

9/28/23 Thursday

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Photo: Taiwan Unveils 'Narwhal', First Domestically-Made Submarine

The government in Taiwan introduced its first domestically-made submarine on Thursday, the newest part of its effort to grow its naval forces amid its preparations for what it claims is a coming attack by the Chinese mainland.

The new submarine, dubbed the Narwhal, was unveiled in a ceremony in the southern port of Kaohsiung, with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in attendance as well as Sandra Oudkirk, the director of the American Institute in Taiwan, which serves as the de facto US embassy on the island.

"Building indigenous submarines, starting from scratch, is a long and complicated journey," Tsai said. "But today, we did it."

Narwhal is the first sub in Taiwan's Indigenous Defense Submarine program, weighing in at nearly 3,000 tons of displacement and 230 feet in length. Eight submarines are planned in the class, which can carry anti-ship torpedoes and sea mines. The subs are powered by diesel-electric motors and built in part using technology sold by the US and UK.

In the 1990s, Taipei attempted to buy eight submarines from the United States, which rejected the request over fears it would inflame tensions with the Chinese mainland.

However, by 2014, Washington had agreed to help Taiwanese designers create an indigenously-made sub, and in 2018, then-US President Donald Trump approved the necessary technology transfers, which included MK-48 Mod6 torpedoes and reportedly also a version of the AN/BYG-1 submarine combat management system used in US nuclear-powered attack subs.

Taiwan currently has four submarines in active service: two Tench-class submarines built by the United States in the late 1940s and two Zwaardvis-class subs built by the Netherlands in the 1980s.

Ret. Taiwanese Navy Adm. Huang Shu-kuang, the director of Taiwan's submarine program and a former chief of staff of the Taiwanese military, told media that the Narwhal was "a defensive submarine that safeguards our crucial sea space and protects our shipping lanes in the ocean."

The government on Taiwan is all that remains of the Republic of China, which once ruled all of China between the abdication of the last Chinese emperor in 1912 and the victory of communist forces in the civil war in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established in Beijing.

US forces stopped the Chinese Red Army from invading Taiwan and reuniting it with the mainland, and even after Washington [switched its recognition](#) of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, it has [continued to funnel weapons](#) to the Taipei government.

The Chinese government has strongly denounced the US' actions, which it says are interference in internal Chinese affairs and exacerbate the risk of military conflict.

After then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [visited the island in August 2022](#), Chinese forces staged massive military drills in the waters surrounding Taiwan, including firing ballistic missiles over the island.

Beijing has outlined its own peaceful plan for reunification with Taiwan that includes a “One Country, Two Systems” arrangement similar to that used to reintegrate Hong Kong and Macau into the PRC. The two islands in the Pearl River Delta were formerly European colonies seized from China centuries ago.

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SpaceX Receives Contract for Starshield, Pentagon’s Version of Starlink Satellite Network

The Pentagon has increasingly leaned on the private sector to pioneer new high-tech tools for the US military to adopt and incorporate, creating fertile ground for firms like Elon Musk’s SpaceX to win lucrative new contracts, an expert told Sputnik.

SpaceX has received its first contract from the US military to provide satellite communications using the Starshield system, a militarized version of the Starlink internet network. Musk recently furrowed brows at the Pentagon after refusing to allow Starlink to be used by the Ukrainian military for an attack on Crimea.

Space Exploration Technologies Corp., better known as SpaceX, received a one-year, \$70 million contract from the US Space Force (USSF) at the beginning of the month to begin work on Starshield, the company confirmed following reports in US media. It is one of 18 companies competing for some \$900 million in contracts for the USSF’s “Proliferated Low Earth Orbit” program over the next five years.

“The SpaceX contract provides for Starshield end-to-end service (via the Starlink constellation), user terminals, ancillary equipment, network management and other related services,” Space Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek told US media.

The contract follows a June deal with the Pentagon to provide an unspecified number of Starlink ground terminals for use in Ukraine. SpaceX has cooperated with Kiev to give navigation and communications support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine since the launch of Russia’s special operation in early 2022, but the company has garnered criticism in the West for [refusing to provide service](#) in the Donbass or Crimea, territories now a part of the Russian Federation, over fears that a Ukrainian attack there could trigger a dramatic escalation.

“Why am I in this war?” Musk reportedly told his biographer, Walter Isaacson, according to a recent interview with the writer in US media. “I, you know, created Starlink so people could chill and watch Netflix movies and play video games. I did not mean to create something that might cause a nuclear war.”

In that same interview, Isaacson noted that Musk created Starshield last year so he could [give the Pentagon direct control](#) over Starlink satellites.

“What he did, which I think is the right outcome, is he decided to sell and give total control over a certain amount of Starlink equipment, Starlink services to the US military so that he no longer controls the geofencing. He no longer controls the terms of use,” Isaacson said.

“And he's even created something called ‘Starshield,’ which is a military version of the Starlink satellite, and so I think that was his way of saying, ‘I got to get out of this. Even I don't believe I should have this much power,’” the biographer added.

Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense, told Sputnik that the Starshield project was “a natural progression” of Musk’s growing entwinement with the US military apparatus.

“It helps his overall SpaceX business a great deal. He’s able to manufacture these satellites very, very rapidly. He has the basic know-how to get it done,” Maloof said. “This is the value of work of the joint venture, if you will, between the military and the commercial sectors. It would take years for the military itself just to do that work, so it has come to rely more and more on the commercial sector to do its highly classified work based upon what its particular mission might be. And this train of satellites, Starshield, will also then be magnified into the military version of a space train of satellites that will orbit the Earth and be capable of doing whatever they need to have done in that military sphere.”

“The military was impressed with Starlink, the commercial version for communications, data processing and what-have-you. Starshield has been an outgrowth of that for specific military and intelligence programs. So this is just the initial cut, and I’m sure it will expand very, very rapidly, because that technology is readily available commercially, rather than the Defense Department going through an entire research and development process,” Maloof explained, adding that the Pentagon would be able to modify the satellites as it desires, such as encrypting them.

“Space is the fastest growing area right now in the defense budget. And it’s just going to increase because that’s basically where warfare is taking us these days. And both Russia and China, and other countries that have [growing space capabilities](#), are now seeing where they’re going to be heading in the future for communications, for target acquisition and locations, very, very rapidly. And as a consequence, it’s naturally going to lead to more of an SDI or ‘space defense initiative’ that will grow from that to protect those satellites over time,” he said. Maloof said he thought Musk’s standing with the US military sphere would “inevitably expand” after getting the Starshield contract.

“Having come up with this concept for fast communication data access and the ability for laser communication among the satellites themselves as they’re orbiting the Earth is phenomenal,” he said of Musk. “He can build upon that technology, and I’m sure technically he has the people and wherewithal to expand that. I see an expansion rather than any retraction.”

“The space program in the military has become one of the fastest-growing areas today, and I think Russia and China have recognized that because they’re doing their own. So it’s not just the US in this business. And in some respects, the US is behind what Russia and China have [achieved just in hypersonics](#), so space has become the new thing now, and I think we’re going to see that there’s nowhere to go but up, as far as increasing in missions and in complexity and certainly in spending.”

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Menendez 'Will Not Resign' Amid Bribery Charges in Spite of Demand by Over Half of Dem Senators

Although Menendez remains committed to not stepping down from his congressional post, he was earlier forced to "temporarily" resign from his role as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee due to standing Democratic Conference rules.

US Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) has remained intransigent in the face of growing calls for him to step down from office after being indicted on federal bribery charges.

"He will not resign," US Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) told reporters on Thursday, following a private lunch between Menendez and Senate Democrats. The New Jersey senator reportedly didn't say if he intended to seek reelection in 2024.

"I think what we all really have to realize is [that] the rule of law is for all of us. No matter what you may think, no matter what I may think or any of us may think," Manchin said. "He is going to vigorously defend himself."

Several other Democratic lawmakers who spoke with US media after the meeting indicated they weren't swayed by Menendez's 15-minute speech about his situation, and suggested the majority of people in the room felt the same way.

Menendez refused to tell the media what he said in the meeting, replying that it was "just for the caucus."

On Friday, Menendez and his wife, Nadine Arslanian, were [indicted on a slew](#) of federal corruption charges for allegedly accepting bribes. Federal investigators seized \$480,000 in cash and more than \$100,000 in gold bars from their home, along with a Mercedes C300 convertible - all alleged to be part of the bribes. They were arraigned on Tuesday and released on bond, with the court confiscating their passports.

Menendez has [strongly denied](#) the allegations, saying the cash was withdrawn from his personal bank account and that the stockpiled money was an old family practice derived from their persecution under the regime of Fulgencio Batista, a US-backed dictator whose rule in Cuba forced Menendez's parents to flee the island in 1953.

The list of [Democrats demanding Menendez's](#) resignation has grown, including 29 US senators - the majority of the caucus - as well as New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and other top party leaders in the Garden State, and US Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the former speaker of the House. Notably, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has not joined the chorus, saying that Menendez "has a right to due process and a fair trial."

If Menendez does step down or is removed from office, Murphy will have to appoint someone else to serve the remainder of his term.

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Over Half of US Voters 'Very Concerned' About Biden's Cognitive Health - Poll

In a recent poll of US voters by an American media company, more than half of respondents said they were “very concerned” about the cognitive health of US President Joe Biden, reflecting broad dissatisfaction with the octogenarian’s presumed position as the Democratic Party’s nominee for the 2024 presidential elections.

The poll, conducted by NewsNation/Decision Desk HQ and [released on Thursday](#), mostly focused on the Republican Party’s presidential primary race, but included two questions about Biden, the present head of state and presumed opponent of any GOP candidate who triumphs over their peers.

One asked voters: “How concerned would you be about Joe Biden’s cognitive health affecting his ability to serve another term as president effectively?”

Of those who responded, 52.21% said they were “very concerned” and another 22.1% said they were “somewhat concerned” about the 80-year-old leader’s cognitive health. Another 12.51% said they were “a little concerned” and 13.19% said they didn’t care at all about Biden’s cognitive health.

When the November 2024 election comes underway, Biden will be 81 years old - 15 days short of his 82nd birthday; by the time his term ends, assuming he completes it, Biden will be 87, as his birthday is in late November and presidential terms end the January after the election.

The other question about Biden was: “If Joe Biden is the Democratic nominee in 2024, would his age impact your decision about who to vote for?” To this, 40.17% said it would “strongly impact” their decision and another 18.84% said it would impact it somewhat. A little over 13% said it would slightly impact their decision, while 27.79% of respondents said Biden’s age wouldn’t affect their decision at all.

The pollsters also asked an identical question about former US President Donald Trump, the eldest of the GOP primary candidates and clear leader of the pack in terms of approval.

While Trump is just three years younger than Biden at 77 years of age, 38.8% said they were “very concerned” about his cognitive health and 20.76% said they were somewhat concerned. Just under 23% said they weren’t concerned at all about Trump’s health.

Trump has himself pushed back on the idea that Biden is too old. During a recent interview with a conservative radio show, Trump said Biden’s problem isn’t that he is too old but that he is “grossly incompetent.”

Biden has long been criticized for his tendency to gaffe, but more recently [that scrutiny has focused on moments](#) when Biden doesn’t seem to be mentally present, becoming confused during simple tasks or answering questions in bizarre ways. Several GOP lawmakers have called for Biden to be forced to pass a cognitive proficiency test, although the White House physician has given the president a [clean bill of physical and mental health](#).

While many of the poll respondents fretted over Biden’s age, they also seemed nonplussed by the Republican options to oppose him, too. Separate questions about voters’ attitudes toward each GOP presidential primary candidate found that more were either opposed to the candidate or were unsure - including Trump. Still, a strong plurality, 44.2%, felt Trump posed the best chance of beating Biden in an election.

The margin of error for the poll was 3.1%.

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Sparks Fly on Day One of US House's Biden Impeachment Hearing: What Did We Learn?

Battle lines were drawn on the first day of impeachment inquiry hearings in Washington, DC, with Republicans attempting to connect the dots between the US president and his son while Democrats claim the proceedings are a distraction from more pressing issues.

Members of the House of Representatives convened in the nation's capital Thursday for day one of impeachment hearings against US President Joe Biden.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy initiated the inquiry last week after a monthslong campaign from conservative Republicans, but Democrats have dismissed the hearings as a political stunt. Sputnik has summarized and contextualized some of the key claims from today's proceedings to help separate fact from fiction and innuendo from actuality.

Outbursts, Interruptions & High Tensions

A combative atmosphere prevailed throughout the proceedings, with Democrats questioning the very basis for the inquiry. Early on in the day, Democratic representatives held up large placards featuring quotes from various Republicans casting an unflattering light on Speaker McCarthy's management of the chamber's Republican majority.

"These folks don't have a plan," read one sign quoting Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY) blasting Republican Freedom Caucus members who insisted on the hearing. "This is a whole new concept of individuals that just want to burn the whole place down," read another quoting McCarthy.

"It's hard to grasp the complete derangement of this moment," proclaimed Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), the highest-ranking Democrat on the House's oversight committee, calling the inquiry a "baseless impeachment drive against President Biden."

Republicans were equally feisty, if not more so. Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC) [adopted Trumpian language](#) when she proclaimed Democratic attempts to exonerate President Biden were "complete and total bullshit."

"Hunter Biden referred to access to his father as the keys to his 'family's only asset,'" said Mace. "Those words are going to come back and haunt Hunter Biden and his family forever."

Republicans have pointed to [exotic financial arrangements](#) on the part of the Biden family, including the establishment of over 20 shell companies to manage income.

Still No Proof of Wrongdoing by Biden

Although his family's accounting maneuvers may seem alien to most Americans of average means, observers point out the GOP has not yet uncovered smoking gun evidence of any crime by Biden.

Republicans' own witnesses admitted as much.

"I am not here today to even suggest that there was corruption, fraud or wrongdoing," said Bruce Dubinsky, a forensic accountant and founder of Dubinsky Consulting. "More information needs to be gathered before I can make such an assessment."

"I do not believe that the current evidence would support articles of impeachment," said Jonathan Turley, a noted legal analyst and professor at George Washington University Law School. "That is something that an inquiry has to establish."

The US Constitution provides for the impeachment of a president for "Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors."

Although concrete evidence of alleged crimes committed by President Biden may (or may not) be yet to emerge, Republicans have succeeded recently in uncovering some unflattering details. Biden previously claimed to have no knowledge of or involvement with his son's business dealings. Republicans say [testimony](#) suggesting the US president attended dinners and listened in on foreign business calls [demonstrates otherwise](#).

Biden's [use of aliases](#) in email correspondence during his time as vice president has also been characterized by conservative critics as suspicious. Meanwhile, [emails showing](#) that Delaware Assistant US Attorney Lesley Wolf blocked a probe of Biden as part of a FARA (Foreign Agents Registration Act) investigation have been interpreted by Republicans as suggesting the current president received favorable treatment or protection from scrutiny.

All Eyes on Hunter

President Biden's son Hunter Biden is set to face a federal court [next week](#) on gun charges in what is the first-ever prosecution of the child of a sitting US president. The younger Biden's lifestyle, including dalliances with prostitutes and addiction to crack cocaine, has generated significant headlines and saw Republicans frequently invoke him throughout the course of the day.

Republicans' framework for their probe, released the night before, outlined a series of questions to be investigated, with the fourth one reading:

"Did Joe Biden abuse his power as President to impede, obstruct, or otherwise hinder investigations (including Congressional investigations) or the prosecution of Hunter Biden?"

Although conceding they weren't inherent proof of "illicit" gains, Dubinsky claimed the Biden family's complex financial arrangements raised questions of fraud and created a "smokescreen" around Hunter Biden.

Meanwhile, Democrats characterized the focus on the younger Biden as a major weakness of Republicans' efforts. Rep. Shontel Brown (D-OH) inquired about the "primary flaw" of GOP claims. Democratic witness Michael Gerhardt, a professor of law from the University of North Carolina, claimed a lack of clear connection between Hunter Biden's business dealings and his father.

"The problem is the dots are not connected," said Gerhardt. "The name repeated most often is Hunter Biden, not President Biden. And the point of an impeachment inquiry is not about a president's son, it has to be about the president himself and I don't think those dots connected. Lots of assumptions and accusations, not evidence."

Trump Looms Large

Democrats cast Thursday's hearing as an effort pursued entirely at the behest of former President Donald Trump. Democrats previously impeached the former commander-in-chief on charges of improperly urging the Ukrainian government to investigate Biden on some of the claims still being made in today's hearings. The former president, Democrats claim, is out for revenge.

Rep. Mike Garcia (D-CA) claimed alleged impropriety committed by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner is worse because Kushner was employed by the Trump administration.

"Just months after Jared left the White House, the Saudi royal family gave him \$2 billion — with a B — into the Kushner hedge fund," said Garcia. "This is a man who was put at the head of Middle East policy in the White House."

Democrats repeatedly attempted to hold a vote on subpoenaing Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York and lawyer who's helped lead Trump through a chaotic series of legal challenges, but Republicans blocked the efforts.

Raskin alleged Republicans were taking orders from the former president via social media posts, claiming the GOP-led House moved "from a Trump-ordered government shutdown to a Trump-ordered impeachment process."

"Let's get it straight; we're 62 hours away from shutting down the government of the United States of America and Republicans are launching an impeachment drive, based on a long debunked and discredited lie," said Raskin.

Larger Significance Still Yet to Be Determined

American voters will have to decide if they agree with Raskin's characterization of Thursday's proceedings or if they see them as a stunt and a distraction.

According to [a recent poll](#), 44% of Americans said the House should begin the impeachment proceedings that could lead to Biden's removal from office, while 47% of Americans said that, based on what they currently know, they should not. The breakdown among political independents was even closer, with 46% supporting the hearings and 45% not supporting them. Still, Republicans' pursuit of the inquiry doesn't appear to be souring the majority of Americans. Some 58% of respondents said the hearings suggest Biden is being held legally accountable like any president should be, while only 32% said they represent an unfair political persecution. [Polling shows](#) the majority of Americans feel Biden's family is "corrupt," but that may not prove to be a deciding issue given many feel the same about Trump. The former president was most recently seen on Wednesday speaking outside Detroit, Michigan, amidst a strike by the United Auto Workers union; Biden visited a strike picket line in the state the day before.

Conservative media outlets are currently highlighting surging immigration as a major political issue, while many political progressives are still concerned about abortion rights in the wake of last year's [overturning of Roe v. Wade](#). Today's impeachment hearing may prove to be a distant memory by the time voters go to the polls more than a year from today.

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Biden Claims Trump Poses Threat to Democracy, But is Joe Its Savior?

Joe Biden previewed his upcoming campaign on Thursday, casting Americans' choice as one between democracy and extremism. Next year's election will demonstrate the salience of the argument and the suitability of Biden as its champion.

As Republican candidates gathered in California for the party's second primary debate of the 2024 campaign season, US President Joe Biden signaled he's already focusing on the general election in a speech in neighboring Arizona.

One candidate was notably absent from the GOP event, but his presence in Biden's speech was unmistakable even when he wasn't invoked by name: for the fifth national election cycle in a row, American voters will submit a verdict on former US President and 2024 contender Donald Trump.

This time is different, claimed Biden in yet another preview of his upcoming campaign, because the vote is a referendum on a core aspect of American society and the country's place in the world.

"There is something dangerous happening in America," [said Biden forebodingly](#) at an event honoring the late Republican Senator John McCain. "There is an extremist movement that does not share the basic beliefs of our democracy. The MAGA Movement."

"Their extreme agenda, if carried out, would fundamentally alter the institutions of American Democracy as we know it," continued Biden. "The decisions we make today will determine the course of this country – and the world – for decades to come."

The argument isn't new for Biden, who has frequently cast politics as a contest for the "soul" of the country during his presidency. In a speech on the anniversary of January 6, 2021, he characterized the events of that day as an existential threat to American democracy.

He spoke again on the subject that year at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and once more before last year's midterm elections.

Biden's team believes the message was a political winner, contributing to Democrats' better than expected performance last November. Now the argument is forming a key part of his presidential reelection campaign. But will the argument hold up in the context of next year's vote?

Clearly, Biden thinks it will. With his opponent currently [facing four indictments](#), including two relating to his challenge of the 2020 election, Biden's advisers are betting the unprecedented chaos created by Trump will remain present in voters' minds.

The issue may also simply be of personal significance to Biden himself. With a number of crises currently facing the United States – immigration, inflation, abortion and workers' rights – there is no shortage of obvious issues he could run on.

The focus on something as potentially abstract as "democracy" may offer particular insight into the octogenarian politician's frame of mind. With even large numbers of Democratic voters expressing concern over his continued fitness to serve, Biden may see his advanced age and experience in Washington as making him uniquely capable of winning a battle he sees in such stark terms.

Political scientist Robert Paxton defined fascism as "the application of colonial violence to the imperial core" – the Germans perfected brutality in their African colonies before the Nazis unleashed it on European Jewry. America has certainly committed its share of colonial violence, and [neocolonial violence](#). Currently the country is funding a major war against a geopolitical foe it thought it had vanquished more than three decades ago.

Meanwhile, a candidate who [gleefully promised](#) to take Syria's oil rises in the polls. Biden may be able to win the struggle for his vision of the democratic soul of America, if voters see him as capable of delivering on his rhetoric. That may include knowing when to pull back on the country's [increasingly unpopular](#) neocolonial ambitions, listening to workers in Scranton rather than their rulers in Langley.

If he tries to preserve America's democracy and its empire he may endanger both.

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Geneticists Rediscover African Population Once Assumed to Have Died Out

Researchers face obvious challenges in understanding the early humans who walked the Earth before us, but modern DNA analysis is providing new clues about ancient peoples in the cradle of mankind.

Preserving linguistic heritage is a priority for many scientists as it's estimated [nine human languages](#) become extinct every year. But genetic analysis of a recently-analyzed population in Africa demonstrates genetic links may remain even as languages are lost.

[The research](#) was carried out by a multinational team of academics from Switzerland, Portugal and Germany. The group studied a population of people in the Namib desert in Angola, traveling to a remote region of many ethnicities and traditions.

"We were able to locate groups which were thought to have disappeared more than 50 years ago," said Jorge Rocha, a population geneticist from the Center of Investigation in Biodiversity and Genetic Resources in Porto, Portugal.

Key to the discovery was the pastoral nature of the Kwepe people, who raise livestock in the region. The people previously spoke a language called Kwadi, which shared common linguistic ancestors with languages spoken by other peoples who engaged in foraging and herding in southern Africa.

"In agreement with our previous studies on the maternally-inherited DNA, most genome-wide diversity segregates according to socio-economic status," said study author Sandra Oliveira, of the University of Bern in Switzerland.

In other words, what we do for a living and how successful we are helps predict the genetics we will pass down, researchers pointed out.

The paper, entitled "Genome-wide variation in the Angolan Namib Desert reveals unique pre-Bantu ancestry," [was published](#) in the Science Advances journal.

The findings were also authored by Anne-Maria Fehn, Beatriz Amorim and Jorge Rocha from the University of Porto in Portugal, as well as Mark Stoneking at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

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Glaciers in Switzerland Slim Down 10% in Just Two Years

The time period included a 6% loss in volume in 2022 alone, the biggest thaw since measurements began. Some glaciers have disappeared entirely.

The country of Switzerland is known for its chocolate, clocks, and large glaciers, but at least one of those heritages appears to be under threat as scientists document significant ice melt in the Central European nation.

All together, Swiss glaciers have lost 10% of their volume over the last two years, according to analysis from the Swiss Academy of Sciences. Stunningly, that's the same amount of volume lost during an entire 30 years from 1960 to 1990.

Researchers say the melt is due to climate change brought about by human burning of fossil fuels. Climate disruption is causing hot summers and winters, they said, which results in less snow. Officials are also reporting the collapse of glacier tongues, the term for parts of glaciers that extend into bodies of water.

Scientists have been forced to stop measuring glacial ice in some locations that disappeared entirely.

"I hope that this is one more piece of evidence that really shows that the climate system is really in a very critical state," said Matthias Huss of GLAMOS, the Swiss glacier-monitoring organization that gathered data for the report. "This is much more impressive than seeing another graph with rising temperatures."

"The losses we've seen in 2022 and 2023 are simply mind-blowing and beyond everything we have experienced so far."

[A recent report](#) showed that as much as half of the world's glaciers could vanish by the end of the century even if proposed targets are met. Glaciers play a crucial role in providing water for various populations.

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Sir Michael Gambon, Decorated Actor Known for Portraying Dumbledore in 'Harry Potter', Dead at 82

The English-Irish actor, once dubbed "the great Gambon" by fellow actor Ralph Richardson, is considered a veteran of the stage and silver screen; however, his fame grew even wider after he signed on to portray the beloved Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore in the "Harry Potter" series.

[Sir Michael Gambon](#), an Irish-born English actor widely known for his role as Albus Dumbledore in six of the "Harry Potter" films, has died at the age of 82.

The actor died "peacefully" in a hospital late Wednesday, according to his representative who issued the statement on behalf of his wife Lady Gambon and their son Fergus.

"Michael died peacefully in hospital with his wife, Anne, and son Fergus at his bedside, following a bout of pneumonia," the statement said. Gambon had two other sons from a subsequent relationship with Philippa Hart, he is survived by those sons as well.

Gambon was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1940 to a seamstress and a World War II engineering operative. The family relocated to London, England, when Gambon was just 6 years-old. At the age of 15 he dropped out of Crayford Secondary School, leaving without any qualifications. At the age of 22, Gambon made his debut on stage in the Fate Theatre's 1962 production of "Othello" after he wrote a letter claiming to be an experienced actor, a move that effectively planted the seeds to a career that spanned more than five decades.

Gambon subsequently received an offer to join Laurence Olivier's new National Theater and took up a series of smaller, non speaking roles - including one in which he performed along Dame Maggie Smith. He ultimately made his mark in London in 1974 when he played a fumbling veterinary surgeon in Alan Ayckbourn's trilogy "The Norman Conquests."

He also performed for the Royal Shakespeare Company in which he played both King Lear and Antony, as well as leading roles in Harold Pinter's "Betrayal" and "Old Times," and in Ben Jonson's "Volpone" at the National Theater, and a role in David Hare's "Skylight," which took him from London to Broadway and earned him a Tony Award nomination for best actor in 1996. In the US, he became well known for a television role in Dennis Potter's "The Singing Detective," a 1986 mini-series. From 1999 to 2001, he won successive best-actor BAFTA awards for television and film roles. His performance as Lyndon B. Johnson in the 2002 mini-series "Path to War" won him an Emmy nomination, as well as his portrayal as Mr. Wodehouse in the 2009 adaptation of Jane Austen's "Emma." For the 2016 film "Hail, Caesar!" and the 2014 and 2017 "Paddington" films he provided his voice for narration.

In 1992, he was given a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) medal, and six years later was knighted for services to drama.

By 2002, Gambon immersed himself in the wizarding world after replacing actor Richard Harris as Albus Dumbledore in the "Harry Potter" series. The Dumbledore role was recast after Harris died following his diagnosis with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In preparing for the role, or any role, the 6-foot tall actor—who was once described as a rhinoceros that could tap-dance—paid particular attention to the physicality of his characters. "I'm very physical," he once said. "I want to know how the person looks, what his hair is like, the way he walks, the way he stands and sits, how he sounds, his rhythms, how he dresses, his shoes. The way your feet feel on the stage is important."

Gambon officially retired from stage acting in 2015 after experiencing long-term memory issues but continued to take on-screen roles until 2019.

Co-stars from the "Harry Potter" films publicly mourned the death of Gambon, with actor [Daniel Radcliffe](#) writing: "With the loss of Michael Gambon the world just became considerably less fun."

"Michael Gambon was one of the most brilliant, effortless actors I've ever had the privilege of working with, but despite his immense talent, the thing I will remember most about him is how much fun he had doing his job. He was silly, irreverent and hilarious. He loved his job, but never seemed defined by it. He was an incredible story and joke teller and his habit of blurring the lines of fact and fiction when talking to journalists meant that he was also one of the most entertaining people with whom you could ever wish to do a press junket," Radcliffe wrote. "The sixth film was where I got to spend the most time working with Michael and he made the hours spent in front of a green screen together more memorable and joyous than they had any

right to be," said Radcliffe, who added that Gambon would pull pranks before cameras started rolling that would leave the younger actor doubled over from laughing.

"I'm so sad to hear he has passed, but I am so grateful for the fact that I am one of the lucky people who got to work with him."

Rupert Grint, who portrayed Ron Weasley in all eight films, wrote on social media: "So sad to hear about Michael. He brought so much warmth and mischief to every day on set. He captivated me as a kid and became a personal role model of mine for finding the fun and eccentricities in life. Sending all my love to his family."

The author and creator of the "Harry Potter" world, J.K. Rowling, recalled Gambon as "a wonderful man in addition to being an outstanding actor."

"I absolutely loved working with him, not only on 'Potter' but also 'The Casual Vacancy.' My deepest condolences go to Michael's family and everyone who loved him," she added.

Aside from his wife Anne and their son Fergus, Gambon is also survived by two sons from a subsequent relationship with set designer Philippa Hart.

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Scientists Recover 630,000 WWII-Era Records to Remedy Gap in Climate Data

At least 4,000 volunteers transcribed more than 28,000 logbook images from the US Navy fleet that was stationed in Hawaii between 1941 and 1945. The new data set is expected to help show whether or not unusually warm temperature recordings during World War II were in fact valid.

A mission to recover weather pattern observations made during World War II has successfully resulted in the recovery of 630,000 records, establishing a means for researchers to gain a better understanding of how meteorological conditions have changed over decades.

The research should help scientists in their search for an explanation for the anomaly known as the "World War II warm anomaly" (WW2WA), a recording of high temperatures thought to have been caused by sailors who documented weather data during the day in order to avoid enemy vessels. The practice is believed to have prompted biases, according to a separate [study](#) by authors Duo Chan and Peter Huybers.

At the time, the primary source for marine observations were made during World War II; however, many records were destroyed as an act of war, or otherwise considered forgotten as they were considered classified for a period of time, the authors explained in a [news release](#).

"The observations that do exist for this period are often unavailable to science as they are still only available as paper records or scanned images. We have rescued the detailed hourly weather observations contained in more than 28,000 logbook images of the US Navy Pacific Fleet stationed at Hawai'i during 1941–1945 to produce a dataset of more than 630,000 records," the study authors, Raveen Teleti, Ed Hawkins, and Kevin R. Wood, write.

"Each record contains the date and time, positional information and several meteorological measurements, totaling more than 3 million individual observations."

“This dataset not only contains hourly weather observations of air temperature, sea surface temperature, atmospheric pressure, wind speed and wind direction, mainly in the Pacific Ocean but also includes some observations from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans,” the authors explain. “This dataset provides invaluable instrumental weather observations at times and places during WW2, which fill gaps in existing reconstructions.

The records were made by crew members aboard 19 US Navy ships during World War II, but many of the ships where this data was recorded were bombed in Pearl Harbor and/or saw action in the Pacific theater during war.

“The greatest respect must go to the brave servicemen who recorded this data. War was all around them, but they still did their jobs with such professionalism. It is thanks to their dedication and determination that we have these observations 80 years on,” adds Teleti.

The information was shared in a study that was published in the Geoscience Data Journal.

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Japanese Scientists Find Microplastics in Clouds for First Time

In the 1967 film "The Graduate," the character Mr. McQuire commented that there was a "great future in plastics." However, its likely he probably didn't mean the kind of future facing humanity at present.

Scientists in Japan have discovered that microplastics are now present in clouds, according to a study published in the journal Environmental Chemistry Letters.

The scientists climbed the summits of Mount Oyama and Mount Fuji, collecting water from mists around the mountain peaks that measured from 1,300 to 3,776 meters.

Using advanced imaging techniques, the team found at least nine different types of polymers and one type of rubber in their samples. The plastics ranged in size from 7.1 to 94.6 micrometers and in a concentration range of 6.7 to 13.9 pieces per liter.

The discovered microplastics included: polyethylene, polypropylene, polyethylene terephthalate, polymethyl methacrylate, epoxy resin, polyamide 6, ethylene-propylene copolymer or polyethylene polypropylene alloy, and polyurethane.

But this isn't the first time microplastics have been discovered in an entity where they don't belong.

“Research shows that large amounts of microplastics are ingested or inhaled by humans and animals alike and have been detected in multiple organs such as lung, heart, blood, placenta, and feces. Ten million tons of these plastic bits end up in the ocean, released with the ocean spray, and find their way into the atmosphere,” the [release](#) states.

“To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report on airborne microplastics in cloud water,” the authors wrote in their paper.

This implies, the researchers add, that microplastics have found their way into clouds and are creating a “plastic rainfall” that will contaminate nearly everything we eat and drink. The accumulation of airborne microplastics (AMPs) in the atmosphere could also cause adverse

effects on biodiversity. Continued research has also linked microplastics to cancers, as well as negative effects on heart and lung health.

"AMPs are degraded much faster in the upper atmosphere than on the ground due to strong ultraviolet radiation, and this degradation releases greenhouse gasses and contributes to global warming. As a result, the findings of this study can be used to account for the effects of AMPs in future global warming projections," writes Hiroshi Okochi from Waseda University, the lead author of the study.

"If the issue of 'plastic air pollution' is not addressed proactively, climate change and ecological risks may become a reality, causing irreversible and serious environmental damage in the future," Okochi warned in a statement on Wednesday.

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Americans Maintain Dim Views of Supreme Court – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – Americans maintain a dim view of the Supreme Court, with 41% approving of its performance, a marginal difference from the court's record-low rating of 40% in 2021 after it declined to block a controversial Texas abortion law, according to a Gallup poll released Friday.

Just under half of Americans, 49%, say they have a "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust and confidence in the court, a two-percentage-point difference from the previous year. This is the second time since 1972 that trust in the Supreme Court has fallen below 50%. Before 2022, trust ratings averaged 68%.

Ratings fell along partisan lines, with 63% of Republicans saying they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the court, compared to 46% of independents and 34% of Democrats.

The Supreme Court also continued to be viewed as "too conservative" by more than a third of Americans – 39%, just three percentage points down from the record high of 42% last year. On the other hand, 17% of Americans see it as "too liberal."

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California Senator Dianne Feinstein Passes Away – Reports

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - California Senator Dianne Feinstein has died , Punchbowl News reported on Friday, citing multiple unnamed sources.

Feinstein, who was on her sixth term as California's senator, was 90.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

PREVIEW - US Congress Enters Friday Without Government Funding Deal, Risking Shutdown Over Weekend

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US Congress is entering its final day of the work week without a finalized deal to fund the federal government beyond the end of the month, risking the initiation of a shutdown over the weekend unless lawmakers quickly reach a deal.

Lawmakers will continue working on Friday in an effort to avert a government shutdown and pass a funding measure through both chambers of Congress. The Democrat-majority Senate and the Republican-majority House of Representatives must reach an agreement before the end of the week or the government will begin shutting down due to lack of funding.

The Biden administration has warned that a shutdown could harm national security by furloughing hundreds of thousands of civilian defense contractors and forcing approximately 1.3 million active-duty troops to work without pay.

Moreover, a shutdown would leave the Pentagon with just \$1.6 billion to replenish arms sent to Ukraine, US Defense Department Comptroller Mike McCord said.

The Senate is attempting to include more than \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine as part of a temporary government funding measure, which would give lawmakers until November 17 to pass further appropriations bills. However, some Republican lawmakers have expressed opposition to the inclusion of Ukraine aid in any government funding bill.

The House of Representatives has proposed its own short-term government funding measure, which would avert a shutdown through October 31 with the intention of passing individual appropriations bills for each area of the federal government. The House proposal also includes border security measures.

US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has said that he is comfortable with the inclusion of Ukraine aid in the upper chamber's government funding measure. McConnell has also expressed support for House Speaker McCarthy's plan and said that his focus is keeping the government open.

McCarthy has said that it is "wrong" to attach Ukraine aid to a US government funding measure. Senate Majority Leader has urged McCarthy to "come to his senses" and reach a bipartisan agreement to avoid a shutdown. McCarthy must ignore so-called MAGA Republicans or risk letting "extremism" dominate the party, Schumer said.

McCarthy has called on US President Joe Biden to step into congressional negotiations and help secure a deal to avert a shutdown. There does not appear to be support for the Senate plan in the House of Representatives, McCarthy said.

Every person in the United States would "pay the price" of a government shutdown, Biden said. A shutdown would impact services ranging from food assistance to cancer research, Biden said.

A government shutdown involves suspending operations for all nonessential personnel, including pausing their pay. However, employees who are furloughed receive backpay once lawmakers fund the government.

A shutdown could negatively impact the credit of the US as well, according to Moody's Investor Service. The longer the shutdown, the more negative the potential impact on the economy,

Moody's said.

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House Oversight Committee Says Subpoenaed Hunter, James Biden for Bank Records

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee said in a press release that Chairman James Comer issued subpoenas for President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, and his brother James Biden seeking to obtain their personal and business records.

"As part of the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) today issued three subpoenas for Hunter and James Biden's personal and business bank records," the Committee said.

According copies of the subpoenas, the Committee is giving Hunter and James Biden until October 12 to provide the requested documents or they may risk facing criminal contempt of Congress charges.

The Oversight Committee has disclosed since January that the Bidens and their associates had established more than 20 shell companies, amassing more than \$24 million from sources in China and other countries.

The investigation also identified nine Biden family members linked to these business operations and affirmed that the president interacted with the business affiliates on at least 24 occasions.

On Tuesday, the House Oversight Committee, citing bank records, revealed that Hunter Biden in 2019 received two payments wired from China totaling \$260,000 with President Joe Biden's Delaware home listed as the beneficiary address.

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US Defense Contractor Tasked to Develop, Demonstrate AI Capabilities - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - ECS Federal has received a more than \$65 million US Army contract to develop and demonstrate artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"ECS Federal [of] Fairfax, Virginia was awarded a \$65,717,799 ...contract to develop and demonstrate ...artificial intelligence capabilities," the release said on Thursday.

Work on the project will be performed in Fairfax in the uS state of Virginia, the Defense Department said.

The program is estimated to take five years with a projected completion date of September 28, 2026, the Defense Department said.

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Northrop Grumman Wins \$513Mln Contract for US Navy Surveillance Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has received a more than half a billion dollar contract extension from the US Navy to manufacture another 14 G/ATOR Ground/Air Radar Systems, the Department of Defense announced in a press release. "Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Linthicum Heights, Maryland is awarded a \$513,035,458 modification ...contract for Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR) systems," the release stated on Thursday.

The contract modification provides for the procurement of up to an additional 14 full rate production G/ATOR systems, the Defense Department said.

Work on the contract will be performed at Linthicum Heights, Maryland (35%) and at East Syracuse, New York (19%) over the next five years with an expected completion date of October 2028, the release said.

The US Marine Corps Systems Command based at Quantico in the US state of Virginia will oversee work on the project as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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US Awards \$966Mln for Heavy Artillery Cartridge Cases - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Day & Zimmermann Lone Star has received a more than \$966 million contract to manufacture cartridge cases for heavy artillery 155 mm Modular Artillery Charge System shells, the Pentagon announced in a press release.

"Day & Zimmermann Lone Star was awarded a \$966,745,000 firm-fixed-price contract for the manufacturing, assembly, inspection, packaging and delivery of 155 mm Modular Artillery Charge System M231/M232-series combustible cartridge cases," the release said.

The Texarkana, Texas-based company has five years to work on the contract which has an estimated completion date of September 27, 2028, the Defense Department said.

Work on the contract will be overseen by the US Army Contracting Command in Newark in the US state of New Jersey, the Defense Department said.

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Pentagon Awards \$112Mln for AI Platform Development

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - L3Harris Technologies has received a more than \$112 million US Army contract to develop artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning platforms, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"L3Harris Technologies [of] Palm Bay, Florida was awarded a \$112,668,576... contract for artificial intelligence and machine learning platform research and development," the release said on Thursday.

Work on the program will be carried out in Palm Bay in the US state of Florida, the Defense Department said.

The project is estimated to last five years with a completion date of September 28, 2028, the Defense Department said.

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'Irresponsible' of Senate to Add \$6Bln for Ukraine in Short-Term Funding Bill - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Paul Gosar in a statement to Sputnik said it is irresponsible for the Senate to include \$6 billion for Ukraine in its short-term spending bill while failing to provide appropriate funding to bolster security on the US southern border, which is experiencing record migration numbers.

The Senate advanced a bipartisan short-term spending bill on Tuesday that includes \$6.15 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine, which is likely to have a difficult time passing through the House of Representatives, mostly because of growing opposition from Republicans hesitant to continue sending large sums of funding to Ukraine.

"It is appalling and irresponsible that Senate democrats are willing to shut down the federal government by including \$6 billion dollars to continue to fund Biden's proxy war in Ukraine while failing to include funding to secure our southern border which has been invaded by more than 8.6 million lawbreakers welcomed in with open arms by [US President] Joe Biden," Gosar said in the statement.

On Wednesday, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham vowed that the party would not support a full spending budget for 2024 until it includes substantial solutions to the ongoing crisis on the US southern border. The Senate's short-term spending bill, if passed by Congress, would keep the US government open until November 17.

The House is currently considering a number of amendments in four spending bills, including for defense. The House passed a measure earlier in the day to separate \$300 million in aid for Ukraine from its defense appropriations bill.

The House, according to reports, could use the measure providing \$300 million to Ukraine as a vehicle to pass its own version of a short-term spending bill.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that he does not see the votes in the lower chamber to pass the Senate's bill, even though it has the support in the upper chamber, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

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US Capitol Police Arrest 18 Climate Activists Occupying House Speaker's Office - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Eighteen members of the Sunrise Movement were arrested at House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's office during a climate funding demonstration, the activist group said in a statement.

"They chose to arrest a bunch of teenagers instead of facing us. They would rather shut down the government than do their jobs and protect our generation. Our generation is watching and we will hold them accountable for their actions," Sunrise Movement organizer Adah Crandall said in the statement on Thursday.

The Sunrise Movement mobilizes young individuals to combat climate change, prioritize eco-friendly job creation in the US, counteract the sway of fossil fuel industries in politics, and support leadership dedicated to the overall health and prosperity of the public, according to the group.

In response to the severe climate events of this year, the Sunrise Movement converged on McCarthy's office, urging support for bridge funding to ensure government continuity and enhance the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) capabilities to address climate-related disasters, the statement said.

However, in anticipation of a potential shutdown, FEMA has started rationing disaster recovery aid, while activists are advocating for full FEMA funding, preservation of Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA) programs, and the reinstatement of the child tax credit, the statement added.

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US House Rejects State Dept. Spending Bill Amendment to Block Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives rejected an amendment to the fiscal year 2024 State Department appropriations bill blocking funds for Ukraine.

US House lawmakers on Thursday evening rejected the amendment in a vote of 90 in favor and 342 opposed.

The House of Representatives is considering a number of amendments to the State Department appropriations bill in an effort to complete the spending bills and fund the federal government. However, lawmakers only have until the end of the week to fund the government before a shutdown initiates.

House lawmakers passed a measure earlier in the day to separate \$300 million in aid for Ukraine from a Defense Department appropriations bill. The Senate is also considering a short-term government funding measure that includes more than \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine.

Some Republicans have opposed the inclusion of aid for Ukraine in US government funding measures, although both Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell support the upper chamber's legislation.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that he does not see the votes in the lower

chamber to pass the bill.

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IMF Board Approves \$1.3Bln Resilience, Sustainability Loan for Morocco - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund announced in a statement that it has approved a new \$1.3 billion loan for Morocco.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved today an 18-months arrangement for Morocco under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) in an amount equivalent to SDR 1 billion (US\$ 1.32 billion, equivalent to 112% of quota)," the statement said on Thursday.

The arrangement will support Morocco's transition to a "greener economy," the statement said. The loan will also help the Moroccan authorities strengthen preparedness and resilience against natural disasters, including those caused by climate change, the statement added.

Earlier in the day, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said they are closely monitoring the situation in Morocco after the recent catastrophic earthquake and remain confident the annual meetings with the Moroccan authorities will take place on October 9-15 in Marrakesh as scheduled.

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Comer to Subpoena Bidens' Records Amid Impeachment Inquiry - US House Oversight Panel

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - Congressman James Comer announced during an US House Oversight Committee hearing his intention to subpoena the bank records of President Joe Biden's son and brother, Hunter and James, as well as the records of their affiliated companies.

"Today, I will subpoena the bank records of Hunter Biden, James Biden and their affiliated companies," Comer said on Thursday.

The Oversight Committee has disclosed since January that the Bidens and their associates had established more than 20 shell companies, amassing more than \$24 million from sources in China and other countries.

The investigation also identified nine Biden family members linked to these business operations and affirmed that the president interacted with the business affiliates on at least 24 occasions.

"What we need to understand is where it [the money] goes next. That is the question this committee seeks to answer and the evidence supports that next step," Comer said.

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Oil in Biggest One-Day Slide in Almost 2 Months Amid Economic Warnings

NEW YORK, September 29 (Sputnik) - Oil markets experienced their sharpest one-day slide in almost two months on Thursday as warnings about economic ructions from a global selloff in bonds pulled crude prices off the more than one-year highs of the previous session.

Both New York-traded West Texas Intermediate crude (WTI) and London-traded Brent oil retreated from Wednesday's highs above \$95 per barrel that marked a near 13-month peak for the US crude benchmark and a ten-month high for its UK peer.

At Thursday's settlement, WTI for delivery in November stood at \$91.71 per barrel, down \$1.97, or 2.1%, on the day. It earlier reached \$95.04, the highest price level since August 2022.

Analysts said the possibility of a deeper correction was as great as that of the rally restarting. "Unless a major de-risking moment occurs, the oil market will still remain tight throughout the rest of the year," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

But he also said that "oil was ripe for a pullback" after coming just \$5 short of \$100, and downside risk was open if the worldwide selloff in bonds - a precursor to recession - continues.

"Energy traders are quickly locking in profits given the turbulence happening in the bond market. Crude demand destruction will clearly happen globally if this bond market selloff extends," Moya said.

Moya put major support for Brent at \$87.75 and WTI at \$84. That would mean a downside of another \$5 to \$7 in both the benchmarks if de-risking extends.

Oil prices have gained between \$25 and \$30 from May lows of beneath \$64 for WTI and \$72 for Brent. The rally was largely in response to production cuts by Saudi Arabia and Russia.

The global squeeze on oil supply has been exacerbated by demand for US crude, which has exploded as it began to fill some international orders underserved by the Saudi-Russian production cuts.

The US initiative led to a plunge in inventory levels at the Cushing, Oklahoma hub that serves as a central delivery and storage point for crude in the United States. This is especially so with the pick up in shipments of a new US crude grade called WTI Midland, which is comparable to the viscosity of the heavier Arab and Russian oils versus the typically light-grade that is WTI.

John Kemp, another analyst, said oil traders have placed so many bullish bets on crude prices that the trade has become overcrowded and was due for a correction.

Kemp says over the past four weeks, traders had bought a total of 183 million barrels of crude and fuel futures. That has brought the total up to 525 million barrels. More importantly, the ratio of bullish to bearish bets on oil and fuels had risen to almost 8:1.

According to Kemp, this is a sign that oil prices may start reversing their gains before too long.

Others, however, anticipate even higher prices, with JP Morgan saying this week that Brent could reach \$150 per barrel. Yet, other commodity analysts see Brent hitting \$100 before this year's end.

One of the bigger risks to the oil rally remains the Federal Reserve and its higher-for-long regime for US interest rates. Fed Chair Powell told a news conference last week that energy-driven inflation was one of the central bank's bigger concerns.

The Fed has raised interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, adding a total

of 5.25 percentage points to a prior base rate of just 0.25%. It could add another quarter point in November and/or December and more likely in 2024.

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US House Advances Rule to Separate \$300Mln in Ukraine Aid From Defense Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives advanced a resolution to consider a measure that separates \$300 million in aid to Ukraine from a Defense Department appropriations bill.

US House lawmakers on Thursday adopted the rule for floor debate on the legislation, dubbed the Ukraine Security Assistance and Oversight Supplemental Appropriations Act, in a vote of 217-211.

The rule also stripped the \$300 million in aid, intended for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, from the fiscal year 2024 Defense Department appropriations bill.

The funds can be used for lethal assistance, training, equipment and logistical support, according to the bill text. The legislation also provides for the establishment of an Office of the Special Inspector General for Ukraine Assistance to oversee the provision of aid to Ukraine.

The legislation stipulates that \$20 million of the funds made available by the bill be provided to that office.

The attempt to separate aid for Ukraine from a defense spending bill comes as the US Congress attempts to fund the federal government and avoid a shutdown before the end of the month. Some House Republicans have opposed the inclusion of Ukraine aid in a government spending bill.

However, the Senate government funding proposal includes more than \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine. A shutdown would leave the Defense Department with \$1.6 billion to replenish arms sent to Ukraine, Pentagon Comptroller Mike McCord said.

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US State Dept. Slams China's Alleged Attempts to Reshape Global Information Environment

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) – The United States believes that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is attempting to reshape the global information environment by using propaganda, disinformation, and censorship in order to subordinate the economic and security interests of other nations, according to a report published by the Global Engagement Center at the US State Department.

“The PRC employs a variety of deceptive and coercive methods as it attempts to influence the international information environment. Beijing's information manipulation spans the use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship. Unchecked, the PRC's efforts will reshape the

global information landscape, creating biases and gaps that could even lead nations to make decisions that subordinate their economic and security interests to Beijing's," the report said on Thursday.

The report claims that Beijing spends billions of dollars to create a positive image of the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party while suppressing any critical views or voices contradicting desired narratives.

"More broadly, the PRC seeks to cultivate and uphold a global incentive structure that encourages foreign governments, elites, journalists, and civil society to accept its preferred narratives and avoid criticizing its conduct," the report said.

If China succeeds in its global manipulation campaign, the result will be a sharp contraction of freedom of expression on a global scale with Beijing sometimes playing a significant role in determining the print and digital content, the report concludes.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) -

BELARUS-POLAND BORDER ISSUE

* A Polish helicopter committed two violations of the Belarusian national border, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

* The General Command of Poland's armed forces dismissed the Belarusian Defense Ministry's accusation of a double violation of Belarus' airspace by a Polish helicopter.

US GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

* The US government shutdown, which may occur if the White House and Congress do not reach an agreement to fund the work of the federal government by the end of October 30, is an avoidable risk to the US economy, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

* The possible shutdown of the US government would significantly slow down the pace of replacing weapons supplied to Kiev, leaving the Pentagon with only \$1.6 billion to use for this purpose, US Defense Department Comptroller Mike McCord has said.

* The US government started notifying federal employees to prepare for an imminent government shutdown, corporate media reported, citing internal memorandums sent to staff.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russian air defense destroyed a Ukrainian aircraft-type drone over the Belgorod Region, the Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

* Ukraine has lost about 230 soldiers in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia directions over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Russia and Ukraine have both expressed a wish for negotiations but have yet to determine a

mutually conducive format, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

* Moscow has taken note of the statement by Nagorno-Karabakh that the self-declared republic will cease to exist and is closely following the situation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* Azerbaijan calls on Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh not to leave homes and become a part of Azerbaijani society, the Foreign Ministry said.

* Moscow has taken note of the statement by Nagorno-Karabakh that the self-declared republic will cease to exist and is closely following the situation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* The issue of increasing Russia's oil exports has not been discussed and all agreements under OPEC+ are being respected, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* Tough measures to deal with the situation in Russia's fuel market are not necessary, but the work with companies will continue, Peskov said.

* Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak convened an extraordinary meeting with top executives of oil companies and several government officials and tasked them with ensuring swift decrease in retail gasoline prices on the domestic market.

* The Russian Central Bank expects that the average key rate next year will amount to 11.5%-12.5%, and inflation by the end of 2024 is still expected to be 4%, Bank of Russia Financial Stability Department Director Elizaveta Danilova said.

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Risk US, Allies May Face Confrontation With Nuclear, Bio-Weapons Grew Since 2014
-Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The risk the United States and its allies may face a confrontation that includes nuclear, chemical, biological or radiological weapons has increased since 2014, the Defense Department said in its Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) report released on Thursday.

"The United States faces dynamic and evolving WMD threats," the report said. "The risk of the United States or its allies and partners facing a military confrontation that includes chemical, biological, radiological, and/or nuclear (CBRN) weapons has increased since 2014."

In light of the existential security environment, the United States must now recapitalize and in some cases reconstitute its ability to conduct large-scale joint operations within a WMD-contested battle space, the report said.

The United States considers Russia and China as the principal WMD challenges, the report added.

However, North Korea, Iran and various violent extremist organizations remain persistent

regional threats that must also be addressed, according to the report.

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Japan to Upgrade Airports, Ports in Preparation for Potential Armed Conflict - Reports

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Japanese government has selected 33 seaports and airports for infrastructure expansion and modernization to enhance the country's defense capabilities in the event of a potential armed conflict in the Asia-Pacific, the Nikkei Asia newspaper reported on Thursday, citing government documents.

The project includes expanding runways at the airports in order to make takeoffs and landings easier for military transport aircraft, as well as the construction of hangars for Coast Guard aircraft and additional docks at ports, the report said. These improvements will facilitate evacuation of civilians and deployment of troops should tensions in the region escalate into an armed conflict, Nikkei Asia said.

The project also involves permission for the US military to send troops to Japanese ports in case of an emergency, a senior military official told the newspaper.

The list of ports eligible for improvements mainly includes those located in western Japan, close to mainland China, which has been increasing its military presence in the region, and Taiwan, which could become ground zero of a potential armed conflict, according to the report. In addition, the Japanese government reportedly plans to upgrade the ports of Hokkaido Island, which is located near the Russian border, and of the Fukui prefecture of Honshu Island, where suspicious activities of North Korean vessels have been recorded.

The list, however, is not final and may be subject to changes, Nikkei Asia said.

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US, Mexico to Hold Security Dialogue on Fentanyl, Other Issues – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) –The United States and Mexico will hold a security dialogue meeting next week to discuss a range of issues, including combating fentanyl proliferation, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Kerri Hannan said on Thursday.

“Next week we have a high-level security dialogue where fentanyl will be one of the topics we discuss,” Hannan told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Hannan pointed out that the Biden administration works with China, from where fentanyl goes to the US through Mexico. “We have had successful cooperation with the PRC on counter-narcotics in the past. But we do need them to do more to disrupt illicit drug supply chains,” she said.

She reassured that Washington uses every tool in its possession to stop fentanyl flows, including diplomacy and sanctions.

In late July, the US and Mexico adopted a joint declaration to combat the flow of fentanyl and illegal arms sales. The White House also announced the release of a comprehensive government-wide response to combat the emerging threat of fentanyl and xylazine to the United States.

Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alicia Barcena said in August that her country is setting up a sophisticated digital system to track fentanyl precursor chemicals and establish controls in ports of entry.

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Finland Studying NATO's Nuclear Weapons Policies - Defense Minister

HELSINKI, September 28 (Sputnik) - Finland is studying NATO's policies related to nuclear weapons but intends to remain nuclear-free for the time being, Defense Minister Antti Hakkanen said on Thursday.

"I will not speculate on various scenarios, but in general terms, it is clear that Finland should not take any initiatives to limit the implementation of NATO's nuclear deterrence. As long as enemy countries have nuclear weapons and use them to bully and threaten others to achieve their political objectives ... it is essential that NATO also has sufficiently reliable and capable nuclear deterrents," Hakkanen said in an interview with Finnish newspaper Ilta-Sanomat.

However, Finland would like to remain a non-nuclear-weapon state, he added.

"There is no prospect of storing or deploying nuclear weapons in new places," Hakkanen said.

NATO's collective defense system has five components, which include conventional weapons, conventional warfare, nuclear deterrence, missile defense, space and cyber defense.

Finland submitted its NATO application in May 2022, several months after Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine. It became a member of the alliance in April 2023.

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North Korea's Minister of Foreign Economic Affairs Arrives in Moscow - Source

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - North Korea's Minister of Foreign Economic Affairs Yoon Jong Ho has arrived in Moscow, a diplomatic source told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Yes," the source confirmed.

The source did not specify the program of the visit.

The trip follows on the heels of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's official visit to Russia's Far East from September 12-17. During the visit, he held talks with President Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny spaceport, met with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and inspected Russian military aircraft.

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German Military to Buy 13 Rheinmetall's Husar Spy Drone Systems

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - The German armed forces said on Thursday they would buy 13 military drone systems called Husar from national defense contractor Rheinmetall and put them into service starting 2025.

"From 2025 the Bundeswehr will obtain a total of 12 series systems and a training system. A system consists of five surveillance drones with maximum takeoff weight of 110kg [243 pounds] apiece, two ground control stations, two launch vehicles, two antenna towers, workshop equipment and three transport platforms," the statement said.

The Husar drones, also referred to as LUNA NG/B, boast 12 hours of operating endurance and a range of up to 150 kilometers (93 miles). They are capable of operating by night and in all weather conditions, the statement said. The drones will replace Bundeswehr's obsolete KZO unmanned aerial vehicles.

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US Urges Countries Entering Deals With Russia to Go in With 'Clear Eyes' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The United States urges any country considering engaging or entering into any agreements with Moscow to be aware of the alleged destabilizing effects of Russia's activities, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"We would urge any country that's considering engagement with Moscow - or that is entering into agreements with Moscow - to go into [with] very clear eyes about the destabilizing effect of Russia's activity," Miller said at a press briefing.

The comment came in response to a question about the recent meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar, which took place this week in Moscow.

Haftar visited Russia on Tuesday, where he held talks at the Russian Defense Ministry, the LNA said in a statement earlier this week. It was reported that the Haftar's visit took place after an invitation from Russia.

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US Soldier Travis King Arrives in Texas Following Release From North Korea – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – US private Travis King arrived in San Antonio, Texas earlier in the day following his release from North Korea where he spent more than two months after he voluntarily crossed into the country in July, Pentagon deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

“Private King arrived early in the morning to San Antonio, where he will be going through a reintegration program,” Singh said during a press briefing. “He'll be going through medical screenings, medical evaluations, and then he'll be meeting with professionals to assess his emotional and mental health.”

During the post-arrival process, King will be debriefed by US military officials while the investigation into the circumstances of his defection to North Korea is still ongoing, Singh said.

King was transferred to the US custody on Wednesday with China and Sweden having played a facilitating role in the transfer.

On July 18, King was scheduled to board a flight to return to the US to face further disciplinary action after being jailed for assault in South Korea. Instead, he managed to leave Seoul's airport and join a tour to the border village of Panmunjom, where he fled over the border to North Korea.

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US Offers Nuclear Test Inspections to Defuse Tensions With Russia, China - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US Energy Department offered to allow international inspections of its nuclear tests to ease tensions with China and Russia, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

At the Vienna International Atomic Energy Agency conference earlier this week, Corey Hinderstein, Deputy Administrator for Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation at the National Nuclear Security Administration, proposed mutual actions to Russia and China, the report said.

According to the report, she emphasized the US's commitment to the nuclear-testing moratorium and its readiness to prove adherence.

However, analysts have raised alarms on satellite images that indicate heightened activity at atomic-test sites in the US, China, and Russia, the report said.

Despite these concerns, China, Russia, and the US maintain adherence to the global standard established under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which operates an expansive array of sensors worldwide, intended to promptly detect any nuclear detonation, the report said.

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Government Shutdown Would Fuel China's Claim of US Non-Commitment to SE Asia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - A government shutdown in the United States would fuel the People's Republic of China's (PRC) claim that the US is not fully committed to developing ties with countries in southeast Asia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Multilateral Affairs Jung Pak said on Thursday.

"A government shutdown would affect that, showing up, those personal relationships... I would argue that it would fuel the PRC's false narrative that we are not committed, that we are inward looking, that this engagement with the southeast Asian countries are just a blip, and that ultimately our default position is looking inward and looking at domestic issues," Pak said, when asked about the potential impact of US efforts to counter China in the region.

The US Congress is attempting to avert a shutdown before the end of the week by passing a government funding measure. However, the House of Representatives and the Senate must negotiate an agreement that can pass both chambers. The House has proposed a short-term funding bill that includes border security measures, while the Senate proposed a short-term bill that includes aid for Ukraine.

A shutdown would harm US national security and force more than a million active duty US troops to work without pay, the White House said.

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Pentagon Says US Gov't Shutdown Would 'Absolutely' Impact Training of Ukrainian Pilots

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – A possible US government shutdown would absolutely have an impact on the training of Ukrainian pilots in the country, Pentagon deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"Civilian personnel that are involved in the training of Ukrainian pilots, such as English language training is what we're talking about right now. Absolutely there could be impacts to training. We're still reviewing some of these details," Singh said during a press briefing. "We are hoping that the Congress can work and find a bipartisan, bicameral way to avoid a government shutdown."

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Hungary Threatens to Block EU Budget Aid to Ukraine Unless Brussels Ends Funding Freeze

BUDAPEST, September 28 (Sputnik) - Hungary will veto EU's further funding for Ukraine unless Brussels unfreezes budget money it has been withholding from Budapest over noncompliance claims, the prime minister's chief of staff said Thursday.

"A change in the EU budget needs a unanimous approval and a non-EU country should not receive a cent of EU budget money as long as an EU country is being denied its fair share,"

Gergely Gulyas warned during a cabinet briefing.

The official also said that EU countries were free to give Ukraine money from their own coffers and that Hungary was doing its part supporting Kiev through humanitarian assistance programs.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has proposed topping up the 2024-2027 EU budget with an additional 66 billion euros (\$70 billion). Most of it will be used to support Ukraine over the next four years.

The EU's Ukraine spending spree comes as Brussels continues to lock horns with Budapest over 6.3 billion euros in funding it froze after accusing Hungary of backsliding on democracy. Budapest argues that it is entitled to its share of EU budget money, which comes from contributions by all member states.

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One Dead, 4 Injured in Shooting in Bratislava - Reports

BRATISLAVA, September 28 (Sputnik) - A shooting in Bratislava occurred on early Thursday, leaving one person dead and four others injured, media reported.

Residents of the Dubravka district in Bratislava were reportedly woken up by the sounds of gunshots and an explosion. A man who opened fire at people from the window of an apartment building was killed by police, the tvnoviny.sk news outlet reported.

The rescue service in Bratislava said that the 32-year-old man had died and four other people — including a police officer — had been taken to hospitals. Police refused to disclose details of the incident, the report added.

Local media reported that the three injured were staying in hospital, while another person had been discharged home after treatment.

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Canada Provides \$1.85Mln in Humanitarian Aid for Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has provided C\$2.5 million (\$1.85 million) in humanitarian relief to the Red-Cross to assist with the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Thursday.

"Today, the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of International Development, and the Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced that Canada has provided \$2.5 million in humanitarian assistance funding to the International Committee of the Red Cross to address urgent needs stemming from the crisis. This funding will help provide emergency health services, food and nutrition assistance, protection services and other life-saving assistance," GAC said in a statement.

Ottawa reiterated its call for allowing the unobstructed passage of assistance toward the

Nagorno-Karabakh region, to help both fleeing and remaining civilians, in accordance with international humanitarian law, the statement added.

Earlier, a spokeswoman for the Armenian government said Armenia had recorded the arrival of 15,914 vehicles from Nagorno-Karabakh, and of 76,400 individuals fleeing the region.

The exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh's almost entirely Armenian population started last week, after Azerbaijan declared the successful completion of its "anti-terrorist" operation launched against the breakaway region on September 19. With mediation of Russian peacekeepers, Nagorno-Karabakh's authorities agreed to lay down arms and surrender all their weapons to Baku the next day. Armenia said it was not part of the talks. Azerbaijan's government pledged to make efforts for ensuring "integration" of those Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians who choose to stay in the region.

Earlier on Thursday, the latest elected leader of the breakaway region, Samvel Shahramanyan, officially dropped all claims to independence from Baku, announcing that the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh, will officially cease to exist on January 1, 2024.

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Ryanair Says Will Reduce Flights in Fall, Winter Due to Aircraft Delivery Delays

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - Ireland's Ryanair airline said on Thursday that it would reduce the number of flights in its fall and winter schedule amid delays in aircraft deliveries.

"Ryanair ... announced a number of Winter 2023 schedule reductions as a direct result of Boeing aircraft delivery delays during the Sept to Dec period," the airline said in a statement.

Ryanair said it had expected to receive 27 new aircraft this fall, but would only get 14 due to production delays at the Spirit Fuselage facility in Wichita, Kansas, as well as Boeing's repair and delivery delays in Seattle.

The airline therefore decided to reduce aircraft based at the airports of Belgium, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Germany and Portugal, which will cause flight cancellations.

"These flight cancellations will take effect from the end of Oct, and will be communicated to all affected passengers by email over the coming days. Passengers will be offered reaccommodation on alternative flights or full refunds as they so wish," Ryanair's CEO Michael O'Leary said.

Aside from delays in aircraft deliveries, Ryanair has also recently witnessed a series of strikes by local trade unions. On September 14 and 15, Belgian pilots went on their fourth strike since early summer. Previous protests resulted in dozens of flight cancellations at Brussels South Charleroi Airport. The pilots have been demanding, among other things, improved work schedules as well as an increase in their wages, which were reduced at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and never increased again.

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US State Dept. Says No Doubt Chinese Hackers Behind Massive Email Breach

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday that the United States has no reason to doubt Microsoft's initial attribution that Chinese hackers were behind the email breach that resulted in about 60,000 unclassified emails being stolen.

"I will confirm that, yes, it was approximately 60,000 unclassified emails that were exfiltrated as a part of that breach," Miller said during a press briefing. "This was a hack of Microsoft systems that the State Department uncovered and notified Microsoft about. We have no reason to doubt their attribution."

Microsoft said in July that it was tracking a China-based actor known as Storm-0558 who gained access to email accounts, including US government accounts. The tech giant's analysis revealed that the cyber-attacks have affected some 25 organizations, including government agencies.

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Russian Embassy in Canada Under Hostile Siege, Security Situation Tense - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - Russian diplomats in Canada perform their duties under a hostile siege by protesters, and the overall security situation remains tense, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The security situation around the embassy remains tense," Stepanov said. "We are taking our own measures to protect our families, our children, but I would say that in comparison with the prosperous climate that the Canadian Embassy in Moscow enjoys, we are under such a hostile siege here."

Stepanov explained that every day since the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, they have been picketed, all sorts of ugly actions have been organized, protesters throw paint on the embassy fence and all sorts of offensive inscriptions on the poles.

"We are being bombarded from tennis guns with colored balls," the envoy added. "In general they behave very badly. We have a kindergarten operating on the territory of the embassy and we detect that some unidentified individuals are trying to take pictures of the faces of our children when minibuses arrive and leave the embassy. The situation is tense. The employees are all trained and competent."

Stepanov shared that the embassy is constantly engaged in the difficult dialogue with the Canadian side about the fact that the Canadian side must all comply with its obligations under the Vienna Convention and take more preventive and active measures to protect foreign diplomats on its territory

"In this context, I would like to note that we do not and never have had a permanent Canadian police presence near our embassy," he said. "That is, any attacker who would like to arrange

something terrible is free in his actions. The police, as we calculated from previous incidents, arrive no earlier than three to 11 minutes. Three minutes is the best. And when I talked with my Canadian colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I told them that any villain can commit an action and hide, because the police will arrive in 3-11 minutes, and then everyone will have to deal with the consequences later."

Stepanov also shared with Sputnik that earlier in the day, after the request from the Russian Embassy, a "laser show" on the diplomatic mission building was banned.

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US House Oversight Committee Holds First Hearing in Biden Impeachment Inquiry

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee held its first hearing on Thursday in an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden for alleged influence peddling and other criminal activities.

Lawmakers heard from witnesses, including from former US Assistant Attorney General Eileen O'Connor, George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill law professor Michael Gerhardt and forensic accountant Bruce Dubinsky.

The hearing was focused on the basis for the impeachment inquiry into Biden, which was ordered by US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

"It is important to emphasize what this hearing is not. It is not a hearing on articles of impeachment. The House has launched an impeachment inquiry," Turley said. "My testimony also reflects the fact that I do believe that, after months of investigation, the House has passed the threshold for an inquiry into whether President Joe Biden was directly involved or benefited from the corrupt practices of his son, Hunter, and others."

Turley said that he does not believe there is adequate evidence at this time to meet the "high crime and misdemeanor" standard needed to draft articles of impeachment. However, lawmakers need to answer "troubling questions" surrounding Biden, Turley said.

Gerhardt, the witness brought by the Oversight Committee's Democratic minority, said that the impeachment inquiry was a partisan endeavor by Republicans. A partisan impeachment effort could harm the integrity of the committee, the House of Representatives and the rule of law in the United States more broadly, Gerhardt added.

US House lawmakers have been investigating the Biden family for alleged influence peddling and bribery involving foreign entities in countries including Ukraine and China. The accusations center around business activity conducted by Hunter Biden, in which Republicans allege Joe Biden was involved.

Biden denies ever having discussed foreign business affairs with his son.

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Achieving New START Successor Treaty 'Difficult' Due to US-Russia Tensions - GAO

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will face difficulty reaching an agreement on a treaty to replace New START due to the current tensions between Washington and Moscow, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said on Thursday in a new report to Congress on nuclear arms control.

"According to several stakeholders we interviewed, agreeing to a successor to New START could be difficult for a number of reasons," the GAO report said. "According to these stakeholders, the current state of relations diminishes near-term prospects that the US and Russia could negotiate a successor to New START."

The GAO conducted its audit by reviewing government plans, reports and studies related to treaty verification and interviewed 43 stakeholders, including US government officials, representatives from the Energy Department's national laboratories, and nuclear arms control experts.

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Russia Has No Illusions For Prospects of Extradition of Nazi Veteran Hunka - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - Russia has no illusions about the prospects for the extradition of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, as Canada will certainly drag out the process until his death, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We understand, we do not have any illusions here, that this Hunka - even if the Poles, NATO allies of Canada demand extradition, if our relevant authorities also bring up the appropriate case and presentation for his extradition to Russia for his crimes against citizens of the USSR and citizens of Russia. Unfortunately, I'm sure that the Canadian authorities will launch such a long bureaucratic process that this 98-year-old SS-man will simply be allowed to quietly pass on to another world here. In order not to recognize his real crime on a legal level. This is unfortunately the reality of Canada today," Stepanov said.

The Ambassador also noted that for many years the Russian Foreign Ministry and the embassy have been working purposefully to bring the problem of these hidden Nazis in Canada to the surface.

"And all the changing Canadian cabinets, they all avoided interaction on this issue in every possible way," he said, providing the two examples of the Nazis in Canada, Vladimir Katriuk and Helmut Oberlander. both of who peacefully dies in Canada.

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Nagorno-Karabakh Takeover Marks Another Diplomatic Failure for Macron's France - Expert

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijan's recent military takeover of breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh marks another failure of French President Emmanuel Macron's diplomacy, which Francois Asselineau, a French geopolitical observer, puts down to his "inexperience" and ambition to present himself as a master deal-maker.

"I think the failure of French diplomacy is due mainly in this case to the lack of experience of Emmanuel Macron, who dreams of applying his 'en meme temps' (at the same time) verbiage to international crises, without any success. In Nagorno-Karabagh, just like in Ukraine or sub-Saharan Africa, Macron's attitudes, bravado declarations and demands obtain strictly nothing," the expert told Sputnik.

Azerbaijan recaptured the ethnic Armenian-populated region in a two-day military operation last week, prompting tens of thousands to flee to Armenia for fear of retribution. France, a party to the three-way OSCE mediating body on Nagorno-Karabakh and home to the largest Armenian minority in Europe, described the region as "sovereign Armenian territory" and demanded that Azeri forces leave what is recognized internationally as an integral part of Azerbaijan, in a move that angered Baku.

Asselineau, a former senior French civil servant who ran against Macron in the 2017 presidential race, argued that the centrist was no longer positioned to play the role of a go-between and broker peace between the two South Caucasus rivals after he took sides, effectively erasing France's gains of the previous decades.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought two wars over Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku's earlier attempt to reclaim the landlocked region in 2020 ended in a Russia-mediated truce and the deployment of peacekeepers. France tried to re-establish itself in the South Caucasus in spring by sending Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna on her first visit to Baku where she got a chilly reception from her Azeri counterpart who accused Paris of "failure and inaction."

"While Moscow had obtained a ceasefire in 2020 and sent Russian peacekeepers that play their role in the present evacuation of civilians, Colonna's call for a 'path to peace between the two republics' fell on deaf ears. It is again a total failure for French diplomacy, after the expulsion of France from the whole Sahel region in Africa," Asselineau said.

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US Not Seeing Russia, China Actively Trying to Affect 2024 Election - NSA Chief

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US National Security Agency (NSA) has seen no evidence that Russia or China are actively attempting to affect the 2024 US presidential election, NSA and the US Cyber Command Chief Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Thursday.

"We haven't seen that," Nakasone said when asked whether Russia or China are trying to meddle in the 2024 US presidential election.

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Canadian Authorities Banned 'Laser Show' on Russian Embassy After Mission Request - Envoy

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - In Canada, after the request from the Russian Embassy, a "laser show" on the diplomatic mission building was banned and the diplomats will continue to work on other subjects, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Regarding the laser show. We saw on Facebook (banned in Russia) an announcement by the certain group, that is constantly trying to cause inconvenience to the work of the embassy, that on September 30, an action with the projection of some laser images on the facade of the embassy would be carried out," Stepanov said. "I personally and our diplomats simultaneously contacted the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which protects diplomatic missions."

Stepanov explained that the diplomats drew attention to the plans of the activist group, expressed protest, and emphasized that this kind of action violates the Vienna Convention and can interfere with the functioning of the diplomatic mission.

"Moreover, it can interfere not only with the activities of our embassy, but also harm the health of our employees. Because if the laser gets into the eyes, then the effect is clear," he added. "It must be said that the Canadian authorities reacted to this and today, at least according to the press reporting, we learned that the city authorities and police have banned this kind of laser projection. It is a good result. We will continue to work on other issues."

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US National Security Agency Creating New Entity Focused on AI Security - Director

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - US National Security Agency (NSA) and Cyber Command chief General Paul Nakasone said on Thursday that the agency is creating a new entity that will be focused on artificial intelligence (AI) security.

"NSA is consolidating various AI security-related activities into a new entity, the NSA Artificial Intelligence Security Center," Nakasone said during a discussion hosted by the National Press Club.

Nakasone explained that the NSA recently conducted an in-depth study of artificial intelligence and found a need for a focus on AI security. He added that AI will be increasingly consequential for national security in diplomatic, military, technological and economic matters for the United States and its allies.

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University of Alberta Closed Hunka Fund Soon After Russian Embassy's Request - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The University of Alberta has announced about the closure of the research endowment fund bearing the name of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka and his wife Margaret soon after the public address by the Russian Embassy in Canada, whose work was timely, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"As a result of our work, the embassy discovered that Hunka and his family have an educational fund at the University of Alberta. But even after this scandal it continued to exist absolutely officially," Stepanov said. "Through our social networks, we drew the attention of the university management to this story and asked them to comment on how they felt about it. The result was not long in coming. Just a few hours later, this morning, the university publicly announced that it was closing the fund, returning the money, and expressed regret for any inconvenience or sadness that may have caused to anyone. The work of the embassy here turned out to be timely and correct."

Interim Provost and Vice-President Verna You said on Thursday that the University of Alberta has decided to close the research endowment fund bearing the name of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka and his wife Margaret, and refund the donation.

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Germany to Increase Scrutiny of Investments From China - Foreign Minister

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - Germany will scrutinize foreign investments in its economy more carefully, especially from China, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Thursday.

"We must start with ourselves and reduce our unilateral dependence, for example, by scrutinizing foreign investment in Germany even more carefully. For example, we, as the federal government, have just banned the complete takeover of a German satellite company by Chinese investors," Baerbock said at a Bundestag meeting on the federal government's China strategy.

Baerbock added that the German government was actively working to diversify trade ties to reduce dependence on Chinese imports. However, Berlin will continue to work with Beijing on global issues such as health and the environment.

In September, the German government blocked a complete takeover of German satellite startup KLEO Connect by Chinese company Shanghai Spacecom Satellite Technology.

In July, Germany unveiled its foreign policy strategy on China. The strategy defines ways and instruments how the federal government can cooperate with China without "endangering" Germany's way of life, sovereignty, prosperity and security.

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Russian Embassy to Send Diplomatic Note to Canada on Probe Regarding Hunka - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) -The Russian Embassy will send a note to the Canadian Foreign Ministry on Thursday with an inquiry about Canada's legal steps regarding Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, and will be awaiting Ottawa's reaction, Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We will send a note officially with questions about what further legal actions the Canadian government intends to take in relation to Hunka since his involvement in the recognized criminal and prohibited by the Nuremberg tribunals organization has now been proven," Stepanov said. "So we'll see what the reaction will be from the Canadian side."

When asked when a note will be sent, Stepanov shared, "Today."

Last Friday, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during World War II, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. The honoring of Hunka happened as the then-House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

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Russian Embassy to Raise With Canada Legal Reaction to Honoring Nazi Veteran - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) -The Russian Embassy will raise in contacts with Canadian authorities the topic of a legal reaction to the honoring of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka in the House of Commons, Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Today, I am going to publicly ask the Canadian authorities about the future of this Hunka," Stepanov said. "Well, everyone understood that he was a former SS executioner, everyone now knows that he is a Canadian citizen and lives in Canada, everyone seemed to condemn him and half-apologized for his appearance in parliament. But what will be the next step of the Canadian government? Are they going to open, for example, an investigation into his possible crimes against humanity? Or will they all now let this scandal die and just quietly step aside? We, the embassy, won't let this go down."

Stepanov underscored that he intends to raise this issue in their contacts with the Canadian side - particularly, what kind of legal reaction they will carry out in relation to Hunka.

Last Friday, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during World War II, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. The honoring of Hunka happened as the then-House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

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Palestine Says Israel Issued Over 32,000 Detention Orders for Palestinians Over 23 Years

GAZA CITY, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Israeli authorities over the past 23 years have issued over 32,000 administrative detention orders for Palestinians, that is, detention without charge or trial, an official with the Palestinian Authority for Prisoners Affairs told Sputnik.

"Since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada on September 28, 2000 and up until today, the Israeli authorities have issued more than 32,000 administrative detention orders, including both new ones and extensions," Abdel Nasser Farwana, who heads the documentation and studies unit within the authority, said.

Over 1,250 Palestinians are still under administrative detention without charge or trial, he added.

Farwana cited two Palestinian prisoners as an example, one of whom had gone on a hunger strike two months ago, protesting against his administrative detention, while the other had been on a hunger strike for 131 days in 2021.

In 2023, Khader Adnan, a spokesman for the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, died after an 87-day hunger strike in protest of his detention without trial.

In 2012, another Palestinian prisoner in Israel, Samer Tariq Issawi, went on the longest hunger strike in Israeli prisons, which lasted 265 days. Among women, prisoner Hana Shalabi's hunger strike is the longest. It lasted 44 days.

In total, Israeli law enforcement agents have arrested over 135,000 Palestinians over the past 23 years, according to the Palestinian Authority for Prisoners Affairs.

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Nuclear Arms Control Deal Between US, China Unlikely in Near Future - Government Watchdog

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - A formal nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and China is unlikely in the near future for a range of reasons, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"According to these officials, as well as several stakeholders we interviewed and studies we reviewed, a formal nuclear arms control agreement between the US and China is unlikely in the near future for several reasons," the report said.

The report said that China's alleged unwillingness to limit its nuclear arsenal until it reaches nuclear force parity with the United States and the absence of a history of nuclear arms control negotiations between Washington and Beijing unlike between the US and Russia and the Soviet

Union are the two main reasons no agreement is possible in the future.

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US Mortgage Rate for Home Loans at Near 23 Year High - Freddie Mac Agency

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-11)

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - US mortgage rates for housing loans are near 23-year highs, the federal agency responsible for assisting Americans with home buying said Thursday, as interest rates were tipped to climb again before the year-end in the world's largest economy.

"The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage has hit the highest level since the year 2000," the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac) said in a statement. It cited a 7.31% for the 30-year mortgage, up from 6.65% during this same time in 2022. The 15-year fixed mortgage rate was at 6.72% compared with 5.95% from a year ago.

The spike in mortgage rates came ahead of an expected rise in US interest rates either in November or December. Interest rates have risen from a peak of just 0.25% in February 2022 to 5.5%, as the Federal Reserve tries to rein in inflation which hit four-decade highs amid trillions of dollars of relief spending in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mortgage rates, along with surging interest rates, have limited the home buying capacity of Americans, said those in the know. Home prices have also not dropped accordingly due to a combination of inflation and low supply - a fact Freddie Mac acknowledged.

"Unlike the turn of the millennium, house prices today are rising alongside mortgage rates, primarily due to low inventory," Freddie Mac said. "These headwinds are causing both buyers and sellers to hold out for better circumstances."

Pending home sales fell 7.1% in August, the National Association of Realtors said on Thursday, a day after the Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that sales of newly constructed homes fell 8.7%. Sales of existing homes, meanwhile, fell 0.7% last month.

The median existing-home price, however, climbed 3.9% from a year ago to \$407,100 – the third consecutive month that it surpassed \$400,000.

"Home prices continue to march higher despite lower home sales," Lawrence Yun, chief economist of the National Association of Realtors, said. "Supply needs to essentially double to moderate home price gains."

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008-09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers.

But while supply of homes, both existing and new, have been way below demand the past two years, rising interest rates and record home prices have kept buyers away.

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Taliban Adhered to Their Counter-Terrorism Commitments, Disrupt ISIS-K - Nuland

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (under UN sanctions) have partially adhered to their counter-terrorism commitments, including engaging in actions to disrupt the operation of the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K, banned in Russia), Acting Deputy Secretary of State and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"It is our assessment that the Taliban have partially adhered to their CT [counter-terrorism] commitments. We've seen them disrupt ISIS-K, for example, but there's obviously plenty more to do to ensure that Afghanistan doesn't become a safe haven or return to a safe haven or persist as a safe haven [for terrorist groups]," Nuland told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Nuland did not recommend including the Taliban in a revised version of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) that has been around for more than 20 years to provide the US government with a legal basis to conduct military operations against alleged terrorist groups.

Earlier in September, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said that the United States has no plans to recognize the Taliban and urges it to meet its international obligations.

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Amsterdam to Have Highest Tourist Tax in EU in 2024 - Mayor's Office

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Amsterdam mayor's office said Thursday it would increase tourist taxes in 2024, making them the highest in the European Union.

The accommodation tax will increase from the current rate at 7% over the room charge and 3 euros (\$3.17) per person to 12.5% in 2024, Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam Hester van Buren said.

Taxes for passengers of cruise liners will increase by nearly 38%, i.e. tourists will pay 11 euros instead of eight, the mayor's office said.

The mayor's office expects the revenue from the tax increase to total over 65 million euros per year.

The tax rise is aimed at fighting "excessive tourism," van Buren said.

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Twitter Would've Censored Canada's Nazi Scandal Were it Really 'Russian Propaganda' – Musk

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – US billionaire and tech entrepreneur Elon Musk agreed on Thursday that X's predecessor Twitter would likely have censored Canada's Ukrainian Nazi veteran scandal were it really "Russian disinformation".

Last Friday, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during World War II, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. The honoring of Hunka happened as the then-House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

"This is how the Canadian Nazi story broke. MSM tried to ignore it. If it wasn't for an academic using this platform, the world would not have known. And since Trudeau tried to deflect by calling it "Russian disinformation," it seems likely that old Twitter would have censored it," podcaster David Sacks, said as he quoted a professor's post on the X social media platform. "Yup", Musk answered.

The academic in question, who specializes in researching comparative politics, conflicts, political communication, and policy in Ukraine, the US, and Canada, is Ivan Katchanovski, a Professor at the School of Political Studies and the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa.

In his post, Katchanovski said he was pleasantly surprised to see his academic research-based tweets and interviews over Hunka's ovation at the parliament, had such a great impact.

The professor made two publications on X, one in which he quote-tweeted an Associated Press photo caption referring to the standing ovation given to Hunka and his characterization as a veteran of the First Ukrainian Division which in fact is the SS Galicia Division.

A second post referred to his own research-based thread containing photos and memories of Hunka voluntarily joining the SS Galicia Division, as well a peer-reviewed article written by him on the divisions' involvement in the mass killings of Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians.

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Sweden to Introduce Special Prisons Amid Increase in Youth Crime - Reports

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - Sweden will introduce special youth prisons by July 1, 2026 as the country faces a dramatic increase in youth crime, Swedish officials said on Thursday in an article published by the Aftonbladet newspaper.

Currently, juveniles who have committed serious offenses are sent to closed youth supervision facilities. In August, Sweden's commission on restrictive sentencing for youth proposed imposing prison sentences on teens convicted of serious offenses such as murder, rape and aggravated robbery. The amendments were expected to take effect January 1, 2028.

The Swedish government intends to take an important step as the commission was ordered to prepare for the creation of special youth prisons, the article co-authored by Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer said.

The decision was made amid a dramatic increase in youth crime, which has never been seen before in the country, the officials said, adding that even young children are now involved in

organized violence.

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Embassy in Beijing Receives Chinese Bloggers After Visit to Russia's New Regions

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - The Chinese bloggers who recently visited the new regions of Russia have been warmly received by the Russian Embassy in Beijing.

The bloggers visited the Russian regions at the invitation of the Ukraina.ru news outlet, which is part of the Rossiya Segodnya international media group. Among the bloggers was opera singer Wang Fang, who won worldwide fame after singing the Soviet war song "Katyusha" in Chinese in the Mariupol Drama Theater.

During a reception at the diplomatic mission, the bloggers from China shared their impressions from the trip to Russia and promised to further strengthen Russian-Chinese ties through citizen diplomacy,

Earlier this month, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry demanded a clarification from Beijing in connection with the visit of bloggers to the new Russian regions. Rossiya Segodnya has said that attempts to force Chinese citizens to report to Ukraine on their movements are tactless and do not benefit Kiev.

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US Navy Accuses Iran's IRGC Vessel of 'Unsafe' Interaction With US Attack Helicopter

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - US Naval Forces Central Command spokesperson Rick Chernitzer said on Thursday that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy had an unsafe and unprofessional interaction with a US military attack helicopter this week.

"Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) interacted in an unsafe and unprofessional manner with a US AH-1Z Viper attack helicopter, assigned to the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, as the aircraft was conducting routine operations in the international airspace of the Arabian Gulf, September 27," Chernitzer said in a press release.

The interaction took place Wednesday night when IRGC Navy vessels shone a laser multiple times at the US helicopter during its flight, Chernitzer said.

No injuries were reported and the US military aircraft was not damaged, according to the press release.

Earlier this year, the US Defense Department deployed some 3,000 Marines and military aircraft, including a squadron of F-35 fighter jets, to the Persian Gulf in response to Iran's seizure of merchant ships in the region.

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US Sanctions Former Sudanese Foreign Affairs Minister, Two Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US sanctioned former Sudanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Karti, a Sudan-based IT company, and a Russia-based military supply company over alleged destabilizing activities, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) targeted two entities and one individual for their role in undermining the peace, security, and stability of Sudan," the release stated.

Karti was the minister of foreign affairs under the Bashir government that was ousted in 2019. He was selected as leader of the Sudanese Islamic Movement and led efforts to derail Sudan's progress toward a full democratic transition, including undermining the former civilian-led transitional government and the Framework Political Agreement process, which contributed to the outbreak of fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April.

He and other hardline Islamists are actively obstructing efforts to reach a ceasefire to end the current war between the SAF and RSF and opposing civilians' efforts to restore Sudan's democratic transition.

The two entities sanctioned are RSF-affiliated companies contributing to and profiting from the conflict in Sudan. GSK Advance Company Ltd is a Sudan-based information technology and security company run by influential members of the security forces. It has been used as a procurement channel for the RSF.

As of late 2020, GSK worked with Aviatrade LLC, a Russia-based military supply company, to arrange for training and the procurement of parts and supplies for unmanned aerial vehicles purchased by the RSF. As of mid-2023, the RSF used GSK to facilitate additional purchases from Aviatrade, including monitoring equipment and spare parts.

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US Mortgage Rate for Home Loans at Near 23-Year High - Freddie Mac Agency

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US mortgage rate for housing loans are at near 23-year highs, the federal agency responsible for assisting Americans with home buying said Thursday, as interest rates are tipped to climb again before the year end in the world's largest economy.

"The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage has hit the highest level since the year 2000," Freddie Mac, or the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, said in a statement. It cited a 7.31% for the 30-year rate, up from 6.65% during this same time in 2022. The 15-year fixed mortgage rate

was at 6.72% compared with 5.95% from a year ago.

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Nuland Says Revised AUMF Should Authorize Use of Force Against Al-Qaeda, Islamic State

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - A revised 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) should explicitly authorize the use of military force against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State terror groups (both outlawed in Russia), Acting Deputy Secretary of State and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"A revised AUMF should explicitly authorize force against Al Qaeda and ISIS [Islamic State]," Nuland told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee. "A revised AUMF, in our view, should not include a certain expiration date given the persistence of this [terrorist] threat."

A new AUMF should also continue to provide the administration with uninterrupted authority for the operation of terrorist detention facilities and should enable it to apply military force to new geographic areas and terrorist groups as needed, Nuland added.

At the same time, the Biden administration does not believe there is a need to include the Taliban (under UN sanctions) into the new authorization together with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, Nuland said.

The 2001 AUMF became the main legal basis for conducting all counterterrorism operations following the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States.

In March, the US Senate passed a bill to repeal the 1991 and 2002 AUMFs against Iraq, sending the bill to the House of Representatives before final approval by US President Joe Biden. The House of Representatives has not been able to decide yet on whether to follow suit or propose changes to the authorizations.

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Belgrade Says Victims of Sunday Clashes Were Deliberately Killed by Kosovar Police

BELGRADE, September 28 (Sputnik) - The three Serbs killed in the clashes with police in northern Kosovo last Sunday were murdered in cold blood, brutally and deliberately, the Serbian government's chief for Kosovo and Metohija Affairs, Petar Petkovic, said on Thursday.

On Sunday, Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti said that unidentified people opened fire on Kosovo police officers in the northern municipality of Zvecan, killing one and wounding another. Later, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that three Serbs were killed and two others injured in the clashes with police in northern Kosovo and Metohija. Vucic said that those killed were not terrorists but were driven to the brink of desperation by the Kosovar authorities in Pristina. He called them "heroes and martyrs."

Petkovic told a briefing that the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) had not participated in the investigation on the site of the incident because the Kosovo police "wanted to hide the evidence and the truth."

"The truth is that the Serbs were killed by the Kosovo police in cold blood, brutally and cruelly. Everybody should know this," the official said.

Serbia, he continued, has reliable information, evidence, photos and statements from eyewitnesses.

"The testimony was confirmed by a lie detector: Bojan Mijajlovic, a father of two children of six years and nine months, a husband and a son, was killed after having sustained a light injury, falling to the ground and exiting the fight, with a shot in the head by the Kosovo police," Petkovic said.

The eyewitnesses are ready to identify the perpetrators, the official added.

Petkovic also called for an international investigation of what happened. He emphasized that the Kosovo authorities had not handed over the bodies of the killed Serbs, which he says proves the fact that they had been injured and later finished off.

Mourning for the victims was declared from September 26-28 in the Serb-populated regions of Kosovo and Metohija and on September 27 in central Serbia.

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University of Alberta to Refund Yaroslav, Margaret Hunka Research Fund - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The University of Alberta has decided to close the research endowment fund bearing the name of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka and his wife Margaret, and refund the donation, Interim Provost and Vice-President Verna You said on Thursday.

The Yaroslav and Margaret Hunka research endowment fund was created in 2019 following a C\$30,097 (US\$22,307) donation made by the individual's family to the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta.

"After careful consideration of the complexities, experiences, and circumstances of those impacted by the situation, we have made the decision to close the endowment and return the funds to the donor. The university recognizes and regrets the unintended harm caused," Yiu said in a statement.

Yiu conveyed the university's commitment to address antisemitism in all its forms and announced that the academic institution would be reviewing the general naming policies and procedures, including those for endowments to ensure they are in line with their values.

Last Friday, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during World War II, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. The honoring of Hunka happened as the then-House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

On Wednesday, the Russian Embassy in Canada tagged the University of Alberta on the social

media platform X (formerly Twitter), depicting the research fund's name, description, value and date of creation, and asking whether they have any comments on the matter.

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US Growth in 2nd Quarter Finalized at 2.1%, 4th Quarter Set at 2.4% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - US gross domestic product growth for the second quarter of 2023 has been finalized at an annual rate of 2.1%, lower than the 2.2% in the first quarter, the Commerce Department said in an update issued on Wednesday.

“Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 2.1 percent in the second quarter of 2023, according to the ‘third’ estimate,” the update said. “The increase in the second quarter primarily reflected increases in business investment, consumer spending, and state and local government spending that were partly offset by a decrease in exports. Imports, which are a subtraction in the calculation of GDP, decreased.”

The Commerce Department issues three GDP estimates for each quarter. It has maintained the 2.1% growth rate in the last two readings of the second quarter, after initially projecting an expansion rate of 2.4%.

Despite the marginal GDP change between the first and second quarters, the economy saw shifts in both consumption and inflation, economist Adam Button said.

“The headline might lull you into thinking there's nothing notable here but the consumer was quite a bit weaker in the quarter while inflation was lower,” Button wrote on the ForexLive platform. “Both of those things are notable for monetary policy going forward. Corporate profits were also much stronger.”

Corporate profits for the second quarter - calculated from the bottom line of companies based on their valuations versus capital consumption adjustments on production - rose \$6.9 billion year-on-year in the second quarter, up \$17.5 billion from the previous estimate.

US consumer spending could witness a sharper slowing in the final three months of the year as labor market and wage growth cool as well, Fitch Ratings said in an economic outlook published Wednesday.

Consumer spending accounts for 70-80% of US economic activity. Fitch’s outlook was published a day after The Conference Board, a group that measures US consumer trends, said consumer confidence tumbled for a second month in a row in September, nearing recession levels, as Americans continued to cut spending amid rising inflation.

US headline inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) hit 40-year highs of more than 9% in June 2022 before falling to as low as 3% by June last year. Since then, it has been on the rise, adding a rounded-up 0.7% over the past two months, as high global oil prices bumped up fuel costs at home.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UK Actor Michael Gambon, Known for Playing Professor Dumbledore, Dies at 82 - Family

MOSCOW, September 28 (Sputnik) - British and Irish actor Michael Gambon, best known for playing the Hogwarts headmaster in the "Harry Potter" film series, has died at the age of 82, his family said on Thursday.

"We are devastated to announce the loss of Sir Michael Gambon. Beloved husband and father, Michael died peacefully in hospital with his wife Anne and son Fergus at his bedside, following a bout of pneumonia. Michael was 82," Gambon's family was quoted as saying by The Guardian.

The family asked for privacy at this painful time and thanked everyone for their messages of support.

Gambon's acting career lasted for more than five decades, spanning both screen and stage. He starred in widely known movies, such as Kingsman: The Golden Circle, The Book of Eli, Paddington and many others.

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Washington Cooperation With Taipei on Deterrence in Taiwan Strait 'Important' - Chollet

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - Cooperation between the United States and Taiwan in ensuring continued deterrence in the Taiwan Strait is important, the nominee for the position US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Derek Chollet, said during his confirmation hearing on Thursday.

"It is a very difficult dynamic, but I think the facts show that the PRC is building up capability at a very alarming rate to threaten Taiwan. It's important for the United States who worked in Taiwan to maintain deterrence across the Taiwan Strait and if confirmed, that will be one of my missions," Chollet told US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Chollet also emphasized the importance of maintaining so-called strategic ambiguity.

Such a posture has served the United States efficiently over the past decades and has allowed Washington to provide military assistance to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act, Chollet said.

"This is an area where Congress has been a leader since 1979," he said.

If confirmed to the position, Chollet said he would work with the Senate to ensure that Taiwan is provided with the relevant support.

Supporting a free and democratic country like Taiwan is critical to US interests, Chollet added.

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IMF Says Vital to Agree On Quota By End Of Year To Improve Economy

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – Reaching the agreement on the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) quota by the end of the year is important to improving the global economy, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

“To make the global economy stronger and more resilient in the world that we are facing, it is vital to reach an agreement to increase the IMF quota resources before the end of the year,” Kozack told reporters.

It is also important to secure the need for resources with the fund's interest-free support to the poorest counties through the Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust, she added.

“A potential increase of the IMF quota is still under discussion with our membership,” Kozack noted.

The increase would be a significant achievement, she said.

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IMF, Ukraine Hold Discussions On Situation, Policies – Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the government of Ukraine continue their technical discussions related to the recent developments in the country and the implementation of the policies needed for reforms, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

“We have a mission that is underway now. It is holding technical discussions with the Ukrainian authorities on recent developments, as well as fiscal financial and structural policies,” Kozack told reporters.

These discussions have the goal to prepare for additional support under different IMF programs, she added.

“We will be communicating more on Ukraine after the end of this technical mission,” Kozack said.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said earlier in September that Kiev will need financial assistance worth about \$42 billion from its Western partners in 2024. He noted that the funding is expected to come from the EU's Ukraine Facility program, the US, the IMF and others.

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US Senate Republicans Eye \$60Bln to \$80Bln in Year-Long Funding for Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - Many US Senate Republicans want to pass a multi-billion dollar package for Ukraine next month to sustain the country through the 2024 US presidential election and eliminate the need for repeated votes on aid for the country,

Punchbowl news reported on Thursday.

The package would be valued in the range of \$60 billion to \$80 billion and would face a single vote in Congress next month, eliminating the need for repeated votes to authorize new funding, the report said.

Authorizing the package in a single vote would minimize news coverage of the current divisions in the Republican party over funding for Ukraine.

Legislators cannot be voting on the issue every three months, the report cited US House Foreign Affairs Chairman Michael McCaul as saying.

The move could also help break the current deadlock between the House of Representatives and Senate over a stopgap funding measure to avoid a government shutdown by taking the issue of Ukraine funding off the table for the moment, according to the report.

The US Congress is attempting to coordinate a stopgap funding measure before the end of the month to avoid a government shutdown. The Senate and House of Representatives have both proposed short-term measures, but there are discrepancies between the two pieces of legislation.

The Senate proposal includes more than \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine, which several House Republican lawmakers have opposed. The House proposal includes border security measures, which the Democrat-majority Senate is unlikely to approve.

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IMF Says Supports Improved International Cooperation, Including Desire to Join BRICS

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) supports improved international cooperation, including countries' desire to join BRICS, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

“Improved and expanded international cooperation and deepening trade and investment ties among groups of countries, including, for example, the BRICS, is something that we welcome and we encourage, as long as they aimed at reducing market fragmentation, enhancing trade, reducing investment costs,” Kozack told reporters.

However, Kozack noted that the IMF urges to avoid the fragmentation of the global economy. “We believe that would be costly for the global economy,” she added.

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IMF Sees Government Shutdown As Avoidable Risk to US Economy – Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – The US government shutdown, which may occur if the White House and Congress do not reach an agreement by the end of October 30, is an avoidable risk to the country's economy, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie

Kozack said on Thursday.

"We do see a shutdown as an avoidable risk for the US economy," Kozack told reporters.

The IMF encourages all parties to come together to reach a consensus on ways to fund the US government, she added.

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Under Secretary of Defense Nominee Chollet Says US Should Continue Military Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Derek Chollet, said during his confirmation hearing on Thursday that he would continue providing military support to Ukraine if confirmed to hold the post.

"[I]f confirmed, I will continue this administration's work to provide military support to Ukraine and rally the world for Ukraine's self defense. This has been an unprecedented effort in which Congress has been an indispensable part," Chollet told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Addressing a question on what the consequences faced by Ukraine in the event financial assistance from the US was reduced, would be,

Chollet said the consequences faced by Ukraine if US financial assistance was reduced would be devastating.

Maintaining robust US support for the Ukrainian government is "vital," Chollet added.

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US Government Starts Notifying Federal Employees Shutdown May Be Imminent - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - The US government on Thursday morning started notifying federal employees to prepare for an imminent government shutdown, the Washington Post reported, citing internal memorandums sent to staff.

"During this time, some of you will be temporarily furloughed while others who perform excepted functions will continue to execute your assigned duties," the Department of Homeland Security said in one of the notices quoted in the report.

The US Congress is attempting to coordinate the budget before the end of the month to avoid a government shutdown. The Senate and House of Representatives have both proposed short-term measures, although there are discrepancies between the two pieces of legislation.

If funding legislation is not enacted before October 1, federal agencies will be forced to stop all nonessential work and not send any paychecks until the shutdown ends.

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US Has Taken Significant Steps Toward Closing Guantanamo Bay, This Remains Goal – Nuland

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) – The United States has taken “significant steps” towards closing the Guantanamo Bay detention center and this remains a goal for the administration, Acting Deputy Secretary of State and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

“We’ve taken significant steps towards closing the facility at Guantanamo Bay, and that remains our goal,” Nuland said during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing.

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Blinken Says Post-Cold-War Era Over, US Now in Competition to 'Shape What Comes Next'

WASHINGTON, September 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that the United States considers the post-Cold-War era to be over and is now in a period of intense competition to "shape what comes next."

"I don't think we're in a new Cold War, but we are in a new era," Blinken said at a talk organized by the Atlantic magazine. "Because as we see it, the post-Cold-War era is over and what we're in now is a period where there's an intense competition to shape what's comes next."

Blinken said Russia, China as well as many other countries are part of the new competition.

The stakes could not be higher in that competition but the United States is confident about its ability to shape the new era, Blinken added.

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New Funding for Ukraine Uncertain Over Republican-Democrat Dispute in Congress

WASHINGTON, September 38 (Sputnik) - The approval of new funds for Ukraine has become uncertain due to the dispute between Republicans and Democrats in the US House of Representatives, Punchbowl News reported on Thursday.

A week after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Washington and pleaded for more aid, Congress is nowhere close to approving additional funding as US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy refuses to new funds in any stopgap spending measures, the report said.

However, legislators may eventually allow for new appropriations for Ukraine, considering the so-called supermajorities in both chambers of Congress favoring new assistance, the report said.

Congress is attempting to coordinate the budget before the end of the month to avoid a government shutdown. The Senate and House of Representatives have both proposed short-term measures, although there are discrepancies between the two pieces of legislation. The Senate proposal includes more than \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine, which some Republican lawmakers have opposed. The House proposal includes border security measures, which the Democrat-majority Senate is unlikely to approve.