

US air, naval assets head to Mideast

As Iran impasse intensifies, American warships and stealth fighter jets sent to region

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

An armada of American warships, stealth fighters and air defense systems is taking up positions in the Middle East, marking one of the biggest U.S. military buildups in the region in years as tensions over Iran ratchet up.

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford is on its way to join counterpart USS Abraham Lincoln amid high-stakes talks between the United States and Iran over Tehran's nuclear program.

President Donald Trump has not signaled whether a strike on Iran is imminent should talks break down. But White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said Wednesday that there are "many reasons and arguments that one could make."

The surge in combat power involves numerous bases stretching from the United States to American military hubs in Europe and the Middle East. That would give Trump a wide range of options if he orders action against Iran.

Open-source flight tracking data has shown significant military activities at locations such as RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath, installations in England that are home to U.S. Air Force tankers and fighter planes.

Another air base in the United Kingdom, RAF Fairford, was mentioned by Trump in a social media post Wednesday along with Diego Garcia, a strategic island base in the Indian Ocean.

"Should Iran decide not to make a Deal, it may be necessary for the United States to use Diego Garcia and the airfield located in Fairford in order to eradicate a potential attack by a

highly unstable and dangerous Regime," Trump said.

In recent days, flight tracking data has shown jets including the F-35 Lightning II, F-22 Raptors and F-16 Fighting Falcons traveling from the U.S. to American military bases in Europe and the Middle East.

Refueling planes, such as those based out of the United Kingdom, would be able assist those fighters in the event of a sustained attack on Iranian military sites.

So far, no evacuations of U.S. military sites have been ordered in the region.

In recent weeks, flight tracking data also has shown scores of U.S. cargo planes flowing to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain. Meanwhile, U.S. fighters also have taken up positions at Jordan's Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, open-source data shows.

Trump has been receiving briefings on military options, which include targeting top Iranian officials with the aim of overthrowing the government as well as attacking nuclear and other military facilities, The Wall Street Journal reported.

In June, Trump ordered strikes on three Iranian nuclear sites. U.S. B-2 Spirit stealth bombers flew long-range missions from the United States to carry out the strikes.

American fighter planes also supported the operation, which destroyed key aspects of Iran's nuclear program.

The attack led to retaliatory strikes on Al Udeid Air Base, the

U.S. military installation in Qatar that serves as a command hub for all Middle East operations.

While U.S. commanders had ordered an evacuation of the base in anticipation of a counter-attack, 44 air defense soldiers remained behind to prevent the base's destruction.

So far, no evacuations of U.S. military sites have been ordered in the region.

However, the U.S. has added air defense capabilities in the Middle East in recent weeks, indicating that it's prepared to respond should Iran target American bases in places such as Bahrain and Qatar.

Patriot missile defense batteries and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, systems are currently in position, The New York Times reported Wednesday.

Necessary assets are in place to defend against any Iranian retaliation, at least for the short term, the newspaper reported, citing an unidentified military official.

Meanwhile, the Iranian military has been training beside Russian forces, The Associated Press reported.

Sailors from the two nations conducted their annual drills in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean aimed at "upgrading operational coordination as well as exchange of military experiences," Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported.

Footage later released by Iran showed members of the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard's naval special forces board a vessel in the exercise. Those forces are believed to have been used in the past to seize vessels in key

international waterways.

Iran also issued a rocket-fire warning to pilots in the region, suggesting it planned to launch anti-ship missiles in the exercise.

In addition, Associated Press reported that Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk urged his nation's citizens to immediately leave Iran as "within a few, a dozen, or even a few dozen hours, the possibility of evacuation will be out of the question." He did not elaborate, and the Polish Embassy in Tehran did not appear to be drawing down its staff.

The German military said that it had moved "a mid-two digit number of non-mission critical personnel" out of a base in northern Iraq because of the current situation in the region and in line with its partners' actions. It said that some troops remain to help keep the multinational camp running in Irbil, where they train Iraqi forces.

"This week, another 50 U.S. combat aircraft — F-35s, F-22s, and F-16s — were ordered to the region, supplementing the hundreds deployed to bases in the Arab Gulf states," the New York-based Soufan Center think tank wrote. "The deployments reinforce Trump's threat — restated on a nearly daily basis — to proceed with a major air and missile campaign on the regime if talks fail."

Tensions are also rising inside Iran, as mourners hold ceremonies honoring slain protesters 40 days after their killing by security forces.

Some of the gatherings have included anti-government chants, despite threats from authorities.

Trump holds inaugural Board of Peace talks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump announced Thursday at the inaugural Board of Peace meeting that nine members of the body have agreed to pledge \$7 billion toward a Gaza relief package and that five countries have agreed to deploy troops to take part in an international stabilization force to the war-battered Palestinian territory.

Indonesia, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Albania have pledged to send troops for Gaza stabilization force, while Egypt and Jordan have committed to train police for the efforts.

Troops will initially be deployed to Rafah, a major population center where the U.S.

administration hopes to first focus on reconstruction efforts.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Kuwait are the countries that are making pledges, Trump said.

“Every dollar spent is an investment in stability and the hope of new and harmonious (region),” said Trump in thanking the donors. He added, “The Board of Peace is showing how a better future can be built right here in this room.”

The dollars pledged, while significant, represents a fraction of the estimated \$70 billion needed to rebuild the Palestinian territory.

Trump also announced the U.S. was pledging \$10 billion for the Board of Peace but didn't specify what the money will be used for.

Maj. Gen. Jasper Jeffers, leader of newly-created International Stabilization Force, said plans call for 12,000 police and 20,000 soldiers for Gaza.

The board was initiated as part of Trump's 20-point peace plan to end the conflict in Gaza. But since the October ceasefire, Trump's vision for the board has morphed and he wants it to have an even more ambitious remit — one that will not only complete the Herculean task of bringing lasting peace between Israel and Hamas but will also help resolve conflicts around

the globe.

But the Gaza ceasefire deal remains fragile and Trump's expanded vision for it has triggered fears the U.S. president is looking to create a rival to the United Nations.

Most countries sent high-level officials, but a few leaders traveled to Washington themselves to take part in the gathering.

More than 40 countries and the European Union confirmed they were sending officials to Thursday's meeting. Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom are among more than a dozen countries that have not joined the board but are taking part as observers.

FDA to drop 2-study requirement before new drug approvals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration plans to drop its longtime standard of requiring two rigorous studies to win approval for new drugs, the latest change from Trump administration officials vowing to speed up the availability of certain medical products.

Going forward, the FDA's “default position” will be to require one study for new drugs and other novel health products, FDA Commissioner Dr. Marty Makary and a top deputy, Dr. Vinay Prasad, wrote in a piece published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The announcement is the latest example of Makary and his team changing FDA standards and procedures with the stated

goal of slashing bureaucracy and accelerating the availability of new medicines. Since arriving at the agency in April, Makary has launched a series of directives that he says will shorten FDA reviews, including mandating the use of artificial intelligence by staffers and offering one-month drug assessments for new medications that serve “national interests.”

The FDA officials predicted the shift would lead to “a surge in drug development.”

Dr. Janet Woodcock, the FDA's former drug director, said the change makes sense and reflects the FDA's decades-long move toward relying on one trial, combined with supporting evidence, for various life-threatening diseases.

Trade deficit declined in 2025, but the gap for goods remains high

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. trade deficit slipped modestly in 2025, a year in which President Donald Trump upended global commerce by slapping double digit tariffs on imports from most countries.

But the gap in the trade of goods such machinery and aircraft — the main focus of Trump's protectionist policies — hit a record last year despite sweeping import taxes.

Overall, the gap the between the goods and services the U.S. sells other countries and what it buys from them narrowed to just over \$901 billion, from \$904 billion in 2024, but it was still the third-highest on record, the Commerce Department reported Thursday.

Exports rose 6% last year, and

imports rose nearly 5%.

And the U.S. deficit in the trade of goods actually widened 2% to a record \$1.24 trillion last year as American companies boosted imports of computer chips and other tech goods from Taiwan to support massive investments in artificial intelligence.

Amid continuing tensions with Beijing, the deficit in the goods trade with China plunged nearly 32% to \$202 billion in 2025 on a sharp drop in both exports to and imports from the world's second-biggest economy.

But trade was diverted away from China.

The goods gap with Taiwan doubled to \$147 billion and shot up 44%, to \$178 billion, with Vietnam.

Trump hosts Black History Month reception

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump hosted a White House reception for Black History Month on Wednesday, less than two weeks after he sparked a bipartisan outcry by posting a racist video on social media that depicted former President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, as primates in a jungle.

Trump on Wednesday didn't reference the video, which he deleted after a widespread backlash but said he won't apologize for posting. He also did not reference Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president, but spoke of other history-making Black Americans.

"We celebrate Black History Month. We honor the memory of those who came before us by continuing their legacy," he said.

Trump name-checked prominent Black Americans among his supporters, including boxer

Mike Tyson, whom Trump praised for defending him against accusations of racism, and rapper Nicki Minaj, whose skin he praised as "so beautiful" while commenting on how long her fingernails were.

The Republican president brought onstage several members of his administration, including Housing and Urban Development Secretary Scott Turner and White House pardon czar Alice Marie Johnson.

"As you look out upon this sea of Black Americans, this president hears you. This president cares for you. Don't let anyone tell you that this president right here, Donald Trump, has not — is not for Black America," Johnson said. "Because he is."

Trump listed ways he said his policies benefited Black Americans, including the law he signed last year eliminating federal income taxes on tips and his deployment of National Guard troops "to

bring back safety" in cities with large populations of Black residents, such as Washington, New Orleans and Memphis, Tenn.

The reception came the day after Trump proclaimed in another social media post that he has been "falsely and consistently called a Racist by the Scoundrels and Lunatics on the Radical Left," in a message that was meant to pay tribute to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who died Tuesday.

In response to a question about the post, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said earlier Wednesday: "There is a lot this president has done for all Americans, regardless of race. And he has absolutely been falsely called and smeared as a racist."

Trump has long recognized Black History Month as president, but his policies and rhetoric while in office often contradicted celebrations of diversity and the contributions of Black Americans.

Trump began his second term by claiming some African American history lessons are meant to indoctrinate people into hating the country. He issued an executive order "restoring truth and sanity to American history," which the administration used to scrub historical information from national parks that "inappropriately disparage Americans past or living," including Black history markers.

Shortly after beginning his second term, Trump issued a proclamation recognizing February as Black History Month as the Defense Department was declaring that official resources will no longer be used to mark cultural awareness months.

The White House's Black History Month reception last year was also held in the wake of another executive order that ended the federal government's diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

Governors meet in DC, eager to push past partisanship

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In another era, the scene would have been unremarkable. But in President Donald Trump's Washington, it's become increasingly rare.

Sitting side by side on stage were Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican, and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat. They traded jokes and compliments instead of insults and accusations, a brief interlude of cordiality in a cacophony of conflict.

Stitt and Moore are the leaders of the National Governors Association, one of a vanishing few bipartisan institutions left in American politics. But it may be hard for the organization, which is holding its annual conference this week, to maintain its reputation as a refuge from polarization.

Trump has broken with custom by declining to invite all gov-

ernors to the traditional White House meeting and dinner. He has called Stitt, the NGA's chair, a "RINO," short for Republican in name only, and continued to feud with Moore, the group's vice chair, by blaming him for a sewage spill involving a federal-regulated pipeline.

The break with tradition reflects Trump's broader approach to his second term. He has taken a confrontational stance toward some states, withholding federal funds or deploying troops over the objections of local officials.

With the Republican-controlled Congress unwilling to limit Trump's ambitions, several governors have increasingly cast themselves as a counterweight to the White House.

"Presidents aren't supposed to do this stuff," Utah Gov. Spencer Cox said about the expansion of executive power in recent ad-

ministrations. "Congress needs to get their act together. And stop performing for TikTok and actually start doing stuff. That's the flaw we're dealing with right now."

Cox, a Republican, said "it is up to the states to hold the line."

Moore echoed that sentiment in an interview with The Associated Press.

"People are paying attention to how governors are moving, because I think governors have a unique way to move in this moment that other people just don't," he said.

Still, governors struck an optimistic tone in panels and interviews Wednesday. Stitt said the conference is "bigger than one dinner at the White House." Moore predicted "this is going to be a very productive three days for the governors."

"Here's a Republican and Democrat governor from differ-

ent states that literally agree on probably 80% of the things. And the things we disagree on we can have honest conversations on," Stitt said while sitting beside Moore.

Tensions over the guest list for White House events underscored the uncertainty surrounding the week. During the back-and-forth, Trump feuded with Stitt and said Moore and Colorado Gov. Jared Polis were not invited because they "are not worthy of being there."

Whether the bipartisan tone struck Wednesday evening can endure through the week — and beyond — remains an open question.

"We can have disagreements. In business, I always want people around me arguing with me and pushing me because that's where the best ideas come from," said Stitt. "We need to all have these exchange of ideas."

Former British Prince Andrew arrested over ties to Epstein

Associated Press

LONDON — Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, the former British prince who was stripped of his royal titles because of his links to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, was arrested Thursday on suspicion of misconduct in public office.

While Andrew has consistently denied any wrongdoing in connection with his friendship with Epstein, concerns about Mountbatten-Windsor's links to the late financier have dogged the royal family for more than a decade. But the arrest of a brother of a monarch was an extraordinary development with no precedent in modern times that will no doubt put more pressure on the crown.

After the arrest, King Charles III said that the law must take its course in the investigation, and he sought to distance the royal family from Mountbatten-Windsor.

Thames Valley Police said that a man in his 60s from Norfolk in eastern England was arrested and remained in custody. The force, which covers areas west of London, including Mountbatten-Windsor's former home, did not identify the suspect, in line with standard procedures in Britain, but pointed to

its statement when asked to confirm if Andrew was arrested.

Mountbatten-Windsor, who turned 66 on Thursday, moved to his brother King Charles III's estate in Norfolk after he was evicted from his longtime home near Windsor Castle earlier this month.

Thames Valley Police previously said it was "assessing" reports that Mountbatten-Windsor sent confidential trade reports to Epstein in 2010, when the former prince was Britain's special envoy for international trade. Those reports stemmed from correspondence between the two men that was among the millions of pages of documents from the U.S. Justice Department's investigation into Epstein that were released last month.

"Following a thorough assessment, we have now opened an investigation into this allegation of misconduct in public office," Assistant Chief Constable Oliver Wright said in a statement. "We understand the significant public interest in this case, and we will provide updates at the appropriate time."

Police also said they were searching two properties.

The arrest came after pictures circulated online that appeared

to show unmarked police cars at Wood Farm, Mountbatten-Windsor's home on the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk, with plainclothes officers gathering outside.

"This is the most spectacular fall from grace for a member of the royal family in modern times," said Craig Prescott, a royal expert at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Policing commentator Danny Shaw told the BBC that in most cases, suspects are held between 12 and 24 hours and are then either charged or released pending further investigation.

The absolute longest the former prince can be held for is 96 hours — but this would require multiple extensions from senior police officers and a Magistrate's Court. It is unclear what time Andrew was arrested.

Andrew will be placed in "a cell in a custody suite" with just "a bed and a toilet," where he will wait until his police interview.

"There'll be no special treatment for him," Shaw said.

The late Queen Elizabeth II forced her second son to give up royal duties and end his charitable work in 2019 after he tried to explain away his ties to Epstein during a catastrophic interview with the BBC.

Ex-president of S. Korea sentenced to life in prison

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol was found guilty of leading an insurrection on Thursday and sentenced to life in prison for his brief imposition of martial law in 2024, a ruling that marks a dramatic culmination of the country's biggest political crisis in decades.

The conservative leader was ousted from office after he declared martial law and sent troops to surround the National Assembly on Dec. 3, 2024, in a baffling attempt to overcome a legislature controlled by his liberal opponents.

Judge Jee Kui-youn of the Seoul Central District Court said he found Yoon, 65, guilty of rebellion for mobilizing military and police forces in an illegal attempt to seize the Assembly, arrest political opponents and establish unchecked power for an indefinite period.

Yoon's martial law imposition, the first of its kind in more than four decades, recalled South Korea's past military-backed governments when authorities occasionally proclaimed emergency decrees that allowed them to station soldiers, tanks and armored vehicles on streets or in public places such as schools to prevent anti-government demonstrations.

As lawmakers rushed to the National Assembly, Yoon's martial law command issued a proclamation declaring sweeping powers, including suspending political activities, controlling the media and publications, and allowing arrests without warrants.

The decree lasted about six hours before being lifted after a quorum of lawmakers managed to break through a military blockade and unanimously voted to lift the measure.

Panel OKs White House ballroom plan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, a panel made up of Trump appointees, on Thursday unanimously approved President Donald Trump's White House ballroom proposal.

At the panel's January meeting, some commissioners questioned the lead architect about the "immense" design and scale of the project even as they broadly endorsed the Republican presi-

dent's vision for a ballroom roughly twice the size of the White House itself.

Trump's decision in October to demolish the East Wing prompted a public outcry when it began without the independent reviews, congressional approval and public comment that are typical even for relatively minor modifications to historic buildings in Washington.

The National Trust for Historic

Preservation has sued in federal court to halt construction of the ballroom. A court decision in the case is pending.

The project is scheduled for additional discussion at a March 5 meeting of the National Capital Planning Commission, which is led by one of Trump's top White House aides and has jurisdiction over construction and major renovations to government buildings in the region.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bill targeting 3D-printed firearms is on docket

CO DENVER — After the federal and state observance of Presidents Day delayed the start of the Colorado legislature's week, a pair of Democrat-backed gun control bills are set to pass through key steps in the process this week.

The first scheduled to be heard is Senate Bill 43, a measure that would restrict the sale of gun barrels to in-person transactions with federally licensed firearm dealers.

The House Judiciary Committee also was to hear House Bill 1144, which would prohibit using 3D printers to manufacture firearms, large-capacity magazines and rapid-fire devices.

The prohibition would not apply to federally licensed firearm manufacturers. The bill would also prohibit the distribution of instructions for 3D-printed firearms and components to unlicensed individuals. First-time violations would be misdemeanors, while second offenses would be felonies.

The bills represent the latest efforts by majority Democrats to restrict firearm access in the state. Earlier this year, the Senate approved Senate Bill 4, which would expand who can request extreme risk protection orders. That measure is slated for a House committee hearing on March 2.

Police arrest man who ran at Capitol with gun

DC WASHINGTON — U.S. Capitol Police in Washington, D.C., arrested an 18-year-old man Tuesday after he ran from his vehicle toward the west side of the Capitol Building

armed with a shotgun.

Capital Police Chief Michael Sullivan said the man, identified as Carter Camacho of Smyrna, Ga., was arrested after he parked a Mercedes SUV near the Capitol, got out and ran "several hundred yards" toward the building with a shotgun before officers intercepted him and ordered him to put down the firearm and get on the ground.

Speaking at a press conference following the arrest, Sullivan said Camacho was wearing a tactical vest and gloves and had a Kevlar helmet and gas mask in the vehicle. The shotgun was loaded and he had additional rounds on him, the chief said.

Sullivan said the motive was under investigation, including whether members of Congress were the target. Congress is not in session.

Regulators decide not to suspend Tesla sales

CA SACRAMENTO — California regulators said on Tuesday that Tesla had stopped misleading drivers about the safety of its cars and so has decided not to suspend its license to sell in the state for 30 days.

The decision by the California Department of Motor Vehicles comes after Elon Musk's electric vehicle maker was found by an administrative law judge last year to have misled drivers about the ability of Tesla cars to drive themselves in its use of the terms "Autopilot" and "Full Self-Driving."

The judge had recommended that regulators suspend Tesla's license to sell cars for 30 days, but the regulators gave the company a 90-day window to make changes. They decided it had done that sufficiently to fix the deceptive

marketing.

Tesla now uses the term "supervised" in references to its Full Self Driving and has stopped using Autopilot in its marketing in the state.

Suits challenge renewed push for oil drilling

AK JUNEAU — Conservation organizations and an Iñupiat group filed legal challenges Tuesday to the Trump administration's renewed push for oil and gas development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and an upcoming lease sale that they say improperly makes available ecologically sensitive lands that have been long protected.

At least two lawsuits challenging the March 18 lease sale were filed. One, in federal court in Alaska, was brought by Earthjustice on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Earth. Another, in federal court in the District of Columbia, was filed by The Wilderness Society and Grandmothers Growing Goodness, a group seeking to draw attention to the impacts of oil and gas development on Iñupiat communities.

The sale would be the first in the reserve since 2019 and the first under a law passed by Congress last year calling for at least five lease sales there over a 10-year period. The reserve covers an area on Alaska's North Slope that's roughly the size of Indiana and provides habitat for an array of wildlife, including caribou, bears, wolves and millions of migratory birds.

This is the latest in a long-running debate over how much of the reserve should be open for development. A plan adopted by the

Trump administration would make about 80% of the reserve available for oil and gas leasing.

Legislature passes paid family and medical leave

VA RICHMOND — Both chambers of the Virginia General Assembly voted Tuesday to pass legislation that would create an insurance program for paid family and medical leave.

The benefit program would cover up to 12 weeks a year of paid leave for childbirth and adoption, long-term illness or injury, or caring for a family member with a serious illness.

The program, funded through premiums assessed to employers and employees, would cover lost income at a rate 80% of individuals' average weekly wage and not more than 100% statewide average weekly wage.

Both bills passed along party lines in the Democrat-controlled legislature. Gov. Abigail Spanberger has indicated she would sign the legislation.

Republicans remain opposed. Del. Mike Webert, R-Fauquier, said the legislation amounted to a new payroll tax on Virginia workers and would pose financial difficulties for employers.

"Large corporations may be able to absorb new premium costs and administrative burdens, but for small and mid-sized Virginia businesses — 20, 50, 100-employee operations who form the backbone of our local economies — this is not a minor adjustment," he said as delegates prepared to vote. "It's a new fixed cost, a new compliance structure, and new uncertainty in workforce planning."

— From wire reports

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US, Canada pull out OT wins to advance

Associated Press

MILAN — When the United States gave up a tying goal to Sweden with 91 seconds left in the quarterfinals at the Olympics, even the most seasoned players were on edge.

“That’s as nervous as I’ve been ever in a hockey game,” Dylan Larkin said.

When Canada was trailing Czechia with under four minutes left, guys with gold medals and Stanley Cup rings started to feel butterflies.

“I never had a doubt, but it was getting a little nerve-wracking,” Drew Doughty said.

After plenty of nerves, the U.S. and Canada are moving on to the semifinals, though it took a roller coaster of emotions to get there.

Quinn Hughes scored in overtime to put the U.S. past Sweden 2-1 after Mika Zibanejad scored to tie it late.

Earlier Wednesday, Nick Suzuki tied it for Canada late in regulation against Czechia, and Mitch Marner won it 4-3 in overtime to avoid what would have been a stunning early exit.

Finland also escaped an upset bid by rallying to beat Switzerland 3-2 in OT. Sweden is going home early from a tournament that did not go as planned for a

team with a full roster of 25 NHL players, while upstart Slovakia is making another improbable run at the Games.

After Canada did its part, the U.S. bounced back from Zibanejad scoring to keep alive the possibility of the North American rivals meeting in the gold medal game Sunday. Goaltender Connor Hellebuyck stopped 28 of the 29 shots he faced, none more important than a Grade-A chance by Lucas Raymond during the second period.

The U.S. will face Slovakia in one semifinal on Friday night. Just before that, also unbeaten Canada plays Finland in the other.

After losing captain Sidney Crosby to injury, Canada was staring down what would have been a stunning quarterfinal exit until Nick Suzuki tied it on a deflection goal with 3:27 left. Then Mitch Marner scored a little more than a minute into overtime to beat Czechia 4-3 and send the tournament favorite into the semifinals.

“Everybody had complete faith in whoever was going over the boards,” coach Jon Cooper said. “It just felt it was like a matter of time. It was going to happen.”

The nerves were palpable when Canada fell behind with 7:42 remaining on Ondrej Palat’s goal on an odd-man rush off a pass from Martin Necas. Replays showed Czechia had six skaters on the ice, which Nathan MacKinnon said he and his teammates were aware of, even if on-ice officials didn’t notice.

Suzuki just about did it all on the tying goal, sending the puck out to the point to Devon Toews and then redirecting the defenseman’s shot that was going well wide past Lukas Dostal and into the net.

Jordan Binnington denied David Pastrnak on a breakaway with 70 seconds left to send the game past regulation. It was the biggest of Binnington’s 21 saves in an excellent performance from Canada’s starter.

Then Marner scored his second OT goal in an international tournament in as many chances. Marner also scored in a similar fashion a year ago at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

“It’s the ‘it’ factor, man: Mitch Marner’s got it,” Cooper said. “He doesn’t disappoint. Sometimes your hair falls out at times, but in the end, he never disappoints.”

Much like Canada, Finland was trailing late in its game against Switzerland. The Finns also got a

late goal to avoid an upset defeat.

Miro Heiskanen tied it with 72 seconds left, Artturi Lehkonen scored in overtime and Finland escaped with a 3-2 victory. Heiskanen’s shot banked in off Switzerland defenseman Jonas Siegenthaler’s stick and past goaltender Leonardo Genoni.

Finland was actually down two goals after Switzerland’s Damien Riat and Nino Niederreiter scored 1 minute, 12 seconds apart in the first period. It took until there was 6:06 left before Sebastian Aho got Finland on the board.

Dalibor Dvorsky turned in another brilliant performance with a goal and an assist, fellow NHL forward Pavol Regenda scored twice as part of his three-point game and Slovakia dominated Germany 6-2 to reach the semifinals and guarantee playing for a medal in Milan.

Slovakia got an injury scare in the second period when 21-year-old emerging Montreal Canadiens star Juraj Slafkovsky, the reigning Olympic MVP, went head-first into the boards and was slow to get up. A trainer applied an ice pack to the back of Slafkovsky’s neck, and he held it on himself when he got up to celebrate a goal scored while he was getting medical attention.

Canada’s Crosby injured against Czechia; status uncertain

Associated Press

MILAN — Sidney Crosby left Canada’s Olympic quarterfinal game against Czechia in the second period because of injury, did not return and his status for the rest of the tournament is uncertain.

Crosby’s right leg appeared to buckle when he braced for contact on a big hit from Czechia defenseman Radko Gudas a few minutes into the second. Laboring as he stayed on the ice, Crosby got crunched into the boards by Gudas and Martin Necas and then left after shaking his right leg and wincing.

The respected 38-year-old captain addressed his teammates at the second intermission, telling them to go get it. Inspired by Crosby and doing so in his absence, Canada rallied to tie it after falling behind with 7:42 left and won in overtime.

“Unfortunately, the game goes on no matter who gets hurt,” said defenseman Drew Doughty, who was teammates with Crosby when Canada won gold at the Olympics in 2010 and ‘14. “We even mentioned going out before the third, ‘Let’s try to win this one for 87.’ Glad we did.”

Coach Jon Cooper said the

message was to make sure this wouldn’t be Crosby’s final game in Milan. Canada next plays in the semifinals Friday, and 19-year-old Macklin Celebrini did not want to talk about the possibility of not having Crosby moving forward.

“Just keep good thoughts,” said Celebrini, who scored for Canada three minutes in and assisted on Marner’s OT winner. “Hopefully he’s back in the next game. That’s our leader, our captain and the heart and soul of our team.”

Crosby was getting punished early in the second by Czechia. Ondrej Palat hit Crosby and

sent him sliding into the boards, with no penalty called despite the puck not being in the vicinity, and then the big check from Gudas.

Crosby is Canada’s oldest and most accomplished player. He scored the famous golden goal in overtime against the United States at the 2010 Games in Vancouver to win it all on home ice and was captain when Canada went unbeaten and never trailed on the way to gold in 2014 in Sochi.

Again wearing the “C” in Milan, Crosby had two goals and four assists in three preliminary round games.

Pistons open 2nd half with best record in NBA

Associated Press

The Detroit Pistons had the worst record in franchise history at the All-Star break four years ago. And two years ago, their record at the break was even worse.

Look at them now.

When the NBA started post-All-Star play Thursday, the Pistons — a franchise that last won a playoff series in 2008 — started the night with the best record in the league, a smidge ahead of the defending champion Thunder. Detroit is 40-13, Oklahoma City 42-14.

The Thunder were expected to be here. The Pistons probably weren't. How Detroit finishes, and if it can hold on to that top spot, is one of the intriguing storylines for the stretch run of the NBA season — with two-thirds of the year complete and teams now set to sprint toward the playoffs or sprint toward the bottom in search of better lottery odds.

"We're just going to run our race," Pistons All-Star guard Cade Cunningham said. "We like where we're at, and we're going to continue to try to finish our season strong."

There's a lot to like about Detroit going into the home stretch.

The Pistons haven't been prone to any sort of real slide yet;

they're 11-2 after a loss and are one of only three teams (Oklahoma City and San Antonio are the others) yet to have a losing streak of more than two games. They don't get blown out; they have a league-low three losses by 10 points or more. They're a league-best 17-6 against teams who were at .500 or better.

Playoff basketball awaits in Detroit, and for the first time since 2008 there should be a Game 1 of a postseason series at home for the Pistons. Plenty of other teams — the Thunder, Boston, New York, San Antonio, Denver, Houston, Cleveland — are probably safe to call playoff locks at this point as well.

The next two months will tell the tale of which teams find their way either into Round 1 or will be trying to land the No. 1 draft pick instead.

"It's been hard. It's been a long journey so far, but just going to work every day, finding ways to connect with my teammates, connect with the city the best I can, and bring wins to the city," Cunningham said. "That's what the city respects and loves is people that go out there and compete every day. There were times they didn't like how we played. We figured it out, and now we have

something going, something building. Just have to keep going now."

Realistic contenders

The top five teams in the NBA record-wise right now: Detroit, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, Boston, Denver and New York (the Nuggets and Knicks are tied).

Expect one of those clubs as the champion in June.

Granted, in the early days the league had far fewer teams than it does now. But there have been only four instances of the eventual NBA Finals winner not being among the league's top-five teams record-wise at the All-Star break.

Milwaukee was seventh at the break in the COVID-affected 2020-21 season. The Pistons were seventh at the break in 2003-04, Houston was ninth at the break in 1994-95 and Washington was eighth in 1977-78.

Scoring race

It looks like a two-person race for the scoring title: the Lakers' Luka Doncic and the Thunder's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander.

Doncic is averaging 32.8 points, Gilgeous-Alexander — the reigning champion — is averaging 31.8.

Doncic won the scoring race in 2023-24; Gilgeous-Alexander could become the 14th player in NBA history to win the title in consecutive seasons.

Award possibilities

Boston's Jayson Tatum and Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton — All-NBA picks last season — were going to be out of the awards mix this season because of their Achilles tendon tears suffered in last season's playoffs, so it was clear from the outset of this season that the group of award winners this spring would be different.

Turns out, it's going to be very different.

Because of the 65-game rule for eligibility for most player awards, the Lakers' LeBron James is going to see his 21-year streak of making the All-NBA team end. He's one of five All-NBA picks from last season who are assured of not making the team this year, joining Tatum, Haliburton, the Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo and Oklahoma City's Jalen Williams.

On the brink of joining that list: Denver's Nikola Jokic and Golden State's Stephen Curry, who can each only miss one more game the rest of the way to preserve their award eligibility.

Zhongyan denies Stolz 3rd speedskating gold medal

Associated Press

MILAN — American speedskater Jordan Stolz's bid for a third gold medal at the Milan Cortina Olympics came up short with a loss to China's Ning Zhongyan in the 1,500 meters Thursday.

Ning won in an Olympic-record time of 1 minute, 41.98 seconds. Stolz, skating in the day's last heat, finished 0.77 off the pace, and adds a silver to the golds he claimed earlier at these Winter Games in the 500 and 1,000. The 21-year-old from Wisconsin will participate in his last race, the mass start, on Saturday.

Only two long track speedskaters ever have won at least four golds at one Games: Eric Heiden of the United States went home with five from the 1980 Lake Placid Olym-

pics, and Lidiya Skoblikova, representing the Soviet Union, claimed four in 1964.

When Stolz finished and his time flashed on the arena's video boards, Ning began jumping up and down with other members of China's team. He then grabbed a flag and wore it like a cape for a victory lap. Stolz bowed his head and rested his hands on his knees.

Ning picked up his third medal at the Milano Speed Skating Stadium, a temporary facility that has been producing swift times, after bronzes in the 1,000 and the team pursuit.

Kjeld Nuis of the Netherlands, who won the 1,500 at the 2018 and 2022 Olympics and holds the world record, got the bronze Thursday, 0.07 behind Stolz.

When healthy, Stolz has essentially been

favored in every race he entered in recent years. He is a two-time world champion at 500, 1,000 and 1,500, and owns the world record in the 1,000.

After setting Olympic records in the 500 and 1,000 — and becoming the only man other than Heiden to complete that double at a Games — Stolz had his sights set on becoming the first male speedskater to win a trio of golds at one Games since Norway's Johann Olav Koss did it at the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994.

Asked to sum up his trip to Italy heading into Thursday, Stolz said: "It's a success, but it's more so of a partial success if I don't win the 1,500, just because I've been so good in that distance for so long. So I hope I can win that one."

No. 25 Alabama tops No. 20 Arkansas in OT

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Houston Mallette hit a 3-pointer with 51 seconds remaining in the second overtime and No. 25 Alabama survived one of the best single-game performances of the season to edge 20th-ranked Arkansas 117-115 on Wednesday night.

Arkansas freshman Darius Acuff Jr. scored 49 points — the second most in college basketball this season — while playing all 50 minutes. But Acuff missed jumpers at the end of both extra frames that would have given the Razorbacks (19-7, 9-4 Southeastern Conference) a short-handed road victory.

Arkansas used a seven-man rotation throughout regulation but had four players foul out in overtime. That forced coach John Calipari to turn to two guys who had played a combined 35 minutes all season.

It was the opening the Crimson Tide (19-7, 9-4) needed to pull out a game that will go down as an instant classic.

Labaron Philon Jr. scored 35 points and Aiden Sherrell added 26 — both career highs — to help Alabama win its fifth consecutive game.

Arkansas, meanwhile, lost for the first time in four games. Acuff's 49 points are the second most by an Arkansas player and the most by an Arkansas player in SEC play.

Alabama trailed by 14 in the second half, but an 18-4 run tied the game. The Crimson Tide moved in front in the waning seconds of regulation — until Acuff's 3-pointer tied the game at 95 and sent it to OT.

Meleek Thomas (24) and Billy Richmond III (20) also scored in double figures for the Razorbacks before fouling out.

No. 4 Arizona 75, No. 23 BYU 68: Anthony Dell'Orso scored a season-high 22 points after coming off the bench, Ivan Kharченkov added 18 and host Arizona bounced back from its first two losses of the season by beat-

ing BYU.

Dell'Orso — a 6-foot-6 Australian — helped the Wildcats get back in the win column after shooting 8 of 15 from the field, including 4 of 8 on 3-pointers.

BYU (19-7, 7-6) was led by freshman star AJ Dybantasa, who finished with 33 points on 12-of-27 shooting. The 6-foot-9 forward topped 30 points for the sixth time this season.

The Cougars were playing their first game without starting guard Richie Saunders, who tore his ACL in a 90-86 overtime victory against Colorado on Saturday. He's out for the rest of the season.

Creighton 91, No. 5 UConn 84: Josh Dix scored 13 of his 21 points in the second half, Nik Graves added 18 points and visiting Creighton beat UConn to spoil former Huskies star Emeka Okafor's number retirement.

Creighton (14-13, 8-8 Big East) handed UConn (24-2, 14-2) its first conference home loss of the season. Creighton coach Greg McDermott became the first coach to beat a Dan Hurley-coached team four times on the road.

Okafor became the third UConn men's basketball player to have his number retired, with the Huskies honoring the 2004 NCAA champion and national player of the year at halftime. Ray Allen and Richard Hamilton are the only other players to have their numbers retired.

No. 8 Kansas 81, Oklahoma State 69: Freshman Darryn Peterson scored 20 of his 23 points in the first half, sparking Kansas to a road win over Oklahoma State.

Peterson, a guard who is expected to be among the first picks in the NBA draft later this year, had shot 13 for 36 from the field combined in his previous three games. He made 7 of 12 field goals against the Cowboys, including 6 of 10 3-pointers.

Tre White scored 16 points and Elmarko Jackson added 14 for Kansas. Bryson Tiller had 10

points, 11 rebounds and seven assists and Flory Bidunga added eight points, 11 rebounds and four blocks for the Jayhawks (20-6, 10-3 Big 12), who made 11 of 24 3-pointers and bounced back from a blowout loss at Iowa State last Saturday.

No. 10 Illinois 101, Southern Cal 65: Andrej Stojakovic scored 22 points to lead seven players in double figures and visiting Illinois routed Southern California for its 14th win in 16 games.

Blue and orange-clad fans were out in force for the Fighting Illini's first game against the Trojans in Los Angeles since 1975. The Illini (22-5, 13-3 Big Ten) didn't disappoint, leading all the way to maintain a hold on second place in the conference standings behind No. 1 Michigan.

Stojakovic was 6 of 7 from the floor and made all nine of his free throws. David Mirkovic added 14 points. The Illini hit 24 of 26 free throws while sending USC to its biggest loss of the season.

No. 11 Gonzaga 80, San Francisco 59: Graham Ike had 22 points and Gonzaga cruised to a road victory over San Francisco.

Ike, the leading scorer in the West Coast Conference, has scored 20 or more in eight consecutive games. That matches the school record shared by Adam Morrison and Derek Rai-vio, both in 2006.

Mario Saint-Supery added 14 points and six assists for Gonzaga (26-2, 14-1), which holds a one-game lead in the league standings over Saint Mary's and Santa Clara. Emmanuel Innocenti had 12 points and eight rebounds, while Jalen Warely scored 11.

No. 14 Virginia 94, Georgia Tech 68: Thijs De Ridder scored 22 points, Malik Thomas added 17 and Virginia won its seventh straight game and eighth in a row on the road, beating Georgia Tech.

The Cavaliers (23-3, 11-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) raced to a 42-9 lead in the opening 13:24. Virginia's 59-27 advantage at the half was its largest in an ACC

game since February 2001.

Cavaliers forward Devin Tillis had six points and a rebound before leaving in the second half because of a lower-body injury.

No. 17 St. John's 76, Marquette 70: Bryce Hopkins had 23 points and 10 rebounds as visiting St. John's defeated Marquette to earn its 12th straight victory and move atop the Big East standings.

St. John's (21-5, 14-1) rallied from a six-point deficit in the second half after squandering an 11-point lead. The Red Storm took over the conference lead from No. 5 UConn, which lost 91-84 at home to Creighton earlier Wednesday.

UConn (24-3, 14-2) hosts the Johnnies on Feb. 25 in the second meeting between the teams. St. John's beat the Huskies 81-72 at Madison Square Garden on Feb. 6.

St. John's has won its last 11 Big East road games dating to last season.

Missouri 81, No. 19 Vanderbilt 80: Jayden Stone had 19 points, Trent Pierce and T.O. Barrett each added 16 and host Missouri (18-8, 8-5 Southeastern Conference) held off Vanderbilt after squandering a big lead.

Vanderbilt's Tyler Nickel hit a 3-pointer with two seconds remaining after Barrett hit a pair of free throws. Tyler Tanner then intercepted Mark Mitchell's inbound pass and heaved a half-court shot that rattled around the rim and bounced out.

Vanderbilt (21-5, 8-5) rallied after falling behind 66-45 with 8:43 remaining after Devin McGlockton was called for his second flagrant 1 foul. Tigers coach Dennis Gates used a challenge to review contact on a rebound on Vanderbilt's offensive possession after Tyler Harris was called for a foul on Mitchell as he attempted a layup. Vanderbilt coach Mark Byington unsuccessfully challenged that Missouri's Anthony Robinson II committed a flagrant foul on the same play.