

Fleet raises concurrent conflict concerns

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Should Russia and China launch competing world conflicts, the Navy is unprepared to fight two wars in separate regions without additional ships, the service's top officer told senators on Thursday.

The current fleet of about 298 ships "is not sized to handle two simultaneous conflicts," Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, said during a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It's sized to fight one and keep a second adversary in check, but in terms of two all-out conflicts, we are not sized for that."

Though Russia's war with Ukraine has garnered much attention in recent months, China is the top "pacing threat" for the U.S. military due to predatory practices in the South China Sea and simmering tensions over Taiwan, according to a document previewing the 2023 National Defense Strategy, which sets the Pentagon's priorities.

With China's persistent threat in the western Pacific region and NATO focused on Russia, the Navy's ability to battle in simultaneous conflicts is of growing importance, said Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri.

"What would the impact be on the Navy's ability to meet its operational requirements in [Europe] if we had to withhold Navy forces from Europe in order to deter Chinese aggression in [the Pacific]?" Hawley said at the hearing.

Gilday said the Navy would be "challenged" to meet both needs.

"You'd have to take a look at how you squeeze the most out of the joint force that you have and use it the best possible way," he said.

In 2018, Congress passed a law requiring the Navy to reach a 355-ship fleet "as soon as practicable," but the number of ships has only dropped in that time due to budget requirements. For example, the proposed 2023 Navy budget calls for adding nine new ships — but cutting 24.

By comparison, China already has 355 ships in its fleet and plans to add about 65 more within the next four years, according to the Pentagon's annual China military report published in November. By 2030, the Chinese fleet is expected to reach 460 ships.

The Navy last month released a 30-year shipbuilding plan that included three options for growing the U.S. fleet — only one of which would allow the Navy to reach the 355-ship

goal. The problem, however, is the plan's financial requirements, Gilday said.

"We would get there with [that option], but it would require real growth in the budget," the admiral said.

Under that plan, the Navy would reach 300 manned ships by 2035 and grow to 367 by 2052. Reaching such a fleet would cost between \$25.3 billion and \$32.7 billion per year, according to a September 2021 report by the Congressional Budget Office.

Gilday said the plan would do "a much better job" of meeting the threat in the Pacific but cautioned it would require more of the shipbuilding industry, which doesn't always meet procurement deadlines.

"The constraint still facing [that option] is the ability of the industrial base to ... actually produce those ships at pace to meet our requirements," he said.

Hawley called it "disturbing" that only one plan comes close to meeting the operational requirements of the Navy to deal with keeping pace with China and urged fellow senators to take seriously the need for additional ships.

"If that's not a wake-up call to the committee, I don't know what it is," he said.

Officials: Russia takes losses in failed river crossing

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia lost significant numbers of troops and important equipment when Ukrainian forces thwarted their attempt to cross a river in the east, British officials said Friday, another sign of Moscow's struggle to win decisive victories and salvage a war gone awry.

Ukraine's airborne command released photos and video of what it said was a damaged Russian pontoon bridge over the Siversky Donets River and several destroyed or damaged Russian military vehicles nearby.

Ukrainian news reports said troops thwarted an attempt by Russian forces to cross the river earlier this week, leaving dozens of tanks and other military vehicles damaged or abandoned. The command said its troops "drowned the Russian occupiers."

Britain's Defense Ministry said that Rus-

sia lost "significant armored maneuver elements" of at least one battalion tactical group as well as equipment used to deploy the makeshift floating bridge.

"Conducting river crossings in a contested environment is a highly risky maneuver and speaks to the pressure the Russian commanders are under to make progress in their operations in eastern Ukraine," the ministry said in its daily intelligence update.

They have struggled to do so, even after diverting troops from other parts of the country to the Donbas, the statement said.

Some analysts initially thought the campaign in the Donbas might offer President Vladimir Putin an easier battleground, after his forces failed to overrun the capital. Instead, Russian and Ukrainian troops have fought village by village.

In that grinding fighting, the Ukrainian

military chief for the eastern Luhansk region said Friday that Russian forces opened fire 31 times on residential areas the day before, destroying dozens of homes, notably in Hirske and Popasnianska villages, and a bridge in Rubizhne.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials claimed another success in the Black Sea, saying their forces took out another Russian ship, though there was no confirmation from Russia and no casualties were reported.

The Vsevolod Bobrov logistics ship was badly damaged but not thought to have sunk when it was struck while trying to deliver an anti-aircraft system to Snake Island, said Oleksiy Arestovych, an adviser to the Ukrainian president.

In April, the Ukrainian military sank the Moskva cruiser, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet. In March it destroyed the landing ship Saratov.

Turkey's leader opposes Finland, Sweden in NATO

Associated Press

HELSINKI — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Friday that his country is “not favorable” toward Finland and Sweden joining NATO, indicating that Turkey could use its status as a member of the Western military alliance to veto moves to admit the two countries.

“We are following developments concerning Sweden and Finland carefully, but we are not of a favorable opinion,” Erdogan told reporters.

The Turkish leader explained his opposition by citing Sweden and other Scandinavian countries’ alleged support for Kurdish militants and others whom Turkey considers to be terrorists. He also accused Greece, a NATO ally, of using the alliance against

Turkey, saying Ankara did not want a repeat of that “mistake.”

Erdogan did not say outright that he would block any accession attempt the two Nordic nations might make, but NATO takes all its decisions by consensus, meaning that each of the 30 member countries has a potential veto over who can join.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said that Finland and Sweden, should they formally apply to join the world’s biggest security organization, would be welcomed with open arms.

The accession procedure could be done in “a couple of weeks,” several NATO officials have said, although it could take around 6 months for member countries to ratify the accession protocol.

Jordan air base to get air traffic control tower

By J.P. LAWRENCE

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military is spending more than a quarter of a billion dollars to build up a seldom-acknowledged air base in Jordan, with the latest project announced earlier this week.

The construction stems from the increased American military presence in Jordan in recent years, as the longtime U.S. ally seeks to bolster its security in the region, analysts said.

The newest contract, worth \$14.6 million, funds construction of an air traffic control tower in the eastern city of Azraq, the Pentagon announced Tuesday.

The project is the seventh awarded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers since 2017 as part of an expenditure of at least \$265 million to repair runways, drill water wells and build dorms that can house up to 280 people.

Although the base isn’t named in the announcement, the Pentagon has identified the headquarters of its 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing’s air combat command as Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Azraq.

The base, located near the border of Iraq and Syria, saw fighter-bombers flying from its runways during the U.S. fight against Islamic State that began in 2014.

The contract announcement preceded the expected meeting of Jordanian leader King Abdullah II and President Joe Biden on Friday. Last week, Abdullah met with top generals at U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Fla., the command confirmed in an email.

While Jordan has had strong ties with the U.S. going back to the 1950s, the kingdom wants to take its relationship to the “next level” by hosting American bases, said Ghaith al-Omari, a senior researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“It is seen as a guarantee that if any of its neighbors try to disrupt it, the U.S. would step in,” al-Omari said.

Annual U.S. aid to Jordan has nearly quadrupled over the past 15 years, and the country now hosts about 3,000 American troops, a recent Congressional Research Service report said.

The U.S. Army shifted supplies from three bases in Qatar to Jordan last summer.

Senators introduce legislation to create Space National Guard

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan group of senators are calling for the creation of a Space National Guard, reviving a yearslong effort to place Air National Guard members working for the U.S. Space Force directly under the command of the military’s newest branch.

Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla., introduced the Space National Guard Establishment Act on Wednesday to correct a misalignment that has about 1,000 National Guard members working on space missions within the Air Force rather than the Space Force. The Guard troops are in 16 Air National Guard units stationed across eight states and territories.

“Without a National Guard component for Space Force, we risk losing many talented individuals who want to keep serving their country and their states after they leave active duty, and that is simply unacceptable,” Feinstein said. “Creating a Space Force National Guard would also save mon-

ey and ensure a smoother process in the event we need to activate personnel.”

The legislation matches a House bill introduced last year and follows a request by the Space Force to integrate its active duty and Reserve personnel into a single command structure.

“This is our No. 1 legislative proposal,” Gen. John Raymond, chief of space operations for the Space Force, told the House Armed Services Committee last month.

Raymond said the Space Force explored several options for integration, including setting up a Space National Guard or removing the Air National Guard from the service entirely. When the Space Force was created in 2019, active-duty troops from the Air Force were moved into the new branch but there was no such transfer for the Air National Guard.

If the legislation becomes law, the need to route funding between the Air Force and the Space Force would be eliminated, senators said. The Space Force would also be able to better implement its policies and culture, they added.

Jan. 6 panel subpoenas McCarthy, 4 others

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A House panel issued subpoenas Thursday to House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy and four other GOP lawmakers in its probe into the violent Jan. 6 Capitol riot, an extraordinary step that has little precedent and is certain to further inflame partisan tensions over the 2021 attack.

The panel is investigating McCarthy's conversations with then-President Donald Trump the day of the attack and meetings the four other lawmakers had with the White House beforehand as Trump and his aides worked to overturn his 2020 election defeat. The former president's supporters violently pushed past police that day, broke through windows and doors of the Capitol and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

The decision to issue subpoenas to McCarthy, R-Calif., and Reps. Jim Jordan

of Ohio, Scott Perry of Pennsylvania, Andy Biggs of Arizona and Mo Brooks of Alabama is a dramatic show of force by the panel, which has already interviewed nearly 1,000 witnesses and collected more than 100,000 documents.

The move is not without risk, as Republicans are favored to capture back the House majority in this fall's midterm elections and have promised retribution for Democrats if they take control.

After the announcement, McCarthy, who aspires to be House speaker, told reporters "I have not seen a subpoena" and said his view on the Jan. 6 committee has not changed since the nine-lawmaker panel asked for his voluntary cooperation earlier this year.

"They're not conducting a legitimate investigation," McCarthy said. "Seems as though they just want to go after their political opponents."

Similarly, Perry told reporters the investigation is a "charade" and said the subpoena is "all about headlines."

Neither man said whether he would comply.

The panel, made up of seven Democrats and two Republicans, had previously asked for voluntary cooperation from the five lawmakers, along with a handful of other GOP members, but all of them refused to speak with the panel, which debated for months whether to issue the subpoenas.

"Before we hold our hearings next month, we wished to provide members the opportunity to discuss these matters with the committee voluntarily," said Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the Democratic chairman of the panel. "Regrettably, the individuals receiving subpoenas today have refused and we're forced to take this step to help ensure the committee uncovers facts concerning January 6th."

Biden looks to nudge ASEAN leaders to speak out on Russia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is looking to nudge southeast Asian leaders to be more outspoken about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the issue continues to be a delicate one for many members of the region's 10-country alliance with deep ties to Moscow.

Biden welcomed leaders from Association of Southeast Asian Nations to the White House on Thursday night for an intimate dinner to kick off the two-day summit, the first meeting of the group to be held in Washington in its 45-year history.

The White House is also trying to demonstrate that it is stepping up in the Pacific even as the administration has been focused on the war in Ukraine. It announced that the United States would commit to more than \$150 million in new projects to bolster Southeast Asia's climate, maritime and public health infrastructure.

But Biden knows that finding consensus with ASEAN members on the Russian invasion could prove to be difficult.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Thursday said Ukraine would be on the agenda for the talks, but she couldn't make a prediction on whether the group would touch on the Russian invasion in the summit's communique.

"I will say that a number of the ASEAN participants have been important partners in calling out the aggressive action of Russia," she said, and "in participating and in supporting sanctions and, certainly, abiding by them."

Some ASEAN members — Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos — for years have depended on Russia for military hardware. With the exception of Singapore — the only member to impose direct sanctions against Moscow — the alliance has avoided criticizing President Vladimir Putin or Russia's prosecution of the war.

Indonesia has been guarded in its public comments on the invasion and, as has the Philippines, made clear it won't impose sanctions against Russia. Thailand joined a United Nations vote against the invasion of Ukraine, but has maintained a position of neutrality in the war.

The top leaders from ASEAN member Myanmar were barred from attending, while outgoing Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte dispatched Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. to represent his government.

The ASEAN nations include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Elon Musk says Twitter deal is briefly on hold

Associated Press

LONDON — Elon Musk said Friday that his plan to buy Twitter is "temporarily on hold" as he tries to pinpoint the exact number of spam and fake accounts on the social media platform, another twist amid signs of turmoil over the proposed \$44 billion acquisition.

Musk has been vocal about his desire to clean up Twitter's problem with "spam bots" that mimic real people and appeared to question whether the company was underreporting them.

In a tweet, the Tesla billionaire linked to a Reuters story from May 2 about a quarterly report from Twitter that estimated false or spam accounts made up fewer than 5% of the company's "monetizable daily active users" in the first quarter.

"Twitter deal temporarily on hold pending details supporting calculation that spam/fake accounts do indeed represent less than 5% of users," Musk said, indicating he's skeptical that the number of inauthentic accounts is that low.

It wasn't clear whether the issue could scuttle the deal. Musk later tweeted that he's "still committed to acquisition."

Formula swapped, sold amid shortage

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden stepped up his administration's response to a nationwide baby formula shortage Thursday that has forced frenzied parents into online groups to swap and sell to each other to keep their babies fed.

The president discussed with executives from Gerber and Reckitt how they could increase production and how his administration could help, and talked with leaders from Walmart and Target about how to restock shelves and address regional disparities in access to formula, the White House said.

The administration plans to monitor possible price gouging and work with trading partners in Mexico, Chile, Ireland and the Netherlands on imports, even though 98% of

baby formula is domestically made.

The problem is the result of supply chain disruptions and a safety recall, and has had a cascade of effects: Retailers are limiting what customers can buy, and doctors and health workers are urging parents to contact food banks or physicians' offices, in addition to warning against watering down formula to stretch supplies or using online DIY recipes.

The shortage is weighing particularly on lower-income families after the recall by formula maker Abbott, stemming from contamination concerns. The recall wiped out many brands covered by WIC, a federal program like food stamps that serves women, infants and children, though the program now permits brand substitutes. The Biden administration is working with states to

make it easier for WIC recipients to buy different sizes of formula that their benefits might not currently cover.

About half of infant formula nationwide is purchased by participants using WIC benefits, according to the White House.

Some parents are using social media to bridge supply gaps.

Ashley Maddox, a 31-year-old mother of two from San Diego, started a Facebook group on Wednesday after failing to find formula for her 5-month-old son, Cole, at the commissary on the Navy base.

"I connected with a gal in my group and she had seven cans of the formula I need that were just sitting in her house that her baby didn't need anymore," she said. "So I drove out, it was about a 20-minute drive and picked it up and paid her. It was a miracle."

Photo taken of black hole at Milky Way center

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The world's first image of the chaotic supermassive black hole at the center of our Milky Way galaxy doesn't portray a voracious cosmic destroyer but what astronomers Thursday called a "gentle giant" on a near-starvation diet.

The colorized image unveiled Thursday is from an international consortium behind the Event Horizon Telescope, a collection of eight synchronized radio telescopes around the world. Getting a good image was a challenge; previous efforts found the black hole too jumpy.

"It burbled and gurgled as we looked at it," the University of Arizona's Feryal Ozel said.

She described it as a "gentle giant" while announcing the breakthrough along with other astronomers involved in the project. The picture also confirms Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity: The black hole is precisely the size that Einstein's equations dictate. It is about the size of the orbit of Mercury around our sun.

Black holes gobble up galactic material but Ozel said this one is "eating very little." It's the equivalent to a person eating a single grain of rice over millions of years, another astronomer said.

"Pictures of black holes are the hardest thing to think about," said astronomer Andrea Ghez of the University of California, Los Angeles. She wasn't part of the telescope team but earned a Nobel Prize for the dis-

covery of the Milky Way's black hole in the 1990s.

She said the image of "my baby" is exactly how it should be — an eerie-looking orange-red ring with utter blackness in the middle.

Scientists had expected the Milky Way's black hole to be more violent, especially since the only other image from another galaxy shows a far bigger and more active black hole.

"It is the cowardly lion of black holes," said project scientist Geoffrey C. Bower of Taiwan's Academia Sinica Institute of Astronomy and Astrophysics.

Because the black hole "is on a starvation diet" so little material is falling into the center, and that allows astronomers to gaze deeper, Bower said.

Survivors rescued after boat capsizes near Puerto Rico

Associated Prses

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — At least 38 people have been rescued and 11 bodies found as the U.S. Coast Guard scoured the waters northwest of Puerto Rico on Friday in a bid to find more survivors after a boat carrying suspected migrants capsized.

The group was first spotted Thursday morning by a U.S. Customs and Border Protection helicopter, with authorities warning it likely would have been too late to rescue anyone otherwise. Rescue efforts were con-

centrated in an area more than 11 miles north of the uninhabited island of Desecheo, which lies west of Puerto Rico.

"We always look for the possibility of finding survivors," said Coast Guard spokesman Ricardo Castrodad, adding that crews worked through the night.

It was not immediately clear how many people were in the boat. Of the 38 survivors, 36 were Haitian and two were from the Dominican Republic, he said. At least eight Haitian nationals have been hospitalized,

although the nationalities of all those aboard was not immediately known.

Authorities in recent months have noted a sharp increase in migrants, especially from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, making what they describe as dangerous voyages aboard rickety ships that often capsize or drop people off in uninhabited islands. It is one of the cheapest ways for migrants to flee poverty and violence, especially in Haiti amid a spike in inflation, kidnappings and brutal gang violence.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Resort surprises 5,400 workers with bonuses

NV LAS VEGAS — Joyous bedlam erupted Wednesday at an employee appreciation and awards buffet at The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas when the resort chief executive announced that all 5,400 people who work there will receive a \$5,000 bonus.

“It’s amazing!” said Edgar Rives, a cook for nine years in the employee cafeteria, after a round of high-five hand slaps and hugs with dancing co-workers at The Chelsea theater at the Las Vegas Strip property. “It’s a big surprise.”

Perhaps half of the resort’s workers attended the midweek event, where executives from Blackstone Real Estate Americas and The Cosmopolitan, including resort President and CEO Bill McBeath, credited them with maintaining “a youthful, exuberant brand” while working through the coronavirus pandemic.

Landmark painted gold to mark anniversary

WA SEATTLE — The roof of Seattle’s iconic Space Needle has been painted “Galaxy Gold” — the original color of the landmark when it opened during the city’s 1962 World’s Fair.

The 605-foot tower’s paint job is part of the 60th anniversary of Seattle Center, the 74-acre campus that was built for the World’s Fair and now features a sports and performing arts stadium, cultural centers, the city’s popular independent radio station and other amenities.

The anniversary celebration,

which began in April, continues for six months.

Man admits guilt in church check thefts

MD GREENBELT — A Florida man has pleaded guilty in connection with the theft of more than 2,600 checks intended for religious institutions in several states that were deposited into fake bank accounts, a federal prosecutor in Maryland said.

Florin Vaduva, 31, of Dania Beach, Fla., pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bank fraud and wire fraud. The plea agreement orders Vaduva to pay at least \$1 million restitution, U.S. Attorney Erek L. Barron announced Tuesday in a news release.

The guilty plea says that from June 2018 to January 2021, Vaduva and at least five others conspired to steal checks intended for religious institutions and deposit them into multiple fraudulent bank accounts. The checks were stolen from roadside mailboxes.

Viral disease reduces deer hunt licenses

ND BISMARCK — The number of licenses for this year’s deer hunt in North Dakota has been reduced because of an outbreak of a viral disease last year.

The state Game and Fish Department is making 64,200 licenses available, down 8,000 from last year.

“Epizootic hemorrhagic disease dramatically reduced white-tailed deer numbers along the Missouri River and parts of some western hunting

units” in 2021, department Wildlife Chief Casey Anderson said. “As a result, license allocations in some units were dramatically reduced.”

The drought in North Dakota last year created perfect breeding areas for biting gnats that transmit the disease. It impacts white-tailed deer more than mule deer, due to the makeup of the animals. It’s not considered a danger to people, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

Black college closes after 157 years

IL CHICAGO — A historically Black college in central Illinois named after Abraham Lincoln and founded the year the former president was assassinated closed this week, months after a cyberattack that compounded enrollment struggles due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Lincoln College, which saw record enrollment numbers in 2019, said in a news release that it scrambled to stay afloat with fundraising campaigns, a consolidation of employee positions, and exploring leasing alternatives.

The school opened in 1865 in Lincoln, about 170 miles southwest of Chicago.

Driver steers bus into ditch to avoid gunshots

NC DURHAM — A North Carolina school bus driver steered his vehicle into a ditch to avoid gunfire on Monday afternoon and no one on the bus was hurt, police said.

Durham police said in a news release that witnesses told offi-

cers that gunfire was exchanged between two vehicles on East Club Boulevard around 4:30 p.m. and the driver of the bus took evasive action to avoid the shooting.

Police found numerous shell casings at the scene, but didn’t find any shooting victims. Police said the school bus, which was not damaged, was not the intended target of the gunfire.

News outlets report that Durham schools spokesman Chip Sudderth said the school bus was carrying 18 students from City of Medicine Academy and Durham School of the Arts, the driver and one other adult. Another bus arrived to pick up the students to take them home.

University probes noose in tree as a hate crime

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Stanford University said it found a noose hanging from a tree outside of a residence hall and is investigating the incident as a hate crime.

In an email to students and staff, university officials said campus safety authorities immediately “removed the noose and retained it as evidence,” after receiving a report that a noose was seen outside an undergraduate dormitory.

“We cannot state strongly enough that a noose is a reprehensible symbol of anti-Black racism and violence that will not be tolerated on our campus,” said the email from Vice Provosts Susie Brubaker-Cole and Patrick Dunkley. “It is the moral responsibility of those with any knowledge of this incident to come forward” so appropriate action can be taken.

— From Associated Press

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Heat top 76ers, advance to 2nd round

Associated press

PHILADELPHIA — Max Strus probably couldn't have envisioned this.

Division II player when he started college. Ended up at DePaul and went undrafted. Bounced around a couple of summer leagues. Went to training camp with Boston and didn't make the team. Signed two-way contracts with three different franchises. Spent time in the G League. Played all of six minutes as a rookie in the NBA two seasons ago.

And now, he's a starter on a team going to the Eastern Conference finals.

For the ninth time overall, and for the sixth time in the last 12 seasons, the Miami Heat are in the NBA's Final Four. A 99-90 win in Philadelphia on Thursday night gave the Heat a 4-2 series win in an East semifinal series, sending the Heat into the conference finals against Boston or Milwaukee.

That series, no matter the op-

ponent, starts Tuesday in Miami.

"It's one of the biggest moments, not only in my career, but in my life," Strus said. "This is the moment you want to be in being a basketball player and doing what we do for a living. And I'm super excited and want to start tomorrow."

Jimmy Butler led the way for Miami with 32 points, continuing his postseason of incredible numbers. Strus added 20 points, 11 rebounds and five assists for the Heat, joining a very small club of Miami players who have done that in postseason play.

LeBron James did it seven times. Bam Adebayo has three such games, Butler has two, and three players have one — Dwyane Wade, Shaquille O'Neal and Max Strus. Few might have suspected a couple of years ago that his name would have been in a sentence alongside players like those, but here he is.

"He's gotten so much better from the time we started this year," Heat forward P.J. Tucker said. "He's definitely our most improved. He's really stepped up to be a guy that we count on, not only to make shots but to be aggressive. ... Even if he didn't believe in himself, we believed in him."

With good reason.

Strus was playing a role for the Heat until late March, when Miami coach Erik Spoelstra decided it was time for a bigger role. The No. 1 seed in the East was beginning to slip away from the Heat and Spoelstra made some rotation tweaks — the most notable one being putting Strus in the starting lineup over Duncan Robinson.

Spoelstra agonized over the decision. The Heat are 14-3 when Strus starts since.

"He did everything last year and this summer to put himself in position to be able to take on a bigger role," Spoelstra said.

It wasn't just Strus who did

that. Gabe Vincent — like Strus, one who went undrafted — had to start at point for Miami in all four of the Heat wins against Philadelphia because Kyle Lowry has a bad hamstring. And hamstrings are unpredictable, meaning there's no assurance Lowry will be ready for Game 1 against the Bucks or Celtics next week, either.

Without those two, this series could have had a very different outcome for Miami. But that wasn't the case, and the Heat headed out of Philadelphia happy, with half of the 16 wins they'll need to win an NBA title.

Strus can't wait for the next challenge. He thinks the Heat are built for this.

"Our connection and trust in each other, it's there. It's special," Strus said. "You can tell. It's not just on the court, it's off. We all really like each other and enjoy each other, and love being around each other and want to play hard for each other."

Doncic, Mavericks cruise past Suns, force Game 7

Associated Press

DALLAS — Luka Doncic has his first victory in an elimination game.

Now the young Dallas superstar gets another one — and another Game 7 to boot.

Doncic scored 33 points and the Mavericks beat the Phoenix Suns 113-86 on Thursday night to force a deciding game in the Western Conference semifinals.

The home team has won all six games, none with a margin closer than seven points. A trip to the West finals will be at stake Sunday in Phoenix.

The Mavericks won when facing elimination for the first time in three tries with the 23-year-old Doncic, their three-time All-Star point guard.

The two losses came against the Clippers the past two sea-

sons, including Game 7 in Los Angeles last year after the visitors won the first six games, a first in the playoffs. Dallas is playing beyond the first round for the first time since winning the title 11 years ago, when first-year coach Jason Kidd was the point guard.

"I don't know if he was playing as if he was trying to do something different," Kidd said. "I think he enjoys the moment. You guys have seen a little bit longer than I have up close. He's not afraid of the stage. I think you guys call it the first time winning an elimination game. He'll be in this situation a long, long time."

The Suns, seeking a second consecutive trip to the conference finals, are going the distance in a series for the first time

in two postseasons with Chris Paul and Devin Booker. The previous three went six, including Phoenix's loss to Milwaukee last year in the NBA Finals.

Booker scored 19 points but was shut out from three-point range (0-for-4) while going 6-for-17. Deandre Ayton had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Paul added 13 points.

The top-seeded Suns were held to a season low in scoring, regular season or playoffs, for the second time in the series. They shot a playoff-low 40% with 22 turnovers, the most all season.

"I don't have enough time to talk about everything that's eating at me," coach Monty Williams said. "I didn't think we understood the desperation they were going to play with. Couple

that with the turnovers that we had tonight, it's a recipe for what we just got."

Paul, 37, is now in line for his eighth Game 7, while Booker, 27, is about to play his first.

"Greatest two words in sports," Booker said. "I'm excited to feel the energy. I'm excited to be a part of it. It's a great opportunity."

Reggie Bullock scored 19 points for Dallas, going 5-for-11 from three-point range after being held scoreless and getting just five shots total in Game 5. Jalen Brunson added 18, and Spencer Dinwiddie had a series-high 15, all on threes (5-for-7).

Doncic played through an apparent left leg injury that sent him to the locker room when he would have been out of the game anyway in the second quarter.

Blues finish Wild, move into 2nd round

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — The St. Louis Blues eliminated the Minnesota Wild in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs with a mid-series goalie change and an unconventional lineup.

Now, the team heads to Colorado to face the top-seeded Avalanche in the second round.

“I don’t mind starting the playoffs on the road,” Blues forward David Perron said. “I think a lot of times you have just nerves sitting at home and when you start on the road, you’re at the hotel kind of sitting with the guys.”

The Blues have met the Avalanche in the playoffs twice before, losing both matchups, including getting swept in the first round last season.

The Blues are confident they are in a better position to compete with Colorado than they were last year.

“I think we’re a better team

than last year for sure,” Blues captain Ryan O’Reilly said. “It’s gonna be a very tough challenge for us. You know, they’re one of, if not the best, team in the league this year. They’re dynamic, deep as well.”

The Blues had nine players score at least 20 goals this season, the most in the NHL.

“We’re deeper this year than we were last year,” Blues coach Craig Berube said. “Up front we’re deeper, back end we’re deeper. So, I think it’ll be a tough series for sure.”

The Blues’ depth on the blue line was tested against the Wild. St. Louis lost Nicky Leddy, Robert Bortuzzo and Torey Krug to injuries in the first three games of the opening round.

Leddy and Bortuzzo returned for Game 5, but Krug (lower body) remains day to day. The injuries prompted the coaching staff to employ a starting lineup of 11 forwards and seven defen-

semen in the final three games against Minnesota.

“There’s a lot a lot that goes into it,” Blues forward Tyler Bozak said. “They (the coaches) see the game different than we do. They are watching all the time and they kind of get a really good feel for who’s going good and what they think is gonna work for us. So, obviously they made some really good decisions in this series.”

Scott Perunovich, who was an emergency call-up following Krug’s injury, is the seventh defenseman and has taken Krug’s spot on the power play, which went 8-for-26 against the Wild, scoring at least once in every game.

“I know we used a lot of (defensemen) in the series, but they all had a job to do and they did it,” Berube said. “That’s what it boils down to. And that was a big reason we stuck with the seven.”

The Blues won the last three games against the Wild after switching to goalie Jordan Binnington in Game 4. Binnington stopped 84 of 89 shots he faced for a .944 save percentage.

“I tried to have the mindset of going in there and just competing and giving the team a chance to win,” Binnington said.

The Blues’ upcoming opponent has had plenty of time to rest.

The Avalanche were the first team to advance to the second round this postseason, sweeping the Nashville Predators.

Colorado trailed in its opening series for a grand total of 4 minutes, 57 seconds, all in Game 4.

The Avalanche averaged 5.25 goals per game and converted at a 43.8% clip on the man advantage.

The Blues’ penalty kill allowed four goals in 24 attempts (83.3%) in the first round.

Point’s OT goal keeps Lightning alive, forces Game 7

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The Tampa Bay Lightning saved their season, keeping their bid for a three-peat alive.

The two-time defending Stanley Cup champions rallied to beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-3 in overtime on Thursday night, staving off elimination and forcing a winner-take-all Game 7 in the first-round playoff series between the Atlantic Division rivals.

Brayden Point scored the winning goal on a rebound with 1:56 remaining in the first extra period, touching off a raucous celebration in the stands at sold-out Amalie Arena and handing Toronto another crushing post-season blow.

Ondrej Palat, Anthony Cirelli and Nikita Kucherov also scored for the Lightning, who blew a two-goal lead for the second straight game and trailed

3-2 entering the third period.

But unlike Tuesday night, when Toronto came from behind to win Game 5 at home, the Maple Leafs couldn’t hold off the reigning champs to claim their first playoff series win in 18 years.

Game 7 is Saturday in Toronto.

“All we did was buy another chance to keep our season going,” Point said.

“It all comes down to one game. ... Those are fun ones to play in,” Cirelli added.

The Lightning are trying to become the first team to capture three consecutive Stanley Cup titles since the New York Islanders won four in a row from 1980-83.

Andrei Vasilevskiy had 30 saves — nine in overtime — to improve to 18-0 in games following a playoff loss over the past three postseasons.

Jack Campbell stopped 32 of 36 shots for the Maple Leafs, whose fortunes shifted dramatically when they were whistled for two high-sticking penalties within a 16-second span of the third period.

Bruins 5, Hurricanes 2: Brad Marchand scored one goal and assisted on another, and Jeremy Swayman stopped 23 shots to lead host Boston past Carolina and send their first-round playoff series to a decisive seventh game.

The home team has won all six games in the series so far — an edge for Carolina, which will host Game 7 on Saturday.

Charlie Coyle also scored for Boston, and Erik Haula and Derek Forbort added third-period goals before Curtis Lazar backhanded the puck into the empty net with 4:17 to play.

Andrei Svechnikov scored twice and Antti Raanta made 29

saves for the Hurricanes, who have won three games by a combined score of 15-4 and lost three by a total of 14-6.

Oilers 4, Kings 2: Evander Kane had two goals and an assist, Connor McDavid added a goal and two assists, Tyson Barrie scored the go-ahead goal in the third period and visiting Edmonton avoided elimination.

Kane has seven goals in the series, including three multi-goal games. The road team has won four times in the series.

Cody Ceci added a pair of assists and Mike Smith stopped 30 shots for the Oilers, who host the deciding Game 7 on Saturday night in Edmonton.

Sean Durzi and Carl Grundstrom scored for Los Angeles, which was looking to wrap up its first series since defeating the New York Rangers in the 2014 Stanley Cup Final. Jonathan Quick made 33 saves.

Rams host Bills to kick off NFL season

Associated Press

To the Super Bowl winner goes the spoils of opening the entire schedule at home.

So the Los Angeles Rams will host the Buffalo Bills on Thursday night, Sept. 8, to begin the 2022 season.

It's a juicy matchup of the team generally considered the title favorite by oddsmakers in the Bills traveling to SoFi Stadium, where the Rams won the championship over Cincinnati in February.

The Bengals are home to their division rivals, the Steelers, on Sunday, Sept. 11, when all but two other teams get started. Those clubs playing Monday night also offer an enticing storyline: Russell Wilson bringing his Broncos to Seattle. The Seahawks traded their longtime quarterback to Denver in the

offseason.

Sunday's prime-time game features Tom Brady — unless he retires again before September — and the Buccaneers at Dallas. Brady's decision to unretire after a short hiatus forced NFL schedule makers to scramble and redo some of the game slots.

The rest of opening Sunday has some eye-opening matches, such as Jacksonville, with new coach Doug Pederson, at Washington, with new quarterback Carson Wentz. Pederson coached Wentz in Philadelphia and won a Super Bowl with the Eagles, although Nick Foles was behind center with Wentz injured.

Several key division matchups are on tap for Sept. 11: New Orleans at Atlanta, Indianapolis at Houston, New England at

Miami, Las Vegas at the Los Angeles Chargers and Green Bay at Minnesota.

Also, it will be Cleveland at Carolina, San Francisco at Chicago, Philadelphia at Detroit, Baltimore at the New York Jets, Kansas City at Arizona, and the New York Giants at Tennessee.

Teams that will open on the road and will be home in Week 2 include Kansas City hosting the Chargers in the first Amazon Prime Video game on Thursday night. Also, it will be Miami at Baltimore, the New York Jets at Cleveland, Indianapolis at Jacksonville, Tampa Bay at New Orleans, Carolina at the New York Giants, New England at Pittsburgh, Seattle at San Francisco, Houston at Denver, Arizona at Las Vegas, Chicago at Green Bay at night, Tennessee at Buffalo on Monday night, followed

by Minnesota at Philadelphia.

Finally playing at home in Week 3 will be Indianapolis against Kansas City, Minnesota against Detroit, New England vs. Baltimore, and Tampa Bay vs. Green Bay, with Brady facing Aaron Rodgers.

Previously revealed was that one of the Christmas Day games, Denver at the Rams, will be televised by Nickelodeon as well as CBS. Slime, anyone? The other Christmas games are Green Bay at Miami in the 1 p.m. slot, then Tampa Bay at Arizona at night.

Christmas Eve will also have a contest, with the Raiders at the Steelers.

The traditional Thanksgiving games will have Detroit hosting Buffalo, Dallas at home for the Giants, and New England at Minnesota at night.

Astros take 2 from Twins, extend winning streak to 10

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Luis Garcia and three relievers combined on a seven-hitter, Yordan Álvarez homered twice and Jeremy Peña capped a big day with three hits as the Houston Astros extended their winning streak to 10 games with a 5-0 victory over the Minnesota Twins on Thursday.

Houston completed a three-game sweep. Before the regularly scheduled game, the teams completed a game suspended after three innings on Wednesday night due to severe weather. Jose Altuve homered, doubled and drove in three runs in an 11-3 victory.

The Astros have given up just 11 runs during the streak with five shutouts and a 0.90 ERA over that stretch.

Garcia (3-1) gave up five hits and two walks while striking out nine in five innings to win his second consecutive start. Josh Winder (2-1) took the loss.

Yankees 15, White Sox 7:

Giancarlo Stanton homered twice and drove in six runs, and visiting New York used a seven-run eighth inning to beat Chicago for its fourth straight victory.

Aaron Judge and Josh Donaldson also connected for major league-leading New York in the opener of an eight-game trip. Judge had four RBIs, and Donaldson drove in three runs as New York won for the 16th time in 18 games.

Mets 4, Nationals 1: Taijuan Walker (1-0) pitched seven scoreless innings and visiting New York remained unbeaten in 10 series this season, cruising past sloppy Washington.

Mark Canha went 3-for-4 with a homer and three RBIs for the NL East-leading Mets, who took two of three from the last-place Nationals. New York has won nine series and split one, and hasn't lost two straight games in a month.

Athletics 5, Tigers 3: Seth Brown hit a tiebreaking, two-

run homer in the eighth off Michael Fulmer (1-2) following Jed Lowrie's walk, sending host Detroit to its ninth loss in 10 games.

Oakland arrived with a nine-game losing streak and won four of five from the Tigers.

Orioles 3, Cardinals 2: Rylan Bannon became just the third Baltimore player since 2000 to get a hit on the first pitch of his big league career, and Jorge Mateo and Anthony Bembom homered off Steven Matz (3-3) in a win over host St. Louis.

Keegan Akin (1-0), the second of six Orioles pitchers, got just his fourth win in 16 big league decisions, allowing one hit over 2½ scoreless innings and striking out four on a bullpen day for the Orioles. Felix Bautista got four straight outs for his second save of the series and the season.

Reds 4, Pirates 0: Connor Overton (1-0) got his first major league win and combined with two relievers on a four-hitter

for visiting Cincinnati's first shutout of the season.

Overton allowed three hits and four walks in 6⅓ innings with one strikeout. The 28-year-old right-hander got nine outs on ground balls.

Rangers 3, Royals 1: Taylor Hearn (2-2) allowed only one hit in five scoreless innings, Brad Miller homered and host Texas defeated Kansas City.

The Royals' first hit literally was off Hearn. Michael A. Taylor sent a liner up the middle off the pitcher's leg that continued to the left of second base and into left field with two out in the second inning.

Phillies 9, Dodgers 7: Bryce Harper homered and drove in three runs as visiting Philadelphia pushed two runs across in the ninth inning after squandering a six-run lead and beat Los Angeles.

The Phillies saw their 7-1 lead evaporate after the Dodgers used a four-run eighth to tie the game 7-all.