

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, April 4, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Experts: US ops won't dent China's sea claims

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

It's too late to constrain China's creeping militarization and sovereignty claims over dozens of islands and reefs in the South and East China seas, experts say.

China's island-building and militarization efforts began early this decade. It now claims dozens of islands and reefs in the Paracel and Spratly islands west of the Philippines. The United Nations does not recognize China's territorial claims, which overlap claims in the same area by Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan.

The U.S. regularly challenges Beijing's claims by sailing warships within 12 nautical miles of islands that China has built up in the Paracel and Spratly chains. So far this year, the Navy has picked up the pace, conducting at least five freedom-of-navigation operations, or FONOPS, since January: one each through the Paracels and Spratlys, and three through the Taiwan Strait, the latest March 24-25.

That's half as many operations in three months as the Navy reported conducting in all of 2018. The Navy does not publicize all of those operations, however.

"Our goal is to make sure [China's development of militarized outposts] doesn't become a tool to operationalize an expansive illegal sovereignty claim," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Randall Schriver told the House Armed Services Committee on March 27.

Nonetheless, sailing through those seas — or flying above them as the Air Force did with B-52 bombers at least three times in March — is probably

too little, too late, said security analyst Paul Buchanan, an American, of 36th Parallel Assessments, a private, non-partisan, strategic analysis consulting firm based in New Zealand.

"The horse has bolted," he said during a January interview with Stars and Stripes. "The days of confronting the Chinese are long gone. It should have been done 10 years ago. Island-building has enabled [China] to claim possession of the South China Sea."

On that point, Masayuki Tadokoro, a professor of international relations at Keio University, agreed.

"It is too late to attempt to control China," Tadokoro said during a panel discussion March 7 sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"If we are to contain China now, it is almost impossible because of the economic importance of China and also China's geopolitical presence" in the South China Sea, Tadokoro said.

Conceding the South China Sea to China would imperil free trade in an economically important region, Buchanan said. About \$3.37 trillion worth of goods — 21% of all global trade — passed through the area in 2016, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies' China Power project.

In that area alone, China has claimed 27 reefs and islands, building outposts for military and civilian personnel on 12 of them since 2014, according to the center's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. Many of what were once bare reefs and uninhabited islands are now military bases, some with missiles, warship docks and landing strips.

Buchanan said Beijing could continue to allow free transit of the South China Sea to benefit

trade but, so far, has treated the sea as its own.

"With that embedded in your maritime perspective, it's pretty hard to be the guarantor of freedom of navigation," Buchanan said. "Their intentions are not for the betterment of the global community — their intentions are for the benefit of themselves."

A January report by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," said China aims to strengthen its control over disputed areas, enhance its presence and challenge other claimants.

"China's maritime emphasis and concern with protecting its overseas interests have increasingly drawn the [People's Liberation Army] beyond China's borders and immediate periphery," the report said.

To challenge those moves, the U.S. Navy in 2017 conducted at least six freedom-of-navigation operations, including two in the Paracel Islands and the remainder described generally as in the South and East China seas, according to a Defense Department report that year.

The U.S. routinely explains that its freedom-of-navigation operations are intended to "challenge excessive maritime claims," though Navy public affairs statements in the wake of those operations rarely tread into details.

However, the 2017 Defense Department report stated that China claims areas around the islands and reefs to which they are "not so entitled" and expects "prior permission" for "innocent passage of foreign military ships" through those areas.

Expecting China to abandon its claims is unrealistic, retired Chinese Navy Capt. Liu Xiaobo said in a March 1 analysis for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a bipar-

tisan, nonprofit think tank in Washington.

"It is not realistic for China to ask the United States to abandon its FONOPs, and it is just as unrealistic for the United States to ask China to simply drop its excessive maritime claims," Liu wrote. "... there is space for consultation between China and the United States here."

While freedom-of-navigation operations have been part of U.S. defense strategy around the world for decades, Buchanan said it needs to do more.

That means a tougher approach — even if it brings a hostile response, Buchanan said in an interview March 22. For example, the Navy could increase the frequency of its freedom-of-navigation patrols and send warships deeper into the 12-nautical-mile radius around the islands and reefs that China claims, he said.

The Navy is "not getting really close to the territorial limits that the Chinese claim. If you wanted to press the point, you could drive way into those territorial waters and see what happens," Buchanan said. "I wouldn't doubt that the Chinese would fire upon any warship that went in there."

In September, a Chinese destroyer, the Luoyang, came within 45 yards of the USS Decatur near Gaven Reef, a Chinese-occupied territory in the Spratlys. The Navy called the maneuver unprofessional.

The 7th Fleet commander, Vice Adm. Phillip Sawyer, on March 18 in Manila, Philippines, said the incident does not change Navy plans for freedom-of-navigation operations, according to The Associated Press.

Buchanan said he doesn't think the American public "has the stomach" for an armed conflict with China, but it will soon have to choose whether to fight or concede the Chinese claims.

US leaders: China is an emerging threat

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

The U.S.-led NATO pact must adapt to face an increased threat posed by China even as European allies work to counter Russia's activities, America's top diplomat said Thursday at a meeting of alliance foreign ministers.

"We must adapt our alliance to confront emerging threats," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told NATO leaders.

While NATO for the past five years has been adapting to a more aggressive Russia, "Chinese strategic competition, including technology and 5G (networks), and many other issues" also are threats for allies

in Europe, Pompeo said.

Pompeo's comments came as NATO marked its 70th anniversary on Thursday in Washington, where members of the 29-nation security pact also held high-level security talks.

Since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, NATO has focused on Russia, but the U.S. now wants the alliance to also focus on China, whose economic and military power has expanded significantly in recent years. U.S. military officials have been raising concerns about Chinese investment in ports and other infrastructure projects around Europe.

And on Wednesday, Vice President Mike Pence raised the issue on the sidelines of

NATO talks, saying "adjust we must."

"Whether we like it or not the implications of China's rise will profoundly affect the choices NATO members will face, individually and collectively," Pence said.

Ultimately, China's expanding influence will demand more U.S. attention and resources, Pence said.

"As we meet that challenge, our European allies must do more to maintain the strength and deterrence of our trans-Atlantic alliance with their resources," he said.

Allies in Europe are under intense pressure by the U.S. to increase their military spending for the alliance's collective

defense, particularly Germany — Europe's economic powerhouse often criticized for not meeting NATO defense budget targets.

"All NATO allies made a promise to invest more in defense," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday. "I expect all allies to deliver on what they've promised."

Meanwhile, NATO is looking at options to counter a new Russian missile system, Stoltenberg said. However, NATO has ruled out deploying ground-launched missiles in Europe as a response to Moscow's violation of a Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, he said.

Lithuania pact signals an increased US military role

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
AND JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

The United States will continue to deploy troops to Lithuania and help the country develop anti-tank and missile systems, according to a comprehensive defense agreement the two countries signed this week to boost cooperation in a region set on edge by Russia's military resurgence.

The five-year "roadmap," signed by defense officials from both countries at the Pentagon on Tuesday, says the U.S. will send forces "to strengthen deterrence and to catalyze the efforts of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to develop their national defense further."

Military bilateral agreements between the U.S. and its allies are fairly routine. But the deal with Lithuania, which resembles a similar one made with Poland in September, could be an indication that the U.S. wants to step up surveillance on Russia's military exclave in

neighboring Kaliningrad.

The deal "suggests that it might include more U.S. investment in scrutinizing Russian activity and weapon deployments in Kaliningrad," said Jorge Benitez, a NATO expert with the Washington-based Atlantic Council think tank.

Lithuania expects to see more joint exercises and a larger investment by the United States in the country's military infrastructure, Minister of National Defense Raimundas Karoblis said in a statement. The defense agreement signals "the U.S. disposition" to further its cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, he said.

The roadmap, to be implemented over the next five years, is focused on expanded training missions, deterrence operations in the Baltic Sea, improving early-warning capabilities in the Baltic region, and building up cybersecurity systems to defend against attacks, according to the Defense Department.

Russia reaffirms its Arctic presence with updated base

Associated Press

SEVERN KLEVER MILITARY BASE, Russia — Missile launchers ply icy roads and air defense systems point menacingly into the sky at this Arctic military outpost, a key vantage point for Russia to project its power over the resource-rich polar region.

The base, dubbed Severny Klever (Northern Clover) for its trefoil shape, is painted in the white, blue and red colors of the Russian national flag. It has been designed so soldiers can reach all of its sprawling facilities without venturing outdoors — a useful precaution in an area where temperatures often plunge to minus 58 Fahrenheit during the winter, and even in the short Arctic summer are often freezing at night.

It's strategically located on Kotelny Island, between the Laptev Sea and the East Siberian Sea on the Arctic shipping route, and permanently houses up to 250 military personnel responsible for maintaining air and sea surveillance facilities

and coastal defenses like anti-ship missiles.

The Russian base has enough supplies to remain fully autonomous for more than a year.

"Our task is to monitor the airspace and the northern sea route," said base commander Lt. Col. Vladimir Pasechnik. "We have all we need for our service and comfortable living."

Russia is not alone in trying to assert jurisdiction over parts of the Arctic, as shrinking polar ice opens fresh opportunities for resource exploration and new shipping lanes. The United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway are jostling for position, and China also has shown an increasing interest in the polar region.

Russia has made reaffirming its presence in the Arctic a top goal, not the least because the region is believed to hold up to one-quarter of the Earth's undiscovered oil and gas. Russian President Vladimir Putin has cited estimates that put the value of Arctic mineral riches at \$30 trillion.

Navy conducts housing survey after outcry

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Sailors in privatized residences now have a chance to voice their opinions about their living conditions in response to recent complaints by military families about housing health and safety concerns, Navy officials announced Tuesday.

Adm. John Richardson, chief of naval operations, directed the survey, which is different than the standard annual questionnaire given to residents, according to a news release from Navy Installations Command, the headquarters responsible for service bases worldwide.

The survey aims to address concerns raised through the media and congressional hearings during the past few months

about the living conditions in privatized military housing. A 2018 investigation by Reuters ignited the examination into military housing.

The Military Family Advisory Network, which advocates for servicemembers and their families, responded to the reporting by conducting its own survey. About 56 percent of the nearly 17,000 respondents said they had a negative view of their living conditions.

Aside from the survey, the Navy has conducted town hall meetings at all its installations worldwide and walk-throughs where residents volunteer to have their chain of command visit their home. The Navy said it is also working with private property management companies to ensure maintenance and

repairs are being conducted and other issues are addressed with their landlord, according to the news release.

Each military branch has responded in various ways to complaints about housing conditions. Similar to the Navy, the Army, Air Force and Marines have conducted town hall meetings with residents and reached out for feedback through various forms of communication, including door-to-door walk-throughs in some neighborhoods.

Through the Navy survey, sailors will be able to note their likes and dislikes with privatized housing, concerns about their homes, community and services provided by privatized housing management companies, as well as overall satis-

faction, according to the Navy news release. Participation is strongly encouraged, though not mandated. It takes about 10 minutes to complete.

The Navy is paying CEL & Associates Inc., an independent third party, to conduct the survey, which will go to about 36,200 residents of family housing and 6,000 sailors in unaccompanied housing. Respondents have the option to remain anonymous.

Residents will receive a letter or email with information on how to access the online survey during April. It has similar questions but is separate from the annual survey conducted by privatized housing companies, which is also being conducted at this time.

Lawmakers praise DOD's first steps but demand more

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military officials have fixed problems in tens of thousands of privatized, on-post homes in recent weeks, top Pentagon officials told House lawmakers Thursday, vowing to establish long-term solutions to ensure military housing is safe for troops and their families.

Lawmakers applauded the initial steps the Defense Department and its four military services have taken to address widespread problems military families have reported in recent months. But they also raised concerns about those long-term fixes during a hearing of the House Armed Services' subcommittee on readiness.

The main problem, Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif., who is chairman of the subcommittee said, was a lack of commanders paying attention to the issue.

The Pentagon officials agreed.

Top leadership has met extensively with executives of the private companies running the

housing and demanded better service, they said. In some cases, those companies have already taken steps, including adding new employees and better training, to address the problems.

Additionally, the services have instructed their inspectors general to probe the issue and have taken other steps, such as requesting money to increase the sizes of their housing management staffs on installations, which were reduced in recent years due to budget cuts, the officials said.

To solve the long-term problem, Robert McMahan, the assistant secretary of defense for sustainment said the Pentagon is implementing a resident bill of rights, determining if it can develop standardized resident leases and improving processes for residents to report health issues and establishing resident customer care advocates.

Rep. Doug Lamborn, R-Colo., said the military seemed to be taking "good first steps." He and Garamendi vowed future hearings on the same issue.

Airman to receive Silver, Bronze stars together

BY BRIAN FERGUSON

Stars and Stripes

An Air Force special tactics operator will receive the Silver Star, the nation's third highest medal, and the Bronze Star with valor for separate actions alongside Army Rangers on a recent deployment to Afghanistan, in support of the U.S. counterterrorism and advising missions there.

Tech Sgt. Cam Kelsch, a Ventura, Calif., native assigned to the 24th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Fla., will receive the medals during a ceremony at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum in Pooler, Ga., on Tuesday. At the ceremony, Maj. Gen. Vincent Becklund, deputy commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, will award the medals for the two missions, the command announced this week.

Deployed as a joint terminal attack controller to Afghanistan with members of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment, Kelsch safeguarded U.S. and

partner forces during an operation against a high-value target on April 25, 2018, Air Force officials said in a statement.

Kelsch, who joined the Air Force in 2008, was injured by enemy fire while dragging a wounded American teammate to safety during the fighting. Despite his wounds, he continued to guide strikes to take out all remaining threats to the assault force, officials said.

Master Sgt. Phillip Paquette of the 75th Ranger Regiment's 1st Battalion also received a Silver Star Medal for the April 25 operation in a ceremony last month at Hunter Army Airfield. Paquette exposed himself to enemy fire several times to retrieve a casualty and helped suppress the enemy, enabling the unit to maneuver to a helicopter landing zone for exfiltration, the Army said in a statement at the time.

A total of 14 Rangers from the battalion received valor awards at that ceremony and three were presented Purple Hearts.

House Dems ask IRS for Trump's tax returns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A House committee chairman formally asked the IRS to provide six years of President Donald Trump's personal tax returns and the returns for some of his businesses as Democrats try to shed light on his complex financial dealings and potential conflicts of interest.

The request by Massachusetts Rep. Richard Neal, who heads the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, is the first such demand for a sitting president's tax information in 45 years. The unprecedented move is likely to set off a huge legal battle between Democrats controlling the House and the Trump administration.

Neal made the request Wednesday in a letter to IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig,

asking for Trump's personal and business returns for 2013 through 2018. He asked for the documents in seven days, setting an April 10 deadline.

Trump told reporters Wednesday he "would not be inclined" to provide his tax returns to the committee.

An IRS spokesman said the agency had no immediate comment on Neal's request.

Democrats insist that obtaining Trump's tax filings falls within their mandate of congressional oversight. Republicans have denounced it as a political witch hunt and invoked privacy concerns.

"We have completed the necessary groundwork for a request of this magnitude, and I am certain we are within our legitimate legislative, legal and oversight

rights," Neal said in a statement Wednesday evening.

Rep. Kevin Brady, of Texas, the senior Republican on the Ways and Means panel, denounced the move as "an abuse of the tax-writing committees' statutory authority."

"Weaponizing our nation's tax code by targeting political foes sets a dangerous precedent and weakens Americans' privacy rights," Brady wrote in a letter Wednesday to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who oversees the IRS. "As you know, by law all Americans have a fundamental right to the privacy of the personal information found in their tax returns."

The legal battle set to ensue could take years to resolve, possibly stretching beyond the 2020 presidential election.

Arrest revives Mar-a-Lago security concerns

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — As palm trees swayed in the ocean breeze, Yujing Zhang approached Secret Service agents in the Mar-a-Lago parking lot.

She said she was going to the swimming pool at the Palm Beach presidential estate and presented agents with two Chinese passports in her name.

That raised suspicions with her screeners, but a call to the front desk at Mar-a-Lago revealed a club member with a similar last name and with that, and a possible language barrier, reception waved her through.

Not long after, Zhang was arrested carrying four cellphones, a laptop computer, an external hard drive and a thumb drive con-

taining computer malware in an incident that is shining a spotlight on the unique difficulty of fortifying the oceanside Florida estate of President Donald Trump — who was staying at the club that weekend but golfing elsewhere at the time.

Zhang's arrest has revived concerns about security — particularly cybersecurity — at a presidential refuge that mixes social functions, world diplomacy and extraordinary access to the president. Hundreds of members frequent Mar-a-Lago and the president's other private clubs, which function as working resorts even when Trump visits, creating a series of challenges that test the Secret Service.

Federal officials were looking into whether Zhang was part of a larger effort

to gain access to the president and do potential harm, and were combing through her devices and treating the case as a "credible threat," according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to speak about the ongoing probe and discussed the matter on condition of anonymity.

Democratic lawmakers were inquiring about a possible connection to Li Yang, the Republican donor and spa owner who promised Chinese business leaders that her consulting firm could get them access to the president at Mar-a-Lago.

Democrats on Wednesday called for an investigation into security at Mar-a-Lago and whether classified information stored there is at risk from hostile foreign governments.

Biden: I'll be more mindful of respecting personal space

Associated Press

Former Vice President Joe Biden acknowledged Wednesday that his tendency toward physical displays of affection and encouragement has made some women uncomfortable, and he promised to be "much more mindful" of respecting personal space.

"Social norms have begun to change. They've shifted," Biden, 76, said in a cellphone video posted to Twitter. "And the boundaries of protecting personal space have been reset. And I get it. I get it. I hear what they are saying. I understand."

Wearing a suit and open-collared shirt, Biden also teased an announcement of his

political plans, promising to "be talking to you about a whole lot of issues." Shortly after the video was released, a union announced Biden would speak at their conference in Washington on Friday.

The video was Biden's first direct comment on what has tripped up his preparations to enter the 2020 Democratic presidential campaign.

He did not directly apologize but seemed to be seeking to ease some people's discomfort, which has raised questions about whether he could wage an effective campaign.

On Friday, former Nevada politician Lucy Flores wrote in New York Magazine

that Biden approached her from behind, touched her shoulders and kissed the back of her head in 2014.

Since then, another woman has said Biden grabbed her face when he was thanking congressional staff at a 2009 event.

On Wednesday, The Washington Post reported that three additional women had recounted uncomfortable encounters with Biden. One of them, Vail Kohnert-Yount, said she was a White House intern in the spring of 2013 when she met Biden in the West Wing and, as they chatted, he put his hand on the back of her head and pressed his forehead to hers and called her a "pretty girl."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Wind turbine fire draws spectators

MI ELKTON — A wind turbine fire in Michigan sent black smoke billowing into the air and drew spectators who watched as flaming debris fell to the ground.

No injuries were reported following the fire in Huron County near Elkton, about 100 miles north of Detroit.

Jared Schuette, who owns the property where the turbine is located, told WNEM-TV it's "a small town and everyone was coming from everywhere to record it and take pictures."

Crews couldn't reach the fire that was at the top of the turbine, so it was left to burn itself out, officials said.

Landowner: Pack of dogs killed 15 animals

NC RAEFORD — A North Carolina landowner said a pack of dogs went on a rampage at a farm and killed at least a dozen animals, including a 500-pound llama.

Landowner Pat Belskie told media outlets the dogs dug under a fence at the Hoke County farm in March to get at the animals.

She said the dogs killed a dozen baby goats, adding that the llama tried to protect the goats but the dogs "ripped him apart."

Man who stole car, used stun gun jailed

OR PORTLAND — A Portland man who tried to use a stun gun on a cashier at a McDonald's drive-thru while in a stolen car with his kids inside was sentenced to more than four years in prison.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported a witness saw Omar

Rashad Greely try to shock the cashier and flagged down a Multnomah County sheriff's deputy on Aug. 22, 2017, according to court documents.

After the deputy ordered Greely to stop, he started revving his engine and drove off, but not before his two sons — ages 11 and 12 — dashed from the car, a probable cause affidavit said.

Greely pleaded no contest to unauthorized use of a motor vehicle as part of a plea deal.

2 students accused of jamming school Wi-Fi

NJ SECAUCUS — Authorities said two northern New Jersey high school students successfully crashed their school's Wi-Fi network on multiple occasions to get out of taking exams.

The Secaucus High School freshmen are charged with computer criminal activity and conspiracy. Authorities said the 14-year-old boys used an app or a computer program to compromise the network, and apparently took requests from other students to bring it down.

The boys' names have not been released.

Police: Homeless man stole vet's wheelchair

WV MILTON — Police in West Virginia said a man stole a motorized wheelchair belonging to a disabled veteran.

The Huntington Herald-Dispatch reported Kevin Bradley Call, 41, of Nitro was arrested on charges including grand larceny. Milton police said the wheelchair was parked outside the veteran's apartment complex when it was taken.

Police posted on Facebook about the theft and the chair was returned the next day with

minor damage.

Police said officers continued investigating the theft and connected it to Call, who was staying at a garage in a nearby alley and said he was homeless.

Teen youngest pilot to fly solo around world

LA MONROE — It's now official: A Louisiana teenager is the youngest pilot to fly solo around the world.

Look up "Mason Andrews" at www.guinnessworldrecords.com, and there he is: "Youngest person to circumnavigate by aircraft, solo."

The Monroe resident was 18 years and 163 days old when he landed his Piper PA-32 Lance in Monroe on Oct. 6. The previous record-holder, Lachlan Smart, of Queensland, Australia, was 71 days older.

Andrews' trip took 180 flight hours over 76 days, including nearly three weeks stuck in the Philippines by typhoons.

The News-Star reported that Andrews' family learned during the weekend that his record had been certified.

Snow melt this year among the earliest

AK ANCHORAGE — Meteorologists said they measured less than 1 inch of snow for the first time in 102 days at the Anchorage airport last weekend, possibly marking the onset of spring.

The Anchorage Daily News reported that National Weather Service forecasters don't expect more accumulation in the city, making this year's snow melt the fourth earliest on record. The mark of less than 1 inch of snow isn't usually reached until mid-April.

Meteorologist Rebecca Anderson said the earliest melt on record was March 22, 2016.

Man in 'MAGA' hat slashes man's hand

CA SAN FRANCISCO — San Francisco police are searching for a man who wore a red "Make America Great Again" hat and used a sword to slash another man's hand after an argument outside a roller-skating rink.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that the suspect fled the scene outside the Church of 8 Wheels, leaving his victim bleeding profusely on the sidewalk.

Officer Robert Rueca told the newspaper the man wearing the MAGA hat approached the victim and the two started arguing. He said the victim tried to grab the hat when the suspect pulled out a sword and cut him.

Shop owner charged after denting cars

MA BOSTON — Authorities said the owner of two Massachusetts auto body shops was charged with using sledgehammers and mallets to further damage cars he was repairing in order to get higher insurance payouts.

Attorney General Maura Healey said Adam Haddad, 42, of Shrewsbury was indicted on 42 charges, including 18 counts of insurance fraud. Authorities said Haddad owns Accurate Collision Inc. in Worcester and ADH Collision of Boston Inc. in Everett.

Healey said surveillance footage shows him using mallets, sledgehammers and wood to intentionally damage vehicles to inflate appraisal repair quotes.

He would then allegedly pocket the insurance payout and not complete repairs.

From wire reports

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At Final Four, NBA-level talent is crucial

Associated Press

In the 30 seasons since the NCAA Tournament started morphing into “March Madness,” 120 teams have traveled the road to the Final Four. That’s 120 unique formulas that have worked to make it onto college basketball’s biggest stage.

For all the debate about what counts more toward building a championship program — great teams with veteran leaders and role players versus outstanding individual talent, even if that talent only makes a short pit stop in college before going to the pros — an Associated Press analysis of rosters found that one factor outweighs all else:

The most surefire way to consistently advance deep into the tournament is by amassing players with enough NBA potential to leave college early.

The AP analyzed rosters of every team to make the tournament at least 10 times over the last 30 years and saw a trend that goes beyond the anecdotes and occasional tales of magical runs that have underscored the storytelling driving this debate for decades. The conclusion, as succinctly summed up by Gonzaga coach Mark Few: “It’s not a big secret. If you want to win and advance in this tournament, you have to have NBA talent.”

“You can get the NBA talent through recruiting one-and-dones, or you can do it through development,” Few said. “But whether it’s one-and-dones or two-and-dones, you have to have it.”

A wealth of NBA talent has been the mainstay on perennial contenders such as Kentucky, Duke and Kansas, which are among the programs that stand out in the AP analysis. Of the 79 teams the AP charted (including seven that made fewer than 10 appearances but went to the Final Four at least once), those blue bloods, along with North Carolina and Connecticut, were the only programs that averaged nearly three wins — a trip to the Elite Eight — per tournament appearance since 1989. All of those teams were also in the top 10 of programs that had the most early entries in the NBA Draft over the same span.

And though this year’s Final Four is being touted as one in which experience and teamwork won out over NBA-ready talent, three of the teams in Minneapolis this week do, in fact, have underclassmen on the roster who could be first-round draft picks. Sophomores Jarrett Culver of Texas Tech and De’Andre Hunter of Virginia are potential lottery picks in this year’s NBA Draft, and even Auburn made it this far with the help of now-injured sophomore Chuma Okeke, who is widely considered to have first-round ability.

The reality only serves to heighten the debate about what is essentially the professionalization of college basketball. It’s an issue that has become increasingly fraught in the wake of FBI investigations that further reinforced the influence that big money, shoe companies and the prospects of pro stardom have on the college game.

“There are some things that are wrong with it, things that take place that are inappropriate,” said Auburn coach Bruce Pearl, who himself has been previously banned by the NCAA and, more recently, has seen a handful of his Tigers assistants caught up in the current probe. “That’s the business of college basketball. The reason why the NCAA is involved in this is because it’s their job to monitor.”

There are, of course, exceptions to the talent-equals-titles rule. This year’s Michigan State squad doesn’t appear to have any NBA-ready underclassmen on its roster, even though the Spartans are a program that traditionally draws that sort of talent.

The Loyola-Chicagos, George Masons and VCUs of the world are the teams that prove, semi-regularly, that anything is possible, and are a big part of the reason the tournament captivates America every spring. But they are the outliers. The reality is that gritty, unselfish teamwork is nice, but raw talent is better.

As Gonzaga’s role in the sport has morphed from plucky underdog to perennial power over the past two decades, Few says he’s changed his strategy from one that emphasized roster building to one that focuses on roster management.

“The most important part of the year now is April and May,” he said, in a nod to the period when NBA-caliber players such as Rui Hachimura and Brandon Clarke make their decisions about whether to stay or go. “You project what they’re going to do, then you plan accordingly.”

No program runs on the hamster wheel of turnover more than Kentucky. Not surprisingly, the Wildcats, thanks largely to the impact of the one-and-done factory John Calipari has been running, have been to the tournament 29 times since 1989 and sent 45 players to the NBA before they graduated. They average just shy of three victories per trip, and just shy of 1.7 early departures per year they’ve appeared.

Not included in the study are teams that didn’t make the tournament despite having one-and-done and other early entry talent. Ben Simmons spent one year at LSU, and Markelle Fultz spent a season at Washington, but neither played in March Madness.

On the other end of the spectrum, having NBA talent is no guarantee of success. Both Texas and Southern California have

put more than a dozen early entry players into the league over the span of the study, but their victories-per-tournament average hovers around 1.

And yet, the way the top programs have ensured consistent success, the analysis proves, is by repeatedly securing that kind of talent.

With the NBA and its players’ union considering changes that could end one-and-done, and possibly allow players to go to the NBA straight from high school — the way the system worked for decades before 2006 — Kentucky’s path to success could be in peril.

“I don’t know how it will play out, but we’ll try to be first in whatever we’re doing,” Calipari said.

Even programs like Michigan and UConn, which tend to keep players around longer, haven’t shied away from the realities of college basketball in the 2000s: one-and-dones drastically improve your outlook, like it or not.

“We’ve never said we’re not going to take a one-and-done guy,” said Wolverines coach John Beilein, who leads a program that, in many ways, wrote the first chapter of the book on modern basketball when the Fab Five came through in the early 1990s. “But at the same time, we’re going to be very open with a young man, that if you’re coming, this is a destination. This is not a stopover.”

Over the three decades the AP studied, Michigan averaged 2.375 wins in each of its 16 NCAA Tournament appearances, while sending 16 players early to the NBA.

Like Beilein — and unlike Calipari — Duke’s Mike Krzyzewski is nowhere near as outspoken about embracing his school’s role as a place where the most talented players are welcome to camp out for a year before heading to the NBA.

In 2015, the Blue Devils won the title with two freshmen who left to become lottery picks. (Jahlil Okafor and Justise Winslow). This year, the Blue Devils have three potential one-and-dones in Zion Williamson, Cam Reddish and R.J. Barrett.

They came up one point short of the Final Four — agonizing, for sure, but hardly an indictment of a formula that has worked for decades.

It’s a formula more schools would like to get their hands on.

“We don’t shy away from that,” said coach Chris Beard, who led Texas Tech to its first Final Four this year. “Our goal is to have a team at Texas Tech one day where every guy on the team is an NBA player. No doubt about it, to play on this stage, you have to have pros, and you’ve got to evaluate and recruit and develop them.”

MLB roundup

Nats hand Phillies first loss

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — David Robertson forced home the game-ending run with a ninth-inning walk to Jake Noll, a rookie without a hit in his two previous major league at-bats, and the Nationals beat the previously unbeaten Phillies 9-8 Wednesday as Washington's fans again booed Bryce Harper.

Noll was sent to the minors after the game to make room for utilityman Howie Kendrick to come off the injured list Thursday.

Robertson (0-1) gave up a leadoff single to Anthony Rendon, then walked three batters in a row.

Nationals closer Sean Doolittle (2-0) worked the ninth.

Philadelphia fell to 4-1 — it had been the last team in the majors without a loss. Making his second appearance against his former team since signing a \$330 million, 13-year deal with the Phillies, Harper hit a pair of singles and was walked three times, twice intentionally.

Dodgers 5, Giants 3: David Freese's two-run double in the seventh inning helped host Los Angeles rally past San Francisco.

The win capped a season-opening homestand in which the Dodgers won five of seven.

Scott Alexander (1-0) got the win in relief and Kenley Jansen got his third save.

Padres 4, Diamondbacks 1: Manny Machado hit his first home run for host San Diego, a two-run drive in the seventh off former Padres farmhand Matt Andriese. Machado is hitting .240 with three RBIs in his first seven games after signing a \$300 million, 10-year contract.

Joey Lucchesi (2-0) extended his scoreless innings streak to 10¹/₃ innings to start the season as the Padres avoided a three-game sweep. Lucchesi allowed four hits in five innings, struck out six and walked one.

Backup catcher Francisco Mejia had a go-ahead pinch-hit double in the fifth off Robbie

Ray (0-1).

Mets 6, Marlins 4: NL Cy Young Award winner Jacob deGrom struck out a career-high 14 in seven shutout innings, hit a home run and ended his streak of five consecutive losses to Miami, helping visiting New York complete a three-game sweep.

DeGrom (2-0) allowed three hits and walked one.

Braves 6, Cubs 4: Johan Camargo hit a go-ahead, three-run double as host Atlanta took advantage of five walks by Chicago relievers in the eighth inning.

It was the Cubs' third blown save this season and third loss by a relief pitcher in five games. Steve Cishek (0-1) walked the Braves' first three batters in the eighth before manager Joe Maddon brought in left-hander Randy Rosario. After taking a ball, Camargo lined the three-run double over Albert Almora Jr. in center field for a 5-4 lead.

Rangers 4, Astros 0: Mike Minor pitched seven sharp innings and host Texas topped frustrated Houston, whose starter Gerrit Cole immediately after his final out went to the plate umpire who earlier ejected the Astros' manager and hitting coach for arguing balls and strikes.

Cole (0-2) struck out nine while allowing three runs over six innings. After fielding Hunter Pence's comebacker and throwing to first for an inning-ending out on his 105th pitch, the right-hander went up to ump Ron Kulpa, put his glove over his mouth and was clearly agitated during an extended conversation.

Blue Jays 5, Orioles 3: Randal Grichuk took over from traded Kevin Pillar in center and hit a pair of solo home runs, a day after agreeing to a \$52 million, five-year contract, to lead host Toronto.

Matt Shoemaker (2-0) allowed two hits in seven shutout innings to help prevent a three-game sweep, and Ken Giles got two outs for his second save in as many chances.

Cardinals 5, Pirates 4 (10):

Tyler O'Neill capped another St. Louis rally by driving in Kolten Wong for the go-ahead run in the 10th inning at Pittsburgh.

Two days after coming back from four runs down to beat the Pirates in Pittsburgh's home opener, the Cardinals again took advantage of another wobbly performance by the Pirates' bullpen.

Brewers 1, Reds 0: Freddy Peralta (1-0) threw two-hit ball for a career-high eight innings, and Manny Pina singled home a run for visiting Milwaukee's only hit off Luis Castillo (0-1). The defending NL champions completed a three-game sweep and improved to 6-1.

Tigers 2, Yankees 1: Matthew Boyd (1-1) junk-balled his way to a career-high 13 strikeouts and Gordon Beckham hit a tiebreaking solo homer in the eighth off Chad Green (0-1), his first homer since Aug. 28, 2016, to lead Detroit to a win at New York.

Rockies 1, Rays 0: Chris Iannetta homered off Chad Roe (0-1) in the 11th inning, and visiting Colorado stopped a four-game losing streak. Iannetta had the Rockies' first hit since Raimel Tapia's leadoff single in the fifth and second run in 41 innings.

White Sox 8, Indians 3: Jose Abreu drove in three runs, Leury Garcia had four hits, and Yoan Mocada hit a two-run homer in the eighth to lead Chicago to a win at Cleveland.

Corey Kluber (0-2), who had won nine straight decisions over Chicago since July 24, 2015, allowed six runs — four earned — eight hits and three walks in 3¹/₃ innings. The two-time AL Cy Young Award winner didn't get his second loss in 2018 until his eighth start.

Twins 7, Royals 6: Eddie Rosario hit a go-ahead single in the ninth off Wily Peralta (0-1) to lead Minnesota to a win at Kansas City.

Red Sox snap slump against A's

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Boston ended a long scoreless drought with a big swing from birthday boy Blake Swihart. Mookie Betts then helped the Red Sox snap a four-game losing streak with an even more important — yet, strange — hit.

Manager Alex Cora is just thankful things finally broke the right way for the World Series champs after a 1-5 start that included back-to-back shutout losses.

Betts' two-out grounder hit the third base bag and popped into the outfield for a tiebreaking, two-run double in the ninth inning, and the Red Sox beat the Oakland Athletics 6-3 on Wednesday night.

"It has to hit the bag," Cora said. "If not, [A's third baseman Matt Chapman] makes the play. That kid is amazing. At least we found a way for him not to make a play."

With two outs in the ninth and the score 3-all, Swihart and Jackie Bradley Jr. both singled and advanced on a wild pitch by Fernando Rodney (0-1). Betts then hit a grounder down the line and, with Chapman in position to make a backhanded play, the ball struck the base, bounced high in the air and landed in the outfield grass.

Betts wound up on second, and the AL MVP scored on a triple by Andrew Benintendi.

"That's pretty much the only way you're going to get it by Chapman," Betts said. "He's one of the best, if not the best at third. I was just hoping it hit the base. It's huge. This was definitely a big win."

One that left A's manager Bob Melvin stunned.

"It was a groundball to third and Chapman was going to get him out," Melvin said. "It's just unfortunate that it hits the base and ends up being two runs. That's the way it goes sometimes."

NBA roundup

Harden, Paul lead Rockets past Clippers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The NBA playoffs are still days away. Tell that to the Houston Rockets, who have their postseason mentality locked in.

James Harden scored 31 points, Chris Paul added 29, and the Rockets routed the Los Angeles Clippers 135-103 on Wednesday night in a potential playoff preview.

“(Chris) is dialed in, and James, too,” Rockets coach Mike D’Antoni said. “When they play like that, it’s pretty tough to lose. We played unbelievably.”

Clint Capela had 24 points and 15 rebounds to help the Rockets win their fourth in a row. They showed little fatigue in cruising past the NBA’s hottest team while playing their last back-to-back of the season.

“It’s the best we’ve played and it’s the right time,” Harden

said.

The Rockets currently own the third seed in the Western Conference and the Clippers are sixth, which would pair them in the first round.

Jazz 118, Suns 97: Donovan Mitchell scored 29 points, leading playoff-bound Utah past host Phoenix.

Hornets 115, Pelicans 109: Kemba Walker scored 21 of his 32 points in the fourth quarter, and visiting Charlotte kept alive its slim playoff hopes with a victory over New Orleans.

Hawks 130, 76ers 122: Trae Young had 33 points and 12 assists, John Collins added 25 points, and host Atlanta handed playoff-bound Philadelphia its second straight loss.

Timberwolves 110, Mavericks 108: Karl-Anthony Towns had 28 points and 13 rebounds, Andrew Wiggins hit the go-ahead bucket in the final

minute and visiting Minnesota turned back a fourth-quarter rally by Dallas.

Nuggets 113, Spurs 85: Nikola Jokic scored 20 points, grabbed 11 rebounds and dished out nine of his team’s season-high 41 assists as host Denver routed San Antonio in a game in which head coach Gregg Popovich was ejected after just 63 seconds.

Jamal Murray added 14 points and 11 assists for a Nuggets team that’s currently holding down the No. 2 seed in the West with four games remaining.

Bulls 115, Wizards 114: Walt Lemon Jr. scored a career-high 24 points, including two free throws with 1.8 seconds to play, to help visiting Chicago snap a five-game losing streak.

Pacers 108, Pistons 89: Thaddeus Young scored 21

points and visiting Indiana took advantage of Blake Griffin’s absence to beat Detroit.

Celtics 112, Heat 102: Gordon Hayward scored 25 points, Kyrie Irving added 23 and visiting Boston pulled away in the final minutes to beat Miami.

Raptors 115, Nets 105: Pascal Siakam had 28 points and 10 rebounds, Kawhi Leonard added 26 points and nine boards and visiting Toronto beat Brooklyn for its fifth straight victory.

Magic 114, Knicks 100: Nikola Vucevic had 29 points and 13 rebounds, and Terrence Ross scored 23 points off the bench as host Orlando beat New York.

Trail Blazers 116, Grizzlies 89: Evan Turner had 13 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists off the bench for his second consecutive triple-double and host Portland reached 50 wins.

NHL roundup

Toews’ shootout goal lifts Blackhawks over Blues

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Jonathan Toews scored the lone goal in the shootout after connecting for his career-high 35th in regulation, and the Chicago Blackhawks beat the St. Louis Blues 4-3 on Wednesday night.

Patrick Kane had a goal and an assist to set a career high for points at 107. Cam Ward stopped 37 shots through overtime and all three Blues shooters in the tiebreaker.

Tyler Bozak stuffed in a rebound with 38.9 seconds left to tie the game at 3 and send it to overtime as St. Louis rallied from a two-goal deficit in the third period.

Ward stopped Bozak’s point-blank first deflection of Patrick Maroon’s pass from left wing, but Bozak jammed in a second attempt. The goal withstood

a video review for goaltender interference.

Vladimir Tarasenko and David Perron also scored for St. Louis, which improved to 95 points, but missed an opportunity to climb into a tie for first place in the Central Division with idle Winnipeg and Nashville, both of which have 96. The three teams have all clinched playoff spots and each has two games remaining.

Ducks 3, Flames 1: Rookies Sam Steel and Max Jones scored first-period goals and host Anaheim continued its strong finish to a lost season with a victory over Calgary.

Captain Ryan Getzlaf also scored and Ryan Miller made 25 saves in his first victory since March 5 for the Ducks, who responded to a 6-1 loss to first-place Calgary last week

with their 10th win in 16 games overall. Anaheim’s streak of six straight playoff appearances will end next week thanks to its disastrous 5-21-4 midseason slump.

Derek Ryan scored and David Rittich stopped 29 shots for the Pacific Division champion Flames, who will start the postseason next week as the top seed in the Western Conference. With nothing to gain from a win, the Flames rested several healthy regulars, including 82-point scorer Sean Monahan and 78-point scorer Elias Lindholm. Johnny Gaudreau got his 98th point with an assist on Ryan’s first-period goal.

Senators 4, Rangers 1: Brady Tkachuk had a goal and an assist and visiting Ottawa earned a win against New York.

Bobby Ryan, Zack Smith and Brian Gibbons also scored while Anders Nilsson made 27 saves as the league-worst Senators picked up their second win in the past three games. Colin White also had two assists.

Lias Andersson scored for New York and Henrik Lundqvist stopped 27 of 31 shots as the Rangers fell for the second straight game.

Ottawa benefited from superior play on special teams, with two power-play goals a short-handed tally.

Ryan opened the scoring when he sent a wrist shot past the glove of Lundqvist at 12:14 of the first period. Chris Tierney delivered the puck from below the goal line to set up Ryan for the power-play goal. Tkachuk also assisted on the play.