

Taiwan on alert in response to Chinese drills

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Taiwan scrambled jets and put military units on alert on Thursday in response to China's two-day military exercise surrounding the island, according to the Associated Press.

The Chinese drills, dubbed Joint Sword 2024A, include components from its army, navy, air force and rocket force, China's Eastern Theater Command said Thursday in a series of posts to the Weibo social media website.

The training includes sea and air combat patrols, battle-field control and "joint precision attack" drills, a post said.

The exercise effectively surrounds Taiwan, according to imagery shared by the command on Weibo. The drills began at 7:45 a.m., according to the state-sponsored Xinhua News Agency.

"This is also a powerful punishment for the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces seeking 'independence' and a serious warning to external

forces for interference and provocation," command spokesman Col. Li Xi said in one of the social media posts.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense condemned the exercise Thursday afternoon and said China's actions jeopardized regional peace and stability.

"We seek no conflicts, but we will not shy away from one to ensure our nation's safety and protect our beautiful homeland," the ministry wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

The ministry regularly posts 12-hour updates on the number of Chinese aircraft and warships operating near Taiwan, but had released no details of activity around the island as of Thursday afternoon.

The drills come just three days after Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, was sworn into office.

Lai, a member of the Democratic Progressive Party, pledged to continue the direction set by his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen. Beijing looks at

Lai as a separatist, according to a report Monday by Japanese public broadcaster NHK.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin critiqued the congratulations U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken gave upon Lai's inauguration Monday.

"'Taiwan independence' leads nowhere, and anyone who connives at and supports 'Taiwan independence' is doomed to failure," Wang was quoted as saying Monday in remarks posted on the Foreign Ministry website.

China views Taiwan, a self-governing island, as a break-away province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Lai in his inaugural speech called on China to "cease its political and military intimidation against Taiwan," according to a translation posted by Taiwan's presidential office.

He also asked China to "share with Taiwan the global responsibility of maintaining peace and stability in the Tai-

wan Strait as well as the greater region, and ensure the world is free from the fear of war."

The exercises are clearly meant to send a message to Lai and are consistent with "the coercive diplomacy Beijing has exercised toward Taiwan" in the past, said Jeffrey Kingston, a professor of history and Asian studies at Temple University.

Tsai "stood up to Beijing's bullying, and it wants to discourage such behavior," he told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

China reacted similarly when Tsai visited California to meet with former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in April 2023. Beijing launched a three-day exercise, also called Joint Sword, around the island.

Last year's drills were on par with Chinese exercises in response to Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022, with five days of exercises that included missile launches, aircraft sorties and naval drills.

Navy, Dutch meet for rare training in South China Sea

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A pair of U.S. Navy ships took advantage of a rare chance to train alongside a Dutch vessel this week in the South China Sea, according to U.S. 7th Fleet.

The littoral combat ship USS Mobile, the dry cargo ship USNS Wally Schirra and the Dutch frigate HNLMS Tromp focused on maneuvers, communications and "routine bilateral surface operations," fleet spokeswoman Lt. Jamie Moroney told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

She declined to say exactly where the training took place, citing operational security concerns.

"The Netherlands is one of our oldest, continuous bilateral relationships, stemming from the 18th century," Capt. Sean Lewis, commander of Destroyer Squadron 7, said Wednesday in a 7th Fleet news release. "I look forward to any opportunity to work together with partners and allies, especially at sea."

While Dutch warships regularly work alongside the United States, their presence in the Indo-Pacific is less frequent. Moroney couldn't immediately verify when a Dutch warship last operated with 7th Fleet.

In 2021, the Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen joined the British aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth's strike group in the

Philippine Sea for drills alongside the carriers USS Ronald Reagan and USS Carl Vinson.

A Netherlands navy spokesperson did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment Thursday.

"We're fortunate to work together with allies and to have them provide replenishment to us. Operating together fortifies our existing relationship with our partners from the U.S.," the Tromp's skipper, Cmdr. Yvonne van Beusekom, said in 7th Fleet's release. "We look to continue coordination between our nations to promote regional peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."

Audit faults EUCOM on Ukraine aid requests

By PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

American military officials in Europe didn't document the procedures they took to validate and approve Ukraine's requests for military assistance following Russia's 2022 invasion of the country, according to a new audit.

The findings by the Pentagon's Inspector General come as Ukraine has struggled to hold off a lightning Russian offensive near Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city.

The audit was conducted from December 2022 through March of this year, and a report of it was released Tuesday. It focused specifically on aid provided through presidential drawdown authority, which al-

lows for the quick delivery of military equipment and services from Pentagon stocks to foreign countries in response to emergencies.

Since the start of the war in February 2022, the Defense Department has announced nearly 60 presidential drawdowns for Ukraine totaling about \$30 billion.

U.S. European Command and affiliated commands and organizations on the Continent had controls in place to validate Ukraine's requests for equipment and training, the audit report said.

"A sense of urgency," however, to support Ukrainian troops meant they did not document their roles, procedures and processes, according to responses by the groups men-

tioned in the report.

"Officials did not ensure seamless operations," the IG said. "Documenting processes and procedures is critical due to the rate of rotation of personnel supporting the Ukraine security assistance efforts."

Aid has included weapons systems, ammunition, training for Ukrainian troops and maintenance of equipment.

EUCOM and affiliated commands are tasked with validating Ukraine's requests for military support before approving them for submission to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The IG did not audit controls at the Office of the Secretary of Defense level.

The investigation also showed that while the Defense

Department coordinated with partner countries on Ukraine's requests for military support, several factors made that difficult, including the large number of partner nations donating equipment, partner nations' desire to remain discreet and classification levels of information.

The IG recommended that in coordination with affiliated units, the EUCOM commander document the roles, responsibilities, processes and procedures for validating Ukraine's requests for military equipment and assistance.

It also called on the commander and his counterpart at the Security Assistance Group — Ukraine to find ways to improve coordination with partner countries.

House panel OKs beard pilot program in USAF

By ALEXANDER RIEDEL

Stars and Stripes

Lawmakers took steps this week toward making beards acceptable in the military, with the House Armed Services Committee approving a proposal directing the Air Force to run a selective three-year pilot program that could lead to permanent approval.

An amendment in the draft 2025 National Defense Authorization Act that was adopted unanimously by the committee Wednesday would require the Air Force to study the impact of allowing Air Force and Space Force members in certain units to grow beards.

Selection of the units for the pilot program would be up to the Air Force secretary, who is directed in the legislation to ensure that the units picked are "located in geographically di-

verse areas" and "perform various missions."

The service would be required to submit an initial report to Congress within a year of the start of the program, followed by a final report at the end with the Air Force secretary's recommendation on whether to make the program permanent.

The reports would evaluate whether beards affect the airtight seals of gas masks or similar equipment and whether beards improve inclusivity for those with shaving waivers.

In addition, the reports would examine the impact beards have on discipline, morale and unity, as well as identify any negative perceptions or biases toward members with beards.

The amendment was introduced by Rep. Marc Veasey, D-Texas.

House panel OKs defense bill with junior troop raise

By SVETLANA
SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday night advanced a defense policy bill that would give a nearly 20% pay raise to junior enlisted service members and pour investments into improving the quality of life of all troops.

The legislation was approved in a 57-1 vote and will be debated next by the full House. The Senate Armed Services Committee has yet to release its version of the bill, but members have not indicated they will follow the House in raising pay for troops ranked E-4 and lower.

All service members are slated to receive a 4.5% pay raise under the White House's \$895 billion proposal for the

defense budget.

The House committee is proposing a 15% pay hike on top of that for junior troops, some of whom make less than \$25,000 in basic pay.

The House bill's focus on addressing the military's shortfalls in compensation, as well as housing, health care and other issues, is reflected in its title: the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act.

"We did that to underscore the tremendous gains this bill makes toward improving the quality of life for our service members and their families," said Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., the committee chairman.

The House panel on Wednesday touted the provisions it believes will improve life and service in the military.

Storm-hit Midwest braces for another round

Associated Press

GREENFIELD, Iowa — More severe weather was coming Thursday for parts of the Midwest where this year's deadliest tornado so far killed four people and injured nearly three dozen as it wreaked havoc in the small city of Greenfield, Iowa.

Before Tuesday's twister carved a path through Greenfield and sent family mementos flying far away, the deadliest tornado in 2024 killed three people in Logan County, Ohio, on March 14.

The National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center showed an enhanced severe storm risk late Thursday into Friday morning for much of Nebraska and western Iowa, including those areas hit by tornadoes Tuesday after hurricane-force winds, large hail and torrential rain flooded streets and basements in parts of Nebraska.

The new risk for severe weather — including possible tornadoes — in Iowa will come "when people are sleeping," warned NWS meteorologist Andrew Ansorge of Des Moines.

"A lot of these people have already experienced damage to their homes and property that might be hit again with rain and wind. Be-

cause of the damage already there, it won't take much wind to inflict even more damage on these homes," Ansorge said. "It's just a bad deal all the way around."

More severe weather could also hit Saturday and Sunday in parts of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas already ravaged by recent storms. An emergency was declared in Temple, Texas, after powerful storms ripped through the city of more than 90,000. Thousands lost power, Thursday's classes were canceled and nearby Fort Cavazos reported debris blocking traffic at the Army installation.

In Iowa, the Greenfield tornado obliterated homes, splintered trees and crumpled cars in the town of 2,000 about 55 miles southwest of Des Moines. The twister also crumpled massive power-producing wind turbines outside the city. It was initially rated at least an EF-3, but the National Weather Service could determine it was even more powerful after a full ground survey. It was so destructive that it took authorities more than a day to account for the area's residents, and Iowa's Department of Public Safety said the number of injured is likely even higher. Officials haven't yet released the names of the Greenfield victims.

A fifth person was killed Tuesday about 25 miles from Greenfield when her car was blown off the road in a tornado, according to the Adams County Sheriff's Office.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds has requested an expedited presidential disaster declaration for those Iowa counties that sustained significant damage. The White House announced that FEMA's administrator would be in Iowa on Thursday.

Digging through a debris field that used to be their home in Greenfield, Kimberly Ergish and her husband searched for family photos and other salvageable items. There wasn't much left. The reality of having their house destroyed in seconds hadn't really set in.

"If it weren't for all the bumps and bruises and the achy bones, I would think that it didn't happen," Ergish said.

This is a historically busy tornado season in the United States. April had the country's second-highest number of tornadoes on record.

Through Tuesday, 859 tornadoes had been confirmed this year, 27% more than the U.S. sees on average, according to NOAA's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Okla. Iowa has so far recorded the most, with 81 confirmed.

Families of Uvalde shooting victims suing Texas state police for waiting

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — The families of 19 of the victims in the Uvalde elementary school shooting in Texas on Wednesday filed a \$500 million federal lawsuit against nearly 100 state police officers who were part of the botched law enforcement response to the deadly school shooting.

The families said they also agreed to a \$2 million settlement with the city, under which city leaders promised higher standards and better training for local police.

The lawsuit and settlement announcement in Uvalde came two days before the two-year anniversary of the massacre. Nineteen fourth-graders and two teachers were killed May 24, 2022, when a teenage gunman burst into their classroom at Robb Elementary School and began shooting.

The lawsuit, seeking at least \$500 million in damages, is the latest of several seeking accountability for the law enforcement response. More than 370 federal, state and local officers converged on the scene, but they waited more than 70 minutes before confronting the shooter.

It is the first lawsuit to be filed after a 600-page Justice Department report was released in January that cataloged "cascading failures" in training, communication, leadership and technology problems that day.

The lawsuit notes that state troopers did not follow their active shooter training or confront the shooter, even as the students and teachers inside were following their own lockdown protocols of turning off lights, locking doors and staying silent.

"The protocols trap teachers and students inside, leaving them fully reliant on law enforcement to respond quickly and effectively," the families and their attorneys said in a statement.

Terrified students inside the classroom called 911 as agonized parents begged officers to go in. A tactical team of officers eventually went into the classroom and killed the shooter.

A criminal investigation into the police response by Uvalde District Attorney Christina Mitchell's office is ongoing. A grand jury was summoned this year, and some law enforcement officials have already been called to testify.

US lawsuit alleges Ticketmaster, Live Nation monopoly

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department filed a sweeping antitrust lawsuit against Ticketmaster and parent company Live Nation Entertainment on Thursday, accusing them of running an illegal monopoly over live events in America — squelching competition and driving up prices for fans.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Manhattan, was being brought with 30 state and district attorneys general and seeks to break up the monopoly they have said is squeezing out smaller promoters and hurting artists.

The Justice Department accuses Live Nation of practices that allow it to maintain a stranglehold over the live music scene.

Ticketmaster, which merged with Live Nation in 2010, is the world's largest ticket seller. Around 70% of tickets for major concert venues in the United States are sold through Ticketmaster, according to data in a federal lawsuit filed by consumers in 2022. The company owns or controls more than 265 North American concert venues, the department said.

Russian missiles slam into Kharkiv

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles slammed into Ukraine's second-largest city in the country's northeast and killed at least seven civilians early Thursday, officials said, as Kyiv's army labored to hold off an intense cross-border offensive by the Kremlin's larger and better-equipped forces.

At least 20 people were wounded as S-300 missiles struck the city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said. Explosions reverberated around the city of some 1 million people.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the attack "extremely cruel" and expressed renewed frustration at not getting enough air defense systems from the country's Western partners to prevent the barrages after more than two years of unrelenting war.

The city of Kharkiv, which is

the capital of the region of the same name, is about 12 miles from the Russian border. Moscow's troops have in recent weeks captured villages in the area as part of a broad push, and analysts say they may be trying to get within artillery range of the city.

The Russian push is shaping up to be Ukraine's biggest test since Moscow's full-scale invasion in February 2022, with outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces being pressed at several points along the roughly 600-mile front line that snakes from north to south in eastern Ukraine.

With Kyiv short of air defenses and waiting for more Western military support that only recently started trickling in, Ukraine's army has been pushed back in places while Russia has pounded its power grid and civilian areas. Kyiv endured further power outages on Thursday.

UN OKs annual Srebrenica genocide commemoration

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations approved a resolution Thursday establishing an annual day to commemorate the 1995 genocide of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serbs, a move vehemently opposed by Serbs who fear it will brand them all as "genocidal" supporters of the mass killing.

The vote in the 193-member General Assembly was 84-19 with 68 nations abstaining, a reflection of concerns among many countries about the impact of the vote on reconciliation efforts in deeply divided Bosnia.

The resolution designates Ju-

ly 11 as the "International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica," to be observed annually starting in two months.

The resolution, sponsored by Germany and Rwanda, doesn't mention Serbia as the culprit, but that didn't stop the intense lobbying campaign for a "no" vote by the Bosnian Serb president, Milorad Dodik, and the populist president of neighboring Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic.

On July 11, 1995, Bosnian Serbs overran a U.N.-protected safe area in Srebrenica. They separated at least 8,000 Muslim Bosniak men and boys from their wives, mothers and sisters and slaughtered them.

As Hamas holds firm, Israel faces bad options

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Diminished but not deterred, Hamas is still putting up a fight after seven brutal months of war with Israel, regrouping in some of the hardest-hit areas in northern Gaza and resuming rocket attacks into nearby Israeli communities.

Israel initially made tactical advances against Hamas after a devastating aerial bombardment paved the way for its ground troops. But those early gains have given way to a grinding struggle against an adaptable insurgency — and a growing feeling among many Israelis that their military faces only bad options, drawing comparisons with U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This was the subtext of a rebellion in recent days by two members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's three-man War Cabinet — Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's main political rival — who demanded that he come up with detailed postwar plans.

They supported Israel's retaliation for Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, including one of the heaviest bombing campaigns in recent history, ground operations that obliterated entire neighborhoods and border restrictions that the United Nations' World Food Program has said pushed parts of the territory into famine.

But now the two retired generals fear a prolonged, costly reoccupation of Gaza, from which Israel withdrew soldiers and settlers in 2005. They are also opposed to a withdrawal that would leave Hamas in control or lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Instead, they have put forth alternatives that many Israelis see as wildly unrealistic. Hamas, meanwhile, has proposed

its own postwar plan.

Netanyahu has promised a "total victory" that would remove Hamas from power, dismantle its military capabilities and return the scores of hostages it still holds from the attack that triggered the war.

He has said victory could come within weeks if Israel launches a full-scale invasion of Rafah, which Israel has portrayed as the last Hamas stronghold.

Amir Avivi, a retired Israeli general and former deputy commander of the Gaza division, has said that's only the beginning. He said Israel would need to remain in control to prevent Hamas from regrouping.

"If you don't drain the swamp, you cannot deal with the mosquitoes. And drain the swamp means a complete change in the education system, and dealing with local leadership and not with a terror organization," he said. "This is a generational process. It's not going to happen in a day."

Far-right members of Netanyahu's governing coalition, who hold the key to his remaining in power, have called for permanent occupation, "voluntary emigration" of large numbers of Palestinians to anywhere that will have them, and rebuilding of Jewish settlements in Gaza.

Most Israelis are opposed, pointing to the immense costs of stationing thousands of troops in the territory that is home to 2.3 million Palestinians. As an occupying power, Israel would likely be held responsible for providing health, education and other services. It's unclear to what extent international donors would step in to fund reconstruction amid ongoing hostilities.

There's also no guarantee such an occupation would eliminate Hamas.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Billionaire rains cash on grads, but with a catch

NH MEREDITH — The clouds weren't alone in making it rain on the commencement ceremony at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth last week. On stage, billionaire philanthropist Rob Hale surprised the graduating class of more than 1,000 by pointing to a nearby truck holding envelopes stuffed with cash.

Huddling under ponchos and umbrellas at the soggy ceremony, the graduates yelled and cheered, their mouths agape, as Hale announced he was showering money upon them. Security guards then lugged the cash-filled duffel bags onto the stage.

Hale told the students each would get \$1,000. But there was a condition: They were to keep \$500 and give the rest away.

Hale said the greatest joy he and his wife Karen had experienced in their lives had come from the act of giving.

It's the fourth year in a row that he has given a similar gift to a group of graduating students.

Governor vetoes bill to restrict pesticide

VT MONTPELIER — Vermont's Republican Gov. Phil Scott has vetoed a bill to severely restrict a type of pesticide that's toxic to bees and other pollinators, saying the legislation "is more anti-farmer than it is pro-pollinator."

The bill would have banned uses of neonicotinoids — commonly called neonics — as well as selling or distributing soybean and cereal grain seeds that are coated in the substance. The

pesticides are neurotoxins and are the most widely used class of insecticides in the world, lawmakers have said.

The Democrat-controlled Vermont legislature may consider overriding the governor's veto during a special session next month.

Scott wrote in his veto message that nearly all corn seed sold in the country is treated with EPA-approved neonics, and Vermont grows about 90,000 acres of corn while the U.S. grows 90 million acres.

"This would put Vermont farmers at a significant disadvantage," he wrote.

Petrochemical company fined for 2019 explosions

TX BEAUMONT — A Texas petrochemical company has pleaded guilty to a violation of the Clean Air Act and agreed to pay more than \$30 million in connection with two explosions that injured workers and caused the evacuation of thousands, the U.S. Justice Department said Tuesday.

The explosions at a TPC Group plant in the coastal city of Port Neches the day before Thanksgiving 2019 prompted the evacuation of more than 50,000 people from the area, about 100 miles from Houston.

Those explosions released more than 11 million pounds of extremely hazardous substances and caused more than \$130 million in offsite property damage and other impacts to human health and the environment, according to a news release from the DOJ.

The company entered into a plea deal with the government on Monday and agreed to pay over \$30 million in criminal

finances and civil penalties. The plan also includes spending about \$80 million to improve its risk management program and improve safety issues.

Climber found dead on continent's tallest peak

AK ANCHORAGE — A climber was found dead on North America's tallest peak, Denali, on Monday, a day after a family member told rangers they had not heard from them in days, authorities said.

The climber was using a satellite communication device to keep in contact with their family during a solo attempt to climb Denali, according to a statement from Denali National Park and Preserve. Rangers found the climber's tent and used information gathered from interviews and location data from their satellite device account to identify where they may be.

A climbing team had reported seeing the climber traversing from a 17,200-foot plateau to Denali Pass at 18,200 feet on May 15, the park said.

Data indicated the device had not changed locations since May 16, "suggesting a fall from the Denali Pass traverse took place on that day," the park said.

Lawsuit: Monument to 'faithful slaves' must go

NC COLUMBIA — A federal lawsuit filed Tuesday seeks the removal of a Confederate monument marked as "in appreciation of our faithful slaves" from outside of a North Carolina county courthouse.

The Concerned Citizens of Tyrrell County, a civic group focused on issues facing local

Black residents, and several of its members filed the lawsuit against the county's commissioners. The legal complaint argues that the monument constitutes racially discriminatory government speech in violation of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause.

Tyrrell County includes a few thousand residents in eastern North Carolina. The monument, which was erected on the courthouse grounds in 1902, features a Confederate soldier standing atop a pedestal, with one of the markings below mentioning "faithful slaves." The lawsuit argues that the monument conveys a racist and offensive message that Black people who were enslaved in the county preferred slavery to freedom.

Regulators: Manure spill caused mile-long fish kill

WI MADISON — A manure spill in west-central Wisconsin has resulted in a fish kill stretching more than a mile, state environmental regulators said Tuesday.

An angler reported the fish kill in Moore Creek in Monroe County on Saturday, state Department of Natural Resources officials said.

The DNR traced the kill to a manure spill at Spring Valley Holstein Inc., a dairy farm east of Norwalk. They said the farm's manure transfer system failed but did not elaborate. An investigation is ongoing.

The spill affected at least 1.2 miles of Moore Creek and an adjacent tributary. DNR officials said they didn't have an estimate of how much manure has been spilled but drinking water supplies shouldn't be affected.

— From wire reports

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Doncic's late surge leads Mavs over Wolves

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS—Luka Doncic led a strong finish for the Dallas Mavericks, swishing crucial shots down the stretch, drawing a couple of fouls and even playing strong defense.

The Mavericks might not be the favorites in yet another series, but they stole home-court advantage from the Minnesota Timberwolves with this promising start.

Doncic had 15 of his 33 points in the fourth quarter and Kyrie Irving scored 24 of his 30 in the first half to lift the Mavericks to a 108-105 victory over the Timberwolves in Game 1 of the Western Conference final on Wednesday night.

Dallas had a 62-38 advantage in points in the paint to offset a 6-for-25 shooting performance from deep.

"We made important ones," said Doncic, who scored seven straight points over 63 seconds early in the fourth quarter to fuel a 13-0 run by the Mavericks for a 97-89 lead.

The Mavericks trailed 102-98 after a 3-pointer by Anthony Edwards with 3:37 left, before an 8-0 run the Wolves didn't stop until a tip-in with 10.5 seconds to go. For the first time in six tries under coach Jason Kidd, the Mavericks won the first game of a playoff series.

Jaden McDaniels had his third straight 20-plus-point game with 24 points for the Wolves, but Edwards—who earned his first All-NBA selection prior to the game, on the second team—was stifled for 19 points in a team effort from the Mavericks. Karl-Anthony Towns needed a late burst to get to 16 points and finished 6-for-20 from the floor.

The star power in this series is strong, and for the first night at least the Mavericks got what they needed from their leading duo while the Wolves largely struggled to run the offense around theirs.

"Terrible offense down the stretch: bad shots, turnovers, no composure," Wolves coach Chris Finch said. "We've got to

be better in clutch moments."

Towns came to life with a long jumper, a lob to Rudy Gobert for a slam and a 3-pointer on a 2-minute burst to give the Wolves the lead back with 4:39 to go on the way to a 10-0 run that Doncic ended with a 3-pointer. P.J. Washington, who had 13 points and seven rebounds, hit from deep to put the Mavericks back in front with 1:56 to go.

Towns thought he tied the game with a putback dunk on the next possession, but that was waved off for basket interference.

Minnesota hosts Game 2 on Friday night.

Edwards, who went scoreless in the third quarter, added 11 rebounds and eight assists.

"He's an amazing player. We have to put multiple bodies on him," Doncic said. "If he's going 1-on-1, it's kind of tough to stop him."

Naz Reid had 15 points and Kyle Anderson added 11 points off the bench for the Wolves, who had two days off after dethroning

defending champion Denver with a Game 7 comeback from a 20-point deficit to win the second-round series.

The transition was sharp from the Nuggets and NBA MVP Nikola Jokic's deliberate and powerful style to the pick-and-roll-heavy Mavericks, who frequently lost their opponents off screens for wide-open dunks. They moved with a purpose that kept the Wolves from consistently setting their half-court defense around the NBA Defensive Player of the Year Gobert at the rim.

Irving's stunning burst on the break and on the drive presented a unique challenge the Wolves and their league-leading defense didn't face in the last round, when they held the Nuggets to an average of 85 points over their four wins.

"He got us going. Without him, we would probably be down 20 at halftime," Doncic said. "I had to help him in the second half a little bit. So we switched roles this time."

Bobrovsky, Panthers shut out Rangers in Game 1

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sergei Bobrovsky had a long stretch without seeing a shot on goal in the middle of the game, and then there was a flurry in the third period.

No matter, he stopped everything that came his way.

Bobrovsky had 23 saves for his first shutout of the postseason, and the Panthers beat the New York Rangers 3-0 on Wednesday night in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals.

"I think you have to be a veteran goalie to do what he did tonight," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said. "Sit for a while, make huge saves, and sense the last 10 minutes of the game that's where he has to be Sergei."

Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, and Carter Verhaeghe and Sam Bennett also scored for Florida.

Bobrovsky, who had six shutouts during the regular season, had five saves in the first period, seven in the second and 11 in

the third for his second career shutout in the playoffs.

"They are a good team, we did a really good defense, we executed our system," the 35-year-old goalie said. "It's a big win for us. A game we can build on. ... It's one game. There's still a lot of hockey to play. We have to keep grinding."

Igor Shesterkin finished with 24 saves for the Presidents' Trophy-winning Rangers. They lost for the third time in four games after opening the postseason with seven straight victories.

"We can play better, that wasn't the best version of ourselves," Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said. "We'll look to see what they did, see what we can do better in all areas of the game. There's more for us to give, more for us to do out there."

Game 2 is Friday night in New York.

With Florida leading 1-0, Bobrovsky slid to his left to deny a one-timer from Kaapo Kakko 6½ minutes into the third period.

Oliver Ekman-Larsson appeared to add

to the lead when he beat Shesterkin from the left side several minutes later. The goal was overturned, however, after a challenge for goalie interference because the Panthers' Ryan Lomberg bumped into Shesterkin in the crease.

"I thought it was right because it's the call I would want to see on Bobrovsky," Maurice said.

The Rangers had a flurry of chances with about seven minutes remaining. Alexander Wennberg was denied on two attempts in close, Jacob Trouba had a shot blocked and Wennberg missed on another shot seconds later.

Bobrovsky made a kick save on a drive by Adam Fox during a New York power play with 5:25 remaining.

"He was really good," Tkachuk said about Bobrovsky. "We did a good job of blocking shots, and when we needed him he was huge, especially with a couple of breakaways. So yeah, he gives us a lot of confidence."

Verstappen may have rival for top driver

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Ask almost any hardcore motorsports fan who the best driver in the world is right now and the answer is probably going to be Formula 1's three-time reigning champion.

But Alexander Rossi has raced against Max Verstappen, just as he has raced against NASCAR star Kyle Larson. And now that he is teammates with Larson for his Indianapolis 500 debut, Rossi firmly believes Larson can hold his own with anyone.

"Dude," Rossi said, "I think he's already towards the top, so I don't know. Put him at the top? Like, he's 'The Man.'"

As good as Verstappen, who has won 48 of 72 races in F1 since 2021?

"I would say they're on the same level," Rossi replied, "which is like, yeah, that's a pretty big deal."

Larson qualified fifth on Sunday for his first Indianapolis 500, then flew to North Carolina, where he finished fourth at North Wilkesboro Speedway in NASCAR's \$1 million All-Star race that night. This Sunday, he will be the fifth driver in history to attempt "The Double" by running both the Indy 500 and the Coca-Cola 600 in Charlotte on the same day.

Tony Stewart in 2001, his second attempt, remains the only driver to complete all 1,100

miles. He finished third in the NASCAR nightcap, the best showing by any of the Double drivers.

Not only is Larson capable of completing the grueling feat of two races in two wildly different race cars in two different states, but people believe he might be a contender to actually win both races. He is among the betting favorites for the Indy 500 and the Coke 600, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

Larson won what has become one of NASCAR's crown jewels in 2021, his championship season. His two-year Indy 500 deal is a joint effort between Arrow McLaren Racing and Hendrick Motorsports, his NASCAR team, with Jeff Gordon among the Hendrick executives who watched him qualify at Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Sunday.

Still, the idea that Larson could win the Indy 500 was mind-blowing to Rossi, who knows what it's like to do it as a rookie. Rossi reached victory lane when he made his debut in "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing" in 2016.

"Wow, damn. I'll be so annoyed," Rossi said of a Larson win. "I'll understand how everyone else felt when I won. Is he capable of doing it? Yeah. Would I be happy for the team? Yeah. Would I be internally annoyed? Yeah."

Larson had the same feelings a year ago following NASCAR's street-course race in Chicago, which was won in the rain by Shane van Gisbergen in the New Zealander's debut.

After van Gisbergen won NASCAR's first-ever street race, Chase Elliott said the Kiwi "made me look bad," and Larson wondered whether van Gisbergen "thinks we all suck."

Rossi said a win by Larson would have the same effect. "We know he's good," Rossi said, "but for him to come into our world, and in his first event win, like, that doesn't reflect well on us."

Two-time IndyCar champion Alex Palou disagreed, saying Larson could add even more cache to the Indy 500.

"It's Kyle Larson. I don't think it would hurt," Palou said. "If Kyle Larson wins, it's Kyle Larson, so whatever. He wins everything. So I don't think it would make us look as idiots. It's not that I'm like, 'Oh yeah, if he wins, that's cool.' I don't want him to win. But I think he will be there, for sure."

Larson was back at Indianapolis Motor Speedway early Monday after the All-Star race, walking onto the front stretch to take the traditional photograph of the 33-driver field with the Borg-Warner Trophy in the midst of them.

Larson keeping a close eye on Indianapolis weather

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Kyle Larson eyeballed his assigned teammates and plotted a strategy to try to score his first win of Indianapolis 500 week.

He was at Wheeler Elementary School early Wednesday in Speedway for the annual "Community Day" and alongside Scott Dixon, Scott McLaughlin and Will Power, Larson was there to entertain the students ahead of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing."

He grinned and cheered through the series of games played with selected students — many of whom were taller than the 5-foot-6 NASCAR star. And if it hadn't been his first-ever time participating in the event with local students, Larson might have won a few

rounds racing scooters around cones, the relay race to collect messages in a bottle or any of the other games.

But the other IndyCar drivers present are "Community Day" veterans and already knew all the hacks on how to win. Larson didn't mind and after heading back to Indianapolis Motor Speedway, he and wife, Katelyn, enjoyed a photo shoot in the midway using the iconic NDY sign in which Larson raised his arms in the air to be the "I" and complete the word.

His only complaint eight days into Indy 500 prep is the forecast for Sunday, which is calling for rain. Larson is trying to become the fifth driver to run the Indy 500 and the Coca-Cola 600 on the same day, and he doesn't want weather spoiling a year's

worth of preparation.

"If it's going to rain here Sunday, then I just want it to rain all day and the (Indy 500) to be on Monday," Larson said. "I don't even want to think about what could happen if we're sitting in the rain Sunday."

That's because his real job is in NASCAR and he's not supposed to miss the race Sunday night at Charlotte Motor Speedway. So Larson grew a bit excited Wednesday when he learned of NASCAR team owner Rick Hendrick's indecisiveness a day earlier over how to handle the weather forecast.

Larson is scheduled to start fifth in the Indy 500 in a joint entry between Arrow McLaren Racing and Hendrick Motorsports.

"We've talked about it many

times, and we know we need to be at Charlotte for the points," Hendrick said Tuesday. "We're just going to let it play out ... we'll make that decision Sunday."

Hendrick acknowledged he didn't want to pull Larson out of the Indy 500 just to get him to Charlotte on time.

"It would be very hard. It would be very tough," Hendrick said. "Would be very disappointing because of all the effort that everyone has put in. We've got a tremendous amount of folks there at Indy, and he's in such a good position, it would be extremely hard."

The decision will fall to Hendrick come Sunday. Until then, Larson is just crossing his fingers and hoping to see sunshine.

Soto already sparking 'M-V-P!' chants

Associated Press

Fifty-one games into the season, Juan Soto is sparking chants of "M-V-P!" at Yankee Stadium.

"Way too early," Soto said after his second two-homer game of the homestand led the Yankees over the Seattle Mariners 7-3 on Wednesday night and stopped New York's first two-game losing streak in three weeks.

Soto drove a full-count sinker into the visitors' bullpen in left in the third for a two-run homer and a 4-0 lead, a 414-foot drive off Bryce Miller that hit the back wall on a hop. Soto connected on another sinker on Miller's first pitch of the sixth inning, a 369-foot shot into the left-field stands.

That prompted the "M-V-P!" chorus from the crowd of 40,224.

"I love when the Bronx gets behind our guys," Yankees

manager Aaron Boone said. "Obviously showing their appreciation for him."

In his first season since the Yankees acquired him from San Diego, Soto is hitting .313 with 13 homers, 40 RBIs and a .978 OPS. The 25-year-old Dominican repeatedly responds to the admiration and affection from the fans behind him in the right-field seats.

"I just got to turn around and they go crazy," he said. "I know it's a lot of Dominicans. They all want me to say hi. I tried to say hi to everybody, but I got to be focused in the game, too."

Soto, who can become a free agent after the World Series, has helped boost the Yankees to an AL-best 34-17 record.

"I'm enjoying every part of every part of it," he said. "You never know how long this is going to be like that, so you do try to enjoy it every second. So I just soak it all in."

Judge, the 2022 AL MVP, loves hearing Soto getting a fan response similar to the one the Yankees captain has long received.

"It gives me chills," Judge said. "The fans are definitely loving the show he's putting on."

Judge hit an opposite-field, two-run homer to right in the first off Miller and is batting .268 with 14 homers — 11 since late April — and 34 RBIs.

Judge credits Soto with boosting the entire batting order.

"It's entertaining. It's fun to watch. It gives everybody behind him a good look at all the guy's pitches, what he's trying to do that day," Judge said.

After Nestor Cortes pitched five scoreless innings, Luke Weaver allowed a three-run homer to Cal Raleigh that cut the lead to 5-3 in the eighth. Alex Verdugo hit a two-run homer in the bottom half.

Entertaining the crowd, Judge, Soto and Verdugo urged on different sections of the bleachers in a cheering competition during an eighth-inning pitching change.

"It's just a good way to get the crowd into it," Judge said. "Get them a little rowdy, man, they just want to cheer."

Soto has 19 career two-homer games but has never hit three. He came to the plate with the bases loaded in the seventh against Cody Bolton but struck out on three big swings.

"I think I went too far," Soto said. "I got too happy with it."

He leaves the stadium with the sounds of the fans in his head.

"At the end of the day, they're part of the game, they're part of the team," he said. "They put pressure on the other team. And whenever they go crazy like that, that other team feels the pressure."

Mahomes, Reid say Butker is entitled to his beliefs

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Patrick Mahomes said Wednesday that while he doesn't agree with all the beliefs espoused by kicker Harrison Butker during a recent commencement address, the Chiefs quarterback nevertheless respects his teammate's right to make them be known.

Butker delivered what has become a polarizing speech May 11 at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, where the three-time Super Bowl champ said most women receiving degrees were probably more excited about getting married and having kids, and that some Catholic leaders were "pushing dangerous gender ideologies onto the youth of America."

Butker also assailed Pride month, an important time for the LGBTQ+ community, and President Joe Biden's stance on

abortion.

"I've known Harrison for seven years. I judge him by the character he shows every single day," Mahomes said after one of the Chiefs' voluntary practices in Kansas City, Mo.. "We're not always going to agree, and there are certain things he said that I don't necessarily agree with. But I know the person he is and he's doing what he can to lead people in the right direction."

Butker's comments were delivered the same week Mahomes offered a toast to the future of women in sports at the TIME100 Gala: "I'd like to raise a glass to a new era in sports, an era when the women's game is finally getting the attention it deserves."

"It was pretty bad timing, I guess you would say. I shot that a couple weeks before," Mahomes said of the film spot. "That's what makes this country

so great is you're able to get as much knowledge as you can and make your own decisions."

But, Mahomes admitted, "it gets a little divisive sometimes when you get to social media and outside the (practice) building."

Earlier in the day, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell declined to expand on the NFL's statement distancing the league from Butker's comments. The league said that the comments and "views are not those of the NFL as an organization."

Still, the commencement address from the 28-year-old Butker in which he said that women "have had the most diabolical lies told to you" has become a flashpoint for a number of discussions, including women in the workplace.

"Some of you may go on to lead successful careers in the world, but I would venture to guess that

the majority of you are most excited about your marriage and the children you will bring into this world," Butker said. "I can tell you that my beautiful wife Isabelle would be the first to say that her life truly started when she started living her vocation as a wife and as a mother."

Butker said his wife embraced "one of the most important titles of all. Homemaker."

Chiefs coach Andy Reid said after Wednesday's practice that while he "talks to Harrison all the time," he didn't believe he needed to discuss the address.

"We're a microcosm of life here," Reid said. "We're from some different areas. Different religions. Different races. But we get along. We all respect each others' opinions, and not necessarily do we go by those, but we respect everyone to have a voice."