

5/22/24 Wednesday

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Canada to Reiterate Call at G7 Meeting to Make 'Full Use' of Russian Assets to Aid Ukraine

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - Canada will reiterate its call to the Group of Seven (G7) states to use the frozen Russian assets in support of Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, the Office of the Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Thursday.

From May 23-25, the G7 will convene a Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting in Stresa, Italy.

"At the G7, Canada will continue to call for making full use of frozen Russian Central Bank assets to pay for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction," her office's statement said.

Canada continues to support proposals to use Russian assets in support of Ukraine," the statement said. Russia being "the aggressor" must foot the bill for the destruction caused during the conflict, it added.

The G7, led by the United States and the European Union, have been discussing ways to confiscate the Russian assets since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. However, the European Central Bank and other relevant institutions and actors have warned that a seizure would pose "reputational risks" to the euro in the long term.

An estimated \$300 billion in Russian central bank assets are frozen in Western accounts. The Kremlin has maintained that confiscating Russia's assets would amount to theft in violation of international law.

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US House Passes Crypto Bill Opposed by White House, Securities Regulator

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US House has passed a cryptocurrency bill opposed by the White House and its chief securities regulator, which says it fears "regulatory gaps" and "immeasurable risk" for capital markets if the motion ever becomes law.

Analysts, however, said the US Senate controlled by Democratic allies of President Joe Biden is unlikely to allow the Financial Innovation and Technology for the 21st Century Act, known as FIT 21 in short, to proceed.

"The Senate typically doesn't take House bills and just vote on them. It does its own thing," Capital Alpha Partners, a Washington-based political and investment advisory, told its clients in a note. "So while the Senate might eventually be interested in considering some kind of crypto legislation, it almost surely won't be this one."

The bill will decide the jurisdictional authority that regulatory agencies have over the United States' vast digital assets, say Republican sponsors of the act. They add that their aim is to create regulatory clarity that would indirectly boost the crypto industry's growth.

President Biden and his fellow Democrats, however, say the bill will adversely impact the existing regulatory landscape for the crypto industry. FIT 21 "in its current form lacks sufficient protections for consumers and investors who engage in certain digital asset transactions," the White House said in a statement.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) pointed out that the bill will not grant securities status for investment contracts recorded on a blockchain, thus denying investors protection under US securities laws. It added that the bill would also allow issuers of crypto investment contracts to certify themselves that their own products were digital commodities and were not subject to SEC oversight, leaving the agency just 60 days to challenge this.

"FIT 21 would create new regulatory gaps and undermine decades of precedent regarding the oversight of investment contracts, putting investors and capital markets at immeasurable risk," SEC Chairman Gary Gensler said in a statement.

Gensler in the past had led some of the heftiest crackdowns on the crypto industry, although the SEC's likely approval of exchange-traded funds for the spot trading of the digital coin ether indicated to some a softening of stance by the commission's chief.

Aside from its Republican sponsors, the crypto bill is supported by industry groups who see Gensler as an enemy of the crypto trade and an impediment to America's wider adoption of digital assets.

The SEC chief has always said the crypto trade should be subject to the same laws that apply to any securities trade. His argument about the unknown risks posed to investors by crypto is often underscored by his citation of the high-profile prosecutions, bankruptcies and business collapses revolving around the trade.

President Biden, who has authority to veto the Congress bill, also offered to cooperate in finding a new way to resolve Republican concerns about the future of the crypto trade.

"The Administration is eager to work with Congress to ensure a comprehensive and balanced regulatory framework for digital assets, building on existing authorities, which will promote the responsible development of digital assets and payment innovation and help reinforce United States leadership in the global financial system," the White House statement said.

Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee in November's presidential election and challenger to Biden, has started accepting digital coin donations, his campaign for the White House announced on Tuesday, adding that it wanted to build a "crypto army" of donors.

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Biden Intends to Designate Kenya as Major Non-NATO US Ally- US Official

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden intends to inform lawmakers of his desire to designate Kenya as a major non-NATO ally, a senior administration official said.

"As part of this move towards elevating and acknowledging that Kenya's already a global partner of ours, President Biden is informing Congress that he intends to designate Kenya as a major non-NATO ally," the senior administration official told journalists during a briefing ahead of the meeting between Biden and Kenyan President William Ruto.

Ruto's visit to the United States is the transformation of Kenya from a partner on regional

issues to a partner on global issues, the official said.

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US Navy Extends Lockheed Martin Space's Missile Support Contract by \$99Mln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has approved an almost \$100 million extension of Lockheed Martin Space's current contract to provide missile production support, the US Department of Defense (DOD) has announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Space, Littleton, Colorado is awarded a not-to-exceed \$99,000,000, cost-plus-incentive-fee, and cost-plus-fixed-fee unpriced letter contract modification ... to a previously awarded contract ... to provide systems engineering, test planning, and long lead material in support of missile production," the DOD said on Wednesday.

Most of the work on the extended contract will be performed in Denver, Colorado (63%), with the rest in Huntsville, Alabama (6%), Sunnyvale, California (7%), East Aurora, New York (9%) and other locations across the United States, the release read.

Work on the extended contract is expected to take two years and eight months and be completed by February 2, 2027, the Defense Department said.

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US Must Secure More Highly Enriched Uranium Supply by 2050s For Naval Reactors - Official

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to find an additional supply of highly enriched uranium to continue fueling its naval reactors beyond the 2050s, US Deputy Administrator for Office of Naval Reactors Admiral William Houston said during a congressional hearing.

"We have to get the capability in time to support about two to three metric tonne delivery to support our fleet needs in the 2050s," Houston told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee on Wednesday. "It's something that has our attention. We have to develop a plan to do that."

The United States' current supply of highly enriched uranium is projected to last to the 2050s even with increased demands, Houston noted.

The US Navy currently gets its highly enriched uranium from older US nuclear weapons that are reprocessed, he added.

US officials are also aware of the AUKUS deal putting pressure on the demand for highly enriched uranium, but it's considered a very small issue in the overall scheme, Houston said.

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Austin Speaks With Israeli Defense Minister About Situation in Gaza - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant about the ongoing situation in the Gaza Strip, Defense Department said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant today to discuss the situation in Gaza and the United States' ironclad support for Israel," the Defense Department said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

Austin reiterated the United States' "strong objections" to the International Criminal Court prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, the readout said.

Austin also underscored the urgent need to increase humanitarian aid into Gaza and encouraged the Israeli government to conclude talks with Egypt to reopen the crossing in Rafah to allow aid from Egypt pass through into the Palestinian enclave, the readout said.

In addition, Austin advocated for an effective mechanism to deconflict humanitarian and military operations in Gaza, the readout said.

Both officials acknowledged a shared interest in defeating the Palestinian movement Hamas and the expedient release of all hostages it holds while minimizing civilian harm, the release added.

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Subcritical Testing Best Way to Maintain US Nuclear Stockpile - Energy Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - Subcritical nuclear testing is the best way for the United States to maintain its stockpile of nuclear warheads without having to carry out a full-scale nuclear test, National Nuclear Security Administration head Jill Hruby said during a congressional hearing.

Last week, the National Nuclear Security Administration - a unit of the US Energy Department - said that it had executed a "subcritical experiment" at a Nevada underground laboratory in order to collect information that will support the effectiveness of US nuclear warheads.

"So we anticipate this is the best way to maintain our stockpile without returning to nuclear testing, especially with the demands that we have right now in our production enterprise, as well as perhaps new weapons that we need in the future to meet these changing global conditions," Hruby told a US Senate Armed Services subcommittee on Wednesday.

These experiments are important because they allow the United States to study actual plutonium without creating a chain reaction, Hruby said.

The subcritical testing gives the department insight into the behavior of aged or newly produced nuclear material, Hruby added.

The Energy Department claims that its subcritical nuclear test was consistent with the moratorium on nuclear explosive testing that the United States implemented in 1992 because the test did not involve a self-sustaining, supercritical chain reaction.

On Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Russia is closely monitoring the situation following the subcritical nuclear test conducted by the United States. Ryabkov emphasized that as long as the United States conducted no full-scale nuclear tests,

neither would Russia.

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US Elite Bomber Force 'Close to Being Outpaced' by Growing World Threats - General

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force's elite Global Strike Command (AFGSC) is close to being outpaced amid the growing challenges and demand for operations it faces against peer adversaries around the world, Gen. Thomas Bussiere said in a congressional testimony.

"We are prepared, yet we are close to being outpaced to meet the demands we find in today's world," Bussiere told the US Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) in a written testimony on Wednesday. "AFGSC is acutely aware of the need to sustain our current force and modernize rapidly."

Bussiere warned that the domestic US military-industrial base has been failing to rise to the challenge and provide the Air Force with the replacement aircraft and weapons systems it urgently needed to face the challenges of a new age.

"We cannot slow down. AFGSC is building the force to face an uncertain future. ...However, the military-industrial complex is not keeping pace. Already, delays, inflation, and expanding overhead are chipping away at time margins and resources. Simply put, we need continued advocacy and bipartisan effort to field new capabilities and divest the old," Bussiere said.

The strategic bomber force no longer enjoyed any operational margin and therefore the preservation even of its much older legacy force for aircraft remained a vital national security objective, Bussiere added.

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AI Vital to Defend US Critical Infrastructure, Nothing Else Can Do Job - Sikorski

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The use of artificial Intelligence (AI) is vital to defend US critical infrastructure, including railroads and pipelines from hostile cyber, malware and other attacks and nothing else can replace it in this role, Palo Alto Networks Unit 42 Chief Technology Officer and Vice President of Engineering Michael Sikorski told a Congressional hearing.

"To prevent the bad guys from winning, we must operationalize Artificial Intelligence for cyber defense," Sikorski told the US House Committee on Homeland Defense on Wednesday. "The bottom line is that AI makes security data actionable for cyber defenders. The AI impact for cyber defense is already significant."

Each day, Palo Alto Networks detects 2.3 million unique new cyber attacks on the government and its business clients that were not present the day before and it succeeds in blocking a total of 11.3 billion attacks per day, Sikorski said.

"We have seen transformative [results] from AI -powered SOCs ... reducing the time to respond from two to three day to under two hours. ...We encourage everyone to embrace AI's transformative impact for cyber defense," Sikorski said.

AI had also resulted in a four fold increase in the amount of security data that could be ingested and analyzed by cyber defenders each day, Sikorski added.

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Biden Campaign in Search of Meme Manager to Get Support of Young Voters – Job Posting

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) – The Biden campaign is looking for a person who would be responsible for managing memes and other social media content in a bid to get more young voters to support Joe Biden in the upcoming presidential election.

"The Biden for President (BFP) campaign is looking for a Partner Manager to join the Digital Partnerships team. In this role, you will initiate and manage day-to-day operations in engaging the internet's top content and meme pages," the job listing said on Monday. "This position is full-time and based in Wilmington, DE."

The meme manager's key responsibilities include cultivating and managing relationships with top digital media companies, podcasters, and meme pages across several social media platforms, according to the listing.

The move looks like a damage control attempt on the part of the Biden campaign following a

long list of slips of the tongue and falling incidents involving President Joe Biden.

The most notorious meme about Joe Biden came to life in October 2021 during a NASCAR race at the Talladega Superspeedway in the US state of Alabama when a 28-year-old driver, Brandon Brown, had won the race and the crowd started to chant "F*** Joe Biden." While interviewing Brown, an NBC Sports reporter suggested the crowd chanted "Let's go, Brandon." The phrase quickly became a very popular way to verbally attack Biden and his supporters by the Republicans.

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US Space Program Faces 'Lot of Risk' With Artificial Intelligence - NASA Administrator

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - The US space program faces "a lot of risk" with Artificial Intelligence (AI) but still uses it more than any other federal agency or department of government, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told a podcast "town hall" meeting on the use of the technology.

"There's a lot of risk with AI," Nelson said on Wednesday. "If it is not applied properly, it could be disastrous."

However, NASA Deputy Administrator Pam Melrose said the space agency was already heavily invested in AI technologies for the success of its satellites and space exploration programs.

"Using AI to analyze underlying trends ... we are already doing this and doing a lot of it," Melrose said.

NASA Chief Information Officer Jeff Seaton said AI had demonstrated a "democratizing" function because it made easily and quickly available a "treasure trove of information that previously was either inaccessible or could only be retried far more slowly."

AI was built into the space agency's missions, Seaton added.

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Nikki Haley Endorses Trump, Says He's Not Perfect But Biden 'Catastrophe'

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - Former Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley announced on Wednesday that she will vote for Donald Trump in November as he meets her priorities better than Biden.

"As a voter, I put my priorities on a president who is going to have the backs of our allies and hold our enemies to account..." Haley said at the Hudson Institute. "I will be voting for Trump."

Trump has not been perfect but Biden has been a "catastrophe," she said.

Haley also expressed hope that Trump will actively engage her voters rather than simply expect their support.

Earlier, an Axios report said that Trump's campaign is considering Nikki Haley for the vice presidential role.

Haley, who was a key Republican rival in the presidential race alongside Vivek Ramaswamy

and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, could be chosen if Trump believes she would enhance his chances of winning the November election, avoid potential imprisonment, and manage his multi-million dollar legal bills, the report added.

Members of the Republican Party close to both politicians believe that teaming up is in their mutual interest because Haley has deep ties with sponsors who are wary of Trump, and she could help him attract the votes of some college-educated Republicans, the report said.

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B-21 Raider Flight Testing Advances, Aiming to Become US Air Force Bomber Fleet 'Backbone'

CALIFORNIA, May 22 (Sputnik) — The B-21 Raider began flight testing on Dec. 2, 2022, and continues to advance toward becoming the backbone of the US Air Force bomber fleet, Edwards Air Force Base said on Wednesday.

"Following its formal unveiling, Dec. 2, 2022, the B-21 Raider began flight testing here where it continues to make progress toward becoming the backbone of the US Air Force bomber fleet," Edwards Air Force Base said in a statement.

According to the statement, the B-21 is a long-range, highly survivable stealth bomber that will gradually replace the B-1 and B-2 bombers and support national security objectives while reassuring US allies globally.

"The B-21 weapon system is manufactured under the Air Force's contract with Northrop Grumman. It is designed with an open systems architecture, enabling rapid insertion of mature technologies, and allowing the aircraft to remain effective as threats evolve over time. The aircraft is expected to enter service in the mid-2020s with a production goal of a minimum of 100 aircraft," the statement read.

Furthermore, earlier in May, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Andrew Hunter said during testimony at the Senate Armed Services Committee that B-21 Raider flight testing is progressing well and meeting timelines, the statement said.

The statement added that Hunter explained this is the first aircraft that is more digital than not, contributing to the program meeting requirements.

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White House Disputes UK Intelligence Indicating Weapon Flow From China to Russia

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that the United States has seen no evidence of China providing weapons to Russia, in a direct dispute of a statement made by a UK official earlier in the day.

"Well, going back to 2022, I've actually stood at this podium and warned about my concern that China might supply weapons to Russia. We didn't see that in 2022; we didn't see that in 2023; we have not seen that to date," said Sullivan.

The comment by Sullivan came as he was asked by a reporter about a statement made by UK

Defense Secretary Grant Shapps earlier in the day indicating that the UK and the US have proof that "lethal aid is now flying from China to Russia and into Ukraine".

"I look forward to speaking with the UK to make sure that we have a common operating picture; we have had one, we have been on the same page - I just want to understand better what exactly that comment was referring to," Sullivan added.

The Chinese Embassy in the United States told Sputnik earlier that China has not provided weapons to either Russia or Ukraine, adding that it has been playing a constructive role in facilitating a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, the Embassy said normal trade between China and Russia should not be interfered with or restricted.

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Pentagon, NSC Still Support Ukraine Pushing Russia Back to February 2022 Lines – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that he believes the Department of Defense along with the National Security Council (NSC) still support the idea that Ukraine should be pushing Russia back to the pre-February 2022 lines on the battlefield.

"Yes, absolutely," Blinken said in congressional testimony when asked whether the Pentagon and the NSC support Ukraine pushing Russia back to the February 2022 lines.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Saturday that the West is not showing its readiness for a "serious conversation" on peace, which is reflected in their calls to supply Kiev with more weapons, allowing strikes on Russian territory.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said on several occasions that Moscow is not going to attack NATO countries. The Kremlin has said that Russia does not threaten anyone, but will not ignore actions that are potentially dangerous to its interests.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) –

MIDDLE EAST

* The United States believes it is wrong on a strategic basis for Israel to withhold funds from the Palestinian Authority, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that he will continue working on the EU's common position regarding the recognition of the Palestinian state.

* France does not believe that the recognition of the Palestinian state can contribute to a political solution to the Middle East conflict, Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne said.

* Germany is not planning to nominally recognize Palestine yet, because a political solution to the Middle East conflict is needed first, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said.

* The decision of several European countries to recognize a Palestinian state would not prevent Israel from achieving a complete victory over the Palestinian movement Hamas, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

* US President Joe Biden supports the creation of a Palestinian state only through direct negotiations, the White House said after Norway, Spain, and Ireland said they would recognize Palestine.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that he is personally engaged in preparations for a peace conference on Ukraine next month in Switzerland, but there is no announcement on the possible participation of President Joe Biden at the moment.

* The Ukrainian armed forces have attacked the territory of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP) with a drone, the plant's press service said, adding that no casualties and damage were reported.

* Ukraine has lost up to 420 soldiers in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in battles with Russia's Tsent (Center) Group of Forces over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

DEATH OF IRANIAN PRESIDENT

* The United States will push back very "strongly and directly" if Tehran accuses Washington of being involved in the death of the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov arrived at the residence of Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali to personally express his condolences over the death of Raisi, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Russian State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin held a meeting with acting President of Iran Dr. Mohammad Mokhber during his visit to Iran, the Russian Parliament said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Inflation in Russia amounted to 8.03% in annual terms as of May 20 compared to 7.91% on May 13, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development said on Wednesday.

* Inflation in Russia slowed to 0.11% on May 14-20 from 0.17% one week earlier, Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* Moscow considers the decision by the EU to use income from frozen Russian sovereign assets to help Ukraine as expropriation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* The Kremlin spokesperson confirmed that the Russian government was aware of warnings made by international financial institutions regarding the West's plans to use revenues generated by frozen Russian state assets to give military assistance to Ukraine.

* EU permanent representatives have agreed on a new sanctions regime against Moscow that is allegedly linked to the situation inside Russia, an EU source told RIA Novosti.

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First Boeing Crewed Starliner Flight Postponed Yet Again, No New Date Set - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - NASA has canceled the latest, long-delayed, and repeatedly rescheduled first crewed flight of the Boeing CST-100 Starliner to the International Space Station (ISS) that was due to take place on Saturday, May 25, the US space agency announced on Wednesday.

"NASA, Boeing Space and ULA Launch [United Launch Alliance] are forgoing the May 25 launch attempt for the agency's Boeing Crew Flight Test following meetings assessing flight rationale, system performance, and redundancy," the US space agency said on X.

The next possible launch opportunity is still being discussed, NASA said. The message gave no indication when this might be.

US astronauts Barry "Butch" Wilmore and Sunita "Suni" Williams were scheduled to fly in the Starliner to the International Space Station (ISS) but after previous delays, a pressure regulation valve on the liquid oxygen tank on the Atlas V rocket's Centaur upper stage had to be released.

The first manned Starliner flight was earlier scheduled for July 2023 but has been repeatedly postponed since then as parts failed to function properly during tests. Boeing has received more than \$5 billion in contracts to build the much-troubled spacecraft which is now \$1 billion over budget.

Starliner was supposed to complement the reliable and now repeatedly used and successful SpaceX Dragon spacecraft which has already flown 50 astronauts, cosmonauts and civilians into orbit in 13 flights, 12 of them to the ISS.

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New US Solid Rocket Motor Completes Its First Static Fire Test - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman's Common 50 High Performance (C50HP) solid rocket motor has successfully carried out a static fire test at the US Air Force Arnold Engineering Development Complex at Arnold Air Force Base in Tennessee, the company announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation's C50HP solid rocket motor successfully completed a static fire test at the US Air Force Arnold Engineering Development Complex," the release said.

Northrop Grumman described the C50HP as a high-performance upper-stage rocket motor that can be adapted to support various missions, including flight in the region outside the Earth's atmosphere or other final stages of propulsion.

"C50HP is the company's first large solid rocket motor system entirely designed and developed in a digital environment using model-based systems engineering. This static test qualified the versatile motor for flight, validated digital modeling and simulations, and demonstrated the design's maturity and performance of the motor," the release stated.

Full pressure and structural qualification testing was completed for the C50HP and they confirmed the advanced design's capability to withstand various loads and extreme environments, Northrop Grumman said.

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Biden Says Plans to Visit Africa in February 2025 After Being 'Re-Elected'

WASHINGTON, May 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he plans to visit Africa after he is re-elected in November.

"I plan on going in February after I'm re-elected," Biden said alongside Kenyan President William Ruto at the White House.

Biden currently trails former President Donald Trump in the national polls by one point, according to an aggregation by RealClearPolitics.

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US House Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Reform Presidential Ethics Standards - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Republican US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Democratic Congresswoman Katie Porter introduced a bipartisan bill to reform presidential ethics standards, the lawmakers said on Wednesday.

"The Presidential Ethics Reform Act is landmark bipartisan legislation that delivers the transparency and accountability the American people deserve to ensure our public offices are not for sale," Comer said in a statement on the bill. "By creating this bipartisan legislation to provide greater transparency to the financial interactions related to the office of the president and vice president, we can ensure that moving forward American presidents, vice presidents, and their family members cannot profit from their proximity to power."

The bill requires presidents and vice presidents to disclose payments, transfers or other items of value from foreign sources received by them or a family member within two years of taking office, during their time in office and two years after leaving office, the statement said.

The bill also requires presidents and vice presidents to disclose conflicts of interest upon taking office and throughout their time in office, to disclose gifts valued at more than \$10,000 received from or by family members, and to disclose tax returns, the statement said.

Moreover, the bill requires presidents and vice presidents to disclose loans or loan repayments of any amount made to them by immediate family members, as well as those received by a family member from any source for over \$10,000, the statement said.

The US Congress can shine a light on improper conduct in the Executive Branch by boosting transparency through additional financial disclosures, Porter said in the statement. The reforms will help restore Americans' trust in government, Porter added.

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biden tells kenyan president he plans to visit africa in February after he is re-elected

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Michigan Farm Worker Diagnosed With Bird Flu - Michigan Health Department

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said in a statement on Wednesday that a dairy farmworker has been diagnosed with bird flu, marking the first such case in the state.

"The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) is announcing the first case of influenza A (H5) virus identified in a Michigan farmworker who had regular exposure to livestock infected with influenza A (H5)," said the release.

Health officials have said the patient had mild symptoms and had been known to be in contact with infected animals. The patient is reported to have recovered.

"Farmworkers who have been exposed to impacted animals have been asked to report even mild symptoms, and testing for the virus has been made available," Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian, the state's chief medical executive, said in the statement.

At this time, health officials agree that because there have been no sustained human-to-human infections, risk to the general public remains low, the statement said.

Since 2022, there have been two previous human cases in the United States - one in Colorado in 2022 and one in Texas in 2024.

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Trudeau Says Prepared to Recognize Palestine 'at Right Time,' Not Necessarily as Last Step

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government stands ready to recognize a Palestinian state "at the right time" and not necessarily as a last step along the path toward a two-state solution, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We are prepared to recognize the State of Palestine at the right time, not necessarily as a last step along the path," Trudeau said, when asked about whether his government would follow in the steps of Norway, Spain and Ireland in recognizing Palestine as a state.

The prime minister stressed that there is an urgent need to build a credible path that will lead toward a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine and expressed his opposition to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejecting the two-state solution.

Trudeau noted that Hamas' presence in Gaza remains a problematic element as they have refused to either lay down their weapons or free the remaining hostages taken on October 7.

Canada has long adhered to the two-state solution as the outcome of a process toward lasting peace, but only when the "right conditions" are met. However, in a major shift earlier in May, it abstained on a UNGA resolution that backs the recognition of Palestine as a full UN member instead of voting against.

When questioned on the change, Trudeau said that Canada's vote reflects that the emergence of a Palestinian state might happen sooner than at the end of the process, as a way of pushing toward the two-state solution.

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Blinken Says US to Take Actions Against Georgian Politicians Over Foreign Agents Law

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will take action against Georgian politicians involved in passing a law on foreign agents that Washington opposes, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"We are looking very hard at what we can do in response to that and I anticipate we will take actions," Blinken said in congressional testimony for the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

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Israel Can Use AI in Weapons Only in Accordance With International Commitments - Fick

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Israel or any other country can use artificial intelligence (AI) in weapons systems only in accordance with their international commitments to respect fundamental rights, US Ambassador-at-Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy Nathaniel Fick said on Wednesday.

"The United States believes very strongly that the integration of critical and emerging technologies into military systems must be done in ways that are in keeping with other international commitments. Beyond that, I do not have any specifics to share about any particular applications of AI in weapon systems by Israel or by any other countries," Fick said.

Fick made the statement when asked to comment on reports that Israel allegedly used AI in military systems during operations in the Gaza Strip.

The ambassador emphasized the importance of respecting fundamental rights and maintaining an open dialogue with allies and partners on these issues.

Fick noted that numerous countries all around the world have the ability to integrate AI into weapon systems.

"The applications of AI are changing every aspect of national power," Fick said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said earlier that he was worried about reports that Israel has been using AI to identify targets in its bombing campaigns in populated areas of Gaza.

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US House Panel Adopts NDAA Amendment to Ban Russian, Chinese Nationals From Research Labs

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Armed Services Committee adopted an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Wednesday to ban Russian and Chinese nationals from national security laboratories and nuclear weapons production sites.

The panel adopted the amendment to the legislation during a markup hearing for the FY25 NDAA.

The amendment was offered by US Congressman Doug Lamborn.

The FY25 NDAA will prevent espionage by the Chinese Communist Party, the panel said in a statement via social media platform X.

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Fed Discussed More Rate Hikes If Inflation Doesn't Give Up - May Meeting Minutes

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - With US interest rates already at two-decade highs, policymakers at the Federal Reserve discussed the likelihood of an even tighter monetary policy should US inflation remain stubbornly high, the central bank revealed in its latest policy meeting minutes published on Wednesday.

"Various participants mentioned a willingness to tighten policy further should risks to inflation materialize in a way that such an action became appropriate," the Fed minutes said, referring to the policymakers who participated at its two-day Federal Open Market Committee meeting that ended on May 1.

The Fed intends to bring US interest rates down from their highest levels since 2002. But the central bank is wary of making rate cuts when inflation is still stronger than its 2% per annum target.

The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a key inflation indicator, went from an annualized growth of 3.1% in January to 3.2% in February and 3.5% in March, before retreating to 3.4% in April.

The CPI hit a four-decade high in the aftermath of the 2020 coronavirus breakout, growing by as much as 9.1% in the year to June 2022.

Responding to that, the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times, bringing them to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5%, versus the pre-pandemic range of between zero and 0.25%.

The current range of rates has been unchanged since July 2023 due to uncertainties in the inflation outlook.

The Fed minutes released on Wednesday underscored that concern, saying policymakers at its May meeting were not sure when they could make good on the central bank's 2% inflation target.

"Although monetary policy was seen as restrictive, many participants commented on their uncertainty about the degree of restrictiveness," the minutes said. "These participants saw this uncertainty as coming from the possibility that high interest rates may be having smaller effects than in the past, that longer-run equilibrium interest rates may be higher than previously

thought, or that the level of potential output may be lower than estimated.”

While policymakers seemed in agreement that the current policy was well positioned to deal with evolving economic conditions, they also wanted it to be nimble enough to deal with unanticipated risks, the Fed minutes said.

“Participants discussed maintaining the current restrictive policy stance for longer should inflation not show signs of moving sustainably toward 2 percent or reducing policy restraint in the event of an unexpected weakening in labor market conditions,” the minutes added.

The Fed has an opportunity to review rates at its next policy meeting on June 12. Should it pass on that, it will have four more chances to make a change before the year-end: July 31, September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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Blinken Calls Leak of Private US-Israeli Discussions on 2,000-Pound Bombs 'Unfortunate'

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday called the leak of private US-Israeli discussions on withholding weapons deliveries, including of US-made 2,000-pound bombs, "unfortunate."

"With regard to 2000-pound bombs, which in a dense urban environment can do terrible damage, we've been in discussions with Israel about that particular weapon and those discussions continue. Those were private discussions. It's unfortunate that it leaked to the press," Blinken said in congressional testimony before the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Blinken reiterated that Israel has other means to defeat Hamas without proceeding with a full-scale invasion of Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip.

Earlier in May, the Pentagon confirmed media reports that the Biden administration halted deliveries of 1800 2000-pound bombs and 1700 500-pound bombs to Israel after the country began its allegedly limited military operation in Rafah while making public its plans to proceed with a major ground operation.

It remains unclear whether the suspension of weapons deliveries to Israel will make any difference and cause Israel to call off its Rafah operation. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly said that his country stands ready to proceed with its military plans no matter what the United States or any other country says or does.

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Blinken Says US to Take Actions Against Georgian Politicians Over Foreign Agents Law

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"We are looking very hard at what we can do in response to that and I anticipate we will take actions," Blinken said in congressional testimony for the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

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Uvalde Agrees to Pay \$2 Million Settlement to Families of 2022 School Shooting - Attorney

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) — The city of Uvalde, Texas, has agreed to a \$2 million insurance settlement with families affected by the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting, Connecticut-based attorney Josh Koskoff said on Wednesday.

"The city of Uvalde [Texas] has agreed to pay its insurance of \$2 million...These families could have pursued a lawsuit against the city, and there are certainly grounds for a lawsuit...But instead of suing the city and jeopardizing the finances of anybody, the families have accepted the insurance," Koskoff said during a press briefing.

Koskoff added that lawsuits will be forthcoming against the state of Texas, which "did nothing at all," and additional lawsuits are planned against the federal government.

According to a review by the Justice Department, on May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos shot and killed 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. Police did not confront the shooter until 77 minutes after officers first arrived at the scene.

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UN Chief to Keep Working on 2-State Solution After 3 States Recognize Palestine -Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will continue his efforts to pursue a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine after Ireland, Norway and Spain recognized Palestine as a state, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"For our part, the Secretary-General will continue to work towards a two-state solution for two states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side in peace and security and to honor the the right of self determination of the Palestinians," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Palestinian movement Hamas said it welcomed the statements from Norway, Ireland and Spain on recognizing Palestine as a state. Several other Arab states also welcomed the decision.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Al Safadi called the decision a step toward implementing the two-state solution, which would define the borders of independent Palestine as they were before the 1967 war.

Saudi Arabia praised the three European countries' decision as a step toward a lasting peace in the Middle East, saying it was time the rest of the world recognized Palestine as well.

The UN General Assembly voted in 1947 to divide UK-governed Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem placed under a special international regime. The partitioning was planned to take place in May 1948, when the British mandate was due to end, but only the state

of Israel was established. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state in the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

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US House Panel Requests Probes Into Chinese Doping Allegations Ahead of Olympics - Letters

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The chair and ranking member of the US House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party sent letters to the US Justice Department and International Olympic Committee (IOC), requesting investigations into allegations involving doping by Chinese athletes.

The lawmakers requested that the Justice Department and FBI use their extraterritorial jurisdiction to investigate individuals involved in doping schemes at international sports competitions that involve US athletes, ahead of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

The lawmakers expressed concerns about reports that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) cleared 23 Chinese swimmers to participate in the 2021 games, despite positive drug tests. The Chinese government reportedly gave WADA \$2 million more than is required in the two years before the incident, the letter said.

"It is imperative to assess whether these alleged doping practices were state-sponsored, which could warrant further diplomatic measures by the United States and the international community," the letter said.

It is critical for the US to ensure that its athletes are competing in a fair environment in the 2024 Olympic Games, the letter said. The lawmakers requested a briefing on the matter no later than June 5.

The lawmakers also requested swift, decisive and transparent action on the matter from the IOC. The lawmakers' letter to the IOC called for an independent investigation into the 23 positive tests and WADA's decision to allow the athletes to compete.

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Kenya's Ruto Says Will Discuss With US House Speaker Terror Challenges Amid ATMIS Drawdown

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Kenyan President William Ruto said ahead of a meeting with House Speaker Mike Johnson on Wednesday that the two will discuss opportunities to ensure stability in East Africa as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) reduces its force posture in the region amid the threat from the al-Shabaab terrorist group (affiliated with al-Qaeda, banned in Russia).

"Part of the conversation we're going to have is on how we can make sure that the drawdown of ATMIS troops does not create a vacuum that will end up being filled by Al Shabaab," Ruto told

reporters alongside Johnson. "Kenya and the United States and frontline states need to work together to see how that can be done."

Ruto added that the timeline for the withdrawal of foreign forces deployed in Somalia should not be calendar driven but conditions based. ATMIS forces are currently mandated to wind down their security operation through this year and transfer those operations to the Somali National Armed Forces.

ATMIS consists of troops from the East African nations of Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda.

ATMIS had a 22,000-strong force in Somalia, but as of February has drawn down a total of 5,000 troops with another 4,000 expected to withdraw from Somalia in June.

Ruto is on an official three-day state visit in Washington, which will include a bilateral meeting with President Joe Biden. The visit comes as the United States is losing influence to Russia and China in the African continent after it was required to withdraw US forces from Niger and Chad by those respective governments.

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Sullivan Says Strategically Wrong for Israel to Withhold Palestinian Authority Funds

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – The United States believes it is wrong on a strategic basis for Israel to withhold funds from the Palestinian Authority, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"I think it's wrong on a strategic basis because withholding funds destabilizes the West Bank, it undermines the search for security and prosperity for the Palestinian people which is in Israel's interests," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, The New York Times reported that the Israeli finance minister said that the country will not transfer funds to the Palestinian Authority after three European countries announced their plans to recognize a Palestinian state.

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US Says Engaged in Ukraine Peace Summit Preparations, No Announcement on Biden's Travel

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that he is personally engaged in preparations for a peace conference on Ukraine next month in Switzerland, but there is no announcement on possible participation of President Joe Biden at the moment.

"I don't have any announcements on that today. What I will say is that I am personally engaged in preparations for that summit as others in our government," Sullivan said. "I can't make any announcements today about President's travel."

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US to Push Back 'Strongly' if Iran Alleges Involvement in Raisi's Death - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will push back very "strongly and directly" if Tehran accuses Washington of being involved in the death of the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday. "If at any point Iran tries to accuse us of having to do [something] with it, we will push back extremely strongly and directly," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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US House to Vote on Crypto Bill Opposed by White House, Securities Regulator

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US House is set to vote Wednesday on a cryptocurrency bill opposed by the White House and its chief securities regulator, which says it fears "regulatory gaps" and "immeasurable risk" for capital markets if the paper ever becomes law.

The Financial Innovation and Technology for the 21st Century Act, called FIT 21 in short, will decide the jurisdictional authority that regulatory agencies have over the United States' vast digital assets, say Republican sponsors of the act. They add that their aim is to create regulatory clarity that would indirectly boost the crypto industry's growth.

President Joe Biden and his fellow Democrats, however, say the bill will adversely impact the existing regulatory landscape for the crypto industry.

FIT 21 "in its current form lacks sufficient protections for consumers and investors who engage in certain digital asset transactions," the White House said in a statement.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) pointed out that the bill will not grant securities status for investment contracts recorded on a blockchain, thus denying investors protection under US securities laws. It added that the bill would also allow issuers of crypto investment contracts to certify themselves that their own products were digital commodities and were not subject to SEC oversight, leaving the agency just 60 days to challenge this.

"FIT 21 would create new regulatory gaps and undermine decades of precedent regarding the oversight of investment contracts, putting investors and capital markets at immeasurable risk," SEC Chairman Gary Gensler said in a statement.

Gensler in the past had led some of the heftiest crackdowns on the crypto industry, although the SEC's likely approval of exchange-traded funds for the spot trading of the digital coin ether indicated to some a softening of stance by the commission's chief.

Aside from its Republican sponsors, the crypto bill is supported by industry groups who see Gensler as an enemy of the crypto trade and an impediment to America's wider adoption of digital assets.

The SEC chief has always said the crypto trade should be subject to the same laws that apply to any securities trade. His argument about the unknown risks posed to investors by crypto is

often underscored by his citation of the high-profile prosecutions, bankruptcies and business collapses revolving around the trade.

President Biden, who has authority to veto the Congress bill, also offered to cooperate in finding a new way to resolve Republican concerns about the future of the crypto trade.

"The Administration is eager to work with Congress to ensure a comprehensive and balanced regulatory framework for digital assets, building on existing authorities, which will promote the responsible development of digital assets and payment innovation and help reinforce United States leadership in the global financial system," the White House statement said.

Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee in November's presidential election and challenger to Biden, has started accepting digital coin donations, his campaign for the White House announced on Tuesday, adding that it wanted to build a "crypto army" of donors.

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White House Consulting With Congress on Sanctions Against ICC, No Decision Yet – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – The White House is consulting with Congress on potential sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC), but has not made any determinations yet, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"We are in consultations on a bipartisan, bicameral basis with the Hill on all of the options for how to respond to what the ICC has just done. We haven't made any determinations," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

On Monday, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan filed requests for arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as for Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar, Hamas political bureau head Ismail Haniyeh and the leader of Hamas' military wing, Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Masri, over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since October 2023 based on evidence collected and examined by his office.

US officials slammed the ICC arrest warrants, with President Joe Biden calling it "outrageous" and saying that despite the ICC prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, Israel is not carrying out genocide in Gaza.

In addition, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that lawmakers are exploring options, including sanctions, to punish the ICC if it proceeds with arrest warrants for Israeli officials.

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us actively engaged in preparations for international peace conference on ukraine, but has no announcement on biden's travel there - white house

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if at any point iran tries to accuse us of having anything to do with raisi's death, we will push back extremely strongly and directly - sullivan

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US Joint Chiefs Chair Brown Says American Troops Could Return to Ukraine After Crisis

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Charles Brown said on Wednesday that he expects American forces are likely to return to Ukraine after Russia's special military operation is over.

"I do expect when this conflict is over that we will have an opportunity to go back to what we were doing before the conflict," Brown said during a panel discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council (designated an undesirable foreign organization in Russia).

However, Brown emphasized that US troops would not be on the ground in Ukraine until it is no longer an active combat zone.

Brown noted that US forces were on the ground working closely with Ukraine before they were pulled out at the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

Last week, Brown said that a NATO deployment of trainers to Ukraine appeared inevitable. For now, he said, an effort inside Ukraine would put "a bunch of NATO trainers at risk."

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US House Panel Advances Bill to Allow Export Controls on AI Systems

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced legislation on Wednesday to allow the US Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) to place export controls on artificial intelligence (AI) systems and other emerging technologies.

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Enhancing National Frameworks for Overseas Restriction of Critical Exports (ENFORCE) Act, in a vote of 43 in favor and three opposed.

The legislation modernizes the Export Control Reform Act of 2018 by giving BIS clear legal authority to use export controls on activities related to AI systems and other national security-related emerging technologies.

The bill also allows BIS to require licenses for the export of AI systems. The legislation gives BIS the flexibility to develop appropriate controls by expanding its authorities, an official bill summary said.

Without the legislation, US companies could sell AI systems that threaten national security to Chinese companies, with no way for BIS to respond, the summary said.

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US House Panel Chair Says Hunter Biden Repeatedly Lied to Lawmakers in Biden Family Probe

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden repeatedly lied to US House lawmakers as part of their investigation into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Jason Smith said on Wednesday.

"New documents provided by the [Internal Revenue Service] whistleblowers show that Hunter Biden repeatedly lied to Congress in his February deposition to distance his involvement in what should be considered a clear scheme to enrich the Biden family," Smith said in a statement.

Evidence provided by the IRS whistleblowers indicate that Biden and his business associates made millions of dollars by selling access to Joe Biden, who denies the accusations, the statement said.

Documents released by the panel confirm the whistleblowers' claims and include evidence of the US Justice Department impeding an investigation into Hunter Biden, the statement said.

In 2021, Assistant US Attorney Leslie Wolf told investigators that they could not pursue Hollywood lawyer Kevin Morris as a witness based on information received from the CIA, the statement said.

"Congress cannot allow our oversight responsibilities to be undermined by lies told by anyone, including the President's son. Hunter Biden, despite what he may believe, he is not above the law," the statement said.

Lying to Congress is a serious offense, the statement added.

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US House Panel Advances Bill to Provide Oversight of Changes to Israel Arms Sales

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee on Wednesday advanced legislation to provide for congressional oversight of changes to arms sales to Israel, following President Joe Biden's decision to pause the delivery of certain weapons over a potential large-scale Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip city of Rafah.

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Maintaining Our Ironclad Commitment to Israel's Security Act, in a vote of 33 in favor and 13 opposed.

The legislation prohibits the president from pausing, suspending or delaying the delivery of defense articles to Israel unless Congress is notified and given a policy justification.

The bill also expresses the sense of Congress that limiting or otherwise delaying the sale or delivery of US arms to Israel runs counter to the United States' commitments to Israel and undermines regional security.

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Johnson Says Opposes US Preventing Ukraine From Striking Russian Territory

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that he opposes efforts by the United States to prevent Ukraine from conducting strikes on Russian territory.

"I think we need to allow Ukraine to prosecute the war the way they see fit," Johnson told reporters in a clip shared to social media, in response to a question about whether he supports Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory.

The US trying to micromanage Ukrainian activities is not good policy, Johnson said.

Earlier this week, a group of US House lawmakers sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, urging the Pentagon chief to permit Ukraine to use US-supplied long-range weapons to strike Russian territory.

The Biden administration has repeatedly said that it discourages Ukraine from conducting strikes on Russian territory and restricts Kiev from using US-supplied weapons for such strikes.

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Oil Prices Hit Week Low; Demand Again Questioned By US Crude Stockpile Build

NEW YORK, May 22 (Sputnik) - World oil prices hit a week-low on Wednesday after the US government reported a fresh weekly build in domestic crude stockpiles, raising questions again about demand in the run-up to summer driving — typically the country's busiest period for fuel consumption.

Inventories of gasoline, the No. 1 fuel for cars, fell during the week ended May 17, boosting somewhat the demand component of the US petroleum complex. At the same time, stockpiles rose for distillates, which are used to turn out the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships and also go into making fuel needed by airplanes.

As a result, crude prices tumbled in New York trading, before recovering slightly at midday. By 12:00 pm in the Eastern United States (6:00 pm UK), a barrel of West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, was at \$77.66. It earlier hit a one-week low of \$77.36.

UK-origin Brent, the global benchmark for oil, was at \$81.88, after reaching \$81.58 earlier — the lowest since May 15.

Based on their Monday-Wednesday showing and without an imminent recovery, crude prices could end the week about 2% lower, wiping out all of last week's gain, which was just about as much. This was despite the determination by oil producers in the OPEC+ alliance to extend output cuts this summer to bolster prices. OPEC+ groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 other oil-producing nations steered by Russia. The alliance intends to maintain supply cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day until the end of June.

In the latest week to May 17, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said domestic crude balances rose by 1.825 million barrels, after the prior weekly draw of 2.508 million. Energy analysts on Wall Street had anticipated a drop of 2.4 million.

The Weekly Petroleum Status Report of the EIA also showed gasoline stockpiles down by 945,000 barrels during that week — well above the prior weekly draw of 235,000 but still lower than the 1.6 million forecast by Wall Street.

Distillates, meanwhile, had a 379,000 barrel build — against the prior drop of 45,000 and the anticipated draw of 100,000.

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Biden Admin Could Finalize Deal to Normalize Saudi-Israel Ties Within Weeks - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that the Biden administration could finalize within weeks an agreement to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

"Those agreements, in principle, are very close to being able to be concluded. Now, of course, we will come to Congress with them when they're ready to be reviewed, but we could be weeks away from being able to conclude them," Blinken said during a House Appropriations Committee hearing.

Blinken added that for normalization to proceed, Saudi Arabia requires calm in Gaza and a credible pathway to a Palestinian state.

Last week, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan held discussions with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in Dhahran.

The parties discussed the nearly final version of the draft strategic agreements between the two countries, as well as the need to find a credible path to achieving a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians.

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US House Republicans Lead Democrats in Voter Support Ahead of 2024 Elections - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Republican candidates for seats in the US House of Representatives lead their Democratic counterparts in support among likely voters ahead of the 2024 elections, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday.

A plurality of respondents, 47%, would vote for the Republican House candidate, the poll report said. Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents would vote for the Democratic candidate, the poll report said.

The Republican advantage has narrowed by one percentage point since March, the poll report added.

House Republicans currently hold a small majority in the lower chamber of the US Congress, while Democrats control the Senate. Both parties are vying to retain control of one chamber and win a majority in the other in the 2024 elections.

The poll surveyed 1,092 likely US voters on May 15-16 and 19. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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ANALYSIS - Raisi's Death Unlikely to Bring Any Positive Change to US-Iran Relations

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden, the vast majority of lawmakers in Congress, and the pro-Israel lobby in the United States will all ensure that there is no improvement in US-Iran relations following the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, analysts told Sputnik.

On Sunday, Raisi, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, and other senior Iranian government officials died in a helicopter crash in northwestern Iran while returning from a visit to Azerbaijan, with Iranian authorities attributing the crash landing in a remote mountainous region to poor weather conditions and thick fog.

It is not yet clear who Raisi's successor will be, but regardless of the choice, Washington remains dominated by opponents of improved bilateral relations, retired US Lt. Col. and former Vice President of the Eurasia Group Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik.

The United States on Monday extended its official condolences for the death of Iran's president and foreign minister, however, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Iranian people are "probably better off" now that Raisi is dead.

"I do not see any significant improvement in relations with the United States, especially with this administration and based on the strong Israeli lobby's influence, not with the current Congress," Rasmussen said.

Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian were well regarded across Iran but the loss of two senior leaders will not make any difference to the policies guiding Iran, he said.

"Unlike many Western analysts. I do not see any change in Iran's role and importance in the region," Rasmussen said. "The government will remain intact and continue in their current direction."

Under the Iranian constitution, an early presidential election must be held within 50 days after the incumbent president is pronounced dead or incapacitated, and his powers are transferred to the first vice president.

IRAN EXPECTED TO MAINTAIN INDEPENDENT PATH

Former senior FBI intelligence analyst, Middle East expert, and political commentator Coleen Rowley agreed that Iran would maintain its current independent path but also cautious alertness toward the United States.

"Obviously there's reason to hope Iran will continue a steady and cautiously pragmatic hand as it replaces the leaders it has lost," Rowley said.

Iran's election headquarters has proposed to register candidates for the post of Iranian president on May 28, with the date to be confirmed by the country's Guardian Council.

University of Stirling Lecturer in Politics and Religion Professor Bashir Saade said that Iran's institutional structure and long-lasting regime were likely to ride out the shock caused by Raisi's death.

"This seems to have been an accident. And it also does not look like it will produce some kind of political vacuum in Iran either," Saade said.

First Vice President of Iran Mohammad Mokhber will serve as head of state after Raisi's death

for the next 50 days until a new presidential election is held by a special council.

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USCP Say Investigating Two Vials of Blood Found at RNC Headquarters in Washington

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) – The US Capitol Police (USCP) are investigating a package containing two vials of blood that was found at the Republican National Committee (RNC) headquarters in Washington D.C., the police said on Wednesday.

"At approximately 7:45 a.m. [11:45 GMT], the USCP responded to the 300 block of First Street, SE, for the report of a suspicious package. The package was just cleared by our Hazardous Incident Response Division. It contained two vials of blood. The source of the package and its contents will be further investigated," the police said in a statement widely quoted by US media. The police put the RNC building under lockdown with staff evacuated and the blood being tested, according to media reports.

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Almost Half of Americans in Swing US States Fear Violence During Election - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Almost half of potential voters in the swing US states fear that there is a potential for violence during or after the presidential election in November, a new Bloomberg-Morning Consult poll revealed on Wednesday.

When asked if they trust the statement that the election and its aftermath will be free from violence, 18% of respondents said "not at all" and 31% said "not much," a report on the poll said.

Sixteen percent of respondents expressed complete agreement with the assumption and 35% said they have "some" confidence the election and its aftermath will be free from violence, the poll report said.

Fifty-five percent of respondents said they are confident the upcoming election will be free from foreign interference, but 45% expressed the opposite view, the poll report said.

At the same time, 60% of respondents expressed doubt the election would be free from misinformation, while 40% said that that would not be a problem, the poll report also said.

The poll took place from May 7-13 among 4,962 registered voters in seven swing US states: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

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US, Netherlands Conduct Bilateral Operations in South China Sea - US Navy

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The US and Dutch navies conducted joint naval operations in the South China Sea to increase interoperability and readiness in the Indo-Pacific, the US Navy said on Wednesday.

"The Netherlands and United States' navies conducted bilateral operations in the South China Sea, May 22," the Navy said in a press release. "The bilateral operation provided a valuable opportunity to improve allied interoperability and conduct complex scenarios to improve combined readiness."

US Navy Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Mobile, Lewis and Clark-class dry cargo ship USNS Wally Schirra and Royal Netherlands Navy De Zeven Provinciën-class frigate HNLMS Tromp took part in the operations, according to the release.