

3/8/24 Thursday

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US History: Billions Spent on the Military Amid Record Homelessness, Lack of Healthcare

The year 2024 is slated to be the greatest election year in history, with more than 50 countries going to the polls. But the election in the United States will have dire consequences for the world, as the country continues its imperialistic tirade across the globe after sinking itself into two proxy wars.

On Thursday, [The Critical Hour](#) spoke with guest Dr. Linwood Tauheed, an associate professor of economics at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and a former president of the National Economics Association. Sputnik's hosts and their guest discussed an article that outlines the US' anti-developmental policies which seemed to begin in 1953 with then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Administration.

"By the fifties, Argentina had the largest middle class in South America, while Uruguay provided free healthcare to its 95% literate people," the [article](#) claims. "Since developmentalism is rooted in equality, justice and independence, the US painted it as the first step towards godless communism, forever tarnishing it in Americans minds. Then, in 1953, President Eisenhower launched the war on development."

The term "developmentalism", says Tauheed, is a set of economic theories developed by economists following World War II, and was created in particular by South American developmental economists.

"Economists in Argentina who looked at the relationships between South American economies and the industrialized north of the US and Europe, realized that if you follow the ways that the US wanted, the north wanted, that these countries could never develop," said Tauheed.

"And so, they rejected the ideas of just trading with these developed countries as a way to get into developing their economies and began to educate their population and engage in what was called import substitution—that is instead of importing industrial machinery from the north, they would learn how to make those things and develop on their own," he added. "And so this begins the US' war on South America to get rid of those regimes in those countries that were making progress for their citizens."

Sputnik's Garland Nixon pointed to a visit that US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen made to Beijing in [July](#). During the visit, Yellen said that a "shift toward a more market-oriented system in China would not only be in the interests of the U.S. and other countries" but would "be better for the Chinese economy as well." The statement was exceedingly self-righteous, seeing as the Chinese economy is outperforming that of the US, Sputnik's hosts and guest suggested.

"In the last 20 years, China has raised 800 million people out of poverty, that's almost two times the population of the US. The median household income in China has grown by 700% whereas the median household income in the US has only grown by 7%. So they outperformed the US in their system by 100 times," Tauheed explained.

“It actually makes no sense for countries to want to grow food in order to sell that to other countries for farming equipment,” said Tauheed in reference to the US’ relationship with its southern neighbors. “These countries have figured out in the 1950s that in order to feed their own population, if your population is healthy, then economic growth comes as a result of that.” “This policy that was destroyed in South America—the import substitution policy—was revived in the 1980s by what was called the Asian Tigers. Japan is part of that, as are Singapore, South Korea,” he continued. “They began to do the things that the South American countries did, but they were not attacked because they were looked upon as allies against China.” “And so they were able to grow their economies and to take over industries like electronics and automobiles because they used the same policies that the South Americans were not allowed to use because the South Americans were invaded militarily. That blowback is still occurring, with the migrants who are coming to this country from their countries because their countries are war-torn as a result of US policy,” Tauheed added.

Nixon noted the US neoliberal capitalist effect on Europe as thousands of angry farmers protested in Warsaw on [Wednesday](#) against EU regulations and cheap Ukrainian imports. Farmers in Europe are frustrated that they are being forced to compete with cheaper imports from Ukraine after the EU eliminated tariffs on Ukrainian goods in 2022 following Russia’s military operation.

“The European population, of course, was sold that they had to be in support of Ukraine against Russia. And not only did the European elites allow their energy source from Russia to be destroyed, they’re also insisting that those crops grown in Ukraine for these Western companies that own them now come into the European market and flood those markets, therefore putting those farmers out of business,” Tauheed explained.

“Now, I can’t imagine that the farmers will continue with their support for Ukraine under these circumstances. But of course, governments have ways of suppressing people militarily and by police force until the dam breaks and they’re no longer able to do that.”

On Thursday, Biden made his State of the Union address in which he [reportedly](#) gave a speech that highlighted the economic issues faced by the US middle class. His constituents’ frustrated response to inflation has caused him to drop the term “Bidenomics” which the White House had used repeatedly, at first, in an attempt to promote his economic agenda.

“Biden’s approval rate is at 38%, the lowest it’s been in spite of the fact that he a couple of months ago tried to push this idea that the economy is doing well. He named it Bidenomics, he raised it up the flagpole and it got shot to pieces,” Tauheed explained. “Although he still has to insist that he’s doing well for the economy.”

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Plead to the Union Cartoon

Just 38% of US adults approve of how Biden is handling his job as president while 61% disapprove, a recent poll by the Associated Press and NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

revealed. The survey also said that 63% of US adults are not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability to serve as president.

The US President is scheduled to deliver his third State of the Union address on Thursday. It is predicted that he will use his time to try and appeal to voters, as the speech comes on the heels of Super Tuesday, which has all but guaranteed a rematch between Biden and former President Donald Trump in the presidential election this year.

White House Chief of Staff Jeff Zients said on [Wednesday](#) that Biden will also use the speech as an opportunity to highlight his agenda for a potential second term.

"Lowering costs, continuing to make people's lives better by investing in childcare, eldercare, paid family and medical leave, continued progress on student debt," Zients said. "But I think importantly, the president is also going to call for restoring Roe v. Wade and giving women freedom over their healthcare. And he'll talk about protecting, not taking away, freedoms in other areas, as well as voting rights."

He may also urge Congress to pass a \$118 billion national security agreement that includes funding for Israel and Ukraine as well as resources and policies that will address the issues at the Mexico-US border.

There seemed, at one point, to be a unanimous agreement on passing the bill between both aisles, but Biden and other democrats have accused Trump of commanding Republicans to torpedo the bill in order to help himself in the presidential race. The [supplemental](#) first passed in the Senate on a bipartisan basis with 70 votes but requires further action to be taken by House Speaker Mike Johnson.

Biden is also expected to defend his administration's stance regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Israel and the US have maintained that the military action they have taken against Hamas is in self-defense, but organizations, constituents, lawmakers, entire countries and others have criticized the assault on Palestinians as being [too aggressive](#), and have accused the Israeli military of carrying out a genocide against Palestinians.

The nation's oldest president is also expected to try and quell voters' concerns regarding his age. But the president has made a handful of gaffes in his speeches throughout his first term. Special Counsel Robert Hur's report, published last month, was also incredibly shameful for [Biden](#) as it described him as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory". And just last week, Biden confused the president of Egypt with the president of Mexico.

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Delusional David Cameron Wants to Steal Russian Assets as 'Surety' to Bail Out Ukraine

Some \$300 billion in Russian assets were trapped abroad in 2022 following the escalation of the US proxy war in Ukraine. Under pressure from Kiev, there have been continued attempts by the West to seize those assets and give them to Ukraine.

[Britain](#) is prepared to loan Ukraine all frozen Russian central bank assets in the United Kingdom on the belief that it will pay those loans back with Russian "reparations" following the end of the war, says UK foreign secretary David Cameron.

Western countries have previously pledged a total of several billion dollars toward rebuilding Ukraine, including investment pledges from dozens of major multinational corporations. And in late [January](#), Belgium announced it would allocate €611 million (\$663 million) to help Kiev in 2024 using the profits they received from the frozen Russian assets.

But Cameron's announcement this week is the most extreme proposal thus far, as the previous proposals only discussed giving Ukraine the "windfall profits" from the frozen assets which are estimated to be about \$4 billion.

"There is an opportunity to use something like a syndicated loan or a bond that effectively uses the frozen Russian assets as a surety to give that money to the Ukrainians knowing that we will recoup it when reparations are paid by Russia. That may be a better way of doing it. We are aiming for the maximum amount of G7 and EU unity on this but if we cannot get it I think we will have to move ahead with allies that want to take this action," said Cameron on Tuesday, most likely referring to the United States.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has also proposed finding a "way to unlock" the assets to support Ukraine.

"I believe there is a strong international law, economic and moral case for moving forward. This would be a decisive response to Russia's unprecedented threat to global stability," Yellen said at a meeting of G20 finance ministers last [month](#).

The G7 itself has questioned whether seizing the assets could undermine faith in the international financial system. And Belgium, which is believed to control as much as €190 billion (\$208 billion) of the assets, is the most resistant to follow Cameron's plan. It is reportedly facing a series of court cases in Russia, and its stance on the issue has the backing of both France and Germany.

Cameron excuses his proposal on the basis that Ukraine will win the war against Russia, and that Moscow will have to pay reparations to Kiev. But the idea that Ukraine could win a military victory against Russia is unimaginable. More and more Western media outlets have been [acknowledging Russia's success on the battlefield](#).

Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law, with the Russian Foreign Ministry labeling such an action as theft.

"Those who are trying to initiate this, and those who will implement it, must understand that Russia will never leave those who did this alone. And it will constantly exercise its right to a legal battle, internationally, nationally or otherwise. And this, of course, will have — both Europeans and Americans understand this very well — it will have legal consequences for those who initiated and implemented it," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in [December](#).

Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov has also said that Moscow is willing to issue a "symmetrical" response to this form of Western financial aggression.

"We have no fewer frozen [assets than Western countries]," Siluanov said in an interview with Sputnik last month. "Any actions taken against our assets would receive a symmetrical response."

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European Vassal States Mull Arms Production as Biden Leads Continent to Destruction

As Europe suffers economically from the US-backed proxy war in the Donbass, will its leaders find the courage to question decades of anti-Russia hysteria?

The United States' proxy war in Ukraine has brought Europe to a state of crisis. As sanctions on Russian gas push energy costs sky high, German industry has taken a hit as manufacturing has become unsustainable. A flood of Ukrainian migrants has also taxed countries' social systems, creating controversy as refugees are granted housing that's increasingly unaffordable to average people.

Now a full-scale collapse in Ukraine threatens to discredit politicians who bet everything on arming the country, with anti-establishment parties poised to benefit.

International affairs analyst Elijah Magnier has observed these developments with disbelief from his home in France, where controversial President Emmanuel Macron recently faced criticism for advocating even deeper European involvement in Kiev's failing effort. The journalist joined [Sputnik's Fault Lines program](#) on Thursday to sound off on the madness of the EU's political class.

"It seems that Europe is freaking out," said host Jamarl Thomas. "Because they know in more detail how bad Ukraine is doing on the battlefield. It seems like they're worried about a general collapse at this point."

"It seems to be a general collapse on some level with Ukraine doing everything in their power basically just to hold ground and them not being able to do so," he continued. "From the internal polling itself, [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky] is not doing great in regard to the way the Ukrainians are seeing him as a leader. And if they were given the option, they would pick [former Ukrainian armed forces commander Valery] Zaluzhny."

Zelensky, observing Zaluzhny's popularity, ousted him from his position as top commander of Ukraine's military, a move that reportedly drew opposition from the Biden Administration.

Presidential elections set for later this month were canceled as Ukraine extends a period of martial law. Zelensky's strongarm tactics, which have also included the forced dissolution of opposition political parties and closure of media outlets, have generated broad criticism.

"In my experience in a war zone and the aftermath of the war, all leaders fall, including General Charles de Gaulle after the Second World War," noted Magnier. "Then they wake up and say 'what is left of our country?' That is going to be the major question for Ukraine."

"And the more challenging one is for the Western bloc to acknowledge its defeat," added the veteran war correspondent, who reported from the ground in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia. "We are talking about 50 nations gathered together in one place in Ramstein, Germany – planning, organizing, supporting with intelligence, logistics, money, military support, men – everything to defeat Russia."

"And then to acknowledge that Russia has won over the 50 united countries under the banner of the United States in Germany, that is going to tremble the earth and all of the European and the Western bloc."

Recently, European politicians have moved to shoulder the cost of assistance to Kiev as Republicans in Congress have balked at continued aid for the country. The Donbass Conflict has generated a bonanza for US weapons manufacturers who have worked to replenish

American stockpiles drained by the war. But political gridlock in the United States has led Europeans to mull domestic arms production.

The proposal has proven highly controversial, with observers pointing out the continent's atrophied arms production capabilities would struggle to meet Ukraine's needs. Additionally, Europe is already facing economic challenges amidst high inflation and deindustrialization. Politicians are hesitant to invest resources towards military concerns, which would likely require the issuance of bonds.

"There is a real panic in Europe, but there is not enough intelligence to say 'we've lost the war and we stop now,'" said Magnier. "I think that is due to the presidential elections in the United States, where they don't want to be seen as the one that created the failure of Joe Biden in the coming election because they are terrified of [former US President Donald] Trump coming and dictating his policy overtly and embarrassing them."

"Joe Biden is more soft on not really voicing what he's doing with the Europeans," he explained. "But he's doing exactly the same as any other president - putting America first."

The United States has long offered Europe military protection under the aegis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But along with the guarantee of the alliance's nuclear umbrella has come a degree of political coercion.

NATO and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded and organized clandestine "stay behind" militias throughout Europe during the 20th century as part of a secret effort known as Operation Gladio. The paramilitary groups were ostensibly designed to offer resistance in the event of a Soviet invasion. But [evidence](#) has implicated the right-wing militias in various acts of terrorism and assassination throughout the continent.

Italy was rocked by decades of open warfare between the US-supported paramilitaries and left-wing groups, with bombings and massacres frequently making headlines. An Italian parliamentary commission found the violence was part of a CIA-backed "[strategy of tension](#)" designed to discredit the Italian Communist Party, which enjoyed widespread popularity as a result of its leading role in opposing Benito Mussolini. The United States also worked to undermine the Italian left via a [covert media campaign](#), ensuring European democracy remained within the narrow parameters deemed acceptable by leaders in Washington.

In Italy, as in neighboring France, the Communist Party was a major force in politics amidst proposals to strengthen the welfare state after the collective sacrifice of World War II. Both parties charted a course independent from Moscow, proposing a peaceful "road to socialism" by democratic means. But fear of Russia proved useful in reorienting European politics back towards the center. When Cold War hysteria proved insufficient in reshaping the democratic landscape, US intelligence stepped in to help mold public opinion.

"Today, what's happening in Europe is leaders are thinking why we need to think in the belligerent approach towards our neighbor," concluded Magnier, noting that opposition leaders are challenging the long-held hostility towards Moscow promoted by the US. "Because Russia is part of the European continent."

"Why do we need to provoke other countries when we can be in peace and do business?" he asked, summarizing the thinking of many throughout Europe. "Nevertheless, the problem remains [with] who is the leader, and in this case, the leader is America."

As the saying goes, political power flows from the barrel of a gun. As long as Europe is dependent on outside powers for security, it will never be fully sovereign, and the fixations of Washington will become the neuroses of Brussels.

Europe's US vassal states are considering arms production to support Ukraine as opposition politicians challenge decades of anti-Russia hysteria promoted by Washington

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The United States' proxy war in Ukraine has brought Europe to a state of crisis, but leaders are fearful that recognition of Kiev's defeat could return Donald Trump to the presidency.

"Joe Biden is more soft on not really voicing what he's doing with the Europeans," said veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier on Sputnik's Fault Lines program. "But he's doing exactly the same as any other president - putting America first."

The US has long offered Europe military protection under the aegis of NATO. But political power flows from the barrel of a gun, and along with the promise of the alliance's nuclear umbrella has come a high degree of influence over European democracy.

"Why do we need to provoke other countries when we can be in peace and do business?" he asked, summarizing the thinking of many throughout Europe. "Nevertheless, the problem remains [with] who is the leader, and in this case, the leader is America."

Enjoy this deep dive examining how NATO and the CIA have been used as tools to control European politics and stoke Russophobia to the detriment of Europeans' autonomy and standard of living.

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UPDATE - US Adds 275,000 Jobs in February, Unemployment Rate Increases to 3.9% - Labor Dept.

(Changes headline and lede, adds details, comment and context in paragraphs 3-12)

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The United States added 275,000 jobs in February, the Labor Department reported Friday, publishing a number almost 40% above Wall Street expectations and keeping in place an immediate hurdle for the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 275,000 in February, and the unemployment rate increased to 3.9 percent," the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a statement.

Wall Street economists polled by US media, on the average, had expected 200,000 new jobs for last month. The Labor Department, meanwhile, revised down December's jobs growth to 229,000 from a previously published 353,000. That put the net change in job creation between February and January at 46,000.

The Fed is looking for jobs growth to cool in order to cut interest rates for the first time in three years.

While February's new jobs haul was 75,000 above Wall Street expectations, unemployment itself ticked higher for the first time in almost three months, rising to 3.9% from January's 3.7%. "Unemployment rose, there was a big negative revision [for January's total] and — critically — wage growth reversed," economist Adam Button said, commenting on the February jobs number, in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum.

That signaled to some money market traders that the central bank could still make its first rate cut by June, though not immediately as the majority seemed to desire.

The Fed's next policy meeting is on March 19, with a decision on rates set for the day after, on March 20.

The jobs data arrived a day after Fed Chairman Jerome Powell hinted at the possibility of rate cuts this year if inflation moderates amid supportive but not runaway economic and labor growth.

"What we expect and what we're seeing is continued strong growth, [a] strong labor market and continuing progress in bringing inflation down," Powell said in testimony before a Senate banking committee on Wednesday. "If the economy evolves over that path, then we do think that carefully removing restrictive policy will begin over the course of this year."

The Fed's favorite inflation indicator — the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, often known as just PCE — grew 2.4% for the year to January. That was markedly lower than the four-decade high of above 9% charted by the PCE in June 2022.

The Fed raised rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023 in response to the runaway post-pandemic inflation.

Rates currently hover at between 5% and 5.25% versus the pre-pandemic level of between zero and 0.25%.

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US Military Lifts Order Grounding Osprey Aircraft After Latest Deadly Crash – Navy

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – The US military has lifted an order grounding all V-22 Osprey aircraft after a deadly crash last November, the Navy's Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) said in a statement on Friday.

"Effective March 8, 2024 at 7 a.m. EST, Naval Air Systems Command is issuing a flight clearance for the V-22 Osprey thereby lifting the grounding. This decision follows a meticulous and data-driven approach prioritizing the safety of our aircrews," the statement said.

The military grounded the aircraft and began an investigation after the November 29, 2023, crash in Yakushima, Japan, when eight Airmen were killed, it added.

"In response to the preliminary investigation indicating a materiel failure of a V-22 component, the V-22 grounding was initiated on December 6, 2023. The grounding provided time for a thorough review of the mishap and formulation of risk mitigation controls to assist with safely returning the V-22 to flight operations," according to the statement.

On November 29, the US Air Force said a CV-22B Osprey from Yokota Air Base in Tokyo was involved in an aircraft mishap while performing a routine training mission off the shore of Japan's Yakushima Island with eight airmen on board.

The Osprey aircraft has a track record of accidents. In 2016, an MV-22 Osprey aircraft crash-landed in Japan, and in August of this year, the same aircraft crashed in Australia.

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US F-35A Officially Certified to Carry Nuclear Bomb - Joint Program Office

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The US F-35A Joint Strike Fighter has received official certification to carry B61-12 thermonuclear gravity bombs, Breaking Defense reported on Friday, citing a statement from the F-35 Joint Program Office (JPO).

"The F-35A is the first 5th generation nuclear capable aircraft ever, and the first new platform (fighter or bomber) to achieve this status since the early 1990s. This F-35 Nuclear Certification effort culminates 10+ years of intense effort across the nuclear enterprise, which consists of 16 different government and industry stakeholders," JPO spokesman Russ Goemaere said in the statement.

The statement added that the certification came "ahead of schedule" on October 12, about 12 months ahead of a pledge to NATO allies that the process would conclude by January 2024.

"The F-35A achieved Nuclear Certification ahead of schedule, providing US and NATO with a critical capability that supports US extended deterrence commitments earlier than anticipated," Goemaere said.

The certification does not yet apply to the F-35A sister variants, the F-35B and F-35C.

But a spokesperson for the US Air Force Air Combat Command told Breaking Defense that all Air Force F-35As would be in a nuclear certified configuration in the future.

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US Adds 275,000 Jobs in February, Unemployment Rate Increases to 3.9% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The United States added 275,000 jobs in February, the Labor Department reported Friday, publishing a number almost 40% above Wall Street expectations that might have made it easier for the Federal Reserve to consider interest rate cuts.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 275,000 in February, and the unemployment rate

increased to 3.9 percent," the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a statement.

Wall Street economists polled by US media, on the average, had expected 200,000 new jobs for last month. The Labor Department, meanwhile, revised down December's jobs growth to 229,000 from a previously published 353,000. That put the net change in job creation between February and January at 46,000.

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Washington to Host Int'l Arts Festival Spearheaded by Russian-Speaking Community

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The Russian-speaking community in North America will have an opportunity to showcase its talents in the performing arts, including theater, music and painting, as Washington DC hosts the grand finale of the international arts festival Constellation this week, organizer Anastasia Vorontsova told Sputnik.

The event will take place from March 8-10.

"We try to attract all kinds of Russian-speaking audiences in North America, children and adults, so our festival gives way to live to different projects," Vorontsova, the president of the US-based Association of Russian-speaking Theaters (ART), said.

One of the festival's projects is a literature forum for poets and writers to reach out to their Russian-speaking audience in America and abroad.

Launched in 2020, the festival is set to hold a theater competition for the first time this year.

"We received so many applications that we even had to invite additional experts from Finland and Israel in order to watch a large number of performances," Vorontsova said.

During the grand finale in Washington, the audience will see live performances of theaters UNICUM (Chicago), Alma Mater (Boston), Terra Incognita (Philadelphia), and Amazing Cat Theater (Toronto, Canada). Young actors will also get the opportunity to improve their theater skills during master classes.

With a broad range of activities available to participate in and enjoy, each attendee can come up with their own answer as to why the festival is important to the Russian-speaking community of North America, Vorontsova pointed out.

"Someone wants to win a cash prize or a trip to our annual Theater Vacation camp, someone wants to meet friends, someone hopes to find colleagues in America and Canada, someone will come to show children performances, someone will read poetry or sing a song. I think the good thing about our festival is that everyone can find something interesting and unique here," she said.

The festival's grand jury will choose winners in different categories, including vocals, reading of prose and poetry, short theater performances, short films, video clips, fine arts, choreography, and artistic photography. Special theater nominations include awards for the best performance, director's work, as well as leading and supporting roles.

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Biden Says US Will Not Walk Away From Supporting Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union speech that the United States will not walk away from supporting Ukraine in the conflict with Russia.

"My message to [Russian President Vladimir Putin], who I've known for a long time, is simple: We will not walk away," Biden said on Thursday night. "We will not bow down. I will not bow down."

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Biden's State of Union Speech Deceived Americans on Border Crisis - Border Patrol Union

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's State of the Union address was a slap in the face of all Americans after he deceived the US public about reality of the immigration crisis on the US southern border, US National Border Patrol Council vice president Art Del Cueto told Sputnik.

"President Biden's address was a true slap in the face to all Americans," Cueto said on Thursday night. "President Biden knows that he could do something to stop the border chaos. He refuses to do so, but instead blames Congress when his inactions for three years are what has caused these problems."

Biden during his address called on Congress to pass a \$118 billion foreign aid bill that includes border policy reforms. The bill was blocked by Senate Republicans last month over concerns it did not do enough to resolve the border crisis.

Biden also argued that his policies are designed to keep drug cartels and human smugglers from profiting off the border crisis.

However, according to the US House Homeland Security Committee, criminal organizations in Mexico made an estimated \$13 billion in 2021 from human smuggling on the US southern border. A Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official previously said migrants pay cartels about \$8,000 to \$12,000 to smuggle them into the United States.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data shows that the Biden administration has experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the US southern border with at least eight million immigrants crossing into the United States illegally.

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Trump Praises China's TikTok Over Facebook

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump praised the Chinese TikTok company on Thursday over Facebook (banned in Russia for extremism).

"If you get rid of TikTok, Facebook and Zuckerschmuck will double their business," Trump said on Truth Social.

Trump said that Facebook "cheated" in the last election, and stressed that he does not want it to do better. He also called this company a "true Enemy" of the American people.

The United States banned TikTok on all US government devices and on some state government devices.

Earlier on Thursday, the US House Committee on Energy and Commerce voted 50-0 to advance both the Prohibition of Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, targeting apps like TikTok, and the Protecting Americans' Data from Foreign Adversaries Act, focusing on preventing data brokers from sharing sensitive US citizen information with foreign adversaries.

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Biden Planning to Strip All Guns, Second Amendment Rights From Americans - Trump

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden wants to strip American gun owners of their rights to own weapons, shattering the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, former President Donald Trump said.

"He [Biden] wants to take away everyone's gun," Trump said on the social media platform Truth Social during Biden's State of the Union address to Congress on Thursday night.

Trump made clear that he was pitching his claim on the threat to Second Amendment rights in order to mobilize his own voting base and turn out a maximum number of his supporters in the presidential election in November.

"Remember that when you go to the voting booth, because if I'm not elected, your guns are gone, along with your freedom," Trump said.

Trump made his allegations while presenting a personalized running commentary as Biden delivered his speech to Congress. The comments also came after Trump virtually assured a third Republican presidential nomination by sweeping almost all the Republican primaries on Super Tuesday, two days before.

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Trump, Texas Governor Say Biden Failed to Spotlight Border Crisis in State of Union Speech

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott called out President Joe Biden for failing to spotlight the immigration crisis on the US

southern border during his State of the Union address to Congress.

"It took him over 40 minutes to get to Immigration, and then said nothing about it," Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social on Thursday night.

Abbott said in a separate statement that Biden's speech "was nothing short of a dog and pony show" to try to persuade the US public that his administration is keeping the United States safe and secure.

Biden argued that his policies are designed to keep drug cartels and human smugglers from profiting off the border crisis.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data shows that the Biden administration has experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the US southern border with at least eight million immigrants crossing into the United States illegally.

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Biden's Weakness Making US 'Punchline' on World Stage - Republican Senator

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is making the United States a punchline on the world stage, Republican US Senator Katie Britt said in response to Biden's State of the Union address to Congress.

"Unfortunately, President Biden's weakness isn't just hurting families here at home. He is making us a punchline on the world stage," Britt said on Thursday night, in the official Republican reply to Biden's remarks.

Earlier on Thursday, Biden delivered the president's annual State of the Union speech to lawmakers at the US Capitol.

Britt said on the response to Biden's speech that the United States deserves better than a "dithering and diminished" leader.

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Trump Says Biden's State of the Union Speech 'Angriest, Worst' One Ever Made

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said President Joe Biden's address to Congress was the "angriest" and "worst" State of the Union speech ever made.

"That may be the angriest, least compassionate and worst State of the Union speech ever made," Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social on Thursday night.

Trump also said Biden disgraced the United States by delivering the speech - and late at that. "It was an embarrassment to our country," Trump added.

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Biden Policies on Climate Change Destroying Economy, Making US Laughing Stock - Trump

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US policies on combating climate change, a central pillar of the Biden administration's agenda, are nothing more than a confidence trick or scam that is destroying the US economy and making the United States the laughing stock of the world, former President Donald Trump said.

"Other countries are laughing at our stupidity on 'climate,'" Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social during President Joe Biden's State of the Union address to Congress on Thursday night.

Trump described the entire issue of global climate change and switching the economy over to renewable energy sources as a massive "green scam" or confidence trick.

"The Green New Scam is destroying our economy and our country," Trump said.

In his presidential term, Trump encouraged massive development of US oil and natural gas reserves, especially through fracking techniques that were widely criticized by environmentalists.

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Trump Says Biden Reason Behind Middle East Conflict

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump said that his successor in the White House, Joe Biden, became the reason why the Middle East is blowing up.

"He is the reason that the Middle East is blowing up!" Trump said on Truth Social.

He stressed that Biden made Iran rich, which caused problems in the entire region.

Trump also pointed out that his administration controlled the situation with Iran. "With me, Iran was BROKE," he said.

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Trump Says Biden's 'Drugs Wearing Off' As He Coughs, Loses Temper During Union Speech

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump described his successor, incumbent US leader Joe Biden as a sick old man with a serious cough and dependent on drugs to get himself through the annual State of the Union address in a simultaneous running commentary on the TruthSocial.

"As he's getting ready to cough yet again into his right hand, the Fake News Media rushes him off the screen," Trump wrote on Thursday night as Biden finished his address. As the 82-year-old president left the congressional chamber, Trump observed that he was in a hurry to do so and coughed again.

"Don't shake people's hands going out - he keeps coughing into his right hand. ...The coughing, the coughing. Always the coughing!" he messaged.

Earlier, Trump accused Biden of losing control of his temper and shouting during his speech and he attributed this behavior to the drugs Biden was taking as beginning to wear off.

No previous former president has ever publicly criticized an incumbent president for being physically incapable or dependent on drugs publicly or during a State of the Union Address.

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UPDATE- Man Escorted Out of Biden's 'State of the Union' Speech After Yelling From Gallery

(Update: adds details in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - A man was escorted out of the US House chambers during President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech for yelling during his remarks.

The man appeared to be shouting at Biden about 13 US Marines killed during military evacuation efforts in Afghanistan in August 2021.

The man was escorted out of the gallery after several seconds of shouting.

On Thursday, Biden delivered the president's annual State of the Union speech to members of Congress at the US Capitol, during which he also briefly engaged with lawmakers who negatively reacted to some lines in his remarks.

US Congressman Derrick Van Orden yelled "lies" in response to Biden criticizing former US President Donald Trump, CNN reported, citing two sources who heard the lawmaker.

US Congressman Max Miller also left the event early, characterizing Biden's remarks as "beneath a president" and a campaign speech, the report said.

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Trump Says Inflation Under Biden 'Killing America'

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said that inflation under the Biden administration is killing the United States.

"Inflation under Biden is killing America" Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social during Biden's State of the Union address to Congress on Thursday night.

During the speech, Biden expressed confidence that the situation concerning inflation in the United States is improving.

"Wages keep going up and inflation keeps coming down!" Biden said.

The president pointed out that inflation in the United States has dropped from 9% to 3%, adding that it is the lowest level in the world.

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Biden Says Directing Military to Establish Temporary Pier for Humanitarian Aid to Gaza

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during his State of the Union Address that he is directing the US Military to lead the mission that will establish a temporary pier that will bring humanitarian aid into Gaza and that the project will be completed without the presence of US troops on the ground.

"Tonight, I'm directing the U.S. military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine, and temporary shelters. No U.S. boots will be on the ground," said Biden during his speech.

Biden added that the temporary pier would enable a massive increase in the amount of humanitarian assistance getting into Gaza, but that Israel must play its part in the process for it to be successful.

The text for Biden's speech was provided by the White House.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and in the ensuing fighting killed 1,100 Israelis, both military and civilians, and abducted some 240 others. Israel launched massive strikes on Gaza, fully blockaded the Palestinian enclave, and then invaded it with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages.

Some 31,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's military operations and more than 76,000 have been wounded, according to the local authorities. More than 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced more than half are facing hunger and starvation as a result of Israel's blockade.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the Palestinians imprisoned by Israel and hostages taken by Hamas, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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Biden Says US Wants Competition With China, Stands in Position to Win It

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union address to Congress that the United States wants competition with China rather than engaging in a conflict and Washington is in a stronger position to win it.

"We want competition with China, but not conflict. And we're in a stronger position to win the competition for the 21st Century against China or anyone else for that matter," Biden said in his speech on Thursday night.

In August, the Biden administration published a new National Intelligence Strategy naming China as the only competitor to the United States capable of reshaping the international order in its favor and also naming Russia as an "immediate and ongoing" threat in Europe.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said on numerous occasions that the Biden administration's approach to China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be and adversarial when it must be.

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Biden Says Israel Has Right to Fight Hamas But Also Responsibility to Protect Civilians

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Israel has the right to go after Hamas, but it also bears the responsibility for ensuring the protection of innocent Palestinian civilians, the released text of US President Joe Biden State of the Union address said.

"Israel has a right to go after Hamas. Hamas could end this conflict today by releasing the hostages, laying down arms, and surrendering those responsible for October 7," Biden's speech said. "Israel has an added burden because Hamas hides and operates among the civilian population. But Israel also has a fundamental responsibility to protect innocent civilians in Gaza."

Allowing humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip for Israel, Biden said in the speech, adding that the protection and safeguarding of civilians must be a priority.

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Biden Vows to Restore Roe v. Wade in State of the Union Address

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during his State of the Union Address that he would restore Roe v. Wade if Congress supported women's right over reproductive health.

"If Americans send me a Congress that supports the right to choose, I promise you, I will restore Roe v. Wade as the law of the land again!" said Biden during his speech.

The speech could be Biden's final State of the Union address if he loses his 2024 reelection bid in November.

The White House released a transcript of Biden's speech before he finished delivering it to lawmakers.

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Biden Tells Families of Hamas-Held Hostages He Will Not Rest Until They Are Freed

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told the families of Hamas-held hostages attending his State of the Union address to Congress that he would not rest until they are all freed.

"Here in the Chamber tonight are American families whose loved ones are still being held by Hamas. I pledge to all the families that we will not rest until we bring their loved ones home," the text of Biden's speech released by the White House, said on Thursday.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and in the ensuing fighting killed 1,100 Israelis, both military and civilians, and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched massive strikes on Gaza, fully blockaded the Palestinian enclave and then invaded it with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages.

Some 31,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's military operations and more than 76,000 have been wounded, according to the local authorities. More than 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced more than a half are facing hunger and starvation as a result of Israel's blockade.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the Palestinians imprisoned by Israel and hostages taken by Hamas, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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

Trump Says Reason He Strong-Armed NATO Was to Make it Stronger

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said in a statement that the only reason he strong-armed NATO was to make it stronger.

President Joe Biden in his State of the Union Address criticized his predecessor for saying recently that Russian President Vladimir Putin could do whatever he wants to any NATO country that does not pay a fair share to the alliance.

"No, I said NATO has to pay its bills, and if it doesn't pay its bills, we are not going to protect you," Trump said via Truth Social regarding Bidens' comment. "THE MONEY CAME POURING IN! Under other Presidents, NATO was BROKE."

Trump further said that NATO only became strong because of him after he got other member states to increase their contributions to the alliance.

NATO was almost all delinquent and the United States was paying for them all, Trump added.

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Biden Calls on US Lawmakers to Harness AI, Protect Against Technology's Risks

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his annual State of the Union speech that lawmakers should work both to harness the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) technology and protect people from its risks.

"Harness the promise of AI and protect us from its peril," Biden said on Thursday, during his speech at the US Capitol.

The White House released a transcript of Biden's speech before he finished delivering it to lawmakers.

Biden called on the US Congress to ban AI voice impersonation.

Moreover, Biden called on lawmakers to pass privacy legislation to protect children online.

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Biden Says Wants to Cap Prescription Drug Costs at \$2,000 Per Year for Everyone

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in the annual State of the Union speech to Congress that he wants to cap prescription drug prices at \$2,000 per year for everyone in the United States.

"Starting next year that same law caps total prescription drug costs for seniors on Medicare at \$2,000 a year even for expensive cancer drugs that can cost \$10,000, \$12,000, \$15,000 a year. Now I want to cap prescription drug costs at \$2,000 a year for everyone," Biden said in the

speech on Thursday night.

The White House released a full transcript of Biden's speech before he finished delivering the address at the US Capitol.

Biden said that Americans pay more for prescription drugs than residents in any other country and added that such a situation is "wrong."

The US president also said he is working to change the situation.

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Trump Says Putin Has No Respect for Biden

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said Russian President Vladimir Putin has no respect for current US President Joe Biden.

"Putin only invaded Ukraine, because he has no respect for Biden," Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social during Biden's State of the Union speech to Congress on Thursday night.

Trump expressed confidence that such a situation would not happen under his administration in he is reelected in November.

"And for four years, it didn't happen!" Trump added.

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Biden Says World Envy State of US Economy

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union address to Congress that the whole world is envious of the state of the US economy.

"I inherited an economy that was on the brink. Now our economy is the envy of the world. 15 million new jobs in just three years - that's a record," Biden said on Thursday night.

The US central bank had to raise interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023 in response to the runaway post-pandemic inflation.

During Biden's presidency, the US foreign debt reached unprecedented levels of \$34.4 trillion from \$28 trillion in January 2021, when he took office.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen called the size of the US national debt scary but manageable because the United States has a huge economy.

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Trump Calls Biden 'Disrespectful' to US for Late Start of State of the Union Address

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden showed disrespect to the United States in his more than 30 minutes late start to his State of the Union address, former President Donald Trump said.

"Crooked Joe is making his way to the Chamber. Very disrespectful to some. Not good!" Trump said via Truth Social on Thursday night. "They are really late. Very disrespectful to our country!"

Trump kept up his running commentary criticizing and ridiculing Biden's behavior and alleged lack of dignity. Millions of people tried to tune into his live comments, crashing the Truth Social social media platform he was using.

After a lady in the chamber kissed Biden as he made his way to the podium, Trump commented, "Who kissed him on the cheek with lipstick? Now he's got lipstick on his cheek. How stupid of her!"

No former US president has ever ridiculed a sitting one on live media during a State of the Union speech in the history of the United States.

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Biden Mentions Ukraine Before US Border Security in 'State of the Union' Speech - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden talked about continuing the United States' support for Ukraine before mentioning domestic border security issues in his annual State of the Union speech to lawmakers, US Congressman Matt Rosendale said.

"Since his speech began, Biden has talked about Ukraine and nothing about our wide open southern border," Rosendale said in a statement on the social media platform X during Biden's speech on Thursday night.

Biden reaffirmed the United States' support for Ukraine, but said he is determined not to send US troops directly to that country.

Biden has not mentioned US border security as of this writing.

Biden's speech comes amid efforts in the US Congress to provide further aid to Ukraine for use in its conflict with Russia. However, some Republican lawmakers have called on Congress and the Biden administration to address border security before approving more foreign aid.

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Biden Says US Will Not Walk Away From Supporting Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union speech that the United States will not walk away from supporting Ukraine in the conflict with Russia.

"My message to [Russian President Vladimir Putin], who I've known for a long time, is simple: We will not walk away," Biden said on Thursday night. "We will not bow down. I will not bow down."

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Biden Says No American Soldiers in Ukraine, Determined to Keep It That Way

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union address to Congress that there are no US soldiers on the ground in Ukraine taking part in the ongoing conflict with Russia and he is determined to keep it that way.

"They [Ukrainians] are not asking for American soldiers. In fact, there are no American soldiers in the war in Ukraine and I'm determined to keep it that way," Biden said on Thursday.

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Biden Begins 'State of the Union' Speech to US Congress

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday began his State of the Union speech to lawmakers nearly 30 minutes later than scheduled, following pro-Palestinian protests in Washington and a slow walk to the podium.

"If I were smart, I'd go home now," Biden said at the start of his speech, which was set to begin at 9:00 p.m. ET.

The speech could be Biden's final State of the Union address, if he loses his 2024 reelection bid in November.

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Truth Social Appears to Have Crashed Amid Trump's Live Reaction to Biden's Speech

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The social media platform Truth Social appears to have crashed due to the popularity of former President Donald Trump's strategy to do a live play-by-play reaction to President Joe Biden's State of the Union address at the US Capitol.

According to Downdetector, which tracks issues with online platforms, there has been a huge spike of complaints with Truth Social leading up to Biden's State of the Union address.

The Truth Social webpage for Trump's account appears to take longer than usual to load.

Biden will talk during his speech about the current state of the United States, including

domestic and foreign policy.

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Trump Says Biden 'Substantially Late' to His State of the Union Address on Thursday Night

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said in a statement that President Joe Biden is substantially late to his own State of the Union address at the US Capitol.

"The president is very substantially late," Trump said on the social media platform Truth Social on Thursday night. "Not a good start, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. I'm sure he had very important things to do, but he is just now getting into the car."

Trump is doing a live play-by-play reaction on Truth Social of Biden's State of the Union address.

Biden will talk in his speech about the current state of the United States and will include domestic as well as foreign policy issues.

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Pro-Palestinine Crowds Gather Ahead of Biden's 'State of the Union' Speech - Correspondent

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Dozens of pro-Palestinian protestors held a demonstration against Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip near the US Capitol on Thursday, where US President Joe Biden will deliver his State of the Union speech, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The protestors blocked part of Pennsylvania Avenue and held a large Palestinian flag.

"Biden's legacy is genocide," one of the protestor's signs said.

The demonstration coincides with a protest at the White House, where the crowd called on the United States to end aid to Israel.

Biden is expected to announce the opening of a seaport in the Gaza Strip to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave. Biden's State of the Union speech is set to begin at 9 p.m. ET at the US Capitol.

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Northrop, Palantir Developing Titan AI System to Speed Up Battle Targeting - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has joined forces with the Palantir Company to develop the new Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node, the US defense contracting giant announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation is partnering with Palantir USG. on the newly awarded Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node (TITAN) ground system for the US Army," the release said on Thursday.

The program is planned to fulfill the US Army's goal of using artificial intelligence and machine learning to automate and accelerate target recognition and location on the battlefield and integrate data from multiple sensors to speed up identification-to-kill speeds, the release said.

Northrop Grumman will partner to lead design maturation of the TITAN advanced and basic vehicle shelters leveraging its capabilities in complex, forward-deployed ground systems and will ensure production readiness to deliver ten initial TITAN prototypes with capability to scale-up to program needs, the release said.

TITAN is a ground-deployed system that has access to space, high altitude, aerial and terrestrial sensors to provide actionable targeting information for enhanced mission effectiveness by integrating intelligence data from sensors, according to Northrop Grumman.

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Ex-US Congressman Santos Says Attending Biden's 'State of the Union' Speech

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Ousted Congressman George Santos said that he will attend President Joe Biden's State of the Union (SOTU) speech on Thursday at the US Capitol, after having been expelled from the House of Representatives last year.

"After three months away from this place, I figured I'd come visit and watch the SOTU and update my 'friends' in the media about my new plans for public office," Santos said in a statement, as quoted by Axios.

Santos maintains floor privileges for the House of Representatives as a former member of Congress. Biden is set to deliver his speech on Thursday at 9:00 p.m. ET in the House chambers.

House lawmakers voted to expel Santos from his congressional seat in December, amid investigations into alleged criminal activity. Santos would lose his floor privileges if he were to be convicted of a crime.

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RPT- US Army Extended Range Multiple Launch Rocket Hits Targets Twice in Tests - Lockheed

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Two new next-generation US Army Extended Range Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (ER-GMLRS) missiles hit their targets in a successful

test in New Mexico, Lockheed Martin, the company that manufactures the weapons announced in a press release.

"The US Army successfully demonstrated Lockheed Martin's next-generation Extended-Range GMLRS against a target set at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico," the release said on Thursday.

The two rockets were test-fired from a US Army High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launcher, Lockheed Martin said.

The two missiles "achieved flight trajectory, range, and accuracy from launch to impact. The rockets also engaged a target set meeting criteria for missile performance," the release said.

The success of the test advances the ER GMLRS closer to deployment and production, Lockheed Martin said.

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Ex-Fox News Chief Murdoch Engaged to Retired Scientist Elena Zhukova - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Ninety-two-year-old former Fox News Chairman Rupert Murdoch is engaged to 66-year-old retired scientist Elena Zhukova, Yahoo News reported.

A Murdoch spokesperson confirmed the engagement, which is his sixth. the report said on Thursday.

The wedding between Murdoch and Zhukova is planned for June at the former's California estate and vineyard Moraga, the report added.

Zhukova's daughter had been married to Russian billionaire businessman Roman Abramovich.

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Biden in State of Union Speech Says Got US Through Tough Period in Country's History

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his State of the Union speech on Thursday night will claim that he helped get the United States through a tough period in its history, according to excerpts of his remarks released by the White House.

"I came to office determined to get us through one of the toughest periods in our nation's history. And we have. It doesn't make the news, but in thousands of cities and towns the American people are writing the greatest comeback story never told," one excerpt said.

Biden is scheduled to deliver his State of the Union speech at the US Capitol at 9 p.m. ET on Thursday.

Biden will also highlight his support of abortion rights and his belief in the need to build the US economy from the "middle out and the bottom up," the excerpts said.

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Judge Denies Trump's Motion to Delay Payment of \$83.3Mln in Defamation Case - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - A US judge refused to delay the enforcement of the \$83.3 million verdict in E. Jean Carroll's defamation case against former President Donald Trump.

"Mr. Trump's current situation is a result of his own dilatory actions. He has had since January 26 to organize his finances with the knowledge that he might need to bond this judgment, yet he waited until 25 days after the jury verdict," Judge Lewis Kaplan said in the filing published on Thursday. "Accordingly, his present application for a temporary administrative stay is denied."

In late January, a jury awarded an additional \$83.3 million to former advice columnist E. Jean Carroll, who said she was defamed and her reputation damaged by Trump for calling her a liar. On February 8, Judge Kaplan affirmed the jury verdict and gave Trump 30 days to pay the full amount of the verdict.

More specifically, Trump is expected to pay \$7.3 million in compensatory damages, \$11 million for reputational repair, and \$65 million in punitive damages.

Even though Trump said following the verdict that his legal team is going to appeal it, he still must pay \$83.3 million no later than March 9.

In late February, Trump was also ordered to pay a total of \$454 in penalties in the civil fraud case against him.

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US Intel Analyst Charged For Allegedly Selling Defense Info to Contact in Hong Kong-Filing

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Former US Army intelligence analyst Korbein Schultz has been charged for allegedly selling classified US defense information to a contact in Hong Kong, court documents revealed.

"Nevertheless, KORBEIN SCHULTZ entered into a corrupt scheme whereby he collected and transmitted to Conspirator A, and to other individuals known and unknown to the grand jury, sensitive US military information, including export-controlled information, in exchange for money," the court documents stated on Thursday.

According to the court documents, Schultz, who had a US security clearance that gave him access to top secret material, provided sensitive US defense information from June 2022 to present to a contact living in Hong Kong.

The contact purported to work for a geopolitical consulting firm and showed a high interest in US defense information related to China, court documents stated.

Schultz received 14 total payments from the contact for a combined \$42,000 in exchange for the US defense information.

Schultz provided export-controlled technical data and tactical information contained in manuals and other documents pertaining to the F-22A fighter aircraft, the HH-60\V helicopter, and intercontinental ballistic missiles, federal prosecutors said.

Moreover, court documents stated that Schultz also gave his contact sensitive information on HIMARS weapon systems, hypersonic equipment, the THAAD missile defense system, and information about the lessons that could be learned from Russia's war with Ukraine, and with those lessons, what the United States could and should do to help defend Taiwan from an attack.

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US Senators Urge Leadership to Revive Panel to Probe War Profiteering - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - A group of US lawmakers led by independent senator Bernie Sanders sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, urging him to revive a World War II-era panel tasked with investigating war profiteering in the US military-industrial complex.

"With the United States on track to spend more than \$1 trillion on the military this year, Sen. Bernie Sanders and five colleagues this week sent a letter to Majority Leader Chuck Schumer urging him to reconstitute the World War II-era Truman Committee to investigate war profiteering and price gouging in the American military industrial complex," Sanders said in a statement on Thursday.

Sanders sent the letter to Schumer on Monday, alongside Democratic Senators Ron Wyden, Elizabeth Warren, Ed Markey, Jeff Merkley and Peter Welch.

The US Defense Department accounts for approximately two-thirds of all US federal government contracting activity, the letter said. The contracting often occurs without adequate safeguards against waste, fraud and abuse, the letter said, citing the Government Accountability Office.

Defense contractors routinely overcharge the Defense Department by 40-50%, "lining their pockets at taxpayer expense," the letter said.

The letter urges Schumer to revive the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, also known as the Truman Committee.

The panel would provide dedicated personnel and resources to probe war profiteering, lack of oversight on military spending and options to make use of the Defense Production Act more effective and transparent, the letter also said.

"The United States needs a strong military, and Ukraine needs our help. But the current model must be reformed," the letter added.

The US defense budget must be efficient and cost-effective, and cannot continue to serve as corporate welfare by a different name, according to the letter.

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TikTok on House Panel Passing Bill to Ban App: US Government Seeks to Curb Free Speech

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - TikTok said the US government is trying to deprive 170 Americans of their Constitutional right to free expression after a House committee approved a bill to ban the app in the United States if its Chinese parent company ByteDance does not divest from the platform within six months.

"This legislation has a predetermined outcome: a total ban of TikTok in the United States. The government is attempting to strip 170 million Americans of their Constitutional right to free expression," TikTok said in a statement on Thursday.

TikTok added that the measure would harm millions of businesses, deprive artists of their audience, and ruin the livelihoods of numerous creators nationwide.

Earlier on Thursday, the US House Committee on Energy and Commerce voted 50-0 to advance both the Prohibition of Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, targeting apps like TikTok, and the Protecting Americans' Data from Foreign Adversaries Act, focusing on preventing data brokers from sharing sensitive US citizen information with foreign adversaries.

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UPDATE - House Panel Approves Bill That Could Ban TikTok in US

(Adds details in para 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Energy and Commerce on Thursday unanimously approved a bill that could potentially ban TikTok in the United States if its Chinese parent company ByteDance does not divest from the video app within six months.

The committee voted 50-0 in favor of advancing the Prohibition of Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, introduced by US Representatives Mike Gallagher and Raja Krishnamoorthi to address threats from "foreign-controlled apps" like TikTok. The legislation covers both existing and future services from ByteDance Ltd. or its affiliates.

Shortly after the vote, Gallagher and Krishnamoorthi expressed their appreciation in a joint statement for the bipartisan support from the House Energy and Commerce Committee, saying, "as long as TikTok is owned by Chinese Communist Party-controlled ByteDance, TikTok poses a grave threat to US national security."

The committee also voted 50-0 in favor of advancing the Protecting Americans' Data from Foreign Adversaries Act, introduced by US Representatives Frank Pallone and Cathy McMorris Rodgers to prevent data brokers from sharing sensitive information of US citizens with so-called foreign adversaries.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden to Deliver Last 'State of Union' Speech to US Congress Before 2024 Election

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will deliver his final State of the Union (SOTU) speech to the US Congress before the 2024 presidential election in November, potentially making it his final SOTU address.

US presidents use SOTU speeches to satisfy a constitutional requirement to periodically address the US Congress on the status of the nation, as well as to deliver policy recommendations.

The speech, which occurs in the chamber of the US House of Representatives, is attended by members of Congress, US government officials, and guests of the president and lawmakers. The administration typically assigns certain cabinet members and lawmakers to skip the speech, so that government operations can continue in the event of a catastrophe at the US Capitol during the event.

Biden has delivered SOTU speeches in April 2021, March 2022 and February 2023. Biden's address on Thursday could be his final SOTU speech, if he loses his reelection bid.

SOTU speeches garner tens of millions of viewers, providing an opportunity for presidents to highlight their achievements, propose new policies and criticize the opposing party.

President Biden will lay out the "historic achievements he has delivered on for the American people and his vision for the future," White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

He will talk about the success in implementing his agenda "from infrastructure to chips to lowering prices," Jean-Pierre said.

Biden will also share his plan to improve the lives of all Americans, she added.

The opposing party traditionally provides a response speech after the event. Republican Party leaders selected US Sen. Katie Britt to deliver their response to Biden this year.

Former US president and lone 2024 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said that he will conduct a live "play by play" reaction to Biden's speech. Trump will correct "inaccurate statements," with a focus on comments regarding border security and the alleged weaponization of government against him.

Biden will claim that the state of the union is strong, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday. However, the state of the union is not strong, and "everybody around the country knows it," Johnson said.

The United States is in decline and nothing Biden could say during his speech would change that, Johnson added.

Biden's SOTU speech is scheduled for Thursday at 9:00 p.m. ET (2:00 GMT on Friday). The White House will have a stream of the event with American Sign Language interpretation.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) –
MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* The United Nations condemns the announcement by Israel that it would increase the number of housing units in the occupied West Bank by 3,400, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Thursday.

* Any distribution of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip is good but more large-scale deliveries by land are needed, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

* The US mission to establish a port in the Gaza Strip will not require the presence of US troops on the ground, a senior Biden administration official said.

* President Joe Biden will announce tonight during his State of the Union Address that he is directing the US military to establish a temporary port in the Mediterranean aimed at delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza, a senior administration official told reporters.

* The delegation of the Palestinian movement Hamas has left Cairo for consultations with its leadership as talks with Israel on the Gaza Strip ceasefire have entered a deadlock, Hamas political office member Husam Badran told Sputnik.

SWEDEN'S ACCESSION TO NATO

* The NATO protocol on Sweden's accession to the alliance has officially entered into force, the State Department announced on Thursday.

* US President Joe Biden welcomed Sweden as NATO's 32nd ally and said the alliance is "stronger than ever."

* Sweden is thankful to its allies for accepting it as a NATO member and pledges to adhere to the values of the alliance, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said.

RUSSIAN BUSINESS OF YANDEX SALE

* The shareholders of Yandex N.V., the Dutch parent company of Russian tech giant Yandex, have approved the restructuring of the company and the sale of the Russian business to top management, the company said on Thursday.

* The value of the contract on the sale of the Russian business of tech giant Yandex has remained unchanged and amounts to 475 billion rubles (\$5.2 billion), the company told Sputnik.

US ECONOMY

* The Federal Reserve will move to cut interest rates over the course of this year if inflation continues to go down amid resilience in the US economy and labor market, Chairman Jerome Powell said Thursday, heightening speculation of a pivot in the central bank's policy despite much debate suggesting it will hold on to high rates.

* Wall Street hit record highs as investors chased up prices of blue chip stocks after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell hinted at the possibility of rate cuts this year if inflation continues to go down amid resilience in the US economy and labor market.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MOLDOVA

* Moldovan opposition Sor party leader Ilan Shor urged authorities on Thursday not to make up fake accusations against Gagauzia head Yevgenia Gutsul because she acts in the interests of citizens.

* France will open a permanent defense mission in Chisinau in the coming months, French President Emmanuel Macron said.

* Moldova is planning to arrest Gutsul after her return from Russia, opposition politician Ilan Shor said.

* Gutsul said that she discussed with the first deputy head of the Russian presidential administration, Sergey Kirienko, the possibility of lifting the food embargo for Gagauzia and gas supplies at a discount price.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Germany's CDU/CSU opposition alliance will initiate another vote next week in the Bundestag on supplying Taurus missiles to Ukraine, CDU Chairman Thorsten Frei told the German Rheinische Post newspaper.

* The recent statements made by French President Emmanuel Macron show the country's increased involvement in the Ukraine conflict, which goes against the interests of Paris, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Kazakhstan is not engaged in negotiations with Ukraine on procurement of Russian military products for the needs of the Ukrainian armed forces, the Kazakh Defense Ministry said.

* Macron told heads of opposition parties on Thursday that there is "no limit" when it comes to supporting Ukraine, the BFMTV broadcaster reported.

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US Ready Reimpose Oil Sanctions on Venezuela if It Does Not Allow Fair Elections - Official

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to reimpose sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector this month if Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government does

not honor commitments to hold fair elections, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Division for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions Erik Woodhouse said Thursday.

Woodhouse made the remarks during a Senate hearing on his nomination to become the next head of the US Office of Sanctions Coordination.

"If Maduro and his representatives do not get back on track with the Barbados agreement, we will not renew General License 44, which authorizes activities in the oil sector," Woodhouse told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We are watching the situation very carefully, and we are prepared to allow General License 44 to expire and not offer any additional sanctions relief."

The US Treasury Department issued General License 44 in October to authorize transactions involving Venezuela's oil and gas sector for six months. The license will expire on April 18.

On October 17, the Venezuelan government and the opposition Unitary Platform of Venezuela resumed talks in Barbados by signing partial agreements to promote political rights and electoral guarantees, as well as to protect the country's assets abroad. The parties agreed, among other things, to facilitate the holding of inclusive elections in Venezuela in the second half of 2024 under close international monitoring.

The opposition's candidate for Venezuela's 2024 election, Maria Corina Machado, recently accused Maduro of not abiding to his commitments in the Barbados agreement.

Machado won Venezuela's opposition primary in October 2023 with nearly 93% of the vote. However, on January 26, the country's Supreme Court announced that she had been disqualified and would be unable to run for the next 15 years.

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House Panel Approves Bill That Could Ban TikTok in US

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Energy and Commerce on Thursday unanimously approved a bill that could potentially ban TikTok in the United States if its Chinese parent company ByteDance does not divest from the video app within six months.

The committee voted 40-0 in favor of advancing the Prohibition of Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, introduced by US Representatives Mike Gallagher and Raja Krishnamoorthi to address threats from "foreign-controlled apps" like TikTok. The legislation covers both existing and future services from ByteDance Ltd. or its affiliates.

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US Approves Potential \$176.6M In Sale of Subsonic Aerial Targets for AEGIS to ROK – DSCA

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The United States approves a potential sale of Subsonic Sea-Skimming Aerial Targets for KDX-III Batch-II AEGIS Class Destroyers and related services for an estimated cost of \$170.6 million to South Korea, the US Defense Security Cooperation

Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Republic of Korea of Subsonic Sea-Skimming Aerial Targets for KDX-III Batch-II AEGIS Class Destroyers and related elements of logistics and program support for an estimated cost of \$170.6 million," DSCA said in a press release.

The Republic of Korea requested to buy five aerial targets as well as GQM-163 target drones, technical publications, personal training, and related support services and logistics elements, according to the release.

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US Preparing UNSC Resolution to Dissuade Putting Nuclear Weapons in Space - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is readying a UN Security Council resolution to dissuade countries from putting nuclear arms in space, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The US plans to introduce the resolution, which would highlight a ban on nuclear weapons in space per the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, later this month, the report said, citing sources familiar with the matter.

The UN Security Council is set to discuss nuclear-related issues in a meeting on March 18, the report said.

The resolution comes amid alleged efforts by Russia to deploy a nuclear weapon in space. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin said last month that such allegations are a ploy to prompt negotiations on the issue with terms that benefit the US.

The US continues to block a Russian proposal to prevent the deployment of nuclear weapons in space, which has been on the table for more than 15 years, Putin said.

The US has not seen any signs indicating that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon, although the country continues to monitor the issue carefully, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said last month.

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UNSC to Hold Meeting on Ukraine on Friday - Program of Work

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is scheduled to hold a meeting on Ukraine on Friday, according to the council's program of work.

The meeting is scheduled for 3:00 p.m. New York time (20:00 GMT).

The meeting was requested by Ukraine in connection with recent Russian strikes on targets in Odesa. Kiev has asked the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to deliver a report, a source in the Security Council told Sputnik.

The Russian armed forces on Wednesday carried out a high-precision missile strike on a hangar in the port district of Odesa, where preparations were underway for the combat use of Ukrainian unmanned boats, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

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Pentagon Identifies Soldier Who Died in Non-Combat Incident in Israel

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon on Thursday named an American soldier from the US Army Reserve who died in a non-combat incident in Israel earlier this week.

"The Department of Defense announced today the death of one US Army Reserve soldier who was supporting the United States Security Staff for the Department of State, US Embassy in Jerusalem, Israel," the Pentagon said in a press release. "Lt. Col. Orlando Bandeira, 54, of Tampa, Florida, died March 4, 2024, as a result of a non-combat related incident."

According to the Pentagon, the incident is still under investigation, though State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday that there were no indications of foul play in the death.

The Pentagon press release contradicts media reports that the deceased was actually a diplomat who was found dead in his apartment, while Miller said he was a direct hire employee of the embassy.

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UPDATE - Sri Lankan Student Faces 7 Charges Concerning Ottawa Suburb Murders - Police

(Updates with more details in paras 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Ottawa Police Service Homicide Unit said on Thursday that it laid seven charges on a 19-year-old Sri Lankan student for the murder of six in the Canadian capital.

Earlier today, the Ottawa Police reported that a multiple homicide had occurred overnight in the Barrhaven suburb of the city leaving six victims, including four children.

"Febrio DE-ZOYSA, 19-years-old, has been charged with six counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder. He is a Sri Lankan national who is believed to be in Canada as a student," law enforcement said in a statement.

Among the victims, three kids of ages 7, 4 and 2 as well as a two-month-old baby, the police said, adding that the children's mother and a 40-year-old man were also found dead on scene. The father is in the hospital in stable condition, it added.

Law enforcement continues its investigation into the homicide, seeking surveillance doorbell or dashcam footage from residents, visitors, and businesses who might have been in the area at

the time of the murders, the statement continued.

All the victims were Sri Lankan newcomers, Ottawa Police Chief Eric Stubbs said in a statement, further stressing that the incident was a mass killing, not a mass shooting. The murders were made with an "edged" weapon and the perpetrator was arrested without resistance, he added.

Stubbs said that the 19-year-old individual will appear before court later on Thursday over what he said was a "senseless act of violence" perpetrated on innocent individuals.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said earlier on Thursday when questioned over the incident that he was shocked and horrified by the violent murders but expected that the community would reach out to support the victims' families and friends and that law enforcement would continue providing updates on the murders.

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US Arctic Policy Cannot 'Ignore' Fact Half of Region Belongs to Russia - Nominee

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US policy on the Arctic cannot ignore the fact that half of the region belongs to Russia and the two parties must engage in dialogue, US Envoy for Arctic Affairs nominee Michael Sfraga said during a US Senate hearing on Thursday.

"It's hard to ignore half of the Arctic, which is Russia," Sfraga told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "In the north, it is a big neighborhood, but a small community, and you must engage."

Earlier in March, Russia said the first meetings of the Arctic Council's working groups, which includes the United States and other Western nations, could be held as early as this spring after a two-year hiatus.

US President Joe Biden nominated Sfraga to be the US Ambassador for Arctic Affairs in February 2023.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee ranking member Jim Risch during the hearing said he strongly opposes Sfraga's nomination, mostly due to his so-called extensive travel to Russia and China, among other related issues.

The Republican senator said Sfraga appeared on a panel with Russians who were sanctioned by the United States government, and he negotiated multiple memorandums of understanding with Chinese institutions allegedly tied to the Chinese government's defense and intelligence services.

Risch also highlighted that Sfraga wrote an op-ed "extolling" the importance of US-Russia relations after Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

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Sri-Lankan Student Facing 7 Charges Concerning Ottawa Suburb Murders – Police

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Law enforcement continues its investigation into the homicide, seeking surveillance doorbell or dashcam footage from residents, visitors, and businesses who might have been in the area at the time of the murder, the statement continued.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said earlier on Thursday when questioned over the incident that he was shocked and horrified by the violent murders but expected that the community would reach out to support the victims’ families and friends and that law enforcement would continue providing updates on the murders.

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US House Passes Bill Requiring Federal Government Detain Migrants for Theft-Related Crimes

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives passed a bill requiring the US Department of Homeland Security to detain migrants who have committed theft-related crimes.

The House passed the Laken Riley Act with a 251-170 vote, sending it to the Senate for consideration.

The bill aims to give US states more power to fight federal immigration laws when it comes to crimes committed by migrants.

The bill is named after 22-year-old college student Laken Riley, who was allegedly murdered by Jose Antonio Ibarra, 26, a Venezuelan migrant who entered the United States illegally through the southern border.

Federal officials said Ibarra was released from federal custody into the United States in 2022 after he entered the country illegally.

Ibarra has been arrested and charged in connection to Riley's death. Prior to the murder, Ibarra was arrested in New York and charged with acting in a manner to injure a child under the age of 17, but state authorities released Ibarra before he could be detained, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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Canada Needs to Spend 'Much More' on Military - Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Canada "must and will" spend much more on its military capabilities, Minister of National Defense Bill Blair said on Thursday.

"I think one of the things that I've tried to make clear to our NATO allies is that yes, Canada must and will spend more on defense ... what the upper limit of that is? I don't know. But we know we need to do much more," Blair told the 92nd Ottawa Conference on Security and Defense.

Blair however did not specify when Canada would finally meet NATO's military spending target of 2% of national GDP. Ottawa has long failed to meet the commitment, keeping military spending under 1.4% of GDP.

The minister reiterated that the Canadian defense budget for 2026-2027 will have doubled comparatively to 2016-2017, noting that it proves Ottawa's commitment to NATO.

Blair further said that National Defense would soon be releasing the Canada Defense Policy Update, which he said would take into account the evolving worldwide security situation, notably around Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific and emerging continental threats, including to the Canadian Arctic.

In February, former US President Donald Trump at a rally of his supporters in South Carolina said that Washington would not defend NATO member states that do not meet their defense spending obligations, and that he would encourage Russia to do "whatever the hell they want" with countries that fail to fulfill their commitments.

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Pentagon Still Sees Islamic State Threat in Syria - Assistant Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The threat posed by the Islamic State terror group (IS, banned in Russia) and Iran in Syria is still present, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Christopher Maier said on Thursday.

"I still see an ISIS [Islamic State] threat and I still see an Iranian threat that continues to look to exploit some of the weaknesses there," Maier said. "I think the experience we've had with the Gaza crisis after the Hamas attacks is going to prompt us to relook at all these commitments."

Maier emphasized that he continues to see value in the role the US government plays in keeping the pressure on the Islamic State in Syria as it sees for the role of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

"Also, we forget at times that our involvement with the SDF helps to keep the Iraqis' western flank from being probably under further pressure from from ISIS [Islamic State] and some of the

other malign actors there in Syria," he added.

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Trump in 'Pre-Buttal' to State of the Union Says It's Time to Tell Biden 'You're Fired'

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump in a statement on Thursday said it is time to tell President Joe Biden that he is fired.

"It's time to tell Crooked Joe Biden, 'YOU'RE FIRED,'" Trump said.

Trump released a "pre-buttal" statement ahead of Biden's "sad excuse" for a State of the Union Address that primarily focused on the border crisis and inflation.

The former US president accused Biden of lying and trying to escape accountability for the "horrific devastation" his administration and Democrats have created on the US southern border.

Trump lashed out at Biden for rescinding his immigration policies and allowing millions of illegal migrants into US communities, which he suspects could be up to 20 million by the end of this year.

The Biden administration, Trump continued, has "looted trillions" from US taxpayers and spent it on illegal migrants and on clean energy initiatives that have triggered inflation.

Biden's State of the Union speech is scheduled for Thursday at 9:00 p.m. ET (2:00 GMT on Friday).

Trump said that he will conduct a live "play by play" reaction to Biden's speech. Trump will correct "inaccurate statements," with a focus on comments regarding border security and the alleged weaponization of the government against him.

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UN Condemns Israel Announcement About Advancing Settlements in West Bank - Official

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations condemns the announcement by Israel that it would increase the number of housing units in the occupied West Bank by 3,400, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Thursday.

"I condemn yesterday's reported advancement by the Israeli authorities of plans for over 3,400 housing units in settlements in the occupied West Bank," Wennesland said in a statement.

The settlements are illegal under international law and are escalating the conflict in the occupied West Bank, the statement said.

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Any Humanitarian Deliveries to Gaza 'Good' But More Deliveries by Land Needed - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - Any distribution of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip is good but more large scale deliveries by land are needed, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"Any way to get more aid into Gaza, whether by sea or air drop, is obviously good. Our focus and the international community's focus should continue to be on increasing the large scale distribution and entry of aid by land," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric explained that aid deliveries by land are cost and volume effective, which is why the United Nations has been saying that more entry points into Gaza are needed to enable the large volume of aid to come in.

Earlier on Thursday, a senior Biden administration official said President Joe Biden will announce during his State of the Union Address later in the night that he is directing the US military to establish a temporary port in the Mediterranean in order to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza.

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Canada's NWT to Have Its First Compressed Natural Gas Facility – Energy Regulator

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The Commission of the Canada Energy Regulator (CER) said on Thursday that it had approved the construction of the Inuvialuit Energy Security Project, the first compressed natural gas facility in the country's Northwest Territories (NWT).

"The Commission of the Canada Energy Regulator (CER) has approved the Inuvialuit Energy Security Project (IESP) Energy Centre with 20 conditions. The project will convert natural gas into compressed natural gas, propane, and synthetic diesel that can be used for power and heating," the regulator said in a statement.

This is the last of three authorizations the CER gave allowing for the construction and operation of the facility, the statement said, the other two being issued at the end of July 2023.

Accordingly, the Council heard and took into consideration expressions of support for the project's benefits from Indigenous Peoples and organizations which notably included the possibility of swapping imported diesel for local source and reliable energy, opportunities for employment as well as economic self-sufficiency and the reduction of the NWT environmental footprint, among others.

Some of the twenty conditions imposed on the project to monitor and mitigate its impacts are the prevention of permafrost melting, the monitoring of noise to protect humans and local wildlife, and the implementation of a seven-year post-construction environmental monitoring program to account for slower vegetation growth rates in the North.

Other conditions include environmental protection, safety, emergency response, and operational readiness, the statement continued.

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UPDATE - US Will 'Carefully' Cut Interest Rates if Inflation, Economy, Jobs Stay in Sync - Powell

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-13)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will move to cut interest rates over the course of this year if inflation continues to go down amid resilience in the US economy and labor market, Chairman Jerome Powell said in a congressional testimony on Thursday, heightening speculation of a pivot in the US central bank's policy despite much debate suggesting it will hold on to restrictive rates.

"What we expect and what we're seeing is continued strong growth, [a] strong labor market and continuing progress in bringing inflation down," Powell told the US Senate Banking Committee. "If the economy evolves over that path, then we do think that carefully removing restrictive policy will begin over the course of this year."

Since his first appearance at the Capitol on Wednesday for this year's periodical assessment of the US economy and the Fed's work, Powell has been at pains to lay out a path for interest rates in 2024 that would not contradict the central bank's projections.

On Wednesday, Powell said interest rates were likely at the highest level desired by the Fed and that cuts will probably happen only when the central bank is convinced that inflation is under control.

But Powell also projected substantial rate cuts if growth kept at the current pace, with appropriate moderation in inflation.

The Fed's favorite inflation indicator - the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index often known as just PCE - grew 2.4% for the year to January. That was markedly lower than the four-decade high of above 9% charted by the PCE in June 2022.

The Fed raised rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023 in response to the runaway post-pandemic inflation.

Powell said Wednesday the Fed will likely cut rates once it is confident that price growth will stay in the lower 2% per annum bracket.

"We're not looking for inflation to go all the way down to 2%," he said. "That's not what we're looking for. What we want is just more evidence that will give us more confidence that inflation is on a path down to 2% sustainably. That will come in the form of good inflation readings (that) we really want to see."

Powell said he did not want a situation where inflation suddenly turned higher late last year after six months of moderation.

"We're just trying to be careful because the economy is so strong and the labor market is so strong, we think we can and should be careful as we approach that decision (to cut rates)," Powell added.

Interest rates currently hover at between 5% and 5.25% versus the pre-pandemic level of between zero and 0.25%.

The Fed's next policy meeting will begin on March 19, with a decision on rates set for the day

after, March 20.

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Biden Welcomes Sweden as NATO's 32nd Ally, Says Alliance Stronger Than Ever

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday welcomed Sweden as NATO's 32nd ally and said the alliance is "stronger than ever."

"I am honored to welcome Sweden as NATO's 32nd Ally. 75 years ago—when the United States and 11 other nations came together to establish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—President Truman said the Alliance, 'would create a shield against aggression and fear of aggression.' Today, that shield—and transatlantic security—is stronger than ever with the formal addition of Sweden to NATO," Biden said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, the US State Department announced that the NATO protocol on Sweden's accession to the alliance had officially entered into force.

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UPDATE - Fed's Powell Says He Expects US Bank Failures This Year But Not The Big Ones

(Adds details in paragraphs 3-7)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell predicted on Thursday that there will be more bank failures this year but stressed that they will involve small and medium-sized lenders, similar to the crisis in the industry last year, rather than the big banks.

"We have identified that banks that have high commercial real estate, or concentration particularly in office and retail, are the ones that have been affected a lot and we have identified them and we are in dialogue with them," Powell said, testifying before a Senate banking committee.

Powell said US banks, in general, were "well-capitalized." But he also flagged weaknesses in certain pockets that could result in bank collapses.

"[This] year, I'm sure there will be bank failures but this is not the big banks. It's not a first issue order for any of the very large banks. It's more, you know, the smaller and medium-sized banks that have these issues."

Powell's comments came a day after shares of New York Community Bank (NYCB) plunged more than 40% amid reports that it was seeking a major cash infusion, triggering worries about the health of small and medium-sized US banks as a whole.

NYCB, buffeted by fears over potential real-estate loan losses, weaknesses in its internal controls and a sharp drop in its stock price, has dispatched bankers to gauge investors' interest in buying stock in the company, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing people familiar with the

matter.

The bank's troubles were accelerated by a surprise loss declared in the past quarter, partly due to soured commercial real estate loans, the Journal said. It said that in spite of the NYCB's urgent need for cash, there's "no guarantee there will be a deal, or that one would succeed in addressing the bank's challenges."

Five small-to-medium-sized US banks collapsed in 2023 from a lack of liquidity after rapid withdrawal of money by depositors following missteps in their management or disastrous forays by the lenders into investments that included real estate.

Following that, the Fed established an emergency lending facility called the Bank Term Fund Program to offer impacted banks loans of up to one year based on qualifying assets. That program expires this month.

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AFRICOM Claims US Narrative in Africa 'Drowned Out' by Russian 'Disinformation'

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Russia has been successful in its attempts to "drown out" the US narrative in Africa through alleged misinformation campaigns over the past years, AFRICOM commander Gen. Michael E. Langley said in a congressional testimony on Thursday. "I would say the Russian Federation's narrative drowned out the US governments in the past years ... The Russian Federation, not just through [PMC] Wagner, stoked a lot of the instability across the Sahel. They did this through misinformation, disinformation campaigns," Langley told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

The United States needs to not only continue building up its military and security capacity but also double down in efforts to tell the "story of success" of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Africa to push back on the Russian narrative.

In September 2023, the leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger signed a charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States to create "a collective defense architecture" following coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023.

In the aftermath of the coups, Russia declared its readiness to develop constructive bilateral relations with each of the countries and also expressed support for their territorial integrity and sovereignty amid Western threats to impose sanctions and send troops to restore regimes friendly to Europe and the United States.

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Russia to Remain Serious Threat to NATO Security for Foreseeable Future - Swedish PM

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Russia will remain a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic security

for the foreseeable future, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on Thursday.

"The security situation in our region has not been this serious since the Second World War. Russia will stay a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic security for the foreseeable future. It was in this light that Sweden applied to join the NATO defense alliance," Kristersson said during a ceremony of Sweden's formal accession to NATO at the US State Department.

Earlier on Thursday, the State Department announced that the NATO protocol on Sweden's accession to the military alliance has officially entered into force.

On Tuesday, Hungarian President Tamas Sulyok signed the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership, making Hungary the last member of the alliance to do so.

In early February, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson that Moscow had no intention of attacking any NATO countries. Putin added the Western countries were starting to understand that Russia's strategic defeat in its conflict with Ukraine was impossible and therefore they should better contemplate their next steps.

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Lowering Level of Humanitarian Cooperation With Sudan Authorities 'Shortsighted' - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - Lowering the level of negotiations on humanitarian cooperation with the Sudanese government would not be effective in the long term, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Anna Estigneeva said on Thursday.

"We are convinced that lowering the level of humanitarian cooperation with current authorities would be shortsighted," Evstigneeva said during a UN Security Council briefing on Sudan.

The Sudanese authorities are rectifying the current situation and are facilitating humanitarian deliveries, Evstigneeva added.

Earlier in the month, Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Al-Sadiq Ali told Sputnik that Sudan is counting on a visit by the country's leadership to Russia and high-level negotiations in the near future.

In April 2023, clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group. The parties to the conflict have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires, but none has helped settle the conflict. In late October, the parties to the conflict resumed negotiations, mediated by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah, but the hostilities have continued.

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US Recognizes Extremists Can Use Ramadan to Spark Violence - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States recognizes that extremists can use the Islamic month of Ramadan to spark violence, a senior Biden administration official said on

Thursday.

"[Ismail] Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, has called for violence over Ramadan, so we recognize that this is something that they might very well try to do," the official said. "It's always a volatile period... Obviously, we recognize that extremists could try to use Ramadan to spark something that would be deeply unfortunate in that holy month."

Earlier this week, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyadh al-Maliki told Sputnik that he hopes to reach an agreement on a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel before the beginning of Ramadan.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after a meeting of all security elements that Israel will allow the entry of Muslim worshipers to the Temple Mount during the first week of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan in numbers similar to previous years, and further entries will be considered based on weekly security assessments.

The office said that Israel strongly safeguards freedom of worship for all faiths, at all sites in Israel, especially the Temple Mount, adding that Ramadan is sacred to Muslims and that its sanctity will be upheld this year as it is every year.

Millions of Muslims around the world will begin a month of celebration around March 10. For many Palestinians, Ramadan presents the only opportunity to pray at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the holiest Islamic sites.

Israel restricts the entry of Palestinian worshipers into the Temple Mount during Ramadan to varying degrees for security reasons every year, which mostly affects young people.

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US Mission to Establish Port in Gaza Will Not Require Boots on Ground - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US mission to establish a port in the Gaza Strip will not require the presence of US troops on the ground, a senior Biden administration official said on Thursday.

"We are not planning for this to be an operation that would require US boots on the ground," the official told reporters.

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UPDATE - Biden to Announce He Directed US Military to Establish Temporary Port in Gaza – Official

(Updates to add details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce tonight during his State of the Union Address that he is directing the US military to establish a temporary port in the Mediterranean aimed at delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza, a senior administration official

told reporters on Thursday.

“Tonight in his speech, the president will announce that he is directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a port in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters,” the official said.

The temporary pier at the port will allow for a daily capacity of hundreds of truckloads of assistance, the official added. The US will coordinate with Israel on security requirements and work with the UN and humanitarian NGOs to distribute the aid within Gaza.

The initial shipments will arrive via Cyprus. The official said that the plan would take weeks to plan and execute and could not provide a date for when the port would open.

The official added that President Biden had directed his administration “not wait for the Israelis” and pursue every channel possible to deliver assistance into Gaza, including by air, sea, or land.

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Biden to Announce He Directed US Military to Establish Temporary Port in Gaza - Official

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will announce tonight during his State of the Union Address that he is directing the US military to establish a temporary port in the Mediterranean aimed at delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza, a senior administration official told reporters on Thursday.

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Seven-in-Ten Canadians Believe That ‘Everything is Broken’ in Canada Right Now- Poll

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Seven-in-Ten Canadians agree with the statement that “everything is broken” in Canada nowadays, a poll by Leger revealed on Thursday.

“It feels like everything is broken in this country right now,” said 7 in 10 of the polled. Among them, 30% strongly agree with the statement whereas 40% are somewhat in agreement.

Slightly over a quarter (27%) expressed their overall disagreement with the statement and 4% were unable to provide an answer.

Canadians cited several reasons for believing the country is broken, among which are “everything is expensive” (21%), the current Canadian leadership (18%), a failing healthcare system (11%), and declining living standards (10%).

Nearly three in five (59%) Canadians are upset with the way Canada is currently being managed by the federal government, the poll showed. Only a third have expressed their

satisfaction with the situation, it added.

Among the areas of utmost importance for Canadians are inflation, the state of healthcare services, and housing affordability, with 34%, 17%, and 10% respectively choosing them as their top priority.

The poll was conducted between February 23-25 on a sample of 1590 individuals aged eighteen and over.

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Fed's Powell Says He Expects US Bank Failures This Year, But Not The Big Ones

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell predicted on Thursday that there will be more US bank failures this year but stressed that they will involve small and medium-sized lenders, similar to the crisis in the industry last year, rather than big banks.

"We have identified that banks that have high commercial real estate, or concentration particularly in office and retail, are the ones that have been affected a lot and we have identified them and we are in dialogue with them," Powell said, testifying before a Senate banking committee. "[This] year, I'm sure there will be bank failures, but this is not the big banks. It's not a first issue order for any of the very large banks. It's more, you know, the smaller and medium-sized banks that have these issues."

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IMF Welcomes China's Efforts to Improve Economic Growth - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) welcomes China's efforts to improve economic growth, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"We certainly very much welcome the authorities' focus on high quality and sustainable growth," Kozack told reporters when asked to comment on China's recent measures to revive its economy.

Kozack also said that the IMF is in a process of assessing the steps that China has and is undertaking.

"We will continue to review additional information provided by the authorities on the direction of policies in the coming days," Kozack added.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang said on Tuesday that China aims to achieve 5% economic growth this year. However, he acknowledged that achieving this goal would be challenging.

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UPDATE - ISIS-K Retains Capability, Will to Attack US in 6 Months With No Warning - CENTCOM

(Updates with background in para 7; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The branch of the Islamic State terror group known as ISIS-Khorasan (outlawed in Russia) retains the capability and will to attack the United States and its Western allies abroad within six months, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"I assess ISIS-Khorasan retains the capability and will to attack us and Western interests abroad in as little as six months and with little to no warnings," Kurilla told the US House Armed Services Committee.

In addition, there is an increased risk of an attack emanating from Afghanistan amid a surge of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria earlier this year, Kurilla said.

Concerning Iran, CENTCOM would require an international and a whole of government approach to be able to stop Iran from allegedly resupplying the Houthis for their attacks on maritime shipping lanes, Kurilla added.

According to the US Defense Department, US forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked more than 150 times since the October 7 escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Earlier this month, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Mohammed Hussein told Sputnik that Iraq and the United States continue their negotiations about the possible withdrawal of the international coalition forces from Iraq, but no final decision or schedule has been agreed upon so far.

ISIS-K was founded in 2015 as the Afghan branch of the Islamic State and considers the United States and its allies as well as the Taliban movement as its enemies, according to media reports.

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US Stocks Hit Record Highs After Powell Suggests Rate Cuts Could Happen This Year

NEW YORK, March 7 (Sputnik) - Wall Street hit record highs on Thursday as investors chased up prices of blue chip stocks after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell hinted at the possibility of rate cuts this year if inflation continues to go down amid resilience in the US economy and labor market.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, was up 45 points, almost 1%, to hover at the 5,150 level, some 90 minutes after trading opened for the day. Earlier, it hit an all-time high of 5,154.

Since the year began, the S&P has hit record highs more than a dozen times, powered by expectations of rate cuts that fuel easier credit for business and a mania over artificial intelligence stocks. The latest rally came after Fed Chair Powell heightened speculation on

Thursday of a pivot in the central bank's rates policy despite much debate suggesting it will hold on to restrictive rates.

"What we expect and what we're seeing is continued strong growth, [a] strong labor market and continuing progress in bringing inflation down," Powell said in testimony before a Senate banking committee. "If the economy evolves over that path, then we do think that carefully removing restrictive policy will begin over the course of this year."

The Fed raised rates at 11 meetings between March 2022 and July 2023, taking them from a pre-pandemic level of just 0.25% to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% now.

Its next policy meeting will begin on March 19, with a decision on rates set for the day after, March 20.

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IMF Refers Reporters to Georgieva on Questions Regarding Her Re-Election - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack on Thursday referred journalists to Kristalina Georgieva regarding questions about the possibility of her re-election as managing director.

"This is really a question for the Managing Director herself," Kozack said.

The IMF has a process for selecting its managing director, Kozack added.

Georgieva became managing director of the IMF in October 2019 and her current term expires in October of this year.

US media reported earlier that Georgieva could be re-elected and has already received support from France.

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US Seeks to Avoid Full-Scale War With Iran - CENTCOM Commander

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to avoid a full-scale war with Iran amid raised tensions in the region following the renewal of hostilities between Israel and Hamas on October 7, US Central Command (CENTCOM) head Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"That is correct," Kurilla told the US House Armed Services Committee when asked if the United States wants to avoid a war with Iran.

Kurilla also said that Iran tries to avoid a head-to-head war with the United States.

As a result of US retaliatory strikes against Iranian proxy groups, US military forces in Iraq and Syria have not been attacked for the past 32 days, Kurilla added.

According to the US Department of Defense, US forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked more than 150 times with dozens of US military personnel injured since the beginning of the

new escalation between Israel and Hamas on October 7.

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ISIS-K Expected to Attack US in 6 Months With No Warning - Central Command

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The branch of the Islamic State terror group known as ISIS-Khorasan (outlawed in Russia) retains the capability and will to attack the United States and its Western allies abroad within six months, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"I assess ISIS-Khorasan retains the capability and will to attack us and Western interests abroad in as little as six months and with little to no warnings," Kurilla told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Additionally, there is an increased risk of an attack emanating from Afghanistan amid a surge of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria earlier this year, Kurilla said.

Concerning Iran, CENTCOM would require an international and a whole of government approach to be able to stop Iran from allegedly resupplying the Houthis for their attacks on maritime shipping lanes, Kurilla added.

According to the US Defense Department, US forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked more than 150 times since the October 7 escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Earlier this month, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Mohammed Hussein told Sputnik that Iraq and the United States continue their negotiations about the possible withdrawal of the international coalition forces from Iraqi soil, but no final decision or schedule has been agreed upon so far.

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Situation in Sudan Has Impact on Overall Stability in Region - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The current turbulent situation in Sudan impacts the stability of the entire region, China's Deputy Permanent Representative Dai Bing said on Thursday.

"The situation in Sudan has a bearing on overall regional peace and stability," Dai said during a Security Council briefing on Sudan.

The Council is now discussing a resolution calling for a ceasefire connected to the Ramadan period.

In April 2023, violent clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group. The parties to the conflict have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires, but none has helped settle the conflict. In late October, the parties resumed negotiations, mediated by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah, but hostilities in the country

continue.

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IMF Board to Consider Allocating \$880M In Loan for Ukraine Under EFF in Late March

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund's board will consider allocating an \$880 million loan for Ukraine under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) in late March, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"The board consideration of the latest review is expected in the second half of March," Kozack told reporters.

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UN Chief Calls for Cessation of Hostilities in Sudan During Ramadan - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on all parties to the conflict in Sudan to cease hostilities during the Islamic month of Ramadan.

"I call on all parties in Sudan to honor the values of Ramadan by honoring a Ramadan cessation of hostilities. This cessation of hostilities must lead to a definitive silencing of the guns across the country, and set out a firm path towards lasting peace for the Sudanese people," Guterres said during a UN Security Council briefing on Sudan.

The UN Secretary-General also said that the values of Ramadan must prevail. Guterres referred to the Islamic principle of empathy and generosity and the need to "share and care," particularly with the poor and needy, during the month of Ramadan.

In April 2023, clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group. The parties to the conflict have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires, but none has helped settle the conflict. In late October, the parties to the conflict resumed negotiations, mediated by Saudi Arabia, but hostilities in the country have continued.

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US Will 'Carefully' Cut Rates If Inflation, Economy, Jobs Stay In Sync - Powell

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will move to cut interest rates over the course of this year if inflation continues to go down amid resilience in the US economy and

labor market, Chairman Jerome Powell said Thursday, heightening speculation of a pivot in the central bank's policy despite much debate suggesting it will hold on to high rates.

"What we expect and what we're seeing is continued strong growth, [a] strong labor market and continuing progress in bringing inflation down," Powell said in a second day of testimony before a Senate banking committee. "If the economy evolves over that path, then we do think that carefully removing restrictive policy will begin over the course of this year."

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Biden SOTU Guests Include Swedish Premier, Woman Denied Abortion, Sister of Uvalde Victim

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – US First Lady Jill Biden has invited Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, the sister of a Uvalde school shooting victim, a woman who was denied an emergency abortion in Texas, and a Bloody Sunday foot soldier to join her in the viewing box for the State of the Union address on Thursday.

Except for Kristersson, whose country joined NATO on Thursday, the other 19 guests are mostly everyday Americans who represent other policy issues that Biden plans to highlight in his speech, such as access to reproductive health care, cancer treatment, gun violence prevention, student debt relief, opioid abuse, workers' rights, and electric vehicles, among others.

"Each of these individuals were invited by the White House because they personify issues or themes to be addressed by the President in his speech, or they embody the Biden-Harris Administration's policies at work for the American people," the White House said in a press release.

The guest list also includes the president of the United Auto Workers, an Alabama couple whose embryo transfer was canceled in the wake of the state Supreme Court's ruling, and a Maui police officer.

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Congresswoman Criticizes Biden for Fencing Off Capitol But Not Sealing US Southern Border

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene on Thursday criticized President Joe Biden for erecting a fence around the Capitol building ahead of his annual State of the Union address but not sealing the United States' border with Mexico.

"The State of the Union summed up in one picture," Greene said via the social media platform X upon attaching a photograph of the fenced off Capitol building. "The Biden admin will erect a fence around the Capital in the dark of night but absolutely refuses to build a wall and seal our border to defend innocent Americans like Laken Riley."

Greene also said that the State of Union address focus on the United States rather than Israel or Ukraine.

"Any attempt to tie America's border security to funding foreign wars and aid will be met with extreme contempt by the American people and rightfully so!" Greene added.

Biden is expected to deliver on Thursday night the last State of the Union address to Congress during his current term in office.

On Wednesday, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden will outline during his speech the "historic achievements" of his administration and share his plans to improve the lives of all Americans.

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US Trade Deficit Increases to \$67.4Bln in January – Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The US goods and services trade gap increased to \$67.4 billion in January, the Commerce Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The US goods and services trade deficit increased from \$64.2 billion in December (revised) to \$67.4 billion in January, as imports increased more than exports," the release stated.

It added that the goods deficit increased \$3 billion to \$91.6 billion while the services surplus decreased \$0.3 billion to \$24.2 billion

While analyst had expected interest rates to curb imports, January saw an increase in imports of goods, led by those in capital goods, and automotive vehicles, parts and engines.

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US House Committee Postpones Hearing to Hold Blinken in Contempt of Congress - Notice

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The House Foreign Affairs Committee has postponed a hearing to hold Secretary of State Antony in contempt of Congress after he refused to comply with a subpoena related to the US botched withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Blinken's contempt of Congress hearing was scheduled to take place on Thursday at 10 a.m., but according to a notice the committee's website, the meeting has been postponed to a later, unspecified date.

In March, the House Foreign Affairs Committee's chair Michael McCaul issued a subpoena to produce the July 2021 dissent channel cable, which purportedly warned of the risk of the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan in the wake of the US withdrawal.

According to McCaul, the dissent cable and official response are "critical and material" to the committee's investigation into the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In late February, US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul threatened to hold Blinken in contempt of Congress for withholding documents related to a State Department review of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Since 2021, Republicans in Congress have accused the Biden administration of fleeing

Afghanistan, as well as leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Afghans who had been collaborating with the American military in the country against the Taliban for 20 years.

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US Congressmen Probe SpaceX Amid Claims Russian Forces Used Starlink Terminals - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Two US House Democrats have called on SpaceX to report complaints about potentially illegal acquisitions of Starlink terminals, including their alleged use by Russian forces in Ukraine, The Washington Post reported on Thursday, citing a letter it obtained.

Reps. Jamie Raskin and Robert Garcia warned in the letter that Russia's alleged use of Starlink terminals "poses a serious threat to Ukraine's security, Ukrainian lives, and US national security" and that they were "concerned that you may not have appropriate guardrails and policies in place."

Ukrainian intelligence officials have alleged that Russian forces have been using Starlink terminals in eastern Ukraine.

SpaceX supplied Starlink terminals to Ukraine soon after Russia began its special military operation in February 2022. The Pentagon also purchased several hundred terminals for Ukraine in June 2023.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk wrote in a social media post that "To the best of our knowledge, no Starlinks have been sold directly or indirectly to Russia."

Commenting on Kiev's claims last month, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the Starlink satellite internet system was neither certified for use in, nor officially supplied to Russia, and therefore could not be used

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Canada to Invest C\$4.4Mln to Ramp Up 155mm Ammunition Production – Blair

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Canada will invest C\$4.4 million (US\$3.3 million) in three ammunition manufacturers to ramp up the production of 155mm artillery shells in support of NATO and Ukraine, Minister of National Defense Bill Blair said on Thursday.

"I'm announcing again that we are investing C\$4.4 million with General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems, and in IMT Defense. This funding is going to enable these Canadian manufacturers to develop detailed plans to modernize production and ramp up production capacity for fun 155 ammunition," Blair said at the 92nd Ottawa Conference on Security and Defense.

The funding will allow the companies to advance the design and production processes for

NATO-standard 155mm ammunition, which is currently in high demand by the alliance and by Ukraine, a separate statement from National Defense said.

The latest announcement comes as part of Canada's efforts to modernize and increase the country's manufacturing capacity to keep pace with its commitments to NATO and Ukraine amid Russia's ongoing special military operation.

In February, Czech President Petr Pavel told the Munich Security Conference that Prague had identified an unnamed country outside the European Union with 500,000 155mm rounds and another 300,000 122mm rounds that could be delivered to Ukraine within weeks if quick funding was provided. Several NATO states have already joined an initiative to urgently provide them to the Ukrainian military.

Western countries, including member states of the European Union, have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. Russia has been attempting to reach an agreement with NATO on security principles in Europe with the alliance for the past 30 years, but despite Moscow's protests, the alliance has kept expanding closer to Russian borders.