

4/12/24 Friday

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Zelensky Could End Ukraine's Viability as Country With Mobilization Law

On Thursday, Ukraine's parliament adopted a new mobilization law, requiring all men aged 18 to 60 to register within 60 days and carry registration documents with them in public. The rules came just weeks after Ukraine lowered its conscription age from 27 to 25.

Ukraine is at risk of losing its viability as a nation if it continues to mobilize its male population, as it was already dealing with a massive demographic deficit due to a massive drop in birth rates after the fall of the Soviet Union.

"There are a lot more people in the 35-plus age bracket and a much smaller group of people in the younger bracket," Mark Sleboda, a security and international relations expert told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Thursday. "They're seriously at such a demographic crisis," that it has put at risk "the future [and] the viability of Ukraine as a country."

According to Sleboda, large parts of the bill remain classified, including the number of Ukrainians set to be mobilized. However, 450,000 - 500,000 has been floated by military generals and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as a possible goal in recent months. "Figures within the Kiev regime are once again talking about mobilizing women in a separate bill, so that's come up again," Sleboda explained, adding that the medical exceptions, including for injuries in combat, have been lowered. "For instance, if you already fought and lost a leg, you're not exempt anymore. You can still pilot a drone, right? That's the mentality of the new bill."

Zelensky also said another \$13 billion would be needed to carry out his plan, but money is in short supply for the Kiev regime, and further US aid to Ukraine has been stalled in Congress since last summer. The US ran out of congressionally approved aid late last year.

Still, Zelensky has kept his grip on power, preventing any kind of resistance from the Ukrainian people.

"You can't really have protests in the country except for wives and mothers, because any men who show their face in public are instantly sent to the trenches in Kupyansk," Sleboda explained.

In March 2022, Zelensky banned eleven political parties in Ukraine, which was on top of the parties banned by former President Petro Poroshenko during Ukraine's so-called "decommunization." This has left virtually no opposition to Zelensky's plans, with even some members of the ruling elite complaining that Zelensky has become a dictator.

"Even the mayor of Kiev, [former Boxer Vitali Klitschko], and numerous other public figures have said, even though they're part of the Maidan ruling elite, [they say] 'we've become a dictatorship under Zelensky,'" Sleboda explained. "[We're] not talking about real opposition, but even other members of the Maidan elite don't have any power anymore outside of Zelensky."

"We're not talking about a democratic country as the West presents," Sleboda said. "It is a little Banderite, fascist dictatorship."

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The Counter-Intuitive-Offensive

The former television clown that NATO ensured holds every Ukrainian man's life in his hands, Volodymyr Zelensky, told a German newspaper on Tuesday that he has a plan to turn the tide in Ukraine through a daring 2025 counteroffensive, once he gets more advanced weapons from the West, of course.

If this story sounds familiar, that's because it is. In February 2023, Ukraine started hyping its spring counteroffensive. High-budget commercials were produced for it. The NAFO online brigade, fresh off ignoring Zelensky's plea for them to leave their desks and join the fight in reality, were giddy with excitement to live vicariously through what was sure to be the Ukrainian army's unstoppable string of victories.

"To the Azov Sea!" They proclaimed. "And then Crimea and then Moscow!" They would type out, often in all CAPS when feeling particularly worked up.

"It all started there, and it will end there, with the return of Crimea," the head of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate, Major General Kyrylo Budanov claimed in March 2023 while hyping the counteroffensive.

The spring counteroffensive was continually delayed and after a few failed attacks that Ukraine assured us definitely were not the counteroffensive, the newly named summer counteroffensive launched in June.

Hundreds of [Western-made tanks](#) and armored personnel carriers rushed to the front lines across the battlefield, opening multiple fronts, including outside of Rabotino, Staromlinovka and Artemovsk. It did not go how Zelensky or NATO envisioned.

Months later, after only gaining a few small villages and fewer square miles of land than Russia did during the same period, even Western media had to admit that the Ukrainian counteroffensive had failed completely to meet its goals. Worse, Western countries were embarrassed. Their hyped modern weapons were destroyed in droves, with 789 tanks and 2,400 other armored vehicles left as flaming husks. Fields outside of Rabotino were nicknamed "Bradley Square" after the number of [US-made Bradley Fighting Vehicles](#) that were destroyed there, although it was also the final resting place of numerous [German-made Leopard 1 and 2 tanks](#). Wrecked and twisted metal, they now serve as monuments to the West's failure.

Before it even ended, NATO's veneer of invincibility was wiped away, with its weapons and tactics completely defeated by Russian forces. Ultimately, 166,000 Ukrainian soldiers were dead or seriously injured, never to return to the battlefield. Since then, Russia has taken back most of the meager gains Ukrainian forces made and has taken the conflict's largest prize since Artemovsk: Avdeyevka.

With Russia on the march and hitting targets across Ukraine with little to no resistance from what's left of Zelensky's air defenses, it is easy to dismiss the comedian-president's ramblings as a desperate attempt to boost morale. He needs to present a plan for victory to justify his decision to sacrifice an even broader swath of Ukraine's youth, already a precious commodity

after a massive drop in Ukraine's birthrate in the 1990s, by lowering the country's conscription age. This 2025 counteroffensive is seemingly the best he could come up with.

Already, videos are leaked on a near daily basis of Ukrainians attempting to avoid the meat grinder by running from or fighting conscription officers. Most of the time, they are pulled into vans and presumably sent to the new meat grinders in Chasov Yar, Netailovo, or The Russian romanized spelling for the town of Novomikhaylovka. A few lucky ones escape, typically when the Ukrainian townspeople turn on the conscription officers and defend their men from being sent to an almost certain death.

That is only going to increase as Zelensky's goons start taking ever-younger Ukrainian sons off the streets. How many Ukrainian mothers, having just grieved the loss of her eldest son, will stand by as they take her second or third son in the same manner and for the same lost cause? Though it was only just announced, it is already apparent the hype around Zelensky's latest counteroffensive will not materialize. Not even the NAFO keyboard warriors seem able to get excited for it. No commercials have been made yet, but they are unlikely to be taken seriously if they are. If anything, they would come off as a brazen waste of resources. [Ukraine's cities are in darkness](#), who cares about a commercial?

On Tuesday, Zelensky criticized German Chancellor Olaf Scholz for not handing over his country's Taurus long-range missiles, seemingly pegging it as one of the "more advanced Western weapons" he says he needs. But even if Scholz acquiesces, the Taurus won't make the 2025 counteroffensive a success, just as the Bradley, Leopards, Abrams, HIMARS and ATACMs failed to turn the tide.

What Zelensky really needs, and wants, is more men to put between himself and the advancing Russian army. He doesn't need Taurus missiles for that. He just needs more money to pay conscription officers and more transit vans to kidnap Ukrainian men with. And that, at least, is a price Western leaders are likely willing to pay.

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Hamas Demands 'Clear Written Commitment' From Israel to Withdraw From Gaza

In February, Hamas proposed a three-stage ceasefire deal that would last 135 days and hopefully result in the exchange of hostages.

On Sunday, it was [reported](#) that Hamas had demanded a “clear written commitment” from Israel to withdraw their troops from the Gaza Strip during the second of a three-phase cease-fire deal, a senior Egyptian official and a Hamas official said. The Palestinian militant group said it had submitted its response to a six-week cease-fire proposal to Egyptian and Qatari mediators, according to a recent report.

“We confirm our readiness to reach a deal regarding a serious exchange of prisoners between the two sides,” Hamas said.

This proposal from Hamas comes after their rejection of an Israeli ceasefire proposal which they had received last Monday. Hamas maintains that any agreement reached by Israel and their group should include an end to the war.

“We... reaffirm our adherence to our demands and the national demands of our people; with a permanent ceasefire, the withdrawal of the occupation army from the entire Gaza Strip, the return of the displaced to their areas and places of residence, intensification of the entry of relief and aid, and the start of reconstruction,” the [Palestinian militant group](#) said, adding that an increase in the number of Palestinian prisoners Hamas wants to see released will also be included in the proposed deal.

In February, Hamas proposed a three-stage ceasefire deal that would last 135 days and hopefully result in the exchange of hostages. The ceasefire was reportedly proposed to last for three phases with each phase lasting 45 days, according to a report by the [Middle East Eye](#). Meanwhile, Israel has claimed that while they want to secure the return of hostages taken by Hamas during the October 7 attack, they will not stop the war until they destroy [the militant group](#).

While Israel has reportedly pulled much of its military forces from Gaza earlier this month, they have maintained that they still plan to attack Rafah, a city in southern Gaza where about 1.4 million Palestinians are, with most of whom sheltering after being displaced due to the war. The war has also left more than 1 million people on the brink of starvation as Israel’s war on Hamas has pushed Gaza into a humanitarian crisis.

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Banquet Hall Adorned With Stunning Trojan War Frescoes Unearthed in Pompeii

The Pompeii ruins, which were first discovered in the 16th century, have become the second most-visited archeological site in the world.

A banquet room filled with well preserved frescoes has been unearthed among the Pompeii's ruins. The striking discovery is a 15-meter-long, six-meter-wide room which was found in a former private residence in Via di Nola during excavations.

The room's walls are covered in detailed paintings inspired by the Trojan War. The room has been dubbed the "black room" due to the color used in the backgrounds of the paintings which were done in an ornate style and date between 15 BC and AD 40-50.

Experts believe that the black color of the walls was intended to mask the soot from burning oil lamps, and was a "refined setting for entertaining during convivial moments," one [report](#) writes. The black room's artworks feature mythical Greek characters including [Helen of Troy](#) meeting Paris for the first time. The elopement between Helen of Troy and the Trojan prince Paris is believed to have sparked the Trojan War. Helen, who was the wife of the king of Sparta, Menelais, was thought to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

In Greek mythology, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda--the queen of Sparta and the wife of Tyndareus.

Another fresco depicts the Greek god Apollo trying to seduce the priestess Cassandra. Apollo bestowed her with the ability to see the future, but when she rejected his attempts to seduce her he cursed her so that no one would believe her visions.

The paintings offered a talking point and helped in entertaining guests during feasts, said Gabriel Zuchtriegel, the director of Pompeii's archaeological park.

"The mythological couples provided ideas for conversations about the past, and life, only seemingly of a merely romantic nature," he said. "People would meet to dine after sunset; the flickering light of the lamps had the effect of making the images appear to move, especially after a few glasses of good Campanian wine."

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EU Falls Behind China, US in Economic Competition Following 'Monumental Mistakes' - IEA Chief

Birol's comment comes at a time when the EU leaders prepare to debate the bloc's economic competitiveness this week as they head towards their June election.

Europe is now trailing China and the US after making "two historic monumental mistakes", according to Fatih Birol, the International Energy Agency chief.

Europe's top mistakes were relying on Russian gas and turning away from nuclear power, the IEA chief said. In order to recover from their mistakes, he explains, the bloc will now need a "new industrial master plan".

Europe has also fallen behind the two countries as they struggle to keep up with the manufacturing of green technology due to regulations and soaring energy prices, a recent [report](#) said. And electricity prices are typically twice to three times higher than that in the US. "The existing industries, especially the heavy industries, are experiencing, and going to experience, a significant cost disadvantage compared to other major economies such as China and the US," Birol said.

Since the 1970s, Germany has been a major buyer of Moscow's affordable pipeline gas but significantly reduced its purchases in 2022. This reduction impacted both small and medium-sized companies, which lack the capacity to quickly adjust to rising production costs, and large industries, leading to widespread difficulties.

On February 24, BASF, a leading German chemical company, announced a reduction of 2,600 jobs, approximately 2.3% of its global workforce. This included 1,800 positions at its Ludwigshafen headquarters in Germany. The company also halted its share buybacks and planned to increase investments to enhance competitiveness in anticipation of continued earnings declines due to escalating costs.

A key factor in BASF's rising expenses has been the increase in European natural gas prices, which began escalating before Russia's special military operation and were further exacerbated by the EU's sanctions against Russia. These sanctions quickly proved to be detrimental to the bloc.

The situation deteriorated further with the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines on September 26, 2022, compelling Germany to transition predominantly to costly liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from the United States. Although European energy prices have slightly decreased from an August 2022 peak of over €340 per megawatt hour (MWh) to around €50, they remain significantly higher than historical averages, as acknowledged by Western media. Previously, the CEO of BASF had noted that Russian gas was crucial for maintaining the competitiveness of the industry.

Meanwhile, the bloc is struggling to make a decision regarding the use of nuclear energy. Some countries are pro-nuclear, including France, Hungary and Czech Republic while other EU member states including Germany, Austria and Luxembourg are opposed to the costly energy source.

The EU is racing toward its June election, which means they will be participating in debates surrounding economic policy and specifically that of economic competitiveness. One article comments that for the EU to develop an effective economic competitive edge they will have to leverage their greatest asset; the single market.

"Only a well-functioning, globally linked EU market will be able to achieve a similar scale to the domestic markets of the U.S. and China," the recent [article](#) claims. "Fragmented national measures won't lead to private investment at the scale Europe needs if it's to become globally competitive in future key technologies, such as batteries or electric vehicles."

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Palestinians Defend Iranian Retaliation Against Israel - Report

Iran cited Article 51 of the UN charter to justify its strike as an act of self-defense. The attack by Tehran, which resulted in no deaths, coincided with a 24-hour period during which the Israeli military reportedly killed 43 and wounded 62 across the Gaza Strip.

Many Palestinians are praising Iran's retaliatory strikes against Israel, seeing in the attack a rare moment of forceful response to the country's months-long assault on Gaza, according to Reuters.

"For the first time, we saw some rockets that didn't land in our areas," [said](#) Abu Abdallah, 32, a Gaza resident who spoke to the media using a pseudonym. "These rockets were going into the occupied Palestine... We are hopeful that if Iran or any other country enters the war a solution for Gaza might be nearer than ever."

"We have been slaughtered for over six months and no one dared to do anything," said Majed Abu Hamza, a 52-year-old refugee from Gaza City who is a father of seven.

A flurry of drones and rockets swept across Israeli territory Saturday in an unprecedented direct strike from Iran's military on Israel. Israel claimed that, with the [support](#) of US and UK forces, it was able to intercept the majority of the strikes.

But [video on social media](#) appeared to show a significant attack on Israel's Ramon military airbase in the Negev desert. The Nevatim airbase was also [reportedly](#) struck as well as an alleged intelligence site in the occupied Golan Heights. The Lebanon-based Hezbollah also fired dozens of rockets towards Israel.

Iran's attack was in retaliation for an apparent April 1 strike by Israel on Iran's diplomatic consulate in Syria, which resulted in at least 16 deaths. A senior Quds Force commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was among those killed, as well as seven other Iranian officers.

Observers suggested the highly-provocative action was designed to provoke an Iranian response, pulling the United States into an expanded conflict with Iran. But an anonymous US official Thursday [suggested](#) Washington would tolerate a measured retaliatory strike by Tehran. US President Joe Biden has since [claimed](#) the United States will only pursue a "diplomatic response" to the Iranian strike.

"Whoever decides to attack Israel, dares to attack Israel at a time when the whole world acts in its service, is a hero in the eyes of Palestinians regardless of whether we share their ideology or not," said Abu Hamza.

Much is often made in Western media of the division between Sunni and Shia Islam in the Muslim world, but Iran's Shiite-led government has made solidarity with the predominately Sunni Palestinians a central tenet of its philosophy since the country's revolution. Iranians overthrew the country's US-backed Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, establishing a regime that denounced [Western interference in the Middle East](#).

Iran's principled anti-imperialism has drawn respect throughout the region as US-supported regimes in other countries are often viewed as little more than Western puppets.

Some Palestinians criticized Iran's strike however.

"Curtains down on the face-saving piece of theater... The Palestinian people are the only ones who pay the price with their flesh and blood," said West Bank resident Munir al-Gaghoub on social media.

The value of Iran's attack may be primarily symbolic; the country usually relies on allied movements in the region to confront Israel militarily.

The precedent of direct Iranian strikes on Israel may eventually prove important, establishing yet another front Tel Aviv must deal with. The refusal of the United States to involve its armed forces in the conflict means Israel will continue to face a steady deterioration of social, military, and economic conditions, ultimately resulting in a strategic defeat [according to](#) former US Middle East intelligence analyst Paul Pillar.

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Germany Escalates Donbass Conflict as Ukraine Admits Frontline is Deteriorating

A pledge by Berlin to augment Kiev's air defense capabilities follows a familiar pattern of Western countries eventually conceding to Ukrainian requests for armaments after publicly agonizing over the threat of escalation with Moscow.

Germany offered to provide Kiev with another US Patriot air defense system Saturday as Ukraine's military chief admitted the country's position on its eastern front is rapidly deteriorating.

"The situation on the eastern front has significantly worsened in recent days," [said](#) Ukraine armed forces commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky, confirming recent media reports. Syrsky made the assessment in a post on Telegram after a visit to a part of territory of the Donetsk People's Republic under Ukrainian control, which is now a Russian territory.

"The enemy is actively attacking our positions in the Lyman [and] Bakhmut [Artemovsk] directions with assault groups and the support of armored vehicles," he added. "In the Pokrovsk direction, it is trying to break through our defenses using dozens of tanks."

Syrsky attributed Ukraine's struggles to Russia's greater supply of weapons and military technology. Russia's defense industry has risen to the occasion during the conflict by churning out significant supplies of ammunition. Observers have praised the quality of Russian armaments, particularly its [well-respected tank building tradition](#).

Material support for the Kiev regime has meanwhile stalled as Europe's defense industry fails to meet demand and US backing is stymied by domestic politics.

Syrsky also acknowledged a lack of effective manpower. Ukraine's population, less than a third of Russia's, has declined by some 30% amidst [a demographic crisis](#) after the country's independence. The country faces a particular shortage of young men and women; the age of the average Ukrainian soldier is estimated to be 43 years old.

"The second serious problem is to improve the quality of training of military personnel, primarily infantry units, so that they can make maximum use of all the capabilities of military equipment

and western weapons,” said the military chief. Reports have emerged of Ukrainian troops being provided with only a few weeks of instruction [after often being forcibly conscripted](#).

Dry weather has granted Russian tanks easy passage over Ukraine’s terrain according to Syrsky. From the air, Moscow has made extensive use of retrofitted glide bombs and drone strikes. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has pleaded with Western partners to help augment the country’s air defense capacity.

Germany obliged Saturday, promising to provide Kiev with a third US Patriot surface-to-air missile system after previously having rejected the request. The pledge follows a familiar pattern of Western countries eventually conceding to Ukrainian requests for armaments after publicly agonizing over the threat of escalation.

“We are supporting Ukraine as much as our own operational readiness will allow,” said German Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius Saturday. Observers have questioned the consequences of Western countries depleting their weapons stocks after more than two years of arming Kiev. Proposals have been floated for Ukraine to manufacture more of the ammunition it needs domestically, but Pistorius said Russian strikes on Ukrainian industry are already compromising its military preparedness.

Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. In April 2022, Russia sent a diplomatic note to all NATO countries on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that any cargo containing weapons for Ukraine will become a legitimate target for Russian strikes.

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Zelensky Takes Advantage of Iran-Israel Crisis to Plead for More Money

The Ukrainian leader has occasionally compared his country’s plight to that of Israel, a dubious distinction as Tel Aviv’s reputation is battered globally.

President Volodymyr Zelensky took to the X (formerly Twitter) social media platform Sunday to [remind](#) Western lawmakers not to forget about Ukraine as the world responds to Iran’s retaliatory strike against Israel.

“Ukraine condemns Iran’s attack on Israel using ‘Shahed’ drones and missiles,” the leader wrote, claiming Moscow and Tehran utilize the same kinds of armaments.

“The world cannot wait for discussions to go on,” he added. “Words do not stop drones and do not intercept missiles. Only tangible assistance does. The assistance we are anticipating... It is critical that the United States Congress make the necessary decisions to strengthen America’s allies at this critical time.”

Former Ukrainian minister Volodymyr Omelyan was even more forceful, slamming former US President Donald Trump whose “America First” brand of conservatism has questioned US military spending.

“I hope that Iran’s attack on Israel will send a powerful message to Republicans, namely to Mr. Trump – you cannot wait aside any more and think that those are small separate regional conflicts happening somewhere in Europe, Middle East, [or] Asia,” Omelyan [said](#) in an interview with a US-based tabloid media outlet.

“China, Russia, Iran and North Korea persistently attack the West,” he said, without clarifying when they have done so.

China, Iran and North Korea have historically been subject to deadly US-backed economic sanctions. The United States [invaded](#) Russia in 1918 in an attempt to thwart the country’s unfolding revolution, and invaded China to help put down the Boxer Rebellion.

Zelensky has occasionally compared Ukraine’s plight to that of Israel. In 2022 the Ukrainian leader claimed he saw the country as a model for Ukraine’s future, [saying](#) Ukraine should become a “big Israel.”

The president said he was referring to Israel’s model of hardened internal security, but critics may instead draw comparisons between the two countries’ strident nationalism and treatment of minorities. The Kiev regime has launched attacks on its Russian-speaking eastern regions for more than a decade, often killing civilians.

A [2014 massacre of trade unionists](#) in Odessa drew particular condemnation. Paramilitary groups attacked a peaceful rally in the coastal city, forcing people to take refuge in the Odessa Trade Union House. The neo-Nazi gangs then set fire to the building, killing some 50 people and bludgeoning to death those who attempted to escape.

Anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalists have [continued to constitute an important faction](#) of the country’s armed forces, with Kiev officially integrating the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion into its military later that year.

Israel has also received criticism for its increasingly extremist trajectory in recent years.

Neo-Nazi activist Richard Spencer publicly [praised](#) the country’s so-called “Jewish Nation State” law in 2018, viewing it as a model for his desired white ethnostate. Israeli human rights group B’tselem has [called](#) Israel an “apartheid” and ethnic supremacist regime.

Ukraine has become more coercive in recent months as US aid has been stalled amidst political infighting.

“Give us the damn Patriots,” [demanded](#) the country’s foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba last month, referring to the US-developed surface-to-air missile system Ukraine sees as crucial to its fight against Russia.

Kuleba appeared to economically [blackmail](#) Western countries in recent comments, suggesting Ukraine would drive up global oil prices with attacks on Russian refineries if US aid were not forthcoming.

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Whither Free Speech? College Campuses Sacrifice Professed Values to Altar of Zionism - Report

Free speech is often held as among the United State's most sacred values, but recent events suggest the right does not extend to criticism of Israel.

A wave of repression is taking place on US college campuses, demonstrated by a proposed policy at the University of Michigan offering severe punishment for political protest.

The proposal emerged after demonstrators disrupted an honors graduation ceremony late last month. The protesters, echoing the demands of students across the country, called on the university to divest its endowment from Israeli companies and military contractors.

The school's president Santo Ono was deeply dismayed by the act of defiance against a country [credibly accused](#) of genocide, claiming the action "brought profound disappointment to students, parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives and friends."

The school's response: a new [policy](#) threatening student protesters with expulsion. Sympathetic faculty could face firing.

"The guidelines are just really a huge overstep," said sophomore Annabel Bean, who rejects the proposal. "The point of a protest is to be disruptive and if you're saying it can't be disruptive, then we're not protesting, and how are you honoring your history of disruptive student protests?" The state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union has also criticized the measure, claiming it would deprive students of core civil liberties. "We believe the proposed policy is vague and overbroad, and risks chilling a substantial amount of free speech and expression," the group said in a letter.

Ono, naturally, has dressed his authoritarian proposal in the garb of liberal anti-racism, claiming the students' protest "was painful for everyone who had gathered – and especially so for members of our Jewish community."

But Jewish students have become some of the biggest targets of colleges' repressive actions, with Jewish-led organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace facing [suspensions](#) across the country. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has [persecuted](#) pro-Palestine campus groups with a zeal otherwise reserved only for Disney and Guantanamo [detainees](#).

"America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests," claimed controversial former Secretary of State [Henry Kissinger](#). Crackdowns on freedom of speech, a value held to be more sacred on college campuses than anywhere else, suggest it has no principles, either.

As with the country's recent [about face](#) on free trade in regards to China, values are only held so long as they prove useful to the wealthy and powerful.

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Germany escalates the Donbass conflict as Ukraine admits frontline is deteriorating

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Dry weather has granted Russian tanks easy passage over Ukraine's terrain according to the military chief. From the air, Moscow has made extensive use of retrofitted glide bombs and drone strikes. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has pleaded Western partners to help augment the country's air defense capacity.

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against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. In April 2022, Russia sent a diplomatic note to all NATO countries on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that any cargo containing weapons for Ukraine will become a legitimate target for Russian strikes.

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Zelensky takes advantage of Iran-Israel crisis to plead for more money

President Volodymyr Zelensky took to the X social media platform to remind Western lawmakers not to forget about Ukraine as the world responds to Iran's retaliatory strike against Israel.

"Ukraine condemns Iran's attack on Israel using 'Shahed' drones and missiles," the leader wrote, claiming Moscow and Tehran utilize the same kinds of armaments. "The world cannot wait for discussions to go on. Words do not stop drones and do not intercept missiles. Only tangible assistance does."

Zelensky has occasionally compared Ukraine's plight to that of Israel. In 2022 the Ukrainian leader claimed he saw the country as a model for Ukraine's future, saying Ukraine should become a "big Israel", Al Jazeera reported.

The president said he was referring to Israel's model of hardened internal security, but critics may instead draw comparisons between the two countries' strident nationalism and treatment of minorities. The Kiev regime has launched attacks on its Russian-speaking eastern regions for more than a decade, often killing civilians.

A 2014 massacre of trade unionists in Odessa drew particular condemnation. Neo-Nazi paramilitaries attacked a peaceful rally in the coastal city, forcing people to take refuge in the Odessa Trade Union House. The neo-Nazi gangs set fire to the building, killing some 50 people and bludgeoning to death those who attempted to escape.

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Whither free speech? College campuses sacrifice professed values to the alter of Zionism - report

A wave of repression is taking place on US college campuses, demonstrated by a proposed policy at the University of Michigan offering severe punishment for political protest.

The proposal emerged after demonstrators disrupted an honors graduation ceremony late last month. The protesters, echoing the demands of students across the country, called on the university to divest its endowment from Israeli companies and military contractors.

The school's president Santo Ono was deeply dismayed by the act of defiance against a country credibly accused of genocide, claiming the action "brought profound disappointment to students, parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives and friends."

The school's response: a new policy threatening student protesters with expulsion. Sympathetic faculty could face firing.

Ono has dressed his proposal in the garb of liberal anti-racism, claiming the students' demonstration "was painful for everyone who had gathered – and especially so for members of our Jewish community." But Jewish students have become some of the biggest targets of college campuses' repressive actions, with Jewish-led organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace facing suspensions across the country.

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US Told Israel After Iran Attack to 'Think Strategically' About Escalation-Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden pointed out to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel must think carefully and strategically about further escalation following the attack by Iran senior administration officials told reporters on Sunday.

"The President was very clear that we were going help defend Israel and he made very clear with Prime Minister last night that we do have to think carefully and strategically about, you know, risk of escalation," officials said. "I think Israel has to think carefully what it does next."

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Israel-Hamas Hostage Talks to Resume As Early As This Week After Iran Attack - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Hostage talks between Israel and Hamas are expected to resume as early as this coming weeks despite a brief delay caused by Iran's retaliatory attack, a senior US administration official said on Sunday.

"Obviously the situation delayed that a little bit, but we look forward to picking that back up as early as this coming week," the official told reporters during a conference call.

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US Received Message From Iran As Attack Unfolded Saying No Other Strikes Expected-Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States received a message from Iran as its retaliatory attack unfolded on Saturday night suggesting that it would not conduct any further strikes targeting Israel, a senior US administration official said on Sunday.

"We received a message from the Iranians as this [Saturday attack] was ongoing," the official told reporters. "This was basically suggesting that they were finished after this, but it was still an ongoing attack."

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US Official Says Iran's Attack Risks Dragging Region Into Broader Conflict

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -A senior US defense official said Iran's retaliatory attack targeting Israel on Saturday night risks dragging the Mideast region into a broader conflict, adding that the strikes violated the airspace of neighboring Arab countries.

"Iran's attack is completely unacceptable and reckless and risks dragging the region into broader conflict. These attacks also violated the airspace of neighboring Arab countries," the official said during a conference call with reporters.

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US Official Says Iran Did Not Give Prior Warning Ahead of Attack on Israel

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -Iran did not provide any notification before it attacked Israel, senior administration officials told reporters on Sunday.

"They did not give a notification nor did they give a sense of you know these will be the targets," officials said. "They were clearly intending to destroy and to cause casualties."

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US Would Not Participate in Possible Counteroffensive With Israel - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -The United States would not take part in a possible counteroffensive with Israel against Iran, senior administration officials told reporters on Sunday.

“Going back to the Damascus strike, for example... we believe Israel has freedom of action to protect itself and defend itself in Syria or elsewhere,” officials said when asked whether Biden told Netanyahu that the United States would not participate in a counter-offensive.

“That’s a long-standing policy, and that remains but no, we would not envision ourselves participating in such a thing,” officials said. “I think Israel has to think carefully what it does next.”

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US Not Seeking Conflict With Iran, Goal Remains to De-Escalate Immediately-Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not seek a conflict with Iran and its goal remains to de-escalate tensions in the region immediately, a senior US defense official said on Sunday.

"Our goal remains to de-escalate immediately and halt any further attacks, we do not seek conflict with Iran, but we will not hesitate to act to protect our forces and support the defense of Israel," the official told reporters during a conference call.

A senior US military official noted that no US troops or US facilities in the Middle East were damaged during Iran's retaliatory attack on Saturday night.

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Iran Launched Over 300 Munitions Targeting Israel Including 100 Missiles - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Iran launched more than 300 munitions targeting Israel, including more than 100 medium-range ballistic missiles, a senior US military official said on Sunday.

"We currently assess that Iran launched more than 300 air threats to include more than 100 medium-range ballistic missiles, more than 30 land attack cruise missiles, and more than 151 one-way attack drones towards Israel," the official said during a conference call with reporters.

The official also noted that two US warships operating in the eastern Mediterranean Sea destroyed between four and six Iranian ballistic missiles during the attack; US aircraft in the region shot down more than 70 Iranian one-way drones headed toward Israel; a US Army Patriot missile battery shot down one ballistic missile in the vicinity of Erbil, Iraq assessed to be on a route to Israel and not assessed to be targeting US or coalition forces.

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US Despite Some Disagreements With Israel Will Always Defend It - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States despite some disagreements with Israel will always come to its defense, a senior US administration official said on Sunday.

"I think the events of the last 10 days have demonstrated that while we may have some disagreements, the United States of America stands with Israel and there's no question that we will come to their defense when they are attacked. Last night demonstrated that fact," the official told reporters during a conference call.

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US Had Contacts With Iran Ahead of Attack, Including Through Swiss Channel - Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -The United States had been in contact with Iran through various communication channels, including through the Swiss channel, in anticipation of last night's attack targeting Israel, a senior US administration official said on Sunday.

"Administration officials have been in constant ongoing continuous contact with Israelis, with other partners in the region, as well as Iran with a series of direct communications to the Swiss channel and other relevant players in anticipation of the events that transpired last night," the official told reporters.

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US Official Says 'If Successful' Iran's Attack on Israel Could Have Caused Escalation

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -US Senior Administration officials said on Sunday that if the attack by Iran on Israel turned out to be successful, it would have led to escalation in the region.

"If successful, this attack could have caused an uncontrollable escalation of broader regional conflict, something we worked day and night to avoid since October 7," officials said.

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US Official Says Virtually No Infrastructure Damage After Iran's Attack On Israel

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -US senior administration officials told reporters on Sunday that the Iran attack on Israel has caused no infrastructure damage.

"Israel and coalition partners are able to defeat 99% of these munitions," US officials said. "There was virtually no infrastructure damage to Israel at all."

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Biden Instructed Administration to Defend Israel to Maximum Extent- Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden instructed the security team ten days ahead of the Iran attack on Israel to defend its Middle East partner to the maximum extent possible, senior administration officials told reporters on Sunday.

"President Biden about 10 days ago now had instructed all of us in the United States to defend Israel to the maximum extent possible...ensuring all authorities were in place, all assets were in place, and now that the attack has concluded, that's exactly what we did as a country," officials said.

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ANALYSIS - 'Whiff of Desperation' Haunts Biden-Kishida Meetings as Their Political Bases Crumble

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - "A whiff of desperation" hovered over the mutually congratulatory meetings between President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Washington this week. The two leaders approved an unprecedented number of trade, investment, defense, and technological agreements. But both of them are enormously unpopular at home and presiding over badly faltering economies, US analysts told Sputnik.

Kishida, a veteran diplomat, and former foreign minister, also won widespread bipartisan support in Congress in a speech expressing his love and commitment to the United States and to democratic values in which he cited the "Star Trek" and "Flintstones" TV shows as major influences on his life.

DEEPLY UNPOPULAR

"I detected a whiff of desperation in last night's White House state dinner for Fumio Kishida," US historian and political commentator Dan Lazare said.

Kishida was a pro-American loyalist, Lazare acknowledged, however, the Liberal Democratic Party (LPD) leader "is deeply unpopular back home due to Japan's lackluster economy and a growing financial scandal," he said.

Followers of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was assassinated in 2022, are accused of stashing away ¥500 million yen (\$3.26 million) in a secret slush fund while Kishida is accused of squirreling away ¥30 million yen (200,000) himself, Lazare noted.

In the United States, Biden faced his own host of problems, Lazare continued.

"Joe Biden ...has two wars on his hands, both of which are going badly, plus an inflationary spiral that just won't quit," he said.

Kishida's problems and Japan's floundering economy also spelled bad news for the ambitious Quad partnership between the two countries, along with Australia and India, against China that Biden was trying to develop, Lazare pointed out.

"All of which suggests that the Quad alliance that Biden is trying to broker in the western Pacific is on rocky ground as public support begins to wane," he said.

Centrifugal forces were likely to continue intensifying in the Indo-Pacific region there just as they were also intensifying in Europe, Lazare observed.

"Biden is going to have a lot harder time lining up support for his anti-China policies than he expects. The coming period should be interesting," he said.

UNSUSTAINABLE POLICY

Former hedge fund manager and political commentator Charles Ortel agreed that Japan would continue to seek closer ties with the United States against China in the short term, but also that its own shaky economic and financial base would soon render this policy unsustainable.

In addition, Japan still maintained hard and soft barriers to trade that rendered it tough to serve from abroad, Ortel observed.

"So, from an investment perspective, Japan remains less attractive than many other places," he said.

Kishida's well-received speech to both chambers of Congress, the first foreign leader to deliver one since Israeli President Isaac Herzog nine months ago, would also have minimal effect in helping either Japan or Biden, Ortel pointed out.

"The US Congress has a low approval rating, so most Americans care little about what is said there. Frankly, Kishida would get much more attention if he sat down for an extended interview with [independent media commentator] Tucker Carlson, whose large audience, even now, is more engaged and more influential in shaping public opinion," he said.

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Biden Says 'Always Concerned About Americans' In Light of Iranian Threat Risks

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told reporters that he is always concerned about Americans when asked about the risk of Iran killing Americans in its anticipated retaliatory strikes against Israel, according to the White House press pool.

"I'm always concerned about Americans," Biden said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Biden during a press conference warned Iran not to attack Israel, but noted that he expects the Iranian retaliatory attack will occur "sooner rather than later."

Biden emphasized that the United States is devoted to the defense of Israel and that Iran will not succeed.

A US defense official told Sputnik that the US military is moving additional assets into the Middle East to bolster deterrence and force protection ahead of the anticipated Iranian

retaliatory strike against Israel.

Tehran reportedly warned Washington that it will attack US forces in the Middle East if the United States gets involved in a military confrontation between Iran and Israel.

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Trump Amid Greene Attempt to Oust Johnson Says Hope She Understands Speaker Doing His Best

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said during a press conference that Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who is threatening to oust House Speaker Mike Johnson, should understand that the Speaker is doing as good of a job as possible in his position.

"We're getting along very well with the speaker and I get along very well with Marjorie," Trump said on Friday. "We have a speaker who was voted in and it was a complicated process. It's not an easy situation for any Speaker. I think he's doing a very good job, he's doing about as good as you're going to do, and I'm sure that Marjorie understands that."

Trump added that Greene is a very good friend of his and that he knows she has a lot of respect for Johnson.

Johnson told reporters on Wednesday that if his Republican colleague moves forward with a threat to remove him from his position, it would cause chaos in the House of Representatives.

Greene recently filed a motion to remove Johnson from his position but has held off on requesting a vote pending his handling of key issues such as Ukraine aid funding.

Greene added that it's pretty clear and obvious that Johnson did not have the support of the House Republican Conference.

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Trump Warns That Israel-Iran Row Risks Igniting a World War

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump told reporters that the heightened tensions between Israel and Iran risks escalating into a world war.

"What's going on with Israel could end up in a world war," Trump said during a press conference alongside House Speaker Mike Johnson on Friday.

Trump added that a lot can happen between now and the November 5 vote for the US presidential election, especially under US leaders who are "incompetent."

Trump hinted that he talked with a world leader relevant to this crisis, but declined to reveal any details.

The former US president said this is a very dangerous period for the United States.

Iran is expected to take retaliatory military action against Israel in the coming hours or days in

response to an Israeli strike in Damascus that killed senior Iranian military officials.

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Wall Street Roiled With Worst Week in Months as War Fears, Inflation Take Toll

NEW YORK, April 13 (Sputnik) - US blue chip stocks had their worst weekly loss since October on Friday, while the broader market took its sharpest hit in more than a year as the specter of creeping inflation and a potential Iranian strike on Israel triggered risk aversion across Wall Street.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, closed down 74 points, or 1.4%, at 5,125. For the week, the blue chip indicator slid 1.6%, the most since the week to October 27, when it lost 2.5%.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which includes Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google stocks, tumbled 267 points, or 1.6%, to finish at 16,175. It was the Nasdaq's third straight losing week, with a weekly decline of 0.5%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equities indicator that tracks the stocks of 30 large US corporations, was at 37,983, down 476 points, or 1.2%. The weekly decline of 2.4% was also the Dow's worst since a 3% drop in the five sessions to February 24, 2023.

Gold hit record highs for the 17th time this year, with futures of the precious metal reaching nearly \$2,450 an ounce, as investors piled into safe havens.

"Today is very much a commodity-based rally with some fears of Iran/Israel developments over the weekend," Scott Shelton, a crude futures broker for ICAP in North Carolina, said in an email to his clients, shared with Sputnik News.

The Dollar Index, which pits the US currency against a basket of six others, rose to a six-month high of just above 106.

"You're seeing there's a flight-to-safety trade, with the dollar stronger, and we're seeing equities sell off," Rob Haworth, senior investment strategist at US Bank Wealth Management, said in comments carried by CNBC.

Risk aversion spiked on speculation that Iran will conduct retaliatory strikes against Israel for a recent Israeli attack on Iran's diplomatic compound in Syria that killed senior military officials.

Further weighing on stocks is the notion among some market participants that the Federal Reserve will not cut interest rates at least until December - or even till early 2025 - as the economy's still pretty hot and inflation is sticky. Various Fed speakers this week have cast doubts that the central bank will be ready anytime soon to cut rates.

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US House Speaker Says Republicans Introducing Bill to Require Proof of Citizenship to Vote

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - US House Republicans will introduce legislation to require proof of citizenship in order to vote in federal elections in the United States, House Speaker Mike Johnson announced.

"House Republicans are introducing a bill that will require proof of citizenship to vote," Johnson said during a press conference on Friday. "It seems like common sense."

Democrats want to use an open border to turn immigrants into their voters, Johnson added.

US Congressman Chip Roy said earlier on Friday that he authored the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act to require proof of citizenship to vote in elections for federal office.

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Key Global Metal Exchanges Banned From Accepting Russian Aluminum, Copper - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - The London Metal Exchange and Chicago Mercantile Exchange are prohibited from accepting aluminum, copper and nickel produced by Russia, the US Treasury Department said in a press release.

"As a result of today's collective actions, metal exchanges, like the London Metal Exchange (LME) and Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), will be prohibited from accepting new aluminum, copper, and nickel produced by Russia. Metal exchanges provide a central role in facilitating the trading of industrial metals around the globe," the release said on Friday.

This Treasury Department claims that its action will deprive Russia and its metals producers of an important source of revenue.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

* The Lebanese movement Hezbollah said on Friday that it fired dozens of missiles at Israeli artillery positions.

* Israel's air defense system has successfully intercepted two drones carrying explosives that crossed the border from Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces said.

* US President Joe Biden said he expects Iran to attack Israel in response to the Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus sooner rather than later.

* The US military is moving additional assets into the Middle East to bolster deterrence and

force protection ahead of an anticipated Iranian retaliatory strike against Israel, a US defense official told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has lost more than 3,000 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past week, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Swiss efforts made at achieving peace in Ukraine will be wasted if Russia is given ultimatums after the first summit in June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* The Biden administration will host the US-Ukraine Partnership Forum next week to explore the best ways to help Ukraine recover and rebuild, the US State Department said on Friday.

* The Netherlands will allocate additional one billion euros (\$1.01 billion) for military assistance to Ukraine this year, and three more billion euros next year, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said.

* Ukraine may receive 1.9 billion euros (\$2 billion) of EU financial aid from the 50 billion euro package as early as May if Brussels approves its reform plan, European Commission Vice-President and Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Global oil prices increased by 3% on Friday, with the price of Brent crude exceeding \$92 per barrel for the first time since October 23.

* The energy market law adopted by the European Parliament will allow the EU member states to limit gas supplies from Russia and Belarus, including pipeline gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG), European Commission spokesperson Tim McPhie said on Friday.

MOLDOVA DEVELOPMENTS

* The Moldovan parliament approved the suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), Speaker Igor Grosu said on Friday.

* The head of Moldova's autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, said on Friday that she is prepared to hold negotiations with Moldovan authorities to restore relations.

* The use of Russia's Mir payment system cards via the payment infrastructure of Moldova is physically impossible, the country's central bank said in commenting on Gagauzia's plan to start using the cards.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO MEETING

* Belarus is ready to take part in the creation of a Russian space station, President Alexander Lukashenko said after his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday.

* There are no issues that can be solved today without using space technology, Putin said.

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US Bans Imports of Aluminum, Copper, Nickel of Russian Origin - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is prohibiting the imports of aluminum, copper and nickel of Russian origin, the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a notice on Friday.

"The importation and entry into the United States, including importation for admission into a foreign trade zone located in the United States, of aluminum, copper, and nickel of Russian Federation origin is prohibited, except to the extent provided by law, or unless licensed or otherwise authorized by the Office of Foreign Assets Control," the notice said.

However, the new rule excludes aluminum, copper and nickel of Russian origin that was produced prior to April 13, 2024, the notice added.

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UPDATE- IMF Executive Board Selects Georgieva to Serve As Managing Director For 2nd 5-Year Term

(Updates with paras 4-5)

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik)—The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board selected Kristalina Georgieva to serve a second five-year term as the fund's managing director, the IMF said in a statement on Friday.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) today selected Kristalina Georgieva to serve as IMF Managing Director for a second five-year term starting on October 1, 2024. The Board's decision was taken by consensus," the statement said.

Before making the decision, the board held several discussions, including with Georgieva, who was the only candidate for the position, it added.

"In recent years, the IMF has helped our member countries to navigate successive shocks, including the pandemic, war and conflicts, and a cost-of-living crisis. We also stepped up our work on climate change, fragility, and conflict, and the digital transition, in line with their increased significance for macroeconomic and financial stability, growth, and employment," Georgieva said in a statement.

The IMF chief promised that the fund would continue supporting its members by providing assistance.

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Weaker America Must Rely More on Rising Japan After Kishida Visit - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visit to Washington this week marked a crucial tipping point in Tokyo's previously subservient six-decades-long relationship with the United States as the Biden administration increasingly looks to Japanese business and technology to produce crucial military equipment the domestic

US industrial base no longer can, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Chas Freeman told Sputnik on Friday.

"Kishida's visit symbolizes the emergence of a more independent Japan as the partner of a weaker America," Freeman, a more than 50-year veteran of high-level US diplomacy in East Asia, said. "This marks the further ratcheting down of American primacy not just in Pacific Asia but at the global level."

Kishida said he detected growing self-doubt in the United States about America's willingness to maintain the burdens of global leadership of its allies and in defense of democracy. He also expressed concern at the growing challenge China posed to international security.

The visit was also striking for the efforts of President Joe Biden and other top US officials to draw Japan into supplying more of the advanced technology and basic industrial capacity the US economy now desperately lacks in its efforts to compete with Russia and China, Freeman said.

"After decades in which Japan relied on the United States for its defense, we now see the United States not just encouraging Tokyo to assume major responsibility for this itself but also turning to Japan to produce the military goods American industry can no longer supply," Freeman said.

Biden and Kishida announced their two governments were setting up an unprecedented military-industrial council to explore the kinds of weapons they could co-produce together.

This development would offer enormous new opportunities for Japanese corporate business and ease Japan's emergence as a leading military global economy, Freeman pointed out.

"Japan's new role as the arsenal of American primacy promises to accelerate the development of its military-industrial base," he said.

Kishida, a veteran diplomat and former Japanese foreign minister, was also successful in flattering members of Congress on both sides of the aisle and bolstering support for the venerable Washington-Tokyo alliance, Freeman observed.

"Everyone loves to hear his or her self-perceptions and fantasies validated and Kishida did this most impressively for members of Congress," he said.

However, Kishida's triumph in Washington was undermined by his increasingly uncertain political base and waning popularity at home, Freeman noted.

The Japanese prime minister is "more loved by Americans, especially those in the US Congress, than he is at home, where polls show that only 16.6% of Japanese have a favorable opinion of him and he has long defied political gravity," he said.

Even Kishida's success in impressing his US audience and members of Congress could backfire on him in domestic Japanese politics, Freeman advised.

Kishida and Biden also announced dozens of new agreements to boost trade, mutual investment, and further technological cooperation.

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One Person Dead, 13 Others Injured After Truck Drives into Texas Police Office - Official

EL PASO, April 12 (Sputnik) - One person is dead and 13 others are injured after an 18-wheel commercial truck was intentionally driven into a Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) office in the city of Brenham, a DPS official said on Friday.

We have several people that were injured and one is deceased at this time," the official said during a press conference.

Another DPS official noted that 13 other people were injured in the attack.

Law enforcement officers have taken the suspect into custody, officials said.

DPS officials said the suspect, 42-year-old Clenard Parker, was denied his Commercial Drivers License on Thursday and had returned Friday to cause harm.

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Apple to Correct Software Glitch Related to Palestinian Flag Emoji Display - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) — US tech company Apple has announced plans to correct a software error that led to the display of the Palestinian flag emoji when users typed "Jerusalem" on iPhones, CBS News reported on Friday.

According to the report earlier this week, British TV presenter Rachel Riley, in a social media post, said that typing "Jerusalem" after updating iOS 17.4.1 on her iPhone suggested the Palestinian flag emoji.

Furthermore, the report said that Riley went on to express her concerns about what she perceives as a discriminatory act against Israel, questioning if it reflected a deliberate decision by the company or a lack of oversight over its developers.

The report added that Apple would resolve this issue in the next iOS update.

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China Has Not Provided Weapons to Either Party in Ukraine Conflict - Embassy in US

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The Chinese Embassy in the United States told Sputnik on Friday that China has not provided weapons to either Russia or Ukraine and has urged Washington to refrain from disparaging the relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

"China is not a producer of or party involved in the Ukraine crisis ... China has not provided weaponry to any party," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in a statement to Sputnik. "We urge the US side to refrain from disparaging and scapegoating the normal relationship between China and Russia."

China has been playing a constructive role in facilitating a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, the statement said.

Normal trade between China and Russia should not be interfered with or restricted, the statement also said.

Earlier on Friday, US media reported that China has surged sales of weapon-making equipment and technology to Russia for use in Ukraine, citing two senior Biden administration officials familiar with a US assessment.

Trade between Russia and China grew by 5.2% to \$56.7 billion year-on-year in the first quarter of 2024, according to General Administration of China Customs data. Chinese-Russian trade grew by 26.3% in 2023 to a record \$240.1 billion, which is more than twice the volume in 2018.

Trade between the United States and China shrank by 4% in the first quarter of 2024 to \$150 billion, with Chinese exports down 1.3% and US exports down 10.7%.

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US Enemies Can Exploit Baltimore Bridge Collapse, Supply Chain Disruptions - Intel. Report

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – Foreign adversaries of the United States could exploit the recent collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore and ensuing supply chain disruptions, according to an intelligence report obtained by ABC News.

The bridge collapse has "reduced the resiliency of US port and shipping operations" and created "opportunities for foreign adversary exploitation," the report quoted the document as saying.

The intelligence report notes that in the aftermath of the bridge collapse in the port of Baltimore, any further supply chain disruptions will be unsurmountable.

"Additional supply chain disruptions will be more difficult to overcome since the standard procedure of partially rerouting ad hoc cargo through the Port of Baltimore is no longer feasible," the document said.

At the same time, the document said that there have been so far no indications that adversaries have made any attempts to exploit the situation.

In the early hours of March 26, a commercial Singapore-flagged cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed the port for Sri Lanka's Colombo. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew working on the bridge into the water. Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice following the bridge's collapse.

US officials have yet to provide a timeline for the complete restoration of the bridge, which took five years to build in the 1970s.

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US Commits to Boosting Philippine Military Modernization - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has affirmed its commitment to enhancing the Philippine military, the US State Department said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the inaugural US-Philippines 3+3 Meeting took place in Washington, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with their Philippine counterparts.

"The parties underscored their determination to increase US support for the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to improve interoperability and to achieve our shared security objectives," the State Department said in a statement.

The participants confirmed their mutual commitment to ensuring the Indo-Pacific remains free and open, and explored ways to better collaborate in addressing the ongoing issues in the South China Sea, the statement said.

"The parties further decided to explore additional opportunities to strengthen global support for upholding the international law of the sea," the statement added.

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UPDATE - Oil Price Above \$90 Bracing for Iran Retaliatory Strike on Israel

(Updates crude prices to settlement in paragraphs 4, 5 and 7)

NEW YORK, April 12 (Sputnik) - The global crude benchmark Brent on Friday stayed above the key bullish level of \$90 per barrel, as buyers piled into the oil market amid speculation that Iran will conduct retaliatory strikes against Israel for the latter's attack on Iran's diplomatic compound in Syria.

Retaliatory strikes against Israel could expand the existing conflict in the Gaza Strip and pose significant ramifications to global relations as well as oil markets.

"Today is very much a commodity-based rally with some fears of Iran/Israel developments over

the weekend,” Scott Shelton, a crude futures broker for ICAP in North Carolina, said in an email to his clients, shared with Sputnik News.

UK-based Brent settled in New York trading up 71 cents, or 0.8%, at \$90.45 per barrel.

The global crude benchmark lost nearly 2% combined for Monday and Tuesday but has since pared those losses for a weekly slide of just 0.8%.

Brent’s high for Friday was \$92.18, a level not seen since its peak of \$92.45 on October 23. If that peak is taken out, the next comparison would be the \$93.79 high reached on October 20.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, settled up 64 cents, or 0.8%, at \$85.66 per barrel in New York trading. Like Brent, WTI fell 2% in the first two sessions of this week before paring losses for a weekly decline of 1.4%.

On Friday, WTI hit a five-month high of \$87.63, matching its peak from a week ago. If that peak is taken out, then the next comparison for the US crude benchmark would be the \$88.29 high reached on October 23.

Crude futures have rallied broadly since the start of 2024, with WTI up almost 20% on the year and Brent standing nearly 18% higher. Traders are now eyeing the possibility of Brent reaching \$100 and WTI \$90 between May and June.

“I like the idea of being long-WTI spreads toward the end of the month,” Shelton said.

“Being long” refers to adding to bullish bets that prices would go higher.

Iran is a key member of the 13-nation Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which has already been curtailing its oil output over the past two months to force crude prices higher.

Disruptions to crude shipments out of the Middle East - both real and perceived - have been steadily pushing oil markets higher since the start of the year. If Iran acts against Israel, it will add fuel to a market already ablaze from geopolitical frictions, analysts say.

Global news networks have been speculating about an imminent Iranian attack on Israel with precision weapons since Bloomberg first raised that possibility on Wednesday, citing assessments by US and Israeli intelligence.

US President Joe Biden added to the speculation when he said on Wednesday that he was aware of the threat posed to Israel by Iran.

Biden also said he held a meeting with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and sought to address, among a range of issues, the alleged “Iranian threat.”

Biden noted that Iran has threatened to launch a significant retaliatory attack on Israel and he expressed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the United States’ iron-clad commitment to Israel's security.

US Defense Department officials told Sputnik earlier this week that they had no information to provide on a possible imminent strike against Israel.

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Biden Expects Iran Attack on Israel 'Sooner Than Later'

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he expects Iran to attack Israel in response to the strike on its consulate in Damascus "sooner than later."

"My expectation is sooner than later," Biden said when asked how imminent an attack by Iran on Israel was.

"We are devoted to the defense of Israel. We will support Israel, we will defend--help defend Israel and Iran will not succeed," he also said.

Biden stated that his message to Tehran is "Don't."

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Gold At New Record High Of Almost \$2,450 As Mideast Tensions On Boil

NEW YORK, April 12 (Sputnik) - Gold prices hit record highs again on Friday, with futures of the precious metal reaching nearly \$2,450 an ounce, as investors hedged against Middle East tensions heightened by speculation that Iran will conduct retaliatory strikes against Israel.

Gold for June delivery on New York's Comex rose to \$2,448.75 an ounce, the highest for a benchmark US gold futures contract. It was the 17th time that such a record high has been witnessed since the start of the year.

The spot price of bullion, which reflects gold trades carried out in real-time, reached as high as \$2,431.51.

Analysts said investors have turned risk-averse in recent days, fleeing from stocks on Wall Street, and into gold and other safe-havens like the US dollar amid reports that Iran might launch missiles at Israel as early as Saturday.

Global news networks have been speculating about an imminent Iranian attack on Israel with precision weapons since Bloomberg first raised that possibility on Wednesday, citing assessments by US and Israeli intelligence.

US President Joe Biden added to the speculation when he said on Wednesday that he was aware of the threat posed to Israel by Iran.

Investors buy gold as a hedge to economic and political troubles, as well as currency debasement.

Just over two years ago, gold was stuck in a range of between \$1,600 and \$1,800 an ounce as the Russia- Ukraine conflict and other political showdowns made relatively fewer headlines.

Now, analysts say, saber-rattling over Iran is prompting investors to take adequate coverage in safe-havens— even to a disproportionate degree considering that no one knows how deep the aversion towards stocks and other risk instruments will ultimately be.

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Man Intentionally Rams Commercial Truck Into Texas Police Station - Statement

EL PASO, April 12 (Sputnik) - A man used a commercial truck to ram into a Texas state police station in the city of Brenham, causing multiple serious injuries, the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) said on Friday.

"A commercial motor vehicle ran into the Brenham DPS Office, and there are reports of multiple serious injuries," police said in a statement via X.

Police also confirmed that the suspect has been arrested and there is no further threat to the community.

Media reported that the man crashed into the police station because he was upset that his commercial driver's license was denied. There are reportedly at least 16 people injured from the incident.

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Biden Admin. to Host US-Ukraine Forum to Explore Ukraine's Recovery - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will host the US-Ukraine Partnership Forum next week to explore the best ways to help Ukraine recover and rebuild, the US State Department said on Friday.

"The Department of State, USAID and the Department of Commerce, in partnership with the Government of Ukraine and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, will host the 2024 US-Ukraine Partnership Forum on April 17 at the Chamber headquarters in Washington, DC," the State Department said in a press release.

The forum will convene leaders in business, public policy and government "to explore how best to help Ukraine recover and rebuild as the country stabilizes its economy and lays the foundation for revitalization and modernization," the release said.

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Mexican Envoy to Meet With Guterres, GA President Over Ecuador Raid on Embassy - Mission

UNITED NATIONS, April 12 (Sputnik) - Mexican Ambassador to the UN Juan Ramon de la Fuente is set to meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and General Assembly President Dennis Francis to discuss the recent police raid on the country's embassy in Ecuador, a spokesperson for the Mexican mission to the United Nations told Sputnik.

"Today the Permanent Mission will be presenting a Note Verbal to the OLA, through which we seek to activate the mechanism contemplated in the General Assembly resolution 77/108. Besides, I believe our PR will be meeting in person with the SG and PGA in this regard in the upcoming days," the spokesperson said.

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US Moving More Assets to Mideast to Bolster Deterrence Ahead of Iran Retaliation -Official

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) -The US military is moving additional assets into the Middle East to bolster deterrence and force protection ahead of an anticipated Iranian retaliatory strike against Israel, a US defense official told Sputnik on Friday.

"We are moving additional assets to the region to bolster regional deterrence efforts and increase force protection for US forces. We have no other information to add at this time," the official said when asked about reports the USS Dwight Eisenhower aircraft carrier is sailing north through the Red Sea in a show of deterrence. Israeli media reported that the US aircraft carrier's movement toward Israel is meant to be a show of deterrence against Iran.

Tehran reportedly warned Washington that it will attack US forces in the Middle East if the United States gets involved in a military confrontation between Iran and Israel.

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UPDATE - US House Passes Bill to Reform, Reauthorize Foreign Surveillance Authorities

(Updates with more details in paras 8, 9)

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed legislation to reform and reauthorize the Section 702 spying authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, in a vote of 273 in favor and 147 opposed.

The legislation reauthorizes Section 702 authorities, which were set to expire on April 19, for two years. The bill also reforms several aspects of the spying program, after an investigation revealed that the US government abused the surveillance power hundreds of thousands of times.

House lawmakers amended the bill to include international narcotics trafficking operations and foreign travelers in the scope of Section 702 authorities, require reports to Congress on US persons queries and update the definition of electronic communication service provider under Section 702.

However, the House of Representatives rejected an amendment to include a warrant requirement for surveillance of US citizens in a tie vote of 212 in favor and 212 opposed.

"This is how the Constitution dies. The Speaker [Mike Johnson] doesn't always vote in the House, but he was the tie breaker today. He voted against warrants," US Congressman Thomas Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

The Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution enshrines protections against unreasonable

searches and seizures without proper issuance of a warrant.

Following the passage of the bill, US Congresswoman Anna Paulina Luna requested a vote on a motion to reconsider passage of the legislation, which was motioned to table.

The House of Representatives postponed a vote on the motion to table the motion to reconsider, delaying advancement of the bill to the US Senate for consideration.

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Blinken to Visit Italy Next Week for G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is scheduled to travel to Capri, Italy, for the Group of Seven (G7) foreign ministers meeting from April 16-19, the State Department announced on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will attend the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Capri, Italy from April 16-19," the State Department said in a statement.

Participants in the meeting will include the foreign ministers of Italy, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the European Union, the statement said.

Blinken is expected to discuss with the other participants in the meeting the issue of continued support for Ukraine, the Middle East crisis and stabilizing Haiti, the statement added.

The United States seeks to strengthen global partnerships on shared concerns such as development finance, climate change, artificial intelligence, public health and peace and security, according to the statement.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Trump's 'Hush-Money' Trial Involving Stormy Daniels Begins on Monday

(Repeats due to technical error)

NEW YORK, April 12 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's trial involving alleged hush-money payments to pornography actress Stormy Daniels during his 2016 presidential campaign is set to begin in New York on Monday.

The case involves alleged hush money paid via Trump's attorney Michael Cohen to Daniels and others from August 2015 to December 2017.

Last year, Trump pleaded not guilty to all 34 counts of falsifying business records in connection with the alleged payments of hush money.

Trump has repeatedly called the trial date "election interference," saying the trial was envisioned to preclude or limit his chances in the 2024 US presidential election.

Last week, Trump's legal team filed another motion to recuse Judge Juan Merchan, who is overseeing the case, citing conflict of interest and due process concerns. Trump argued that the judge's daughter has a direct financial interest in his case given that President Joe Biden and

Vice President Kamala Harris are clients of her digital agency Authentic.

Last month, Merchan filed an order to gag Trump, limiting his public statements about witnesses, legal counsel, court staff and their families to prevent interference with the case.

The New York State Supreme Court judge recently rejected a previous motion by Trump's team to delay the trial in the case until the US Supreme Court decides on the issue of his immunity from prosecution.

The US Supreme Court is scheduled to decide whether Trump is immune from being prosecuted as a former US president on April 25.

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[EMBARGO] PREVIEW - Trump's 'Hush-Money' Trial Involving Stormy Daniels Begins on Monday

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UN Chief Closely Monitors Iran's Actions, Worries About Escalation - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 12 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is closely monitoring Iran's actions and is very worried about further escalations in the already tense region, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"It's something he [Guterres] is following very closely," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "We're very worried about potential escalation in a situation that seems to be escalating on a daily basis."

However, Dujarric also said that the United Nations has no inside information on any potential military activities by any of the parties in the region.

"Our message which has been sent publicly and privately is to avoid any escalation and to work toward de-escalation of the tensions," Dujarric added.

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Immigration Watchdog Authorizes Eligible Palestinians to Work in US Through August 2025

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – Eligible Palestinian refugees are now able to apply for employment authorization and work in the United States through August 13, 2025, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced on Friday.

"U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services today posted a Federal Register notice establishing procedures for Palestinians covered by Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) to apply for Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) that will be valid through Aug. 13, 2025," USCIS said in a press release.

On February 14, US President Joe Biden issued a memorandum deferring the removal of certain Palestinians present in the United States through August 13, 2025, according to the release.

The release also clarified that those Palestinians who arrived in the United States after February 14 are not eligible for DED.

Biden's memorandum was issued in the wake of Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza resulting in millions of Palestinian refugees and an ever-growing civilian death toll.

Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state in the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and builds settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the UN.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. 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 33,100 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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Oil Price Above \$90 Bracing for Iran Retaliatory Strikes on Israel

NEW YORK, April 12 (Sputnik) - The global crude benchmark Brent on Friday stayed above the key bullish level of \$90 per barrel, as buyers piled in amid speculation that Iran will conduct retaliatory strikes against Israel for the latter attacking Iran's diplomatic compound in Syria.

Retaliatory strikes against Israel could expand the existing conflict in the Gaza Strip and pose very significant ramifications to global relations as well as oil markets, according to analysts.

"Today is very much a commodity-based rally with some fears of Iran/Israel developments over the weekend," Scott Shelton, a crude futures broker for ICAP in North Carolina, said in an email to his clients, shared with Sputnik News.

The UK-based Brent crude was up \$1.17, or 1.3%, to \$90.91 per barrel in New York trading by 12:00 p.m. ET (17:00 GMT).

The global crude benchmark lost nearly 2% combined for Monday and Tuesday, but has since pared those losses for a weekly slide of just 0.3%.

Brent's high for Friday was \$92.18, a level not seen since its peak of \$92.45 on October 23. If that peak is taken out, then the next comparison would be the \$93.79 high reached on October 20.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, was up \$1.20, or 1.4%, to \$86.22 per barrel in New York trading. Like Brent, WTI fell 2% in the first two sessions of this week before paring losses to head towards a weekly decline of 0.7%.

On Friday, WTI hit a five-month high of \$87.63, matching its peak from a week ago. If that peak is taken out, then the next comparison for the US crude benchmark would be the \$88.29 high reached on October 23.

Crude futures have rallied broadly since the start of 2024, with WTI up 20% on the year and Brent standing 18% higher. Traders are now eyeing the possibility of Brent reaching \$100 and WTI \$90 between May and June.

"I like the idea of being long-WTI spreads toward the end of the month," Shelton said.

"Being long" refers to adding to bullish bets that prices would go higher.

Iran is a key member of the 13-nation Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which has already been curtailing its oil output over the past two months to force crude prices higher.

Disruptions to crude shipments out of the Middle East - both real and perceived - have been steadily pushing oil markets higher since the start of the year. If Iran acts against Israel, it will add fuel to a market already ablaze from geopolitical frictions, analysts say.

Global news networks have been speculating about an imminent Iran attack on Israel with precision weapons since Bloomberg first raised that possibility on Wednesday, citing assessments by US and Israeli intelligence.

US President Joe Biden added to the speculation when he said on Wednesday that he was aware of the threat posed to Israel by Iran.

Biden also said he held a meeting with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and

sought to address, among a range of issues, the alleged "Iranian threat."

Biden noted that Iran has threatened to launch a significant retaliatory attack on Israel and he expressed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the United States' iron-clad commitment to Israel's security.

US Defense Department officials told Sputnik earlier this week that they had no information to provide on a possible imminent strike against Israel.

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WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed legislation to reform and reauthorize Section 702 spying authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act, in a vote of 273 in favor and 147 opposed.

The legislation reauthorizes Section 702 authorities, which were set to expire on April 19, for two years. The bill also reforms several aspects of the spying program, after an investigation revealed that the US government abused the surveillance power hundreds of thousands of times.

House lawmakers amended the bill to include international narcotics trafficking operations and foreign travelers in the scope of Section 702 authorities, require reports to the US Congress on US persons queries and update the definition of electronic communication service provider under Section 702.

However, the House of Representatives rejected an amendment to include a warrant requirement for surveillance of US citizens in a tie vote of 212 in favor and 212 opposed.

"This is how the Constitution dies. The Speaker [Mike Johnson] doesn't always vote in the House, but he was the tie breaker today. He voted against warrants," US Congressman Thomas Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

The Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution enshrines protections against searches and seizures without proper issuance of a warrant.

The legislation now heads to the US Senate for consideration.

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Iran Warns It Will Attack US Forces in Mideast If It Helps Defend Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Tehran warned Washington that it will attack US forces in the Middle East if the United States gets involved in a military confrontation between Iran and Israel, Axios reported on Friday, citing three US officials familiar with the matter.

Last week, Israel carried out an airstrike on the consular annex of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, destroying the building. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said seven of its members had been killed in the attack, including two commanders. Iran is expected to conduct retaliatory strikes against Israel in the coming hours or days.

The Iranian message was that if the United States gets involved after the anticipated Iranian attack on Israel, US bases in the region will be attacked, the report said.

However, a US official told Axios that it's unclear if Iran is threatening to attack US forces in the region if they help Israel intercept Iranian missiles or only if they participate in an Israeli counteroffensive.

The US intelligence community believes Iran could attack US forces only if the United States joins Israel in a counteroffensive, the report said, citing a US official.

Two US officials, the report added, said Iran aims to conduct a limited response that will not lead to a regional escalation.

The United States is communicating directly with Iran through the formal Swiss channel of communication, but Iran relayed its threats through several Arab countries, the report said.

The Biden administration has requested that Israel check in with the United States first before making any decisions on any potential retaliatory actions against Iran following the anticipated attack.

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Biden Approves \$25Mln Humanitarian Aid Boost for Uganda Refugees - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved an additional \$25 million in food and other aid to help refugees in Uganda, the US State Department announced in a release on Friday.

"The United States, through the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), and USAID [US Agency for International Development], is providing more than \$25 million in additional humanitarian funding to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP) to assist refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda," the release said.

PRM is contributing more than \$14 million to UNHCR and USAID is providing \$11 million to WFP, bringing US total humanitarian assistance in Uganda to more than \$178 million since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2023, the release said.

"These additional contributions to UNHCR and WFP will support the provision of essential services such as health, education, protection, food assistance, and income-generating activities to the more than 1.6 million refugees in Uganda," the release added.

Uganda contains the highest number of refugees of any African country and received more than 130,000 new refugees last year who were fleeing conflicts in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sudan, according to the release.

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Pentagon Says Deploying SM-32A Blocks on Ships Shouldn't Cause Concerns From Russia,China

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – The US military believes that deploying Standard Missile 3 blocks IIA (SM-3 IIA) on its ships worldwide should not create concerns in Russia and China, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space and Missile Defense John Hill said on Friday. “I think the implications of the SM32A, which is up being deployed in fleets in different places around the world, is not something that should logically cause China or Russia to have any concerns from the strategic stability perspective,” Hill said during a hearing at the US House Armed Services Committee.

The SM-3 is a ship-based surface-to-air missile system used by the United States Navy to intercept short—and intermediate-range ballistic missiles as part of the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System.

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NASA Says Gagarin's Historic Spaceflight Began Human Exploration of Universe

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's historic spaceflight in 1961 began the journey of human exploration of the universe, a NASA spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday in commemoration of Cosmonautics Day.

"This milestone in human spaceflight began the journey on the road to human exploration of the universe," the spokesperson said.

On April 12, 1961, Gagarin became the first person to travel into space aboard the Vostok spacecraft. Cosmonautics Day is celebrated in Russia and some other post-Soviet republics on April 12 to commemorate Gagarin's achievement.

In 2012, the UN General Assembly proclaimed April 12 as the International Day of Human Space Flight with the support of over 60 UN member states.

The NASA spokesperson highlighted that many significant accomplishments for the Russian and US space programs have occurred over the decades as shown through the international partnership on the International Space Station, and will continue in the future to inspire new generations of explorers.

Earlier on Friday, Russian cosmonauts Oleg Kononenko, Nikolai Chub and Alexander Grebenkin, who are currently aboard the International Space Station, congratulated Russians on Cosmonautics Day.

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NASA Says Gagarin's Historic Spaceflight Began Human Exploration of Universe

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Kirby Claims US Warning of Terrorist Attack in Russia Was as Detailed as Possible

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – The United States was as detailed as it could be in its warning to Russia about an imminent terrorist attack in March, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"We did have a communication with Russian officials because of the 'duty to warn.' That conversation was as detailed as we could make it," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Earlier in April, US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh wrote, citing a US official, that the US warning about an imminent terrorist attack at a concert venue in Russia was marked "urgent," but contrary to media reports did not identify Crocus City Hall as the target.

On March 22, several armed men broke into Crocus City Hall, a major concert venue just outside Moscow, and started shooting at people. They also started a fire in one of the auditoriums, which was full of people ahead of a concert. The attack left 695 casualties, including 144 dead, according to the latest data from the Russian Emergencies Ministry.

The four main suspects in the case — all of them citizens of Tajikistan — tried to flee the scene in a car but were detained and charged with terrorism. Russian authorities believe the perpetrators planned to flee to Ukraine, where a safe haven had been arranged for them. An investigation is underway.

Later in March, The New York Times reported, citing European and US security officials, that the US intelligence agencies did not provide the Russian side with all the information they had about the threat of a terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in the Moscow Region out of fear that Russian authorities might learn about their intelligence sources or methods of work.

Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov also said that the information transmitted by the United States on the preparation of a terrorist attack was of a general nature, and the Russian special services responded to it.

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Ukraine Can Fulfill Russia's Requirements Without Compromising Own Statehood - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 12 (Sputnik) - Ukraine can reach a peace agreement with Russia and fulfill Moscow's security requirements without compromising its sovereignty and statehood, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"Our justified and well-grounded demands to our neighbor ... are well known. Ukraine can achieve this and meet these demands without detriment to its sovereignty and statehood," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador said if Ukraine wanted peace, they would have reached a peace agreement long ago.

Nebenzia also said that Germany was able to end Nazism and Japan was able to end militarism, and these developments did not result in the disappearance of their states.

Regarding the current situation, Nebenzia said given Ukraine's constant losses on the battlefield, it is being transformed into a terrorist state.

Russia called the meeting on Ukraine at the Security Council to discuss deliveries of weapons by the collective West to Ukraine - in response to yesterday's meeting called by the Western countries to discuss the humanitarian situation in Ukraine.

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US Treasury Says Sanctioning Hamas' Drone, Cyber Operations Leaders

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on the leaders of the Palestinian organization Hamas' drone and cyber operations units, the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is taking action against Hamas, targeting Gaza- and Lebanon-based leaders of the terrorist group's offensive cyber and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operations," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The European Union is concurrently imposing sanctions against Hamas, the statement said. The sanctions action reinforces the United States' continued focus on disrupting Hamas' ability to conduct attacks, including through cyber and drone warfare, the statement added.

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US Made Force Posture Changes Amid Threat of Iranian Retaliation Against Israel – Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – The United States has changed its force posture in the Middle East in anticipation of a potential Iranian retaliation strike against Israel, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"There have been force posture changes. I certainly can't deny that we've taken a look at that and made some adjustments," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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White House Declines Comment on Extent of US Assistance to Israel in Case of Iran Attack

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The White House on Friday declined to comment on the extent of US assistance to Israel in the event of an Iranian attack.

"I'm not going to get into speaking about the details of our commitment to help Israel defend itself," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said during a briefing.

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Russian Mission to UN Calls Kishida Statement on Alleged Russian Nuclear Threat 'Disgrace'

UNITED NATIONS, April 12 (Sputnik) - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's statement in the US Congress that Russia allegedly represents a nuclear threat is a shame and a disgrace, Russian First Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky said on Friday.

"What a shame and disgrace," Polyanskiy said via the social media platform X.

On Thursday, Kishida said in his address to US lawmakers that Japan is a loyal ally and steadfast friend of the United States and that Russia allegedly continues to threaten to use nuclear weapons.

Kishida also said that this situation has contributed to concerns around the world about another nuclear weapons disaster is possible today.

The Japanese prime minister failed to mention in his speech that the only use of atomic weapons in armed conflict was conducted by the United States against Japan in 1945.

US lawmakers repeatedly rose from their seats to applaud Kishida on various aspects of his speech.

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Up to 226,000 people - mostly civilians - were killed in the attacks. The two cities' residential structures were mostly burned and destroyed in the detonations.

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US House Democrat Continues to Stall F-15 Jets Sale to Israel Despite Assurances - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Gregory Meeks continues to withhold approval of a sale of F-15 fighter jets despite receiving assurances from Israel about their usage, Axios reported on Friday.

Meeks reviewed the assurances from Israel that they would abide by international law during military operations in the Gaza Strip, but the lawmaker is yet to greenlight the sale, the report said, citing a lawmaker familiar with the matter.

At least a dozen House Democrats are pressuring Meeks to block the deal, according to the report.

As ranking member of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, Meeks has the power to place holds on US weapons sales.

A senior US official reportedly said that the State Department showed Meeks a letter outlining Israel's assurances, but that the lawmaker did not indicate whether he intends to approve the sale.

Israel would not receive the fighter jets for five years, Meeks reportedly said, adding that he is "doing his homework" and considering multiple factors before approving the sale.

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Biden Used Democratic Campaign Funds to Pay Special Counsel Probe Legal Bills - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden used campaign funds channeled through the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to pay legal bills associated with a special counsel probe into his mishandling of classified materials, Axios reported on Friday.

The DNC paid more than \$1.5 million in legal fees for Biden during the special counsel probe, the report said, citing campaign finance records and two people familiar with the matter.

Earlier this year, Special Counsel Robert Hur released a report on his investigation, which found that Biden willfully mishandled classified materials. However, Hur declined to bring

criminal charges against Biden, claiming that a jury would likely have found Biden a "well-meaning" old man with a poor memory.

Democrats have criticized former US President and presumptive 2024 Republican Party presidential nominee Donald Trump for likewise using campaign donations to pay legal expenses.

However, there is "no comparison" between Biden and Trump using political funds to pay legal bills, DNC spokesperson Alex Floyd reportedly said.

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No Reason for China to Look at US-Japan-Philippines Summit as Threat - White House

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – There is no reason for China to look at the first-ever US-Japan-Philippines summit as a threat, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

“There's no reason for the PRC [the People's Republic of China] to look at this as any kind of a threat,” Kirby said during a press briefing. “This was simply a discussion between three allies about mutual challenges and, quite frankly, mutual opportunities that we are trying to explore in the Indo-Pacific region.”

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US Deems Potential Threat of Iranian Retaliation Against Israel to Be Real, Viable – Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – The United States considers the potential threat of Iran's retaliation against Israel for a strike on its consulate in Damascus to be real and viable and continues to watch it closely, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

“We still deem the potential threat by Iran here to be real, to be viable, certainly credible, and we are watching it as closely as we can,” Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby emphasized that at the moment the Biden administration is making sure that Israel has everything it needs to defend itself.

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white house declines comment on possibility of direct us involvement in case of iran attack on israel

Trump Allegedly Believed During His Presidency Ukraine 'Must Be Part of Russia' - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump during his presidency allegedly believed that Ukraine "must be part of Russia" and could not understand the idea of Ukraine's independence, The Guardian reported on Friday citing Trump's former adviser Fiona Hill as saying in an upcoming book by David Sanger, a New York Times reporter.

In Sanger's book "New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West," Hill tells the author that Trump made it very clear he thought Ukraine, and certainly Crimea, must be part of Russia.

"He [Trump] really could not get his head around the idea that Ukraine was an independent state," the report cited Hill as telling Sanger in the book.

Citing Hill's statements, Sanger concludes in his book that Trump's views of Ukraine were "essentially identical" to those of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the report said.

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Biden Canceling \$7.4Bln in Student Debt for Almost 300,000 Borrowers - White House

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden announced on Friday that his administration is canceling \$7.4 billion in student debt for almost 300,000 borrowers.

"Today, my Administration is canceling student debt for 277,000 more people, bringing the total number of Americans who have been approved for debt relief so far under my Administration to 4.3 million borrowers through various actions," Biden said in a statement.

He added that these borrowers are enrolled in his administration's SAVE Plan, or were approved for relief because of fixes that have been made to Income-Driven Repayment Plans and Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

Earlier this week, the Biden administration unveiled new plans that would cancel student debt for more than 30 million Americans when combined with other measures already taken.