

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2026

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US and Russia to revive military talks

BY PHILLIP WALTER

WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

The United States and Russia will maintain high-level military-to-military dialogue for the first time since 2021, with the reopening of a direct communication channel that was suspended ahead of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The agreement was reached during meetings this week in the United Arab Emirates involving Gen. Alexus Grynkevich, commander of U.S. European Command, and counterparts from Russia and Ukraine, EUCOM said in a statement Thursday.

President Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and senior White House adviser Jared Kushner also participated in the talks, EUCOM said.

"Maintaining dialogue between militaries is an important factor in global stability and peace," EUCOM said without identifying specific topics expected to be discussed under the restored channel.

It will provide consistent military contact as the sides pursue a potential path toward ending the war in Ukraine, the statement added.

Dialogue between the U.S. and Russian militaries was suspended in the fall of 2021 amid tensions leading up to Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine the following February.

Since then, the U.S. and its European allies have significantly increased troop presence along NATO's eastern flank, citing the need to deter further aggression by Moscow.

The buildup has raised the

risks of an unplanned incident that could trigger a wider confrontation.

In addition to his role as the leader of EUCOM, Grynkevich serves as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, a position that gives him authority to maintain military-to-military communication with Russia's Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff.

EUCOM declined to comment Thursday in response to questions seeking further information.

Grynkevich was in the capital of the United Arab Emirates where talks between American, Russian and Ukrainian officials on ending the war in Ukraine entered a second day and as Moscow escalated its attacks on Ukraine's power grid, The Associated Press reported.

The resumption of the military-to-military hotline marks an effort to lower the tensions that soared since the start of the war in Ukraine and avoid collisions between the Russian and U.S. militaries.

In one such incident in March 2023, the U.S. military said it ditched an Air Force MQ-9 Reaper drone in the Black Sea after a pair of Russian fighter jets dumped fuel on it and then one of them struck its propeller while it was flying in international airspace.

Moscow has denied that its warplanes hit the drone, alleging that it crashed while making a sharp maneuver.

It said that its aircraft reacted to a violation of a no-flight zone Russia has established in the area near Crimea amid the fighting in Ukraine.

Admiral: Iran significantly outclassed by US might

BY ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Iran is no match for American military forces, the Navy's highest-ranking active-duty officer said this week.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, told hundreds of sailors at an all-hands call Wednesday that although he doesn't take Iranian posturing lightly, U.S. forces overmatched Tehran's threats "significantly" when it comes to capabilities.

"We have a very good approach of providing the president of the United States military options," Caudle told an audience at Naval Support Activity Naples. "Iran knows this. So,

the fact that we have that type of capability is a strong deterrent."

The U.S. bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities in June in an operation dubbed Midnight Hammer was evidence of the American military's "capability to do things on that order and that scale," he said.

Caudle and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman were in Naples on Wednesday and Thursday to meet with officials and sailors of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet.

The visit followed Caudle's attendance at the Paris Naval Conference earlier in the week.

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump told NBC News

that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei should be "very worried." Trump has repeatedly warned Iran that the U.S. has an "armada" coming to the region.

A day earlier, U.S. Central Command confirmed that a Navy F-35 Lightning II fighter jet had shot down an Iranian drone as it "aggressively" approached the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea.

U.S. and Iranian officials are scheduled to begin negotiations Friday in Oman. The administration wants Tehran to stop its nuclear program altogether and get rid of its enriched uranium, among other demands.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has beefed up naval forces in the

Middle East, sending the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group with its three destroyers and Carrier Air Wing 9 into the region.

There are at least eight Navy destroyers in the area, including two more in the Persian Gulf, one in the Red Sea and two in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

All told, there are 40,000 U.S. service members throughout the Middle East stationed in Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and other countries.

Caudle's remarks Wednesday were in response to a sailor's question about concerns that potential hostilities with Iran could ignite a broader conflict in the Middle East.

The John F. Kennedy returns from 1st sea trials

BY GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

The John F. Kennedy returned to its Virginia shipyard on Wednesday, completing a week-long sea trial as it moves toward a scheduled delivery to the Navy early next year.

The John F. Kennedy is the second of 10 planned nuclear-powered Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be built by Newport News Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls

Industries. The Navy's most recent procurement cost estimate is \$13.196 billion.

The carrier, designated CVN-79, is scheduled to be delivered and officially commissioned into the Navy in March 2027.

"Our nation is depending on us to deliver these critical assets that will protect freedom around the world, and we're proud to see CVN-79 take another step toward joining the fleet," said Derek

Murphy, vice president of new construction aircraft carrier programs.

The carrier left Newport News on Jan. 30 for "testing important ship systems and components at sea," the shipbuilder said.

Newport News Shipbuilding said technological advancements on the carrier design would increase operational efficiency and reduce manning requirements; the ship would need about 900 fewer sailors than the Nimitz-

class, according to Navy estimates. The Gerald R. Ford class also features upgraded nuclear reactors, increasing its electrical power-generation capacity.

The Navy has started a \$145 million electrical systems overhaul at Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., where the Navy has said the John F. Kennedy will eventually be homeported. Similar upgrades will be required at bases where future Gerald R. Ford-class carriers are homeported.

Reservist flew unauthorized drone that Navy shot down

BY GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

SEATTLE—A Navy reservist was at the controls of an unauthorized commercial drone downed Tuesday over Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, the Navy said.

"The drone operator was a reservist here on temporary duty," said Michael Welding, the air station's spokesman. "During a break, unbeknownst to his superiors, he deployed a personal drone in violation of base regula-

tions. The drone was detected once airborne, and countermeasures were deployed to render the device inoperable."

NAS Whidbey Island, about 60 miles north of Seattle, is the home of the Navy's carrier-based EA-18G Growler electronic warfare squadrons.

Base security and explosive ordnance disposal personnel secured the drone and found that it did not carry any explosives or payload that constituted a physi-

cal threat to personnel.

No one was injured in the incident, Welding said.

Naval Criminal Investigative Service agents identified "the suspect" as a reservist at the base and detained him for questioning.

Following an interview, the reservist was released to his unit, Welding said.

The Navy did not identify the person responsible or indicate what, if any, action would be tak-

en in response to the incident.

Welding confirmed that the base's defensive systems disabled the drone, which he described as a four-propeller commercial "quadcopter."

Because of operational security, Welding said the Navy would not release specific information about how the drone was brought down.

The Navy also declined to say if the quadcopter was equipped with a camera or other devices.

25th ID gears up for combat 'rehearsals' in Philippines

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Hawaii-based 25th Infantry Division heads to the Philippines next month for its part in U.S. Army Pacific's annual Operation Pathways training engagements with that nation's armed forces.

Just don't call them "exercises."

"I will emphasize: We won't call these exercises," Col. Aidan Shattock, the division's deputy commander for interoperability, said by phone Tuesday.

"The Philippines look at these activities as rehearsals," he said. "We are rehearsing how they

will defend their homeland and their territories."

That distinction reflects the evolution of Operation Pathways, which started in 2014 as Pacific Pathways, and the changing security in Southeast Asia.

The initial Pathways rotated small Army units into the Indo-Pacific region for a few months at a time by moving through a series of established multinational exercises west of the International Date Line.

Its redesignation as Operation Pathways in 2023 marked the initiative's shift into an Army campaign.

"Now we're focused on ... rehearsing," Shattock said. "That creates the most amount of deterrence."

That deterrence is primarily directed toward China, which maintains expansive but disputed claims to most of the South China Sea, including islands and atolls claimed by the Philippines.

Over the past two years, Philippine crews have captured video of Chinese coast guard vessels harassing Philippine boats with water cannons and unsafe maneuvers.

Tension between Manila and Beijing over the South China Sea

is an "existential issue for the Philippines," Adm. Ronnie Gil Gavan, commandant of the Philippine coast guard, told reporters in Honolulu in January.

Operation Pathways kicks off in March with Salaknib, which has in the past included live-fire drills, logistics operations and air-assault training.

Salaknib has primarily been an army-to-army engagement between the two nations, but it is apparently expanding this year.

Philippine media reported this fall that the Japan Self-Defense Force and the Australian army will join Salaknib for the first time.

Slotkin refuses interview with DOJ about video

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic Sen. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan is refusing to voluntarily comply with a Justice Department investigation into a video she organized urging U.S. military members to resist “illegal orders” — escalating a dispute that President Donald Trump has publicly pushed.

In letters first obtained by The Associated Press, Slotkin’s lawyer informed U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia Jeannie Pirro that the senator would not agree to a voluntary interview about the video. Slotkin’s legal team also requested that Pirro preserve all documents related to the matter for “anticipated litigation.”

Slotkin’s lawyer separately

wrote to Attorney General Pam Bondi, declining to sit for an FBI interview about the video and urging her to immediately terminate any inquiry.

The refusal marks a potential turning point in the standoff, shifting the burden onto the Justice Department to decide whether it will escalate an investigation into sitting members of Congress or retreat from an inquiry now being openly challenged.

“I did this to go on offense,” Slotkin said in an interview Wednesday. “And to put them in a position where they’re tap dancing. To put them in a position where they have to own their choices of using a U.S. attorney’s office to come after a senator.”

Last November, Slotkin joined five other Democratic lawmakers — all of whom previously served in the military or at intelligence agencies — in posting a 90-second video urging U.S. service members to follow military protocols and reject orders they believe to be unlawful.

The lawmakers said Trump’s Republican administration was “pitting our uniformed military and intelligence community professionals against American citizens” and called on troops to “stand up for our laws.”

The video sparked a firestorm in Republican circles and soon drew the attention of Trump, who accused the lawmakers of sedition and said their actions were “punishable by death.”

The Pentagon later announced it had opened an investigation into Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, a former Navy pilot who appeared in the video. The FBI then contacted the lawmakers seeking interviews, signaling a broader Justice Department inquiry.

Slotkin said multiple legal advisers initially urged caution. But in January, the matter flared again, with the lawmakers saying they were contacted by the U.S. attorney’s office for the District of Columbia.

Meanwhile, security threats mounted. Slotkin said her farm in Michigan received a bomb threat, her brother was assigned a police detail due to threats and her parents were swatted.

Judge limits ICE in Ore. on warrantless arrests

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — U.S. immigration agents in Oregon must stop arresting people without warrants unless there’s a likelihood of escape, a federal judge ruled Wednesday.

U.S. District Judge Mustafa Kasubhai issued a preliminary injunction in a proposed class-action lawsuit targeting the Department of Homeland Security’s practice of arresting immigrants they happen to come across while conducting ramped-up enforcement operations.

Critics have described the current policy as “arrest first, justify later.”

Similar actions, including immigration agents entering private property without a warrant issued by a court, have drawn concern from civil rights groups across the country amid President Donald Trump’s mass deportation efforts.

In a memo last week, Todd Lyons, the acting head of U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement, emphasized that agents should not make any arrests without an administrative arrest warrant that has been issued by a supervisor unless they develop probable cause to believe that the person in question is in the U.S. illegally and is likely to escape from the scene before an administrative warrant can be obtained.

But the judge heard evidence that agents in Oregon have arrested people in immigration sweeps without such warrants or determining escape was likely.

The daylong hearing included testimony from one plaintiff, Victor Cruz Gamez, a 56-year-old grandfather who has been in the U.S. since 1999.

He told the court that he was arrested without a proper warrant and held in an immigration detention facility for three weeks even though he has a valid work permit and a pending visa application.

Epstein files rife with nudes, victims’ names

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Nude photos. The names and faces of sexual abuse victims. Bank account and Social Security numbers in full view.

All of these things appeared in the mountain of documents released Friday by the U.S. Justice Department as part of its effort to comply with a law requiring it to open its investigative files on Jeffrey Epstein.

That law was intended to preserve important privacy protections for Epstein’s victims. Their names were supposed to have been blacked out in documents. Their faces and bodies were supposed to be obscured.

Mistakes, though, have been rampant. A review by The Associated Press and other news organizations has found countless examples of sloppy, inconsistent or nonexistent redactions that have revealed sensitive private information.

Police reports with the names

of several of his victims, including some who have never stepped forward to identify themselves publicly, were released with no redactions at all.

Despite the Justice Department’s efforts to fix the oversights, a selfie taken by a nude female in a bathroom and another by a topless female remained on the site, their ages unknown but their faces in full view, as of Wednesday evening.

Some accusers and their lawyers called this week for the Justice Department to take down the site and appoint an independent monitor.

A judge scheduled a hearing for Wednesday in New York on the matter, then canceled it after one of the lawyers for victims cited progress in resolving the issues. But that lawyer, Brittany Henderson, said they were still weighing “all potential avenues of recourse” to address the “permanent and irreparable” harm caused to some women.

NATO plans Arctic surveillance mission

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO is poised to step up its military presence in the Arctic region with a new surveillance mission modeled along the lines of a similar effort in the Baltics, an alliance spokesman said this week.

"The activity will even further strengthen NATO's posture in the Arctic and High North," Col. Martin L. O'Donnell, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe spokesperson, said Thursday.

Planning for the effort, to be called Arctic Sentry, is already

underway, said O'Donnell, who did not indicate when the operation might launch.

The initiative is the latest example of how NATO is stepping up efforts aimed at countering Russia in northern Europe and along the alliance's eastern flank. One year ago, NATO began Baltic Sentry, which was prompted by a series of suspected undersea sabotage incidents that resulted in damage to energy pipelines and communication cables.

The effort has incorporated a wide range of naval surveil-

lance drones, warships, submarines and aircraft to identify and track ships.

Allied officials have said the mission has paid off over the past year with fewer instances of mischief-making in the Baltic Sea.

NATO's plan to boost operations in the High North comes as the Arctic as a whole has become a major focal point for the alliance. President Donald Trump has argued that the alliance is vulnerable to Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Trump has cited such concerns as a justification for

the United States to take control of Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark.

Trump's push for control of the territory has rattled some members of the alliance. However, tensions appear to have eased in recent weeks following Trump's visit last month to an economic forum in Davos, Switzerland. In Davos, Trump said he and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte had reached the "framework of a future deal" on Greenland. Details of the plan, however, have yet to emerge.

Taiwan leader says US ties are 'rock solid'

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Taiwan's ties with the United States are "rock solid," the island's president said Thursday, hours after President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping spoke on the phone about topics that included the self-ruled island's future.

"The Taiwan-U.S. relationship is rock solid, and all cooperation projects will continue uninterrupted," Taiwan President Lai Ching-te told reporters during a visit to textile merchants in western Taiwan.

The comments came after

Xi, in his first call with Trump since November, warned the U.S. president to be "prudent" about supplying arms to the self-ruled island, according to a readout provided by China.

Taiwan is a self-ruled democracy that China claims as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary. Beijing prohibits all countries it has diplomatic relations with from having formal ties with Taipei.

Still, while the U.S. doesn't officially recognize Taiwan as a country, it is the island's strongest informal backer and arms supplier.

In December, the U.S. State Department announced its largest-ever arms sales package to Taiwan, valued at more than \$11.1 billion and including missiles, artillery systems and drones. The package is yet to be approved by Congress.

The arms sales are also facing pushback from Taiwan's opposition KMT party and some of its population, along with a proposed increase of defense spending to 3.3% of Taiwan's gross domestic product.

Taiwan's opposition-controlled parliament has

blocked Lai's budget plan, including a \$40 billion special defense budget, proposing instead a much smaller defense spending plan.

Trump said the call with Xi was "excellent" and "thorough" in a post late Wednesday on Truth Social.

He added that he is looking forward to a trip to China in April that will be the first of his current term in office.

Trump also said China is considering buying 20 million tons of U.S. soybeans in the current season, up from 12 million tons in the previous season.

Deadly Storm Leonardo slams Spain and Portugal

Associated Press

MADRID — A man died from rising floodwaters in Portugal, while a girl remained missing after she was swept away by a swollen river in Spain as Storm Leonardo brought more heavy rain and winds Thursday to the Iberian Peninsula.

In Spain's southern Andalusia region, close to 4,000 people evacuated their homes due

to the ongoing storm, and dozens of roads remained closed due to flooding and landslides.

Spain's weather agency lifted the highest alert level in southern Spain, but added that another storm system was expected over the weekend. Leonardo is the latest in a series of storms that have pummeled Spain and Portugal in recent weeks.

On Wednesday night, a man

died in southern Portugal after his car was engulfed by floodwaters, local media said.

The southern Portuguese city of Alcacer do Sal, about about 56 miles from Lisbon, was battling rising waters from the river Sado, with downtown areas flooded and water levels measuring roughly 7 feet high in some places.

Heavy rains were expected

to lash several regions in Portugal in the coming days. A previous storm in late January left a trail of destruction in the country and killed several people, according to Portuguese authorities.

In southern Spain's Malaga province, authorities were still searching for a girl who fell into the Turvilla River on Wednesday while trying to save her dog.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lindell campaign spends big on copies of memoir

MN MINNEAPOLIS — MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell raked in about \$352,000 in campaign donations in just 2½ weeks after announcing his run for Minnesota governor on Dec. 11.

Lindell's campaign then spent more than half of the money he's raised on copies of his autobiography, according to a newly filed year-end campaign finance report.

The Lindell for governor campaign paid about \$187,000 to MyPillow in December for copies of his self-published memoir titled, "What Are the Odds? From Crack Addict to CEO." It was his campaign's biggest expenditure last year, accounting for 68% of his roughly \$272,000 in spending.

Lindell signed and gave out copies of his memoir to people at a GOP gubernatorial forum in Prior Lake in January. Lindell said MyPillow, which is "employee-owned," owns the rights to his book.

The Minnesota Campaign Finance Board has previously said it is OK for candidates who've published books to use them as campaign material.

Education chief: Protests must not disrupt class

FL TALLAHASSEE — School districts across Florida have heard rumblings lately about student plans to walk out of classes to protest federal immigration enforcement actions, such as the shooting of Alex Patti in Minneapolis.

Some walkouts have already taken place, while others are be-

ing discussed for the coming days.

In response, Florida Education Commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas told school leaders on Tuesday that they better not encourage or facilitate any such activity during class.

"Any conduct by school or district personnel that diverts students from instruction, undermines classroom authority or compromises student supervision violates professional responsibilities and warrants disciplinary action," Kamoutsas wrote to superintendents in a letter he also posted on X.

Kamoutsas wrote that he was not suggesting students may not express their views. They have constitutional rights, including free expression and peaceful protest, he wrote, so long as they comply with state law and school district policy.

State's red flag law expansion advances

CO DENVER — The Colorado Senate approved an expansion of Colorado's red flag law on Tuesday, sending the proposal to the House for consideration.

Senate Bill 4 would build off Colorado's 2019 extreme risk protection orders law, which allows family members, law enforcement, health care professionals and educators to petition the courts to require people to surrender their firearms temporarily. A judge must find the person to be a risk to themselves or others.

This bill would expand the list of qualified petitioners to include behavioral health professionals who are co-responders with police or other authorities in emergencies, as well as

health care and educational institutions.

The Senate approved the measure on a near-party-line vote, 20-13. Democrats have nearly a 2-to-1 majority in both chambers of the legislature.

Sen. Lynda Zamora Wilson, an El Paso County Republican and Air Force veteran, worried the bill would dissuade gun owners from seeking mental health help because the institution providing it could request that they lose access to their firearms.

Driver pleads guilty to flipping off Border Patrol

MI DETROIT — A Michigan motorist accused of flipping off federal agents and cutting off a Border Patrol van has pleaded guilty to charges, according to court records.

Jacob Nathaniel Len, 30, of Ypsilanti, entered the plea last month in U.S. District Court in Detroit, court documents said.

The filings also said he was sentenced to six months of probation, to pay a \$5,000 fine, to participate in a mental health treatment program, and to perform 40 hours of community service.

Authorities allege that on July 7, the defendant was driving a black BMW sedan on west-bound Interstate 96 when he confronted four Border Patrol agents in a van transporting 15 immigrants to the North Lake Correctional Facility east of Luddington. Officials said Len moved his car in front of the agent's van, stepped on his brakes and stuck his hand with his middle finger extended through his car's sunroof. They said the defendant brake-

checked the CBP van a second time then drove away.

ICE releases researcher after border wrong turn

NY BUFFALO — An up-state New York research scientist arrested after making a wrong turn near the Canadian border has been released from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody after nearly a month in detention.

Shovgi Huseynov, an Azerbaijani national, has been a researcher at the University at Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences since 2022.

Under his visa, he is authorized to work in the U.S. through 2029, according to a UB spokesperson. However, Huseynov was taken into custody by border patrol agents on Jan. 7 following a navigation error.

Huseynov was driving for Lyft and attempting to drop off a passenger when he made a wrong turn onto the Peace Bridge, an international border crossing connecting Buffalo, N.Y., and Fort Erie, Ontario, local CBS affiliate WIVB reported. Though he said he was not trying to leave the U.S., Customs and Border Protection officers arrested him and determined he "may be subject to removal from the U.S."

On Monday, a UB spokesperson confirmed Huseynov's release.

"The university will continue to provide appropriate support to Shovgi and his attorney as his case proceeds through the federal immigration system," the spokesperson said in a news release.

— From wire reports

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New era of Games ready to start at Milan

Associated Press

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy — Will there be an Olympic spirit or will it seem like a bunch of individual world championships? Will a complicated transport network connecting far-flung venues run smoothly?

Will crowds fill the arenas, rinks and stadiums despite sluggish advance ticket sales? Will the controversial sliding venue and main hockey arena feel finished following construction delays? Will the locals remain more interested in soccer than snow and ice sports?

The answers to these and many other questions that shadowed the preparation of the Milan Cortina Olympics are about to be answered.

When the XXV Winter Games kick off with the opening ceremony at the San Siro soccer stadium Friday, it won't just be the athletes who are going to be tested. It's a new era for the entire Olympic movement.

Spread out over a vast swath of northern Italy, these Olympics are the first to truly em-

brace the International Olympic Committee's reform plan of using existing venues no matter how far apart they are.

Skating sports will be held in Milan; women's Alpine skiing, sliding and curling in Cortina d'Ampezzo; Nordic sports in Val di Fiemme; men's Alpine skiing and ski mountaineering in Bormio; snowboarding and freestyle in Livigno; and biathlon in Anterselva.

In all, this Olympic footprint covers an area of nearly 10,000 square miles. That's about the size of the state of Massachusetts.

"I do believe that we took the right decision in having a more dispersed games," new IOC President Kirsty Coventry said. "But it has — and I think we can all say very openly and honestly — it has added additional complexities."

Complexities that Olympic organizers are going to have to get used to because this is the first of several Winter Games arranged with the same model.

The 2030 French Alps Games

don't even have a host city in its name. Same for Utah in 2034; and probably for a Switzerland bid — the only candidate — for 2038, too.

Spread out ceremony

Adapting to the new model extends beyond the competition.

The opening ceremony will also be spread over multiple locations, with athlete parades held simultaneously in Milan, Cortina, Livigno and Val di Fiemme. There will be two cauldrons lit, one in Milan and another in Cortina.

Former Olympic champion skiers Alberto Tomba and Deborah Compagnoni are the favorites to light the cauldrons in Milan and Cortina, respectively.

Lindsey Vonn

American skiing standout Lindsey Vonn, competing in her fifth Olympics, has mixed feelings about the new formula.

"I mean, I'm in Cortina, so there's really nothing to complain about. I'm very happy being here. It's one of the most

beautiful places in the world. But it is sad to not be closer to more of your teammates, not just in ski racing, but in any sport," said Vonn, who plans to race despite a torn ACL in her left knee.

Down to the wire

The sliding center in Cortina was rebuilt against the wishes of the IOC, which preferred using an existing venue for bobsled, luge and skeleton in nearby Switzerland or Austria.

The sliding track itself is finished, tested and ready. But surrounding areas of the track are still under construction. Fortunately for organizers, it has snowed all week in Cortina.

"Obviously outside (the track) there are still some little things," Italian luger Dominik Fischnaller said. "But the snow will cover it, so we're good for the Games."

A gondola lift to the Alpine skiing center in Cortina also remains unfinished, which will slow the access of spectators to the races.

Kings fill scoring void by trading for Rangers' Panarin

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Artemi Panarin needed a new home after 6½ seasons with the New York Rangers.

The Los Angeles Kings have needed a scorer of Panarin's stature for a whole lot longer than that.

And a few minutes before the NHL's Olympic trade freeze Wednesday, Panarin and the Kings both got what they wanted.

After the Kings sent a conditional third-round draft pick and prospect Liam Greentree to the Rangers in a trade for the high-scoring left wing, they swiftly locked down Panarin with a two-year, \$22 million contract that will keep the Russian forward in Los Angeles through the 2027-

28 season.

"Players of Panarin's skill, hockey sense, resume ... hard to find those players," general manager Chris Drury said after pulling off one of the biggest in-season trades in Kings history. "He's an elite offensive producing machine. Does it year in and year out, year after year. Talking to him, he's really excited to come to LA. I think this was his No. 1 destination, so you're getting a player motivated, that wants to come out here."

The trade ends weeks of uncertainty around the 34-year-old Panarin, who hadn't played since Jan. 26 while the Rangers held him out in anticipation of moving their top scorer in each of the past seven consecutive seasons. Panarin has 57 points in

52 games this season for last-place New York, which has embarked on what general manager Chris Drury describes as a re-tooling process less than two years after making the Eastern Conference final.

That's decidedly not what Holland has in mind for the Kings, who have stayed in contention for their fifth consecutive playoff appearance this season despite ranking 31st in the NHL with 139 goals and 29th in power-play success.

Adrian Kempe and Kevin Fiala are the only Kings with more than 13 goals or 30 points this season, so Panarin represents a significant upgrade in their offensive potency.

"You either compete, or you enter this long-term rebuild,"

Holland said. "Well, I'm not interested in a long-term rebuild. I think some of the people that we signed are not interested in that, so we're trying to compete."

While Holland said the Kings don't intend to change their style of play, Panarin and the Kings both believe he can fit into their system while injecting excitement into a team that needs it.

Panarin is the NHL's seventh-leading scorer over the past five seasons, putting up 156 goals and 298 assists for New York.

Panarin's departure is the biggest deal yet in Drury's reconstruction of the last-place Rangers. In a letter to fans on Jan. 16, Drury said the focus would be on "obtaining young players, draft picks and cap space to allow us flexibility moving forward."

Davis goes to Wizards in 8-player trade

Associated Press

DALLAS — The Washington Wizards are acquiring Anthony Davis in an eight-player trade with the Mavericks that includes draft picks for Dallas, a person with knowledge of the deal said Wednesday.

The move is a signal the Mavericks are moving on from the widely criticized trade that sent superstar Luka Doncic to the Los Angeles Lakers for a package headlined by Davis last year.

Former general manager Nicco Harrison, who was fired by Dallas in November, engineered the middle-of-the-night deal that angered fans. Trade speculation had surrounded Davis ever since Harrison was let go following a slow start to the season.

The Wizards are sending Khris Middleton, AJ Johnson, Malaki Branham and Marvin Bagley III to the Mavericks along with two first-round draft picks and three second-rounders, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the deal had yet to be approved by the NBA.

Washington is getting three guards from Dallas in Jaden Hardy, D'Angelo Russell and Dante Exum.

The Wizards have made a stark shift recently from their rebuild after losing 67 and 64 games the past two seasons. Washington traded for Trae Young last month and now adds Davis to a group of young players that includes big man Alex Sarr, the No. 2 pick in 2024.

It's not clear if Young or Davis will play much this season, which could be for the best given the Wizards lose their top draft pick this year if it falls outside No. 8.

Still, a deal like this suggests Washington is ready to move on from the phase of waiting for lottery luck. A 2026-27 team with Davis, Young, Sarr and other complementary players could be interesting in the Eastern Conference, although health is always a concern with Davis.

The 10-time All-Star has been out since Jan. 8 with a left hand injury and wasn't expected to return before the All-Star break later this month.

Harrison's Doncic-for-Davis deal was so heavily criticized because he took on the big man with an extensive injury history while giving up a generational talent in his prime. Doncic was 25 at the time of the trade.

As might have been expected, Davis appeared in just 31 of a possible 84 games over two partial seasons with the Mavericks, including the two play-in tournament games he played last season.

The 32-year-old's ailments included a core muscle issue and a calf strain before Davis injured his hand while defending a driving Lauri Markkanen of Utah last month.

The trade is a big step for Dallas toward making Cooper Flagg the next face of the franchise after Doncic. The rookie No. 1 pick set an NBA scoring record for a teenager with 49 points against Charlotte last week, and the 19-year-old is on a three-game streak of 30-point games, another league first for the under-20 group.

Flagg, who is averaging 20.1 points per game a year after

leading Duke to the Final Four as just the fourth freshman to be named the AP men's basketball player of the year, doesn't turn 20 until next season.

The Mavericks lost all three games on Flagg's current 30-plus run and are on a five-game skid, a season worst. Dallas is 12th in the West at 19-31, making it increasingly unlikely that guard Kyrie Irving will play this season. The nine-time All-Star tore the ACL in his left knee last March.

Dallas is likely to miss the playoffs for the second consecutive season since Doncic and Irving led them to the 2024 NBA Finals. Boston won that series in five games.

Harrison traded Doncic believing that Davis, an elite player at both ends of the court, could pair with Irving to keep the Mavericks in contention for several years. Instead, Davis and Irving shared the court just once before Davis exited with an aggravation of his abdominal injury in the third quarter of his Dallas debut. Irving injured his knee less than a month later.

Warriors acquire Porzingis, sending Kuminga to Hawks

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The Golden State Warriors found their dependable big man by acquiring Kristaps Porzingis from Atlanta and granted forward Jonathan Kuminga his wish to be traded while also dealing guard Buddy Hield to the Hawks, according to a person with knowledge of the swap.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity Wednesday night because the trade had not yet been approved by the league.

Kuminga sat out Tuesday night's 113-94 loss to the Philadelphia 76ers because of a bone bruise in his left knee, his fifth straight missed game.

The Hawks had listed Porzingis — who has recently missed time with an Achilles tendon injury — as questionable for Thursday's game against Utah because of an illness. Atlanta also acquired center Jock Landale from the Jazz, a person with knowledge of the trade told the AP.

In mid-January, Warriors coach Steve Kerr spoke with Kuminga about being out of the rotation for more than a month and the expectation that he would be traded. However, general manager Mike Dunleavy said on Jan. 20 after Jimmy Butler's season-ending knee injury that there wasn't an immediate indication other teams were interested in Kuminga.

"As far as the demand, I'm aware of that," Dunleavy said, ref-

erencing Kuminga's trade request.

"I think when you, in terms of demands, when you make a demand, there needs to be a demand on the market. So we'll see where that unfolds."

Kerr discounted any issues between him and Kuminga as the reason the high-flying forward requested a trade after not being used in 17 of 18 games — though he has been listed as injured for nine games this season.

A 23-year-old from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Golden State's seventh overall pick in the 2021 draft, Kuminga appeared in 20 games this season with 13 starts, averaging 12.1 points, 5.9 rebounds and 2.5 assists.

On Sept. 30, he agreed to a two-year contract that could be worth up to \$46.5 million if the team were to exercise its option for 2026-27. Kuminga had a \$7.9 million qualifying offer in hand since June 29 but was also weighing other options and he missed the team's media day.

Kuminga missed much of last season with a right ankle injury. He averaged 15.3 points, 4.6 rebounds and 2.2 assists in 24.3 minutes over 47 games with 10 starts.

The 7-foot-2 Porzingis is averaging 17.1 points, 5.1 rebounds and 2.7 assists.

The Warriors will be the sixth team in 10 seasons for the 30-year-old Latvian nicknamed "The Unicorn" for his combination of length and outside shooting touch.

Diggs' fire has helped fuel Patriots' run

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Left back pylon. One knee. Head bowed. Eyes closed.

That is how Stefon Diggs will spend some of his final moments prior to kickoff of the first Super Bowl of his career.

It's been a staple of the wide receiver's routine before each game he's played this season for the New England Patriots.

Following pregame warmups, he also calls his teammates in to huddle around him as he leads one of a series of impassioned, fiery and often viral speeches.

"I just say what I feel like I'm supposed to do and just go," Diggs said. "It's not so much the words, it's more so the tenacity."

Then, he turns the volume down for his prayer in the corner of the end zone.

"Taking a second to kind of appreciate where I am and give my thanks to God and kind of have my little moment with him. Thanking him for the trials and tribulations," Diggs said. "Build-

ing my character up a little bit as a person and making these shoulders weight-bearing, I guess."

Both are necessary for the player whom teammates have called the emotional centerpiece of their Super Bowl run. And for Diggs, it's been fuel during a comeback season that didn't seem likely after his tenure in Houston last season was cut short by a knee injury.

But after posting his seventh 1,000-yard receiving season in his 11th year in the league, he may also be the not-so-secret weapon for an offense that will need to be at its best against a Seattle defense that allowed an NFL-low 17.2 points per game during the regular season.

So many of the things that got Diggs to this point stemmed from an initial sense of trust he found early in his free agent process last summer.

When Diggs signed with the Texans in 2024, he acknowledged it was in an effort to chase a championship. But he purposely

didn't have many expectations after signing in free agency with New England.

What drew him initially to the Patriots was a sense of trust he felt after finding an almost instant connection with wide receivers coach Todd Downing, who was the tight ends coach in Minnesota in 2018 when Diggs was there.

He got the same thing from the "straight shooter" he met in coach Mike Vrabel, as well as offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. It was McDaniels whom Diggs credits with unlocking a work ethic he hadn't had during his pro career.

McDaniels said the veteran receiver has been the perfect match for second-year quarterback Drake Maye.

"I think it's great for Drake to be around a player as accomplished as Stef," McDaniels said. "Drake has learned how to assimilate with him, (to) work together with a player that has been around a long time and been

around a lot of good quarterbacks. I think it's been great for Drake's growth and development."

Diggs has also created a new Patriots fan along way, thanks to his high-profile relationship with Grammy-winning rapper Cardi B. She and Diggs also celebrated the birth of a son together in November. It's helped Diggs keep his mind on football after being accused in December of strangulation and other criminal charges in connection with a dispute with his former private chef. Diggs has denied the allegations.

As for Sunday, Diggs expects to bring the same voice for his team that he has all season.

"I mean what I say and say what I mean," Diggs said. "My teammates know that, and the biggest thing is they know I'm trying not to be a 'rah-rah' guy. I try to be more show rather than I tell. It's the fact that I can back my words up with what I say. I try to go as hard as I can to give it everything I've got."

No. 5 Illinois beats Northwestern for 12th straight win

Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Andrej Stojakovic scored 17 points and No. 5 Illinois made 17 3-pointers in an 84-44 win over Northwestern on Wednesday night.

Keaton Wagler, Zvonimir Ivisic and Ben Humrichous each had 13 points for the Fighting Illini (20-3, 11-1 Big Ten), who won their 12th straight game. David Mirkovic had 12 points and Tomislav Ivisic had 12 rebounds.

Nick Martinelli, the Big Ten's leading scorer, had just four points, 19 under his average. He was 2 of 10 from the field while playing 27 minutes. Tre Singleton led Northwestern (10-13, 2-10) with eight points.

Portland 87, No. 6 Gonzaga 80: Joel Foxwell scored 27 points and the host Pilots upset the Bulldogs, giving Portland its first victory over a top-10 team and snapping Gonzaga's 15-game winning streak.

The victory also ended a 20-game Zags winning streak in the series. The Pilots had not defeated Gonzaga since an 82-73 triumph in Portland on Jan. 9, 2014.

No. 8 Houston 79, UCF 55: Kingston

Flemings had 18 points and six assists, Chris Cenac Jr. added 14 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Cougars beat the Knights.

Cenac and Flemings combined for 22 points on 10-of-17 shooting in the first half as Houston (20-2, 8-1 Big 12) took a 33-19 lead into halftime. The duo finished 15 of 25 from the field.

Minnesota 76, No. 10 Michigan State 73: Jaylen Crocker-Johnson had 22 points and seven rebounds to help the host Golden Gophers fend off a late surge by the Spartans and secure a upset.

Cade Tyson scored 17 points and Langston Reynolds added 14 points and eight assists for Minnesota (11-12, 4-8 Big Ten), which broke a seven-game losing streak despite being outscored 22-9 over the final four minutes in a game in which it was 7½-point underdogs according to MGM Sportsbook.

Oklahoma State 99, No. 16 BYU 92: Anthony Roy scored a season-high 30 points and the host Cowboys overcame 36 points from freshman sensation AJ Dybantsa to beat the Cougars.

Jaylen Curry scored 18 points and Vitorius Miller added 14 for Oklahoma State (16-6, 4-5 Big 12), which won its second straight. Cowboys fans stormed the court after the victory.

No. 20 Clemson 66, Stanford 64: Nick Davidson made a pair of free throws with 24.9 seconds left to put his team ahead and had a team-high 16 points to go with seven rebounds as the visiting Tigers held off the Cardinal.

The Tigers (19-4, 9-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) won their 13th straight conference road game dating to 2024-25 — the fourth-longest streak in ACC history and tied for longest for the league in the last 25 years.

No. 24 Louisville 76, Notre Dame 65: Ryan Conwell scored 12 points, including seven during a 15-1 second-half surge, and Khani Rooths added 12 off the bench to help the host Cardinals put away the Fighting Irish.

Louisville (16-6, 6-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) overcame another cold start to lead 38-28 just before halftime, but needed much of the second half to gain another double-digit cushion against stubborn Notre Dame.