

5/17/24 Friday

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'Shake Off the Shackles': France Struggles to Keep Its Colonies

Since the 1998 Nouméa Accord, France agreed to give the island nation more political power, with only New Caledonia natives and long-term residents being eligible to vote in provincial elections and local referendums.

On Thursday, Sputnik reported that the French government had deployed military units to New Caledonia after a state of emergency was declared in the French Island Territory amid violent mass protests. The unrest is a response to Paris-backed changes to local voting laws. The island nation is between Australia and Fiji, and has been a French territory since the 19th Century. The indigenous Kanak people make up about [40%](#) of the population.

The peace activist, writer and teacher, KJ Noh and analyst Steve Poikonen sat down with [Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) on Friday and discussed the ongoing unrest in the island nation.

"This was originally a British slave colony, and then it became a French slave colony and a French penal colony that looked a little bit like Australia. And the indigenous Kanak people were enslaved. They were kept in reservations," Noh explained. "Essentially, an independence movement started after WWII, and it was violent and brutal. It was not unlike what we saw in Algeria with the French doing violent counter insurgency."

"But eventually the French decided that they would make accommodations with the Kanak people for independence, and in 1988, they signed what's called the Matignon Agreement, agreeing that within 10 years, they would hold a referendum for full independence. When 1998 came around, the French, instead of holding the referendum, said, 'oh, you have to wait another 20 years'. This is called the Nouméa Accord, and this was essentially kicking the can down the road for another 20 years," Noh suggested.

"This new legislation from Paris, it has said that new settlers to Caledonia can vote in Caledonian elections, including the referendum. This is essentially a plan to prevent independence," he added. "It's very, very clear. And not only do they want to allow new settlers, new European, new French settlers to vote, but also the French still control immigration. So they decide who gets to go into Caledonia and who gets essentially to tilt the voting public."

On [Thursday](#), France accused Azerbaijan of fomenting the riots in New Caledonia, with French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin saying that the violence has been actively supported by Azerbaijan. Philippe Gomes, the former president of the government of New Caledonia has also claimed that Azerbaijan is bankrolling the pro-independence Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front. The Eastern European country has strongly rejected the accusations.

"Azerbaijan has always been a strong supporter of the nonaligned movement. And with their Baku Initiative Group, they have, you know, strongly verbally supported these independence movements in the French territories, and the French are using this to characterize this as external interference," Noh explained.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly accused France of neocolonialism and supported independence from France. The country has also founded the Baku Initiative Group, which brings together 14 political movements across the former French Empire in an effort to decolonize.

“We have to understand this in the larger global context, which is that this essentially is yet another signal of the rise of the multipolar world that is colonized countries taking out the colonizer,” he added. “They no longer want to be colonial or neocolonial vassals of France, regardless of how the French characterize it. They want to shake off those colonial shackles.” “The French do not want to give up their empire,” said Noh. “They want to keep their colonies, and then, of course, there are domestic considerations as well. Macron is not looking good. He does not want to be the one who lost yet another territory.”

Commenting on the French neocolonial ambitions Poikonen highlighted the recent fails of Paris in maintaining control over what used to be its overseas territories.

“They got frog-marched out of Niger, and Mali and Burkina Faso. The nickel that they want from New Caledonia is just part of the green energy jam where they're trying to sell people a sustainable future built on, you know, harvesting all the rest of the minerals out of the ground and destroying the planet in the process,” the analyst clarified.

“And Macron knows that but he lost what 70% of France's uranium when they got kicked out of Niger. They're losing contracts. The thing that they're ultimately fighting over, I think, is to maintain some sort of international influence as far as shipping lanes are concerned. And, other than that, save face and try not to look like they're getting spanked everywhere they go, everywhere they are,” Poikonen added.

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Scientists Reveal Hidden Branch of the Nile, Potentially Solving Pyramid Mystery - Study

The discovery could be the answer to the question of how ancient Egyptians were able to transport massive stone blocks that make up their now-famous monuments.

Scientists have recently discovered a long-buried branch of the Nile river that once rushed with life alongside the country's magnificent Giza pyramid complex. The river branch is about 40 miles long (64 km), but has been hiding under desert and farmland for millennia, according to a [study](#) that published the findings on Thursday in *Communications Earth & Environment*.

[Eman Ghoneim](#), a geomorphologist who was born and raised in Egypt, is a professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She and her team analyzed batches of satellite images as well as sediment samples that were collected from beneath the desert's surface.

“We were looking at these meandering natural features closer to the [pyramid] field, like long depressions and troughs, now covered up entirely by farmlands and sand,” Ghoneim says. “It can be very hard to see if you don't know what to look for.”

Radar gave the research team the “unique ability to penetrate the sand surface and produce images of hidden features including buried rivers and ancient structures,” said [Ghoneim](#). And

through this process, they found the long-lost ancient branch of the Nile that once ran through the foothills beside the Giza pyramid field - just a kilometer from the banks of the river.

The team believes this hidden branch could be the answer to how builders transported heavy materials to the construction site of the now iconic pyramids - as heavy materials would have been easier to float down river than to carry across land.

The ancient Egyptians built 31 pyramids along the now inhospitable desert strip between 4,700 and 3,700 years ago. Ghoneim adds that the branch could help researchers find potential sites of ancient human settlements that might be buried beneath the land's surface.

While archaeologists have long suspected a waterway was responsible for helping to build the pyramids, Ghoneim says "nobody was certain of the location, the shape, the size or proximity of this mega waterway to the actual pyramids site."

The scientists believe the river, which they named Ahramat, was covered in sand when a major drought set in around 4,200 years ago. And the discovery of the river branch could also explain why the pyramids were built in different areas. Ghoneim explains that the water's course and volume changed over time, so kings of later eras had to make different choices compared to those of earlier eras.

She adds that she is hopeful of continuing to piece together a map of the Nile's previous life.

"For most cities, we're not talking about how water helped the building of pyramids but rather how human civilizations otherwise depended on it and adapted to its changes," she says. "And when we learn from the past, we can prepare for the future."

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'Business as Usual': Elite WhatsApp Chat Found Influencing NYC Mayor, Gaza Public Opinion

During the call, the powerful individuals reportedly discussed making political donations to Adams, and suggested that they could pressure the school's president and trustees to permit the use of police against students protesting the deaths of Palestinian civilians.

The Washington Post reported on [Thursday](#) that a group of billionaires and business titans privately pressured New York City Mayor Eric Adams (D) to send police to disperse pro-Palestinian protestors at Columbia University. The elite group held a Zoom video call on April 6 with Adams, about a week after the mayor sent New York police to the campus, the newspaper reported.

Jon Jeter, an author and journalist, sat down with Sputnik's [The Critical Hour](#) on Friday. Jeter told the show's hosts that he finds it "ironic" the US has "Black mayors in the biggest cities in the country", and yet their approval ratings are "in the toilet".

According to a recent [poll](#), only 16% of likely voters in NYC would vote for Adams in the next election, and two-thirds say they would vote for someone else.

"Why? Because they're taking their cues from the business class, the corporate class. We know this explicitly with Eric Adams. We can assume that's the case with [Chicago Mayor] Brandon Johnson as well, and the people are rejecting it out there," said Jeter.

Following his first year in office, Johnson has slammed into a net approval rating of -29% with only 28% of likely voters saying they approve of his performance in office, and a majority (57%) saying they disapprove and 41% strongly disapprove.

“All of these Black mayors, they are first and foremost employees of the corporate class, the CEO class in the cities where they function. None more so than Eric Adams, who I think we can do a whole show on how Eric Adams carries water with this neoliberal elite,” he added.

“And, by the way, his policies are neoliberal to the core and they are prescriptions which are only digging a deeper hole for his city,” said Jeter. “And so, they've always taken their orders from this corporate elite. This is business as usual. I'm sure this is not their first time calling Mayor Adams and telling him what to do.”

The report suggests the chat group - titled “Israel Current Events” - which was formed after the October 7th attack, has influenced the highest levels of the Israeli government, the US business world and other elite universities. The report also found that more than a dozen of the roughly 100 members of the group appear on Forbes’s annual list of billionaires.

Prominent figures who appeared in the chat include: “former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, Dell founder and CEO Michael Dell, hedge fund manager Bill Ackman and Joshua Kushner, founder of Thrive Capital and brother of Jared Kushner, former president Donald Trump’s son-in-law.” The newspaper adds that the chat was initiated by a staffer for Barry Sternlicht, who never joined the group directly.

“These people who govern us, the ruling class, their misrule is characterized by a lack of new ideas. They don't have any counter arguments anymore. All they know is power. And so all they know is that they elect. They got this man elected,” he added.

“He's not intellectual. He does exactly what they say. They put ideas in his head because he has none of his own, right. And so this is clearly starting to become problematic, right. Because people are no longer responding, but they don't know what else to do.”

“That's such a big part of this class war ... where race is used to divide the working class,” said Jeter. “Trying to peel off layers of the working class and turn them against each other.”

Just four days after the group chat members held a video call with the NYC mayor, student protestors occupied Hamilton Hall, a campus building, when the school’s president invited police back to clear it. At least 112 were arrested in the process, and [police](#) claim that 32 were not affiliated with the school.

More than 34,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Israel-Hamas war, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. Israel has lost about 1,200 Israelis who were killed by Hamas in the assault in October.

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Shooting of Slovak Prime Minister Reveals ‘Hateful’ Rhetoric Against Ukraine Heretics

Western media has "explained" the shocking incident by Fico's independent political position, which demonstrates the pressures faced by foreign leaders who refuse to toe the NATO party line.

Slovakia remains at a political standstill as the country awaits news of the health of Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The Slovak leader, who was elected head of the country's parliament in October, was shot yesterday in a brazen assassination attempt while greeting supporters in the town of Handlová. The gunman fired five shots at the Prime Minister at close range, striking him in the shoulder and abdomen. Fico was immediately airlifted to a nearby hospital in the city of Banská Bystrica and underwent surgery under a medically-induced coma as doctors described his wounds as "life-threatening."

Fico survived the five-hour operation, but officials continue to describe his condition as "serious." The incident has shed light on the tenor of the political discourse in Slovakia and throughout Central and Eastern Europe as the question of military support for Ukraine's war against Russia remains a highly contentious issue. The gunman, Juraj Cintula, confessed to interrogators that he targeted Fico over opposition to the Prime Minister's political policy. Fico has repeatedly rejected calls for the country to send armaments to Kiev.

The Slovak Prime Minister had previously warned about the potential for polarization in the country to boil over into political violence, [claiming](#) in a video message just over a month ago that the rhetoric of opposition media outlets could result in "the murder of some of the leading government politicians."

Mindia Gavasheli, the editor-in-chief of Sputnik's US bureau, joined the [Fault Lines program Thursday](#) to offer insight on the situation from the ground in the Slovak capital of Bratislava.

"The biggest issue here in Slovakia is how the government is going to handle its relations with the media," said Gavasheli, offering background on the political controversy that has engulfed the country in recent weeks. "Slovak [public] radio and television, as Fico claims, is filled with loyalists to the previous government... The ruling coalition was preparing to introduce a law to reshape how the state-owned media works, and that caused a lot of outcry here."

Fico's allies immediately blamed the controversy over the issue for instigating the attempt on the Prime Minister's life.

Opposition politician Zuzana Čaputová, the country's outgoing president, recorded a message with president-elect Peter Pellegrini of Fico's party urging calm and calling for an end to the "hateful rhetoric" she claimed had overtaken Slovak politics.

"However, it doesn't feel like the deputies in the parliament got the message," said Gavasheli as political tensions in the country remain high.

The assassination attempt comes as [protests rock the Georgian capital of Tbilisi](#) over a planned foreign agents registration law mirroring legislation in the US and various other countries. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, like Fico, is often labeled in Western-aligned media as "authoritarian" and "pro-Russian." Kobakhidze has charted a similar course to Fico on the Ukraine proxy conflict, [promising](#) his government's "firm" commitment to humanitarian support for Ukrainians but rejecting calls to provide arms to controversial President Volodymyr Zelensky.

As in Slovakia, Kobakhidze's independence on the issue has led to controversy, with the Georgian Prime Minister recently criticizing the tenor of coverage from US-backed media outlets. Kobakhidze has accused the US and its allies of [color revolution tactics](#), attempting to overthrow or politically damage the leader in retribution for his claimed "pro-Russian" stance.

Similar media narratives have surrounded Fico, who is stigmatized as a relic of Slovakia's Soviet-aligned past for his opposition to the arming Ukraine. British newspaper The Guardian [described](#) Fico's Slovakia as "close-minded, corrupt and out of sync with the liberal west." "Like [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán, Fico spreads pro-Russian propaganda and tries to muzzle independent media," wrote the liberal tabloid outlet two weeks ago, characterizing Fico's attempts to reform state media as an authoritarian power grab.

Whether in Georgia or Slovakia, the narrative remains the same. Citizens are left with the option between the ostensibly open, liberal and free West or the stigmatized, "pro-Russian" leadership of those who question whether it is in their country's interest to support a proxy war hundreds of miles away.

Ukrainians faced a similar choice in 2014, when Western countries characterized the overthrow of another "pro-Russian" leader as a victory for liberal values. The country has been engulfed in violence ever since.

Years later, voters in Georgia, Slovakia, and elsewhere naturally seek to choose a different path. They will first have to overcome objections from the West and their media allies, who insist on respect for freedom and democracy – as they define it.

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Nazi Pizza? Third Reich Iconography Spotted at Parlor Where Ukraine Hosted Blinken

Another day, another example of Nazi sympathy on the part of Ukraine's post-Maidan government.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made [a surprise visit to Kiev](#) this week, ostensibly in order to voice the Biden administration's support for Ukraine as the country faces [challenging conditions](#) amid its Western-backed proxy war against Russia.

Blinken's itinerary included a stop at a military-themed pizza parlor and an unexpected performance by the top diplomat and amateur guitarist, who treated locals to a performance of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World." Blinken's musical stunt was met with mixed reviews, with some Ukrainians questioning its appropriateness given the country's current struggles on the battlefield.

"Like many other politicians... Blinken appears to have misinterpreted the 1989 rock hit as a patriotic anthem," noted a critical [review](#) by NBC News. "In fact, the 'free world' is Young's ironic reference to America's failings, including homelessness and gun crime."

However, the secretary of state's dinner outing with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba is now receiving even more attention than the impromptu concert as users on social media make disturbing discoveries about the restaurant. Former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter discussed the controversy with host Garland Nixon on [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Thursday](#).

"What are your thoughts on that spectacle of Tony Blinken going to some pizza joint in Kiev... and playing the guitar and all of this kind of stuff?" asked Nixon, referring to an incident that one

White House spokesperson defended as an example of “cultural diplomacy.” Nixon referred to the restaurant as “a place that is notorious for sporting the iconography of the Third Reich.” Users on the X social media platform identified the Kiev pizza parlor as Veterano Pizza, which is described online as a “relaxed restaurant serving pizzas & cocktails with military-themed decor and a terrace.” The parlor pays tribute to veterans of Ukraine’s ongoing conflict with Russia, with [various nationalist paraphernalia adorning its walls](#).

But critics have pointed out the extremist political affiliations of many members of the country’s armed forces, with photos frequently emerging of servicemembers sporting Nazi tattoos. The troubling connection was again [identified](#) in the decor of the pizza restaurant, with users on X spotting a patch that appeared to feature the insignia of the Nazis’ “Wiking” 5th SS Panzer Division. The symbol, which resembles a rounded swastika, corresponds to a division of the Nazi Party’s Waffen-SS paramilitary.

Another framed photo appeared to show an image from the [2014 Odessa trade union house massacre](#), when neo-Nazi paramilitaries set a building where demonstrators were sheltering ablaze. Some 48 people were burned alive during the shocking attack.

Other users quickly noticed that it appeared the restaurant’s owners had swapped out some of their more controversial decor before Blinken’s visit. Large framed images of the flag of Ukraine’s extremist Right Sector* organization and the Nazi Wolfsangel were also [observed](#) in other photos from the pizza parlor.

The [Wolfsangel](#) is a Medieval rune design adopted by the Nazi Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS Das Reich division – the symbol is frequently used by groups with Nazi sympathies or affiliations, such as the Ukrainian nationalist organizations that collaborated with Nazi Germany during World War II.

Observers stress that the troubling symbolism is not simply an indication of a few “bad apples” in Ukraine’s military, but a representation of the extremist politics of the government that took hold after [the 2014 Euromaidan coup](#). US public television outlet PBS aired an [interview](#) with the mayor of a large Ukrainian city in 2022 who referred to Russians as “cockroaches.”

A large portrait of notorious Ukrainian nationalist and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera was observed behind him – it was unclear whether the attempt to blur and obscure the background was made by PBS or the interviewee.

Ritter criticized Blinken’s attempt at “cultural diplomacy” in Kiev, saying “it’s ridiculous and I think the Ukrainians are seeing through this. Even Kuleba couldn’t muster too much enthusiasm, although he felt at home in the Nazi pizza parlor. But the Ukrainians understand what’s happening right now.”

“This isn’t going to last much longer,” concluded the former UN weapons inspector, claiming Ukraine is nearing military and political collapse.

*Right Sector, Azov Battalion are terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

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Was Robert Fico the West's Next Color Revolution Target? What We Know So Far

Sputnik investigates the role of the media and foreign-backed NGOs in turning up the political temperature in the Central European country.

Robert Fico remains under the care of doctors at a hospital in the city of Banská Bystrica after a brazen assassination attempt Wednesday against the Slovak Prime Minister shocked the country and brought politics to a standstill.

Officials claimed the populist leader's life was no longer in danger after an hours-long operation earlier this week. However, Fico experienced a setback as doctors recently revealed his condition required a second surgery. Officials continue to await updates on the prime minister's condition to judge whether it will allow him to be transported to a larger hospital in the capital of Bratislava next week.

As Fico recovers, light is being shed on the [highly contentious political and media environment](#) in Slovakia that the prime minister's defenders say contributed to the attempted assassination. The Slovak Prime Minister had previously warned about the potential for polarization in the country to boil over into political violence, claiming in a [video message](#) just over a month ago that the rhetoric of opposition media outlets could result in "the murder of some of the leading government politicians."

Still others have [questioned the influence of foreign NGOs](#) and Western government-backed organizations, which frequently play a role in instigating political unrest and even regime change across the world. Fico has earned scorn for his steadfast refusal to contribute military aid to the regime in Ukraine, insisting he does not believe it is in Slovakia's interest.

Here, Sputnik summarizes what is known so far about the role of foreign influence in Slovakia's politics.

"Russian tilt"

Fico has been frequently criticized in Western media since beginning his fourth term as Slovakia's Prime Minister in 2023. As leader of the country's Social Democratic party – commonly referred to as Smer – Fico has remained perhaps Slovakia's most prominent politician, serving as prime minister for a longer period of time than any other leader in the country's post-independence history.

But Fico's electoral success has not stopped liberal columnists from insisting that – somehow – the popular leader represents a vague threat to "democracy" in Slovakia. Mainstream European media has heavily stigmatized the prime minister as an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin for his opposition to arming Ukraine, with a columnist for The Guardian [writing](#) that he "showers praise on Moscow."

No examples were cited of the prime minister doing so. Instead, the author employed guilt by association, insisting Fico "models himself on Viktor Orbán, the 'alt-right' leader in neighboring Hungary" (Fico is, in fact, a left-wing politician). The prime minister is also faulted for having "fulminated against the west for his domestic audience," while his party's vice-chair identifies the war in Ukraine as a "proxy war of the United States against Russia." These critiques, at least, make clear that Western media's complaints against Fico are ideological.

The Guardian once again turned to the subject of Slovakia just over a month before the recent assassination attempt on Fico, with a [hit piece](#) blaming him for being "out of sync with the liberal west." As proof of the claim, the testimony of a communications advisor for the opposition party

is cited. The article came shortly after Fico ally Peter Pellegrini won the country's presidency, once again on a platform of neutrality regarding the Ukraine conflict. The Guardian again [warned](#) of the country's "Russian tilt."

Slovak opposition protests taking place early this year received heavy [coverage](#) in the European press, leading some to wonder whether Western leaders would begin openly encouraging unrest as they have done in [Georgia](#). Had the seeds of a regime change operation been planted?

USAID to the rescue

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has become one of the United State's [most important regime change tools](#). Under the banner of such causes as economic development and government transparency, the agency invests in various social causes globally.

But the organization has also been wielded as a weapon of US influence, funding organizations, activists and politicians that align with Western interests. Thus funding for such priorities as "the development of independent media" obscures support for opposition-aligned journalism outlets; "strengthening civil society" invariably means strengthening US-aligned pressure groups. Along with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – a government agency [described](#) by one of its founders as dedicated to continuing the work of the CIA – USAID forms an important part of US efforts to interfere in foreign countries' political systems.

[Controversial](#) USAID Administrator Samantha Power [visited](#) Slovakia in 2022 to meet with members of the then-ruling opposition party. Her trip also took her to nearby [Moldova](#) where she [visited](#) the offices of Mediacor, a USAID-sponsored organization ostensibly dedicated to "strengthening independent journalism."

Claims that "the Kremlin weaponizes disinformation" played a central role in Power's trip as the Biden administration uses the talking point as a pretense to [regulate and censor social media](#).

Power [met with the organization GLOBSEC](#) during her time in Slovakia, a US government-backed organization dedicated to furthering US and NATO interests in the country. GLOBSEC emerged from the Slovak Atlantic Commission, an agency dedicated to encouraging Slovakia's integration into NATO and the European Union.

The organization has hosted figures such as former British Prime Minister David Cameron, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and current European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen at glitzy speaking engagements in Bratislava.

In 2021, GLOBSEC [hosted](#) Belarusian opposition members in Slovakia for a meeting dedicated to discussing "systemic reforms." It was hoped that "Belarusian professionals" could "become familiar with the Slovak experience of market economy transformation" as the US-sponsored Belarusian opposition hoped to take power in Minsk to implement pro-elite neoliberal policy. Such "systemic reforms" have remained a key motivation for the efforts of billionaire donors like George Soros, who stand to benefit from the loosening of economic regulation across Europe. Hand of Soros?

George Soros' political giving has [made the wealthy financier a controversial figure](#) – a 1991 [article](#) in the Washington Post dubbed him an "overt operative" of US-backed regime change operations. Alongside US government organizations like the NED, Soros funnels his massive wealth towards pro-Western activists who help bring down Russian and social democratic-aligned governments.

But how has the billionaire exerted his influence in Slovakia? The record is murky, as Robert Fico's leadership has allowed the country to keep its social democratic economy relatively intact, but the billionaire's organizations maintain a presence in Slovakia as they do throughout the continent.

Earlier this month, a member of Fico's Smer party publicly [criticized](#) the NGO Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS), which has attacked a proposed foreign agents registration act in Slovakia. The organization rejected the charge that it is funded by George Soros (the agency is actually [supported](#) by the US government), but Soros funds a number of other organizations that [operate](#) in the country, including the Slovak branches of the [Open Society Foundation](#) and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX).

IREX has funded a number of [fellowships](#) for liberal activists in the country, including [at least one](#) who went on to work for Aktuality.sk – one of the media outlets Fico blamed for stoking political hatred in Slovakia.

Meanwhile, the Georgian branch of Soros' Civil Society Foundation (CSF), which has been instrumental in promoting anti-government protests in Tbilisi, has similarly [labeled](#) Robert Fico as an "authoritarian" leader for Slovakia's NGO transparency legislation. The allied Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) has [contributed](#) to so-called "media monitoring" efforts in Bratislava.

Some anti-government demonstrations erupted in Slovakia earlier this year, but protests have not yet reached the size they have in Georgia. Outside-backed NGOs are recognized as a way for foreign interests to covertly exert influence abroad, allowing their donors to raise and lower the temperature of political controversies at will. If events have not yet been brought to a boil of regime change in Slovakia, it may be simply because outside interests are occupied elsewhere or still waiting for the right moment.

However, the shooting of Prime Minister Fico is certainly a highly detrimental development that demonstrates the polarized environment in the country. Those concerned with guarding Slovak society must stand guard against such pernicious outside influences as the country seeks to chart its own path.

Russophobia has done much to damage the political discourse, in the United States and elsewhere. In Slovakia it appears it has almost led to the death of the nation's leader. Countries deserve the right to discuss matters of foreign policy with their own sovereign interests in mind – without accusations of ties to a Russian boogeyman.

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Israeli Political Crisis Deepens as IDF Failures Prompt Cabinet Resignation Threat

The country's emergency war cabinet appeared on the verge of collapse Saturday with a key member voicing opposition to its leadership.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's grip on power appeared under threat this weekend when a key member of the country's war cabinet [threatened](#) to resign.

Opposition leader Benny Gantz issued an ultimatum Saturday, claiming he would leave the emergency political formation if Netanyahu does not implement his six-point plan for the country's military operation in Gaza by June 8. Among Gantz's demands are efforts to ensure the return of Hamas-held Israeli captives, a demilitarization of the Gaza Strip and a move towards international administration of the Palestinian territory.

Gantz, a retired army general, has criticized Netanyahu's prosecution of the country's military campaign in Gaza, reflecting public frustration in Israel over the prime minister's failure to secure the return of Israeli hostages. Fighting has resumed in northern Gaza recently as Hamas fighters have returned to the area, prompting claims the country has failed to accomplish Netanyahu's stated aim of defeating Hamas.

The threat suggests the transpartisan political cooperation that emerged after Hamas' October 7 attack threatens to break down, potentially leading to calls for new elections. Critics have claimed Netanyahu has prolonged Israel's military campaign in Gaza to maintain his hold on power. The Prime Minister was previously under investigation on multiple charges of corruption, with the judicial process against him set to resume if he is toppled.

Recent polling [reveals](#) Netanyahu's approval rating in Israel stands at some 32%. The country has been rocked by large demonstrations for months with protesters calling on the prime minister to step down.

[An open letter signed by dozens of prominent Israelis](#) earlier this year called on Netanyahu's "immediate removal," deeming him an "existential" threat to the country. Political polarization in the country has remained high since large anti-Netanyahu [protests](#) took place in 2019 and 2020.

Netanyahu was briefly dislodged from power in 2021, with a government led by Naftali Bennett emerging to take his place, but he returned as prime minister in late 2022.

The loss of the support of Gantz could make Netanyahu more reliant on hard line members of his coalition like Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, who have called for the expulsion of Palestinians and the rebuilding of Israeli settlements in Gaza.

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Ukraine Conflict Reveals Russian Supremacy in High-Tech Warfare of the Future - Report

The proxy war has put NATO weaponry to the test and found it to be lacking.

"The US has been Ukraine's single most important ally" in its conflict with Russia, observes [analysis](#) from Business Insider Friday, but Kiev's use of American weapons systems has left it reliant on technology with "serious flaws."

The website's investigation reveals Russian superiority in a number of areas, including drones and electronic warfare, as well as the deficiencies of the United States' military production sector.

"One area in which the US has revealed its shortcomings is in electronic warfare," the author writes. "Russia's jamming systems have created major issues with Western precision weaponry, including GMLRS rockets and Excalibur artillery shells. Russia's electronic warfare units have

become increasingly adept at scrambling the GPS navigation systems used to guide the missiles and shells to their targets, sending them off course and rendering them useless.” The observation was also made recently by The New York Times, which [acknowledged](#) that Russia’s electronic jamming capabilities have managed to disable even the US’s vaunted HIMARS missiles, and [echoed this week](#) by an ex-Pentagon analyst. The retired Army lieutenant general [suggested](#) America is significantly behind in developing similar technology. The Business Insider analysis also noted that Russia has better adapted to modern realities of fighting in the age of drone warfare, with constant surveillance making attempts to obscure troops and supply routes impossible. US Army units currently rely on a small number of outdated drones, the article admits.

The US military’s attempts to develop [microwave weapons](#) and [drone swarms](#) to counter Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have so far failed to bear fruit, demonstrating the weaknesses of a military industrial complex that for decades has been focused on “war against militant groups such as the Taliban* in Afghanistan” rather than combating large state actors. The result has been an inefficient defense production base, both in terms of cost and developing sufficient quantities of weapons. Analysis [published](#) earlier this year revealed that Russia is now producing three times more ammunition than the United States and all European allies of Ukraine combined as Russian military industry has stepped into high gear. Kiev reportedly “was being outfired at a rate of 10-1 on parts of the front line” earlier this year, notes Business Insider. The article observes that the United States is capable of producing high-quality armaments, but claims they are hopelessly expensive compared to Russian equipment that can be produced at a much lower cost, allowing the country to prevail in “fights which require endurance.”

A similar [observation](#) was made recently by geopolitical analyst and ex-US Marine Brian Berletic, who noted, “the West still seems incapable of learning that quantity can indeed be a quality of its own.”

“The collective West still believes firmly in its own full-spectrum supremacy in terms of political, economic, and military power, despite the growing body of evidence to the contrary,” Berletic added. “Russia for many years worked on making itself more self-sufficient in general, dismantling many potential dependencies on an increasingly aggressive and irrational West. This clearly paid off when Western sanctions in 2022 failed to have the crippling impact Washington, London, and Brussels had hoped for, and instead backfired on the West itself.”

“Russia has continuously expanded its military industrial base while at the same time the West allowed theirs to atrophy,” he concluded. “The result is a proxy conflict where the collective West is incapable of matching let alone exceeding Russia’s level of ammunition, weapons, and vehicle production.”

“And while the West appears to understand this mistake in hindsight, they still seem incapable of grasping just how much time is needed to rectify this or accept the possibility that it is perhaps impossible at this point to rectify.”

*Taliban is under UN sanctions for terrorist activities.

Shooting of Slovak Prime Minister reveals ‘hateful’ rhetoric against Ukraine heretics

Mindia Gavasheli, the editor-in-chief of Sputnik’s US bureau, joined the Fault Lines program to offer insight on the attempted assassination of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who is a critic of the Western-backed Ukraine proxy war on Russia.

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“The biggest issue here in Slovakia is how the government is going to handle its relations with the media,” said Gavasheli, offering background on the political controversy that has engulfed the country in recent weeks. “Slovak [public] radio and television, as Fico claims, is filled with loyalists to the previous government... The ruling coalition was preparing to introduce a law to reshape how the state-owned media works, and that caused a lot of outcry here.”

Fico's political allies Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić condemned the attack, Gavasheli noted, and have vowed to visit Slovakia soon in an act of solidarity.

The assassination attempt comes as protests rock the Georgian capital of Tbilisi over a planned foreign agents registration law mirroring legislation in the US and other countries. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, like Fico, is often labeled in Western-aligned media as “pro-Russian.” Kobakhidze has charted a similar course to Fico on the Ukraine proxy conflict, promising his government’s commitment to humanitarian support for Ukrainians but rejecting calls to provide arms to the country.

As in Slovakia, Kobakhidze’s independence on the issue has led to controversy, with the Georgian Prime Minister recently criticizing the tenor of coverage from US-backed media outlets. Kobakhidze has accused the US and its allies of color revolution tactics, attempting to overthrow the leader in retribution for his claimed “pro-Russian” stance.

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“This isn't going to last much longer”: Russia’s plan to disintegrate Ukraine’s army – Scott Ritter

Former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program to weigh in on Antony Blinken’s impromptu concert in Kiev as the Russian army goes on the offensive in the northern Kharkov region.

“I'll just say he has to work on his, c, d, f, b minor transitions,” said Ritter of the secretary of state’s guitarwork. “If we look at the depth of what he was saying... I think he said we got another \$2 billion we're going to give [Ukraine].”

“He's talking about long-term joint defense industry efforts, meaning that America's got to work with Ukraine so that sometime in the future, Ukraine will be able to produce its own defense needs.... And he's talking about the potential of having a weapons factory built in Ukraine two

years down the road. I mean, Tony Blinken's just off in Never Neverland," he said, predicting the "imminent collapse of the Ukrainian ability to sustain combat cohesion on the battlefield."

Moscow has been engaged in a "war of attrition" against Kiev, Ritter noted, with the ultimate stated aim of demilitarizing Ukraine and ending the threat it poses as a proxy for NATO.

"They're not just wearing down the Ukrainians, but they're putting the Ukrainians into a classic horn of a dilemma, meaning they don't have enough forces to defend the area they were already defending. And now a new frontier opened up, and they have to decide what forces they're going to strip from where to send north, weakening the line that they're stripping [and] giving the Russians more opportunities."

The result, Ritter said, is the gradual thinning out of Ukraine's armed forces until its military is split and collapses.

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Was Robert Fico the West's next "color revolution" target? What we know so far (Part 1)

As Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico recovers from an assassination attempt Wednesday, light is being shed on the highly contentious political and media environment the politician's allies say contributed to the attempted assassination.

Others are questioning the influence of foreign NGOs and Western government-backed organizations, which frequently play a role in instigating political unrest and even regime change across the world. Fico has earned scorn for his steadfast refusal to contribute military aid to the regime in Ukraine, insisting he does not believe it is in Slovakia's interest.

Mainstream European media has heavily stigmatized the prime minister as an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin for his opposition to arming Ukraine, with a columnist for The Guardian writing that he "showers praise on Moscow." No examples were cited of the prime minister doing so. Instead, the author employed guilt by association, insisting Fico "models himself on Viktor Orbán, the 'alt-right' leader in neighboring Hungary" (Fico is, in fact, a left-wing politician).

The Guardian once again turned to the subject of Slovakia just over a month before the recent assassination attempt on Fico, with a hit piece blaming him for being "out of sync with the liberal west." As proof of the claim, the testimony of a communications advisor for the opposition party is cited. The article came shortly after Fico ally Peter Pellegrini won the country's presidency, once again on a platform of neutrality regarding the Ukraine conflict. The Guardian again warned of the country's "Russian tilt."

Slovak opposition protests taking place early this year received heavy coverage in the European press, leading some to wonder whether Western leaders would begin openly encouraging unrest as they have done in Georgia. Had the seeds of a regime change operation been planted?

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Was Robert Fico the West's next "color revolution" target? What we know so far (Part 2)

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has become one of the United State's most important regime change tools. Along with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – a government agency described by one of its founders as dedicated to continuing the work of the CIA – USAID forms an important part of US efforts to interfere in foreign countries' political systems.

Controversial USAID Administrator Samantha Power visited Slovakia in 2022 to meet with members of the then-ruling opposition party. Claims that "the Kremlin weaponizes disinformation" played a central role in Power's trip as the Biden administration uses the talking point as a pretense to regulate and censor social media. Power met with the organization GLOBSEC during her time in Slovakia, a US government-backed organization dedicated to furthering US and NATO interests in the country.

In 2021, GLOBSEC hosted Belarusian "opposition members" in Slovakia for a meeting dedicated to discussing "systemic reforms." It was hoped that "Belarusian professionals" could "become familiar with the Slovak experience of market economy transformation" as the US-sponsored Belarusian opposition hoped to overthrow the legitimate president in Minsk.

Such "systemic reforms" have remained a key motivation for the efforts of billionaire donors like George Soros, who stand to benefit from the loosening of economic regulation across Europe. Soros funds a number of organizations that operate in Slovakia, including the Slovak branches of the Open Society Foundation and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX).

IREX has funded a number of fellowships for liberal activists in the country, including at least one who went on to work for Aktuality. sk – one of the media outlets Fico blamed for stoking political hatred in Slovakia that he warned could lead to a political assassination just one month before Wednesday's shooting.

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US flip-flops on sending NATO military trainers to Ukraine, raising prospect of dangerous escalation

The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown claimed it is only a matter of time before the United States sends military trainers to Ukraine, according to reporting in The New York Times.

"We'll get there eventually, over time," Brown told reporters per the US newspaper.

The claim contradicts previous statements by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that NATO allies would not send military to Ukraine, as well as a draft document set to be approved at the NATO summit in July. Brown's statement also contradicts assurances by the Biden administration, which insisted as recently as this week that there were no plans to send trainers to Ukraine.

The sending of trainers or advisors would be interpreted as a commitment of US military personnel to the conflict with Russia. The possibility of servicemembers being harmed raises the prospect of even greater direct US participation in the war, possibly even triggering NATO's Article 5 and compelling a broader commitment of the alliance to the conflict.

US involvement in the Vietnam War began with former President Dwight D. Eisenhower's commitment of military advisors to the country in 1956.

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Israeli political crisis deepens as IDF failures prompt cabinet resignation threat

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's grip on power appeared under threat this weekend when a key member of the country's war cabinet threatened to resign.

Opposition leader Benny Gantz issued an ultimatum Saturday, claiming he would leave the emergency political formation if Netanyahu does not implement his six-point plan for the country's military operation in Gaza by June 8. Among Gantz's demands are efforts to ensure the return of Hamas-held Israeli captives, a demilitarization of the Gaza Strip and a move towards international administration of the Palestinian territory.

"If you choose the path of fanatics and lead the entire nation to the abyss — we will be forced to quit the government," he said.

Gantz, a retired army general, has criticized Netanyahu's prosecution of the country's military campaign in Gaza, reflecting public frustration in Israel over the prime minister's failure to secure the return of Israeli hostages.

“The people of Israel are watching you,” Gantz said in the prime-time address to Netanyahu.

The threat suggests the transpartisan political cooperation that emerged after October 7 threatens to break down, potentially leading to calls for new elections. Critics have claimed Netanyahu has prolonged Israel’s military campaign in Gaza to maintain his hold on power. The Prime Minister was previously under investigation on multiple charges of corruption, with the judicial process against him set to resume if he is toppled.

The loss of the support of Gantz could make Netanyahu more politically reliant on hard liner members of his coalition such as Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, who have called for the rebuilding of Israeli settlements in Gaza.

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Revealed: US oligarchs demanded police crackdown on pro-Palestine protests (Part 1)

Reporting in US media this week revealed a private group of wealthy executives pressured New York City Mayor Eric Adams to use police force to dismantle pro-Palestine protests at Columbia University earlier this month.

The article revealed the existence of a secret WhatsApp chat group where pro-Israel business leaders discussed efforts to manipulate US public opinion on the ongoing Israeli military operation in Gaza. The influential billionaires obtained a private Zoom meeting with the NYC mayor in late April, where they urged Adams to dissolve the pro-Palestine encampment at Columbia’s Manhattan campus.

Some of the participants in the discussion appeared to use financial donations to the mayor as leverage to ensure the crackdown.

Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program featured a panel discussion on the revelations. “What this article is uncovering is that a number of these individuals, such as the former CEO of Starbucks Howard Schultz [and] Dell founder and CEO Michael Dell... were all using the WhatsApp application to pressure the mayor of New York to go in and remove these encampments,” noted host Wilmer Leon.

Leon said the incident was “one of the things I think that got President [Claudine] Gay from Harvard fired, that she refused to release the personal information on the students.” The host noted members of the secret WhatsApp group offered to hire private investigators to help New York City Police spy on and discredit pro-Palestine activists at Columbia.

Leon compared the incident to COINTELPRO, an illegal effort by the FBI to surveil and subvert activist groups in the 1960s. The infamous program led to the FBI's assassination of civil rights leader Fred Hampton and attempts to discredit Martin Luther King Jr.

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Revealed: US oligarchs demanded police crackdown on pro-Palestine protests (Part 2)

Sputnik's The Critical Hour program featured a panel discussion on revelations about business leaders' influence over the New York City mayor, with Black Alliance for Peace activist Erica Caines and former Green Party vice presidential candidate Ajamu Baraka reflecting on the implications of the startling development.

"[Mayor Adams] mobilized police forces and they went in to smash this protest movement," Baraka explained. "Why Columbia?... Because of the fact that you're talking about a \$13 billion endowment. And this demand by the students for divestment [from Israel] was seen as a serious challenge to capital."

Caines said the business leaders' influence over the NYC mayor illustrated "the collaboration between corporate power and law enforcement. It also highlights the paramilitary form in policing today. We can see that this is what the use of policing has become... This suppression of protest and the arrest of demonstrators at Columbia University only highlights that erosion of civil liberties."

US police departments have been criticized for their relationship with Israel, with officers often traveling to the country to receive training from Israeli security forces. Observers also question the so-called "Army-to-police pipeline," with departments increasingly staffed by veterans who critics claim bring a militarized mindset to policing.

"Police departments have employed their newly acquired military weaponry not only to combat terrorism but also for everyday patrolling," noted The Atlantic magazine in 2011. "Now, police officers routinely walk the beat armed with assault rifles and garbed in black full-battle uniforms... In recent years, police departments both large and small have acquired bazookas, machine guns, and even armored vehicles (mini-tanks) for use in domestic police work."

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Ukraine conflict reveals Russian supremacy in high-tech warfare of the future - report

“The US has been Ukraine's single most important ally” in its conflict with Russia, observes analysis from Business Insider, but Kiev’s use of American weapons systems has left it reliant on technology with “serious flaws.”

“One area in which the US has revealed its shortcomings is in electronic warfare,” the author writes. “Russia's jamming systems have created major issues with Western precision weaponry, including GMLRS rockets and Excalibur artillery shells. Russia's electronic warfare units have become increasingly adept at scrambling the GPS navigation systems used to guide the missiles and shells to their targets, sending them off course and rendering them useless.”

The US military’s attempts to develop microwave weapons and drone swarms to counter Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have so far failed to bear fruit, demonstrating the shortcomings of a military industrial complex that for decades has been focused on “war against militant groups such as the Taliban* in Afghanistan” rather than combatting large state actors.

The result has been an inefficient defense production base, both in terms of cost and developing sufficient quantities of weapons. Analysis published earlier this year revealed that Russia is now producing three times more ammunition than the United States and all European allies of Ukraine combined as Russian military industry has stepped into high gear.

The article observes that the United States is capable of producing high-quality armaments, but claims they are hopelessly expensive compared to similar Russian equipment that can be produced at a much lower cost, allowing the country to prevail in “fights which require endurance.”

*Taliban is under UN sanctions for terrorist activities.

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Pentagon Chief Pledges Steady Flow of US Aid to Ukraine 'Week After Week'

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will be maintaining a "steady flow" of security assistance for Ukraine week after week, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

"Thanks to the passage of the supplemental, we'll continue to approve substantial security assistance packages for Ukraine. And you'll see a steady flow of U.S. assistance to Ukraine week after week," Austin said during a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

He recalled that President Biden announced an additional package worth \$400 million earlier this month. The US has already delivered many of Ukraine's "top-priority requirements" and much more assistance is on the way, Austin stated.

"That includes additional munitions for NASAMS and Patriot air-defense systems more HIMARS systems and ammunition Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor

systems," Austin said. This package also includes armored vehicles, he added.

The US will not announce any new drawdowns of equipment or contracts during the Ukraine meetings on Monday, a Politico reporter wrote on X, citing sources familiar with the matter. The Biden administration is, however, looking to get back to the previous schedule of announcing drawdowns about every two weeks, the reporter added.

The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying they would only prolong the conflict but would not change the situation on the ground.

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Ukraine Defense Contact Group to Discuss Air Defense Capabilities Monday - Austin

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The Ukraine Defense Contact Group will discuss during its virtual meeting on Monday the provision of additional air defense systems to Kiev, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

"Air defense will be high on our agenda today," Austin said in his opening remarks during the meeting.

The US defense secretary urged US allies and partners to reassess their ability to provide air defense capabilities to Ukraine.

Western countries have provided hundreds of billions of dollars worth of military - and other - aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special operation in February 2022. Aid shipments have included tanks and other combat vehicles; aircraft; air-defense systems; radars; artillery; missiles; drones; mines; small arms; and various kinds of munitions.

Russia has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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White House Backs Senate Reviving Border Legislation, Johnson Says Bill 'Dead on Arrival'

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Monday threw its support behind the Senate plans' to revive border security legislation, an attempt dismissed by House Speaker Mike Johnson as "dead on arrival."

"We strongly support this legislation and call on every Senator to put partisan politics aside and vote to secure the border," the White House said in a statement.

In a letter to fellow lawmakers late on Sunday, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that the upper chamber will reintroduce the bipartisan Border Act as a standalone measure this coming week.

Schumer accused former President Donald Trump of "killing" an attempt to pass a bipartisan Senate border bill earlier this year.

The border legislation would deliver the significant policy changes, resources and personnel needed to secure the US border and make the country safer, he stated. While admitting opposition to some of its provisions from both Democrats and Republicans, Schumer called on every Senator to "vote to secure the border."

In a joint statement with House Republican leaders, Speaker Johnson said that the bill has already failed once in the Senate "because it would actually codify many of the disastrous Biden open border policies that created this crisis in the first place."

The Republican leaders warned that should it reach the House, the bill would "be dead on arrival."

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Navajo Says Will Soon Meet US Officials to Address Concerns Linked to Russian Uranium Ban

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - Navajo Nation officials will soon meet with US President Joe Biden's administration to address concerns linked to the new US law banning imports of Russian uranium, Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik.

"Yes we do," Ahasteen said on Friday, when asked whether Navajo officials planned to meet with the Biden administration for talks on the matter.

The Navajo Nation, the largest Native American tribe in the United States, has a long-standing policy against uranium mining because of the harm it may cause to public health and the environment in its tribal communities, Ahasteen recalled.

"Historically, uranium mining has left a devastating legacy on our lands, including contamination of water sources, radiation exposure, and long-term health issues among our people," Ahasteen said. "These consequences have reinforced our commitment to prioritizing the preservation of life and the well-being of our environment."

Any initiative, whether it involves domestic or foreign sources of uranium, must consider the environmental and health implications for all communities involved, Ahasteen explained.

Earlier in May, Biden signed the Prohibiting Russian Uranium Imports Act, which bans the imports of Russian uranium until 2040. The law envisages limiting the import of low-enriched uranium produced in Russia or Russian-based companies, but also authorizes the US energy secretary in coordination with the secretary of state and the commerce secretary to lift the ban if other sources of uranium supplies are unavailable or the import of Russian nuclear fuel is in the national interests of the United States.

The United States announced this week that it is seeking bids on contracts for at least \$3.4 billion in domestically produced nuclear reactor fuel following the implementation of the ban.

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Navajo Says House Speaker Worried Over Cost of Helping People Harmed by US Atomic Activity

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - US House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson during a meeting with Navajo tribe officials this week was receptive to their calls to seek a vote to renew funding that assists people harmed by US atomic activity, but expressed concerns over the potential costs of expanding the program, Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik.

On Thursday, a bipartisan group of US lawmakers rallied outside the US Capitol to urge the House Speaker to schedule a vote on legislation that would renew and expand funding that compensates people who have been harmed by US atomic weapon testing and uranium mining before it expires next month. In December, US lawmakers removed the Radiation Exposure and Compensation Act (RECA) amendments from the US defense policy bill.

"The Speaker's office was receptive to our discussions and acknowledged the importance of addressing the issues raised," Ahasteen said on Friday. "However, they did express concerns over the potential costs involved."

The Navajo Nation Washington Office said it is hopeful that RECA amendments will be brought to the floor for a vote as soon as possible.

"It is our belief that this legislation is vital to ensuring justice and support for those who have been affected by radiation exposure," Ahasteen said. "Addressing these historical injustices is not only a matter of fairness but also a recognition of the invaluable contributions and sacrifices made by the Navajo Nation."

The Navajo Nation, the largest Native American tribe in the United States, reminds the US government that it has made significant contributions to the United States during World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, both through military service and work in the uranium mines, Ahasteen said.

Navajo uranium miners have worked under severe conditions in the United States both before and after 1971, dealing with inadequate ventilation or protective equipment, and exposing themselves to harmful radiation and toxic substances on a daily basis, Ahasteen noted.

"Despite the known risks, the working conditions remained perilous, leading to a legacy of health issues, including cancer and respiratory diseases, that continue to affect our community to this day," Ahasteen said.

The United States carried out nearly 200 atmospheric nuclear weapons development tests from 1945 to 1962. Uranium mining and processing, which were carried out by tens of thousands of workers, were also considered essential to the nation's nuclear weapons development.

Numerous lawsuits were filed against the US government for its alleged failure to warn of exposures to known radiation hazards from atmospheric nuclear weapons testing and uranium mining and testing, but these suits were dismissed by appellate courts.

US Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act in 1990 and broadened it over the years to address these issues.

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Niger Not Cutting Off Relations With US, Will Further Negotiate Partnership - Official

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The withdrawal of US forces from Niger does mark the end of the bilateral relationship, but the two sides will further negotiate the future of their partnership, a senior US military official said on Sunday.

Earlier in the day, the US Department of Defense said that the two states' authorities had agreed to complete the withdrawal of US troops from Niger no later than September 15.

"The [Niger] military representatives especially were keen to keep opportunities open for future engagements, and we're looking forward to future dialogues," the official told reporters. "They thought it was important to emphasize that they did not see this as the closing of the relationship, but that a new relationship needed to be negotiated based on what the CNSP desires."

The official emphasized, however, that the National Council for Safeguarding the Homeland (CNSP) has made clear that it does not want a large presence of foreign forces in Niger.

Moreover, the official noted that the meetings between US and Niger military officials this past week were strictly about the defense relationship and did not involve any talks on trade or diplomatic matters.

A senior US defense official mentioned that US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell is expected to visit Niger in the coming weeks or months for broader talks about the future of US-Niger relations.

The US withdrawal of forces from Niger has been underway for some time and there are currently less than 1,000 US troops in the country, according to the officials.

The United States has not carried out any counterterrorism operations or partnered operations in Niger since the CNSP took control of the government, an official added.

Niger's military is capable of addressing the terrorism threat in the region and continues to disrupt those threats, the official said.

The military pullout was initiated in March after a Nigerien military spokesperson said the country's transitional government, which took power in a coup in July 2023, had terminated the military agreement with the US with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.

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RFK Jr. Team Says Trump Has Yet to Agree to Debate at Libertarian Convention This Week

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s press team told Sputnik that former President Donald Trump has yet to respond to a debate challenge between the two candidates at the Libertarian convention this week.

Earlier this month, Kennedy challenged Trump to a debate at the Libertarian Party's national convention that the two are planning to attend in Washington from May 24 to 26.

"We have not heard from the Trump campaign regarding our debate invite at the Libertarian

Convention," the press team said on Saturday.

The Trump campaign did not respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

Trump and President Joe Biden recently agreed to debates on June 27 and September 10, but Biden rejected additional debates proposed by NBC News and Fox News in the coming months. The Trump campaign has been calling on Biden to agree to have a debate each month leading to the November 5 vote in the US presidential election.

On Wednesday, Kennedy said that Trump and Biden are colluding to keep him off of the debate stage, but later admitted that he does not qualify and hopes he will meet the required criteria before the June 20 deadline to participate in the debate on June 27.

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WFP Delivers 10 Truckloads of Food Via Pier to Its Warehouse in Gaza - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - The UN World Food Programme (WFP) has delivered 10 truckloads of humanitarian aid to its distribution centers via the US-installed pier to help the people of the Gaza Strip, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Saturday.

"WFP says today (Saturday) that it can confirm that 10 truckloads of food were transported to its warehouse yesterday via the floating dock. Some of the shipment included high-energy biscuits for WFP to distribute, but there were also commodities for other humanitarian partners to distribute, which included rice, pasta, and lentils. WFP informed its partners that the aid is in its warehouse at Deir El Balah for them to collect and distribute," the statement said.

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Thursday that it installed a temporary pier in the Gaza Strip for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the enclave. The UN said that humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza should not be dependent on the US-constructed floating dock given that working land routes are required to meet the needs of the residents.

On May 6, the Israel Defense Forces launched a military operation in Rafah and took control of the Gaza side of the Rafah border crossing.

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On Tuapse Attack, White House Says US Doesn't Encourage Ukrainian Strikes on Russian Soil

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United States does not encourage or enable Ukrainian strikes on Russian soil, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby told Sputnik in light of the Tuapse attack.

"We do not encourage or enable attacks on Russian soil," Kirby said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, an oil refinery in the Russian city of Tuapse caught fire after Ukrainian drones that attacked the city crashed there, according to the operative headquarters in the Krasnodar Territory.

No casualties have been reported as a result of the attack, the administration of Tuapse told Sputnik later in the day.

The United States has publicly expressed concerns that Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil infrastructure, such as refineries, could destabilize the global market.

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US Army Orders More Mobile Heavy Artillery Worth \$57Mln From BAE Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered \$57 million worth of additional heavy artillery and support vehicles from BAE Systems Land and Armaments, the Defense Department announced.

"BAE Systems Land & Armaments [of] York, Pennsylvania was awarded a \$57,585,343 modification ... contract for the production and delivery of M109A7 Self-Propelled Howitzer and M992A3 Carrier Ammunition Tracker ground combat vehicles," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed in York, Pennsylvania, over the next three-and-a-half years with an estimated completion date of December 30, 2027, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command located in Detroit Arsenal, Michigan will oversee the work as its contracting activity, the release added.

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US Special Operations Command Orders \$73Mln More GOLAM Specialty Munitions - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Mistral Company has won a more than \$73 million contract to provide GOLAM II specialized munitions and convert to a longer range precision strike weapons system for the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the Defense Department announced.

"Mistral [of] Bethesda, Maryland is being awarded a ... contract which has a maximum value of \$73,552,208 for GOLAM II munitions," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

The contract will also include the production of spares, engineering change proposals, new equipment training and the conversion of weapons from organic precision fires-mounted to medium range precision strike systems, the release said.

Work on the contract is scheduled to last five years and is expected to be completed by May 16, 2029, the release added.

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US Army Gives Lockheed Martin \$750Mln Boost on Hypersonic Weapon Contract - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US Army has given Lockheed Martin Space more than three-quarters of a billion dollar boost to its contract to provide ground support equipment for the new Long Range Hypersonic Weapon, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Space [of] Huntsville, Alabama was awarded a \$756,807,861 modification ...contract for Long Range Hypersonic Weapon ground support equipment," the release stated on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Huntsville, Alabama over the next three years and nine months with an estimated completion date of February 28, 2028, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command located at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama will oversee the production as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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US, Iran Hold Indirect Talks in Oman on Avoiding Regional Escalation – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – US senior officials held indirect talks with Iranian counterparts in Oman to discuss ways to avoid escalation amid heightened tensions in the region, Axios reported, citing sources in the know.

The talks with Iran in Oman were the second in a row since January this year and involved US National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and US Deputy Special Envoy for Iran Abram Paley, the report said on Friday.

The US officials arrived in Muscat on Tuesday and met with Omani mediators to discuss the potential consequences of Iran and its proxies' actions in the region and the status of Iran's nuclear program, according to the report.

It remains unknown who represented Iran at the talks, the report noted.

On April 13, Iran launched several hundred ballistic missiles and drones on Israel in response to the Israeli air strike on the consular annex of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus in early April. The United States played a key role in repelling the attack.

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First Crewed Boeing Starliner Flight to Space Station Delayed Another Four Days - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The repeatedly delayed first crewed launch of the Boeing CST-100 Starliner spacecraft to the International Space Station (ISS) has been delayed for at least another four days from Tuesday, May 21 to Saturday, May 25, NASA announced in an official blog.

"The teams now are targeting a launch no earlier than 3:09 p.m. EDT [Eastern Daylight Time] Saturday, May 25, for the flight test carrying NASA astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams to the International Space Station," the blog said on Friday.

The additional time will allow engineering teams to further assess a small helium leak in the Boeing Starliner spacecraft's service module traced to a flange on a single reaction control system thruster, the blog explained.

"NASA, Boeing, and ULA (United Launch Alliance) teams will take additional time to work through spacecraft closeout processes and flight rationale before proceeding with the launch of the agency's Boeing Crew Flight Test," the blog said.

Even if the repeatedly delayed and heavily over-budget Starliner succeeds in its first crewed mission with astronauts Wilmore and Williams, industry analysts said this week it looks unlikely to significantly threaten SpaceX and its Dragon spacecraft in dominating the US side of supplying the space station.

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TikTok, DOJ Ask Court to Issue Decision on Forced Divestiture By December 6 - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - TikTok and the US Justice Department are asking a federal court to issue a decision on the forced divestiture of the social media company by December 6, court documents revealed.

"To ensure that there is adequate time before the Act's prohibitions take effect to request emergency relief from the Supreme Court, if necessary, the parties respectfully ask this Court to issue its decision on the merits of these actions by December 6, 2024," the court document stated on Friday.

TikTok and its parent company ByteDance filed a petition in US federal court last week seeking to overturn a new US law that would ban their application if ByteDance does not sell its US business within nine months, but the law allows the US president to extend the deadline to one year.

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Committee To Protect Journalists Urges DOJ to Drop Charges Against Julian Assange

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Committee to Protect Journalists is urging the US Justice Department to drop charges against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who is currently

at risk of being extradited to the United States, the Committee said in a public statement.

"The prosecution of Assange in the United States would create legal pathways under the Espionage Act and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act that would allow for the prosecution of journalists who are simply doing their jobs and covering matters of public interest," said the Committee in a letter to the Justice Department.

Assange, who is currently being held in the United Kingdom awaiting an appeals process in the British court, is at risk of being extradited to the United States after his upcoming appearance on May 20, the letter continued.

The Committee argued in the letter that promises from the Justice Department assuring that Assange would be allowed to "rely upon" First Amendment rights if he were to be extradited to the US don't account for freedom of expression under international human rights law or address the fact that the charges themselves "directly challenge his First Amendment rights."

"However, this entire legal process could and should be swiftly ended if the Justice Department were to drop the charges, which we firmly believe undermine the freedom of the press both domestically and internationally," the letter continued.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was transferred to London's high-security Belmarsh prison in April 2019 on bail breach charges. In the US, he faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that shed light on war crimes and human rights violations committed by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If convicted, the WikiLeaks founder could face up to 175 years in prison. One of the last means of preventing his transfer to the US may be an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. Assange lost his previous appeal at the UK High Court last June.

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US Looking for Ways to Defend Satellites Citing Alleged Threats From China, Russia—Reports

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The United States is seeking ground- and space-based capabilities to defend its satellite network, pointing to alleged threats posed by rapidly advancing China and Russia, The New York Times reported on Friday, citing Pentagon officials.

More specifically, the United States is looking for tools that would make it possible to both defend its satellite network from being attacked and to disrupt or disable enemy spacecraft in orbit, the report said.

The US is in the midst of a significant shift in its approach to space, which Washington now perceives as a new battlefield against its enemies, which include Russia and China.

The United States has accelerated this search after information appeared about alleged Russian plans to deploy nuclear weapons in space against satellites, which would be capable of disabling the entire network of American satellites at once, thus causing irreparable damage to the country's defense capability, according to the report.

However, according to a number of American officials, it was China's activity in space that served as a trigger for the United States to accelerate the development of measures to respond to the threat to its satellites, the report said.

“China has fielded a number of space capabilities designed to target our forces,” the report quoted Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall as saying in an interview. “And we’re not going to be able to operate in the Western Pacific successfully unless we can defeat those.”

Space Command Chief General Stephen Whiting described China’s tripled satellite network as a “kill web over the Pacific Ocean to find, fix, track and, yes, target United States and allied military capabilities,” the report said.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday that US officials claim that Russia launched a research spacecraft into space in February 2022 that is intended to test components for a potential nuclear anti-satellite weapon.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that Russia has always been categorically opposed to deploying nuclear weapons in space. Russia’s activities in space are no different from those of other countries, including the US, Putin stressed.

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Trump Says Accepts Fourth Presidential Debate, Calls for Vice Presidential Debate at HBCU

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) — Former President Donald Trump announced on Friday that he has accepted a fourth presidential debate with US President Joe Biden to be hosted by NBC and Telemundo.

"I have accepted a fourth Presidential Debate against Crooked Joe Biden, this time with NBC & Telemundo," Trump said on Truth Social.

Trump went on to say that it is important for Republicans to win the support of the Hispanic community, which he claimed Biden has devastated with "crippling inflation, high gas prices, crime in our streets, and border chaos."

"This is all in addition to our accepting an invitation from Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum of Fox News to host the Vice Presidential Debate at Virginia State University, or another venue, in Virginia, to be named later. These are the Debates that Voters have been asking for, and these are the Debates that Voters will get," Trump said.

Trump added that on behalf of his future, yet-to-be-chosen Vice President, they accepted the Fox Vice Presidential Debate at Virginia State University, the first HBCU to host such an event, and urged Vice President Kamala Harris to agree.

Yesterday, US Vice President Kamala Harris accepted an invitation to a vice presidential debate hosted by CBS News sometime this summer.

On Wednesday, Trump and US President Joe Biden agreed to a June 27 CNN debate and a September 10 ABC debate.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN VISIT TO HARBIN

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that China and Russia have their own views on the ways of national development that focus on the principles of constructiveness and peace.
- * US themselves undermine confidence in the dollar as a global reserve currency, although it gives them enormous advantages, Putin said.
- * The numerous bans on goods from Russia and China will lead to an inflation in the United States, Putin said.
- * Putin said that China and Russia have their own views on the ways of national development that focus on the principles of constructiveness and peace.

MIDDLE EAST

- * The United States has sent a message to Hamas that the maritime pier built to deliver aid into the Gaza Strip does not have a military capacity for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and has a strictly humanitarian purpose, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.
- * US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Saudi Arabia and Israel to meet with senior leaders and discuss regional matters, including the situation in Gaza, Kirby said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * The Russian air defense systems on Friday destroyed a Ukrainian Tochka-U missile over the Belgorod Region and a Ukrainian drone over the Bryansk Region, the Defense Ministry said.
- * The Russian armed forces have struck a Ukrainian military unit near Odesa, Mykolaiv (also known as Nikolayev) underground network coordinator Sergei Lebedev told Sputnik.
- * A Ukrainian attack with kamikaze drones on the Novaya Naumovka village in Russia's Belgorod Region on Friday killed one civilian and injured another one, the regional governor, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said.
- * Several Ukrainian pilots are on track to graduate later this month from the F-16 training course in the United States, an Arizona National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.
- * The United States does not encourage or enable attacks using US-supplied weapons inside Russia, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.

ATTACK ON SLOVAK PRIME MINISTER

- * Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico underwent another surgical operation, Slovak Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Robert Kalinak said on Friday.
- * Fico underwent another surgery on Friday, he is conscious, but his condition is still serious, Miriam Lapunikova, the head of the F. D. Roosevelt University Hospital where Fico was admitted, said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIAN MEDIA

- * The European Council has decided on Friday to suspend the broadcasting activities of four

more Russia-associated media outlets Voice of Europe, RIA Novosti, Izvestia and Rossiyskaya Gazeta in the European Union.

* The European Union's new ban on broadcasting of several Russian media outlets will not take effect before June 25, as additional executive decisions are required, according to a new regulation.

* Russia considers new sanctions against media in the European Union's political censorship and an attempt to remove alternative points of view from the information space, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

RUSSIAN FROZEN ASSETS

* Third countries may try to interfere with the process of exchanging frozen assets of Russia, they have leverages for this, but Russia cannot influence this, Russian Deputy Finance Minister Ivan Chebeskov said on Friday.

* The EU Council plans to approve a decision on the use of proceeds from frozen Russian assets for military assistance to Ukraine at a meeting on May 21, an EU source told RIA Novosti.

* US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen will travel to Italy next week to participate in the Group of Seven (G7) Finance Ministers meeting where she will address the issue of tightening sanctions that have been imposed on Russia by the collective West and unlocking the value of frozen Russians assets to aid Ukraine, the Treasury Department said.

BLAST IN ST. PETERSBURG MILITARY ACADEMY

* There was a blast in a military academy in the Kalininsky district of St. Petersburg on Friday, a source in emergency services told Sputnik.

* Seven servicepeople have suffered injuries after a World War II-era munition exploded on the territory of the Military Academy of the Signal Corps in St. Petersburg, the Leningrad Military District said.

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US, Argentina Sign MOU to Reestablish High-Level Dialogue Between Countries

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to reestablish a high-level dialogue between the two countries.

The signing ceremony took place at the State Department on Friday.

During the ceremony, Blinken noted that the signing symbolizes a very robust relationship between the two nations, and pointed out that there has been an intensification of the cooperation in the last months across every front, including bilateral, regional, and global.

"This high-level dialogue that we are now reestablishing really reflects the strengthening of the relationship," Blinken said. "For us today and for me today, it's not just the symbolism of the moment, it's actually the practical implications for our ability to do more and to do more

together.”

On Thursday, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino and Chief of Cabinet Nicolas Posse and discussed boosting defense and security ties between the United States and Argentina.

The officials also discussed ways to enhance cooperation in order to deal with regional and global problems, including the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

In November 2023, then-presidential candidate Javier Milei won the election in Argentina. During his campaign, Milei spoke against joining the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group of countries and against cooperating with China, Brazil, and Russia, while advocating a foreign policy oriented toward the United States and Israel.

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White House on Putin-Xi Hug After Holding Bilateral Summit: ‘That’s Nice for Them

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said in comments on Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping hugging after their bilateral summit in Beijing earlier this week that "that's nice for them." "No surprise that these two leaders continue to try to develop this burgeoning relationship, but they're also two leaders that don't have a long history of working together," Kirby said on Friday. Kirby also said that China and Russia are allegedly acting toward the United States in ways that are inimical to Washington's national security interests.

Putin is on an official visit to the Chinese cities of Beijing and Harbin from Thursday to Friday, in his first foreign trip after being reelected earlier in the month. On Thursday, Putin and Xi met in Beijing to discuss strategic cooperation, identify key areas to further develop relations and exchange views on the most acute international and regional issues.

Later on Thursday, China and Russia released a joint statement in which they condemned the deployment of US missile systems in the Asia-Pacific and in Europe, and described this move as a threat to the security of both countries. They also voiced concerns about the United States' attempts to create a global missile shield and deploy its elements across the globe as well as in space.

In addition, the two countries urged the United States to stop putting the security of "small groups" of countries above regional security.

On Thursday, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said that the Biden administration did not find anything new in the joint statement.

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US Energy Dept Says Completed Subcritical Nuclear Experiment on Materials Used in Warheads

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) said on Friday that it completed a subcritical experiment to provide essential data on the behavior of materials used in nuclear warheads.

"On the evening of May 14, the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration successfully executed a subcritical experiment in the Principal Underground Laboratory for Subcritical Experimentation (PULSE) facility at the Nevada National Security Site," NNSA said in a statement.

NNSA relies on subcritical experiments to collect valuable information to support the safety, reliability and effectiveness of the United States' nuclear warheads, without nuclear explosive testing, the statement said.

The experiment was consistent with the US' self-imposed moratorium on nuclear explosive testing and did not create a self-sustaining, supercritical chain reaction, the statement added.

NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby said in June 2023 that the United States plans to increase the frequency of subcritical experiments to gather data on nuclear weapons materials.

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US to Purchase Additional 3Mln Barrels of Oil for National Reserve - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The US government is soliciting bids from US energy firms for the purchase of 3 million barrels of crude oil that will be used to fill the national oil reserve, the Energy Department said on Friday.

"The Department of Energy, Strategic Petroleum Reserve Project Management Office ... has a requirement to conduct a purchase of approximately three million barrels of United States produced sour crude oil for November 2024 delivery at a price no higher than \$79.99 per barrel," the Energy Department said in a notice.

US energy firms must submit their bids by May 29, the notice said. The oil is expected to be delivered in November, it added.

The US government announced a similar purchase of crude oil on May 7.

The Energy Department began buying crude oil to refill the SPR in May 2023, after drawing about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve since the end of 2021 to tamp down spiraling oil prices caused by supply outages.

Biden's use of the SPR has been a highly charged matter for proponents of high oil prices and political opponents of the president. Both accuse him of turning the SPR into a political tool to subdue crude prices and shore up his standing with American voters, when the reserve is meant for emergency use — i.e. to boost the availability of oil in times of critically short supply.

Biden, in his defense, had said he was only acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above \$5 per gallon in June 2022 and has stabilized since at below \$3.50. The administration had also blamed high crude oil prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs

of above 9% in June 2022.

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Senior US Diplomat Heads to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan to Discuss Human Rights - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya will travel to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from May 19-23 to discuss reforms and human rights issues, the State Department said on Friday.

"Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya will travel to Astana, Kazakhstan and Tashkent, Uzbekistan from May 19-23 to engage on democratic governance and rule of law; human rights and protection of vulnerable populations; and religious freedom," the release said.

In Astana, Zeya will lead the US delegation at the third annual United States-Kazakhstan High-Level Dialogue (HLD) on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms. Zeya will also meet with civil society representatives to advance democratic values and praise Kazakhstan's effort to reduce domestic violence, according to the release.

In Tashkent, the Under Secretary will give remarks at the Academic Conference on Constitutional Criminal Procedures to bolster Uzbekistan's ongoing implementation of constitutional reforms on justice and human rights, the release added. While there, she will also meet with senior officials and human rights activists to promote equality, religious freedom, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

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US House Speaker Says Thursday's Fiasco Among Lawmakers 'Not Good Look for Congress'

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Friday that the disorderly conduct between lawmakers during a committee vote yesterday was a bad look for Congress.

On Thursday night, a US House Oversight Committee meeting to hold US Attorney General Merrick Garland in contempt for defying a congressional subpoena turned into a disaster after lawmakers became heated and hurled insults at each other.

"It was not a good look for Congress and we all, I think, need to control the emotions better and get the job done," Johnson said. "That's what we're trying to do here. I think the decorum in the House [of Representatives] is an important tradition to maintain."

Johnson said he will talk with Republican lawmakers about their disorderly behavior at the meeting and hopes Democratic leadership does as well.

The meeting on Thursday night began to derail after Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene told Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett, "I think your fake eyelashes are messing up your

reading."

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez immediately lashed out at Greene from across the room.

"How dare you attack the appearance of another person ... girl, baby girl, don't even play," Ocasio-Cortez told Greene.

Crockett also fired off on Republicans after she was told to calm down.

"Don't tell me to calm down, you all talk noise and then can't take it. If I come and talk shit about her [Greene], then you all gonna have a problem," Crockett said.

House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer had to pause the meeting at least two times and, at one point, pulled Greene aside to speak to her privately.

Greene repeatedly declined to apologize to Crockett and later praised herself for having a nice body for a woman of her age.

Aside from this dispute, another lawmaker notified the Oversight Committee that there were lawmakers who were not part of the panel inside the room drinking, which prompted the live feed of the hearing to be immediately cut off.

At another point during the firestorm, a lawmaker on the panel was using his laptop to watch a National Hockey League (NHL) playoff game taking place Thursday night.

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Canadian Officers Seize Over \$300,000 in Elvers at Toronto Int. Airport - Border Authority

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The Canada Border Services Agency announced on Friday that its officers, assisted by Fisheries and Oceans Canada personnel, have seized more than C\$400,000 (US\$297,000) worth of baby eels - otherwise known as elvers or glass eels due to their translucent nature - at the Toronto Pearson International Airport.

In March, Fisheries and Oceans Canada announced that the elver fishery would not open in 2024 because of conservation and safety concerns. Individuals caught fishing for elvers could be liable under the Fisheries Act and the Maritime Provinces Fishery Regulations.

"On the evening of May 15, 2024, fishery officers from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), as well as border services officers from the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), seized approximately 109 kilograms of unauthorized elvers at Toronto Pearson International Airport," CBSA said in a statement.

The elvers are thought to be worth up to C\$500,000 (US\$367,000) and were set to be shipped overseas, CBSA said without giving specifics on their destination.

Baby eels are the object of a worldwide illicit trade. They usually weight only a few grams and measure up to 10 centimeters in length and are worth more than C\$4,760 (US\$3500) per kilogram.

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

US Has Passed Message to Hamas That Gaza Pier Does Not Have Military Capacity - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has sent a message to Hamas that the maritime pier built to deliver aid into the Gaza Strip does not have a military capacity for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and has a strictly humanitarian purpose, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"There's been some bogus stuff out there in the information environment, particularly in the region that this [pier] has some sort of military capacity or operational capacity for the IDF and it just doesn't. It's nothing more than humanitarian assistance and we've also passed that message back through the appropriate channels to Hamas so they understand exactly what this is," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Urges Increased Caution for Citizens Abroad Amid Risk of Violence Against LGBT+ Persons

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The Department of State issued a Worldwide Caution Security Alert for US citizens abroad on Friday amid what it says is increased potential for "foreign terrorist organization-inspired violence" against LGBTQI+ persons and events.

"The Department of State issued a Worldwide Caution Security Alert. Due to the potential for terrorist attacks, demonstrations, or violent actions against US citizens and interests, the Department of State advises US citizens overseas to exercise increased caution," the State Department said in a statement.

According to the statement, the Department of State is aware of the increased potential for foreign terrorist organization-inspired violence against LGBTQI+ persons and events, and advises US citizens to stay alert in locations frequented by tourists, enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), and follow the Department of State on social media.

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

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Some Ukrainian Pilots Set to Graduate from F-16 Training in US This Month - National Guard

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - Several Ukrainian pilots are on track to graduate later this month from F-16 training taking place in the United States, an Arizona National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

"We are still expecting the first graduating class to be this month," the spokesperson said. "For

the safety of the pilots, we do not have any releasable information at this time."

Twelve Ukrainian pilots are training on F-16 fighter jets at a military base in the state of Arizona and are expected to graduate between May through August, according to the Air Force. Ukraine is expected to start receiving its first deliveries of F-16 fighter jets by this summer.

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White House Says Has No Information Now on Biden Participating in Ukraine Peace Conference

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday that there is nothing to announce at this time in regards to US President Joe Biden's potential participation in the Ukraine peace conference next month.

"I don't have anything on his schedule to speak to in that regard," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked whether Biden plans to attend the event.

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Washington Does Not Encourage, Enable Attacks With US-Supplied Arms Inside Russia - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The United States does not encourage or enable attacks using US-supplied weapons inside Russia, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"Do not encourage nor do we enable attacks using US-supplied weapons systems inside Russian territory," Kirby said during a briefing.

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Sullivan to Travel to Saudi Arabia, Israel to Discuss Regional Matters, Gaza - White House

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Saudi Arabia and Israel to meet with senior leadership and discuss regional matters, including the situation in Gaza, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"I can announce today that our national security adviser Jake Sullivan will travel to Saudi Arabia starting tomorrow. He'll be there to meet with Prime Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman," Kirby said during a press briefing.

On Sunday, Sullivan will travel to Israel to meet with Israeli officials, including Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu, to discuss the war in Gaza and the ongoing efforts to secure the release of all the hostages and to address the humanitarian crisis in the enclave amid the Israeli preparations for a major ground military operation in Rafah.

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White House Says First Shipments of Aid to Gaza Arrived Through Maritime Corridor

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The first shipments of humanitarian aid delivered through a maritime corridor established by the United States arrived in the Gaza Strip, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

"Earlier today, the first shipments of humanitarian assistance arrived on the shores of Gaza through the multinational humanitarian maritime corridor," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Additional aid is arriving in Cyprus, where it will be screened by Israeli authorities and loaded on to ships for delivery through the corridor, Kirby said.

The US anticipates an increase in the flow of assistance from additional countries and organizations, utilizing and scaling up the humanitarian corridor, Kirby said.

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us national security advisor sullivan to travel to saudi arabia tomorrow to meet crown prince mohammed - white house's kirby

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Man Who Attacked Pelosi's Husband Sentenced to 30 Years in Prison - Court Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The man who attacked former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband, Paul Pelosi, with a hammer inside their San Francisco home in October 2022 has been sentenced to 30 years in prison, a court spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

The court spokesperson said US federal judge Jacqueline Scott Corley sentenced David DePape to 360 months in prison in connection to the attack on Paul Pelosi.

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Man Who Attacked Former US House Speaker Pelosi's Husband Sentenced to 30 Years in Prison - Court Spokesperson to Sputnik

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Elon Musk Transitions Twitter to X.com

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk announced on Friday that all core systems of Twitter have been moved to X.com.

"All core systems are now on X.com," Musk wrote on the social media platform.

Musk bought then-Twitter for an estimated \$44 billion in October 2022. Twitter Corporation ceased to exist as a separate company as a result of its merger with X Corp. in April 2023.

In July 2023, Twitter's logo was changed from a blue bird to a black-and-white X logo. Musk specified that the new logo symbolized "the imperfections in us all that make us unique."

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Most US Voters Believe Random Group of People Would Govern Better Than Congress - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that a randomly selected group of people would govern the country better than the current US Congress, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll published Friday.

Most voters, 54%, believe that a group of people randomly selected from a phone book would better address the country's problems than current lawmakers, the poll report said.

The figure is the highest ever recorded in response to the survey question, topping the previous high of 52% in July 2014, the poll report said. The figure is up five percentage points from December 2022, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 1,087 likely US voters from May 7-9. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Austin to Host 22nd Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting Virtually Monday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. CQ Brown, Jr. will host the next meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on May 20 in a virtual format, the Pentagon announced.

"This will be the twenty-second meeting of the UDCG since the international group was formed

in April 2022," the Pentagon said on Friday. "They will join ministers of defense and chiefs of defense from nearly 50 nations from around the world to discuss Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, and the continued close coordination among the international community to provide the Ukrainian people with the means necessary to defend their sovereign territory."

Western countries have provided hundreds of billions of dollars worth of aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles, and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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US Homeland Security Chief Says Foreign Terror Reemerged as Biggest Threat

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Friday that foreign terrorism has reemerged as one of the greatest threats to the US mainland.

"In the terrorism context, I would say the threat of foreign terrorism has reemerged with a greater level of significance and the threat of domestic violent extremists, individuals or loose affiliations of individuals who are radicalized the violence because of ideologies of hate, which are only increasing especially after the October 7 terrorist attacks against Israel," Mayorkas said with respect to what is the biggest security threat to the United States.

Last month, FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing that the agency is increasingly concerned about the potential of a coordinated attack in the United States by the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia) similar to the attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Russia.

Republican Congressman Paul Gosar said in a press release on Thursday that some 330 illegal migrants on the FBI's terrorist watchlist have entered the United States in the past three years, including at least 80 this year.

In early May, two foreign nationals tried to breach a US Marine base in Virginia, media reported. The report, citing multiple anonymous sources, said that one of the two individuals in the truck was a Jordanian foreign national who recently crossed the US southern border and that one of the individuals was also on the US terrorist watch list.

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US Indicts 2 Chinese Nationals Over Cryptocurrency Laundering Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - Two Chinese nationals have been indicted in California for allegedly leading a a scheme to launder proceeds from cryptocurrency investment scams, the

Justice Department said on Friday.

"An indictment was unsealed in the Central District of California yesterday charging two Chinese nationals alleging they played leading roles in a scheme to launder proceeds from cryptocurrency investment scams," the statement said.

Daren Li was arrested on April 12 in Atlanta and transported to California, while Yicheng Zhang was arrested in Los Angeles on May 16.

"Li and Zhang are both charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering and six substantive counts of international money laundering. If convicted, the defendants face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison on each count," the statement said.

Li, Zhang, and other conspirators allegedly laundered proceeds from cryptocurrency scams, inducing victims to transfer millions to shell company accounts. The scheme involved \$73 million laundered through US financial institutions to bank accounts in The Bahamas, and converted to the virtual asset USDT, or Tether. A cryptocurrency wallet used in the scheme received over \$341 million in virtual assets, the statement said.

The perpetrators allegedly instructed co-conspirators to open bank accounts for shell companies, monitored the transfer of funds to Deltec Bank in The Bahamas, and converted them into cryptocurrency, with communications showing extensive coordination and involvement from both in the laundering network, the statement added.

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Pentagon to Expand Use of Microsoft Software Starting in June – Memorandum

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense is planning to expand the use of Microsoft software products across all its components starting in June, according to a Pentagon memorandum obtained by Axios on Friday.

"To accelerate and enhance the Department's cybersecurity posture and ability to reach Target Level ZT [Zero Trust Strategy] before FY27, each Component must implement the full suite of Microsoft 365 E5 licenses across your NIPR enterprise within 12 months. All DoD Components must initiate implementation of the E5 suite no later than June 3, 2024," the memorandum reads.

The components of the Department of Defense will have until June 2, 2025, to complete the transition to the Microsoft 365 E5 license, the memo added.

The Microsoft E5 license includes a combination of Office 365, Windows 10 and 11, and Enterprise Mobility and Security (EMS) services, according to Threatscape, an IT security company.

Additionally, the license provides access to the Microsoft Defender suit protecting from all kinds of online threats, according to Microsoft.

In November 2022, the Department of Defense published its Zero Trust strategy detailing the roadmap for heightened cybersecurity before the end of the fiscal year 2027, according to the memo.

In March, both the US House and Senate introduced a strict ban on the use of Microsoft

Copilot, an AI-based chatbot assistant, by its staffers amid attempts by US government agencies to harness the rapid development of artificial intelligence.

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Trudeau Tells Canadians to Listen to Intelligence Chief Warnings on Alleged TikTok Threats

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - Canadians should listen to the warnings made by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Director David Vigneault about the alleged threats posed by the social media platform TikTok, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday. Earlier in the day, CBC News released an excerpt of an interview with Vigneault set to be aired on Saturday. Vigneault explicitly warned Canadians against using TikTok given that there was a "very clear strategy" on the part of the Chinese government to obtain personal data from anyone around the world.

"Obviously, as a government, we lean heavily on CSIS and our intelligence agencies to keep Canadians safe. And when the director of CSIS is pointing out that TikTok poses a real threat to the security of Canadians, I think Canadians need to listen," Trudeau said during a press conference.

The Canadian government will always look at what its allies do, Trudeau said when questioned on whether he would ban the TikTok app if the US government did so, adding that Ottawa's decisions will always reflect what is best for Canadians.

In February 2023, Ottawa announced that it was banning the use of TikTok from all devices issued by the federal government, including laptops and cellphones, saying that the application represented an unacceptable level of risk to privacy and security.

In mid-March, media reported that the Trudeau government had launched a previously undisclosed national security review of TikTok in September 2023.

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UPDATE - Yellen to Visit Italy Next Week, Discuss Sanctions, Frozen Russian Assets - Treasury

(Updates with details throughout text)

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen will travel to Italy next week to participate in the Group of Seven (G7) Finance Ministers meeting where she will address the issue of tightening sanctions that have been imposed on Russia by the collective West and unlocking the value of frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

Yellen is first set to travel to Frankfurt, Germany from May 21-23 for a series of engagements. The Secretary will then depart for Stresa, Italy to participate in the G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting from May 23-25.

In Germany, the discussion will include highlighting the efforts made to support transatlantic clean energy supply chains and talks about the ways in which the US and Europe can complement their own investments in clean technologies. Bolstering energy security and advancing climate goals will also be addressed.

"While in Italy, Secretary Yellen will discuss with partners ways of further tightening sanctions against Russia's military-industrial complex, as well as ways to unlock the value of Russian sovereign assets to benefit Ukraine," Treasury said in a statement.

Yellen's trip to Italy will also include discussions on furthering Washington's "leadership" role within the multilateral system, engagements with G7 partners about strengthening the global economy, and promoting sustainable development in emerging markets, the statement added.

The Secretary further intends to engage with her counterparts on shared "concerns" about the risks to the global economy posed by China's "industrial overcapacity," the statement continued.

Members states of the Group of Seven are reportedly "making progress" toward reaching a consensus on the plan to harness Russia's frozen sovereign assets in favor of Ukraine, media reported citing an official with knowledge of Yellen's trip.

The G7 led by the US and the EU have been discussing legal ways to confiscate Russian assets since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in early 2022. Moscow has criticized the efforts to take its money as an act of stealing and a violation of international laws. The European Central Bank has warned that seizure poses reputational risks to the euro in the long term.

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Biden Sends Memorandum Updating US Antarctic Policy

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden sent a memorandum to administration officials on Friday, regarding an update to the United States' policy in the Antarctic region.

"The memorandum establishes the policy of the United States with respect to the Antarctic Region," the memorandum said. "It identifies the key objectives and mechanisms by which the United States will lead and participate in activities within or pertaining to the Antarctic Region."

The memorandum rescinds and replaces a June 1994 presidential directive on the matter. Consistent with the Antarctic Treaty System, the US will continue to use all tools available, including expanding its polar icebreaker fleet, to support the goals of the policy, the memorandum said.

However, the US maintains only one heavy polar icebreaker and one medium polar icebreaker, according to an April 2024 Congressional Research Service report. A 2023 Coast Guard fleet mix analysis concluded that the service requires eight to nine polar icebreakers to perform its polar missions in coming years.

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US on 'Very Big Ramp-Up' of Missile Production - US EUCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is conducting a "very big ramp-up" of missile and artillery shell production, Supreme Allied Commander Europe and US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said on Friday.

"The United States is on a very big ramp-up of missiles and artillery shells, in particular," Cavoli said during a discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council.

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Sullivan, Argentine Counterpart Discuss Deepening Defense Ties - White House

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino and Chief of Cabinet Nicolas Posse and discussed boosting defense and security ties between the United States and Argentina, the White House said on Thursday.

"The National Security Advisor also congratulated Argentina on the recent purchase of F-16s from Denmark, and discussed further opportunities to deepen our security and defense partnership," the readout said on Friday.

The officials also discussed ways to enhance cooperation in order to deal with regional and global problems, including the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

In November 2023, then presidential candidate Javier Milei won the election in Argentina.

During his campaign, Milei spoke against joining the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group of countries and against cooperating with China, Brazil and Russia, while advocating a foreign policy oriented toward the United States and Israel.

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NATO to Have 'Big Russia Problem' for Years to Come - Top Commander

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) – NATO believes that Russia will pose a long-term threat and create big problems for the military bloc for years to come, Supreme Allied Commander Europe and US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said on Friday.

"I believe Russia will pose a long-term threat to the alliance, we will have a big Russia problem for years to come," Cavoli said during a discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council.

Cavoli noted that Russia will soon reconstitute its military from the conflict in Ukraine and become a very large force on the border with NATO.

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general cavoli says russia will pose long-term threat to nato alliance, we will have big russia problem for years to come

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US Reevaluating Parts of G7 Ban on Russian Diamonds – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) – The United States is reevaluating the most stringent elements of a G7 ban on Russian diamonds, Reuters reported on Friday, citing unnamed resources.

Two sources said that the US has been present but not engaged during the G7 working groups on the stringent controls. Its apparent reassessment comes as the diamond sanctions have faced backlash from industry players in Africa, India, and New York.

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US Diplomat on Serbia Trip Discusses EU Accession, Combating 'Foreign Malign Influence'

WASHINGTON, May 17 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State Liz Allen met with Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Djuric on Friday to discuss Serbia's progress toward EU's accession and

fight against "foreign malign influence," the State Department said.

"They agreed on the importance of strengthening the U.S.-Serbia bilateral relationship and accelerating Serbia's progress toward EU accession. The Under Secretary urged continued progress toward the normalization of relations with Kosovo through the EU-facilitated Dialogue," the statement said.

Allen welcomed Serbia's "contributions to European and regional security, including through its support for Ukraine," the statement said.

The officials also discussed the "importance of countering foreign malign influence to create an open information space" as well as opportunities to expand educational and cultural ties between the two countries, according to the statement.