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Report: Pacific balance shifting against US

BY PAUL ALEXANDER

Stars and Stripes

The regional balance of power in the Pacific is slipping away from the U.S. because President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia has been hampered by budget cuts, a lack of clear policy goals and China's willingness to take risks to assert territorial claims, a new U.S. study warns.

That trend has been accelerated by North Korea's continued provocations, Russia's growing interest in the region and the threat from the Islamic State group that has drawn away U.S. military assets, according to a report prepared for the Defense Department by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank.

The report warned that unless the trend is reversed, the South China Sea will be "virtually a Chinese lake" by 2030, capable of "overawing ... lesser powers."

"Actions by countries in the region routinely challenge the credibility of U.S. security commitments, and U.S. capability development is not keeping pace with challenges by potential competitors, resulting in the regional balance of military power shifting against the United States," the report said.

The Obama administration came into office with the goal of refocusing American attention from the Middle East to the Pacific and East Asia, through which more than \$1.2 trillion in U.S. trade transits each year. Then the perfect storm of budget cuts, a rising Islamic State, Syria's civil war and concerns about Iran and Russia kept dragging the U.S. back into the Middle East morass.

Still, concrete military commitments have been made to the Asia-Pacific since the pivot was announced, and the CSIS report gave the Defense Department "high marks" for its efforts.

A Stars and Stripes assessment last year found that the number of troops in the region rose from 244,000 to 266,000; the Navy deployed two more destroyers in Japan and a second littoral combat ship in Singapore; and the number of Marine Corps aircraft rose from 416 to 630, while the Navy's increased from 1,056 to 1,111.

In addition, the Marines created a rotational force in northern Australia. The Army deployed highly trained units for multiple sequential exercises with nations throughout the region under the Pacific Pathways program, providing a presence without permanent bases and their inherent costs.

An agreement signed with the Philippines

in 2014 allows for an increased rotational presence and enhanced cooperation.

"Nevertheless, the implementation of the rebalance may be insufficient to secure U.S. interests," the CSIS report said, adding that the U.S. needs to continue and "in some cases accelerate investments in regional relationships, posture, operational concepts and capabilities."

The main issue is China's aggressive policy toward a number of disputed islands in the South and East China seas, which threatens freedom of navigation in one the world's most critical trade routes.

"Polls in Asian countries indicate strong support for the rebalance, with the notable exception of China," said the report, which reflects the work of 21 CSIS contributors. "States across the region have become more sensitive to China's growing political, economic and military power, and are potentially vulnerable to Beijing's increasingly coercive behavior."

"The U.S. relationship with China is complex, mixing elements of cooperation and competition. Although the U.S. rebalance seeks to create space for China to contribute to peace and prosperity throughout the region, it is also important that DOD deter Chinese aggression or coercion and defend U.S. interests."

Army secretary nominee vows troop cut reversal

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's nominee to be the next Army secretary told the Senate on Thursday that he would reverse plans to shed 40,000 soldiers during the next two years.

During his confirmation hearing, while fielding pointed questions from lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee about troop cuts, Eric Fanning said he is worried about the size of the force and its ability to fight foes such as the Islamic State group.

Fanning's nomination comes in the Obama administration's last year, after it was held up briefly by the Senate. Yet the Pentagon insider still could exert major influence on the Army as it re-evaluates some of its plans announced last summer to reduce its active-duty strength from 490,000 to 450,000.

"If confirmed, I would look for ways to reverse as many of the combat cuts that the Army made last year as possible," Fanning said.

The cuts would hit military bases in Georgia, Texas, Alaska, Washington and Ha-

'I do worry about the size of the Army today.'

Eric Fanning

waii. The service also could cut 10,000 civilians.

"I do worry about the size of the Army today ... the [global threat] risk is increasing and I don't see that vector changing," Fanning said.

"Two years ago, when we targeted that 450,000, we didn't have [the Islamic State], we

didn't have Russia as provocative as it is."

Fanning has a 25-year career in government service and was acting Army undersecretary last year. He also was temporarily the Air Force's top civilian and worked closely with Defense Secretary Ash Carter as Carter took control at the Pentagon.

If confirmed, Fanning also would be the first openly gay Army secretary, a subject that did not come up Thursday. The Armed Services hearing was a crucial step but he must still be approved by a full Senate vote.

Hunter calls for new Navy leader; Mabus fires back

The San Diego Union-Tribune

CORONADO, Calif. — Tensions rose this week in a growing dispute between the Navy secretary and a congressman who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Marine Corps officer.

On Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., dispatched a letter to the Pentagon suggesting that Navy Secretary Ray Mabus should be replaced because of an apparently abrupt order he issued to the Marine Corps to merge men's and women's training.

The letter follows friction between Mabus and Marine Corps leaders over the issue of opening ground combat jobs to women. In recommending the integration last year, Mabus defied a Marine Corps study that said women got injured more often and dragged down the performance of combat teams.

"Unfortunately, the only way this relationship can be repaired, I believe, is through the leadership of a new Navy secretary — specifically one who does not regularly make a point to undercut the Marine Corps, distract its mission and insult its leaders," Hunter wrote.

That letter was a follow-up to one from Hunter the previous week. On Jan. 11, Hunter wrote to Defense Secretary Ash Cart-

er that Mabus "continues to make a compelling case for the Marine Corps to be an autonomous military department with its own civilian leadership."

Mabus, who was in Coronado on Wednesday, shot back during a question-and-answer period with reporters.

"Look, I've got that letter framed. That's one of the biggest compliments I've ever gotten," Mabus said, guffawing.

Mabus stood his ground on several controversial stances he has taken during his seven-year tenure as the civilian leader of the Navy and the Marine Corps.

One is the integration of women into Marine infantry, Navy SEALs and other direct-combat jobs by April.

"If you can meet the standards, why should it matter if you are male or female? Why should it matter if you are straight or gay?" Mabus told reporters.

The tenure of Mabus, a former Democratic governor of Mississippi, has included major social changes for the U.S. military-all of which he supported.

They included the end of the "don't ask, don't tell" ban on openly gay servicemembers.

Hunter, a Republican who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Marine Corps officer, has been a frequent critic.

4 Navy 'green fleet' ships set out to sea

The San Diego Union-Tribune

CORONADO, Calif. — Four Navy warships sailed off into the Pacific on Wednesday as the "great green fleet," all operating on some version of alternative fuels.

In Coronado, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus struck a victorious tone. The green initiative by the Navy and Marine Corps has been his personal mission since 2009.

"The Navy has always been a leader when it comes to energy innovation," Mabus said during a ceremony at North Island Naval Air Station.

"Sailors look out, they look to the horizon. They saw no obstacles. They saw the open sea," he said, referring to the Navy's history of embracing new power sources, from wind to coal to oil to nuclear reactors.

Mabus' green fleet effort has been controversial at times — and to some degree, still is — because the cost of pure biofuel remains higher than petroleum.

The "green" cruiser and destroyers deploying Wednesday burned a petroleum-heavy blend of fuel — 90 percent regular ship diesel and 10 percent

biofuel from beef fat.

The cost of fossil fuels has fallen so much in recent months that the Defense Logistics Agency was basically forced to use a low-biofuel blend to make its purchase for the green fleet competitive with straight petroleum. The 77.6 million gallons being used by the Navy for this demonstration project constitutes the largest buy of "drop-in" biofuel ever.

"This is the market. The price of oil has gone way down. This was bid out.

"We said, 'Give us the best blend you can give us.' This was what came back," Mabus said, in response to a reporter's question Wednesday.

"But we're not static. This is 2016. Our goal is to be at 50 percent by 2020. By doing this, this is a huge step."

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier John C. Stennis, based in Washington state, and the San Diego-based cruiser Mobile Bay and destroyers Stockdale and William P. Lawrence make up the bulk of the "great green fleet," which headed out on a regular seven-month deployment from Coronado on Wednesday.

US military to target Islamic State in Afghanistan

The Washington Post

The Obama administration has granted the military new authority to strike the Islamic State group in Afghanistan, signaling a more sustained fight against the extremist group outside of its base in Iraq and Syria, officials said Wednesday.

A defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal decisions, said new rules of engagement approved last week permit U.S. commanders in Afghanistan to

launch airstrikes against militants affiliated with the Islamic State, in the same way that the military targets fighters linked to al-Qaida.

The new arrangement "enables the United States to more actively target ISIL in Afghanistan," the official said, using an acronym for the group that controls parts of Iraq and Syria and has established outposts from North Africa to Central Asia.

Under previous rules, the U.S. military was able to conduct airstrikes in Afghanistan in

three circumstances: to protect foreign forces, to help Afghan troops ward off an enemy onslaught, and to target al-Qaida and affiliated militants.

According to a second official, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity, the U.S. military has struck militants identified with the Islamic State group in Afghanistan in the past, but those strikes were launched on the basis of the fighters' "hostile intentions" rather than their affiliation with the group's Afghan organization.

While the decision does not signal a dramatic change for U.S. activities in Afghanistan, it strengthens commanders' authority against assorted militants there and, more generally, illustrates the expanding U.S. campaign against the Islamic State beyond its home base.

The granting of expanded strike authority follows the State Department's designation this month of the Islamic State's Afghan entity, called "ISIL-K," or Khorasan, as a foreign terrorist organization.

Arizona out to boost lagging run game

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — The Arizona Cardinals' once-robust running game has all but vanished in recent weeks. Now the team has to try to rediscover it while facing the punishing defense of the Carolina Panthers.

In last Saturday's 26-20 overtime victory over Green Bay, the Cardinals managed just 40 yards rushing in 19 attempts, an anemic average of 2.1 yards per carry.

David Johnson gained 35 yards in 15 tries, an average of 2.3 per attempt. Arizona's longest running play of the game was 8 yards.

"I think they had a good scheme against us from the two weeks before that when we played them, they were ready for us," Johnson said Tuesday after the Cardinals' walk-through practice.

Arizona coach Bruce Arians placed the blame squarely on the offensive line and not on his rookie running back.

"Getting their [behind] kicked up front,"

Arians said. "It's not anything David is doing. There's just not a lot of holes there and we have to do a better job. It's a tough challenge this week."

When the Cardinals face Carolina in the NFC championship game on Sunday, they will go against a defense that ranked fourth against the run in the regular season, allowing 88.4 yards per game.

Arians said Star Lotulelei and Kawann Short are the best pair of defensive tackles Arizona has seen all season.

"The linebackers are great," Arians said, "but they (the tackles) help make them great."

Lotulelei and Short are great players, Cardinals left guard Mike Iupati said. "They're big, fast, strong."

And they help make linebacker Luke Kuechly the great player he is.

Kuechly, Arians said, has "got great instincts."

"He's really fast," the coach said. "What he really is, he's a great pass defender. People see all the tackles, but they do a

great job of keeping him clean to make the tackles,"

The absence of defensive end Jared Allen, who is doubtful for the game due to a broken foot, won't have that much impact, the Cardinals coach said.

"They've got good depth," Arians said. "Mario Addison gave us problems last year and I'm not sure there's a drop off there."

Rest assured that the Arizona offensive linemen heard a lot this week about their run blocking from Arians and offensive coordinator Harold Goodwin, who specializes in coaching those positions.

Iupati, named to the Pro Bowl for the fourth time in his six NFL seasons, is considered one of the best run blockers in the league.

"We've got to execute better," he said. "We've got to block better, block longer, extend your guys. It's no secret. ... Us O-line guys, we know what we've got to do. We've just got to go out there and open holes for David or whoever's in the back-

field and protect the quarterback."

Most of the season, the Cardinals' ground game has been humming along nicely, with Chris Johnson the featured back until he went down with a season-ending injury in Arizona's 19-13 win at San Francisco on Nov. 29. David Johnson stepped in and, if anything, the running game got better.

He gained 99 yards in his first start (at St. Louis), 92 in his second (against Minnesota) and a breakout 187 yards in 29 carries at Philadelphia.

But he had only 39 yards, 25 yards and 35 yards in the three games since.

Johnson, a third-round draft pick out of Northern Iowa, knows that the running game has been crucial to the success of the Cardinals, who had the No. 1 ranked offense in the NFL in the regular season.

"When we're able to run the ball, it keeps our offense on the field and it just overall helps our whole team," Johnson said.

McIlroy upstages Spieth in 1st round

Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — Jordan Spieth was agrieved at being given a warning for slow play, and complained that his tee shots were "short and crooked."

But after his opening round of the Abu Dhabi Championship on Thursday, the top-ranked Spieth's biggest concern might just be the sublime form of his playing partner.

Rory McIlroy got the better of Spieth in their first head-to-head of 2016, using his power and accuracy with the driver to set up a 6-under 66 that put him two shots off the lead held by American amateur Bryson DeChambeau.

Spieth, who scrambled well to shoot a 68, made an early-season statement two weeks ago by winning by eight strokes in Hawaii to back up his stellar 2015. McIlroy laid down a marker of his own in his first event of the year after a two-month break and laser eye surgery.

"It was the Rory that I have seen win majors," Spieth said. "It was spectacular. It was a pretty unbelievable round on a very challenging golf course."

McIlroy says his eye operation in December will improve his ability to read greens and that seemed to be the case, the No. 3-ranked Northern Irishman making eight birdies — beginning on his first hole with a 20-footer. But it was his driving that set him apart on a warm, wind-free morning in the gulf emirate.

"I was really excited to get going, especially playing in a group like that," said the No. 3-ranked McIlroy, who was also playing alongside No. 6-ranked Rickie Fowler (70). "Couldn't be happier."

Spieth's first round in a regular European Tour event was a mixed bag and ended with a brush with a rules official, who gave the American a "monitoring penalty" for taking too long over a putt on No. 8 — his 17th hole.

There were no such problems for another 22-year-old American.

DeChambeau was making only his seventh start in a professional event but showed no nerves in shooting seven birdies and an eagle for a 64 to lead a stellar field. Henrik Stenson (65) was a shot behind, with McIlroy and Branden Grace a further stroke adrift.

Hewitt retires after loss

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Andy Murray learned a lot about tennis by watching Lleyton Hewitt, a player he admired so much it inspired a pet's name.

Murray has broken a lot of droughts in tennis for British men, ending more than seven winless decades at the majors with his titles at the 2012 U.S. Open and 2013 Wimbledon and adding a Davis Cup crown last year.

After his 6-0, 6-4, 6-1 second-round win over Sam Groth on Thursday extended his unbeaten streak against Australians to 17, he took time to pay tribute to Hewitt — the last Aussie to win a men's Grand Slam title — who was scheduled to play the following match on Rod Laver Arena.

"He was someone I loved watching growing up. His attitude toward competition — I loved," Murray said. "He fought, well, fights extremely hard to this day. He still has the same passion to win."

"He was an idol for me — I actually named one of my dogs after him because he was someone that I loved growing up."

Hewitt's 20th bid to win the Australian Open ended in the second round in a 6-2, 6-4, 6-4 loss to eighth-seeded David Ferrer. Typically, it was a feisty affair. He launched a verbal volley at chair umpire Pascal Maria after the seventh game of the last set when he was angered by foot-fault calls at one end.

"Left nothing in the locker room. That's something I can be proud of," Hewitt, who turns 35 next month, told the crowd. "My whole career, I've given 100 percent."

Hewitt, who played his first Australian Open in 1997, won his first title at 16 and was the youngest player ever to hold the No. 1 ranking at 20 years, 8 months, was joined on court by his three children.

He thanked his family and his coach, Tony Roche — "Rochie, Love ya mate" — and his fans.

"I felt like this was the perfect place to finish," he said. "A couple of the roars during the match tonight was as loud as I've ever played in front of. I was getting goosebumps at times."

Hewitt won the U.S. Open in 2001, Wimbledon in '02, and held the top ranking for 80 weeks. His best run at his own national championship was when he reached

the final in 2005, losing to Marat Safin.

Even before he retired as a player, he was hired as Australia's Davis Cup coach for 2016. As one of the respected elders on the tour, he had a combative response to reports published at the start of the tournament that match-fixing had gone unchecked in tennis.

Tennis officials have rejected the allegations. Like Roger Federer, Hewitt was aggravated that it was a topic of post-match news conferences despite the reports not identifying any players or presenting new evidence.

"It's just absurd," he said. "The whole thing [is] an absolute farce."

Murray has reached four finals in Australia, but never won the title. That's something the 28-year-old Scot wants to do before he becomes a dad.

With his pregnant wife back in Britain, due to have their first baby next month, he doesn't want to labor too many points. He dismantled Groth's biggest weapon — he has the fastest serve in tennis — before closing with an ace — his 10th — in 1 hour, 31 minutes.

"It's been a very good start," said Murray, who plays No. 32 Joao Sousa next. "But I can get better, for sure."

Fourth-seeded Stan Wawrinka, who won the 2014 Australian Open title and won the French Open last year, had a 6-2, 6-3, 6-4 win over 37-year-old qualifier Radek Stepanek, joining No. 10 John Isner, No. 13 Milos Raonic and No. 16 Bernard Tomic in the next round.

Fernando Verdasco lost 6-4, 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (4) to Dudi Sela, a surprising defeat coming two days after he beat 14-time major winner Rafael Nadal in five sets.

Seeded players went out in both draws, with No. 25 Jack Sock and No. 30 Jeremy Chardy ousted on the men's side and No. 11 Timea Bacsinszky, No. 18 Elina Svitolina, No. 19 Jelena Jankovic and No. 30 Sabine Lisicki defeated on the women's side.

Wimbledon finalist Garbine Muguruza, seeded No. 3, No. 7 Angelique Kerber, No. 9 Karolina Pliskova, No. 15 Madison Keys and No. 20 Ana Ivanovic had second-round wins.

Two-time Australian Open winner Victoria Azarenka continued her strong recent run with a 6-1, 6-2 victory over Danka Kovinic.



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Cavaliers rebound, beat Nets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kevin Love had 17 points and 18 rebounds, and the Cleveland Cavaliers bounced back from their embarrassing performance against Golden State with a 91-78 victory over the Brooklyn Nets on Wednesday night.

It was a welcome performance after the Cavaliers were crushed 132-98 on Monday in the NBA Finals rematch.

"It's painful to get knocked down, but it's shameful not to get back up if you get knocked down," Cleveland coach David Blatt said.

LeBron James also had 17 points and neither forward played in the fourth quarter, a welcome rest with a home game against the Los Angeles Clippers on Thursday.

"I think tonight it was very easy to look each other in the face and know that we got better tonight," James said.

Cleveland led by 23 in the second half before Brooklyn made the score respectable when the Cavs went deep into their reserves.

Pistons 123, Rockets 114: Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and Marcus Morris each scored 22 points and visiting Detroit beat Houston despite Andre Drummond setting an NBA record by missing 23 free throws.

Drummond set a career high and franchise record by attempting 36 free throws on a night he was intentionally fouled 21 times. The previous record for most misses was 22, set by Wilt Chamberlain on Dec. 1, 1967.

The Hack-A-Shaq tactic allowed the Rockets to take the lead in the third quarter when they did it 12 straight times, but it didn't help them close the gap in the fourth when Drummond went out for good with 5½ minutes left after seven hacks in the quarter and Detroit leading 107-94.

Warriors 125, Bulls 94: Stephen Curry scored 25 points, and Golden State made it look easy again in beating host Chicago.

Curry tied a season high with 11 assists and grabbed seven rebounds.

Klay Thompson added 20 points. Harrison Barnes scored 19, and the defending champions simply outclassed Chicago after embarrassing LeBron James and the Cavaliers in Cleveland on Monday night. The Warriors built a big lead in the first quarter and never were threatened after that, improving their league-best road record to 20-4.

Thunder 109, Hornets 95: Kevin

Durant scored 26 points to help host Oklahoma City beat Charlotte for its sixth straight win.

Russell Westbrook collected 16 points, 15 assists, eight rebounds and five steals in 27 minutes before sitting out the fourth quarter because the Thunder were in control.

Steven Adams had 10 points and 10 rebounds for the Thunder, who have won 21 of their past 25 games. Kyle Singler added a season-high 11 points.

Kings 112, Lakers 93: DeMarcus Cousins had 36 points and 16 rebounds, and Rajon Rondo added 11 points and 17 assists in visiting Sacramento's sixth consecutive victory over the Lakers.

Rudy Gay scored 16 points for the Kings, who have won three straight and six of nine. Cousins continued his tear through 2016 with another brutally effective performance, scoring at least 29 points for the eighth time in the Kings' nine games in January.

Kobe Bryant scored just two of his 15 points after halftime and Brandon Bass had a season-high 18 for the Lakers, who have lost four straight and eight of nine to drop to 9-35.

Hawks 104, Trail Blazers 98: Paul Millsap had 23 points and nine rebounds, leading visiting Atlanta to its third straight win.

Kent Bazemore also had 23 points for the Hawks, who have won four straight against the Blazers.

CJ McCollum had 28 points for Portland, which trailed by as many as 13 points in the first half but came all the way to grab an 84-79 lead after Meyers Leonard's 3-pointer with 8:10 left.

Kyle Korver wrestled back the lead for the Hawks with his first 3-pointer of the game, before Millsap's 3-pointer and Al Horford's jumper stretched Atlanta's lead to 98-92 with 1:53 left. Portland couldn't catch up.

Knicks 118, Jazz 111 (OT): Carmelo Anthony had 30 points, nine assists and seven rebounds, leading host New York to an overtime victory over Utah.

Robin Lopez added 22 points and 12 rebounds for New York, which trailed by as many as 12 in the second half and by eight entering the fourth quarter. Derrick Williams scored 18 points, and rookie Kristaps Porzingis had 16.

Rodney Hood led Utah with 29 points, and Gordon Hayward finished with 27.

Mavericks 106, Timberwolves 94 (OT): Chandler Parsons scored seven of his game-high 30 points in overtime as short-handed Dallas rallied to beat visit-

ing Minnesota.

The Mavericks, playing without Dirk Nowitzki, shook off a 10-point, fourth-quarter deficit and a career game from Timberwolves rookie Karl-Anthony Towns to win in their fourth consecutive overtime game at home.

After trailing for much of the second half, Dallas was never behind in overtime. Parsons hit the biggest shot of the extra period, a 3-pointer with 2:36 to play to give Dallas a 98-93 lead. With 1:25 to go, Devin Harris made a three-point play to extend the lead to eight.

With Nowitzki (right knee) and Kevin Garnett (rest) watching from their respective benches in suits, the 2015 first overall pick Towns had 27 points and career highs with 17 rebounds and six blocks for Minnesota. Andrew Wiggins added 23 points for the Wolves.

Wizards 106, Heat 87: John Wall had 18 points and 10 assists and Bradley Beal added 18 more as host Washington sent injury-ravaged Miami to its sixth loss in seven games.

Miami played without Dwyane Wade, who was scratched with shoulder soreness about a half-hour before the game. Halfway through the second quarter, starting center Hassan Whiteside abruptly fell to the floor and with a strained left oblique and did not return to the game.

Down to nine players, 33-year-old Amare Stoudemire scored a season-high 11 points in 21 minutes — six more than he had played in his previous 14 games this season.

Raptors 115, Celtics 109: DeMar DeRozan scored 34 points and Jonas Valanciunas had his eighth double-double with 19 points and 12 rebounds as host Toronto won its season-high sixth straight game.

Luis Scola chipped in with 18 points and Kyle Lowry added 14 for the Raptors.

Boston guard Isaiah Thomas had his fifth double-double of the season with 21 points and 10 assists. Avery Bradley added another 19 points for the Celtics.

76ers 96, Magic 87: Jahlil Okafor scored 20 points, Ish Smith had 13 points and 11 assists and Philadelphia beat host Orlando.

Hollis Thompson added 17 points and Isaiah Canaan scored 15 for Philadelphia, which has won two of three to get to six wins on the season.

Elfrid Payton led Orlando with 21 points and 10 assists, but the Magic were lethargic all night defensively and lost for the eighth time in nine games. Nikola Vucevic had 15 points and 11 rebounds, and Tobias Harris added 15 points and 10 boards.

Tar Heels roll over W. Forest

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Brice Johnson had 27 points and 11 rebounds, and No. 2 North Carolina beat Wake Forest 83-68 on Wednesday night for its 10th straight win.

The Tar Heels (17-2, 6-0 Atlantic Coast Conference) had little trouble extending their best start to conference play since 2000-01. They never trailed and overcame one of their worst shooting performances of the season (38.4 percent) by forcing Wake Forest into 19 turnovers and turning them into 21 points.

North Carolina — which appears in line to return to No. 1 after Oklahoma's loss earlier this week — reeled off 12 straight points late in the first half to build a comfortable lead, then went up by 27 after halftime.

No. 4 Villanova 72, Seton Hall 71: At Newark, N.J., Ryan Arcidiacono hit a go-ahead layup with 32.4 seconds to play and foul-plagued Daniel Ochefu made a crucial block to preserve the lead as the Wildcats held off another Pirates upset bid.

The win was the ninth in a row overall and the 22nd straight in the Big East Conference for Villanova (17-2, 7-0), which tried its best to give away the game in the closing seconds.

Texas 56, No. 6 West Virginia 49: Javan Felix scored the final nine points for Longhorns against the host Mountaineers.

Felix, who finished with 17 points, shot 4-for-9 from the field, including 2-for-3 from three-point range. He was 7-for-8 from the foul line against the Mountaineers (15-3, 4-2 Big 12), who had not lost at the WVU Coliseum this season.

Nebraska 72, No. 11 Michigan State 71: Shavon Shields scored 28 points while playing through hip pain, and Denzel Valentine missed a shot just before the buzzer to allow the visiting Cornhuskers to hold on against the Spartans.

Nebraska (12-8, 4-3 Big Ten) has won four straight, three on the road. They've also won three in a row against the Spartans.

No. 13 Baylor 79, Kansas St. 72 (2 OT): Al Freeman scored all 11 of his points after regulation, Lester Medford hit the go-ahead free throws to start the second overtime and the Bears stretched their home winning streak to 15 games with a victory over the Wildcats.

Medford made two foul shots in the opening minute of the second overtime to put Baylor (15-3, 5-1 Big 12) ahead to stay before Freeman added a driving layup.

No. 15 Miami 67, Boston College 53: Sheldon McClellan scored 19 points, Ja'Quan Newton had 12 and the visiting Hurricanes rebounded from consecutive losses with a win over the Eagles. It was the 11th straight victory for the Hurricanes (14-3, 3-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) against Boston College. Tonye Jekiri matched his career high with 17 rebounds, and Angel Rodriguez scored 12 points.

No. 17 Louisville 84, Florida State 65: Quentin Snider scored 20 points, Damion Lee added 14 and the host Cardinals had no problem with the Seminoles. Louisville (15-3, 4-1 ACC) was rarely challenged in winning its second consecutive Atlantic Coast Conference game, shooting 48 percent while outrebounding Florida State 44-36.

Elliott stops 29 shots as Blues top Wings

Associated Press

DETROIT — Brian Elliott stopped 29 shots in the St. Louis Blues' latest win, though he didn't face many great chances.

Elliott came within less than 2½ minutes of handing Detroit its first shutout in 69 games, Dmitri Jaskin scored a key third-period goal, and the Blues beat the Red Wings 2-1 Wednesday night.

"We're playing well, even if we're giving up a lot of shots," Elliott said. "When someone makes a big block, that makes a huge difference."

Henrik Zetterberg spoiled Elliott's shut-out bid with 2:13 remaining with a power-play goal through Justin Abdelkader's screen to pull Detroit within one.

"I thought we created enough chances to score more than one goal, especially

in the first 10 minutes, but we've got to put the puck in the net," Zetterberg said. "We're working hard, but we're not getting the second puck often enough. That's where you get goals in this league."

Detroit pulled Petr Mrazek with two minutes left, but their momentum was destroyed when Dylan Larkin took a penalty with 58 seconds to play.

The Red Wings have only scored 12 goals in their last seven games, but coach Jeff Blashill doesn't think there's a big problem.

"We don't have to make vast changes to the way we play," he said. "We got 30 shots against a really good team, and we played well."

Avalanche 2, Sabres 1: Francois Beauchemin scored a go-ahead goal with 31.7 seconds left in the third period to lift

host Colorado past Buffalo.

Alex Tanguay had a goal and an assist and Semyon Varlamov had 27 saves for Colorado. Beauchemin also had an assist.

The Avalanche went ahead when Beauchemin's shot from the point went off Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk and beat goalie Robin Lehner high for his sixth of the season.

Ducks 3, Wild 1: Rickard Rakell scored the go-ahead goal with 6:19 left in the third period and rookie John Gibson made 25 saves to lead host Anaheim past Minnesota.

Chris Stewart also scored for the Ducks, who are 11-2-0 in their past 13 games against Minnesota. Jakob Silfverberg added an empty-netter with 49 seconds left.