

S. Korea weighs options on North troops

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — South Korea will take “phased measures” in response to reports suggesting the North is deploying troops to aid Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, according to a news release Tuesday from the office of President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Possible steps include diplomatic, economic and military options, and South Korea could consider sending both defensive and offensive weapons to Ukraine, a senior South Korean presidential official told reporters on condition of anonymity in a background briefing.

The South will “not sit idly by,” but would “respond firmly with the international community if the current military collusion between North Korea and Russia continues,” the release states.

The statement followed an

emergency meeting in Seoul of the South’s national security council, called in response to intelligence and news reports revealing thousands of North Korean troops are in Russia to support its two-year invasion of Ukraine, according to the release.

Roughly 1,500 North Korean troops were deployed to Russia by ship earlier this month and given Russian uniforms and weapons, South Korea’s National Intelligence Service reported Friday.

Another 10,000 North Korean troops followed them, an intelligence service spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

South Korean government spokespeople customarily speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

If Moscow’s military cooperation with the North continues to pose “a serious threat” to its security, the South will “pre-

pare corresponding measures,” according to the release.

“The government will take phased measures in line with the progress of Russia-North Korea military cooperation,” Yoon’s office said.

Security issues in the Indo-Pacific and Atlantic “are inseparable” and the South will take unspecified “step-by-step measures” in response to Pyongyang’s military aid to Moscow, Yoon told NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte by phone Monday, according to a news release from Yoon’s office that day.

Rutte said NATO was prepared to cooperate with the South in its response to the North’s troop deployment; he and Yoon agreed that sending North Korean troops to Ukraine violates international law and U.N. Security Council resolutions, the release said.

The deployment of North Ko-

rean troops on Russian soil marks a deepening of military ties between Russia and North Korea, as well as escalating the South’s role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

During a June summit in Pyongyang, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged mutual military support if either were attacked.

The U.S. State Department has accused North Korea of exporting ballistic missiles and artillery shells to Russia since 2023.

Following the Kim-Putin summit, Yoon’s office said it would review its policy of sending only nonlethal aid to Ukraine. Sending weapons would depend on Russia’s military cooperation with the North, South Korean national security adviser Chang Ho-jin said during a televised interview June 23.

Report: F-35s failing to meet readiness goals

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — All versions of the F-35, the world’s costliest weapons program, have failed to meet minimum combat readiness rates for six straight years, according to the watchdog agency for Congress.

That’s despite the Army, Navy and Marine Corps spending \$12 billion, or about 21%, of \$57.2 billion for aircraft operations and maintenance appropriated by Congress during that time on the fighter jet built by Lockheed Martin, according to a Government Accountability Office tally released Monday.

The F-35s of all three services didn’t reach their “mission capable rates in any of the

years we reviewed,” from October 1, 2017, through September 30, 2023, according to the congressionally mandated assessment.

The “mission capable” rate is the percentage of time an aircraft in a squadron can fly and perform at least one of its assigned missions. More than 1,000 F-35s have been delivered to the U.S. military and international partners in a program projected to produce more than 3,000 of the stealthy aircraft. The first F-35s were declared operational in 2015 by the Marine Corps. The Air Force followed in 2016 and the Navy in 2019. The new assessment doesn’t provide specific target

readiness percentages, but a March 2023 GAO report said the objective for the Air Force’s F-35A is 90%, while those for the Marines F-35B and the Navy’s F-35C are 85%.

“The F-35’s poor mission capable rates were due partly to challenges with depot and organizational maintenance,” the audit found.

A GAO report in September 2023 said the F-35 fleet’s mission capable rate in March of that year was about 55%.

Acknowledging the problem, Air Force Lt. Gen. Michael Schmidt, the F-35 program manager, initiated a “War On Readiness” last year to improve the F-35’s mission capa-

ble rate.

The GAO reviewed readiness trends of U.S. fighters — including the F-35 — against the operations and maintenance dollars spent. “Mission capable rates for tactical aircraft have generally not met service goals for several years” because of issues “such as aging aircraft, maintenance challenges and supply support issues,” the agency found.

Lockheed Martin said in a statement that the aircraft “consistently meets or exceeds the reliability performance requirements we are contracted to deliver,” as “almost 90% of F-35 components are performing better than required.”

NCO charged with attempted murder, rape

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — A Fort Cavazos sergeant broke into the barracks rooms of five soldiers with the intent to rape them — holding two of the women at gunpoint and strangling one with a lamp cord until he thought she was dead, according to court records.

Sgt. Greville Clarke, 31, was arraigned Monday on nine charges with a total of 27 counts, including attempted premeditated murder, attempted rape, violation of a lawful general regulation, rape, unlawful recording, robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, kidnapping and

obstruction of justice.

There are five victims, according to the Army Office of Special Trial Counsel, which is prosecuting the case. Clarke pleaded not guilty Monday and delayed selecting a court-martial with a jury or only a judge.

Clarke has been in pretrial confinement at the Bell County Justice Center since Oct. 3, 2022, the day after the last attack.

Michelle McCaskill, spokeswoman for the Office of Special Trial Counsel, said last month that the case has taken nearly two years to bring to court because piecing together the additional accusations and multiple

victims took “substantial investigative and administrative efforts.”

In the last incident on Oct. 2, 2022, Clarke is accused of breaking into a woman’s barracks room, holding her at gunpoint and tying up her hands with a rope, blindfolding her, touching her sexually and taking photos of her naked, according to 21-page charge sheet.

At some point in the attack, Clarke hit her head with the loaded firearm, took two cell phones and her credit card and then stole \$14,000 from her bank account. It ended when he forced her into a footlocker to move her to another location,

but she managed to escape and run around a corner before he could shoot at her.

That same day, Fort Cavazos officials sent out a text-message alert to soldiers living at the intersection of Legends Way and 37th Street on the Texas base warning them to stay away because a man with a gun had been seen.

Military Judge Col. Maureen Kohn presided over the arraignment at Fort Cavazos, where Clarke is assigned to the 74th Multi-Role Bridge Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 36th Engineer Brigade. His next court hearing is scheduled for Dec. 10.

Female aviators killed in crash were trailblazers

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

Two aviators who died when their fighter jet crashed last week near Mount Rainier during routine training were a trailblazing female duo who recently returned from a Red Sea deployment, the Navy said.

Lt. Cmdr. Lyndsay Evans and Lt. Serena Wileman, both 31, were identified Monday by Naval Air Forces Pacific. The two were declared dead Sunday — five days after the EA-18G Growler jet from the Electronic Attack Squadron 130, nicknamed “Zappers,” went down east of Mount Rainier in Washington state.

“More than just names and ranks, they were role models, trailblazers and women whose influence touched countless people on the flight deck and well beyond,” according to a tribute from Carrier Strike Group 2, the unit with which the aviators recently deployed.

Evans’ and Wileman’s fates were unknown Oct. 15 following the crash, which proved difficult to locate. On Oct. 16, search and rescue crews found the wreckage site resting at about 6,000 feet in a remote, heavily wooded area that was inaccessible by foot or vehicle. Special Forces soldiers trained in mountaineering, high-angle rescue and technical communications were brought in Thursday to reach the wreckage and locate the aviators.

“It is with a heavy heart that we share the loss of two beloved Zappers,” Cmdr. Timothy Warburton, commanding officer of the aviators’ Electronic Attack Squadron, said Sunday.

The duo returned in July from a nearly nine-month deployment with the strike group as a part of Carrier Air Wing 3 aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. They primarily operated in the Red Sea.

China holds live-fire drills near Taiwan after exercise

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — China is holding live-fire drills off the coast of its southern Fujian province facing Taiwan, just a week after a massive air-and-sea drill it described as punishment for Taiwan’s president rejecting Beijing’s claims of sovereignty.

The live-fire drills were being held near the Pingtan islands, according to a notice from the Maritime Safety Administration.

Taiwan’s Defense Ministry said China’s drills were part of an annual exercise and it was tracking them.

“It cannot be ruled out that it is one of the ways to expand the deterrent effect in line with the dynamics in the Taiwan Strait,” the statement added.

Taiwan is a self-ruled island that Beijing claims is part of China. Tensions around the issue have flared in recent years. China has increased its pres-

ence in the waters and skies around Taiwan. It now increasingly sends large numbers of warplanes and navy vessels to military exercises near Taiwan, and its coast guard carries out patrols.

Last week, China held a one-day military exercise aimed at practicing the “sealing off of key ports and key areas.” Taiwan counted a record one-day total of 153 aircraft, 14 navy vessels and 12 Chinese government ships.

Taiwan’s premier, Cho Jung-tai, called on China to stop its exercises aimed at Taiwan.

“Like all democratic countries in the world, we believe that China’s military exercises are a threat to regional peace and stability. Regardless of the scale of the exercise, China’s military exercises should not frequently approach Taiwan to make meaningless declarations,” he said.

GOP challenges to overseas voters denied

Associated Press

Courts in Michigan and North Carolina on Monday rejected attempts by Republicans to disqualify the ballots of certain overseas voters.

Both cases targeted people who have never lived in the state but were born overseas to parents who were residents of the state. The Michigan case also targeted the spouses of military and overseas voters.

A state judge in Michigan dismissed the Republicans' case because it was filed so late

— less than a month before the Nov. 5 presidential election. But the judge also found that the election language allowing those voters to cast ballots complied with both state and federal law, as well as the Michigan Constitution.

The state GOPs and the Republican National Committee were among the plaintiffs bringing both cases, which were filed as part of a broader legal strategy against overseas ballots in presidential battleground states ahead of the Nov.

5 election.

The RNC did not immediately return requests for comment.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson criticized the lawsuit in her state as frivolous and described Monday's ruling as a win for election integrity.

"This baseless lawsuit targeted the voting rights of U.S. citizens and their families living abroad, including the children of active-duty military service members," she said in a statement. "It represents a new low

in the ongoing PR campaign to cast doubt on the security of Michigan's elections."

In North Carolina, a judge hearing a case in Wake County Superior Court denied a preliminary injunction the Republicans were seeking against the state Board of Elections.

The decision will allow people who have never lived in the state, but were born overseas to parents or guardians who were North Carolina residents, to vote as usual in the November presidential election.

Conflict in Mideast looms over US presidential race

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—Two weeks from Election Day, the crisis in the Middle East is looming over the race for the White House, with one candidate struggling to find just the right words to navigate its difficult cross-currents and the other making bold pronouncements that the age-old conflict can quickly be set right.

Vice President Kamala Harris has been painstakingly — and not always successfully — trying to balance talk of strong support for Israel with harsh condemnations of civilian casualties among Palestinians and others caught up in Israel's wars against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Former President Donald Trump, for his part, insists that none of this would have happened on his watch and that he can make it all go away if elected.

Both of them are bidding for the votes of Arab and Muslim American voters and Jewish voters, particularly in extremely tight races in the battleground states of Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Harris over the weekend alternately drew praise and criticism over her comments about a pro-Palestinian protester that were captured on a widely shared video. Some took Harris' remark

that the protester's concerns were "real" to be an expression of agreement with his description of Israel's conduct as "genocide." That drew sharp condemnation from Israel's former ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren.

But Harris' campaign said that while the vice president was agreeing more generally about the plight of civilians in Gaza, she was not and would not accuse Israel of genocide.

A day earlier, the dynamics were reversed when Harris told reporters that the "first and most tragic story" of the conflict was the Oct. 7 Hamas attack last year that killed about 1,200 Israelis. That was triggering to those who feel she is not giving proper weight to the deaths of the more than 41,000 Palestinians who have been killed in Gaza.

Trump, meanwhile, in recent days has participated in interviews with Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya and Lebanese outlet MTV, where he promised to bring about peace and said "things will turn out very well" in Lebanon.

In a post on his social media platform Monday, he predicted a Harris presidency would only make matters in the Mideast worse.

"If Kamala gets four more years, the Middle East will spend

the next four decades going up in flames, and your kids will be going off to War, maybe even a Third World War, something that will never happen with President Donald J. Trump in charge," Trump posted. "For our Country's sake, and for your kids, Vote Trump for PEACE!"

Harris' position is particularly awkward because as vice president she is tethered to President Joe Biden's foreign policy decisions even as she's tried to strike a more empathetic tone to all parties. But Harris aides and allies also are frustrated with what they see as Trump largely getting a pass on some of his unpredictable foreign policy statements.

"It's the very thoughtful, very careful school versus the showboat," said James Zogby, founder and president of the Arab American Institute, who has endorsed Harris. "That does become a handicap in these late stages when he's making all these overtures. When the bill comes due they're going to walk away empty-handed, but by then it'll be too late."

The political divisions on the campaign trail augur potentially significant implications after Election Day as powers in the region, particularly Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, closely eye the

outcome and the potential for any shifts to U.S. foreign policy.

A new AP-NORC poll finds that neither Trump nor Harris has a clear political advantage on the situation in the Middle East. About 4 in 10 registered voters say Trump would do a better job, and a similar share say that about Harris. Roughly 2 in 10 say neither candidate would do a better job.

There are some signs of weakness on the issue for Harris within her own party, however. Only about two-thirds of Democratic voters say Harris would be the better candidate to handle the situation in the Middle East. Among Republicans, about 8 in 10 say Trump would be better.

In Michigan, which has the nation's largest concentration of Arab Americans, the Israel-Hamas war has profound and personal impacts on the community. In addition to many community members having family in both Lebanon and Gaza, Kamel Ahmad Jawad, a metro Detroit resident, was killed while trying to deliver aid to his hometown in southern Lebanon.

The war's direct impact on the community has fueled outrage and calls for the U.S. to demand an unconditional cease-fire and impose a weapons embargo on Israel.

Blinken back in Mideast as Israel levels building

Associated Press

BEIRUT — The Israeli military leveled a building in a suburb of Beirut on Tuesday that it said housed Hezbollah “facilities,” sending smoke and debris into the air a few hundred yards from where a spokesperson for the militant group had just briefed journalists about a weekend drone attack that damaged the Israeli prime minister’s house.

The airstrike came 40 minutes after Israel issued an evacuation warning for two buildings in the area that it said were used by Hezbollah. The Hezbollah press conference nearby was cut short. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Hezbollah’s chief spokesman,

Mohammed Afif, said the group was behind the Saturday drone attack on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s home in the coastal town of Caesarea. He hinted that it might attempt future strikes on Netanyahu’s home. Israel has said neither the prime minister nor his wife were home during the attack.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Tuesday with Netanyahu as part of his 11th visit to the region since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. After Israel’s killing last week of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, Blinken is trying to revive efforts to secure a cease-fire in Gaza. So far, both Israel and Hamas appear to be digging in.

Netanyahu called his meeting

with Blinken, which lasted more than two hours, “friendly and productive.”

Blinken landed hours after Hezbollah launched a barrage of rockets into central Israel, setting off air raid sirens, but causing no apparent damage or injuries.

An Israeli airstrike late Monday night in Beirut destroyed several buildings across the street from the country’s largest public hospital, killing 18 people and wounding at least 60 others. The Israeli military said it struck a Hezbollah target, without elaborating, and said that it hadn’t targeted the hospital itself.

Associated Press reporters visited the Rafik Hariri University Hospital on Tuesday. They

saw broken windows in the hospital’s pharmacy and dialysis center, which was full of patients at the time.

During his meeting with Netanyahu, Blinken underscored the need for a dramatic increase in the amount of humanitarian aid reaching Gaza, according to U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller.

Miller said Blinken also stressed the importance of ending the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, which escalated earlier this month when Israel launched a ground invasion of southern Lebanon.

Blinken’s visit to the region is likely to include stops in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Pro-Palestinian protesters arrested on Minn. campus

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Police arrested about a dozen pro-Palestinian protesters Monday at the University of Minnesota after a group of students entered an administrative building, university officials said.

The Monday afternoon protest prompted an alert from school officials.

Ryan Mattson, a media liaison with the university’s chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, said some protesters who were inside the building were arrested. He did not initially know how many were arrested, but university officials released a statement saying 11 people were taken into custody less than two hours after they entered Morrill Hall.

Merlin Van Alstein, an organizer with the group, earlier said about 30 protesters occupied Morrill Hall, while a larger group gathered outside.

The group renamed the building “Halimy Hall,” in remembrance of 19-year-old Palestinian TikTok content creator Medo Ha-

limy, who died in August in an apparent Israeli airstrike.

The protesters were equipped with tents and supplies, and said they planned to stay until their demands are met. They were demanding that the university divest from Israel and repeal its political neutrality agreement. Video posted online showed chairs and other patio furniture stacked in front of an exterior window of the building.

“We plan to stay until they forcibly remove us,” Van Alstein said before the arrests. “The people inside aren’t going to leave until they meet our demands or they are forced to leave.”

The university said that once inside the building, protesters covered lenses of internal security cameras with spray paint, broke some interior windows, and barricaded entrances and exits. Earlier Monday, the group shared a video to Facebook of a speaker’s announcement that its members were occupying the building but not restricting anyone from exiting or entering.

Report: Abortion tally similar to before Roe was overturned

Associated Press

Women living in states with abortion bans obtained the procedure in the second half of 2023 at about the same rate as before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, according to a report released Tuesday.

Women did so by traveling out of state or by having prescription abortion pills mailed to them, according to the #WeCount report from the Society of Family Planning, which advocates for abortion access. They increasingly used telehealth, the report found, as medical providers in states with laws intended to protect them from prosecution in other states used online appointments to prescribe abortion pills.

“The abortion bans are not eliminating the need for abortion,” said Ushma Upadhyay, a University of California, San Francisco public health social scientist and a co-chair of the survey. “People are jumping over these hurdles because they have to.”

The #WeCount report began surveying abortion providers across the country monthly just

before *Roe* was overturned, creating a snapshot of abortion trends. In some states, a portion of the data is estimated. The report has chronicled quick shifts since the Supreme Court’s 2022 ruling that opened the door to enforcement of state bans.

The number of abortions in states with bans at all stages of pregnancy fell to near zero. It also plummeted in states where bans kick in around six weeks of pregnancy, which is before many women know they’re pregnant.

But the nationwide total has been about the same or above the level from before the ruling.

The study estimates 99,000 abortions occurred each month in the first half of 2024, up from the 81,000 monthly from April through December 2022 and 88,000 in 2023.

One reason is telehealth, which got a boost when some Democratic-controlled states began implementing laws to protect prescribers. In April 2022, about 1 in 25 abortions were from pills prescribed via telehealth, the report found. In June 2024, it was 1 in 5.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Hundreds rescued from flooding, at least 2 dead

NM ROSWELL — Authorities in New Mexico rescued hundreds of people in the Roswell area after record rainfall produced severe flooding that stranded many and left at least two people dead.

New Mexico National Guard officials said 309 people had been rescued since Saturday, with 38 of those taken to hospitals for treatment of injuries. New Mexico State Police said two people died as a result of the flash flood, but information on the victims or the circumstances of their deaths wasn't immediately released.

Albuquerque TV station KOAT reported that Chaves County Sheriff Mike Herrington was seen standing on top of his vehicle surrounded by floodwaters. Herrington said he had to go to the roof of his vehicle when it and several other vehicles became stranded in water that rose up to the windows.

Roswell city officials said water levels had receded in many parts of the city but remained high in the downtown area. All roads leading to and from the city were closed Sunday, authorities said.

Ex-United Way worker guilty of taking \$6.7M

NH CONCORD — A man who worked for United Way in Massachusetts was convicted of taking \$6.7 million from the nonprofit through an information technology company that he secretly owned.

Imran Alrai, 59, was convicted last week in federal court in Concord of 12 counts of wire fraud and six counts of money laundering.

Prosecutors said that between 2012 and June 2018, Alrai, an IT professional at United Way, obtained the payments for IT services provided by an independent outside contractor. They said Alrai misrepresented facts about the contractor and concealed that he owned the business.

For the next five years, while serving as United Way's Vice President for IT Services, Alrai steered additional IT work to his company, prosecutors said. They said he routinely sent emails with attached invoices from a fictitious person to himself at United Way.

One of last Navajo Code Talkers dies at 107

AZ WINDOW ROCK — John Kinsel Sr., one of the last remaining Navajo Code Talkers who transmitted messages during World War II based on the tribe's native language, has died. He was 107.

Tribal President Buu Nygren has ordered all flags on the reservation to be flown at half-staff until Oct. 27 to honor Kinsel. With Kinsel's death, only two Navajo Code Talkers are still alive: Former Navajo Chairman Peter MacDonald and Thomas H. Begay.

Hundreds of Navajos were recruited by the Marines to serve as Code Talkers during the war, transmitting messages based on their then-unwritten native language. They co-founded Japanese military cryptologists during World War

II and participated in all assaults the Marines led in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945, including at Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima.

The Code Talkers sent thousands of messages without error on Japanese troop movements, battlefield tactics and other communications crucial to the war's ultimate outcome.

Helo crash in Houston kills 4, destroys tower

TX HOUSTON — A helicopter crashed Sunday in Houston, killing four people on board and destroying a radio tower, officials said.

The helicopter went down just before 8 p.m. after taking off from Ellington Field, Mayor John Whitmire said at a news conference. He didn't know its destination.

The National Transportation Safety Board said it was investigating the crash of the Robinson R44 II helicopter.

The private helicopter with four people on board, including a child, either struck a cable or the tower, Houston Police Chief J. Noe Diaz said at the news conference. As far as officials know, there was no one on the ground when the crash occurred, he said. The identities of the victims and their ages have not yet been released.

About 200 minks released from farm

PA SUNBURY — Two people are facing charges following the release of about 200 minks from cages at a central Pennsylvania fur farm.

Most of the animals were recovered, according to an official, unlike a similar incident

just over a year ago in which thousands of minks were released into the surrounding area.

State police in Northumberland County say troopers were called shortly before 1 a.m. Saturday after a report that two people had been caught on camera releasing the minks at the Richard H. Stahl Sons Inc. farm in Rockefeller Township outside of Sunbury.

Two Massachusetts residents were arrested on charges of agricultural vandalism, criminal mischief involving property damage, theft, burglary, trespass and animal cruelty. They were taken to the county jail.

Whooping cough at decade-high level in US

WI MILWAUKEE — Whooping cough is at its highest level in a decade for this time of year, U.S. health officials reported last week.

There have been 18,506 cases of whooping cough reported so far, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. That's the most at this point in the year since 2014, when cases topped 21,800.

The increase is not unexpected — whooping cough peaks every three to five years, health experts said. And the numbers indicate a return to levels before the coronavirus pandemic, when whooping cough and other contagious illnesses plummeted.

Still, the tally has some state health officials concerned, including those in Wisconsin, where there have been about 1,000 cases so far this year, compared to a total of 51 last year.

— From wire reports

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NBA dynasties may be thing of past

Associated Press

It was a few minutes after Denver's reign as NBA champion had come to an end last spring. The Minnesota Timberwolves were celebrating, their music and screams loud enough to be heard inside the room where Nuggets coach Michael Malone was somberly going through his final postgame news conference of the season.

In that moment, it was official: Another season was going by without the NBA having a back-to-back champion, and Malone was left to state what has become obvious.

"It is hard. It is hard. It is hard to repeat," Malone said. "It's hard to win."

He's right. And there's never been an era in NBA history where it's been harder.

Here are the last six NBA champions, in order: Toronto,

the Los Angeles Lakers, Milwaukee, Golden State, Denver and now Boston. That's six different title-winning franchises in six seasons, a run of parity that the league has seen only once before — nearly a half-century ago.

The days of dynasties may be on hold for now, replaced by a time when, for a variety of reasons, it's more difficult than usual to get to the NBA mountaintop and stay there. It's the Celtics' turn to try to buck that trend.

"It's always hard to win one," said Boston guard Jrue Holiday, who won a title with Milwaukee in 2021 and was part of the Bucks team that was ousted in Round 2 a year later. "But then to win back-to-back is even harder."

The NBA doesn't seem to mind. This is the Parity Era and the current collective bargain-

ing agreement figures to make it even tougher for teams to be dynastic — a swift change from the four-year run spanning 2015 through 2018 when Cleveland and Golden State got to the finals annually.

In simple terms, the more that teams spend, the harder it is to make moves, especially moves involving big-contract players. The latest CBA, which went into effect last year, includes two aprons over the luxury tax figure. Go over the first apron, your roster flexibility is hampered. Go over the second one, and it's severely hampered. It could be argued there haven't been rule changes this significant since the league changed the lottery odds and added a play-in tournament to discourage tanking.

An example: it recently took Minnesota and New York several days to complete a deal a cou-

ple of weeks ago after agreeing on the parameters — Karl-Anthony Towns going to the Knicks, Julius Randle and Donte DiVencenzo going to the Wolves — because the financial particulars needed to be very precise.

"The new rules ... some of the consequences are unintended, quite frankly," Wolves President of Basketball Operations Tim Connelly was quoted by ESPN saying. "I don't know if anyone intended to make it this challenging to make moves, to make trades when you're above certain aprons."

No, that's exactly what the NBA wanted.

"I don't want to say nothing is lost, but to me, I don't think our system, by definition, will prevent repeat championships," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said.

49ers' Aiyuk tore ACL, will miss remainder of season

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — San Francisco 49ers star receiver Brandon Aiyuk will miss the rest of the season after tearing ligaments in his right knee.

Coach Kyle Shanahan said tests Monday confirmed the initial diagnosis that Aiyuk tore his ACL and would need major reconstructive surgery after getting hit on the knee while making a catch in the red zone late in the second quarter of a 28-18 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday. Shanahan said Aiyuk also tore his MCL.

Shanahan said Aiyuk took the news of a significant injury hard when he talked to him at home on Sunday night.

"He was hurting. Just bummed out," Shanahan said. "Exactly how you'd expect. But, BA is a strong dude and a spiritual guy. He believes everything happens for a reason, so he'll be all right. But definitely a little

down last night. I was just telling him how bad I felt for him and just let him know we're all here for him through this."

Aiyuk, who signed a \$120 million, four-year extension in late August following a lengthy contract "hold in," has 25 catches for 374 yards this season. He was a second-team All-Pro last season when he had 1,342 yards receiving.

Tagovailoa cleared, could return Sunday

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa has been cleared by medical experts to play football again after he collided with Bills defensive back Damar Hamlin in Week 2 when he ran for a first down and then initiated the contact by lowering his shoulder into Hamlin instead of sliding.

He still technically needs to be cleared from the NFL's concus-

sion protocol before he returns, which could come after he practices on Wednesday. If everything goes well, coach Mike McDaniel said, the plan is for Tagovailoa to start Sunday against the Arizona Cardinals.

"I don't mess with timelines or try to overcook the forecast," McDaniel said. "You lean on experts for matters of the career, and that's what we're doing here."

Tagovailoa has traveled across the country over the past month meeting with numerous medical experts, who he and McDaniel said deemed it safe for him to play football again. He was not told he would be at increased long-term risk if he resumed his career.

Watson's season over after Achilles tear

CLEVELAND — Deshaun Watson won't finish the season as Cleveland's starting quarter-

back for the second straight year.

Watson ruptured his right Achilles tendon in the first half of Sunday's loss to Cincinnati. The team feared Watson's year was over and an MRI on Monday confirmed the rupture. The Browns said Watson will have surgery this week and miss the rest of the season but "a full recovery is expected."

It's the second significant injury in two seasons for Watson, who broke a bone in his throwing shoulder last year. He also had surgeries on both knees after tearing ligaments while at Clemson and playing for Houston.

Now needing help at quarterback for another season, Cleveland signed Bailey Zappe from Kansas City's practice squad. Zappe gives the Browns some protection behind Dorian Thompson-Robinson and Jameis Winston, who could start this week against Baltimore.

Ravens beat Bucs for fifth straight win

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Lamar Jackson, who may be playing the best football of his career, made it look easy.

The two-time MVP threw for 281 yards and five touchdowns Monday night, helping the Baltimore Ravens overcome an early double-digit deficit and extend their winning streak to five games with a 41-31 victory over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who lost their top two receivers to injuries.

“Trying to win. That’s all that’s on my mind,” Jackson said after the AFC North co-leaders scored on seven of nine possessions before removing him from the game with just under two minutes left.

“I’m proud of him. I’m happy for him. He’s a great leader, a great player,” coach John Har-

baugh added. “He’s the ultimate competitor on a level with the greatest competitors I’ve ever seen.”

Jackson improved to 23-1 against NFC teams, the best mark by a quarterback against an opposing conference in NFL history. He’s 3-0 against the Bucs (4-3), who faded after taking a 10-0 lead with help from the 100th TD reception of Mike Evans’ career.

Evans departed with a hamstring injury after Baker Mayfield tried to connect with him in the end zone again, and late in the fourth quarter with the game out of reach, leading Bucs receiver Chris Godwin was carted off the field with a left ankle injury. ESPN declined to show replays of Godwin’s injury, which appeared to be severe.

“Early indication is that it’s dislocated. Doesn’t look good,” said Bucs coach Todd Bowles, who defended the decision to still have Godwin on the field in the closing minutes.

Jackson completed 17 of 22 passes without an interception, including TD throws of 9 and 4 yards to Mark Andrews. He also tossed scoring passes of 49 yards to Rashod Bateman, 18 yards to Justice Hill and 11 yards to Derrick Henry, who rushed for 169 yards on 15 carries. Bateman had four catches for 121 yards.

The Ravens (5-2) rebounded from a slow start on defense, with cornerback Marlon Humphrey turning the game around with a pair of second-quarter interceptions — one of them in the Baltimore end zone. Jackson led a four-play, 80-yard TD drive after the first pick, and the sec-

ond interception set up Justin Tucker’s 28-yard field goal for a 17-10 halftime lead.

“It doesn’t matter when, where or what. He’s the ultimate competitor,” Andrews said of Jackson. “It’s just play after play after play of him making big-time plays and helping this team win games. He does it better than anybody in the league. He lays it all out on the line every game. He’s the best. He’s the MVP.”

Mayfield finished 31-for-45 passing for 370 yards, three TDs and two interceptions. Evans joined Hall of Famers Jerry Rice, Randy Moss, Marvin Harrison and Terrell Owens as the only players to have at least 100 TD receptions in the first 11 seasons of a career when he caught a 25-yard scoring pass in the first quarter.

Murray, Cards top Chargers on game-ending field goal

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Arizona’s Kyler Murray rolled out to his left before turning on the jets, beating a Chargers defender to the sideline and then coasting for a spectacular 44-yard touchdown, casually holding the ball with one hand like it was a backyard game.

Cardinals coach Jonathan Gannon admitted that’s not the way his players are taught to protect the ball.

Then again, Gannon didn’t teach Murray how to run like that, either.

“Until he fumbles, I’ll let him ride,” Gannon said with a wry grin. “That was a pretty spectacular play.”

Murray ran for the game-changing touchdown early in the fourth quarter and then led the Cardinals on a drive that set up Chad Ryland’s 32-yard field goal as time expired, and Arizona rallied for a 17-15 win over Los Angeles on Monday night.

Cameron Dicker kicked his fifth field goal of the night — this one from 40 yards — to give the Chargers a 15-14 lead with 1:54 left. But the Cardinals (3-4) quickly moved into field-goal range, aided by an unnecessary roughness call on Cam Hart that cost Los Angeles (3-3) 15 yards.

Arizona followed that with a bruising 33-

yard catch and run by James Conner, who finished with 101 yards on the ground and 51 yards receiving. Conner’s big gain eventually set up Ryland’s short field goal and a Cardinals celebration. Conner delivered a sterling speech to the team on Sunday night and backed up those words on Monday.

“That’s just the way the season’s been going,” Conner said. “As a captain on this team, that’s the job description. Just tried to rally the troops.”

It was a frustrating night for the Chargers’ offense, which gained 395 yards but couldn’t find the end zone. Justin Herbert completed 27 of 39 passes for 349 yards. It was coach Jim Harbaugh’s first loss on Monday night, dropping him to 6-1 for his career.

Dicker booted field goals of 59, 50, 28, 47 and 40 yards, the first of which tied a franchise record for distance.

The Chargers came into the game with one of the NFL’s top defenses and had another good night, but the offense usually couldn’t execute when it mattered most. Los Angeles has gone 16 consecutive offensive drives without a touchdown.

“I thought we did a lot of good things, but we’ve got to score points in the red zone,” Herbert said. “That’s the biggest takeaway

from tonight’s game. We’ve got an amazing kicker, but we’ve got to do a better job for our defense and special teams. We’ve got to score points.”

Murray ran for his spectacular touchdown early in the fourth quarter for the 14-9 lead. It was his second long touchdown run in three weeks after he scored on a 50-yard sprint against San Francisco.

“It’s a good feeling, just putting the ball in the end zone,” Murray said. “Wish we could have done that more tonight, but a win’s a win.”

It was also Murray’s 20th career game with a touchdown pass and run.

Murray completed 14 of 26 passes for 145 yards, one touchdown and one interception.

Dicker’s 28-yarder late in the third quarter gave the Chargers a 9-7 lead. Los Angeles gained possession after stopping Cardinals backup quarterback Clayton Tune on third-and-1 and fourth-and-1. The Cardinals sometimes use Tune in short-yardage situation because he’s bigger than Murray.

Arizona scored on a 5-yard touchdown pass from Murray to Greg Dortch in the second quarter to take a 7-6 lead into halftime. It was Dortch’s first touchdown catch of the season.

Dodgers get contributions from all over

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The World Series is always the goal for the big-spending Los Angeles Dodgers. It's been elusive recently, with first-round flops two years running. Now, with Shohei Ohtani leading the way for the first time, they are going for another championship.

So a raucous clubhouse celebration was in order after the Dodgers beat the New York Mets to clinch their record 25th National League pennant.

"We hope we can do it again," infielder Max Muncy said. "We need to get four more wins."

Next up are the New York Yankees in the World Series, starting with Game 1 on Friday at Dodger Stadium. The best-of-seven series pits two of baseball's most glamorous teams against each other.

"I know the fans love this and the players love this, too," Los Angeles outfielder Teoscar Hernández said. "It's not going to be easy but we have the team, we have the help, and we're going to go for that World Series trophy."

The Yankees have beaten the Dodgers in eight of their 11 World Series clashes. The first seven were played in New York

— with the Yankees in the Bronx and Dem Bums in Brooklyn. The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles before the 1958 season.

"I think the whole world was looking forward or hoping for this potential matchup," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said.

He isn't kidding. Los Angeles has another country backing it — Japan has been tuning into the team's playoff games in record numbers, eager to see Ohtani and pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

The Dodgers landed Ohtani with a record \$700 million, 10-year deal in free agency, and they gave Yamamoto a \$325 million, 12-year contract. Ohtani's performance in 2024 included becoming the first player in major league history with 50 home runs and 50 stolen bases in a season.

At the same time, Los Angeles overcame a litany of injuries that decimated its starting pitching. It led the major leagues with 36 injured list placements and 2,342 days lost, 445 more days than any other team.

Helped by a couple of key contributors who arrived at the July trade deadline, the Dodg-

ers still finished with baseball's best record at 98-64 to earn home-field advantage throughout the postseason.

"This is a team that stayed together. Everybody contributed," Hernández said. "Shohei was a big part of all the wins we got, but the pitching, the bullpen was the big thing and thanks to them we're here, going to the World Series."

Los Angeles was in a perilous position in its NL Division Series, trailing the rival San Diego Padres. The Dodgers rallied to win the last two games and take the best-of-five series 3-2.

"They proved to themselves how tough they are," Roberts said.

Los Angeles is down to three healthy starters and has used three bullpen games so far this postseason. That strategy worked twice, including Sunday's clincher over the Mets.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The Dodgers acquired Tyler Glasnow, but he went down with an elbow injury in mid-August. Two weeks later, Clayton Kershaw, already coming off elbow surgery, was finished because of a bone spur in his big toe. Dustin May never pitched this season and Tony Gonsolin

was rehabbing after Tommy John surgery.

Walker Buehler struggled at times in his first season back from a second Tommy John procedure.

All-Star first baseman Freddie Freeman and shortstop Miguel Rojas have missed some time this postseason because of injuries, forcing multiple lineup changes.

Still, Los Angeles has stayed alive.

"I'm going to enjoy it no matter how little I helped," said Kershaw, the team's longest-tenured current player.

The Dodgers bolstered their roster in July by trading for starter Jack Flaherty, reliever Michael Kopech and versatile utilityman Tommy Edman, whose 11 RBIs against the Mets earned him NLCS MVP honors. Thrown into the cleanup spot in Game 6, Edman responded with four RBIs.

"I just think that I've got to bet on players that I feel are capable, put them in the best position to have success and be willing to live with whatever consequence," Roberts said. "This postseason, I've had a lot of clarity, and the players have made me look really good."

Nylander helps Maple Leafs power past Lightning

Associated Press

TORONTO — William Nylander had two goals and an assist as the Toronto Maple Leafs defeated the Tampa Bay Lightning 5-2 on Monday night.

Auston Matthews, Max Pacioretty and Matthew Knies also scored for Toronto. Anthony Stolarz made 32 saves. Mitch Marner had two assists.

Nick Paul and Brayden Point replied for Tampa Bay. Andrei Vasilevskiy allowed four goals on 14 shots before getting the hook midway through the second period. Jonas Johansson

made 14 saves in relief. Victor Hedman had two assists.

Nylander opened the scoring early in the first and put Toronto up 3-1 midway through the second.

Pacioretty stretched the lead to 4-1 from well out to end Vasilevskiy's night before Knies added another on Johansson for a four-goal advantage through 40 minutes.

The Leafs beat the Lightning in the first round of the 2023 playoffs for the Original Six franchise's only series victory in the NHL's salary cap era.

Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov, who picked up an assist, was held in check after entering with an NHL-leading seven goals in four games.

Toronto's 27th-ranked power play connected on its second opportunity when Matthews was quickest to a loose puck in the crease after Vasilevskiy couldn't squeeze Marner's initial shot.

Key moment

The Lightning had a 5-on-3 power play down 4-1 in the second for a full two minutes when

Max Domi and Bobby McMann were penalized on the same sequence, but Stolarz held the fort.

Key stat

Toronto scored at least five goals in a game for the 22nd time dating to last season. Only Colorado (31), Red Wings (25), Lightning (24) and Stars (23) have more in the same span.

Up next

The Lightning were in New Jersey on Tuesday. The Maple Leafs visited Columbus.