

**3/20/24 Wednesday**

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Election and Polls Show Russia Is United While West Fractures

Over the weekend, Russian President Vladimir Putin was reelected for another six years in a record landslide, securing 87.8% of the vote, a figure that largely matched outside polling. Russian President Vladimir Putin's resounding victory over the weekend shows that Russia is more united than ever while the West has a "huge problem" unifying a "divided support base," Nicolai Petro, a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Tuesday](#).

"I think [[the election results](#)] pretty accurately reflect the desires of the Russian people and it's hard to come up with any evidence to the contrary," Petro said, adding that in Western media you will find "contrary opinions, but you cannot find any evidence."

Co-host Garland Nixon noted that Western leaders have comparatively abysmal approval ratings, noting that 76% of French people oppose French President Emmanuel Macron's plan to send troops to Ukraine and that British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have incredibly low approval ratings at 25% and 17%, respectively.

"That's a huge problem for the West. We have a divided support base in the West, perhaps a more ostensibly unified leadership, but that's only until an opposition comes into power. Then, we've got huge problems for the West, no matter which way you slice it," Petro explained.

"Whereas in Russia, again no matter how you slice it, you have a unified population and political elite. One of the most popular Ukrainian journalists— now in exile— Diana Panchenko, put it very well when she said 'A united collective West gave us a united collective Russia.'"

Co-host Wilmer Leon asked about US Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) who recently spoke to the Ukrainian parliament, urging them to pass a mobilization bill that would lower the minimum conscription age from 27 to 25. Before the conflict, Ukraine had one of the oldest populations in Europe and the high conscription age was set in an attempt to save younger Ukrainians who would be needed to father the next generation.

"We can [see the difficulty in getting it passed] by the 4,000 or 5,000 amendments that have been submitted to the new mobilization law, in fact, that it's very difficult going," Petro explained.

"It's easy for Sen. Graham to sit here and to say, I believe his quote was 'we need more people on the line.' Of course, the classic retort is, 'Who's 'we' Kemo Sabe? I don't see you anywhere near the front line.' And, that's the way a lot of people seem to be reacting to this call."

"I think Russia is, in fact, seeking some sort of negotiated settlement," Petro added. "[As that becomes] clear, both in Ukraine and in the West, people will inevitably begin asking themselves 'Well, why don't we actually negotiate a ceasefire and see how far we can go?'"

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## Macron Sending Troops to Ukraine 'Like a 'Poodle' Urinating on Odessa'

Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Sergey Naryshkin said on Tuesday that thousands of French troops are being prepared for deployment in the Odessa region of Ukraine.

French President Emmanuel Macron's plan to put around 2,000 troops in Odessa would only serve as a "human tripwire force" and would be "the equivalent of NATO, like a dog, urinating on Odessa, marking it as NATO's territory," Mark Sleboda, an international relations and security expert, [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday](#). He added that in this analogy, France is like "a poodle."

On Tuesday, French ground army chief of staff General Pierre Schill said in an op-ed that his forces are ready to respond to "the toughest engagements" and said the country could engage a division of 20,000 troops within 30 days.

"He's wrong. The French army is most certainly not ready for this," Sleboda said, commenting on the general's assertion. "If they were engaged in a high-intensity conflict such as the Kiev regime is engaged in, firing many less artillery shells than Russia, then France would have enough artillery shells for four days of conflict with Russia. Four days," Sleboda explained. By comparison, Russia has more than 600,000 troops deployed in the special operation zone, according to both Russian and Western analyses. "There is a likelihood that the French believe that Russia will not fire on these French troops, [because] they are under uniform, out of fear of striking a NATO member, even though of course, NATO's Article Five would not apply," Sleboda explained.

Sleboda added that he believes Macron thinks that if French troops are killed by Russia, then that will create more support for the conflict domestically and "help politically mobilize" other European countries to join the fight.

"I think if Macron sent his troops to Odessa, obviously not a force that could be able to engage Russia in a slugfest on the battlefield, but as kind of a human tripwire force. It would be the equivalent of NATO, like a dog, urinating on Odessa, marking it as NATO's territory," Sleboda said.

"Of course, with NATO troops officially in uniform dying in Ukraine, that would take us to a whole other level," he warned.

Sleboda predicted that there will be a "very big information warfare game, the targets of which will be the French people," and other NATO member states, noting that Finland, the Czech Republic, the Baltics and Canada "have all already suggested that they might" join the French. Co-host Wilmer Leon asked if Macron could seriously believe a "behind whopping isn't on the horizon," Sleboda responded by describing NATO's "salami-slicing tactics" of incrementalism. "We now have NATO leaders openly admitting, 'yeah, we've got troops all over Ukraine. They've been heavily involved in all operations of combat,'" he said, citing a Spanish newspaper. "Russia has still not taken any retaliatory actions against NATO outside of Ukraine, outside of the parameters of the proxy war. So, I think this is one more escalation they believe they can get through [using] incrementalism."

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The US Feels It 'Won' Europe in The Cold War

Over the past few weeks, French President Emmanuel Macron has threaten to send troops into the Odessa region of Ukraine, representing a major escalation in the conflict and if followed through, a declaration of war against Russia. The declaration comes as Russia is making consistent gains on the battlefield

The US feels it "won" Europe in the Cold War, political commentator and senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute George Szamuely told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Wednesday.

While discussing the situation in Ukraine, Szamuely said that the US saw the leadup to the Ukraine conflict as a "win-win" situation, saying that the push to get Ukraine into NATO would have either surrounded Russia if Moscow didn't respond or would provide the opportunity to hurt Russia militarily and economically if they did.

"For the United States, [the Ukraine conflict] fulfills the goals they set for themselves at the end of the Cold War, 'Hey we won the Cold War, we want our winnings. And our winnings [are] we scoop up the entire European continent within our military alliance.'"

Szamuely noted that the US goal of inflicting economic damage against Russia "hasn't really worked very well," describing the policy as "very cynical" and "bloodthirsty."

"As far as the United States and NATO were concerned, it was a win-win for them. They either push Russia further and further against the wall by pulling Ukraine into NATO" which would surround Russia, turning it into "essentially a minor power in the world," or "Russia is forced to intervene and try to prevent this, in which case Russia has a difficult war on its hands...which will divide Russia from Europe."

Meanwhile, Szamuely said that Macron's threats were meant to set a redline in Ukraine with the aim to partition it "with a view to continuing the war at some later date," adding that it is obvious that Macron is "pursuing an American-driven agenda" that is "clearly harming Europe."

The move to [accept Sweden and Finland into NATO](#) was also a geopolitical attack on Russia, Szamuely admitted, despite them lacking "much of a military to speak of" they will serve as a base for the US intelligence infrastructure.

When asked about European leaders like [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban](#) and [Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico](#), who have distanced themselves from the US/NATO position on Ukraine and Russia, Szamuely argued that the EU would like to get rid of them.

"The EU and US threw a lot into elections a couple years ago that failed... They had a US ambassador, David Pressman, openly threatening Orban," Szamuely recalled. "You can never rule [it] out. They have all sorts of things at their disposal and if they really want to get rid of a leader, they find troubling, they would probably find some underhanded way of doing it," he warned.

"The EU [and US are] going to have to make this decision... Orban is usually isolated when they have these votes... but if in the coming EU parliamentary elections, the various populist parties – the Alternative for Deutschland in Germany, the National Rally in France – then they might decide that Orban is really becoming a problem for [them]."

Szamuely noted that “Fico is now coming under attack” by the EU and that they are similar to the ones Orban faced. “The EU is thinking of taking measures against Fico that are the same ‘rule of law’ issues [that were used against Hungary] in Slovakia,” Szamuely explained. “It’s amazing how the EU suddenly invents this rule of law when someone is critical of EU policy.” The United States feels it “won” Europe in the Cold War, political commentator and senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute George Szamuely told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Wednesday.

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“I think [the election results] pretty accurately reflect the desires of the Russian people and it’s hard to come up with any evidence to the contrary,” Petro said, adding that in Western media you will find “contrary opinions, but you cannot find any evidence.”

“We have a divided support base in the West, perhaps a more ostensibly unified leadership, but that’s only until an opposition comes into power. Then, we’ve got huge problems for the West, no matter which way you slice it,” Petro explained. “Whereas in Russia, again no matter how you slice it, you have a unified population and political elite. One of the most popular Ukrainian journalists— now in exile— Diana Panchenko, put it very well when she said ‘A united collective West gave us a united collective Russia.’”

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US Doubles Security Funding for Taiwan, Increases Spending to Counter China - Bill

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Appropriation Act for fiscal year (FY) 2024 provides additional funding for security cooperation with Taiwan and increases spending to counter China, the US House Appropriations Committee said on Thursday.

"Defense Appropriation Act, 2024, provides a \$27 billion increase over the FY23 enacted level, and directs that funding to critical national defense efforts, including countering the PRC," the House Appropriations Committee said in a summary of the package.

The Act doubles security cooperation funding for Taiwan, the committee said.

"The Act also rejects tens of billions of dollars in waste included in the President’s Budget Request and redirects those resources to activities that counter the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and other near-peer adversaries," the committee added.

The United States would counter China by maximizing its production of critical munitions and by spending more than \$66 billion for the US Indo-Pacific Command capabilities, including \$42 million to bolster its military capabilities in the region, according to the committee.

In addition, the bill prohibits funding for China's Wuhan Institute of Virology - the laboratory at the center of investigations into the COVID-19 origins - and the EcoHealth Alliance, the committee said.

"[The bill] counters the People's Republic of China by ... rejecting the Biden administration's inadequate shipbuilding plan by denying the request to divest four ships prematurely and funding the construction of eight battle ships," the committee said.

The document also increases investments in 5th and 6th-generation aircraft, like the F-35 jet, and next generation air dominance, the committee added.

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#### US House Panel Advances Bill to Sanction Chinese Communist Party Members

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced a bill on Thursday to impose sanctions on members of the National Communist Party Congress of the People's Republic of China.

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Sanctioning Tyrannical and Oppressive People within the Chinese Communist Party Act (STOP CCP Act), in a vote of 28 in favor and 22 opposed.

The legislation expresses the sense of the US Congress that the CCP has committed numerous human rights violations against people in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The bill directs the US president to impose sanctions on members of the CCP Central Committee or any successor organization.

The legislation provides an exception for some sanctions if it is necessary to comply with the United States' obligations as the home of the United Nations headquarters.

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#### UPDATE - US FY2024 Spending Package Provides \$3.3Bln for Israel, Prohibits UNRWA Funds

(Clarifies which funds are allocated as part of State, Defense budgets, swaps quote, minor edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The newly released US spending package for fiscal year 2024 includes \$3.3 billion in aid to Israel while excluding funding for UNRWA, among various new restrictions on assistance for Palestinians, according to a summary released by the House appropriations committee early Thursday.

"The Act [State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act] also continues our

commitment to Israel, fully funding our annual security commitment of \$3.3 billion, prohibiting any taxpayer funding from going to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and eliminating funding for the United Nations Commission of Inquiry against Israel," the summary said.

The bill also includes new conditions on any assistance to Gaza, including mechanisms for coordination with Israel, prevention of diversion to Hamas or other terrorist entities, and a requirement for third-party monitoring.

It also requires unprecedented conditionality on funds to the UN, including new requirements on anti-Israel bias, transparency, and terrorism vetting for every UN entity and international organization funded in the bill. The UNRWA exclusion will be in effect for FY2024.

Funding for the Defense Department will fully cover Israel's Cooperative Missile Defense Programs, which include Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow. It also includes \$300 million for research, testing, and evaluation, and \$200 million for procurement.

The Senate and House appropriations committees agreed on the \$1.2 trillion package early Thursday. The bill is expected to be passed by Friday midnight in order to avoid a shutdown of several government agencies. The legislation provides funds for the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Labor and Health and Human Services.

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US House Panel Advances Bill to Sanction People Tied to Russia-Crimea Tunnel, Bridge

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced legislation on Thursday to impose sanctions on people connected to work on any bridge or tunnel that is connecting the mainland Russia to the Crimean Peninsula.

The House panel advanced the bill, dubbed the No Russian Tunnel to Crimea Act, in a vote of 49 in favor and 1 opposed.

The legislation is sponsored by the panel's top Democrat, US Congressman Gregory Meeks. The bill is cosponsored by Congressmen Joe Wilson, William Keating and Michael Lawler.

The bill requires the imposition of sanctions with respect to any foreign person who knowingly participates in the construction, maintenance or repair of any tunnel or bridge connecting Russia's mainland with the Crimean Peninsula.

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US FY2024 Spending Package Boosts Baltic Security Initiative by \$20Mln to \$228Mln – Senate

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – US Congressional negotiators agreed to increase funding for the Baltic Security Initiative by \$20 million to \$228 million as part of its spending package for fiscal year 2024, according to a release published early Thursday.

“The bill provides \$92 million above the budget request to improve US Indo-Pacific Command’s deterrence. It adds \$20 million for the Baltic Security Initiative, for a total of \$228 million,” the Senate Appropriations Committee said in a summary of the bill text.

The Baltic Security Initiative provides military aid to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Senate and House appropriations committees released the text of the bill early Thursday ahead of a Friday deadline to fund the government.

Lawmakers must pass the legislation — which provides budgets for the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Labor and Health and Human Services — before the end of the day on Friday to avoid a partial government shutdown.

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US FY2024 Defense Spending Bill Provides \$3.3Bln for Israel, Prohibits UNRWA Funds

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The US defense spending bill for FY2024 includes \$3.3 billion in aid to Israel while excluding funding for UNRWA, among various new restrictions on assistance for Palestinians, according to a summary provided by the House appropriations committee.

"The Act also continues our commitment to Israel, fully funding our annual security commitment of \$3.3 billion, prohibiting any taxpayer funding from going to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and eliminating funding for the United Nations Commission of Inquiry against Israel," the summary said.

The bill also includes new conditions on any assistance to Gaza, including mechanisms for coordination with Israel, prevention of diversion to Hamas or other terrorist entities, and a requirement for third-party monitoring.

It also requires unprecedented conditionality on funds to the UN, including new requirements on anti-Israel bias, transparency, and terrorism vetting for every UN entity and international organization funded in the bill. The UNRWA exclusion will be in effect for FY2024.

The funding for Israel will fully cover its Cooperative Missile Defense Programs, which include Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and Arrow. It also includes \$300 million for research, testing, and evaluation, and \$200 million for procurement.

The bill is part of the second package of final Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations bills. The Senate and House appropriations committees agreed on the \$1.2 trillion package early Thursday. The bill is expected to be passed by Friday midnight in order to avoid a shutdown of several government agencies.

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## US FY 2024 Defense Spending Bill Includes \$300Mln in Ukraine Security Assistance

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The US defense spending bill for FY 2024 includes \$300 million in security assistance for Ukraine, the Senate Appropriations Committee said in a summary of the package on Thursday.

The bill is part of the second package of final Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations bills. The Congress has until the end of Friday to approve the \$1.2 trillion package to avert a shutdown. The legislation includes spending for the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Labor and Health and Human Services.

The first package, worth \$460 billion, cleared Congress earlier this month, averting a partial shutdown on March 8.

"The [Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations] bill includes \$300 million in funding for USAI [Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative], as requested, to continue support for Ukraine," the committee said.

Separately, the bill provides \$4.6 million above the budget request for the Special Inspector General for Operational Atlantic Resolve to support additional oversight over the Pentagon's activities related to Ukraine, it added.

In total, the bill provides \$8 million for the Special Inspector General for Operation Atlantic Resolve for Ukraine oversight, according to the House Appropriations Committee.

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## IBM Wins \$576Mln Deal to Create Secure Supply Chain to Make Semiconductors - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - International Business Machines (IBM) has won a \$576 million Defense Microelectronics Activity (DMEA) contract to create a wide range of advanced semiconductor technologies and services to establish a secure supply chain in the field, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"International Business Machines Corporation [of] Armonk, New York is being awarded a ...contract ...or the Defense Microelectronics Activity (DMEA) Trusted Access Program Office ...[with a \$576,000,000 ceiling," the release stated on Wednesday.

The purpose of the project is to set up a "trusted" enclave in a commercial manufacturing environment to support the Trusted Foundry Access III – Manufacturing Contract, the Defense Department explained.

"This will enable a wide range of advanced semiconductor technologies and services to create a DMEA-accredited trusted supply chain with the contractor," the release said.

Work on the project will be carried out at the Semiconductor Fabrication facilities in Burlington, Vermont; East Fishkill, New York; Malta, New York and Bromont, Canada, the Defense Department said.

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US Says Evacuating Americans From Haiti Uncertain Due to 'Tracherous' Situation on Ground

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US government cannot guarantee that US citizens will be evacuated from Haiti given the "treacherous" situation on the ground there, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.

"We've been stressing that the United States government cannot guarantee American citizens will all be evacuated given the treacherous situation on the ground," Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

The US government is exploring options to assist registered Americans in departing from Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haitien.

Earlier on Wednesday, the State Department said it is organizing government-chartered flights to facilitate the departure of Americans fleeing gang violence in Haiti. The State Department said it expects multiple trips to transport as many US citizens as possible.

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Paralyzed Man Uses Musk's 'Neuralink' to Control Computer With Thoughts - Footage

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - A quadriplegic man is able to control a computer with only his thoughts using a brain implant developed by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's Neuralink company, according to video footage of the feat published to social media platform X.

Nolan Arbaugh, 29, is the first ever human recipient of the Neuralink implant. Arbaugh said in the video released on Wednesday that he was paralyzed from the shoulders down as the result of a diving accident.

The video demonstrates Arbaugh's ability to control a computer using only his thoughts. Arbaugh is able to play video games using the technology, which Musk characterized as a form of telepathy.

"I love playing chess, and so this is one of the things that y'all have enabled me to do, something that I wasn't able to really do much the last few years, especially not like this," Arbaugh said.

In January, Musk said that Neuralink implanted the first in-brain device in a human. Musk has said that Neuralink aims to develop a comprehensive brain interface that incorporates a generalized input and output device to enable interactions with all aspects of the brain.

The technology is imperfect but nevertheless life-changing, Arbaugh said. The surgery was "super easy," Arbaugh added.

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Sullivan Says During Speech in Kiev Ukraine Must Believe US Will Continue to Give Support

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said during a press conference in Kiev that Ukraine should continue to believe the United States will stand by its side and provide aid.

"I'm also here to say that you should believe in the United States," Sullivan said on Wednesday. "We have stood by your side since this war began. We have provided enormous support and we will continue to do so every day in every way we know how."

Sullivan visited Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his chief of staff Andriy Yermak to reaffirm US support for Ukraine amid an impasse in the US Congress over new military aid, according to the White House.

The White House said Sullivan emphasized during the meetings the need for the US House of Representatives to approve the national security supplemental to address Ukraine's critical battlefield needs. Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Last month, the Senate passed a \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes some \$60 billion for Ukraine, but it is currently stuck in the House of Representatives as Republicans look into other options for providing aid to Ukraine while also addressing the crisis on the US southern border.

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Sullivan in Kiev Says Nothing to Announce Deliveries of ATACMS to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has nothing to announce regarding possible provision of the US long-range surface-to-surface precision missile system (ATACMS) to Ukraine, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said during his visit to Kiev.

"With respect to ATACMS, I'm going to disappoint you by saying I have nothing to announce here publicly today on that issue. When we do have something to share, we will be sure to share it," Sullivan said on Wednesday. "But, I will say that we have had very constructive discussions about our military support and the capabilities that are necessary to ensure that support is as effective as it could possibly be."

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US Blue-Chip, Industrial Stocks at Record Highs Despite Fed Uncertainty on Rate Cut Timing

NEW YORK, March 21 (Sputnik) - US stocks mostly hit record highs on Wednesday as investors on Wall Street appeared optimistic about larger corporate profits this year from impending interest rate cuts despite the Federal Reserve not committing to a timing on such actions.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, hit an all-time high of 5,226 before closing at 5,225 - up 46 points, or 0.9%, on the day.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by tracking the stocks of 30 large US corporations, touched a record high of 39,528. The Dow settled at 39,512, up 401 points, or 1%.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple and Netflix fell short of an all-time peak though it rose to a session high of 16,377 versus the previous session's 16,176. The Nasdaq finished at 16,369, up 203 points, or 1.3%.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Fed projected a 75-basis point interest rate cut each for 2024 and 2025, according to the US central bank's Summary of Economic Projections.

In addition, the Fed released its latest decision on interest rates, leaving them unchanged in the 5.25%-5.5% range - the fifth time since July - due to uncertainties over inflation.

The US Consumer Price Index, a key gauge for inflation, grew 3.2% in the year to February, remaining above the Fed's long-term annual 2% target that could expedite a cut.

"We're likely to cut rates at some point this year," Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said. But he also said the central bank needs greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably down and there remains tremendous uncertainty about that.

Despite the Fed's wavering on the timing for cuts, investors on Wall Street piled into blue-chip and industrial stocks tracked by the S&P 500 and Dow.

Yohay Elam, an analyst on FXStreet, said investors usually responded to Powell's words "but may have a rethink once the dust settles and analysis of the bank's message surfaces." Elam added that the odds for a rate cut in June stand at roughly 50-50.

The Fed's next meeting and decision on interest rates is scheduled for May 2.

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UPDATE - US Interest Rates Unlikely to Go Back to Zero or 'Very Low' Levels - Powell

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-20)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - US interest rates are unlikely to return to zero or the ultra low levels seen prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said.

"My instinct is that rates will not go back to the very low levels," Powell told reporters on Wednesday after the US central bank left rates unchanged in the range of 5.25%-5.5%.

"All around the world rates were at or below zero in some cases," Powell said. "I don't see rates going back down to that level."

Interest rates could stay high for longer than thought, Powell said, adding that there must be satisfactory declines in inflation for cuts to occur.

The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a key gauge for inflation, grew 3.2% in the year to February, remaining stubbornly above the Fed's long-term annual 2% target that could expedite a cut.

"The Committee does not expect it will be appropriate to reduce the target range until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably toward 2 percent," the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee said in a statement.

The Fed's next meeting and decision on interest rates is scheduled for May 2.

In considering any adjustments in May and beyond, the Fed will carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks, the statement said.

Inflation hit a four-decade high in July 2022, with the CPI spiking to annual growth of 9.1%, from the trillions of dollars of federal spending as part of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and disruption of global supply chains.

Responding to the runaway inflation, the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023.

Now, policy-makers at the US central bank see a 75-basis point rate cut each for 2024 and 2025, according to the Fed's Summary of Economic Projections released on Wednesday.

But what clouded that outlook was another inflation projection. Aside from the CPI, the Fed closely watches the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index (PCE). Fed policy-makers projected an annual PCE growth of 2.4% by end the of 2024.

But that level was already attained in January, suggesting there could be little progress in bringing inflation any lower for the rest of this year.

Powell explained the irony by saying: "We're likely to cut rates at some point this year, but the outlook is uncertain and we remain attentive to risks."

The Fed chair added that the path to lower inflation will likely stay bumpy. "We need greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably down before we cut rates," he said, before adding that there remains "tremendous uncertainty about that."

A sharp pullback in US jobs growth could be another factor that expedites and intensifies cuts, Powell said.

Unemployment in the United States remains near 50-year lows despite the jobless rate rising to 3.9% in February from January's 3.7%. For more than a year now, the country has experienced so-called maximum employment — a Fed term that denotes a jobless rate of 4% or lower.

Powell said that the labor market is in good shape.

"Wage increases have been quite strong but they're gradually coming down to levels that are more sustainable over time. That is what we want," he said.

The greatest job security since the 1970s, coupled with wage growth, have cushioned many Americans from current price pressures and encouraged them to continue spending. This has produced contrasting results for the Fed, which has seen glorious success with maximum employment and glaring failure with inflation.

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US House Passes Bills to Prevent Impediments to Domestic Energy Production

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a pair of bills on Wednesday to prevent the Biden administration from imposing a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing and block a proposed rule to reform federal onshore oil and gas programs.

House lawmakers passed the first bill, dubbed the Protecting American Energy Production Act, in a vote of 229 in favor and 188 opposed.

The legislation expresses the sense of the US Congress that states should maintain primacy for the regulation of hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, on state and private lands. The bill prohibits the president from declaring a moratorium on fracking unless such a moratorium is authorized by Congress.

"American energy production through fracking leads to lower energy prices for families and workers boosts economic growth, and improves quality of life for Americans. We must protect American energy production from President Biden's radical anti-American energy agenda," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

Lawmakers also passed the Restoring American Energy Dominance Act in a vote of 216 in favor and 200 opposed. The bill blocks the US Bureau of Land Management from moving forward with a proposed rule on reforming fluid mineral leases and the leasing process.

The proposed rule would increase bonding rates for oil and gas production on federal lands and implement new "preference criteria" for onshore oil and gas leasing, restricting areas available for production, Scalise said.

The rule would significantly impede oil and gas production on federal lands, threatening energy security and stifling small businesses, Scalise said.

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White House Says Sullivan Visited Kiev, Met With Zelenskyy, Yermak

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited Kiev to meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his chief of staff Andriy Yermak to reaffirm US support for Ukraine amid an impasse in Congress over new military aid, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan traveled to Kiev, Ukraine today to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Head of the Office of the President Andriy Yermak, and senior Ukrainian officials to reaffirm the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine," the statement said on Wednesday.

Sullivan during his meetings emphasized the need for the US House of Representatives to approve the national security supplemental to address Ukraine's critical battlefield needs, Watson said. Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Sullivan also discussed ongoing efforts to impose punitive measures on Russia, as well as "progress on anti-corruption and other key reforms needed to further Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration," Watson added.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

##### WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- \* Permanent Representatives of EU countries approved new sanctions against Russia in connection with the death of Alexei Navalny, a senior EU official said on Wednesday.
- \* The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and two companies from Russia, the Department of the Treasury said.
- \* The proposal of EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on the use of profits from Russian frozen assets leads to the destruction of EU legal foundations and internal law, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- \* The European Commission proposes to start paying Ukraine using profits from Russian frozen assets in the EU from July 2024, a source in the EU told reporters.

##### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- \* US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan traveled to Kiev to reaffirm the United States' support for Ukraine and expressed confidence in overcoming deadlock in Congress on providing additional aid, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday.
- \* Ukraine has lost more than 71,000 soldiers and over 11,000 units of various weapons since the start of the year, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
- \* Russian troops have cleared the Kozinka village in the Belgorod Region from Ukrainian units, the Defense Ministry said.
- \* The European Commission has transferred the first tranche of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine worth 4.5 billion euros (\$4.8 billion), European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

##### US FEDERAL RESERVE DECISIONS

- \* The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged at its March policy meeting, its fifth such decision since July, with the central bank saying cuts can only come with satisfactory declines in inflation.
- \* The Federal Reserve could keep US interest rates high for longer than thought, with appropriate declines in inflation being key for any cuts, Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters.
- \* US interest rates are unlikely to return to zero or the ultra low levels seen prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Powell said.

##### MIDDLE EAST

- \* US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer declined a request by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak with the Senate Democratic Caucus, Punchbowl News reported on Wednesday.

\* Netanyahu said he had already approved the plan for the ground operation by the Israeli military in the city of Rafah in the Gaza Strip, adding that the plan to evacuate civilians from the combat zones would also be adopted soon.

\* Qatar and Turkey have agreed to reunite Gazan families in Doha after they were split for medical treatment between the two countries, the Qatari Foreign Ministry said.

\* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had eliminated about 90 Hamas fighters and detained nearly 460 suspects for questioning during its raid on the Shifa hospital in the north of Gaza City.

#### ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

\* Azerbaijan has a negative attitude towards the functions of the EU mission in Armenia, so its effectiveness can be questioned, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

\* Armenia and Azerbaijan have not agreed on maps for border delimitation yet, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said.

#### POPE'S INVITATION TO MOSCOW

\* Moscow is not able to comment on reports that it had invited Pope Francis to visit the country, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

\* The information about Pope Francis' invitation to visit Russia is not true, the Holy See told RIA Novosti.

#### PUTIN-MODI TALKS

\* Moscow is not able to comment on reports that it had invited Pope Francis to visit the country, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

\* India and Russia have agreed to cooperate on deepening the special and privileged strategic partnership between the countries, Modi said after phone talks with Putin.

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Blinken, Saudi Foreign Minister Discuss Gaza, Sudan, Yemen – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud discussed during a bilateral meeting the situations in Gaza, Sudan and Yemen, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

“The Secretary and the Foreign Minister discussed the urgent need to protect all civilians in Gaza and immediately increase humanitarian assistance to those in need,” Miller said in a statement.

Blinken stressed the importance of continued close coordination with regional and international partners on resolving the conflict in Gaza and preparing for the post-conflict phase, he added. Miller also emphasized that Blinken reiterated Washington’s commitment to achieving sustained peace through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with security guarantees for Israel.

The two sides also discussed the importance of ending the conflicts in Sudan and Yemen, according to the statement.

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Assange Lawyer Says 'No Indication' US Justice Department Seeking to Resolve Criminal Case

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - There is no indication that the US Justice Department is seeking to resolve a criminal case against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange except through extradition and prosecution in the United States, Assange defense attorney Barry Pollack said on Wednesday amid reports of a potential plea deal.

"It is inappropriate for Mr. Assange's lawyers to comment while his case is before the UK High Court other than to say we have been given no indication that the Department of Justice intends to resolve the case and the United States is continuing with as much determination as ever to seek his extradition on all 18 charges, exposing him to 175 years in prison," Pollack said in a statement shared with Sputnik.

Assange faces prosecution in the US under the Espionage Act for obtaining classified information and disclosing it in the public domain. Assange is awaiting a decision in his attempt to appeal an effort to extradite him from the United Kingdom to the US.

Earlier on Wednesday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the US Justice Department is weighing whether to allow Assange to plead guilty to a lesser charge of mishandling classified information and resolve the criminal case against him.

The Justice Department has held preliminary discussions with Assange's lawyers in recent months, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter. Any plea deal would require approval from the highest officials in the Justice Department, the report said.

Assange could potentially plead guilty to a misdemeanor charge of mishandling classified information and enter the plea remotely from the UK, the report said. Assange's time spent jailed in the UK could count toward his US prison sentence, the report said.

The UK High Court is set to rule on Assange's extradition appeal in the coming weeks; if the court rejects the appeal, the US would likely have 28 days to bring Assange to trial, the report said.

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US Air Force Scraps Scheme to Mount High Powered Laser on AC-130J Gunship - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force (USAF) has abandoned its efforts to mount and operate a high energy laser on an AC-130J Ghost rider gunship aircraft for operational use, media reported on Wednesday.

The Airborne High Energy Laser (AHEL) was previously planned to be deployed for test operations on a Lockheed Martin AC-130J Ghost rider gunship starting in January this year and completing the tests in June, around three years later than the originally planned testing period in Fiscal Year 2021.

However, a need to improve the system's operations and reliability had led the Air Force to pass on the project and hand over further research and development on it to other government agencies, a US Air Force spokesperson told Military.com.

The Air Force consequently no longer plans on installing and operating the high-energy laser as a weapon and has cited technical challenges as the reason for its decision, the spokesman said.

The decision marks the end of this particular project to develop an aircraft-mounted high energy laser weapon system, according to the report.

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Biden Agrees to Ban LGBTQ Flags From US Embassies as Part of \$1Trln Funding Deal – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden bowed to pressure from conservatives in the House of Representatives and agreed to ban the display of LGBTQ Pride flags at US embassies overseas to secure a \$1 trillion funding bill and prevent a shutdown this weekend, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday, citing a person familiar with closed discussions on the deal.

Along with LGBTQ flags, the deal will likewise prohibit the flying of Confederate or pro-Trump "Make America Great Again" flags at US embassies, the report said.

House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters earlier in the day that he intends to put the agreed spending bill for a vote on Friday or hours before the deadline to avoid a partial shutdown.

Later in the day, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that as soon as the House acts on the remaining funding package, he will put it on the Senate floor for a vote.

On Tuesday, the White House and congressional leaders agreed on the remaining six appropriations bills for Defense, Financial Services, Homeland Security, Labor, Health, and Education, the Legislative Branch, and the State and Foreign operations.

Earlier in March, Congress passed a \$460 billion spending bill that covers six appropriations areas for which funding was set to expire on March 8 followed by Biden's signature of the law without delay.

The international LGBT movement is designated an extremist organization in Russia, with its activities totally banned.

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US Cannot Grow Space Systems Fast Enough to Meet Growing Threat - Space Force General

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The United States faces rapidly growing threats to its unlimited use of space and is incapable of increasing its own space military capabilities fast

enough to meet and match the potential challenges, US Space Force Vice Chief of Space Operations Gen. Michael Guetlein said on Wednesday.

"We are experiencing a significant increase in the threat," Guetlein told the National Security Infrastructure Building Summit in Washington. "The threat is also coming in the near term, not the far term. This means, I don't have time to go off and build a lot of new capability."

The US military-industrial base lacked the sheer scale and high tech capabilities and enough qualified workers to produce the additional equipment, systems and hardware that would be needed to match and contain the rapidly expanding forces and capabilities of near peer nations in space, Guetlein emphasized.

"I can't build capability fast enough to get after the near term threat. So that means we're going to have to rely on partnerships. partnerships with allies and partnerships with commercial companies," Guetlein said.

Republican Senator Mark Kelly, a former NASA astronaut, agreed that any future great power conflict would involve a major struggle for control of space and would disrupt the military and commercial systems that the United States had come to take for granted.

Such a conflict would have a "real impact" on commercial space as well, Kelly said.

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Sullivan Visits Kiev to Affirm Ally Support Amid Deadlock Over New Aid - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan traveled to Kiev to reaffirm the United States' support for Ukraine and expressed confidence in overcoming deadlock in Congress on providing additional aid, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. While the Senate approved a \$95 billion version of the bill last month, US House Speaker Mike Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

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US Senator Says Only Matter of Time Before Terrorists Attack US Through Unsecure Border

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Steve Daines said on Wednesday that it is a matter of when, not if, a terrorist attack will occur in the United States due to a lack of border security.

"It's not if, but when, there will be a terror attack on our soil," Daines said in remarks on border security during a Senate Republican press conference.

Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray said that the US intelligence community is concerned

about the potential for terrorist groups to exploit a lack of security at the US' southern border. However, the FBI is not tracking any specific terrorist threats at the border at this time, Wray said.

The US has experienced three consecutive years of record illegal migration at the southern border under the Biden administration, according to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data.

US immigration authorities have encountered 59 non-US citizens on the Terrorist Screening Data Set between ports of entries so far in fiscal year 2024, according to CBP data.

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US Rates Unlikely To Go Back To Zero Or 'Very Low Levels' - Fed Chairman Powell

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US interest rates are unlikely to return to zero or the ultra low levels seen prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"My instinct is that rates will not go back to the very low levels," Powell told reporters after the central bank left rates unchanged in a range of 5.25%-5.5% for a fifth time in a row. "All around the world rates were at or below 0 in some cases. I don't see rates going back down to that level, but I (also) think there's tremendous uncertainty about that."

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Boeing-Made Delta Air Lines Plane Made Emergency Landing After Mechanical Issue  
-Statement

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - A Boeing-made Delta Air Lines aircraft made an emergency landing shortly after takeoff from the Caribbean island of Aruba due to a mechanical issue, Delta Airlines said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Delta flight DL581 from Aruba to Atlanta experienced a mechanical issue shortly after takeoff," the company said. "It landed safely and returned to the gate uneventfully."

The company said the aircraft in question was a Boeing 737-900 with some 168 passengers on board.

The incident took place late on Tuesday night, according to Delta Air Lines.

Boeing has had a string of issues with their aircraft, including missing exterior panels and missing door plugs, among others.

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Fed Could Keep US Rates High for Longer, Inflation Will Be Key to Any Cut - Chair

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve could keep US interest rates high for longer than thought, with appropriate declines in inflation being key for any cuts, Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters.

"We're likely to cut rates at some point this year, but the outlook is uncertain and we remain attentive to risks," Powell said on Wednesday after the central bank left rates unchanged in a range of 5.25%-5.5% for a fifth time in a row. "We need greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably down before we cut rates. Unexpected weakness in the labor market could warrant a response too."

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Federal Reserve Sees 75-Basis Point Interest Rate Cut Each for 2024, 2025 - Projections

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve policy-makers see a 75-basis point interest rate cut for each of this year and next, a summary of their projections showed after the US central bank left rates unchanged for a fifth straight time.

Fed policymakers upgraded their 2024 forecast for US Gross Domestic Product growth to 2.1% from a prior 1.4%, while revising down the outlook for unemployment to 4% from 4.1% in December, the central bank's Summary of Economic Projections (SEP) showed.

The SEP was released after the Fed on Wednesday left rates unchanged at its March policy meeting, its fifth such decision since July, with the central bank saying cuts can only come with satisfactory declines in inflation.

US consumer prices, a key gauge for inflation, grew 3.2% in the year to February, remaining above the central bank's long-term annual 2% target that could expedite an interest rate cut.

The Fed, which follows more closely another inflation barometer called the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) index, expects prices to continue moderating this year, the SEP showed. According to the policy-makers, PCE inflation is seen growing 2.4% by end-2024.

With the interest rate cuts through 2025, the median outlook for rates at end-2026 was 3.1%, the SEP showed.

Prior to July, the Fed hiked the interest rates 11 times, helping ease inflation from four-decade highs.

The 5.25%-5.5% range for interest rates, in place since July, are the highest lending rates the United States has practiced since 2001.

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## Pentagon Declines to Confirm Ukraine Used US-Supplied Equipment to Attack Russia

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense declined to confirm the Russian Ministry of Defense's reports that Ukraine used US-made Bradley infantry fighting vehicles to attack the Belgorod region of Russia earlier in March.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, on March 12-15, the Ukrainian army lost 16 tanks, 11 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, and 15 vehicles when attempting to break into the territory of the Belgorod and Kursk regions of Russia.

"We cannot confirm those reports and refer you to Ukraine to speak to their operations," a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik in a statement.

On the eve of the presidential elections in Russia that took place on March 15-17, Ukrainian armed forces attempted to attack Russian border territories killing and injuring dozens of civilians and damaging a host of civilian objects.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Wednesday that the Ukrainian forces lost 3,501 soldiers killed and injured during the attacks on Russian border settlements in Belgorod and Kursk regions.

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## Florida Governor DeSantis Signs Legislation to Address Homelessness Crisis - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Wednesday signed HB 1365, emphasizing its aim to keep Florida's streets safe by requiring counties to ensure homeless individuals receive necessary services while residing off public streets, prioritizing public safety.

"This legislation requires counties to ensure that homeless individuals receive the mental health and drug addiction services they need while residing in a designated location off our public streets, prioritizing public safety," DeSantis said in a statement.

According to the statement, HB 1365 prohibits homeless individuals from camping on city streets, sidewalks, and parks, mandating placement in monitored temporary shelters, with enforcement tools ensuring compliance, drug-free policies, and provision of substance abuse and mental health treatments.

Furthermore, HB 1365 offers alternatives for full homeless shelters by directing the Department of Children and Families to authorize temporary campsites ensuring sanitation, access to treatment resources, and prohibiting illegal substance and alcohol use, the statement added.

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## US House Passes Bill to Prohibit Selling Americans' Data to Foreign Adversaries

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Wednesday to prohibit the sale of Americans' sensitive personal data to foreign adversaries or entities under the control of a foreign adversary.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Protecting Americans' Data from Foreign Adversaries Act, in a unanimous vote, with 414 lawmakers supporting the legislation.

"Ensuring the security of Americans' sensitive personal information, especially that of our military men and women, is more important than ever before - both for individuals as well as our national security," Congressman Frank Pallone and Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers said in a joint statement.

The legislation prohibits data brokers from selling, licensing, renting, trading, transferring or otherwise providing personally identifiable sensitive data of a person in the United States to a foreign adversary country or an entity under such an adversary country's control.

The bill empowers the US Federal Trade Commission to enforce the restriction, every violation of which would incur a fine of more than \$50,000.

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UPDATE - US House Mulling Inviting Netanyahu to Address Congress, Needs Schumer's Approval - Source

(Updates with background in para 7; corrects name in para 6)

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US House Republicans are considering inviting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of the US Congress, but there's a bit of skepticism about whether US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer would approve of those plans, a congressional source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"That is absolutely the case," the source said when asked if House Republicans are considering inviting Netanyahu to address Congress. "Unfortunately, a joint session address requires the Senate Majority Leader's approval and I don't think that is likely given Schumer's recent comments about Bibi."

Schumer recently called for new elections in Israel and said that Netanyahu's government no longer fits Israel's needs. Schumer added that the United States must bolster its efforts to work actively for peace if Netanyahu remains in power after the conflict.

Moreover, media reported that the Biden administration is exploring response options if Israel launches a military operation in Rafah contrary to Washington's warnings and without a credible plan to protect civilians.

According to Punchbowl News, Schumer already declined a request from Netanyahu to speak to the Senate Democratic Caucus, claiming it was too partisan.

However, the report said Netanyahu was speaking to Senate Republicans.

US lawmakers are currently working on approving more funding for security assistance for Israel, either through the Senate's \$95 billion supplemental bill or a standalone security aid bill

from House Republicans.

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Fed Leaves US Rates Unchanged at March Meeting, Cuts Complicated by Creeping Inflation

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged at its March policy meeting, its fifth such decision since July, with the central bank saying cuts can only come with satisfactory declines in inflation.

"In support of its goals, the Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 5-1/4 to 5-1/2 percent," the Fed said in a statement, referring to its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee. "In considering any adjustments to the target range for the federal funds rate, the Committee will carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks. The Committee does not expect it will be appropriate to reduce the target range until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably toward 2 percent."

US consumer prices grew 3.2% in the year to February, stubbornly above the central bank target which could expedite a rate cut. The 5.25%-5.5% range, in place since July, are the highest lending rates the United States has practiced since 2001, records show. Prior to July, the Fed hiked rates 11 times, helping ease inflation from four-decade highs.

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US State Dept. Spokesman Says Has Not Seen Report on Blinken, G7 on Russian Election

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday that he has not seen the report about Secretary of State Antony Blinken blocking the release of a Group of Seven (G7) statement condemning Russia's presidential election, nor does he believe the report is true.

"I've not seen that report, and I don't believe it to be true," Patel said during a press briefing. Earlier on Wednesday, the newspaper La Republica reported that Blinken blocked the release of a G7 statement condemning the recent presidential election in Russia. The text of the communique was reportedly agreed upon by Italy's G7 presidency and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

Blinken's decision to block the document was allegedly motivated by his desire not to give Russia an excuse to interfere in the US presidential election in November, the report said.

The divergence of views between the US National Security Council and the State Department in the end prevented the adoption of the G7 statement, the report added.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin was reelected for a sixth term with 87.28% of the vote.

Patel said the following day that the Russian presidential election was neither free nor fair. However, Sullivan as well as White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said that Putin is the president of Russia and the United States was prepared to deal with that fact. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow categorically disagreed with the US assessments claiming the presidential election in Russia was not free or fair. Such assessments were expected from a state involved in the conflict in Ukraine, Peskov added.

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US House Mulling Inviting Netanyahu to Address Congress, Needs Schumer's Approval - Source

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US House Republicans are considering inviting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress, but there's a bit of skepticism about whether US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer would approve of those plans, a congressional source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"That is absolutely the case," the source said when asked if House Republicans are considering inviting Netanyahu to address Congress. "Unfortunately, a joint session address requires the Senate Majority Leader approve and I don't think that is likely given Schumer's recent comments about Bibi."

Schumer recently called for new elections in Israel and said that Netanyahu's government no longer fits Israel's needs. Schumer added that the United States must bolster its efforts to work actively for peace if Netanyahu remains in power after the conflict.

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According to Punchbowl News, Schumer already declined a request from Netanyahu to speak to the Senate Democratic Caucus, claiming it was too partisan.

However, the report said Schumer was speaking to Senate Republicans on this matter.

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Canadian Tories to Table Non-Confidence Motion at HoC on Wednesday Over Carbon Tax Hike

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada Pierre Poilievre said on Wednesday that he would table a motion of non-confidence at the House of Commons (HoC) over Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's refusal to halt a carbon tax increase on April 1st.

In 2019, the Trudeau government introduced "carbon pricing" aiming to charge fossil fuel distributors for fuel consumed across Canada and tax large industrial companies as major

carbon emitters. However, the fiscal measure also affects ordinary citizens who pay more at the pump and have higher energy bills depending on the fuel used to power home heating.

Both fuel distributors and industrial emitters currently pay C\$65 (US\$47) per ton of carbon, an amount that is set to grow by yearly increments of C\$15 (US\$11) until it reaches C\$170 (US\$126) by 2030. The charge will surge to C\$80 (US\$59) starting April 1st, despite the opposition from 69% of Canadians as per a Leger poll earlier in March.

"I'm giving Trudeau one last chance to spike his hike ... Today I'm announcing that if Trudeau does not declare today an end to his forthcoming tax increases on food, gas, and heat, that we will introduce a motion of non-confidence in the Prime Minister," Poilievre said while addressing the Conservative Caucus.

The motion will declare non-confidence on Trudeau and his "costly government" over his intention to increase the carbon tax on April 1st, putting further financial pressure on Canadians, Poilievre said, adding that it will also call on the HoC to allow for a "carbon tax election."

On March 13, the prime ministers of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island issued letters addressed to Trudeau in which they urged him to either halt the planned hike or scrap the carbon tax altogether. The calls were echoed by the premiers of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario.

Some of the officials criticized Trudeau for making life increasingly more unaffordable for ordinary citizens while others called on him to listen to the pleas of the people who are being hurt by continued increases in the costs of living. Trudeau reacted to the statements saying that his job was not to be popular but to do the "right thing" for Canada now and in the future.

Trudeau argued that he intends to maintain the hike because the tax rebate will reimburse the money to the families paying it and bring more in return to eight in ten families in participating regions nationwide.

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Schumer Declines Netanyahu's Request to Address US Senate Democrats - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer declined a request by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak with the Senate Democratic Caucus, Punchbowl News reported on Wednesday.

Schumer believes that the request was too partisan, according to a Punchbowl reporter.

Netanyahu is also in talks with Senate Republicans, the report said.

Netanyahu's request to speak with Senate Democrats comes following a floor speech by Schumer on the conflict between Israel and Hamas, in which he characterized Netanyahu as an obstacle to peace and called for new elections in Israel.

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## US Gov't Organizing Charter Flights Out of Haiti to Dominican Republic - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is organizing government-chartered flights to facilitate the departure of Americans fleeing gang violence in Haiti, State Department principal deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

On Sunday, the US flew over 30 American citizens on a charter flight from a city on Haiti's north coast to Miami.

"As of March 20, the US government is facilitating the safe departure of US citizens from Port-au-Prince, Haiti," Patel said in a press briefing. "We are in the process of organizing government chartered helicopter flights from Port-au-Prince to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic where US government personnel are present to provide consular assistance, and from Santo Domingo, American citizens will be responsible for their own onward travel to the United States."

The State Department expects these helicopter flights to make multiple trips in order to get as many American citizens as they can today.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti, and they stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

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## Review Group on UN Palestine Agency to Present Final Report on April 20 - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 20 (Sputnik) - The independent review group that is assessing whether the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is neutral should present its final report on April 20, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The group will present the final report on the 20 April and that report will be made public," Dujarric said in a statement.

The review group will develop recommendations on how to strengthen critical areas of UNRWA, the statement also said.

In January, Israel shared data with UNRWA's leadership on the alleged involvement of some of the agency's staff in Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023. The United States, Finland, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Australia, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom, among other countries, suspended funding for UNRWA.

In early February, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an independent review panel led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna to examine UNRWA's activities. Canada, Sweden and Australia have lifted their suspensions of UNRWA funding after a pause

of more than two months.

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Indo-Pacific Command Head Says US Has Plan to Assess if Taiwan Armed Enough to Deter China

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has a plan to assess whether enough people in Taiwan are armed to deter an invasion by China, US Indo-Pacific Command chief John Aquilino said during a congressional hearing.

"There absolutely is," Aquilino told the US House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday. Aquilino made the comment in response to a question from Congressman Matt Gaetz, who inquired about whether the Defense Department has a plan to assess whether there are enough small arms in the hands of Taiwanese people to deter a Chinese invasion.

Last week, the Taiwan Defense Chief Qiu Guozheng said that US Army special forces known as Green Berets are stationed on the island and are training the Taiwanese military.

China has repeatedly expressed opposition to US military contacts with Taiwan.

Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan - a territory with its own elected government - maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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US Governor Says 'Alarming' That China Controls Over 384,000 US Acres Worth \$2Bln

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem said that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) allegedly aims to control US food supply chains which can be proven by its purchase of over 384,000 acres of agricultural land worth \$2 billion.

The House Committee on Agriculture is holding on Wednesday a session on The Danger China Poses to American Agriculture.

"Now they [CCP] are coming for our land ... Between 2010 and 2020, the Chinese Communist Party's holdings of ag [agricultural] land increased by 5,300%. Reports now show that China owns about 384,000 acres of US ag land valued at over \$2 billion. This should be alarming to all of us," Noem told the Committee.

The Governor pointed out that throughout the years, CCP-affiliated businesses have purchased US fertilizer, chemical, and processing companies. Allowing them to further purchase land would effectively put them in control of the American food supply chain, she added.

Noem emphasized her belief that the CCP is neither a friend, partner nor an ally of the US, but

rather an “enemy” that is rapidly expanding the national security threat it poses to the country. She notably referred to attempted purchases of land in the proximity of sensitive locations like South Dakota's Ellsworth Air Force Base.

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Biden 2025 Defense Budget Has \$11Bln Shortfall for Indo-Pacific Command Needs - Commander

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's fiscal year 2025 defense budget is \$11 billion short of meeting the Indo-Pacific Command's needs, Commander John Aquilino said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We've identified a requirement of \$26.5 [billion] of which there's an \$11 billion shortfall," Aquilino told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Aquilino said the \$11 billion is needed to help US forces enhance their capabilities in the Indo-Pacific as soon as possible.

US lawmakers highlighted the importance of the US military's ability to deter a Chinese confrontation in the region.

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US Indo-Pacific Command Chief Says 'Very Concerned' About China-Russia Relationship

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The partnership between Russia and China is a major concern for the US military as it changes the United States' security environment, US Indo-Pacific Command chief John Aquilino said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"That [Russia-China] cooperation from those two authoritarian nations puts us in a different security environment, so I'm very concerned about that," Aquilino told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Aquilino said the China-Russia relationship is amplified by North Korea's support for Russia in the form of ballistic missiles and other munitions and capabilities.

The China-Russia relationship is a way to counter the United States and its alliances with other nations in the Indo-Pacific region, Aquilino added.

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## US Reiterates Need for Hypersonic Weapons to Protect Guam – Indo-Pacific Command

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The US Indo-Pacific Command reiterated Wednesday that it needed hypersonic weapon capabilities in order to protect Guam.

“I’ve articulated the requirement and it’s been consistent for five years, which is a 360-degree integrated air and missile defense capability for Guam that would protect our citizens and protect the forces that we need, and that includes ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missile threats,” Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, testified at a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

Aquilino also said that these capabilities needed to be in place more quickly, ideally by 2027.

He said that it would not be destabilizing for the US to have offensive hypersonic capabilities in competition with China.

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## US Says China Would Like to Avoid War Over Taiwan – Indo-Pacific Command

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The US Indo-Pacific Command said Wednesday that it believes China would like to bring Taiwan under its sovereignty without a war.

“My view is that China would absolutely like to assimilate Taiwan without a war,” Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, testified at a House Armed Services committee hearing.

Aquilino said this was clear by China’s “increasingly aggressive, coercive campaign against Taiwan,” such as deploying more ships in its vicinity, crossing the Taiwan Straits centerline with its air assets, and adjusting its flight paths to be closer to the self-governing island. He noted that China had not ruled out the use of force against Taiwan.

He added that he did not think the Taiwanese would capitulate to the campaign.

Earlier, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China's policy toward Taiwan was to seek peaceful reunification and that Beijing's "red lines" were very clear, and that Taiwan will "never be allowed to secede from the motherland."

Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan - a territory with its own elected government - maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contact of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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## US Crude Stockpiles Fall 2nd Week in Row Capping Downside in Oil Prices - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles fell for a second week in a row, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report on Wednesday.

Crude balances fell by 1.952 million barrels during the week ended on March 15. The drop compared with the 1 million-barrel build forecast by energy analysts on Wall Street and the previous week's slide of 1.536 million.

Crude stockpiles built by more than 28 million barrels over a six-week period from late January, according to the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department.

Gasoline balances slid a seventh week in a row, showing a deficit of 3.31 million in the latest week, well above the forecast decline of 2.6 million and the prior week's drop of 5.662 million. Gasoline stockpiles fell almost 19 million barrels between the weeks ended February 1 and March 15.

Distillate inventories, meanwhile, bucked the declines in crude and gasoline, rising for a second week in a row. The EIA reported a build of 642,000 barrels in distillates last week versus the forecast slide of 500,000 barrels and the prior week's slide of 888,000. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also go into making airline fuel. They had seen an approximate inventory loss of 13.5 million barrels between the weeks ended on January 19 and March 1.

Crude prices have been in an uptrend since the year began, with US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) rising 13% and London-traded Brent gaining almost 12%.

The rally was triggered first by fears that the Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the conflict zone.

Crude prices also benefited from a commitment by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies to extend production cuts into the second quarter. The so-called OPEC+ alliance, led by Russia and Saudi Arabia, intends to maintain its current run of 2.2 million barrels per day supply cuts until the end of June.

Lately, crude prices also rallied due to outages at Russian oil refineries targeted by Ukrainian drones.

In Wednesday's trading, Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, was at \$85.92 per barrel, down \$1.46, or 1.7%. In Tuesday's trading, Brent peaked at \$87.80, its loftiest since an October high of \$92.32.

WTI, the benchmark for US crude, was at per barrel - down \$1.57, or 1.9%, on the day.

Tuesday's session high for the so-called WTI was \$83.11, the most since November's peak of \$83.60.

Crude prices slid on concerns that the Fed might take longer than expected to cut interest rates in light of hotter-than-forecast inflation.

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Western Measures Applied on Sudan Worsened Country's Stability - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 20 (Sputnik) - The conflict in Sudan has worsened the situation in the country but Western measures applied against Sudan have undermined the stability of its society, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative Eva Evstigneeva said on Wednesday.

"The conflict has clearly worsened the humanitarian situation in Sudan. But one should not forget that the economic and other restrictive measures applied by the West against the country have undermined the stability of Sudanese society," Evstigneeva said during the Security Council meeting on Sudan.

Evstigneeva reiterated that it is important to continue working with the current authorities on aid distribution.

Earlier this week, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) said that the lives of 24 million Sudanese children have been put in peril due to the raging internal military conflict between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that has been ongoing for almost a year.

In April 2023, clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the RSF. They have since introduced some 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 Imposes Sanctions on 2 Persons, 2 Companies From Russia - Treasury

(Updates with more details in paras 2, 4-8)

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and two companies from Russia, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two individuals and two entities for services they provided the government of the Russian Federation in connection with a foreign malign influence campaign, including attempting to impersonate legitimate media outlets," the statement said.

The sanctions target Ilya Gambashidze, Nikolai Tupikin, the Moscow-based Company Group Structura LLC and Social Design Agency (SDA), the statement said. Gambashidze is the founder of the SDA and Tupikin owns Structura.

The US government claims that both individuals have been involved in a "persistent foreign malign influence campaign" at the direction of the Russian presidential administration, the statement said.

"SDA and Structura have been identified as key actors of the campaign, responsible for providing GoR [government of Russia] with a variety of services, including the creation of websites designed to impersonate government organizations and legitimate media outlets in Europe," the statement said.

Tupikin and Gambashidze used their companies to implement more than 60 websites that impersonated legitimate news organizations, the statement also said.

"The fake websites appeared to have been built to carefully mimic the appearance of legitimate news websites," the statement added.

US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a separate statement that the United States designated both Russian citizens and their companies for creating a network of websites that impersonated genuine news organizations in Europe and then used bogus social media accounts to amplify the misleading content of the spoofed websites.

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US Congressman Arrives at Biden Probe Hearing Wearing Putin Mask

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Congressman Jared Moskowitz arrived at a House hearing on Wednesday wearing a mask of Russian President Vladimir Putin, in an attempt to highlight allegations that the House impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden is rooted in Russian intelligence sources.

On Wednesday, the US House Oversight Committee held a public hearing with witnesses as part of its impeachment inquiry into Biden, which is based on allegations of criminal activity by the Biden family.

"I just came to thank [House Oversight Committee Chairman] James Comer for taking all of our intelligence and using it in the committee," Moskowitz said while wearing the Putin mask, when asked about his intention.

Moskowitz's comment references the arrest of former FBI informant Alexander Smirnov, who was arrested and charged with making false statements to authorities about alleged ties between the Biden family and Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

House Republicans are using information "right from Russian intelligence" to justify their investigation into Biden, Moskowitz said in a statement, as quoted by The Hill.

Moskowitz said that his donning of the Putin mask is intended to provide a visual for that claim.

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Canada-Ukraine FTA Receives Royal Ascent Despite Several Hurdles – Trade Minister

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) has received Royal Ascent despite several delays due to the opposition by the Conservative Party to its implementation, Minister of International Trade Mary Ng said on Wednesday.

Bill C-57, Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act was introduced in 2023 following the visit of Volodymyr Zelensky to Ottawa last September. It notably aims to promote reciprocal trade and strengthen economic relations between Ottawa and Kiev.

"The Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) received royal ascent! This milestone, a testament to the dedication and hard work of our team, wouldn't have been possible without the

tireless efforts of everyone involved in making this important modernized trade agreement reality," Ng said via the X platform.

The Minister added that by approving CUFTA, several new jobs will be created. Ng further noted that it would be a testament to Canada's continued support for Ukraine.

CUFTA's approval went through several delays and hurdles which were notably due to the Conservative Party's opposition to the treaty. Tory leader Pierre Poilievre and his lawmakers repeatedly voted against the ratification of the treaty because it would include carbon pricing, something they staunchly opposed.

However, despite Conservative opposition, Bill C-57 still made its way past the House of Commons to the Canadian Senate. CUFTA received a favorable vote on Tuesday, this time without the support of Tory Senators.

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Speaker Johnson Says Expressed to Netanyahu His Strong Disagreement With Schumer's Remarks

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that during his lengthy phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he expressed a strong disagreement with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's remarks.

"I had a lengthy conversation this morning with Prime Minister Netanyahu and reiterated to him House Republicans' strong support for Israel and their efforts and expressed my strong disagreement with leader Schumer['s remarks]," Johnson told reporters.

On Thursday, Schumer said that Netanyahu has "lost his way" and his coalition no longer fits the needs of Israel following the October 7 attack by Hamas. He also said that Israel had been "too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows."

Netanyahu has pushed back against calls for new elections in the country, warning they would halt the war in Gaza and "paralyze" Israel for at least six months.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 31,700 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, 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 militants in Gaza.

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US House Democrats Believe Supplemental Funding Bill Best Way to Aid Ukraine - Aguilar

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Democratic leadership in the US House of Representatives continues to believe that passing a national security supplemental bill is the best route to getting additional aid to Ukraine, House Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar said on Wednesday.

"We will consider options, but I think the fastest way and the way that [US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries] and our leadership team would like us to proceed is to pass a national security supplemental," Aguilar said during a press conference.

The supplemental aid bill is the fastest and most certain way to get aid to Ukraine, Aguilar said. The US Senate could take "weeks or longer" to pass foreign aid if the legislation is modified in the House of Representatives, Aguilar added.

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Schumer Calls Supplemental Funding Ukraine's Best Chance to Win Conflict with Russia

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that the pending supplemental funding package is Ukraine's best chance to win the conflict against Russia, as European aid is insufficient.

"The supplemental package is Ukraine's best chance to win this war. The aid being supplied to Ukraine by our European allies, they're generous, but it's not enough," Schumer said on the Senate floor.

In his remarks, Schumer suggested that House Speaker Mike Johnson either put the supplemental bill to a vote or "kowtow" to former President Donald Trump, who allegedly wants to see Russian President Vladimir Putin victorious in Ukraine.

Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. While the Senate approved a \$95 billion version of the bill last month, Speaker Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

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US Plans to Fully Refill Oil Reserve By the End of 2024 - Official

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The United States plans to fully refill its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) by the end of 2024, Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm said on

Wednesday.

"By the end of this year, we will be back to essentially where we would have been had we not sold during the invasion of Ukraine," Granholm told the House Appropriations Committee.

Granholm stressed that the US had already repurchased about 30 million barrels back to the SPR.

"We are going to accelerate exchanges," she added.

Last week, the US announced the purchase of an additional 3.25 million barrels to refill the SPR.

The Biden administration leaned heavily on the SPR at the height of an oil supply crisis in 2022 triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Crude prices initially skyrocketed that year, with the US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) overshooting \$130 a barrel and London's Brent virtually reaching \$140, both 14-year highs. However, supplies and prices have eased since that time.

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US Judge Allows Trump, Co-Defendants to Appeal Fani Willis Ruling - Court Document

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Georgia Judge Scott McAfee on Wednesday granted a request by former President Donald Trump and his co-defendants to appeal his decision not to disqualify Prosecutor Fani Willis, a court document showed.

"The Court finds that the Order on the Defendants' Motion to Dismiss and Disqualify the Fulton County District Attorney issued March 15, 2024, 'is of such importance to the case that immediate review should be had,'" McAfee said in a ruling.

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Schumer Says Passing Remaining Appropriations by March 22 Would Be 'Tight Squeeze'

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that even with the bipartisan agreement on the remaining appropriations bills to fund the US government this fiscal year, it would be a "tight squeeze" to pass the measures by the March 22 deadline.

"Even with bipartisanship, it is going to be a tight squeeze to get this funding package passed before the weekend deadline," Schumer said in his remarks from the Senate floor.

Schumer added that as soon as the House acts on the remaining funding package, he will put it on the Senate floor for a vote.

On Tuesday, Republican and Democratic negotiators reached an agreement on the remaining six appropriations bills for Defense, Financial Services, Homeland Security, Labor, Health, and education, the Legislative Branch, and the State and Foreign operations.

The US Congress must pass the remaining appropriations bills by March 22, lest lawmakers

risk a partial federal government shutdown.

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US Senate Panel Advances Nominees for Sanctions Coordinator, Arctic Envoy - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday advanced President Joe Biden's nominee to head the Office of Sanctions Coordination, Erik Woodhouse, along with his pick for Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs, Michael Sfraga, a spokesperson for the committee told Sputnik.

The committee voted 12-9 in favor of Woodhouse's nomination and 11-10 in favor of Sfraga's nomination, sending both picks to the full Senate floor for a confirmation vote.

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Greek Prime Minister to Visit Canada From March 24-25 – Trudeau's Office

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will host his Greek counterpart, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, on March 24-25 to advance bilateral ties and discuss regional and global issues, the Canadian leader's office said on Wednesday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced that the Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, will visit Montréal, Quebec, and Toronto, Ontario, on March 24 and 25, 2024," Trudeau's office said in a statement.

During the visit, Trudeau and Mitsotakis will advance collaboration on shared interests such as trade, investment, climate action, and middle-class jobs, the statement said.

The two leaders will also address regional and international issues, including the ongoing western assistance to Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia, the statement added.

Mitsotakis' visit to Canada will be his first since he took office in 2019.

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US Energy Secretary Says Hopes Russian Uranium Imports Ban Promptly Goes Into Force

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday that she "strongly hopes" that the ban on supplies of Russian uranium goes into force soon.

"The 2024 appropriations bill specifies that DOE [US Department of Energy] can not re-purpose the CNC funds which were used for the HALEU (high-assay low-enriched uranium) until a law is

enacted to ban those supplies from Russia. I strongly hope and encourage that Congress does that so that we can move with alacrity," Granholm told the US House Appropriations Energy and Water Development Subcommittee.

The White House did not initially support the ban on Russian uranium fueling US power plants, but the House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill in December that seeks to halt Russian uranium imports through 2040. The bill remains stalled in the Senate.

US media reported earlier that industry experts expected the ban to be enacted sometime this year.

Russia controls nearly half of the global uranium enrichment capacity. Official US figures show that the United States imported \$1.2 billion worth of enriched uranium from Russia in 2023 - an all-time record.

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US Urges Austria's Raiffeisen Bank to Stop Deal Allegedly Involving Deripaska - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The US authorities are urging Austria's Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI) to stop a deal with a company they believe is controlled by Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska, Reuters said on Wednesday.

RBI, the biggest Western bank operating in Russia, plans to purchase Deripaska's \$1.6 billion stake in the Vienna-based Strabag company, the report said. Senior US officials conveyed their concerns over the potential agreement during a recent meeting with Austrian counterparts and bank representatives.

The US government believes Deripaska will benefit from the deal and urges RBI to share the list of individuals and companies involved in the agreement, according to the report.

Washington may impose sanctions against the bank if RFI decides to proceed with the transaction.

A RBI spokesperson confirmed that the bank had diligently verified the compliance of the transaction with all applicable sanctions prior to signing and noted that the bank does briefs all relevant authorities, including the US Treasury Department.

RBI will not proceed with any deal in breach of sanctions or exposing RBI to the risk of sanctions, the spokesperson said.

Deripaska's spokesperson referred to his earlier statements that the businessman has no control over the company holding the Strabag stake. The spokesperson also said Western sanctions on Deripaska are misguided and based on false accusations.

US officials maintain regular contact with RBI about its business with Russia and have often visited Vienna for that purpose, including the visit of Treasury Department official Anna Morris earlier in March who encouraged RBI to reconsider its Russian exposure and avoid any dealings linked to the Russia's military-industrial complex or else risk being barred from the US financial system, according to the report.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 People, 2 Companies From Russia – Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and two companies from Russia, the Department of the Treasury said on Wednesday.

The sanctions target Ilya Gambashidze, Nikolai Tupikin, Mbscow-Based Company Group Structura Llc and Social Design Agency.

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US Sees No Indication of Hezbollah Plans for Domestic Attacks – Homeland Security Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) does not see any indication of domestic attacks planned by Hezbollah in response to Israel's war on Gaza, an official said on Wednesday.

"With regard to Lebanese Hizballah, DHS I&A does not have any indication that Hizballah is pursuing attacks in the homeland directly in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict," James Dunlap, deputy under secretary for analysis at the DHS' Office of Intelligence and Analysis, testified at a House committee hearing.

Dunlap said that his office most commonly encountered individuals supporting Hezbollah through financial facilitation.

He added that his office believed lone wolf attacks by individuals responding to Israel's war on Gaza would pose the "most likely threat" domestically rather than attacks directed or supported by Iran.

Robert Wells, assistant director of the FBI's counterterrorism division, testified that the agency remained concerned that Hezbollah could launch retaliatory attacks against former US officials both in the US and overseas.

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US Falls Out of Top 20 Happiest Countries – Report

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The United States ranked 23rd among 143 nations in the World Happiness Report released on Wednesday, marking the first time it had fallen out of the top 20 since Gallup first published the report in 2012.

Its relatively low ranking was driven by a drop in the well-being of Americans under 30,

according to the report, which developed additional rankings by age group.

Finland topped the list for the seventh consecutive year. Nordic countries dominated the top 10, which also included Denmark; Iceland, Sweden; Israel; Netherlands; Norway, Luxembourg; Switzerland; and Australia.

China ranked at 60, Russia at 72, and India at 126.

The rankings were based on a three-year (2021-2023) average of each population's average assessment of their quality of life.

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Canada Invests \$6.1Mln to Research Climate Change Link with Democratic Decline – Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government will invest C\$8.4 million (US\$6.1 million) to investigate how climate change affects the decline of democracy, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

The Canadian premier delivered the remarks during his virtual participation at the Third Summit for Democracy convened by South Korea.

“Today, I'm announcing that Canada is investing C\$8.4 million on research across the global south to better understand how climate change interacts with democratic decline,” Trudeau said.

The world is confronted to growing insecurity tied to armed conflicts and climate change, Trudeau said. The funding will also assist in preserving the human rights of environmental defenders, he said.

Canada is increasing and expanding its funding for non-profit organization Acces Now in a bid to ensure human rights defenders and others who may face digital threats, have the proper tools to protect themselves, Trudeau added.