporate culture that demoralized some female employees, drove some to quit in frustration and left many feeling brushed aside.

"Reports that the NFL has not taken sufficient effective steps to prevent discrimination, harassment and retaliation from occurring in the workplace persist," the release said.

The attorneys general are thus exercising their legal authority to seek information from the NFL regarding allegations of gender pay disparities in compensation, harassment and gender and race discrimination, the release added.

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UPDATE - Four New US Bases in Philippines Will Not Be Used to Attack Anyone - Marcos (Updates with more details in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. said on Thursday that he has assured Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang that the four new US bases to be built in the Philippines will not be used to attack anyone.

"Last month, the Philippines granted four new bases to the United States. I assured the foreign minister of China these are not intended to be military sites to attack anyone," Marcos told a podcast interview at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Thursday.

On Monday, Marcos said the Philippine government was opposed to any military provocations in the region and would not allow itself to be turned into a staging post for any country's military campaigns.

"The United States has never brought up the possibility that these sites will be used to attack anybody. That is not the purpose of these sites and this is not the way that they will be used," Marcos said.

Marcos also said that the United States has not asked the Philippines to provide any military forces in the event of a US-China war over Taiwan.

When Marcos was asked if the Biden administration had requested any Philippine military forces be supplied in the event of a US conflict breaking out with China over the status of Taiwan, he replied, "No."

The Philippines and China are also "slowly inching" toward a resolution of their disagreement over which nation should enjoy control and sovereignty over oil and gas fields in the South China Sea, Marcos said.

The Philippines and the United States have agreed to increase their joint military exercises in the region with the goal of boosting agility and quick responses to emerging threats amid increasing tensions between China and the two nations, Marcos added.

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US General Recommends Incorporating All Threats Into New Int'l Treaty Instead of New START

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Air Force Global Strike Commander Gen. Thomas Bussiere said that he recommends incorporating all potential threats into a new international treaty instead of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which is set to expire in February 2026.

"As our nation approaches the expiration of the New START, if asked, I'd recommend that we would look at an international treaty that captures all the potential threats that we would face," Bussiere said during a discussion hosted by the Hudson Institute on Thursday.

Although the New START has not accounted for all of Russia's weapons, it nevertheless provided the international order with stability, Bussiere said.

In February 2023, Russia announced that it had suspended its participation in the New START. Russia and the United States signed the treaty in 2010 and envisaged mutual inspections of the two countries' strategic nuclear facilities.

President Vladimir Putin said in his annual address to the Russian parliament then that the United States had demanded that Russia unconditionally fulfill its obligations under the New START while being arbitrary about its own obligations.

On March 25, Putin announced that Russian tactical nuclear weapons would be placed in Belarus, with the storage sites for weapons expected to be finished by July 1. The move does not breach Russia's commitment not to proliferate nuclear weapons since Moscow will not hand over control of the weapons to Minsk, Putin said.

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Four New US Bases in Philippines Will Not Be Used to Attack Anyone - Marcos

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"The United States has never brought up the possibility that these sites will be used to attack anybody. That is not the purpose of these sites and this is not the way that they will be used, Marcos said on Thursday in his comments at CSIS.

The Philippines and the United States have agreed to increase their joint military exercises in the region with the goal of boosting agility and quick responses to emerging threats amid increasing tensions between China and the two nations, he added.

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Shootings in US State of Georgia Result in 4 Fatalities - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) – Four people were killed as a result of several violent incidents on Thursday in the US state of Georgia, local media reported.

Officials said that a man killed three adults before killing himself in the city of Moultrie, according to the reports.

The individual, whose name has not been disclosed, murdered his mother and grandmother, the report cited Colquitt County Coroner Verlyn Brock as saying.

After that first tragic incident, the man went to a local McDonald's and killed a woman before committing suicide, Brock added.

It is unclear whether this person knew the woman he killed, the report said.

A separate media report, citing witnesses, added that the killer was an employee at the same McDonald's.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) -

DRONE ATTACK ON THE KREMLIN

* Russia said what it meant to say regarding the role of the United States in the attempted drone attack on the Kremlin, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

* The United States is currently assessing the reports of the drone attack on the Kremlin but may never be able to fully understand what happened, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said.

* The United States is not formally investigating the drone attack on the Kremlin, but is looking for more clarifying information on the incident, Kirby said.

* Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro condemned the recent drone attack on the Kremlin during a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has received the vast majority of what it had requested to launch a spring counter-offensive, White National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

* US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said that Ukraine remains "heavily dependent" on external aid and would likely be unable to counter Russia's military and resource advantages if most of the assistance ceased.

* The Netherlands is working with partners on options for the supply of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said.

* Belgium is preparing a new package of military assistance for Ukraine, Belgian Prime Minister

Alexander De Croo said.

* Ukraine has lost up to 255 military and 11 pieces of military equipment in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

* Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov have reached progress on some points of bilateral agreement during talks in the United States, the Armenian Foreign Ministry said.

* Armenia and Azerbaijan made headway on a durable peace agreement during talks hosted by the Biden administration this week, and an agreement may be within reach, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

BLACK SEA GRAIN DEAL

* A meeting on the level of technical experts on the Black Sea Grain Initiative will be held in Istanbul on Friday, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Thursday.

CONFLICT IN SUDAN

* US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he issued an Executive Order expanding the United States' ability to hold individuals responsible for undermining peace in Sudan through sanctions, following the outbreak of civil conflict in the country last month.

* The UK Foreign Ministry said that the last evacuation flight from conflict-torn Sudan departed on May 3, bringing the total number of evacuated people to over 2,450.

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Justice Dept. Says Secured Conviction of Four 'Central' Figures in US Capitol Riot

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department secured the conviction of four Proud Boys members who played a central role in the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Thursday.

"Today, the Justice Department secured the conviction of four leaders of the Proud Boys for seditious conspiracy related to the January 6 attack on the Capitol," Garland said during a press conference. "The evidence presented at trial detailed the extent of the violence at the Capitol on January 6 and the central role these defendants played in setting into motion the unlawful events of that day."

The defendants were also convicted of other felonies, including obstructing Congress' certification of election results and conspiring to prevent Congress and federal officers from discharging their duties, Garland said.

The verdict makes clear that the Justice Department will do everything in its power to defend democracy in the United States, Garland added.

The members of the Proud Boys are alleged to have agitated demonstrators around the US Capitol, urging people to move forward. However, defense attorneys argued their clients never

planned to breach the Capitol building.

The US Justice Department has secured more than 600 convictions related to the events surrounding January 6, Garland said.

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Blinken, Sullivan to Make Separate Visits to Saudi Arabia in the Coming Weeks - Report

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan are planning separate trips to Saudi Arabia in the coming weeks, signaling the Biden administration's readiness to ease tensions with the Middle Eastern country, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

Sullivan will travel first, meeting with counterparts from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and India next week in the kingdom before meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, said the report, citing people familiar with the matter.

Sullivan's meeting will be the first between the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and India, and discussions are set to cover issues such as diversifying supply chains and investments in strategic infrastructure projects, including ports, rail, and minerals, said the report.

Blinken will follow Sullivan's visit later in June when he will visit Saudi Arabia for a meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (banned in Russia), the report added.

The two trips, happening in such close proximity, exemplify the administration's determination to get past defining tensions between Riyadh and Washington, the report said.

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Western Allies Issue Joint Statement on Participation of Russian, Belarusian Athletes

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – Three dozen countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Ukraine, have signed a joint statement on Thursday to inform the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that they have noted its recommendations with respect to the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes with neutral status and will closely watch their implementation.

“We [...] have noted the recommended conditions of participation for individual neutral athletes and support personnel with a Russian or Belarusian passport in international sports competitions, and the accompanying press statement, published by the International Olympic Committee on 28 March 2023,” the joint statement said. “While fully respecting the autonomy of sporting organizations, we will closely watch the implementation of the recommendations by the IOC and international sports federations over the coming weeks.”

The countries said in the statement that they remain focused on ensuring that Russian and Belarusian athletes are “in no way appearing as representatives of their states.”

Of the entire European Union, only Hungary, Malta, and Romania did not sign the joint statement, which was also signed by a number of non-European countries, including Australia, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand.

The IOC's executive board agreed in March that Russian and Belarusian athletes should be allowed to compete in Paris with neutral status unless they actively support the conflict in Ukraine.

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US State Dept. Approves \$207Mln Sale of Sonar Surveillance Systems to Australia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the possible sale of sonar surveillance systems to Australia at a price of \$207 million, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Australia of Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System Expeditionary (SURTASS-E) mission systems for Vessels of Opportunity (VOO) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$207 million," DSCA said in a statement.

The proposed sale would support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States, the statement said.

The sonar systems would improve Australia's capability to meet current and future maritime threats by providing tactical platforms with the detection and cueing of enemy submarines, the statement said.

The sale would neither alter the basic military balance in the region, nor impact US military readiness, the statement added.

Lockheed Martin's Syracuse, New York, and Manassas, Virginia locations will serve as the sale's principal contractor, the statement said.

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Canada Summons China Ambassador Over Alleged Targeting of Lawmaker, Mulls Expulsion - Joly

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – Canada summoned Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu over the alleged role of an embassy diplomat in targeting a Canadian lawmaker behind a parliamentary motion to label Beijing's treatment of Uighurs as genocide, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said on Thursday, noting that Ottawa is considering expulsion.

Earlier this week, media reported that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service said that Conservative lawmaker Michael Chong and his family were allegedly targeted by the Chinese government after he sponsored a motion to accuse China of genocide against Uighurs.

"My deputy minister right now is meeting with the Chinese ambassador and summoning him, and that's why also we're assessing different options, including the expulsion of diplomats," Joly said before the House of Commons foreign affairs committee.

The government needs to assess the consequences related to the potential expulsion of Chinese diplomatic personnel, Joly continued, noting the importance of taking a decision that would suit Canada's economic and diplomatic interests.

Joly referred to the "lessons learned" by Canada when China imprisoned the two Michaels (Spavor and Kovrig) on espionage charges, a move seen as politically motivated in Ottawa, and Beijing's response to the detention of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou.

The embassy, when contacted by Sputnik, said they will provide an update if they have any further information on the issue.

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Autopsy Shows Tyre Nichols Died of Blunt Trauma After Beating By Memphis Cops - Attorneys

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Tyre Nichols, who was beaten to death by five Memphis officers earlier this year, died of blunt force trauma according to an autopsy report, attorneys Benjamin Crump and Tony Romanucci said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"The legal team representing the family of Tyre Nichols acknowledges the release of the medical examiner's report, the contents of which are highly consistent with our own reporting back in January of this year," the joint statement said. "We know now what we knew then. Tyre Nichols died from blunt force trauma and the manner of death was homicide."

The attorneys said the official autopsy report further propels their commitment to seek justice for Nichols.

Nichols died on January 10, three days after Memphis Police Department (MPD) officers beat him for three minutes during a traffic stop. Five officers involved were fired and charged with second-degree murder, among other crimes. The city also disbanded the Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace In Our Neighborhoods (SCORPION) special unit the officers belonged to.

According to the Ben Crump law firm, Nichols' family is suing the city of Memphis, the Memphis Police Department, and Memphis Police Chief Cerelyn Davis for \$550 million.

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Blinken Hopes Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Deal in Sight After Progress at US-Hosted Talks

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Armenia and Azerbaijan made headway on a durable peace agreement during talks hosted by the Biden administration this week, and an agreement may be within reach, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"[Both countries] made tangible progress on a durable peace agreement. I hope that they see and I believe that they do, as I do, that, there is an agreement within sight, within reach, and achieving that agreement would be, I think, not only historic but would be profoundly in the interests of the people of Azerbaijan and Armenia," Blinken said during closing remarks.

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US Navy Drag Queen Ambassador Initiative 'Pilot Program,' Not Recruiting Effort - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - A US Navy initiative featuring an active-duty sailor performing in drag was part of a pilot program, not a recruitment effort, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"The program I believe that you're referring to was the Navy Digital Ambassador Program, which was a pilot outreach effort. It was not a recruiting effort," Singh said during a press briefing when asked about the initiative.

The pilot program has concluded, Singh said, adding that the US Navy is now evaluating the program and its future.

The US Navy used an active-duty servicemember, who goes by the drag stage name Harpy Daniels, for the program, according to US media reports.

The sailor, US Navy Yeoman 2nd Class Joshua Kelley, served in the program from October 2022 to March 2023, receiving wider public attention in recent days after videos of the individual went viral on social media, the reports said. Kelley identifies as non-binary, according to their videos.

On Wednesday, US Senators including Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz and Steve Daines sent a letter to Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro expressing concerns about the program. The lawmakers criticized the Navy's promotion of TikTok amid concerns about its privacy practices, as well as questioned where the Navy stood on the issue of drag performances more broadly.

"Such activity is not appropriate for promotion in a professional workplace or the United States military," the letter said.

The outreach program occurred amid a broader US military recruitment crisis, with most branches seeing less interest in service among young people than desired.

In March, US military officials testifying to Congress on the matter pointed to low unemployment, an inability to recruit in-person in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, declining eligibility due to behavioral problems and poor perceptions of military service as possible factors proving a challenge to recruitment.

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US Expresses Concerns Over China's New Counter-Espionage Law – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The United States is closely monitoring the situation with China's new counter-espionage law and expresses concerns over Beijing's approach to foreigners, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

"We are closely monitoring the passing of the PRC's new counter- espionage law, which, as written, will greatly expand the scope of what is considered espionage activities. That is, of course, incredibly concerning to us," Patel told reporters.

US media reported earlier in the day that the new law allows Chinese authorities to gain access to data, personal information and also to ban border crossing. The law also classifies cyberattacks as espionage activity, the reports said.

Patel declined to provide recommendations to the private sector in terms of this law. However, he added, that the US continues to press China to allow foreign individuals to operate in a safe and open working environment, free of harassment, and free of intimidation. That includes journalists, scholars, and people who are working in civil society organizations and in private companies.

The United States will continue to speak out for human rights and the rule of law, and promote accountability for Chinese government activities, Patel added.

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Biden's Economic Czar Brainard Vows to Make America More Competitive

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's top economic aide Lael Brainard vowed in a speech on Thursday to make America more competitive, saying that middlemen in business should be weeded out while gadget and electronics buyers should be allowed to do simple repairs on their own to cut costs.

"Competitive market structures mean a more resilient economy — so that shocks don't paralyze the entire system when a few suppliers or middlemen become chokepoints," Brainard, the former vice chair of the Federal Reserve who has become Biden's top White House economic aide, said.

Brainard's role as economic czar comes at a particularly challenging time for the United States, where severe disruptions from the coronavirus pandemic have shuttered many small and medium-sized businesses that used to be lifeline for consumers seeking better prices and availability of goods.

On the bigger corporate front, a crisis of confidence among US banks has led to a number of them being wiped out or forcibly sold to a larger rival, again limiting consumer choices.

Brainard acknowledged the changing face of America, and urged corporations to adapt with a more competitive game as well to offer consumers better deals.

"Changing course following decades of increasing consolidation in our economy is a significant task," Brainard said. "So let me be very clear today: we're just getting started, and we remain committed to finishing the job."

The top economic aide took heart especially with the changes made by gadget giants such as Apple and Microsoft in allowing consumers to fix their own gadgets after Biden endorsed the

"right to repair." She noted that the Federal Trade Commission has also successfully secured settlements making it easier for ordinary Americans to repair grills, motorcycles and generators.

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Kirby Says US May Never be Able to Fully Understand What Happened With Drone Over Kremlin

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is currently assessing the reports of the drone attack on the Kremlin but may never be able to fully understand what happened, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We're still trying to ascertain exactly what happened here and do the best we can, and we're going to be humble about this ... maybe we'll never fully understand exactly what happened here," Kirby said during a press conference.

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Ukraine Has 98% of What It Asked For to Launch Spring Offensive - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has received the vast majority of what it requested to launch a spring counter offensive, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"They have the vast majority, and by vast, I mean, something to the order of 98% of what they asked for materially to do offensive operations in the spring," Kirby said during a press conference.

Ukraine has received armor, artillery, air defenses, ammunition, and training of multiple brigades of armed forces outside the country, he added.

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US Not 'Investigating' Kremlin Drone Attack, Simply Looking Into Incident - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is not formally investigating the drone attack on the Kremlin in Moscow, but rather, simply looking for more clarifying information on the incident, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We're not investigating it, I want to be clear. I said we're still looking at this. We haven't come to any conclusions one way or the other," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We're going to try

to learn more, but let's not label it a report or an investigation or anything like that."

On Wednesday, two drones attempted to attack the Kremlin in what Russia has claimed was a Ukrainian assassination attempt on Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ukraine has denied involvement, alleging the attack was staged.

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Tucker Carlson Mulls Hosting His Own GOP Primary Debate After Leaving Fox News - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Political commentator Tucker Carlson is contemplating assuming a more prominent role in the media after being let go from Fox News and hosting his own Republican candidate debate ahead of the 2024 US presidential elections, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

In late April, Fox News and Carlson agreed to part ways despite the fact that he hosted the network's top-rated program. Reports suggest Carlson was let go due to his coverage of controversial topics - ranging from the January 6 events at the US Capitol to the COVID-19 measures to the US support for the war in Ukraine - while others have said Carlson was fired for his criticism of Fox News' senior management.

Should Carlson decide to go with this ambitious option, he would have to say goodbye to millions of dollars that Fox News owes him under his contract, which is set to expire at the end of 2024, the report said.

Carlson has discussed the idea of moderating the Republican primaries with former US President Donald Trump, who has already threatened not to attend the Fox News-moderated primary debate and at the same time said he is interested in attending Carlson's event, the report said.

A source close to Carlson said that he is ready to accept less money in order to be able to return to media work before 2024, the report added.

A host of smaller broadcasters, including Trinity Broadcast Network, One America News Network and Newsmax have already approached Carlson, according to the report.

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Canada's Watchdog Begins Public Consultations on Banning Fox News Over LGBT+ Complaint

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has launched public consultations on the removal of Fox News from the list of non-Canadian services authorized for distribution after an LGBT+ advocacy group demanded accountability for comments made by former TV host Tucker Carlson.

Canadians can submit their comments on the issue until June 2, according to a notice on the watchdog's website published on Wednesday.

"I oppose the removal of Fox News from the List of non-Canadian services authorized for distribution. Tucker Carlson is no longer employed by Fox News," one of the submissions said. Another one argued that Fox should not be removed from cable packages because a "democratic society" such as Canada includes provisions for freedom of speech, and that allowing interest groups to dictate content would set a "dangerous" precedent.

Comments in favor of the removal have yet to be made.

In an open letter dated April 4, Executive Director of LGBT+ advocacy group Egale Canada Helen Kennedy requested that Fox News be removed from the list of non-Canadian programming services authorized for distribution in the country, stating that one of Carlson's Tonight shows covered LGBT+ communities with a "provocative" and "violence-inciting" approach, endangering their members.

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US Trade Deficit Narrows by 9% to Just Over \$64Bln in March - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit narrowed by more than \$6 billion, or about 9%, in March to just over \$64 billion, thanks to fewer microchip imports and lower oil prices that led to a smaller energy bill for the nation, the Commerce Department said in report on Thursday.

The trade gap fell to a four-month low of \$64.2 billion from a previous \$70.6 billion in February, the report from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit within the Commerce Department, said. Imports were at a three-month low of \$320.4 billion and off from the record high of \$350 billion set a year ago. The United States imported fewer computer chip parts and earth-moving machines. The lower price of oil in the first quarter of the year also reduced expenditure on petroleum-related goods.

Exports, meanwhile, rose 2.1% to \$256.2 billion, with the United States shipping out more oil and automobiles. Demand for US-made goods also held up better due to a general decline in the dollar in the first quarter, which enabled greater purchasing power for foreign customers of such products.

Notwithstanding the smaller trade deficit, some analysts pointed out that US consumers appeared to be shying away from purchases of goods - which could be a source of concern for a nation where about 70% or more of economic activity depends on consumers.

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New York Officials Point to Role of Mental Health After Chokehold Death of Subway Rider

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Kathy Hochul and New York City Mayor Eric Adams both pointed to the role that mental health may have played in the death of a Black

homeless man on the subway system, whom a fellow passenger put into a choke-hold after he allegedly acted in an erratic manner.

On Monday, 30-year-old Jordan Neely died after being restrained in a rear naked choke by a 24-year-old ex-Marine. Neely, who was homeless, purportedly lost consciousness as a result of the chokehold, after which point emergency responders were unable to revive him.

The 24-year-old was initially taken into custody by law enforcement, but later released without charges. On Wednesday, the city's medical examiner ruled the death a homicide via compression of the neck. The Manhattan District Attorney's Office is investigating Neely's death to determine whether charges are warranted.

"One element we haven't talked about is the billion dollar investment in mental health services so we don't have people who are homeless in our subways, many of them in the throes of mental health episodes. And that's what I believe are some of the factors here," Hochul said in a statement on the incident. "There are consequences for behavior. I will look at it more closely to find out whether the state has a role."

Neely, who law enforcement sources have reportedly said was arrested numerous times in the past, was purportedly yelling at passengers prior to being placed in the chokehold.

Hochul called the incident "deeply disturbing," but noted that the number of crimes on New York City subways is declining.

"There's a lot we don't know about what happened here, so I'm going to refrain from commenting further. However, we do know that there were serious mental health issues in play here," Adams said of the incident.

The city has made record investments in providing care to those who need it and getting people off the streets and subways, Adams added.

Adams appeared on CNN Wednesday evening, where he criticized US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for characterizing the incident as a "murder" in a tweet.

"I don't think that's very responsible at the time where we're still investigating the situation," Adams said.

The incident has sparked some protests in the city, where demonstrators have called for the arrest of the passenger who restrained Neely.

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Washington Jury Finds 4 Proud Boys Members Guilty of Seditious Conspiracy - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - A Washington, DC jury has found that four members of the Proud Boys group are guilty of seditious conspiracy for their role in the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, CNN reported on Thursday.

Defendants Enrique Tarrío, Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs and Zachary Rehl were also charged with obstructing the 2020 electoral college vote, tampering with evidence and three separate conspiracy charges, the report said.

Tarrío, the Proud Boys' leader, was not in Washington on January 6 but contributed to a command structure within the group, the report said. Tarrío's chat messages included in the

indictment suggest he was preparing for a revolution and planned to occupy buildings in Washington identified within the group as "crucial," including offices in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Prosecutors utilized messages and videos posted by the defendants to argue that the Proud Boys began inciting violence and talk of revolution against the incoming Biden administration, who they saw as a threat to the United States, the report said.

The Proud Boys are alleged to have agitated protesters on Capital Hill grounds, communicating with hand signals and urging a group to move forward, the report said.

Defense attorneys argued that their clients never had a plan to storm the Capitol and stop the electoral college vote, the report added.

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Salvadoran President Bukele Ratifies Act that Removes All Taxes on Tech Innovation

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The President of El Salvador Nayib Bukele announced on Thursday that he had signed into law the Innovation and Technology Manufacturing Incentives Act, effectively removing all taxes on technological innovation.

In late March, Bukele had expressed his intention to send a bill to the Salvadoran congress, whose purpose would be to eliminate all forms of taxes on technological innovation.

“I’ve just signed into law, the INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY MANUFACTURING INCENTIVES ACT, that eliminates all taxes (income, property, capital gains and import tariffs) on technology innovations, software and app programming, AI, computer and communications hardware manufacturing,” Bukele said via Twitter.

By ratifying this act, the president and the Legislative Assembly are fulfilling their “constitutional obligation” to promote economic and social development through production increase and good use of the country’s resources, the Act’s decree shared by the president reads.

Moreover, the Act is in line with El Salvador’s 2020-2030 Digital Agenda, the decree reads, which aims at stimulating economic growth derived from the innovation and technologies industry,

The law aims to promote the country's sustainable development, increase its capacitated labour force, and participate in global technology industry supply chains, according to the decree.

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US Army Orders Nearly 4,000 Javelin Missiles Per Year by 2026 in \$7.2Bln Deal - Lockheed

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered Javelin anti-tank missile production to be increased to almost 4,000 per year by 2026 in a new multi-year contract with its manufacturers, Lockheed Martin announced on Thursday.

"The US Army awarded the Javelin Joint Venture (JJV) an indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity (IDIQ) production contract with a total ceiling of \$7.2 billion for fiscal years 2023 to 2026 for the Javelin weapon system and associated equipment and services," Lockheed Martin said in a press release.

The deal includes a base year with authorized funding to \$1.02 billion and production ramp support to increase Javelin All Up Round production to 3,960 per year by late 2026, the release said.

"The contract will also provide tooling, test equipment and non-recurring effort for the Javelin production ramp that will support increasing Javelin production capacity both at JJV factories and throughout the supply chain," the release added.

Javelin is developed and produced by the JJV between Raytheon Technologies in Tucson, Arizona, and Lockheed Martin in Orlando, Florida. So far, the JJV has produced more than 50,000 Javelin missiles and more than 12,000 reusable Command Launch Units. Javelin is expected to remain in the US weapon arsenal until 2050, according to the release.

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New South Korea Government Will Seek New Dialogue With China - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - South Korea's new government will make an effort to engage with China soon and will also seek an opportunity to launch a new era of trilateral cooperation with China and Japan, newly appointed South Korean Ambassador to the United States Cho Hyun Dong said on Thursday.

"We will definitely engage with China and there will be the opportunity for high level exchanges between Seoul and Beijing," Cho said in a podcast interview at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "We are going to engage with China at the senior level."

Cho was speaking after recently elected President Yoon Suk Yeol's state visit to the United States, which included an address to a joint assembly of Congress. The envoy acknowledged there has been an absence of such high level exchanges in recent years mainly because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have to have some new foundation of relations between Seoul and Beijing. There should be mutual respect. ... I think it will take some time but I think it will work at some point. I think we will have better relations with China in comparison to these days," Cho said.

The new South Korean government was also going to seek some opportunity for diplomacy in the context of trilateral negotiations between Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing, "which has been stalled for many years for many reasons," Cho added.

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UPDATE-Trading Halted in Shares of Western Alliance, Latest US Bank Reportedly in Trouble

(updates with statement from Western Alliance)

NEW YORK, May 4 (Sputnik) - Trading in the shares of Western Alliance Bancorporation was halted on Thursday as they plunged 25% in value after the Phoenix-based lender was reported to be the latest US banking casualty after Los Angeles-based PacWest.

Trading in Western Alliance was suspended at \$16.19 a share, versus its previous year high of \$86.87, by the New York Stock Exchange, which was "waiting for additional information", US media reports said.

As late as Wednesday, Western Alliance said it had not experienced any unusual deposit outflows — which had been the main reason for the spate of US banking failures over the past two months.

The Financial Times reported on Thursday that Western Alliance was mulling "options, including a potential sale."

Western Alliance, however, issued a statement disputing the Financial Times report, which it called "categorically false in all respects."

"There is not a single element of the article that is true. Western Alliance is not exploring a sale, nor has it hired an advisor to explore strategic options," the Phoenix-based lender said.

A spate of US banks have landed in trouble over the past two months after deposit runs, requiring either government intervention to prop them up or an outright sale to a stronger banking entity.

Just earlier this week, San Francisco-based First Republic was acquired by JPMorgan Chase, the largest US banking group.

Prior to this, Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank were rescued by the US government's Federal Insurance Deposit Corporation in March.

Shares of PacWest, the other bank reported to be in trouble, were at \$2.57 at the time of writing, down 60% on the day, versus their previous year high of \$34.21.

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US City of Dallas Says Identifying, Isolating Devices Impacted by Potential Cyber Attack

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The city of Dallas in Texas is working to identify and isolate devices impacted by a suspected ransomware attack, the city government said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Wednesday morning, the city's security monitoring tools notified our Security Operations Center (SOC) that a likely ransomware attack had been launched within our environment.," the statement said. "Information and Technology Services (ITS) will continue working around the clock to identify the source of the outage and isolate impacted devices."

The city's police, fire and rescue websites were taken offline, although service to residents remains unaffected, the statement said.

Calls on the emergency line 911 continue to be received and dispatched, the statement said.

Courts in Dallas were closed on Wednesday and will also be closed on Thursday, the statement added.

Less than 200 of the city's thousands of devices are impacted, with any at-risk quarantined and blocked by ITS, according to the statement.

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US Unlikely to Prevent Russia, China From Getting Closer in Coming Years - Haines

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The United States is unlikely to prevent Russia and China from continuing to get closer in the years to come, US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said on Thursday.

"I think that it is unlikely that we will take them really off the trajectory of continuing to get closer in the coming years," Haines told a Senate hearing.

Haines nonetheless noted that although Russian-Chinese cooperation has increased since the onset of the special military operation in Ukraine, a NATO-style alliance between the two is unlikely.

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Russia Able to Quickly Build Back Degraded Ground Forces - US Defense Intelligence Agency

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Russia will be able to quickly build back its ground forces that have been degraded during the special military operation in Ukraine, US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director Scott Berrier said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Even though Russia's ground forces are degraded right now, they will quickly build those back," Berrier told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Berrier pointed out that Russia's strategic forces have been untested and remain "formidable."

US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines agreed with Berrier's assessment during the hearing and added that the degrading of Russia's ground forces does not mean that Russia is not a powerful military force anymore.

In April, Supreme Allied Commander Europe and US European Command head Christopher Cavoli said that much of the Russian military has not been affected negatively by the conflict in Ukraine, including its undersea forces. Cavoli also said that Russia has been more active undersea and throughout the Atlantic than he has seen in years.

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US-Russia Military Communication Channels Remain Open Even in Periods of Tension – Haines

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said on Thursday that military communication channels with Russia remain open even during periods of escalation of tension.

"Yes," Haines said, when asked about the lines of communication between Russia and the US. Russia's behavior is different from China's, Haines added, noting that Beijing "classically" does not engage in talks in times of crisis.

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Trading Halted in Shares of Western Alliance, Latest US Bank in Trouble After PacWest

NEW YORK, May 4 (Sputnik) - Trading in the shares of Western Alliance Bancorporation was halted on Thursday as they plunged 25% in value after the Phoenix-based lender joined Los Angeles-based PacWest in becoming the latest US banking casualties.

Trading in Western Alliance was suspended at \$16.19 a share, versus its previous year's high of \$86.87, by the New York Stock Exchange, which was "waiting for additional information," US media reports said.

As late as Wednesday, Western Alliance said it had not experienced any unusual deposit outflows — which had been the main reason for the spate of US banking failures over the past two months.

The Financial Times reported on Thursday that Western Alliance was mulling "options, including a potential sale."

If indeed true, it would be the latest US bank to be sold after San Francisco-based First Republic, which earlier this week was acquired by JPMorgan Chase, the largest US banking group.

Western Alliance is also the fifth US lender in trouble after Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank — the two rescued by the US government's Federal Insurance Deposit Corporation in March — and PacWest, whose shares were also tumbling on Thursday.

Shares of PacWest were at \$2.57 at the time of writing, down 60% on the day, versus their previous year's high of \$34.21.

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Republicans, Democrats Square Off on US Debt Ceiling Increase in Senate Committee Hearing

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Republican and Democratic members of the US Senate Budget Committee held a debate during a hearing on Thursday about House Republicans' plan

to increase the United States' debt limit in exchange for cuts to government spending.

The proposal, dubbed the Limit, Save, Grow Act, passed the House last month along partisan lines. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said the legislation has no chance of passing the upper chamber, instead calling the bill the "Default on America" act.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Sheldon Whitehouse and Ranking Member Chuck Grassley echoed the arguments of their respective parties during the hearing on Thursday.

"Simply put, we must raise the debt limit, we must do it now, and we must do it without wrecking lives and livelihoods to appease eccentric billionaires," Whitehouse said.

Whitehouse also expressed skepticism about Republican claims that defense and veterans programs would not be impacted by proposed cuts.

Grassley reaffirmed Republicans' promise not to cut the two areas and emphasized the historical precedent for tying spending cuts to a debt limit increase.

"House Republicans have acted responsibly by passing a debt limit increase while also beginning to tackle our country's unsustainable debt and deficits," Grassley said.

Grassley called on US President Joe Biden and Senate Democrats to return to the negotiation table "in earnest."

The committee heard from witnesses, including from Moody's Analytics chief economist Mark Zandi. The US economy skirts recession under both the Republican proposal and a "clean" debt limit increase, Zandi said.

However, the Republican plan would "meaningfully increase" the chance of an economic downturn and result in 790,000 fewer jobs by the end of 2024 compared to a clean increase, Zandi also said.

The hearing comes after the latest warning of US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen that the United States could run out of money to pay its bills by early June.

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Biden Says Issued Order Expanding US Sanctions Authority to Address Sudan Conflict

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he issued an Executive Order expanding the United States' ability to hold individuals responsible for undermining peace in Sudan through sanctions, following the outbreak of civil conflict in the country last month.

"Today, I issued a new Executive Order that expands US authorities to respond to the violence that began on April 15 with sanctions that hold individuals responsible for threatening the peace, security, and stability of Sudan; undermining Sudan's democratic transition; using violence against civilians; or committing serious human rights abuses," Biden said in a statement.

The US is responding to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Sudan and stands ready to support enhanced humanitarian assistance when conditions allow, Biden added.

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China Has Surpassed US in Number of Fixed, Mobile Land-Based ICBM Launchers - DIA

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – Director of the US Defense Intelligence (DIA) Agency Gen. Scott Berrier confirmed on Thursday that China has surpassed the United States in terms of the number of fixed and mobile land-based launchers for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). “I do agree,” Berrier told a Congressional hearing when asked whether he agrees with the assessment that China has now surpassed the US in the number of fixed and mobile land-based launchers for ICBM.

Berrier has also confirmed recent DIA reports that China will deploy 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035.

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Ukrainian Military Still Finalizing Priorities, Scale of Counter-Offensive - Haines

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said on Thursday that the Ukrainian military is still finalizing details on the priorities, timing and scale of its forthcoming counter-offensive against Russian forces.

"Both sides are focusing on preparations for a potential Ukrainian counter offensive this spring or summer designed to push Russia out of illegally annexed territory and the Ukrainian armed forces are still finalizing the specific priorities, timing and scale of the offensive," Haines said.

Assistance by the collective West to Ukraine is crucial for preparing the counter-offensive's plans and troops that will take part in it, she said,

Haines emphasized that the United States is doing a lot to bolster Ukraine's chances for success in the forthcoming counter-offensive.

Even if Ukraine's counter-offensive was to fail, Russia would likely not be able to mount its own offensive this year, unless Moscow calls for a mandatory mobilization and secures "third-party" supplies of ammunition, Haines said.

Wagner Private Military Company chief Yevgeny Prigozhin said on Wednesday that the Ukrainian counter-offensive had begun in the area of Bakhmut and the Ukrainian troops have increased their activity in the area.

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House Republicans' Debt Limit Plan Increases Chance of US Economic Downturn - Moody's

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - House Republicans' plan to increase the United States' debt limit in exchange for cuts to government spending increases the chance of an economic

downturn, chief economist for Moody's Analytics, Mark Zandi, said on Thursday.

Last month, House Republicans passed the proposal, dubbed the Limit, Save Grow Act, along partisan lines. However, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said the plan has no chance of clearing the upper chamber, instead proposing a "clean" debt ceiling increase.

"While the economy skirts recession in both scenarios, recession risks are uncomfortably high, with a consensus of economists and many investors and business executives expecting a downturn beginning late this year or early next," Zandi said in testimony to the US Senate Budget Committee. "The timing of the government spending cuts in the Limit, Save, Grow Act is thus especially inopportune – it would meaningfully increase the likelihood of such a downturn."

The Republican plan would result in 790,000 fewer jobs by the end of 2024 than under a clean debt limit increase, Zandi said.

In addition, the government spending cuts proposed by Republicans would act as a "substantial headwind" to near-term economic growth, Zandi said.

The hearing on the debt ceiling plans comes following a warning by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen that the US could run out of money to pay its bills as soon as early June.

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US Default Would Create Global Uncertainty About Value of Dollar – Intelligence Director

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – US default would create global uncertainty about the value of the dollar, US institutions and leadership and prompt volatility in financial and commodity markets, US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said on Thursday.

"Almost certainly it [default] would create global uncertainty about the value of the US dollar and US institutions and leadership, leading to volatility in currency, and financial markets and commodity markets that are priced in dollars," Haines told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

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US Designates 3 Ex-Colombian Military Officials for Rights Violations – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The United States designated three former Colombian military officials for their alleged role in "gross" violations of human rights during the years-long conflict in the country, making them ineligible to enter the US, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Today, we are taking action to promote accountability for three former Colombian officials for their involvement in gross violations of human rights during Colombia's decades-long internal armed conflict," Blinken said in a statement.

The United States designated former Colonels Publio Hernan Mejia Gutierrez and Juan Carlos

Figueroa Suarez, former General Ivan Ramirez Quintero, as well as five members of their families. As a result of the action, they are ineligible for entry into the United States, the statement added.

Blinken also reaffirmed Washington's support for the 2016 Colombia's peace agreement, which he says addresses conflict-related atrocities and abuses which took place over more than 50 years.

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Ukraine 'Heavily Dependent' on Aid, Likely Unable to Counter Russia if Aid Stops - Haines

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines said on Thursday that Ukraine remains "heavily dependent" on external aid and would likely be unable to counter Russia's military and resource advantages if most of the assistance ceased.

"Ukraine remains heavily dependent on external military aid and would likely be unable to counter Russia's natural relative manpower and resource advantages if most Western military aid ceased," Haines said.

Haines also said that external aid to Ukraine is crucial to prepare the plans and forces for Kiev's counter-offensive.