

5/15/24 Wednesday

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Biden Sending \$1 Billion Arms Package to Israel in Latest Flip-Flop – Report

The news comes just days after Biden announced a hold on the provision of 2,000 pound bombs to Israel, citing concerns over the potential for mass civilian casualties.

Reporting on Tuesday [indicated](#) US President Joe Biden is preparing to send \$1.25 billion worth of weapons and ammunition to Israel despite putting a separate arms transfer on hold just days ago.

The news emerged late in the day based on reports from three congressional aides speaking on condition of anonymity.

The package will reportedly include \$700 million worth of tank ammunition, \$500 million for tactical vehicles and \$60 million for mortar rounds. It is currently unconfirmed when exactly the weapons package will be sent.

The news comes just one week after the Biden administration announced a hold on the provision of 2,000 pound bombs to Israel, citing concerns over the potential for mass civilian casualties as Israel attacks Rafah. The crowded southern Gazan city is currently home to over 1.5 million Palestinians, many of them refugees from other parts of the territory.

Biden has previously [suggested](#) an Israeli incursion into the city would constitute a “red line,” before immediately walking the comment back during a heavily criticized interview on cable news channel MSNBC.

The US president was pilloried by conservative and pro-Israel lawmakers after announcing the hold on heavy weaponry last week as White House spokespeople quickly clarified the administration would continue to provide Israel with various other forms of lethal aid.

The announcement of the new weapons package may be seen as a response to criticism from pro-Israel forces as the octogenarian US leader prepares to seek reelection, hoping to keep the powerful Zionist lobby on his side.

The Biden administration previously contradicted itself in March after voting “present” during a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, allowing a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Israel’s seven-month assault on Gaza to pass. White House officials quickly insisted the resolution was “non-binding,” a characterization criticized by international law experts.

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Conflict at Home and Abroad as Clock Ticks Down on US Empire

Journalist Patrick Lawence sees weakness at the heart of American attempts to impose its will by force.

A provocative new [essay](#) by author Patrick Lawrence suggests the collapse of US empire is on the horizon, with the repression of pro-Palestine campus protests serving as the most recent evidence of a global power in recession.

“In this late phase of decline, no one or no entity is permitted to stand beyond the fence posts in the name of independent thought or free speech,” writes Lawrence for the website ScheerPost. “The special gravity of this when tertiary education is the target cannot be overstated. Destroy colleges and universities as sanctuaries of uncircumscribed, purposefully exploratory thought and speech – academic freedom in the common parlance – and you are a good way along to destroying the nation’s intellectual dynamism, and so the nation’s future.”

Author and international security analyst David Oualaalou joined [Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program Tuesday](#) to discuss the piece, reflecting on the turmoil increasingly experienced by the United States both at home and abroad.

“Let’s start with the internal, or domestic front,” said Oualaalou, “the fragmentation that exists within the system which, by the way, didn’t start a year ago, or two years, or three. That was in the making for the last three or four decades. It’s just now it’s becoming more open, more vivid, more apparent, and the American people feel like coming to grips with this reality.”

“The administration is sending our tax dollars to Ukraine – that is getting wasted and there is nothing in it for us American citizens,” he added.

The sentiment is increasingly shared by Americans across the political spectrum, with [half](#) of respondents in a recent survey agreeing US President Joe Biden is spending “too much” money on propping up Ukraine’s war effort and civil society.

Polling shows Americans’ views about the economy more broadly are pessimistic, with 54% [saying](#) younger generations will likely enjoy a lower standard of living than their parents and 70% of people under 30 [saying](#) home ownership in the US has become more difficult. On the other side of the age divide, the country faces a major crisis as millions of older Americans [approach retirement age with insufficient savings](#).

Internationally the United States appears to be losing its clout in global institutions, with host Garland Nixon pointing to [a letter drafted by 12 US senators](#) threatening the International Criminal Court against taking action against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his cabinet. Whereas previously the country enjoyed a level of influence and respect that allowed it to mold global opinion, “it appears that the US [now] sees the [United Nations] only as a political tool,” remarked Garland.

“That’s just the double standard but also it shows even a much bigger problem, and that is the end of American dominance and influence on the global stage,” agreed Oualaalou. “The American century is coming to a close whether we like it or not. And what comes with it? It’s the end, for example, of the financial dominance. It’s the end of the global economic dominance.”

“What happened to freedom of speech?” the analyst asked, commenting on recent police crackdowns on campus pro-Palestine demonstrations in the US. “Freedom of expression in academia when they’re on campus, or wherever? So those people, if they are demonstrating peacefully, which was the case, against injustice – how can the government just send in these riot police like we are in a war zone here?”

“Or sending [snipers on the roof](#) of the colleges? That, to me, was degrading. And we have the audacity to say we are a democratic nation? Really?”

Lawrence reserved his most withering criticism for the discourse surrounding an alleged “crisis” of antisemitism in the United States, which he compared to the McCarthyism of the 1950s. “This is an assault on reason, language, law – and even that highest of American ‘values’ – common sense,” he writes. “It is a sign of American weakness and further advances this weakness.”

“Those purporting to lead this nation are very little interested any longer, if they are interested at all, in what the rest of the world thinks of America – or even what Americans think of America,” he adds. “Power is all the late-phase imperium has left to rely upon.”

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Conflict at home and abroad as clock ticks down on US empire

A provocative new essay by author Patrick Lawrence suggests the collapse of US empire is on the horizon, with the repression of pro-Palestine campus protests serving as the most recent evidence of a global power in recession.

“The special gravity of this... cannot be overstated. Destroy colleges and universities as sanctuaries of uncircumscribed, purposefully exploratory thought and speech – academic freedom in the common parlance – and you are a good way along to destroying the nation’s intellectual dynamism, and so the nation’s future,” writes Lawrence.

Author and international security analyst David Oualaalou joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program to discuss the piece, reflecting on the turmoil increasingly experienced by the United States both at home and abroad.

"How can the government just send in this riot police like we are in a war zone here. Or sending snipers on the roof of the colleges? That, to me, was like degrading. And we have the audacity to say we are a democratic nation? Really? How so?" Oualaalou wondered.

“The administration is sending our tax dollars to Ukraine – that is getting wasted and there is nothing in it for us American citizens,” said Oualaalou.

Internationally the US appears to be losing its clout in global institutions, with host Garland Nixon pointing to a letter drafted by 12 US senators threatening the International Criminal Court against taking action against Israel. Whereas previously the country enjoyed a level of influence and respect that allowed it to mold global opinion, “it appears that the US [now] sees the UN only as a political tool,” remarked Garland.

"Well, that's just the double standard but also it shows even a much bigger problem, and that is the end of American dominance and influence on the global stage is coming to an end. It is a reality we cannot shy away from facing," Oualaalou emphasized.

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Biden sending \$1 billion arms package to Israel in latest flip-flop – report

US President Joe Biden is preparing to send \$1.25 billion worth of weapons and ammunition to Israel despite putting a separate arms transfer on hold just days ago, The Washington Post reported.

The news emerged late in the day based on reports from three congressional aides speaking anonymously. The package will reportedly include \$700 million worth of tank ammunition, \$500 million for tactical vehicles and \$60 million for mortar rounds. It is currently unconfirmed when exactly the weapons package will be sent.

The news comes just one week after the Biden administration announced a hold on the provision of 2,000 pound bombs to Israel, citing concerns over the potential for mass civilian casualties as Israel attacks Rafah. The crowded southern Gazan city is currently home to over 1.5 million Palestinians, many of them refugees from other parts of the territory.

Biden has previously suggested an Israeli incursion into the city would constitute a “red line,” before immediately walking the comment back during a heavily criticized interview on MSNBC.

The US president was pilloried by pro-Israel lawmakers after announcing the hold on heavy weaponry last week as White House spokespeople quickly clarified the administration would continue to provide Israel with various other forms of lethal aid.

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Tensions between Egypt and Israel grow as the US plays 'political trickery'

Tensions between Israel and Egypt have been growing in recent days as the former has stepped up its military attacks on the city of Rafah. Egypt announced that it plans to join a genocide case against Israel that was first brought by South Africa. Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst in the office of the Secretary of Defense, joined Sputnik's Fault Lines to discuss the growing tensions between Egypt and Israel. “The Egyptians have been rather tolerant,” said Maloof. “They don't want the Israelis pushing Palestinians into the Sinai - that's their land now. They're not set up for it.” Aid has accumulated on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing between southern Gaza and Egypt since Israel seized control of the crossing on May 7. Israel has said it is up to Egypt to allow a reopening of the crossing, which Cairo has said is a “desperate attempt” to scapegoat them for the blockage of aid. “But, as long as the

Israelis are hell-bent on keeping out and pushing and bombing, there's no talk, there's no discussion. And, of course, the US continues to supply this. In the decades ahead, it's going to have a major impact on how the world views not only Israel, but also the US," the analyst emphasized.

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#### Tensions Between Egypt and Israel Grow as US Plays 'Political Trickery'

The Philadelphia accord was added to the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in 2005 following the evacuation of Israeli settlements in Gaza. Israel's recent capture of the Egypt side of the crossing is being seen as a breach of that accord.

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Michael Maloof is a former senior security policy analyst in the office of the Secretary of Defense, and is also an author and regular contributing analyst on RT. On Wednesday, he joined [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) to discuss the growing tensions between Egypt and Israel.

"The Egyptians have been rather tolerant," said Maloof. "They don't want the Israelis pushing Palestinians into the Sinai - that's their land now. They're not set up for it... And now you have the Israelis trying [a form of ethnic cleansing](#), if you will. And this is now beginning to arouse the other Sunni countries in the region - not only Egypt, but also Saudi Arabia and a few others who are saying, 'you just can't keep going on like this.'"

Egypt announced on Sunday that it would seek permission to join South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in which Israel has been accused of violating its obligations under the [Genocide Convention](#). Earlier this year, Colombia and Turkiye also asked to join the case which was brought in January.

In their request to join South Africa's case against Israel at the ICJ, Egypt commented on the "worsening severity and scope of Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip, and the continued perpetration of systematic practices against the Palestinian people, including direct targeting of civilians and the destruction of infrastructure in the Strip, and pushing Palestinians to flee."

Egyptian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid added that Israel's actions in Gaza have "led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, creating [unlivable conditions in the Gaza strip](#), blatantly violating international law, international humanitarian law, and the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War."

"I think [Egypt made] a reluctant decision. They thought maybe they could work with the Israelis, but I think they finally came to the conclusion that the Israelis were not in a listening mood," the analyst said. "There was no give and take here and they finally decided that - probably - that the Israelis are hell bent on a genocide approach. And that's what the allegations of the ICC is all about. So I think they did it reluctantly because they wanted to maintain that peace agreement, the Camp David Accords."

"But, as long as the Israelis are hell-bent on keeping out and pushing and bombing, there's no talk, there's no discussion. And, of course, the US continues to supply this. In the decades ahead, it's going to have a major impact on how the world views not only Israel, but also the US. If Israel still survives, I'm beginning to think that there's some question about that here."

"If this thing escalates into a regional conflagration, but it seems to be heading in that direction, and if the Egyptians, who are right next door, begin to wash their hands of it, that's not a good sign," he added. "I fully expect that the Egyptians will begin to move troops in and, because the concern is that Israelis could move into Sinai in order to get the Palestinians out of there and that's just not acceptable under any measure."

Sputnik's Jamarl Thomas then asked the show's guest about US President Joe Biden's decision to withhold weapons from Israel following their offensive action on Rafah.

"You can never mistrust them enough. And that appears to be what is occurring here with the Biden administration. They speak out of both ends of their mouth," Maloof explained. "I think Biden is walking a delicate line. He wants to show support for Israel, on the one hand, but he's also got, internally, people screaming and yelling in his ear by the progressives at the universities."

"The problem is going to be that he's going to continue doing what he's doing, but in a subliminal way. There's not going to be any broadcasting, for example, slowing up of the 2,000-, 1,000-pound bombs," he continued. "And when people's attention is away from it, then they just quietly move them in. He wants to give the impression that he doesn't want them all dropped on people in Rafah, but they can just line up a number of aircraft and just strafe the area and bomb whatever they have. They can get bombs from elsewhere, from the UK, for example. The UK has already said they're not going to hold up any shipments. So, it's all political trickery."

Maloof addressed why the US is so dependent on ensuring its relationship with Israel. The US has maintained a steady flow of weapons to Israel worth billions of dollars, but major American weapons manufacturers have also benefited from the war in Gaza, including Lockheed Martin, RTX, Boeing, and General Dynamics which have all reportedly seen their stock prices skyrocket as a result of the destruction and war crimes in Gaza, a recent [report](#) addressed.

"The United States is too committed to Israel. Not only due to its lobbying efforts, but also our own defense contracting lobbyists on the Hill. They need to continue to stay in business. They need to thrive. Some of these, like Lockheed and all these, 90% of their income is from the US government. They need these contracts, and the only way you have them is by encouraging and fomenting conflict. And that's what we're seeing. We've had endless conflict now for 23 years."

"And so, you know, and, we don't see any end to it. And now the Biden administration comes in, an administration that hasn't done anything to improve the plight of Americans generally, but has offered us now two wars that we're now and heartily engaged with. We've opened our borders, made us energy dependent again on Middle East countries, ironically, that can't wait to get off

the US dollars. What we're seeing here is that, and we have inflation. I mean, where's the benefit that this administration is offering?"

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Living in an Alternate Reality: Blinken Performs With Rock Band in Kiev Bar

Blinken played on stage at a speakeasy-style bar in central Kyiv called Barman Dictat, where he joined the Ukrainian band 19.99 for a rendition of Canadian-American singer-songwriter Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World".

Following a number of high-level meetings in Kyiv, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken played a rendition of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" accompanied by a Ukrainian rock band, [The Guardian](#) reported. According to the outlet, the stunt divided opinion in Ukraine, with some viewing it as a gesture of support, and others acknowledging the bizarre optics of performing in a bar while Ukrainian soldiers lose their lives on the frontlines of the US proxy war with Russia. Moscow-based international relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday, and lambasted Blinken's bizarre stunt.

"So it appears that Antony Blinken's emergency trip to Kiev was him delivering a secret new US weapons system to the Kiev regime," said Sleboda ironically. "A system that we are told is even more powerful than the infamous HAARP system. This system is a sonic weapon. It consists of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken attempting to perform Neil Young's 'Rockin' in the Free World.' And, evidently, this rendition was such an awful sonic onslaught that the Russian government is considering surrendering."

"But, besides that, it's pretty much, just a quizzical look in a way," the analyst continued. "It is rather bizarre and, as the Guardian notes, within the Kiev regime, it's not simply regarded as laughable, but there are critics, including from some Ukrainian soldiers who spoke to the Guardian that said it was inappropriate that he was singing in a bar when Ukrainian men are dying and having their limbs blown off in trenches."

"And on the same trip, Antony Blinken is telling Ukrainian students, at a university in Kiev, that they need to embrace conscription and head into those trenches," he added.

It was reported on Tuesday that Blinken said Ukraine will hold elections when all Ukrainians, including those who now live in Russia, decide to participate. A recent [article](#) from RT suggests that doing so essentially permits Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky to postpone a vote unless Ukrainian territories are recaptured. Ukraine was scheduled to hold a presidential election on March 31, but Zelensky canceled the vote last year citing martial law and the ongoing conflict with Russia.

"Evidently Zelensky is president of the Kiev regime for life, at least until he is overthrown, or killed by his own people, or whatever. He said that they will have elections in Ukraine again when all of the millions of Ukrainians that have fled to Europe, or, to Russia, because there's some 5 million Ukrainians in Russia - not counting those that have since become Russian citizens," said Sleboda.

It was also reported on [Tuesday](#) that UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said the UK would not support any solution to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that involves what it sees as concessions to Moscow. Earlier that day, the defense secretary said that the UK would also provide Kiev weapons to strike Russia's Crimean Peninsula, because London considers the region to be an "integral part of Ukraine". Shapps added that he does not think it "plausible at all for [Russian President Vladimir] Putin to win this war."

"I mean, has he paid any attention to the headlines? The state of the battle? Doesn't he receive intelligence briefings? I think he's as much of the Western leadership, they appear to be living in an alternate reality. They have become so accustomed to their supremacist, messianic belief in their own exceptionalism that they just simply can't come to grips with the fact that they are losing this proxy war against Russia, and they are losing it badly," said Sleboda.

"And it is a tragedy because he is sending hundreds of millions of pounds of British taxpayers' money again and again and again to weapons, to this regime that is not changing the reality on the ground at all. These weapons are shoved into the hands of people that are press-ganged forcibly off the streets of little villages and Transcarpathia is not going to win this war against Russia for Grant Shapps."

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Endgame for Ukraine? Peaceful Settlement Still Blocked by Anti-Russia West

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's backers are still driven by anti-Russia extremism, claims one analyst.

President Vladimir Putin arrived in China early Thursday for the Russian leader's first foreign visit since beginning another term in office earlier this month.

Recent reporting suggests discussions over the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war will take place when Putin meets with his counterpart Chinese President Xi Jinping before touring the Asian country. China released a [12-point peace plan](#) to end the conflict last year, identifying eastward NATO expansion as the origin of the conflict. Beijing has stressed the importance of addressing Moscow's security concerns in any peace settlement, criticizing Western efforts that exclude Russian participation.

Putin has [praised](#) "the genuine desire of our Chinese friends to help stabilize the situation," endorsing Beijing's view of the roots of the war.

Jim Jatras, a former senior foreign policy advisor to Republicans in the US Senate, joined [Sputnik's Political Misfits program](#) to discuss the meeting as the attempted assassination of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico demonstrates enduring tensions over the conflict throughout Europe.

"Let's remember, too, that Xi just got back from his trip to Europe where he had a very contentious meeting with [French President Emmanuel] Macron," noted Jatras. "The Chinese plan, remember – we're talking about many months ago when developments were very, very different from what they are now, especially now with this new [Russian] offensive coming in the

north of Ukraine. It's possible that the Russians would [previously] settle for some kind of minimalist plan.”

“I don't think that's going to happen,” he argued. “Despite whatever their other inclinations might be, I think the Russians will be forced to go for something that's much more maximal, maybe including what amounts to the liquidation of the current Ukrainian state which, by the way, will be facilitated by the fact that as of next week [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky won't even be the legal president of Ukraine anymore.”

Although Zelensky's defenders frequently cast the crisis in the Donbass as a struggle to uphold Western democratic values, the Ukrainian leader has been heavily criticized for his undemocratic policy since taking office. Zelensky has insisted elections will remain suspended while the country is at war while also banning opposition-aligned political parties. In 2021, the controversial leader banned [three opposition television networks](#), then blacklisted [eleven opposition parties](#) in March 2022.

Tensions between pro-Russian supporters of Donbass independence and pro-Western Ukrainian nationalists, neo-Nazi gangs constituted a major cause of the current political and military crisis. Polling consistently revealed that [only a minority of Ukrainians](#) supported the [pro-Western protests](#) that led to [2014's so-called Euromaidan coup](#). A survey in 2019 [showed](#) only 9% of Ukrainians expressed confidence in the regime that took hold afterwards, the lowest support for any government in the world.

Yet Zelensky's Western backers continue to block a negotiated solution with Russia even as support for the Kiev regime remains low. Questions remain over how Moscow may choose to end the conflict as Russian armed forces continue to make gains in the Kharkov region.

“What do the Russians intend?” asked Jatras. “What do they want to see as the endgame? Because whatever it is I think they're in the position to impose it. The question is, politically, what have they decided to do?”

“There is also speculation, I have seen, that even this is a diversion for what is really going to be intended as a move on Odessa,” he added. “At some point, though, I think the expectation of a lot of people is that whether it's a crack in the front in the Donbass, whether it's in the north, whether it's a move on the south, that the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian state is on the verge of collapse, and the only thing holding it up at this point is Tony Blinken and his guitar.”

“These people are ideologues,” said Jatras of Ukraine's Western backers. “They have no way of actually coming to a reasonable accommodation for Russian interests, no matter how many people in Moscow might actually welcome such a thing. So I think they're still looking at the calculus to say, ‘well, how much could we still hurt the Russians?’”

Endgame for Ukraine? Peaceful settlement still blocked by anti-Russia West

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Jim Jatras, a former senior foreign policy advisor to Republicans in the US Senate, joined Sputnik's Political Misfits program to discuss Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, where the two will reportedly discuss the ongoing Russian special military operation.

“The Chinese [peace] plan, remember – we're talking about many months ago when developments were very, very different from what they are now, especially now with this new [Russian] offensive coming in the north of Ukraine,” noted Jatras.

“Despite whatever their other inclinations might be, I think the Russians will be forced to go for something that's much more maximal, maybe including what amounts to the liquidation of the current Ukrainian state which, by the way, will be facilitated by the fact that as of next week [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky won't even be the legal president of Ukraine anymore.”

The Ukrainian leader has been heavily criticized for his undemocratic policy since taking office. Zelensky has insisted elections will remain suspended while the country is at war while also banning opposition-aligned political parties. In 2021, the controversial leader banned 3 opposition television networks, then blacklisted 11 opposition parties in March 2022.

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US Blocks Imports from 26 Chinese Companies For Alleged Forced Uyghur Labor - DHS

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Homeland Security blocked imports from 26 Chinese textile companies on Thursday over alleged ties to forced labor in Xinjiang, where the Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups are concentrated, according to a federal registry filing.

"This update adds twenty-six entities to the section 2(d)(2)(B)(v) list of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), which identifies facilities and entities that source material from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or from persons working with the government of Xinjiang or the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps for purposes of the 'poverty alleviation' program or the 'pairing-assistance' program or any other government labor scheme that uses forced labor," the filing stated.

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Microsoft Asks Hundreds of Employees to Relocate Outside of China – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Microsoft has asked hundreds of China-based employees mostly working in cloud computing and AI to consider relocating outside of China, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing unnamed sources.

The 700-800 staff in question, most of whom were engineers with Chinese nationality, were given offers to transfer to countries such as the US, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. They

will have until early June to decide whether to accept the offers or stay in China.

A Microsoft spokesperson confirmed to The Wall Street Journal that some employees were given an option for an internal transfer, but declined to comment on the reasons.

Microsoft's move came amid the White House seeking to curb Beijing's AI development, including a potential new policy that would require American cloud computing companies that offer advanced AI computing power to procure licenses for their Chinese customers.

Microsoft employs about 7,000 engineers in cloud computing and AI research and development in the Asia-Pacific, with most based in China.

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#### US Capitol Police Says Investigating Small Bag of Cocaine Found In Its Headquarters

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police said in a press release that it is investigating an incident involving a small bag of cocaine discovered on the floor of a hallway inside its headquarters.

"The United States Capitol Police (USCP) is investigating a roughly one-inch by one-inch zip lock bag with a small amount of a white powdery substance, which field tested positive for cocaine," the release said on Wednesday.

US Capitol Police will soon test the bag for any traces of human DNA, the release said.

The release explained that the hallway where the cocaine was found is on the second floor of the headquarters building where furniture and supplies are stored.

This area is heavily trafficked by contractors and employees, the release said, noting that it's also near offices such as Prisoner Processing, Crime Scene, Intel and Reports Processing.

In July 2013, the US Secret Service said it had found a small bag of cocaine inside the White House complex. Authorities concluded the investigation without identifying any suspects.

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#### Johnson Says Energy Security, Border And China Top Issues If Republicans Win in Elections

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Republicans will focus on US energy security, fixing the border crisis, and competition with China should they take control of the White House and Congress after this year's US elections, House Speaker Mike Johnson said in an interview with NBC News.

Johnson said that he expects border security will be on the Republican agenda next year if they sweep the US elections in November.

Republicans will also pass bills addressing threats from China, US crime rates, and US energy security, the report added, citing Johnson.

An aggregation of polls composed by RealClearPolitics shows former President Trump leading

President Joe Biden by one point in the US presidential election.

The poll average also shows Trump leading Biden in all seven battleground states.

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Some 1.6Mln Migrants Have Snuck Through US Southern Border Under Biden - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Some 1.6 million migrants have evaded the authorities when entering the United States illegally through the country's southern border under the Biden administration, Fox News reported, citing data it obtained from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The report said on Wednesday that between 2021 and 2023, CBP recorded that some 1.6 million migrants were able to evade authorities when they illegally crossed the US southern border.

In comparison to previous years, the number of migrants who illegally crossed the US-Mexico border freely between fiscal years 2010 to 2020 under both the Obama and Trump administrations was over 1.4 million, according to the report.

Most asylum-seeking migrants coming to the US southern border turn themselves in to US Border Patrol agents immediately after entering the United States. US immigration officials have warned that migrants seeking to evade apprehension when illegally crossing the US-Mexico border likely have a criminal background that would lead to immediate deportation if they are apprehended by American authorities.

Illegal migration on the US southern border has gone through three consecutive record-breaking years since Biden took over the White House in January 2021, totaling nearly 8 million illegal encounters during that period, according to publicly available CBP data.

Since October 2023, an estimated 1.5 million migrants have been apprehended for illegally crossing into the United States on the southern border, CBP data shows.

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US Arrests 2 Persons for Stealing \$25Mln in Cryptocurrency in 12 Seconds - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - US prosecutors indicted two brothers who allegedly exploited a vulnerability of the Ethereum blockchain network to steal \$25 million in cryptocurrency within 12 seconds, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"An indictment was unsealed today charging Anton Peraire-Bueno, 24, of Boston, and James Pepaire-Bueno, 28, of New York, with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, wire fraud, and conspiracy to commit money laundering. The charges in the indictment arise from an alleged novel scheme by the defendants to exploit the very integrity of the Ethereum blockchain to fraudulently obtain approximately \$25 million worth of cryptocurrency within approximately 12

seconds," the release said on Wednesday.

US prosecutors allege that the defendants spent months developing a technologically sophisticated and novel scheme to manipulate the Ethereum blockchain by fraudulently gaining access to pending transactions and managed to execute it in seconds, resulting in the theft of \$25 million from the victims, the release said.

The release said that the brothers were arrested on Tuesday in Boston and New York and were expected to be arraigned later on Wednesday.

Each defendant faces a maximum of 20 years in prison for each of the three counts, the release added.

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### Wall Street Hits Record Highs Cheering Retreat in US Inflation

NEW YORK, May 16 (Sputnik) - US stocks hit record highs on Wednesday as Wall Street cheered April's retreat in consumer prices that could prod the Federal Reserve into cutting interest rates in the not-too-distant future.

The US Labor Department reported earlier in the day that the growth in consumer prices slowed in April for the first time in two months. The Fed has said it needs to see a consistent retreat in inflation and less-than-stellar growth in jobs and wages to roll back interest rates at two-decade highs.

Investors on Wall Street, yearning for a rate cut since last year, responded jubilantly to the April consumer price data.

The S&P 500 Index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, hit an all-time high of 5,312, settling at 5,308 for a 1.2% gain on the day.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, reached a record high of 16,749 before finishing at 16,742, up 1.4% on the day.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest indicator for US equity markets, surged to its highest ever level of 39,935 before closing the day at 39,908, up 0.9%.

In its bid to fight inflation, the Fed has left US interest rates at two-decade highs over the past 10 months.

Inflation surged to a four-decade high amid the 2020 coronavirus breakout and subsequent restrictive measures, with the Consumer Price Index growing as much as 9.1% a year by June 2022.

The Fed, in response, hiked interest rates 11 times since March 2022.

The current range for rates, at between 5.25% and 5.5%, are at their highest since 2002. They compare with the pre-pandemic range of between zero and 0.25%.

The Fed has an opportunity to revise this at the conclusion of its next policy meeting on June 12. Should the Fed pass on its June decision on interest rates, it has four more opportunities to make a change this year: July 31, September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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#### Jewish Biden Administration Staffer Resigns Over Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - A Jewish American staffer resigned from her position at the Interior Department, citing Biden's continued support of Israel's war in Gaza, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Lily Greenberg Call resigned from her position as special assistant to the chief of staff in the Interior Department, citing her Jewish heritage and connection to Israel in her resignation letter, according to the report.

"I can no longer in good conscience continue to represent this administration amidst President Biden's disastrous, continued support for Israel's genocide in Gaza," Greenberg Call is cited as saying in her resignation letter.

The former staffer is the first known Jewish appointee to publicly resign over Biden's support of Israel, and the sixth person to resign citing concerns over the administration's Israel policy, the report added.

Greenberg Call is also quoted in the report as saying in her resignation that Biden "has the power to call for a lasting ceasefire, to stop sending weapons to Israel, and to condition aid," but instead enabled and legitimized Israel's actions.

The letter also references Nakba Day, which is a term used to mark the anniversary of the flight and expulsion of nearly 700,000 Palestinians before and during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 following Israel's establishment, the report said.

The Biden administration told Congress on Tuesday that it was moving forward with more than \$1 billion in new weapons deals for Israel - less than a week after the administration paused a shipment over Israel's military operation in Rafah.

The new package will include the potential transfer of \$700 million in tank ammunition, \$500 million in tactical vehicles and \$60 million in mortar rounds.

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#### Trump Says Blinken Playing Guitar in Ukrainian Bar 'Not the Look You Want'

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken taking time to play guitar on stage in a Kiev bar during his visit to Ukraine is not a good look for the Biden administration, former President Donald Trump said.

"It's not the look you want. I said it this morning. I told people, I said this is not what we want. This is not central casting," Trump said in an interview with Hugh Hewitt, when asked about Blinken playing guitar in a Kiev bar.

Blinken has done a very poor job as secretary of state, Trump also said.

The world is "blowing up" under the Biden administration because nobody respects the

president, Trump added.

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#### US Businessmen Who Once Alienated Trump Moving Towards Him - Reports

NEW YORK, May 16 (Sputnik) - US businessmen who once felt alienated by Donald Trump are moving towards him with less than six months to November's presidential elections, with some doing so due to concern that he may win his second attempt for the White House, while others were acting out of disappointment with incumbent president Joe Biden, reports said on Wednesday.

The businessmen, including some who at one time outrightly hated Trump, represent some of the biggest names on Wall Street, according to reports by Bloomberg and The New York Times. These individuals have made their change in position known mostly in private circles and settings and not publicly, to avoid conflict with the Biden camp, particularly if he ends up staying on the job.

Some are entertaining the prospect of engaging with Trump's campaign as and when necessary. Some are considering donating money, including hedge fund magnate Ken Griffin — one of the rare few who has come out publicly for Trump after severely criticizing the former president before.

"It's a question I'm giving serious consideration to," Griffin said when asked by The New York Times if he would support Trump's 2024 campaign.

Griffin, described as a "political megadonor," had publicly derided Trump less than two years ago as a "three-time loser," the Times said.

It also said more than a dozen bankers, asset managers, hedge fund titans, lawyers, and venture capitalists at a Milken Institute Global Conference this month expressed disappointment with Biden's economic and border-control policies that have resulted in less disposable incomes for Americans and huge illegal immigration.

One individual who has attracted attention with his change of heart for Trump has been Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, America's largest banking group.

In 2021, after Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol over their dismay at his loss of the 2020 election to Biden, Dimon had accused Trump of "gassing up a mob." JPMorgan Chase also paused all political donations in the aftermath of the Capitol attack.

Now, the bank has resumed those donations, giving more to Republicans aligned with Trump than the Democrats with Biden.

What's more, Dimon said Trump had been "kind of right" on several issues, including taking a tougher stance toward China and passing tax cuts.

Biden and Trump are to have their first presidential debate in four years on June 27 as they head for a rematch in the November 5 election.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) -

##### ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON SLOVAK PRIME MINISTER FICO

- \* Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico was seriously injured after a gunman tried to assassinate him at the government field meeting venue, the Pravda news agency reported on Wednesday.
- \* Fico's condition is "life-threatening" after he was shot, the ruling Smer party said.
- \* The shooter was detained by the police, Slovak President Zuzana Caputova said.
- \* Russian Ambassador in Bratislava Igor Bratchikov condemned the assassination attempt and wished Fico a speedy recovery, adding that it is necessary to punish the perpetrators of the attack.
- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote a letter to Slovak President Zuzana Caputova, saying that the attack has no justification.
- \* US President Joe Biden said in a statement that he is alarmed by the assassination attempt and condemns the horrific act of violence.

##### MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

- \* Israel's amendments to a ceasefire proposal made by mediators have led talks on the truce in the Gaza Strip to a deadlock, the chairman of the political office of the Palestinian movement Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, said on Wednesday.
- \* The United States expects the Gaza humanitarian aid pier to become operational in the next several days, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Response Director Dan Dieckhaus said.
- \* Lebanon's Shia movement Hezbollah has fired more than 100 rockets in the direction of the Israeli Meron airbase and barracks near the Lebanese-Israeli border, a Lebanese military field source told Sputnik.

##### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- \* UK Secretary of State for Defense Grant Shapps said on Wednesday that he does not consider it necessary to deploy Western troops in Ukraine.
- \* The more effective the work at the front line is, the greater the chances of resolving the situation in Ukraine peacefully, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.
- \* The United States and Ukraine see the provision of Patriot air defense systems for their deployment in the Kharkiv region as an "urgent priority" and are actively working on it, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.
- \* The United States has not encouraged or enabled Ukrainian attacks inside Russia, but it is up to Kiev to make their own decisions, Blinken said.
- \* The United States will provide an additional \$2 billion in foreign military financing for Ukraine, Blinken said.

#### ARMS CONTROL

\* The United States is considering what may happen after the New START Treaty expires in 2026, but between now and then it is trying to bring Russia back to the negotiating table on arms control, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Wednesday.

\* The United States provided China with a paper on arms control last fall, but has not received a response amid Washington's efforts to bring China to the negotiation table, Jenkins said.

#### US PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

\* US President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday that he has received and accepted an invitation from CNN for a presidential election debate with presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump on June 27.

\* Biden and Trump agreed to participate in an ABC News debate on September 10, the candidates announced on their social media.

\* Trump said that he would accept Biden's challenge to hold two presidential debates in June and September.

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#### Trump Says Biden 'Total Thief' Who Fears Russia, China

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is a thief who fears Russia and China because of the money he has allegedly received from the two countries, former US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday.

"No, he's afraid because of a different reason. He's a thief, a total thief, and he's taken millions and millions of dollars from China and Russia," Trump said in an interview with Hugh Hewitt, when asked whether he thinks Biden fears Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Biden is a "Manchurian candidate" getting paid off by Russia, China and Ukraine, Trump said. Biden takes a weak approach toward China because of the money allegedly given to his family, Trump said.

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#### Trump Says Biden May Skip Presidential Debate Despite Accepting Dates

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that current officeholder Joe Biden may ultimately choose to skip debates with him, despite accepting two dates.

"And he may never show up to the debate," Trump said in an interview with Hugh Hewitt. "I know he accepted the debate, you know, accepted more or less. He sort of accepted it, but let's see if he shows up. It's all misinformation, disinformation."

Earlier on Wednesday, Biden and Trump agreed to a CNN debate on June 27 and an ABC debate on September 10.

Biden should debate sooner rather than later, because he is "not going to get any better" over time, Trump said.

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US Has Small Number of Troops in Chad Engaged in Counterterrorism Mission - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States still has a small number of troops in Chad engaged in a multinational counterterrorism mission, US Assistant Secretary of State Molly Phee said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We still have a very small number of troops engaged in Chad," Phee told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee. "There's a multinational joint task force that deals with the Boko Haram problem."

Earlier this month, a US defense official told Sputnik that the United States has relocated 60 of its military personnel from Chad to Germany amid an ongoing review of security cooperation between the countries.

According to media reports, there were fewer than 100 US troops in Chad.

Phee said the United States does not consider Chad's request to pull out several US troops to be hostile.

The decision to withdraw US forces is legitimate, Phee said, adding that the United States and Chad are expected to have discussions in the "near future" about the US military presence in the latter.

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US to Raise Concerns of S. Africa's Ties to Russia, China if New Govt Elected - Official

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to raise concerns about South Africa's ties to Russia and China if a new government is elected in the country, US Assistant Secretary of State Molly Phee said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

South Africa's ruling party, known as the African National Congress, has controlled the government for some 30 years, but recent polls project it will lose its parliamentary majority in the general election on May 29 due to poverty and corruption issues.

"We also have issues of concern that you cited, particularly some of South Africa's engagement with Russia and China and we will continue to raise concerns with any new government if they

continue to pursue those policies," Phee told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee. South African voters decide which party will control the country's parliament, and those lawmakers will then choose who will be the president of South Africa. Dethroning the African National Congress could trigger policy changes to Africa's most advanced economy, according to media reports.

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US Delegation Meeting Niger's Transitional Government Today to Organize Exit - Official

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - A US delegation is meeting with Niger's transitional government to organize the withdrawal of US forces from the West African country, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs Molly Phee said during a congressional hearing.

"We are currently working with the CNSP to withdraw US forces, right now General Dagvin Anderson and assistant secretary Chris Maier ... are in Niamey today organizing the responsible withdrawal of our troops," Phee said. "We've agreed to withdraw from Niamey in a responsible way, and those discussions are underway right now."

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US Commerce Dept. Says Expects to Publish Rule on Chinese-Connected Vehicles in Fall

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Wednesday that the Commerce Department expects to publish a rule on Chinese-connected vehicles this fall.

"The comment period just closed, and we expect to have a rule out this fall," Raimondo said during a Senate appropriations panel subcommittee hearing, when asked about the issue. Raimondo said the Commerce Department received a significant number of comments to review.

National security risks from such vehicles are "quite significant," Raimondo added.

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Biden to Host Kenya's President, First Lady for State Visit on May 23 - White House

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host Kenyan President William Ruto and First Lady Rachel Ruto on May 23 to mark the sixtieth

anniversary of Kenya and the United States establishing diplomatic relations, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host President William Ruto and First Lady Rachel Ruto of the Republic of Kenya for a State Visit to the United States on May 23, 2024. The upcoming visit will mark the 60th anniversary of US-Kenya diplomatic relations and will celebrate a partnership that is delivering for the people of the United States and Kenya," the White House said in a press release.

The two leaders will discuss ways to bolster bilateral cooperation in a range of areas, including trade and investment, technological innovation, climate and clean energy, health and security, the release said.

Biden and the First Lady will also host their Kenyan counterparts for a state dinner on the South Lawn following a bilateral meeting in the Oval Office, the release added.

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Canada Must Assure US It Can Be Good Partner in Creating 'Fortress North America' - Blair

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Minister of National Defense Bill Blair said on Wednesday that his job was to assure the United States that Canada could step up and do its part to create a "fortress North America."

"I think there's a tendency at times for America to think about fortress America. I think my job is to assure them that we can create a fortress North America," Blair said during a discussion on Canada's defense policy update at the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations.

Blair said Ottawa must demonstrate that it is willing to step up and do its part to secure its own perimeter, particularly the northern one, but also that it is a good and fully committed partner when it comes to it.

Despite Canadians already doing a lot, Blair said that it was important for Ottawa to acknowledge that it needs to do more and that it will work on doing more, notably as Canada faces "criticism" by both US Democrats and Republicans about not doing enough on continental defense.

"It's important to acknowledge to them [US] we have to do more and we're going to do [more]. And I think we've been able to assure them that we're going to be the good partner that they need," he said.

In mid-April, the Ministry of National Defense released its defense policy update "Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defense."

Under the update, Canada plans to invest C\$8.1 billion (\$6 billion) over the next five years, and C\$73 billion over the next 20 years. The increased spending would bring the country's defense budget to 1.76% of its GDP by 2029-2030.

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Russia Remains Most Active Foreign Threat to US Elections - Haines

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines said on Wednesday that Russia remains the most active foreign threat to US elections.

"The most significant foreign actors who engage in foreign influence activity directed at the United States in relation to our elections are Russia, the People's Republic of China, and Iran. Specifically, Russia remains the most active foreign threat to our elections," Haines said.

Russia's influence operations aim to erode trust in US democratic institutions, worsen sociopolitical divisions and degrade Western support for Ukraine, Haines added.

In early May, Haines claimed that Russia has continued to be increasingly focused on influencing US elections.

However, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia does not interfere in any elections and will work with any elected US president.

Last year, then-National Security Agency chief Paul Nakasone said that the agency had not seen evidence of attempts by Russia or China to affect the 2024 US presidential election.

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Biden to Host Kenya's President, First Lady for State Visit on May 23 - White House

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Schumer Says US House Bill to Compel Provision of Aid to Israel 'Not Going Anywhere'

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that legislation in the House of Representatives to compel the provision of certain arms to Israel withheld by the Biden administration will not clear the Congress.

"The House hasn't voted yet. The president has already said he'd veto it, so it's not going anywhere," Schumer said during a press conference.

On Wednesday, the White House said that President Joe Biden would veto the bill if it manages to pass both chambers of Congress. The legislation undermines the president's ability to execute an effective foreign policy and raises concerns about infringement of his constitutional authorities, the White House said.

The bill condemns Biden's decision to pause certain aid to Israel over a prospective large-scale operation in the Gaza Strip city of Rafah. The legislation also withholds funds from the State Department and Defense Department until the aid is delivered.

US House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said that the bill is an effort to hold Biden accountable for "dangerous intimidation tactics" that risk Israel's security by emboldening Palestinian

organization Hamas.

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US Lawmaker Introduces Bill to Bolster US Drone Industry Against China - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Republican US lawmaker Elise Stefanik said on Wednesday that she introduced a bill that would bolster the US drone industry in order to counter China's dominating stake in the market.

"I am proud to introduce the Drones for First Responders Act to empower US drone manufacturers to compete with Communist China," Stefanik said.

The US lawmaker notes that at present some 90% of drones operated by US first responders are made in China, which currently dominates the US and global drone market.

Stefanik's office said in a separate press release that the legislation would increase the competitiveness of US drone manufacturers and enhance US national security by requiring new tariffs on China's drones starting at 30% and increasing by 5% each following year.

Moreover, the bill would establish a new grant program for American first responders, critical infrastructure providers, and farmers and ranchers that would help them acquire drones made in the United States or allied countries, the release said.

The release further said that the bill would also require that drones imported to the United States not contain critical components that are made in China by 2030.

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Netanyahu Acknowledges Disagreements With US Over Rafah Operation - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged in an interview on Wednesday that Israel and the United States disagree over a major ground military operation in Rafah, but claimed there are no other options to guarantee Israel's security.

"Yes, we do have a disagreement [with the US] on Gaza, rather on Rafah, but we have to do what we have to do. And, you know, sometimes you just have to do what is required to ensure your survival in your future. We cannot continue into the future by having Hamas retake Gaza," Netanyahu said in an interview for MSNBC.

While Israel continues to talk to the United States, it will ultimately do what is necessary to protect the life of the Israeli nation, Netanyahu added.

On May 6, the Israel Defense Forces launched a limited military operation in Rafah and took control of the Gaza side of the Rafah border crossing. On Friday, Israeli media reported that Israel's military cabinet had approved expanding the ground operation. Israeli authorities say the operation is aimed at eliminating the remaining battalions of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

US President Joe Biden said last week in an interview that the United States will go as far as to

stop the flow of weapons to Israel should the Netanyahu war cabinet decide on a major military operation in the Gaza Strip without protecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering in the city.

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#### Barge Strikes Pelican Island Causeway Bridge in Texas Halting Traffic - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - A barge struck the Pelican Island Causeway Bridge that connects Pelican Island to the city of Galveston on Wednesday, local news outlet KHOU 11 reported.

Footage from the scene of the incident shows a collapsed train line on the bridge. The incident resulted in traffic being halted on the bridge, the report said.

US Coast Guard officials are on the scene assessing an oil spill linked to the incident, the report said.

Texas A&M University at Galveston is located on Pelican Island. University officials are coordinating with state and local officials about the incident.

Earlier on Wednesday, a US Coast Guard official told lawmakers that the service is studying risks to bridges from larger and more complex ships, following the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore in March.

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#### US Lawmaker Asks Garland to Appoint Special Counsel to Probe Biden Withholding Israel Aid

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Claudia Tenney on Wednesday sent a letter to US Attorney General Merrick Garland asking him to appoint a special counsel to investigate President Joe Biden for temporarily withholding military aid to Israel.

"Congress appropriated this aid to be obligated and expended expeditiously, and yet the Biden administration is unnecessarily delaying the expenditure of this aid. This potential violation of statute and dangerous failure to comply with Constitutional precedent by the Biden administration must be fully investigated by a special counsel. Due to the grave urgency of this issue, I demand that a special counsel be appointed immediately to investigate and prosecute any wrongdoing," Tenney said in the letter.

The congresswoman said Biden's decision to hold off on approvals and weapon transfers violates the separation of powers in addition to the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, which were established to prevent the president and other government officials from unilaterally substituting their own funding decisions for ones made by Congress.

The letter noted that the US House of Representatives last month overwhelmingly passed the

Israel Security Supplemental Appropriations Act 2024, which was signed into law as part of a larger aid package that included funding for Ukraine and Taiwan as well.

"This bill appropriated funds in support of Israel's ongoing military operations against Hamas. Congressional intent with this legislation is clear: this aid is urgently needed and must be delivered as expeditiously as possible. However, instead of following the law, the Biden administration has delayed the delivery of this essential aid that has already been obligated," Tenney said.

The letter comes just as the Biden administration told Congress on Tuesday that it was moving forward with more than \$1 billion in new weapons deals for Israel - less than a week after the administration paused a shipment over Israel's military operation in Rafah.

The new package will include the potential transfer of \$700 million in tank ammunition, \$500 million in tactical vehicles and \$60 million in mortar rounds.

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Violations of Agreements May Lead to Conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina- Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - Russia believes that the violations of international agreements and other UN Security Council resolutions may lead to the resumption of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"We have before us numerous examples of gross and irresponsible violations of the international agreements and accords, a crisis of trust in them and in the Security Council resolutions," Nebenzia said during the UN Security Council meeting on Bosnia and Herzegovina. "This will not lead to anything other than a resumption of conflict."

In addition, he said that Russia urges the UN Council members to take action and prevent negative events from happening.

At the beginning of May, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a telephone conversation with his Serbian counterpart, Marko Duric, as well as with Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dacic and National Assembly Speaker Ana Brnabic, during which they discussed the situation in the Balkans. The parties also discussed joint work at multilateral platforms, bilateral cooperation, and ways to strengthen it.

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Oil Prices Rebound From Two-and-Half Month Lows Amid Slide in US Crude, Fuel Stockpiles

NEW YORK, May 15 (Sputnik) - Oil prices rebounded Wednesday from two and half month lows after US government data showed weekly declines in crude and fuel inventories, boosting prospects for a market also helped by output cuts planned by producer alliance OPEC+.

With some two hours to settlement, West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, was at \$78.14 per barrel, up 12 cents, or 0.2%. WTI slumped to a session low of \$76.70 earlier, a bottom not seen since it touched \$75.84 on February 26.

London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude, traded at \$82.41, up 3 cents, or 0.04%. Earlier, Brent tumbled to \$81.06. Like WTI, that was a low not seen by Brent since February 26, when it fell to \$81 a barrel.

Both US crude and fuel balances showed some hefty gains of late, worrying traders about demand heading into the summer driving season, when consumption of oil is typically at its highest.

In a turnaround, the latest Weekly Petroleum Status Report of the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) revealed that domestic crude balances fell by 2.508 million barrels during the week ended May 10, adding to the prior weekly decline of 1.362 million. Energy data forecasters on Wall Street had called for a drop of just around 600,000 barrels for the May 10 week.

Gasoline stockpiles slid by 235,000 barrels, after a build of 915,000 barrels the prior week, said the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department. Wall Street had called for a build of 1.0 million barrels instead.

Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

Distillate stockpiles slid by 45,000 barrels last week versus the prior weekly gain of 560,000 and Wall Street's forecast build of 700,000. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also go into making airline fuel.

Also helping to put a floor beneath crude prices was OPEC+'s determination to support the oil market through output cuts. OPEC+ groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 other oil producing nations steered by Russia. The alliance intends to maintain supply cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day until the end of June.

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UN General Assembly President Condemns Assassination Attempt on Slovakian PM Robert Fico

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations President of the General Assembly Denis Francis condemns the assassination attempt against the current Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, the UN Spokeswoman Monica Grayley said on Wednesday.

"The President of the General Assembly Mr Denis Francis has expressed his deep shock and sadness after hearing about the attack against the Prime Minister of Slovakia His Excellency Robert Fico a few hours ago," Grayley said in the UN briefing.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also condemned the attack earlier today.

Earlier on Wednesday, Slovak media reported that a man shot Fico as he was leaving a field meeting of the Slovak government in the town of Handlova, northeast of Bratislava. The prime minister was promptly taken to a hospital by helicopter with wounds in the abdomen and

shoulder. The presumed shooter was arrested on the spot. He was later identified as 71-year-old writer Juraj Centula.

As of now, the doctors said that they are still unable to stop the bleeding of the Prime Minister following gunshots into his abdomen.

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UPDATE - Trump Campaign Proposes Debates With Biden in July and August - Statement

(Updates with more details in para 2)

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The Trump campaign on Wednesday sent a letter to the Biden campaign proposing that President Joe Biden agree to additional debates with presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump in July and August after they both locked in debates in late June and early September.

Earlier in the day, Trump and Biden agreed to participate in debates on June 27 and September 10. Trump later confirmed that Fox News will also host a debate on October 2.

"We propose a debate in June, a debate in July, a debate in August, and a debate in September, in addition to the Vice Presidential debate. Additional dates will allow voters to have maximum exposure to the records and future visions of each candidate," the Trump campaign said.

The Trump team emphasized that there should be one debate each month leading up to the November vote so that US voters have additional opportunities to hear from the candidates themselves.

The Trump campaign expects key topics in the debates will be inflation, border security and foreign policy matters related to ongoing conflicts.

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US Coast Guard Studies Risks to Bridges Following Collapse in Baltimore - Vice Admiral

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard is studying the impact of larger and more complex ships on marine transportation infrastructure that may not have kept pace with increased risks, Deputy Commandant for Operations Vice Adm. Peter Gautier said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"While we look forward to the results of these investigations, it is evident looking more broadly, that the size and complexity of ships has grown over the years, placing greater demands on our marine transportation infrastructure that may not have kept pace with the increased risks that these vessels pose. It's time for us to more broadly understand these risks," Gautier told the US House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Gautier made the comment during a hearing on reviewing and examining the federal response

to the incident, in which the cargo ship Dali crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, leading to the bridge's collapse.

The US Coast Guard aims to evaluate their risk management tools' effectiveness, assess the recent use in major ports, develop national risk profiles, identify vulnerabilities and propose actions to reduce the risk of major incidents, Gautier said.

On Tuesday, the National Transportation Safety Board reported that the Dali experienced a blackout during in-port maintenance about ten hours before leaving Baltimore and its generator failed again due to insufficient fuel pressure, causing a second blackout.

The port of Baltimore announced on Tuesday that a milestone was achieved with the successful detonation of controlled explosives to break apart the collapsed Francis Scott Key bridge and begin dislodging the stuck cargo ship Dali.

US media reported that the insured loss from the bridge collapse could reach \$4 billion, making it the most expensive ship collision incident in modern history.

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US Senate AI Working Group Says Supports \$32Bln in Funding for AI Innovation

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate's Bipartisan AI Working Group released a roadmap for AI policy on Wednesday, in which they expressed support for \$32 billion in funding for AI innovation.

"The AI Working Group encourages the executive branch and the Senate Appropriations Committee to continue assessing how to handle ongoing needs for federal investments in AI during the regular order budget and appropriations process, with the goal of reaching as soon as possible the spending level proposed by the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) in their final report: at least \$32 billion per year for (non-defense) AI innovation," the roadmap said.

The working group encourages the Senate Appropriations Committee to work with relevant panels to develop emergency appropriations text to fill the gap between current spending levels and the NSCAI-recommended level, the roadmap said.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said during remarks on the roadmap that he plans to meet with US House Speaker Mike Johnson in the near future to make work on AI a bicameral effort.

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US Government Alerts Air Carriers on Measures to Prevent Illegal Migration - Official

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration alerted air carriers and other members of the aviation industry on measures to prevent illegal migration related to Nicaragua, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"Today, the Treasury, State and Department of Homeland Security are also issuing a policy alert to inform the aviation and travel industry of the ways in which smugglers are facilitating this illegal migration," the official said.

This policy alert is part of the US government's comprehensive approach to addressing illegal migration and a reminder for the industry about the necessity of taking measures on the issue, the official added.

The State Department said in a statement that migrants are increasingly traversing the region and using Nicaragua as a disembarkation point to continue north by overland means.

"The United States has shared releasable intelligence with the aviation sector highlighting this trend and underscoring the need for greater enforcement of airline policies with respect to flights in and out of Managua," the statement said.

The US government recommended air carriers to monitor high-risk routes, undertake appropriate due diligence and take other measures, the statement added.

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Biden Says 'Alarmed' to Hear About Assassination Attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Fico

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said in a statement on Wednesday that he is "alarmed" to find out about an assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and condemns this horrific act of violence.

"I am alarmed to hear reports of an attack on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. Jill and I are praying for a swift recovery, and our thoughts are with his family and the people of Slovakia. We condemn this horrific act of violence. Our embassy is in close touch with the government of Slovakia and ready to assist," the statement said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Slovak media reported that a man shot Fico as he was leaving a field meeting of the Slovak government in the town of Handlova, northeast of Bratislava. The prime minister was promptly taken to a hospital by helicopter with wounds in the abdomen and shoulder. The presumed shooter was arrested on the spot. He was later identified as 71-year-old writer Juraj Centula.

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US Lawmaker Blasts Blinken for Playing Guitar in Ukrainian Bar While US in 'Deep Trouble'

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Rosendale on Wednesday criticized the Biden administration for sending Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Ukraine to play guitar in a bar, while the United States experiences a variety of challenges.

Blinken visited Ukraine this week for talks with Ukrainian government officials, stopping at a bar in Kiev to play guitar on stage.

“Americans are currently experiencing record inflation, a skyrocketing national debt, and the largest invasion of foreigners and lethal drugs from across the world into our communities, but this is what the Biden admin is doing in Ukraine,” Rosendale said in a statement via social media platform X, sharing a video of Blinken’s bar performance. “America is in deep trouble.”

US consumer prices rose by 3.4% in the year to April, according to the US Consumer Price Index.

However, grocery prices are up by 21.3%, electricity by 28.5% and gasoline by 55.5%, Rosendale said in a separate post. The price increases are the result of failed economic policy and reckless spending by the Biden administration, Rosendale said.

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Trump Campaign Calls Bidenomics ‘Unmitigated Disaster’ Amid Surging Prices – Statement

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – Bidenomics is an “unmitigated disaster” resulting in high inflation with American families earning less and paying more for basic household essentials, including gas, food, and rent, the Trump Campaign said on Wednesday.

“Bidenomics is an unmitigated disaster. Workers and families are literally paying the price for Joe Biden’s failed economic policies, with prices on household essentials like gas, food, rent, and diapers skyrocketing. Baby food and formula alone are up 30%. Overall prices are up 20%, while real average weekly earnings are down 4.4% since Biden took office,” the campaign said in a statement on April’s Consumer Price Index.

The statement said that when Donald Trump is back at the White House he will lower taxes, and prices, and raise wages to uplift all Americans.

Commenting on the state of the US economy earlier in the day, House Speaker Mike Johnson said that Bidenomics has ruined the American economy and everybody knows that.

“Inflation continues to rise under President Biden. This administration has spent too much money, grown the size of the government, and regulated some industries almost to the point of extinction. American families cannot afford to live in President Biden’s America,” Johnson said in an X (formerly Twitter) post.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics published its April’s Consumer Price Index, or CPI, a key inflation indicator. According to the index, US consumer prices grew 3.4% in the year to April, easing for the first time in three months.

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First Biden-Trump Debate in 4 Years Looms With Fight Kicking Off Over Inflation

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The first presidential debate in four years between President Joe Biden and presumptive Republican presidential candidate Trump is looming, with the two sides unofficially kicking off their battle of wits with who is right on the problem of inflation.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Labor Department reported that consumer prices moderated in April in the first easing of inflation in three months. The highest prices for US goods and services in decades, and interest rates kept at 22-year highs by the Federal Reserve, have greatly burdened households, promising to be a key battle point in the November presidential election.

Biden and Trump confirmed they would participate in the presidential debate on June 27 while locking horns over the consumer price data, saying that each had the right remedy for inflation.

"My agenda will give families breathing room by building two million new homes to lower housing costs, taking on Big Pharma to lower prescription drug prices, and calling on grocery chains making record profits to lower grocery prices for consumers," Biden said in a statement released by the White House.

Biden also targeted his Republican rivals led by Trump, whose prescriptions for the economy, he said, "would send inflation skyrocketing."

"I have a different vision for the future: one in which we take on special interests to lower costs and give the middle class a fair shot," Biden said. "Republicans want to slash taxes for the ultra-wealthy and big corporations, and raise taxes for middle class families. They would protect special interests and Big Pharma, and undermine workers and seniors by slashing Social Security and Medicare."

Trump campaign Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that Biden's economic plan, pet-named "Bidenomics," has been an unmitigated disaster.

"Workers and families are literally paying the price for Joe Biden's failed economic policies, with prices on household essentials like gas, food, rent, and diapers skyrocketing. Baby food and formula alone are up 30%," Leavitt said. "Overall prices are up 20%, while real average weekly earnings are down 4.4% since Biden took office. The American people cannot afford four more years of Bidenomics."

Trump had built during his presidency the strongest economy in US history and will re-implement his America First agenda of low taxes, lower prices and higher wages to uplift all Americans if re-elected, the campaign said.

Commenting on the looming debate, CNN said there were stark differences between what each candidate would like as the outcome from the showdown.

The Biden campaign said they want the event to be "more substantive and less of a spectacle" and possibly without a studio audience.

"Well, make my day, pal, I'll even do it twice," Biden said in a dare to Trump, suggesting a second debate in September.

Trump accepted the offer to participate in the debate without hesitation.

"I am ready and willing to debate Crooked Joe at the two proposed times in June and

September," Trump said in a post on Truth Social.

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Trump Campaign Proposes Debates With Biden in July and August - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The Trump campaign on Wednesday sent a letter to the Biden campaign proposing that President Joe Biden to agree to additional debates with former President Donald Trump in July and August after they both locked in debates in late June and early September.

Earlier in the day, CNN announced that it will host a debate between Trump and Biden in Atlanta on June 27.

"We propose a debate in June, a debate in July, a debate in August, and a debate in September, in addition to the Vice Presidential debate. Additional dates will allow voters to have maximum exposure to the records and future visions of each candidate," the Trump campaign said.

The two presidential hopefuls also said they agreed to take part in a debate hosted by ABC on September 10.

The Trump team emphasized that there should be one debate each month leading up to the November vote so that US voters have additional opportunities to hear from the candidates themselves.

The Trump campaign expects key topics in the debates will be inflation, border security, and foreign policy matters related to ongoing conflicts.

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RFK Jr. Says Biden, Trump Colluding to Keep Him Off Debate Stage

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert Kennedy Jr. said on Wednesday that competitors Joe Biden and Donald Trump are colluding to keep him off of the debate stage.

Earlier on Wednesday, Biden and Trump agreed to a CNN debate on June 27 and an ABC debate on September 10.

"Presidents Trump and Biden are colluding to lock America into a head-to-head match-up that 70% say they do not want," Kennedy said in a statement via social media platform X. "They are trying to exclude me from their debate because they are afraid I would win."

Excluding viable candidates from the debate stage undermines democracy, Kennedy said.

Biden and Trump are trying to avoid discussion of their eight years of mutual failure, including deficits, wars, lockdowns, chronic disease, and inflation, Kennedy said.

Kennedy previously challenged Trump to debate at the Libertarian Party's national convention

later this month — a challenge to which Trump has not responded, despite both candidates planning to attend the convention.

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Biden, Trump Say Both Agreed to ABC News Debate on September 10

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) — US President Joe Biden and Former President Donald Trump both agreed to participate in an ABC News debate on September 10, the candidates announced on their social media on Wednesday.

"I've also received and accepted an invitation to a debate hosted by ABC on Tuesday, September 10th," Biden said via X.

In a separate message on Truth Social, Trump said he accepts the ABC News debate against Joe Biden on September 10.

Earlier today, CNN announced it will host an election debate between US President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump on June 27, 2024.

According to the statement, the debate will be held in CNN's Atlanta studios without an audience to maximize candidates' time, and moderators and additional details will be announced later.

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CNN to Host Biden-Trump Debate in Key Battleground State of Georgia June 27 - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - CNN announced on Wednesday that it will host an election debate between President Joe Biden and former President and presumptive Republican presidential nominee President Donald Trump on June 27 in the US state of Georgia.

"CNN will host an election debate between President Joe Biden and former President Donald J. Trump on June 27, 2024, at 9 p.m. ET from the crucial battleground state of Georgia," CNN said in a statement.

The debate will be held in the company's Atlanta studios without an audience in order to maximize the candidates' time. The debate's moderators and other additional details will be announced later, the statement said.

To qualify, the presidential candidates must meet constitutional requirements, file a statement of candidacy, appear on enough state ballots to reach 270 electoral votes, accept the debate rules and format as well as receive at least 15% in four national polls meeting CNN's standards.

Earlier on Wednesday, Biden said that he has received and accepted the invitation from CNN for the presidential election debate with Trump on June 27.

Trump also confirmed that he accepted the invitation for the debate on June 27, while calling

Biden the worst president in US history and a threat to democracy.

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US Maintains Stance on Not Adopting No First Use Nuclear Policy – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – A US State Department arms control official said Wednesday that the country had not changed its current stance on not adopting a no first use policy regarding nuclear weapons.

"What I'll say is we stand by what we put into the NPR, so we're not changing that right now," Department of State Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said at a Senate foreign relations committee hearing.

Jenkins had been asked if the State Department had ruled out the idea of discussing with China the possibility of a mutual no first use policy.

While the US and Russia have the world's largest nuclear arsenals, China and India are the only two nuclear powers who have a formal no first use policy.

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UN Chief Strongly Condemns 'Vile Attack' on Slovakian Prime Minister Fico - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemns the attempt to assassinate Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the vile attack carried out today against the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico. The Secretary-General's thoughts are with the Prime Minister and his loved ones at this difficult moment," Haq said on Wednesday.

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US Living in 'La-La Land' Waiting for Russia, China to Restart Nuclear Talks - Senator

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Jim Risch said on Wednesday that the State Department was living in "la-la land" waiting for Russia and China to come back to the table to negotiate on nuclear arms control.

"I'm really disappointed in what I've heard today. These people are sitting around waiting for these things to happen, and it's a dream world to live in; it's la-la land; it's ludicrous," Risch said during a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing with Under Secretary of State for

Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins.

With regard to both Russia and China, Jenkins had admitted that she could not predict when either country would respond to US overtures to return to nuclear arms talks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in February 2023 that Russia would suspend the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with the United States.

The United States has no scheduled meetings with China since a rare meeting last November regarding nuclear arms control.

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US Health Authorities Begin Process to Debar EcoHealth Alliance - US House Panel

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services is beginning the process of debarring nonprofit group EcoHealth Alliance from participation in government programs, according to a document shared by the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic on Wednesday.

The House panel previously found that EcoHealth Alliance facilitated gain-of-function research in China without proper oversight and violated multiple National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant requirements.

"This is to provide notification that ... I have suspended and proposed for debarment EcoHealth Alliance, Inc. (EHA) from participating in the United States Federal Government procurement and nonprocurement programs," the Department of Health and Human services said in a letter to EHA President Peter Daszak.

EHA lacks the present responsibility to participate in such federal programs, the letter said.

The House Coronavirus Subcommittee will hold EHA accountable for any waste, fraud and abuse, as well as uncover any illegal activity, including lying to Congress or the NIH, panel chairman Brad Wenstrup said in a statement.

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US Expects Gaza Aid Pier to Be Operational in Next Few Days - USAID Official

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik)—The United States expects the Gaza humanitarian aid pier to become operational in the coming few days, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Response Director Dan Dieckhaus said on Wednesday.

"We expect this to be operational in the next few days," Dieckhaus told reporters.

US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper stressed the humanitarian nature of this project. "There is only one purpose to this pier, and that is to deliver humanitarian assistance to Gaza. There is no other purpose," he added.

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US Provided China Paper on Arms Control Last Fall But Has Not Received Response - Jenkins

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States provided China with a paper on arms control last fall, but has not received a response amid Washington's efforts to bring China to the negotiation table, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We did have a dialogue with them in November of last year," Jenkins told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We provided them a paper that we think highlights some of the areas that we can do in terms of crisis management and risk reduction, the ways that we can continue to work together. To date, we have not received a response from the PRC [People's Republic of China] on that, but our goal is to continue to try to see if we can bring them to the table."

Jenkins also said that as of now, a meeting with Chinese representatives has not been scheduled to discuss arms control issues.

"We are always hoping that we will have those meetings," Jenkins added.

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US Wants Russia to Return to Table for Arms Control Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States wants Russia to return to the table for arms control talks, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Wednesday.

"We want them to come back to the table," Jenkins told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

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US Thinking About Post-New START Future, Wants to See Russia Back to Table - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering what will happen after the New START Treaty expires in 2026, but between now and then is trying to bring Russia back to the table for arms control talks, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Wednesday.

"We are also having interagency discussions ... to think about what's going to happen if in fact we are not able to get back to the table by 2026 and what that will look like," Jenkins said

during a congressional hearing. "But at the same time between now and then, February 2026, we want to continue our efforts to try to bring them [Russia] back to the table."

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Russia Committed to New START Treaty Limits, US to Stay Within Limits Too - Jenkins

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is committed to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) limits and the United States will stay within the limits as well, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"Russia is committed to - at least they have said that they are going to be committed to - the treaty limits, which they are and which we assess that they continue to be, and we are also going to stay within the limits as well," Jenkins told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "So, that is something that we are committed to as long as they are."

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us considering what will happen after 2026 but between now and then is trying to bring russia back to table on arms negotiations - state department

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US Imposes Anti-Nicaragua Sanctions, Targets Russian Military Training Center in Managua

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed a new round of anti-Nicaragua sanctions targeting a Russian military training center in Managua and two gold companies, a senior Biden administration officials told reporters on Wednesday.

"Today, the Biden administration is taking several coordinated actions out of a significant concern about the government of Nicaragua and its continued repression of the people of Nicaragua and the exploitation of migrants," the officials said.

The US Treasury Department designated three Nicaragua-based entities - a Russian military training center that the Biden administration alleges supports "repressive activities" by the Nicaraguan national police to prosecute political opposition and two gold companies that allegedly "generate revenue and enrich the Ortega regime."

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Biden Says Received, Accepted Invitation From CNN for Debate With Trump on June 27

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday he has received and accepted an invitation from CNN for a presidential election debate with Donald Trump on June 27.

"I've received and accepted an invitation from CNN for a debate on June 27th. Over to you, Donald. As you said: anywhere, any time, any place," Biden said in a social media post.

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US Slaps Visa Curbs on Over 250 Nicaragua Officials, Non-Government Actors, Family Members

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced visa restrictions against more than 250 Nicaraguan officials, non-governmental actors and their family members for supporting the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, senior administration officials said on Wednesday.

"At the same time, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on over 250 members of the Nicaraguan government, non-governmental actors and their immediate family members for their role in supporting the Ortega regime, attack on human rights and fundamental freedoms of the people and repression the civil society organizations," the officials told reporters.

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US, Japan Ink Deal to Develop Hypersonic Missile-Intercepting System - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan have finalized an agreement to jointly develop a hypersonic missile-intercepting system that is set to become operative by 2032, the US Department of Defense said in a release on Wednesday.

"Today, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) and Japan Ministry of Defense (MOD) have finalized a formal agreement for a Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI) Cooperative Development (GCD) Project Arrangement under the U.S.-Japan bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Research, Development, Test and Evaluation Projects," the release said.

While the US Missile Defense Agency will continue to lead the development of the Glide Phase Interceptor for the Defense Department, but Japan will lead the development of rocket motors

and propulsion components under the terms of the agreement, the release added.

In April, MDA Director Heath Collins said in a congressional testimony that the Glide Phase Interceptor system will provide a layered defense with currently deployed so-called sea-based terminal capabilities.

At present, Raytheon Technologies and Northrop Grumman are competing to design the capability, according to reports.

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US, China Discuss Approaches to AI Safety - National Security Council

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and China held talks on safety and risk management practices related to AI technology, the White House National Security Council said on Wednesday.

"In a candid and constructive discussion, the United States and PRC exchanged perspectives on their respective approaches to AI safety and risk management. The United States reiterated the importance of harnessing the benefits of AI for sustainable development, for developing and developed countries alike," the National Security Council said in a statement.

The US highlighted the importance of ensuring safe, secure and trustworthy AI systems, as well as building global consensus on that basis, the statement said.

The US also raised concerns about the misuse of AI, including alleged misuse by China, the statement said.

Additionally, the US affirmed the need to maintain open lines of communication on AI risk and safety as part of responsibly managing competition, the statement said.

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US Engagement With New Taiwanese Officials Will Impact Ties With Beijing - Chinese Embassy

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States' relationship with the incoming authorities in Taiwan will impact its relationship with China moving forward, Chinese Embassy in the US Spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in a statement to Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the US announced that it will send a delegation of former government officials and others to Taiwan on May 20 for the inauguration of Lai Ching-te as president.

"In what way does the US deal with the new Taiwan authorities on May 20 and afterwards will affect the cross-Strait situation and the China-US relationship in the future. We urge the US side to act on President Biden's commitment of not supporting 'Taiwan independence,' 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan' and not taking Taiwan as a tool to contain China," the statement said.

The US should stop official interactions with Taiwanese authorities and not support the island in

seeking independence, the statement said.

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US Sending Delegation of Former Officials to Taiwan Inauguration on May 20 - Official

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is sending a bipartisan delegation of former officials to attend the inauguration of Taiwan's president-elect Lai Ching-te on May 20, a senior administration official said.

"We will send a bipartisan, former USG official delegation to represent the American people at the May 20 Taiwan inauguration," the official said during a press briefing.

The delegation will consist of former Assistant to the President and Director of the National Economic Council Brian Deese, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Taiwan expert and former AIP chair Richard Bush, along with the current American Institute in Taiwan Chair Laura Rosenberger, the official said.

"We've been clear in our communications with Beijing that the US sending delegations, unofficial former USG delegations, is a long-standing practice," the official AO added.

In January, Taiwan held a general election in which pro-independence candidate Lai, also of the ruling DPP, won with 40.05% of the vote to head the island's local administration.

China strongly opposes visits by US officials to the island and sees them as a challenge to its sovereignty over the territory. The US does not officially recognize Taiwan as an independent country, but it maintains strong informal diplomatic relations with Taipei and provides weapons to the territory.

Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence.

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UPDATE - US Consumer Prices Grow Slower First Time In 3 Months, Bolstering Rate Cut Hopes

(Revises lede; adds details, comments and context in paragraphs 3-12)

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew 3.4% in the year to April, easing for the first time in three months and in line with Wall Street forecasts that boosted hopes for a Federal Reserve rate cut in the not-too-distant future.

The US Consumer Price Index, or CPI, a key inflation indicator, had one of its slowest growth in January, expanding at an annualized rate of just 3.1% from December's 3.4%. But it edged higher again over the next two months, touching 3.2% in February and 3.5% in March. The Fed intends to cut interest rates that are at two-decade highs but wary of doing so with inflation still

stronger than the central bank's targets.

"This is a good reading," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum, referring to the latest CPI reading.

While the April CPI reading isn't likely to prod the Fed to cut rates right away, on the contrary, "it will dull talk of further rate hikes and problematic inflation," Button said.

Combining it with the latest retail sales data, "there's a developing picture of a softening economy," he added.

Retail sales data, also issued Wednesday, showed a flat growth for April. Wall Street had forecast a 0.4% expansion instead, after the 0.7% advance in March.

Prior to the reading on April CPI, some on Wall Street had expected the first post-pandemic rate cut to occur as late as 2025, despite the Fed having penciled in as many as three reductions this year.

For there to be more optimism of a cut, the central bank has to continuously see inflation on the decline, with corresponding slowing in the economy, jobs and wage growth.

That notion was reinforced by Fed Chair Jerome Powell who said this week the central bank's confidence in scoring a fairly quick win against inflation had diminished after stronger-than-expected price growth in the first quarter of the year.

Speaking at the Foreign Bankers' Association's Annual General Meeting in Amsterdam on Tuesday, Powell said the Fed was optimistic of bringing annual inflation back to the pre-pandemic rate of 2% at some point, though it was hard to say when that would be achieved.

In its bid to fight inflation, the Fed has left US interest rates at two-decade highs over the past 10 months, at between 5.25% and 5.5%. The Fed has an opportunity to revise this at the conclusion of its next policy meeting on June 12.

Should the Fed pass on its June decision on rates, it has four more opportunities to make a change this year: July 31, September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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US Republicans Blast Biden for West African Foreign Policy – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – Several US Republican politicians have criticized US President Joe Biden's foreign policy in West Africa, Fox News reported on Wednesday.

"President Biden's foreign policy has been a disaster on every continent, and Africa is no exception," Sen. Tim Scott told Fox News Digital. Scott added that China and Russia were making strong inroads into the region, while the Biden administration was fumbling US strategic interests.

Rep. Matt Gaetz also said to Fox that US troops were being used as "pawns" in Niger, and Biden "has two choices: resupply our troops or bring them home ASAP."

Earlier this month, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell complained that the US had been "effectively been pushed out of Chad, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, making more room for Russia and China."

Niger's military government recently ordered 1,000 US military personnel and contractors to

leave the country, while allowing Russian forces to move onto the same airbase. Chad has also ordered some of the 100 US service personnel stationed there to leave.