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US pulling carrier from Persian Gulf

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
AND CHRIS CHURCH
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States will not have an aircraft carrier deployed to the Persian Gulf this fall for the first time in years, and the rare gap could hinder military capabilities in the war against the Islamic State group, the Obama administration's nominee to lead the Navy told the Senate on Thursday.

Adm. John Richardson conceded the effects of a two-month gap in carrier presence — the first since 2007 — under intense questioning from Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., as the Senate Armed Services Committee weighs whether to approve the admiral's nomination as chief of naval operations.

"Without that carrier, that will be a detriment to our capability, yes, sir," Richardson said.

The USS Theodore Roosevelt is currently deployed to the region and has been launching strikes against targets in Iraq and Syria as the U.S. and coalition forces struggle to make headway in the year-old war against the Islamist hard-liners there.

In addition, U.S. officials say the recent agreement to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief hasn't alleviated concerns about Iranian power in the Middle East. Arab countries in the Gulf are concerned Iran will use additional funding to support terrorism within the region.

Still, the Navy is shouldering budget cuts and a limited number of ships. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended the gap in carrier operations, the current Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert told Stars and Stripes in a recent interview.

"In the intent of the Joint Staff, it was determined that appropriate replacement or substitute can be made for a carrier or carrier strike group," Greenert said.

Richardson told the Senate that the military would work to mitigate the gap left by a carrier by using land-based aircraft, but did not elaborate.

U.S. Central Command is confident it has the necessary "combat power," said CENTCOM spokeswoman Maj. Genevieve David.

The U.S. and Turkey recently announced expanded coordination on the war in Iraq and Syria that includes Turkish permission for the U.S. to use its air base at Incirlik for

bombing runs. The move could be a significant breakthrough in the war effort, giving the U.S. closer access to Islamic State targets in northern Syria and Iraq.

But carriers have given key support to the current air campaign, the previous Iraq War and stability in the region.

Roosevelt-based aircraft fly about one-third of the aircraft sorties supporting Operation Inherent Resolve, according to the Navy. Last fall, President Barack Obama ordered the USS George H.W. Bush on station in the Persian Gulf to respond to the Islamic State group's advance in Iraq.

The Roosevelt carrier strike group was also recently dispatched to Yemen as that country devolved into violence.

"So, now you believe that land-based air can replace the presence of a carrier?" McCain asked.

Others remain skeptical about taking a carrier out of the Middle East.

"It reduces the president's options," said Bryan McGrath, former naval officer who now runs the consulting firm FerryBridge Group. "Aircraft carriers are so powerful because we can relatively quickly move it in position where we need it and use it without anyone's permission."

Analysts: Taliban likely to stay course in both war, peace talks

BY ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL
AND SLOBODAN LEKIC
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The new Taliban leadership that has emerged since the death of the group's revered leader is unlikely to change course, either on the battlefield or in approaching nascent peace talks, analysts predicted Friday.

As the founder and spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar helped keep the movement — essentially a coalition of semi-autonomous regionally based outfits — united and nominally subject to a central command structure. Since the U.S.-led invasion that ousted the Taliban government

in 2001, he is believed to have lived in hiding in neighboring Pakistan. Although he exerted little influence

ANALYSIS on day-to-day operations of the guerrilla group, his rare statements were considered to set policy for the movement. Just a few weeks ago, a statement attributed to him on the Taliban website tacitly endorsed tentative talks aimed at formalizing a peace process.

But if he indeed died in 2013, as the Afghan government asserted Wednesday, the peace process gradually gained momentum under his deputy and now replacement, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor. Mullah Omar

was regarded as a hard-liner who opposed negotiations with what the Taliban consider a U.S.-installed puppet government.

After a series of informal meetings of Taliban representatives and Afghan civil society leaders, representatives of the insurgent group and the Afghan government held their first formal meeting on July 7 in the Pakistani hill resort of Murree. The next round, which was scheduled for Friday at the same location, was called off by the Pakistani hosts after the Taliban confirmed Mullah Omar's death and claimed no knowledge of the pending talks.

No date was set for a new meeting, but Kabul political an-

alyst Mohammad Younas Fakor predicted the process would continue because Mullah Mansoor, the new leader, was known to support the negotiations.

Mullah Omar's death "had an immediate impact because the second round was pushed back, but in the long term, it won't affect the talks," Fakor said.

There will also probably be little immediate change in the conduct of the war, although fighting could eventually ebb as the various Taliban factions reconsider their options, he said. Later on, however, this could lead to a splintering within the organization if some groups refuse to submit to Mullah Mansoor's leadership.

Islamic State still strong after 1-year start of air campaign

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After billions of dollars spent and more than 10,000 extremist fighters killed, the Islamic State group is no weaker than it was when the U.S.-led bombing campaign began a year ago, American intelligence agencies have concluded.

The military campaign prevented Iraq's collapse and put the militant group under increasing pressure in northern Syria, squeezing its self-proclaimed capital in Raqqa. But intelligence analysts see the overall situation as a strategic stalemate: It remains a well-funded extremist army able to replenish its ranks with foreign jihadis as quickly as the U.S. can eliminate them. Meanwhile, it has expanded to other countries, including Libya, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Afghanistan.

The assessments by the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency and others appear to contradict the line taken by the Obama administration's special envoy, retired Gen. John Allen, who told a forum in Aspen, Colo., last week, "ISIS is losing." The intelligence was described by officials who would not be named because they were not authorized to discuss it publicly.

"We've seen no meaningful degradation in their numbers," a defense official said, citing estimates that put the group's strength at between 20,000 and 30,000, the same estimate as when the airstrikes began in August 2014.

The group's staying power also raises questions about the administration's approach to the threat it poses to the U.S. and its allies. Officials do not believe it is planning complex attacks on

the West from its territory, the group's call to Western Muslims to kill at home has become a serious problem, FBI Director James Comey and other officials say.

The administration's campaign of bombing and training, which prohibits U.S. troops from accompanying fighters into combat or directing airstrikes from the ground, could take a decade to drive the Islamic State group from its safe havens, analysts say. The administration is adamant it will not commit ground troops, despite calls from some in Congress.

The U.S.-led coalition and its Syrian and Kurdish allies have made some inroads. The group has lost 9.4 percent of its territory in the first six months of 2015, according to an analysis by the conflict monitoring group IHS.

Search continues for MH370

Associated Press

SAINT-ANDRE, Reunion — Searchers scored Reunion's shoreline for debris and investigators prepared to load a sea-encrusted wing fragment onto a plane bound for France on Friday to learn whether the aircraft remnant could help unlock the mystery of missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.

It will take at least another day to learn whether the plane missing for 16 months crashed into the sea. Though several officials have expressed confidence that the debris found on the French island of Reunion is from a Boeing 777, French authorities are planning to send the piece to southern France for analysis. The part could arrive Saturday morning, according to the Paris prosecutor's office.

Officials, keenly aware that families of those on board Flight 370 are desperately awaiting word on the fate of their loved ones, hope to have at least some answers within a day or two.

"The most important part of this whole exercise at the moment is to give some kind of closure to the families," said Australian Transport Minister Warren Truss, whose country is leading the search for the plane in a desolate stretch of ocean off Australia's west coast.

Even if the piece is determined to be the first confirmed wreckage from Flight 370, there's no guarantee investigators can find the plane's vital black box recorders or other debris. A multinational search effort now focused on the southern Indian Ocean has come up empty.

The part has been moved to the local airport on Reunion, located off Africa's east coast, and will next head to Toulouse, the hub of Europe's aerospace industry. It will be analyzed in special defense facilities used for airplane testing and analysis, according to the Defense Ministry.

House eases opposition to Tricare copay hikes

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday edged toward raising Tricare copays for prescription drugs as it wrangles with the Senate over ballooning costs that are draining the budget for military health care.

The chamber is willing to support "modest" increases in beneficiary payments as part of the 2016 defense budget, according to a memo that Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, sent to House lawmakers about ongoing negotiations with the Senate. The memo was not released to the public.

The high cost of prescription drugs came to the forefront again last month when the

Defense Department warned Congress of an unexpected \$2 billion shortfall in the Defense Health Program that has nearly depleted all funding for off-base health care.

With political pressure mounting, Thornberry told the House that negotiators are accepting 30 percent of the increases proposed by senators.

The Senate has proposed annual increases that would raise the average copay for a 30-day generic drug prescription from \$8 to \$14 over the coming decade.

The Pentagon said this week that the cost of prescriptions for compound drugs, which are mixed specially for individual patients, increased 1,252 percent between 2012 and 2014.

WikiLeaks cache finds US spied on Japan

TOKYO — The WikiLeaks website published documents Friday that it said shows the U.S. government spied on Japanese officials and companies.

The documents include what appear to be five U.S. National Security Agency reports, four of which are marked top-secret, that provide intelligence on Japanese positions on international trade and climate change. They date from 2007-09.

WikiLeaks also posted what it says is an NSA list of 35 Japanese targets for telephone intercepts including the Japanese Cabinet office, Bank of Japan officials, Finance and Trade Ministry numbers, the natural gas division at Mitsubishi and the petroleum division at Mitsui.

The validity of the documents could not be independently verified.

From Associated Press

Jays, Astros deal for postseason push

Associated Press

HOUSTON — With mere hours until the trade deadline, the Houston Astros and Toronto Blue Jays had sent a clear message that they're going for it — making big moves to try to propel their teams into the playoffs for the first time in a long time.

The Astros haven't reached the postseason since being swept by the White Sox in the 2005 World Series. Toronto's playoff drought is the longest in the majors, with its last trip coming in 1993, when Joe Carter's home run won the World Series.

The Blue Jays acquired All-Star left-hander David Price from Detroit on Thursday, a couple days after getting shortstop Troy Tulowitzki from Colorado.

"These types of players, the great superstar players, rarely become available," Toronto general manager Alex Anthopoulos said. "We think we're a good team and adding a guy like Price we think makes us that much stronger and will give us a chance to win. It's as simple as that."

The Astros made their own moves before the deadline for making non-waiver trades at 4 p.m. EDT Friday.

They added top left-handed starter Scott Kazmir from Oakland last week and picked up two-time All-Star outfielder Carlos Gomez and right-hander Mike Fiers from the Brewers on Thursday night.

"This was a move with an eye toward this year, next year and the year after that, more so than five or seven years from now," Houston general manager Jeff Luhnow said. "That's what our fans want. They want us to win."

In other trades, the Los Angeles Dodgers, who haven't won it all since 1988, the year of Kirk Gibson's pinch homer off Dennis Eckersley, increased their already hefty luxury tax payroll to \$297 million with a three-team deal. It brought them starters Mat Latos from the Marlins and Alex Wood from the Braves as well as relievers Jim Johnson and Luis Avilan from Atlanta.

The Blue Jays are six games back in the American League East and two games out of the second wild card.

"By adding these two," Toronto manager John Gibbons said, "it gives me a shot in the arm. I know that."

In Price they get a proven veteran and high-level starter to bolster a team with a powerful offense. The first overall pick in 2007 is 9-4 with a 2.53 ERA in 21 starts this season.

"They've got a good thing going on right now in Toronto," Price said. "They've kind of been in this situation before and didn't make these type of moves. It definitely shows you that they want to win right now. You have to respect that. You have to like it and that's what you want to be a part of."

The ahead-of-schedule Astros wrapped up a three-game sweep of the Angels on Thursday night to take a two-game lead in the AL West. The young and energetic team has finally coaxed fans back to the park after several miserable years, including dropping 100-plus games in three straight seasons from 2011-13.

"There is a lot of excitement when you add two players of that caliber for this home stretch," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said. "Moves are exciting this time of year. Everybody loves that."

Milwaukee general manager Doug Melvin said a trade fell through Wednesday that would have sent Gomez to the New York Mets for infielder Wilmer Flores and injured pitcher Zack Wheeler.

Luhnow said he had been talking with Melvin for a few weeks and that they resumed talks on Thursday morning. He raved about Gomez.

"He'll be plugged right in," Luhnow said.

"He's an All Star-caliber player. This guy is exciting. Everybody here is going to love him once they get to know him. He's got a lot of energy. ... He has all the tools and abilities in the world."

The 29-year-old Gomez is hitting .262 with eight homers and 43 RBIs in 74 games for the Brewers this season. He is making \$8 million this season and \$9 million in 2016, then can become a free agent.

Gomez, who won a Gold Glove in 2013, is a nine-year veteran coming off a career-best season last year, when he hit .284 with 34 doubles, 23 homers, 73 RBIs and 34 steals. Gomez and Mike Trout are the only players with at least 100 steals and 50 home runs over the last four seasons.

Gomez played for the Mets and the Twins before joining the Brewers in 2010. After a whirlwind 24 hours, Gomez was excited to join a new team in the thick of the postseason race.

"They have a lot of talent," he said. "And they have a great group to play with."

Fiers is 5-9 with a 3.89 ERA in 21 starts for Milwaukee this season. He has 121 strikeouts in 118 innings this season. He won't be a free agent until after the 2019 season.

First-place Dodgers bolster pitching staff

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The first-place Los Angeles Dodgers bolstered their pitching staff on the eve of the trade deadline, completing a 13-player deal with the Atlanta Braves and Miami Marlins that sent two starters and two relievers to the NL West leaders on Thursday.

Clinging to a half-game lead over San Francisco, the Dodgers acquired right-hander Mat Latos from the Marlins and left-hander Alex Wood from the Braves, two pitchers who can move right into the rotation behind aces Clayton Kershaw and Zack Greinke. Also, Los Angeles obtained relievers Jim Johnson and Luis Avilan from Atlanta, adding needed depth to the bullpen.

"To sit here having addressed the biggest areas of need for us in terms of rotation and bullpen, while adding future pieces and preserving the top guys in our farm system, that's a really good outcome," said Andrew Friedman, the Dodgers' president of baseball operations. "Not only for what it does for the 2015 team, but the position it puts us in for the winter and next season and beyond."

The rebuilding Braves kept up their massive overhaul, also surrendering top infield prospect Jose Peraza to the Dodgers largely to land 30-year-old Cuban defector Hector Olivera, an infielder who has impressed in the minors since signing a \$62.5 million, six-year deal with Los Angeles this year.

As for the Marlins, it was another familiar salary dump. Out of contention in the

NL East, Miami rid itself of Latos and first baseman Michael Morse for three minor leaguers. Morse didn't last long with the Dodgers, who designated him for assignment shortly after the trade.

The Dodgers got Wood (7-6, 3.54 ERA), Johnson (2-3, 2.25, nine saves), Avilan (2-4, 3.58), Peraza (.294 with 26 stolen bases for Triple-A Gwinnett) and pitcher Bronson Arroyo from the Braves, along with Latos (4-7, 4.48), Morse (.214, four homers, 12 RBIs) and cash considerations from the Marlins. Arroyo is coming back from Tommy John surgery and hasn't pitched this season, his inclusion in the deal mainly a financial benefit to the Braves.

Atlanta received Olivera, who is hitting a combined .348 with two homers and seven RBIs in 19 games at three different levels of the Dodgers' farm system this season, along with injured left-hander Paco Rodriguez and minor leaguer Zachary Bird, a right-handed pitcher. The Braves also got a draft pick from the Marlins.

Miami acquired minor league right-handers Kevin Guzman, Jeff Brigham and Victor Araujo from the Dodgers, none of whom has pitched above Class A.

Atlanta pays the Dodgers \$7.45 million on Dec. 10 this year, and Miami gives the Dodgers \$2,601,093 on Oct. 15, 2016.

While the Dodgers spent lavishly to land Olivera, they decided the organization has enough depth at second base to make the deal.

"It's not that we thought he was expendable," Friedman said. "This lined up with something that we felt like addressed

some current needs for us."

To clear room in the rotation, Mike Bolsinger will be dropped despite going 5-3 with a 2.83 ERA in 16 starts.

The deadline for making trades without waivers is 4 p.m. EDT Friday. The Dodgers may not be done.

Braves general manager John Hart kept up its efforts to rebuild the team for the long term, with an eye toward the move to a new suburban stadium in 2017. The Braves were eager to sign Olivera after he defected and feel he can be a key offensive player for years to come — even though he's yet to play in the big leagues and his age makes him an unorthodox prospect.

They jumped at the chance to trade for him even though it cost them the 24-year-old Wood, who isn't even eligible for arbitration until 2017, and one of their top prospects in Peraza.

"We really tried to sign the guy and the Dodgers came in and blew us out of the water financially," Hart said before a game at Philadelphia. "We like the player, we like the bat, we like the makeup. This is a guy we felt was major league ready and can come in and hit somewhere in the middle of the order."

Olivera could play second base, third base or even left field in Atlanta, but Braves are more concerned with beefing up their anemic offense. Also, the Dodgers will be responsible for the remaining \$16 million due as part of his \$28 million signing bonus.

But Olivera has battled right elbow problems — leading to a clause in his contract which tacks on another year at just

\$1 million if he has Tommy John surgery at any time during the next six years. He currently is sidelined by a left hamstring injury.

That wasn't enough to dissuade Hart. "Financially, it's just tough to find those bats," he said. "We were able to get a bat we feel is affordable for us because of the fact they paid the signing bonus. We feel this is going to give us the opportunity to do more things to build the club."

The Marlins dumped two big contracts on the Dodgers, whose record luxury-tax payroll climbed to \$297 million. That would lead to a \$43 million assessment at the end of the year under baseball's luxury tax.

Latos is making \$9.4 million in the final year of his contract, while Morse is getting \$7.5 million this year and is owed another \$8.5 million next season.

In other trades:

■ The Cardinals acquired reliever Jonathan Broxton from the Brewers, supplementing their bullpen with another veteran.

The NL Central-leading Cardinals sent minor league outfielder Malik Collymore to their division rivals. St. Louis also received an unspecified amount of cash.

■ The Orioles obtained left fielder Gerardo Parra from the Brewers in a trade for a minor league right-hander Zach Davies.

■ After whiffing on Cole Hamels, the Giants got starter Mike Leake from the Cincinnati Reds for a pair of prospects.

■ The Twins acquired right-handed reliever Kevin Jepsen from the Rays for two minor league pitching prospects.



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Late drama for Astros, Padres

Castro's walkoff homer in 9th gives Houston sweep of Angels

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Few expected the Houston Astros to be contenders entering this season.

Perhaps fewer still can doubt that they have become exactly that.

Jason Castro hit a three-run homer with two outs in the ninth inning to give the Astros a 3-0 victory and a three-game sweep of the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday night.

First-place Houston moved two games ahead of the Angels in the AL West.

"We've continued to fight on and prove that we deserve to be here," Castro said.

It was 0-0 to start the bottom of the ninth inning. Jed Lowrie drew a walk off Jose Alvarez (2-2) with one out before a two-out single by Marwin Gonzalez. Castro then launched his two-out shot off Fernando Salas into the seats in right field to give Houston the victory.

"This has been a fun run so far to get to

this point," manager A.J. Hinch said. "You can downplay it only so much but the resiliency in this team and the methodical continuation of how we approach our games every day is really fun to be a part of."

Luke Gregerson (4-1) pitched a scoreless ninth to complete the three-hitter and get the win.

Scott Kazmir allowed three hits and struck out five in 7²/₃ innings in the first start for the Astros in his hometown and his second since a trade from the Oakland Athletics. He's been dazzling in his first two starts for the Astros, throwing 14²/₃ scoreless innings and allowing just six hits.

Kazmir allowed one earned run this month to give him a major league-leading 0.26 ERA in July.

"This month, being able to use all my pitches and being able to have a feel for them in any count, that's been the key," Kazmir said.

Upton blast caps San Diego's rally from 6-run deficit against Mets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The 44-minute rain delay wasn't the problem for Jeurys Familia. The quality of his pitches was the issue.

Familia returned from the first of two ninth-inning rain delays adding up to almost four hours, taking the mound with two outs and a two-run lead. He gave up three straight hits, including Justin Upton's go-ahead home run that led the San Diego Padres to an 8-7 victory over the New York Mets on Thursday.

"I didn't feel different," Familia said of the delay. "I made a bad pitch, in the middle ... then the home run. I don't have an excuse."

Upton's three-run shot through a driving rain capped a most unusual 24 hours at Citi Field for the Mets, who

wasted a six-run lead in their second straight loss to San Diego.

A night earlier, shortstop Wilmer Flores was left on the field in tears after hearing from fans he'd been traded — in a deal it turns out was prematurely announced by reporters on social media because it never happened.

Now, New York must regroup before opening a three-game set against the NL East-leading Washington Nationals, who have a three-game lead in the division.

"We're all humans out here. You know, we're not tigers in a circus jumping through rings of fire and get put in our cages afterwards," manager Terry Collins said.

Papelbon perfect in debut as Nationals' closer

Associated Press

MIAMI — Max Scherzer scattered three hits over seven innings and Jonathan Papelbon got his first save for Washington with a perfect ninth inning as the Nationals beat the Miami Marlins 1-0 on Thursday.

"To be honest, very nervous," Papelbon said when asked he how felt entering his Washington debut. "I can't really explain it. You come here to a team and expect to win and expect to do your job. That's all that's expected of me. I'm glad it's out of the way."

Backed by Ryan Zimmerman's second-inning homer off Dan Haren, Scherzer (11-8) struck out six and lowered his ERA to 2.22.

Former closer Drew Storen pitched a perfect eighth, striking out two in his new setup role.

"I was in the shower with Storen and

said to him, 'Can you show me that slider grip?'" Papelbon said. "He was really, really good."

Papelbon, acquired Tuesday from Philadelphia, retired Ichiro Suzuki on a comebacker, got Christian Yelich to line out and struck out pinch-hitter Michael Morse for his 18th save in 18 chances this season.

Haren (7-7) gave up four hits in six innings and lowered his ERA to 3.42.

Cardinals 9, Rockies 8: Matt Carpenter hit two home runs and Greg Garcia's bases-loaded walk capped a three-run rally in the ninth as St. Louis beat visiting Colorado.

Rangers 7, Yankees 6: Josh Hamilton delivered a game-ending RBI single with two outs in the ninth as host Texas beat AL East-leading New York. Hamilton also had a three-run homer for the Rangers.

Indians 3, Athletics 1: Carlos Carrasco

threw a two-hitter and Carlos Santana hit a two-run homer as visiting Cleveland beat Oakland.

Blue Jays 5, Royals 2: Dioner Navarro hit a two-run home run, and Russell Martin and Josh Donaldson added solo shots as Toronto beat visiting Kansas City. The Blue Jays have homered in 12 consecutive games since the All-Star break, their longest streak of the season.

Red Sox 8, White Sox 2: Xander Bogaerts and David Ortiz each had three hits as Boston beat Chris Sale, snapping Chicago's seven-game winning streak.

Cubs 5, Brewers 2: Anthony Rizzo hit a three-run homer with two out in the eighth inning as visiting Chicago beat Milwaukee. The Cubs won for the third time in four games since they were swept in a weekend series against lowly Philadelphia.

Twins 9, Mariners 5: Eddie Rosario fin-

ished a single shy of the cycle and drove in three runs to help host Minnesota snap a four-game skid with a victory over Seattle.

Reds 15, Pirates 5: Brandon Phillips hit a pair of three-run homers and drove in a career-high seven runs in a victory that kept Pittsburgh winless in Cincinnati this season.

Tigers 9, Orioles 8: Yoenis Cespedes homered and drove in three runs as visiting Detroit beat Baltimore after shifting into rebuilding mode by trading two of its best pitchers. Mired in fourth place in the AL Central, Detroit dealt starter David Price to Toronto and closer Joakim Soria to Pittsburgh the day before the non-waiver trade deadline.

Phillies 4, Braves 1: Domonic Brown homered and Aaron Harang snapped his losing streak at eight starts, leading host Philadelphia past Atlanta.

Beijing selected to host 2022 Winter Games

Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Beijing was selected Friday to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, defeating the bid from Almaty in a surprisingly close vote to become the first city awarded both the winter and summer Games.

Beijing won the secret vote of the International Olympic Committee 44-40, with one abstention. The vote was conducted by paper ballot, after the first electronic vote experienced technical faults with the voting tablets.

The Chinese capital, which hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics, came in to the vote against the city from Kazakhstan as the strong favorite, despite its lack of natural snow.

Beijing was seen by IOC members as a safe, reliable choice that also offered vast commercial opportunities in a new winter sports market of more than 300 million people in northern China.

"They chose certainty in Beijing," IOC vice president Craig Reedie of Britain said. "But I don't think anybody would have believed that the result would have been that close."

Almaty had hoped to bring the Games to Central Asia for the first time, but was a lesser-known quantity and viewed as a riskier choice by IOC members. Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Massimov made a last-minute impassioned plea for the IOC to be "brave" and give the Games to his country, but it wasn't quite enough.

"Gee, you wouldn't have picked that

close result a few months ago," IOC vice president John Coates of Australia said. "That address by the prime minister today was brilliantly crafted. I think that's why it got close. But the size of China, the number of people that are going to be introduced to winter sport now, those were all factors."

The contest was a study in contrasts between the world's most populous nation and a former Soviet republic seeking to establish itself on the world stage. China's political and economic might was a big advantage against its northwestern neighbor, which became independent in 1991.

"Just as with the Beijing 2008 Summer Games, the Olympic Family has put its faith in Beijing again," the bid committee

said. "This will be a memorable event at the foot of the Great Wall ... that will further enhance the tremendous potential to grow winter sports in our country, in Asia and around the world."

Almaty bid vice chairman Andrey Kryukov said the city would consider bidding again.

"One thing I can say is Almaty was ready to host the 2022 Winter Games," he said.

Beijing and Almaty had both been considered longshots when the 2022 bid race opened two years ago. But they were the only two candidates left after four European cities — including Oslo and Stockholm — pulled out for political or financial reasons.