

5/22/23 Monday

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US Aims to 'Knit Up' China in Pacific Islands 'Scramble' With Papua Defense Deal

Although Washington's new defense deal with Papua New Guinea (PNG) doesn't mention China by name, it's clearly aimed at curbing Chinese influence in the region off Australia's coast, according to one scholar.

On Monday, the United States and Papua New Guinea formally [signed a deal](#) to allow the US access to PNG's airfields and ports, including boarding each others' vessels, sharing technical expertise, and satellite surveillance. The island nation sits less than 100 miles from Australia at its closest point, of which it was a colony until 1975.

Dr. Joseph M. Siracusa, a renowned US professor of history and international diplomacy who serves as dean of Global Futures at Curtin University, and the author of more than 30 books on diplomacy and international security, told Sputnik on Monday that the deal was part of a larger attempt by Washington to undermine Chinese influence in the region, especially in the wake of a similar deal between China and the Solomon Islands, which sit to PNG's east.

"They're playing a zero-sum game in the area. They don't want China in Papua New Guinea and they're very disappointed that the Chinese were able to make a major inroad into the Solomon Islands," Siracusa said.

"These are small islands and, you know, they're playing off both sides against the middle, as you do when you have a great power competition and smaller powers do what they can. It's a matter of influence. The American intent is to knit up or to continue the containment of China. And China's position is mainly to infiltrate these islands, those for its network of influence and more importantly, for its ports and harbors and its geographic, geographical, geopolitical position. It's sort of like a scramble," he explained.

"The Americans think that China and Russia are in cahoots together to penetrate the South China Sea, these areas, and that when they're resisting the Chinese, they are resisting the Russians," he asserted. "They don't know any Chinese-Russian history, do they? If they knew a little more about Chinese-Russian history, they would think there was less of this love affair than they imagine."

Siracusa explained that many nations in the region, from small island states like the Solomon Islands to major powers like India, are more interested in solving their own problems, such as mitigating climate change or developing their infrastructure, and are happy to play Beijing and Washington off of one another to get what they want.

"They're not so much interested in playing the big game of politics. They want to see what they can get out of both the West and the East in terms of who could provide the greatest amount of help for mitigation or adaptation, and they'd like [that] from the Americans, not bases or ships."

"They'd like reparations or some way to keep the islands from sinking. They have very mixed motives. The American motives are purely strategic. And the islanders are a mixed bag here,

because it's not often that the big powers even think about them - and when they do, it's too late. So they're sort of maneuvering," he said.

"The Americans overreacted to the Solomons by promising them an embassy. I mean, a full scale embassy in the Solomon Islands is a waste of money and getting involved in the South Pacific. What they showed their Australian allies is that they're very concerned about Australia's concerns about what goes on here. What's the point of buying a long range nuclear-powered submarine if you're going to have a Chinese naval base one day 80 kilometers away? But it doesn't make any sense. The Americans are very keen in assisting the Australians in pushing the Chinese as far away from those sea lanes of communication."

"That is most of America's diplomacy in the last 20 years," Siracusa said.

"Most of America's solutions to these problems are military solutions. They use the military to get in and out of places, they use the military to establish places. The United States is very, very obsessed with power, either demonstrating it, holding it, or changing things. And so it's very hard for the Chinese to match the American maritime assets. The Chinese may have technically more ships, but they don't have more tonnage. So the Americans use their military might to get involved in these places. And they have offered people a measure or some kind of protection, perhaps [it] makes them feel better. But as I say, it won't last long. This is a very short interest. They are really going to stay there a couple of hours before going on to something else. But the Americans have overreacted to what's going on in the South China Sea because it looks like the Solomon Islands were selling the place."

By comparison, Siracusa said the Chinese "mostly buy influence in most of these places," adding that "China doesn't have to invade anything."

"What the Americans and the Australians and others are trying to do is to displace this Chinese influence and maybe replace it with Western or Indian influence. That is, to make these nations less dependent on Chinese money and goods and services. Now it's an all around competition, beginning with the military and ending up with the socio and the economic," he said.

"Well, New Guinea has a lot of deep water ports and a lot of lovely places for the Navy. Of course, the United States Navy fought in the waters in and around PNG during the Second World War when the Japanese Imperial Navy was coming very close to defeating that part of the world."

He predicted that the South Pacific would "become militarized" in the next five-to-seven years, as the Americans pour money into keeping China out.

"When the Chinese started to get special privileges in the Solomons, one of them was a potential naval base there," he explained. "And that naval base, as far as the Australians are concerned and the Americans are concerned, are for hostile purposes."

Siracusa noted that "when it comes to the Chinese in the neighborhood, the Americans equate Chinese capabilities with Chinese intentions. So you might have a Chinese capability to put ships in the area or an influence in the area. What are they going to do with it? Well, the Americans have come to the conclusion that the Chinese are only involved in these particular pursuits and in the name of a bigger picture, in the larger order of things, and that is Chinese mastery of this part of the Pacific. It's hard for this area not to become militarized. Almost impossible."

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Soleimani 'Trenchmate' Akbar Ahmadian Becomes New Chair of Iran's Security Council

As head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Adm. Al Shamkhani helped negotiate some of the republic's greatest diplomatic feats, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia earlier this year.

On Monday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi issued a decree appointing Brig. Gen. Al Akbar Ahmadian as new secretary of the SNSC, the Islamic Republic's national security council. Ahmadian replaces Shamkhani, who held the position for more than a decade.

Who is Ahmadian?

Ahmadian, 62, is the director of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Strategic Center and a member of the Expediency Council, an advisory body to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that also irons out disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council.

He also served as commander of the IRGC navy from 1997 to 2000 and was IRGC chief of staff for seven years and has been chief of the IRGC Strategic Center for 16 years.

Ahmadian is a graduate of the University of Tehran in dentistry and has a PhD in strategic management from the Supreme National Defense University of Iran. He was appointed to the Expediency Council last year by the Supreme Leader.

One Iranian news agency described Ahmadian as a "trenchmate" to Lt. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the IRGC's Quds Force who was assassinated by the United States in a 2020 drone strike outside Baghdad. Both men were company commanders during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, leading troops into battle to repulse the Iraqi invasion of Khuzestan.

Shamkhani Out?

Iranian media did not indicate why Shamkhani was removed from his post, or if he would be given a new position. He had been SNSC secretary since 2013 and oversaw several key diplomatic deals that helped end some of Iran's geopolitical isolation, including the JCPOA, the 2015 nuclear deal that saw the West lower its economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for Iran accepting limitations on its nuclear power program and forswearing the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

An ethnic Arab from Khuzestan, Shamkhani was a guerilla fighter against the Pahlavi monarchy prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, then joined the nascent IRGC and helped lead the fight against the Iraqi invasion that began in September 1980. He is the only Iranian leadership figure to have served on the brass of both the IRGC and the Iranian Army, and his career has spanned administration across the political spectrum. He was one of the few holdouts in Raisi's government who had previously served under President Hassan Rouhani.

According to some reports in the Western press, Shamkhani was believed to have been implicated in some kind of corruption scandal. The accusation is based on the purported leaking to the Western press of minutes from a meeting between Khamenei and senior clerics and IRGC commanders. Shamkhani has denied the accusations.

However, one anonymous source described as an "Iranian insider" told one Western media outlet that Shamkhani might be considered for a "more important position," rather than removed in disgrace.

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Watch Meteor Burn Bright Green in Skies Above Australia

Meteors are asteroids or specks of interstellar dust that glow brightly as they fall to Earth, heating up in the planet's atmosphere. Even a small rock can contain large amounts of energy, with the 59-foot-wide Chelyabinsk meteor creating an explosion equivalent to 500 kilotons of TNT.

Security cameras in Queensland, Australia, captured footage of a meteor burning brightly in the skies overhead on Saturday night. The footage was posted on Facebook* by Cairns Airport, the international air hub in the state capital.

In the background of the video, a bright white streak can be seen zipping down towards the Earth, which turns bright green as it burns up and gets exponentially brighter. Eventually, it disappears behind a nearby mountain and an even brighter flash can be seen emanating from the area.

Soon, other videos that had also captured the phenomenon began pouring onto social media. The color a meteor burns as friction with the Earth's atmosphere incinerates it is determined by its chemical content. Meteors [that burn green](#), like that seen on Saturday, contain large amounts of magnesium ores, while those that contain primary iron burn yellow.

According to local media, the Queensland authorities are unsure if the meteor impacted the Earth or exploded, and have mounted a hunt for the meteorite.

About 17,000 meteorites survive the [perilous journey](#) through Earth's atmosphere each year, although essentially all are very small and insignificant, aside from a scientific curiosity. Events like the explosion of a meteor over Chelyabinsk, Russia, in 2013, or larger ones like the Tunguska Event in 1908 or the Chicxulub impact 65 million years ago, are exceedingly rare and carry more significant effects for the planet.

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Ukraine 'A Long Way' From Being Allowed to Join NATO - Chancellor Scholz

Ever since the 2014 coup d'etat that was heavily backed by the United States, the Ukrainian government has sought to grow closer to the West by joining key power blocs, including the anti-Russia NATO alliance and the European Union.

In a recent interview with German media, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reaffirmed NATO's longstanding position that Ukraine won't be joining the mutual defense pact anytime soon. When asked about whether or not he would support letting Ukraine join the alliance after the conflict with Russia is concluded, Scholz told journalists that "we are a long way away from there."

Noting that it was "clear to everyone that this doesn't stand on the agenda anytime soon," the German chancellor pointed out that besides NATO member states agreeing that Ukraine should be allowed in at some point, "there is a whole range of requirements belonging to NATO's criteria that Ukraine can't fulfill at present."

While NATO has said it will not [refuse any state entry](#), it does have certain standards for its members. In the past, Ukraine has been refused entry by both NATO and the European Union due to its problems with corruption, transparency, and individual liberties, as well as its topsy-turvy political system, which is presently dominated by radical nationalists as a consequence of the 2014 coup d'etat.

The US backed that coup, which ousted President Vyktor Yanukovich for choosing a Russian association deal over an EU one that would have required a neoliberal-inspired overhaul of Ukrainian finances.

Earlier this month, NATO Secretary-General [Jens Stoltenberg told reporters](#) that all 31 member states had recently agreed to invite Kiev to join them at the end of the present conflict. However, Hungarian President Viktor Orban later disputed Stoltenberg's claim of unanimity, which is required for a new member state to be admitted.

In the past, Ukrainian membership in NATO was also opposed on the grounds that it would [further destabilize relations](#) with Moscow, which has long seen Kiev's turn westward as a security threat. In the months prior to the launching of the special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin made this point clear, drawing a red line at Ukraine becoming a base for NATO weapons.

At its closest point, Ukrainian territory is only about 270 miles away from the Russian capital - a distance that NATO missiles could close in a matter of minutes.

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Report: Jeffrey Epstein Allegedly Tried to Extort Bill Gates Over Extramarital Affair

Jeffrey Epstein, who was arrested for sex trafficking minors and subsequently died in jail, had an array of powerful friends in his rolodex, including former US Presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, as well as the Duke of York Prince Andrew.

A [newly surfaced report](#) has revealed details that allege convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein had once attempted to extort Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates over an extramarital affair after the tech figure failed to participate in a multibillion-dollar charity.

Citing people familiar with the incident, the report claimed the extortion case centered around an alleged romantic affair between Gates and a bridge player since-identified as Mila Antonova. Antonova reportedly first approached Epstein with a business venture idea in which she wanted to start her own business that would teach people how to play bridge. Boris Nikolic, an adviser to Gates at the time, had directed her to Epstein in 2013.

While the financier declined her venture idea, he did agree to pay for her education. He also provided her an apartment to stay in while she was in New York City in 2014. Antonova said she had no interaction with Epstein or anyone else while she stayed there.

By 2017, Epstein reportedly sent an email to Gates requesting he be reimbursed for Antonova's education. A spokesperson for Gates said he did not pay the money, adding Gates had "no financial dealings" with the disgraced financier.

Epstein later allegedly threatened to expose the affair that same year after Gates dodged a philanthropic venture Epstein was trying to establish with JPMorgan Chase. Epstein had hoped to use his relationship with Gates to legitimize himself in the eyes of the bank.

"Mr. Gates met with Epstein solely for philanthropic purposes. Having failed repeatedly to draw Mr. Gates beyond these matters, Epstein tried unsuccessfully to leverage a past relationship to threaten Mr. Gates," a spokesperson for Gates told media.

The alleged affair with Antonova is the second of which Gates has been accused of while he was in his 27-year marriage, the other being an alleged affair of almost two decades that he had with a Microsoft employee.

Gates reportedly met Antonova in 2010 when the two were playing in a bridge tournament together. The two then allegedly shared a short romance while Gates was still married to his wife, philanthropist Melinda French Gates.

Melinda and Gates announced their divorce in May of 2021.

Beginning in 2011, Gates had more than six meetings scheduled with Epstein, including dinners at Epstein's New York townhouse. Gates also flew on Epstein's private jet from New Jersey to Florida in March of 2013. Later that month the two traveled to France together, before meeting again in 2014.

By this time Epstein had already been accused of sexually abusing girls as young as 14 in 2006, and pleaded guilty in 2008 to soliciting and procuring a minor for prostitution.

"I am disgusted with Epstein and what he did," Antonova said, while declining to comment on her alleged relationship with Gates. She later added she was unaware of Epstein's true identity, including his criminal history, and "just thought he was a successful businessman and wanted to help."

"I don't know why he did that," she said. "When I asked, he said something like, he was wealthy and wanted to help people when he could."

An explosive 2018 report by the Miami Herald revealed dozens of more women who were abused by Epstein, and led to his arrest in 2019 on sex trafficking charges. However, he never faced the charges after being found dead in his jail cell on August 10, 2019, at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York. The death was later ruled a suicide.

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Biden-McCarthy Debt Ceiling Talk Yet to Produce Deal as June 1 Deadline Draws Near

Ahead of the latest debt ceiling meeting, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) told reporters the US president would need a deal by "this week" in order for it to pass Congress before "extraordinary measures" set by the Treasury Department start expiring June 1.

US President Joe Biden and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy met late Monday at the White House in order to hammer out a deal to raise the US debt ceiling, 10 days before current measures are set to expire.

McCarthy revealed after the highly-watched meeting that a deal was not yet reached between involved parties but admitted conversations proved "productive," and that they were "better than any other time we've had discussions."

"I did feel the discussion was productive in areas that we have differences of opinion," McCarthy said on Monday evening. "We're going to have the staff to continue to get back together and work on... some of the things that we had talked about."

In a [subsequent statement](#), Biden agreed the get-together proved "productive" but acknowledged "areas of disagreement" remained in place for the time being.

"We reiterated once again that default is off the table and the only way to move forward is in good faith toward a bipartisan agreement," he said.

A potential default would not only put the US economy, as well as the world economy at risk, but it may specifically affect US cities with a large military presence. About 1/6 of US government spending goes to national defense, while a quarter of that spending goes to military personnel, meaning a default could shake the economies of several, if not all, US states.

"A default on the federal debt would be an economic disaster in many ways, but it will especially hit cities with high government employment, so military communities around the country are especially vulnerable," John Mayo, professor of economics, business and public policy at Georgetown University, told [US media](#).

Figures compiled from government data note there were at least 1.7 million Americans employed by the Defense Department at the end of March.

"These are middle-class families that have a high paycheck-to-paycheck living ratio. They don't have a lot of extra income, don't have a lot of savings and if the payments to those families are delayed, they'll have to make really horrible choices."

Ahead of the Monday meeting, McCarthy informed reporters that the negotiation process was "on the right path." At the time, Biden echoed the sentiment and stated he believed the two would make some progress.

Though the tone of the meeting appears to be more optimistic than previously reported, the urgency for both parties to reach an agreement remain amid growing concerns of a potential economic crisis.

While the House of Representatives is scheduled to break for the upcoming holiday weekend, McCarthy announced he would keep the chamber in session for as long as it takes to pass a bill. "We're going to stay and do our job," he said.

Debt limits are periodically raised to account for expense repayments; however, Republicans have repeatedly underscored that in order to avert a default, a deal must also include vast cuts to the US' \$31.4 trillion.

Tapping on past negotiating tactics, the debt ceiling limit is currently being used to ensure vast cuts to government-funded assistance programs, ranging from rental assistance to college aid for everyday Americans.

Monday's meeting came as US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reiterated just how little time remained before "extraordinary measures" implemented by the agency would expire and see the US slowly begin to default. In an earlier meeting Yellen warned it was "highly likely" the US Treasury would not be able to foot its bills by early June without raising the debt ceiling.

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Stunning New Images of the Sun Released

The latest images of the hot ball of plasma that serves as the center of the solar system have offered an exciting look into the sun's photosphere (the sun's surface), as well as a close-up look at a variety of sunspots.

Eight new images taken by the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Daniel K. Inouye Solar Telescope (DKIST) were recently unveiled, giving audiences quite the breathtaking view of our universe's center.

The newly released images show the movement of the sun's plasma, details of its sunspot regions, as well as its convective cells.

The images, however, also displayed the enormous size and power of the [DKIST](#), which is located at the Haleakala Observatory on the Hawaiian island of Maui, and is the world's largest telescope featuring a 13-foot aperture.

Astronomers still aren't sure, exactly, of what creates a sunspot. But the telescope's ability to capture images of the sun in stark detail will help scientists better understand the sun's magnetic field and other causes of solar storms, which are created during explosive events by sunspots.

The sunspots which had their images captured vary in size, however many of them are the size of Earth, if not larger. Sunspots, which are responsible for creating explosive events like solar flares, are the dark and cool areas of the Sun's surface and affect its heliosphere, which has the highest chance of affecting planet Earth.

The DKIST will continue to collect data on the sun and its activity, as the images recently released were taken during its "Operations Commissioning Phase" (OCP), a learning and transitioning period the Haleakala Observatory runs at its fullest capacity.

The continuation of the project is good news too, as sunspot activity is based on an 11-year cycle, when the sun's poles swap places. The sun's most recent cycle began in 2019, and its activity will reach its peak in 2025.

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U-Haul Truck Crashes Near White House Security Barrier - Video

The U-Haul driver has been detained, however it's unclear if their motives were intentional. An investigation into the crash is currently underway.

A U-Haul moving truck crashed into a security barrier near the White House late Monday, prompting officials to carry out evacuations of nearby buildings.

A motive has not been detailed by law enforcement officials; however, local media reported the driver was allegedly taken into custody. No injuries were reported at the scene.

The incident unfolded just before 10 p.m. local time near Lafayette Square, which sits just north of the White House. The Hay-Adams Hotel was evacuated following the crash while other nearby buildings were put on alert or fully evacuated, US media reported.

Video has since emerged on social media showing the truck from a distance.

"There were no injuries to any Secret Service or White House personnel and the cause and manner of the crash remain under investigation," the Secret Service said in a release to US media.

Authorities are investigating what has been reported as a "suspicious package" that was left behind after the crash. Authorities have closed several blocks on H Street for their [investigation](#).

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UPDATE - Driver Charged With Threatening to Kill Biden After Crashing Near White House - Police

(Changes attribution; adds quote, edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The driver of a truck who crashed into a security barrier in Lafayette Square near the White House has been charged with multiple counts, including threatening to kill or harm a president, vice president or family member, the US Park Police said on Tuesday.

"The driver of the vehicle was identified as Sai Varshith Kandula, 19, of Chesterfield, Missouri. Kandula was arrested and charged with assault with a dangerous weapon, reckless operation of a motor vehicle, threatening to kill / kidnap / inflict harm on a president, vice president, or family member, destruction of federal property, and trespassing," the police said in a statement.

The incident happened at about 9:40 p.m. on Monday (13:40 GMT on Tuesday).

The driver may have intentionally struck the security barriers at Lafayette Square, US Secret Service Communications Chief Anthony Guglielmi said on Monday.

Among the items that appear to have been found in the truck are a flag of what appears to be a swastika, a black backpack and a roll of duct tape, CNN reported.

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Driver Charged With Threatening to Kill Biden After Crashing Near White House - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The driver of a truck who crashed into a security barrier in Lafayette Square near the White House has been charged with multiple counts, including threatening to kill or harm a president, vice president or family member, CNN reported on Tuesday, citing the US Park Police.

The man was arrested. He was also charged with assault with a dangerous weapon, reckless operation of a motor vehicle, destruction of federal property and trespassing, the report said.

The incident happened shortly before 10:00 p.m. on Monday (2:00 GMT on Tuesday). Secret Service Uniformed Division officers detained the driver.

The driver may have intentionally struck the security barriers at Lafayette Square, US Secret Service Communications Chief Anthony Guglielmi said on Monday.

Among the items that appear to have been found in the truck are a flag of what appears to be a swastika, a black backpack and a roll of duct tape, CNN reported.

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US House Passes Bill Requiring Interagency Analysis of Economy's Exposure to China

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation requiring the Treasury Department lead an interagency analysis of the exposure of the United States' economy to China's financial sector.

House lawmakers passed the bill, entitled the China Financial Threat Mitigation Act, on Monday evening in a vote of 400-5, with two-thirds support required for passage.

The legislation requires the US Treasury Secretary, in consultation with the heads of the State Department, Federal Reserve, Securities and Exchange Commission and Commodity Futures Trading Commission, to conduct a study on the "exposure of the United States to the financial sector of the People's Republic of China," according to the text of the measure.

The bill requires the report to Congress to cover policies that the United States is taking to protect its interests as China reforms its financial sector, as well as an analysis of risks to US financial stability and global economy emanating from China.

The legislation also requires recommendations for actions the US government or its representatives at international organizations could take to mitigate financial stability risks and protect US interests.

The bill requires the US Treasury Secretary to submit the report to Congress no later than one year after enactment of the legislation. The report shall be unclassified, but may contain a classified annex, according to the bill.

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McCarthy Says Debt Limit Talks With Biden Productive in Area of 'Differences of Opinion'

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said after meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House that both sides had productive talks in areas where they have differences of opinion on raising the US debt limit.

"I did feel the discussion was productive in areas that we have differences of opinion," McCarthy said on Monday evening. "We're going to have the staff to continue to get back together and work on ... some of the things that we had talked about."

McCarthy added that he thinks the tone of his meeting with Biden on Monday evening was better than any other time they have had discussions on raising the debt limit.

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US House Passes Bill Requiring Government Report on Financing of Synthetic Drug Market

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation requiring the US Comptroller General to conduct a study on illicit financing connected to the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and methamphetamine.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Preventing the Financing of Illegal Synthetic Drugs Act, on Monday in a vote of 402-2, with two-thirds support required for passage.

The legislation directs the Comptroller General, who heads the US Government Accountability Office, to conduct a study on "illicit financing in connection with the trafficking of synthetic drugs, including fentanyl and methamphetamine," according to the text of the measure.

More than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses in the United States from January 2021-2022, with more than two-thirds of those deaths involving synthetic opioids like fentanyl, the bill said, citing Center for Disease Control and Prevention data.

The bill requires the study to cover the potential involvement of transnational criminal organizations and terror syndicates in the synthetic drug trade, the overlap of the industry with human trafficking, and the use of online marketplaces and social media for the sale of synthetic drugs.

The legislation also requires the study to cover US government activities to combat illicit finance related to the trafficking of synthetic drugs, including interagency and intergovernmental collaboration.

The bill requires the Comptroller General submit the report to Congress no later than one year after enactment of the legislation.

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US Default Could Prove 'Catastrophic' for Military Services - Chief of Naval Operations

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The United States defaulting on its financial obligations by not raising the debt ceiling could prove catastrophic for its military services, US Navy Chief of Naval Operations Michael Gilday said during a Council on Foreign Relations panel discussion.

"I think that the potential here could be catastrophic for us, and I don't say that lightly," Gilday said on Monday, when asked about the impact on the US military of a potential default.

The statement comes following warnings by the Treasury Department that the United States could default as early as June 1 if the debt ceiling is not raised. President Joe Biden is currently in negotiations with Republican leaders in Congress on the matter, although they have yet to reach an agreement.

A default would have an "immediate and dramatic impact" on the readiness of the services, US Coast Guard Commandant Linda Fagan said during the panel discussion.

Earlier on Monday, Biden met with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy about the debt ceiling, following which both leaders express optimism about the prospect of reaching a deal, although the president underscored that there are still some disagreements.

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US Navy Orders Another T-AO Class Oil Transport Ship For \$736Mln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics National Steel and Shipbuilding has won a more than \$736 million US Navy contract to build a new oil carrier of the T-AO class, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"General Dynamics National Steel and Shipbuilding Company [of] San Diego, California is awarded a \$736,160,588 modification ...contract to exercise the option for the. ...design and construction of T-AO 213," the release said on Monday.

More than half of the work on the contract will be performed in San Diego, California (58%) and the rest at other locations, the release said. Work on the ship is expected to take just under five years and to be completed by March 2028, the release said.

The US Navy currently operates 15 fleet replenishment oilers through Military Sealift Command to provide underway replenishment of fuel to ships at sea and jet fuel for aircraft assigned to aircraft carriers. T-AO class oilers can carry 162,000 tonnes of fuel at speeds of up to 20 knots per hour.

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McCarthy Says Biden Agrees US Debt Too Large, Hopeful Will Reach Deal on Raising Limit

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said during remarks at the White House that he and President Joe Biden agreed that the US national debt is too large and must be addressed, and both are hopeful that they will reach an agreement on

raising the debt limit.

"We both agreed we need to change the trajectory - that our debt is too large - and I think at the end of the day we could find common ground, make our economy stronger, take care of this debt, but more importantly get this government moving again to curb inflation, make us less dependent upon China," McCarthy said alongside Biden on Monday.

Biden also expressed hope that both sides will reach an agreement on raising the debt limit, underscoring that although there are still some disagreements, they have a significant responsibility to arrive at a consensus.

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Biden to Veto Congress' Joint Resolution on Scrapping Student Debt Relief - White House

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - Should Congress pass the joint resolution to scrap the student debt relief reform undertaken by the Biden administration, President Joe Biden will veto it, the White House said in a statement.

"The Administration strongly opposes passage of H.J. Res. 45, a joint resolution to disapprove the Department of Education's Waivers and Modifications of Federal Student Loans," the statement said on Monday. "If Congress were to pass H.J. Res. 45, the President would veto it."

According to the White House, the resolution threatens to deprive more than 40 million Americans of debt relief and weaken the US middle class.

The statement pointed out that nearly 90% of the debt relief would go to Americans earning less than \$75,000 per year while no relief funds will go to individuals or households from the top five percent of incomes.

House lawmakers are expected to vote to repeal Biden's student debt relief as a stand-alone measure on Wednesday afternoon.

On Thursday, the Congressional Budget Office said that the joint resolution would reduce direct spending by about \$320 billion over the next decade.

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DeSantis Spokesperson Rebuffs NAACP Travel Advisory – Report

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) – A spokesperson for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis today dismissed a travel warning issued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, calling the advisory "a stunt" on Monday.

"This is nothing more than a stunt," a DeSantis spokesperson said when asked about the NAACP advisory on Monday while touting the state's robust tourism numbers as evidence of DeSantis' success.

NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson said in a press statement over the weekend that

DeSantis' policies, legislation, and rhetoric are a clear and present danger to African Americans. "Let me be clear - failing to teach an accurate representation of the horrors and inequalities that Black Americans have faced and continue to face is a disservice to students and a dereliction of duty to all," Johnson said. "Under the leadership of Governor Desantis, the State of Florida has become hostile to Black Americans and in direct conflict with the democratic ideals that our union was founded upon. He should know that democracy will prevail because its defenders are prepared to stand up and fight. We're not backing down, and we encourage our allies to join us in the battle for the soul of our nation."

Johnson said DeSantis and his fellow Republicans are openly hostile not just to African Americans but also to LGBTQ+ people and other people of color.

"Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color," he said.

DeSantis has also been engaged in overhauling Florida's educational curriculum to limit any reference or study of critical race theory. Florida banned teaching on the topic in 2021, rejecting it because it invokes a "woke" philosophy and because it explores the history of systemic racism in the United States and its continued effects up to the present day. In addition, DeSantis signed into law restrictions on when, where, and how teachers and administrators can discuss race with students.

Earlier this year, DeSantis called the idea of travel warnings a joke, ridiculous, and "a stunt, a pure stunt," echoing his spokesperson's comments Monday.

According to CBS, The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) warned people if they visited the Sunshine State because of the governor's treatment of immigrants. In a statement, Domingo Garcia, LULA's president, characterized Florida as being a "dangerous, hostile environment for law-abiding Americans and immigrants."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) -

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

* A joint effort with allies and partners to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 jets and then provide Kiev with the fourth generation aircraft is a priority for the United States that will be implemented in the coming months, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

* The EU foreign ministers did not decide during their meeting on a new tranche of military aid to Ukraine and on the 11th sanctions package against Russia, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.

* There is no consensus in NATO regarding prompting Ukraine's membership in the alliance, but the issue will be discussed at the summit in Vilnius, NATO Deputy Secretary-General Mircea Geoana said.

ATTACK ON TURKISH CONSULATE IN NEW YORK

- * An unknown individual smashed windows of the Turkish consulate in New York on Monday morning, a New York Police Department spokesperson told Sputnik.
- * The investigation into the attack is ongoing and the identity of the man who smashed the windows is yet to be determined, Turkey's mission to the United Nations told Sputnik.
- * The US State Department is working with the New York law enforcement authorities on the investigation into the attack and condemns the act of vandalism, spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

- * A Ukrainian sabotage group attack on Russia's Belgorod region on Monday resulted in eight people being injured, Vyacheslav Gladkov, the region's governor, said.
- * Ukraine has lost up to 270 military in the Donetsk direction in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Russia's armed forces delivered a group missile strike at Ukraine's Dnipro airfield with long-range air-launched high-precision weapons, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

- * Finland's state-owned gas company Gasum announced on Monday that due to the inability to resolve the dispute with Russian gas giant Gazprom within the time limits set by a court, it will terminate the long-term contract for the supply of natural gas.
- * New mineral deposits have been discovered in various parts of Syria, and currently work is underway to attract local and foreign investment, Syrian Oil and Mineral Resources Minister Firas Kaddour told Sputnik.

BLACK SEA GRAIN INITIATIVE

- * UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is faced with the unconstructive position of some Western countries regarding the Russian part of the grain exports deal and this complicates the process, but the contacts will continue, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

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US Govt, 7 States Agree on Proposal to Conserve More Water in Colorado River Basin - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US government and seven US states agreed on a proposal designed to combat severe drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin, President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"Today's agreement between the Department of the Interior and seven Colorado River Basin states on a consensus-based approach marks an important step forward in our efforts to protect the stability of the Colorado River System in the face of climate change and historic drought conditions," Biden said.

Biden noted that the US government is deploying record resources to support water conservation and improve the Colorado River's long-term sustainability, benefiting the 40 million people who rely on the Colorado River Basin for agriculture, drinking water, and power.

The Interior Department said in a separate press release that the proposal seeks to conserve 3-million-acre feet of water through 2026. The Interior Department also said it aims to finalize its plans later this year.

The Colorado River impacts communities in California, Arizona, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico.

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Yellen Tells McCarthy Treasury Unable to Pay All Debts as Early as June 1 - Letter

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The latest information indicates that the US Treasury Department will be unable to pay all of its debts as early as June 1, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a letter addressed to US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy on Monday.

"With an additional week of information now available, I am writing to note that we estimate it is highly likely that Treasury will no longer be able to satisfy all of the government's obligations if Congress has not acted to raise or suspend the debt limit by early June, and potentially as early as June 1, Yellen wrote in the letter.

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Ukraine's Best Response After Losing Bakhmut Would Be to Seek Peace - Ex-US State Senator

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will face pressure to launch a new offensive after Russian forces captured the city of Bakhmut, also known as Artyomovsk, but he would be wiser to seek peace and avoid further casualties, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"Russia has won the biggest battle in Europe since World War II," Black said. "Western media were hesitant to acknowledge Ukraine's defeat, but it appears that Zelenskyy lost the city after sustaining crushing losses of manpower and armor. Those losses will pressure Zelenskyy to launch an offensive to prove he still has combat power, though a wiser path might be to seek peace and stop further bloodshed."

On Saturday, Wagner Group head Yevgeny Prigozhin said that Russian forces had gained full control over the city, a fact that was confirmed by the Russian Defense Ministry. Zelenskyy admitted the loss, though later his office retracted the statement.

"Prigozhin's troops, which included paroled prisoners, bore the brunt of the fighting. Throughout the struggle, his cautious battle assessments proved prescient. He refused to claim

complete victory prematurely, often predicting that the fall of the city remained weeks away," Black noted. "Though some stragglers remain in Bakhmut, it appears that most are withdrawing or being driven out. Ukraine continues denying the city's fall, but the areas it holds are trivial; Russia is conducting mopping-up operations at this point."

Black went on to say that while casualties were enormous on both sides, the losses pose a greater problem for Ukraine, since its population is only a quarter that of Russia's.

"It is unclear whether the loss of Bakhmut will impact Ukraine's supposed spring offensive, which has appeared imminent for weeks," he added. "Meanwhile, President Zelenskyy continues his global trips to solicit advanced weapons, none of which has thus far impacted the tide of battle dramatically."

Black pointed out that throughout the struggle for Bakhmut, Western media alternated between dismissing the objective as unimportant or claiming that Ukraine had drawn Russia's Wagner forces into a treacherous killing ground.

"Others recognized that Bakhmut does have considerable strategic value, a fact underscored by Ukraine's willingness to suffer enormous casualties in its defense," he said. "Beyond that, Ukraine's defeat in the epic battle holds great political significance in a presidential election year."

On Saturday, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated the Wagner Group and the Russian armed forces on the liberation of Bakhmut.

The hotly contested city, located north of the city of Donetsk, has been the center of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine for months. Bakhmut is an important transport hub, and prior to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, the city served as a vital center for supplying Ukrainian troops in the region.

Retired Colonel Richard Black was wounded in fierce fighting during the Vietnam War. He flew 269 combat missions as a Marine helicopter pilot, then made 70 ground patrols with the 1st Marine Division. He was a prominent elected member of the Virginia House and Senate.

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TikTok Sues US State of Montana Over Impending Ban on Application - Filing

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Social media company TikTok is suing the US State of Montana in an attempt to prevent enforcement of a new law that would ban the application in the state starting next year, according to a court document filed Monday.

TikTok filed a complaint for declaratory and injunctive relief in the US District Court for the District of Montana, naming Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen as the defendant.

"This action seeks to prevent the State of Montana from unlawfully banning TikTok, a short-form video sharing platform that empowers hundreds of thousands of users in Montana to communicate and express themselves, primarily through creating, sharing, and interacting with short-form videos," the filing said.

Earlier this month, Montana Governor Greg Gianforte signed a bill from the state's legislature that bans companies from allowing TikTok to be downloaded off their application stores in

Montana. The ban is set to take effect January 1, 2024.

The legislation comes amid other efforts across the United States to restrict the use of TikTok amid privacy concerns linked to TikTok's ties to China-based parent company ByteDance.

Montana's ban violates the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the right to freedom of speech, the filing said. The ban is based on "nothing more than unfounded speculation" regarding the app's ties to China, the filing said.

The filing also alleges that Montana's ban is preempted by federal regulatory law, which currently handles national security concerns raised by the legislation. Montana's ban also violates the Commerce Clause of the US Constitution by unduly burdening interstate and foreign commerce through its state-specific restrictions, the filing said.

The lawsuit seeks an order from the court permanently enjoining Montana from implementing or enforcing the TikTok ban, as well as a declaratory judgment that the ban is unconstitutional and preempted by federal law, the filing said.

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Trump Administration Kept Clinton Probe Open Until Final Days in Office - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department under former President Donald Trump kept open an investigation into his political rival Hillary Clinton until the final days of the administration, the New York Times reported on Monday.

Trump's Justice Department kept open its investigation into Clinton's dealings with foreign donors as Secretary of State until just days before Trump left office, the report said, citing newly released documents and interviews with former Justice Department officials.

In January 2021, the US Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas provided two emails advising the closure of their files related to the Clinton probe, prompting the FBI Field Office in Little Rock to consider the matter closed, the documents said.

The investigations were based on accusations that Clinton supported the interests of donors to the Clinton Foundation as part of quid pro quo deals.

The Justice Department did not express great interest in the Clinton probes, frustrating some FBI agents, the report said.

The investigation caused friction between the FBI and Justice Department, with the former accusing the latter of impeding their work, the report also said.

Due to accusations of FBI bias by Trump, the top agent in Little Rock wanted it to be clear that career prosecutors made the decision to close the case, the report added.

All of the evidence obtained during the investigation has been returned or otherwise destroyed, according to the documents.

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Chinese Immigrants Sue Florida Over Law Banning Certain Foreigners From Buying Land - ACLU

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - A leading US civil liberties group filed a lawsuit on Monday against authorities in Florida in an attempt to block a new law that would limit Chinese and other nationals from buying land in the state.

Earlier this month, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed legislation to restrict citizens of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela and Syria from buying farmland or other land near US military bases.

"We're suing Florida over a discriminatory property law that blocks most immigrants from China, Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Russia, and North Korea from buying homes in much of the state. The law singles out Chinese people for the harshest restrictions and penalties," the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said via Twitter.

The ACLU filed the lawsuit on behalf of four Chinese immigrants and a real estate brokerage firm in Florida that primarily serves clients of Chinese decent.

"This lawsuit challenges a new Florida law, SB264, that imposes discriminatory prohibitions on the ownership and purchase of real property based on race, ethnicity, alienage, and national origin — and imposes especially draconian restrictions on people from China," the lawsuit states.

According to the lawsuit, the legislation would force Chinese immigrants to cancel purchases of new homes and register their existing properties with the state under threat of severe penalties.

The complaint argues that the new law stigmatizes Chinese immigrants and their communities, and casts suspicion over anyone of Chinese descent who seeks to buy land in Florida.

The state legislation is slated to take effect on July 1 unless it is blocked by a court.

The US Treasury Department's Office of Investment Security recently proposed a new rule that would require foreign individuals and companies to seek government approval to buy land near eight military bases in the United States, following an attempt by a Chinese firm to build a plant near an Air Force base. The proposed rule, published in the Federal Register, would require the US government to approve attempts by foreign entities to purchase property within 100 miles of eight military bases.

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Wagner Group Allegedly Seeking to Purchase Weapons for Use in Ukraine – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – The Wagner Group private military company (PMC) is allegedly seeking to acquire some weapons from foreign suppliers and transfer them through Mali for use in Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"Wagner is trying to secure its efforts to acquire military equipment for use in Ukraine, including by working with third-party countries where it has a foothold," Miller said during a press briefing.

"[T]here are indications that Wagner has been attempting to purchase military systems from foreign suppliers and route these weapons through Mali as a third party."

However, the United States has not seen yet any indications that these acquisitions have been finalized or executed, Miller added.

On Saturday, Wagner Group head Yevgeny Prigozhin said that Russian forces had gained full control over Bakhmut, also known as Artyomovsk, following 224 days of heavy fighting. The Russian Defense Ministry later confirmed that the liberation of the city had been completed.

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US Takes Over 4,000 Actions to Disrupt Fraud Networks – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – US federal law enforcement agencies completed a three-month-long campaign to disrupt networks used by fraudsters to obtain criminal proceeds, the US Justice Department said on Monday.

Many of the perpetrators involved in the schemes are based overseas, the department said in a statement.

"Over approximately the last three months, law enforcement took over 4,000 actions against individuals responsible for facilitating a range of fraud schemes. These schemes included those that targeted consumers, such as lottery fraud and romance scams, as well as those that targeted businesses or pandemic funds," the statement said.

The actions taken by law enforcement included criminal prosecutions, civil actions, and warning letters. They were designed to punish those who knowingly assisted fraudsters and to advise those who may have been unknowingly helping fraudsters that their conduct furthered crime, according to the statement.

"These actions are intended to deter overseas fraudsters from relying on U.S.-based individuals to facilitate schemes and thereby reduce the harm caused by foreign fraud operations," the statement said.

Agencies participating in the campaign issued over 4,000 letters warning people. They also filed 12 civil or administrative actions and imposed criminal charges against more than 25 individuals for knowingly receiving and forwarding victim funds or otherwise laundering fraud proceeds.

In one case, law enforcement in the state of Massachusetts charged a defendant for using a scheme that allowed him to create dozens of shell companies and, using their business bank accounts, to launder approximately \$35 million.

In another case, an individual in North Carolina was charged with facilitating an international, multimillion-dollar tech support fraud, the statement said.

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State Dept Says Provision of F-16s to Kiev 'Priority,' to Be Implemented in Coming Months

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - A joint effort with allies and partners to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16s and then provide Kiev with the fourth generation aircraft is a priority for the United States that will be implemented in the coming months, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"I don't have any announcements about when or how that will happen, what countries they'll [F-16s] come from, but it's a priority for us and we will begin to implement that in the coming months," Miller told reporters.

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US Condemns Vandalism Against Turkish House in New York - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is working with New York law enforcement authorities on the probe into the attack on the Turkish House and condemns the vandalism, spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

On Monday morning, an unknown male individual smashed windows of the Turkish House in New York, a New York Police Department spokesperson told Sputnik. The man fled in an unknown direction, and no one was arrested. The building also houses the Turkish mission to the United Nations.

"We have seen these reports of vandalism at the Turkish House in New York City. I can tell you the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service is working with local law enforcement authorities on the investigation, we condemn the vandalism," Miller told reporters.

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UN Spokesman on Possible F-16 Jets Deliveries to Kiev: 'Our Aim is to See End to Conflict'

UNITED NATIONS, May 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations' objective is to end the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in line with the UN Charter, the spokesperson for the world body, Stephane Dujarric, said on Monday.

"We've not been commenting on the various shipments of weapons into a theater of war, and as the Secretary-General repeatedly said; our aim is to see an end to this conflict, an end to this war, in line with the charter, international law and relevant GA [General Assembly] resolutions," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric made the comment in response to a question on whether UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was concerned over the potential deliveries by the United States and its European allies of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine.

The NATO allies recently pledged to supply Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets, the latest addition to the list of lethal weapons the collective West has provided to Ukraine as it allegedly gears up to undertake a counter-offensive against Russian forces.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said the potential transfer of F-16 jets to Ukraine raises the question of NATO's involvement in the conflict.

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US Not Considering Lifting Sanctions on Chinese Defense Minister - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning to ease any sanctions on China, including on its defense minister, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

When asked whether the State Department is considering lifting sanctions on China's Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu, Miller said: "No, we are not."

"We are not planning to lift sanctions on him or on China more broadly," Miller told reporters.

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Western States Meddling in Sudan Affairs at Fault for Crisis - Russian Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Anna Evstigneeva said on Monday that the meddling of Western states in Sudan's internal affairs is largely responsible for the ongoing crisis in that country.

"It is our view that to a large extent the conflict is a result of mismanagement when it comes to the political settlement in Sudan, and a large degree of responsibility belongs with those Western countries who for a very long time thought that they had the right to interfere in the internal affairs of the country," Evstigneeva said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Instead of allowing the political process to unfold at its own pace and as per the will of the Sudanese people, Western states chose to force imposed solutions, which were neither in line with the country's political culture or favored by a significant portion of the population, she said.

Evstigneeva lamented the fact that the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission forced the process in which the military transferred its authority to rule to a civilian government, noting that Sudan has been subjected to "questionable democratic formulas."

"We continue thinking that the Sudanese need to have the full right not just to make decisions as regards the future of the country and the people but also to be fully responsible for them," Evstigneeva said.

The Russian envoy also emphasized the necessity to avoid a repetition of the "Libyan scenario" of foreign military intervention in Sudan, as it would risk destabilizing the African continent once again and create another catastrophe in the country.

Russia is in contact with the Sudanese authorities and stands ready to assist the people of Sudan upon request, Evstigneeva said, adding that Moscow would not interfere in the country's

internal affairs.

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Axiom Private Crew With 2 Saudi Astronauts Arrives at International Space Station - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Two American and two Saudi astronauts arrived at the International Space Station (ISS) on the Axiom Mission-2 (Ax-2), the second all-private space mission into orbit, NASA said in an official blog statement on Monday.

"Axiom Mission 2 astronauts Peggy Whitson, John Shoffner, Ali Alqarni and Rayyanah Barnawi arrived at the International Space Station at 9:12 am EDT [Eastern Daylight Time] Monday, May 22, on the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft," NASA said.

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket propelled the company's Dragon spacecraft carrying Ax-2 crew members Commander Peggy Whitson, Pilot John Shoffner and Mission Specialists Ali Alqarni and Rayyanah Barnawi into orbit on a mission to conduct more than 20 scientific experiments on the ISS, the space agency said.

ISS commander, Russian cosmonaut Sergey Prokopyev welcomed the visiting Axiom crew to the space station.

"Welcome on board, dear friends. So nice to have you on board," he said. The visitors raised the number of personnel on the ISS to eleven," Prokopyev said.

Whitson, a veteran NASA astronaut, was the only new crew member who had been in space before. Alqarni is a Saudi fighter pilot and Barnawi is the first Saudi woman in space. The Axiom crew plans to depart the space station for their return to Earth on May 30, NASA said.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden to Pardon Civil Rights Activist Marcus Garvey - Letter

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - A group of US lawmakers led by Congresswoman Yvette Clarke is urging President Joe Biden to pardon black civil rights activist Marcus Garvey for a 1923 mail fraud conviction, according to a letter shared by Clarke's office on Monday.

"We write with due respect to express our strong support for the April 18, 2023, request for a posthumous pardon of Marcus Mosiah Garvey's 1923 conviction for fraudulent use of the mail, submitted to your administration," the lawmakers said in the letter to Biden.

Garvey, born in Jamaica, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Garvey's works have influenced civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela, the letter said.

Garvey's mail fraud case was marred by prosecutorial and governmental misconduct, leading former US President Calvin Coolidge to commute Garvey's sentence, the letter said. However, Garvey was then deported to Jamaica and barred from returning to the United States.

"In light of Marcus Garvey's sustained efforts to uplift and empower peoples of African descent, his determination to build communities through economic independence, and his lasting impact on society, we find it imperative that Mr. Garvey be exonerated by way of a posthumous pardon," the letter said.

The pardon request offers the Biden administration an opportunity to deliver on its inaugural promise of delivering racial justice, the letter added.

The letter was signed by 23 members of Congress, including Clarke, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Barbara Lee, James McGovern, Sheila Jackson Lee and Cori Bush.

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US Asks Sudan Warring Parties to Respect Ceasefire, Allow Humanitarian Aid - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 22 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Monday called on the warring parties in Sudan to abide by the ceasefire agreed in Saudi Arabia and not obstruct humanitarian assistance work in the country.

"This past weekend, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States announced that the Sudanese Security Forces agreed to a short-term ceasefire and humanitarian arrangement. We call on both parties to fulfill their obligations under the seven-day ceasefire and allow for humanitarian aid and relief assistance to reach those in desperate need," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Thomas-Greenfield expressed concern over multiple reports of civilians being targeted as well as of airstrikes on hospitals and noted the necessity of urgently working to bring back peace and stability to the country.

The United States will continue to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, the African Union, the League of Arab States and other entities involved in the peace and humanitarian efforts in Sudan and South Sudan, Thomas-Greenfield said.

Washington remains committed to providing support to the more than 250,000 Sudanese who fled to neighboring countries and the 840,000 internally displaced as a result of the armed clashes, she added.

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Only 63% of Americans Have Money to Cover a \$400 Emergency - Fed Survey

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - About a third of Americans do not have enough cash even to cover a \$400 emergency, a Federal Reserve survey on living standards shows, as citizens in the world's largest economy continue to see their living standards eroded by inflation.

"The share of adults who reported that they would cover a \$400 emergency expense using cash or its equivalent was 63 percent. This was down 5 percentage points from a high in 2021,"

said the report on the Fed's Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, or SHED, released on Monday.

The survey, conducted on 11,000 American adults, noted that 13% would be unable to meet a \$400 emergency expense by any method — a number the Fed said was “slightly higher” than previously.

The survey also noted that 73% of adults reported doing okay or living comfortably financially in the fourth quarter of 2022. That was, however, down 5 percentage points from the previous year and among the lowest levels observed since 2016, the central bank said.

“Consistent with these changes in overall financial well-being, fewer adults reported having money left over after paying their expenses,” the SHED report said. “Fifty-four percent of adults said that their budgets had been affected ‘a lot’ by price increases.”

Those disproportionately impacted by higher prices include parents living with children under 18, Black adults, Hispanic adults, and those with disabilities.

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Federal Reserve's Bullard Sees 2 More Interest Rate Hikes Totaling 50 Basis Points

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said on Monday that he expects another two interest rate hikes totaling 50 basis points (bps) in all, in the US central bank's fight against inflation.

“This year, I am expecting two more rate hikes,” Bullard said in a live-streamed speech. “The Fed will have to go higher on the policy rate, perhaps 50 bps more [in] hiking this year. I think we're going to have to grind higher with the policy rate in order to put enough downward pressure on inflation to return inflation to target in a timely manner.”

The Fed has raised interest rates by ten times since the end of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2022, adding a total of 500 basis points, or 5%, that has brought rates to a peak of 525 basis points, or 5.25%.

After its last hike of 50 basis points or 0.25%, the Fed said it will “closely monitor” data in the coming months and assess their effectiveness in helping the United States return to its inflation target of 2%. That had given the Fed's watchers hope that it could call for a pause in its next rate decision on June 14.

Bullard has, however, been suggesting that the interest rate hikes need to continue.

“The core measures of inflation have not changed much in the recent months,” Bullard said. “Households are still flush [with money] ... and ... will continue to support consumer spending. If inflation is not controlled, the Fed will have to do a lot more and should err on the side of doing more.”

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 year 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, those numbers were more than twice the Fed's appetite for inflation, which stands at

2% per year.

"I want to fight inflation while the labor market is strong," Bullard said.

The Fed has identified robust job and wages growth as two key drivers of inflation. The labor market has been the juggernaut of US economic recovery from the pandemic, with hundreds of thousands of jobs being added without fail since June 2020 to make up for the initial loss of 20 million jobs to the pandemic. Average monthly wages have also grown without a stop since May 2021.

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Biden Taps 3 Candidates to Serve on US Federal Communications Commission - White House

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is nominating three candidates to potentially serve as commissioners on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the White House said on Monday.

Biden intends to nominate Anna Gomez, Geoffrey Starks and Brendan Carr as FCC Commissioners, the White House said in a statement.

The FCC, an independent government agency overseen by Congress, is led by five commissioners appointed to five-year terms by the president. However, terms may be extended to the end of the session of Congress following term expiration.

Starks and Carr currently serve as FCC commissioners, with their terms extendable until January 3, 2024 and January 3, 2025, respectively. They serve alongside FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel and Commissioner Nathan Simington. The FCC has one vacant commissioner position.

The third nominee, Anna Gomez, serves as a Senior Advisor for International Information and Communications Policy in the State Department's Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy. Gomez has also worked at the FCC, including as Deputy Chief of the International Bureau.

The FCC may not have more than three commissioners in the same political party; Rosenworcel and Starks are Democrats, while Carr and Simington are Republicans.

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Pennsylvania Man Convicted of Torture, Operating Illegal Weapons Plant - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - A Pennsylvania man faces a sentence of life in prison after a federal jury found him guilty of torturing an Estonian citizen for 39 days as well as illegally producing and exporting weapons in Iraq, the US Justice Department said on Monday.

"According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Ross Roggio, 54, of Stroudsburg, arranged for Kurdish soldiers to abduct and detain the victim at a Kurdish military compound where Roggio suffocated the victim with a belt, threatened to cut off one of his

fingers, and directed Kurdish soldiers to repeatedly beat, tase, choke and otherwise physically and mentally abuse the victim over a 39-day period," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The victim was employed at a weapons factory that Roggio was developing in the Kurdistan region of Iraq with an intention to manufacture M4 automatic rifles and Glock 9mm pistols, the release said.

The Justice Department said Roggio made the firearms, trained foreign fighters and illegally exported weapons parts that the US departments of Commerce and State monitor and control for export, the release also said.

Roggio is slated to be sentenced on August 23, according to the release.

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Almost 60,000 Pounds Of Chemicals Lost In Rail Shipping – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – Almost 60,000 pounds of chemicals used as fertilizer and an explosive became missing during a rail trip from the US state of Wyoming to California, NBC News said on Monday, citing federal records.

A rail car with ammonium nitrate left a plant operated by the Dyno Nobel company in Wyoming on April 12. The company's representative filed a relevant report on the issue with the National Response Center on May 10.

The chemical was released "due to an unknown cause," according to the report. The incident was discovered when the empty car arrived at a small town in California over 1,000 miles away from the plant, it added.

Ammonium nitrate has been a key ingredient used in terror attacks and fatal accidents, according to the news report.

However, Kristen South, a spokesperson for Union Pacific, the rail company that was transporting the chemical, reassured that it should not threaten the public.

"The fertilizer is designed for ground application and quick soil absorption. If the loss resulted from a railcar leak over the course of transportation from origin to destination, the release should pose no risk to public health or the environment," South said, as quoted by NBC News.

She noted that the investigation is ongoing, and there is no evidence of any criminal or malign activity.

A representative for Dyno Nobel told local media in California that they believe that the loss was a result of leakage while the rail car was in transit.

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US, Partners Launch Task Force for Maritime Security Training in Middle East – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its partners launched a new task for maritime security training in the Middle East, the US Naval Forces Central Command said on Monday.

The Combined Task Force (CTF) 154 was commissioned during a ceremony at the US 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. It is CMF's fifth task force. The fourth Combined Task Force, CTF 153, was established in April 2022 for maritime security in the Red Sea.

"The U.S.-led multinational partnership, Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), established a new task force May 22 that will train partner navies and improve operational capabilities to enhance maritime security in the Middle East," the statement said.

The training will take place at various locations across the Middle East, enabling more CTF partner nations to participate in training programs without ships or aircraft, particularly during courses that are facilitated ashore, it added.

The training will include maritime awareness, maritime law, maritime interdiction, maritime rescue and assistance, and leadership development. Each training opportunity will be tailored to meet partner requests ranging from basic to advanced levels, the statement said.

CMF is a multinational partnership established in 2001 to combat illicit non-state actors on the high seas and promote security, stability, and prosperity, as well as to counter the threat of piracy in the region. Headquartered in Bahrain, the partnership consists of 38 member nations, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Yemen.

CMF is the largest multinational naval partnership in the world, according to the US Naval Forces Central Command.

Earlier this month, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said that in the coming weeks, the US will seek to increase coordination and interoperability of the international maritime security construct in the Arabian Gulf amid alleged Iranian interference with commercial maritime activity.

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FCC Head Says Encourages US Congress to Pass Bill to Streamline Space Industry Regulation

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chief Nathan Simington on Monday urged US lawmakers to pass the Satellite and Telecommunications (SAT) Streamlining Act, which would reform the FCC's regulation of the space industry.

"I strongly encourage Congress to adopt the SAT Streamlining Act," Simington said during remarks at a Hudson Institute event.

The bill requires the FCC to clear its "logjams" in the processing of satellite license applications and modifications, Simington said. The legislation also limits the amount of information provided to the FCC by satellite operators to only that which is necessary to inform a commission

determination, Simington said.

In addition, the bill requires the FCC to adopt a framework for orbital debris mitigation for satellites that are harmonized with a whole-of-government approach, Simington said.

The legislation was introduced and sponsored by House Energy and Commerce Chair Cathy Rodgers.

The FCC faces challenges keeping up with the pace of innovation in the emerging space industry due to "outdated rules" that are ill-equipped to deal with current marketplace realities, Rodgers said in a summary of the bill. The SAT Streamlining Act will improve the FCC's processes to ensure greater certainty, transparency, and flexibility to satellite operators, the summary said.

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Suspect in Attack on Turkish Consulate in NY Not Yet Identified, Probe Ongoing – Mission

NEW YORK CITY, May 22 (Sputnik) - The investigation into Monday's attack on the Turkish consulate in New York is still ongoing and the identity of the man who smashed windows is yet to be determined, the country's mission to the United Nations told Sputnik.

"The investigation of the process and the identity of the attacker is still ongoing," spokesperson Gul Kiratli said, when asked if the identity has been established and if the attack is connected to the Turkish presidential election.

On Monday morning, an unknown male individual smashed windows of the Turkish consulate in New York, a New York Police Department spokesperson told Sputnik. The man fled in an unknown direction, and no one was arrested.

The building also houses the Turkish mission to the United Nations.

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Biden to Meet With McCarthy for Debt Ceiling Talks at 21:30 GMT - White House

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy later today to continue negotiations on raising the United States' debt ceiling, the White House said on Monday.

Biden will meet with McCarthy at 5:30 p.m. ET (21:30 GMT), according to the White House daily schedule.

The meeting comes following Biden's return from a trip to Japan for a Group of Seven (G7) summit. Biden postponed previously planned stops of the trip to return to the US for negotiations to avoid default, which the US Treasury Department has warned could occur as early as June.

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Swing State Voters Would Rather Not See Biden, Trump Run for Re-Election in 2024 - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Focus groups involving voters from so-called "swing" US states found that every single one of them would rather not see President Joe Biden or former-President Donald Trump run for re-election in 2024, the Washington Post reported on Monday.

Many among the focus group members offered dire assessments of Biden's cognitive and physical abilities, with some pointing out to his advanced age and others noting his possible dementia, the report said.

Nevertheless, the focus groups found that some of the participants at least opted to reject both candidates, the report said.

Nine out of fifteen respondents said they would rather vote for Biden, whereas three said they would cast their ballots in favor of Trump; the remaining respondents said they would either abstain from voting or find a third-party candidate, the report said.

The focus groups appear to demonstrate that although voters have apparent concerns over Biden's health and age on his ability to lead the nation, they would prefer having him as president than giving Trump the opportunity to lead the country again, the report added.

The focus groups included eight Independent, four Democrat and three Republican ones, including from the US states of Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona and Wisconsin, according to the report.