

Congressman Asks SECDEF to Direct Recission of SLCM-N Cancellation Memo



The crew of the Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Annapolis (SSN 760) successfully launches Tomahawk cruise missiles off the coast of southern California as part of a Tomahawk Flight Test (TFT) June 26, 2018. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ronald Gutridge*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The ranking member of the Strategic Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) said he asked Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to direct the acting Navy Secretary to rescind a directive that cancels a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile program, the SLCM-N.

The Defense Department's (DoD's) 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) said the department would pursue a Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N) "leveraging existing technologies to help ensure its cost effectiveness. SLCM will provide a needed non-strategic regional presence, an assured response capability. It also will provide an arms-control compliant response to Russia's non-compliance with the Intermediate-

range Nuclear Forces Treaty, its non-strategic nuclear arsenal, and its other destabilizing behaviors.”

The review asserted an SLCM “will not require or rely on host nation support to provide deterrent effect. They will provide additional diversity in platforms, range, and survivability, and a valuable hedge against future nuclear ‘break out’ scenarios.”

The president’s 2022 budget would, if approved by Congress, fund the SLCM-N in 2022. But a memorandum by Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker – issued before the summit meeting in Switzerland between U.S. President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin – directed that the SLCM-N be defunded in the 2023 budget, said Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, speaking July 7 in a webinar of the Hudson Institute.

“The acting secretary of the Navy issues a memorandum that instructed the staff constructing the budget for 2023 to defund this sea-launched cruise missile,” Turner said. “It is currently funded in this [2022] budget as it came over from President Biden’s submission. In his testimony, he [Harker] claimed to not have spoken to anyone” and made the decision “just on his own.”

Turner pointed out the need for a flexible deterrent, that SLCM-N is “a weapon that is absolutely needed” to counter Russia’s INF treaty violations.

“The acting secretary, in saying that he didn’t speak to anyone, the secretary of defense and the chief of staff have all said that they were not involved officially,” Turner said. “Now, what’s horrible about this is that Biden was on his way to go meet with Putin to have their so-called summit, and on Biden’s agenda was, of course, arms control, and here we have the acting secretary of the Navy basically telling Russia that we’re not going to field this, we’re not going to develop it, we’re going to defund it. And it really undermined the

president that the acting secretary admitted that he understood that his actions had undermined the president of the United States.”

In June 15 testimony before the HASC, Harker said that, in considering the 2023 budget in work, “my initial guidance was based on the fact that the overall posture review and the [updated] National Defense Strategy have not been completed, so I didn’t want anyone to assume that [SLCM-N] would be in until we had further guidance from the Nuclear Posture Review.”

Turner said he sees an undercurrent of within DoD that is undermining the U.S. nuclear strategic deterrent through universal disarmament of the United States.

“Here we have a missile that has a capability that we need and that we have this desire for arms control,” Turner said, noting that canceling a needed capability “would unilaterally concede and get nothing from the Russians or Chinese in any concessions in their systems. But that undercurrent of policy at DoD really has to be brought forward. ... The [next] Nuclear Posture Review is ongoing; even the assessment of alternatives for the SLCM itself is ongoing.

“Now I’ve asked the secretary of defense to direct the acting secretary of the Navy to rescind this direction,” Turner said. “I certainly hope that he does that. It sends the wrong message.”

The HASC chairman, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Washington, has stated his opposition to the SLCM as being destabilizing to the nuclear balance.

AeroVironment Debuts Crystals Ground Control System



The new Crystals ground control station, shown here in its Ultralight form. *AEROVIRONMENT*

Unmanned aircraft maker AeroVironment announced Crystals, a new flexible, cross-platform ground control system the company says will form the command-and-control basis for all its products going forward.

Company President and CEO Wahid Nawabi and other company officials announced the product in a live video press conference on July 6, saying the goal is to make command and control much simpler for the warfighter and provide a “window”

to all the systems they control, eventually including air, ground and maritime equipment.

“With the introduction of Crysalis, we are streamlining command and control of our small UAS and empowering warfighters with actionable intelligence at the speed of war to increase their tactical decision making,” Nawabi said. “Crysalis can be integrated into our portfolio of intelligent, multi-domain robotic systems and deliver easy-to-use, yet powerful new capabilities that enable our customers to succeed in full spectrum operations.”

Crysalis, which the company calls “ground control, simplified,” is built around hardware, software and antennas and comes in four sizes: RVT, or remote video terminal, the smallest, wearable, phone-based system; Ultralight, also wearable, but which adds joysticks and physical controls and is the smallest size that allows full command and control; Tactical, which adds a battery splitter for hot-swapping batteries for longer power life; and Command, a laptop-based variant intended for a fixed or semi-fixed command post location.

It’s cross platform with Windows, Android and Linux, and is flexible in that an Android-powered Crysalis system on a phone could interact with a Windows system on a laptop.

Ease of use is key to reduce “cognitive load” on warfighters, Nawabi said, and the system is designed to put critical information front and center. Size was also a key driver for the system because, as Chief Software Engineer Mark Graybill said, “Weight is about how much ammo you can’t pack.”

HII To Acquire Alion Science and Technology

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. – Huntington Ingalls Industries has entered into a definitive agreement to acquire Alion Science and Technology for \$1.65 billion in cash from Veritas Capital, subject to customary adjustments, HII announced in a July 6 release.

Alion will become part of Huntington Ingalls Industries' Technical Solutions division. The transaction is expected to close in the second half of 2021, subject to customary closing conditions.

Alion provides advanced engineering and research and development services in the areas of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, military training and simulation, cyber, data analytics and other next-generation technology-based solutions to the Department of Defense and intelligence community customers, with the U.S. Navy representing about one third of current annual revenues.

Alion is poised for continued strong growth with over \$3 billion in backlog today, with more than \$5 billion in estimated contract value and a robust opportunity pipeline, Huntington Ingalls said. Alion has more than 3,200 employees with over 80% of employees maintaining security clearances.

"We established the Technical Solutions division in 2016 with a vision and strategy focused on partnering with our customers to solve their most pressing challenges," said Mike Petters, HII's president and CEO. "Today's announcement, coupled with our previous investments in leading edge technologies, such as cybersecurity and autonomous systems, reflects our commitment to stay on the cutting edge of critical, high-growth national security solutions and generate significant long-term value

for our shareholders.”

“The combination of Alion and our Technical Solutions business represents a significant value creation opportunity that broadens our capabilities and customer access in our target markets,” said Andy Green, HII executive vice president and president of Technical Solutions. “The experienced Alion team and the highly complementary solutions and products they provide are consistent with the strategic vision we have articulated for the Technical Solutions business, and we are excited about the significant growth potential this combination represents.”

Cutter Thetis Returns from 47-Day Counter-Drug Patrol



A Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron MH-65 Dolphin helicopter is aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Thetis during a patrol in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, June 12, 2021. The Coast Guard Cutter Thetis returned home to Key West, Florida after completing a 47-day patrol to the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean. *U.S. COAST GUARD*

KEY WEST, Fla. – The Coast Guard Cutter Thetis, a 270-foot Famous-class cutter, and crew returned to Key West, Saturday, July 3, following a 47-day deployment to the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean working with U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South, the Coast Guard 7th District said in a release.

Thetis' crew interdicted three suspected smugglers and approximately 4,000 pounds of cocaine with a street value of \$75 million. The Thetis crew deployed with an MH-65 helicopter and aviation detachment capable of conducting airborne use of force from the Coast Guard's Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron based in Jacksonville, Florida.

The Thetis crew also conducted joint counter-narcotic and

seamanship training with the Panamanian navy, in which they participated in communications exercises, non-compliant vessel pursuit tactics and medical training while at sea with Panamanian partners.

“The Coast Guard maintains a consistent presence in the region while also leveraging support from our maritime partner nations,” said Cmdr. Justin Nadolny, Thetis’ commanding officer. “It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to train and operate with the Panamanian navy, they are a true group of professionals and together we continue to disrupt the flow of illicit contraband into the United States.”

Cutter Alex Haley Returns to Kodiak from Bering Sea Patrol



Coast Guard Cutter Alex Haley boat crew members prepare to disconnect from the forward-davit connection during rescue-and-assistance training in the Bering Sea, May 28, 2021. Small boats deployed from Coast Guard cutters are used in a variety of missions including law enforcement and search and rescue.
U.S. COAST GUARD

KODIAK, Alaska –The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Alex Haley returned to homeport on Tuesday, June 29 following a 52-day Bering Sea patrol, the Coast Guard 17th District said in a July 2 release.

While deployed, the crew of the Alex Haley provided search and rescue capability to the fisheries in the Bering Sea. Their embarked MH-65 helicopter crew from Air Station Kodiak conducted a search and rescue mission in the coastal town of Akutan. The aircrew transported a severely injured resident to a higher level of medical care.

The crew also maintained a law enforcement presence throughout the Aleutian chain. They conducted 17 law enforcement boardings, ensured compliance with maritime laws and

regulations, and protected the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone by patrolling the maritime boundary line to prevent the illegal harvesting of U.S. fish stocks.

“Assuming the duties as commanding officer of Alex Haley during a patrol afforded me the opportunity to learn a great deal about the ship and its crew,” said Cmdr. Brian Whisler commanding officer of the Alex Haley. “While such a significant transition can prove challenging, the crew continually maintained impressive work ethic and professionalism in the execution of our primary missions. Their dedication to the people and communities we serve proves Alex Haley crew members is a vital asset in the Bering Sea region.”

The Alex Haley is a 282-foot medium-endurance cutter that has been homeported in Kodiak since 1999. The crew routinely operate throughout the Bering Sea, Gulf of Alaska, and Pacific Ocean. The cutter’s ability to operate in extreme weather conditions provides the mission flexibility necessary to perform search and rescue, fisheries law enforcement, and vessel safety inspections across Alaska.

USS Donald Cook Concludes Forward Deployment to U.S. 6th Fleet



The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Donald Cook (DDG 75) departed Naval Station Rota, Spain, for the last time as a Forward Deployed Naval Forces-Europe (FDFNF-E) destroyer, June 30, 2021. *U.S. NAVY*

ROTA, Spain – The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Donald Cook (DDG 75) departed Naval Station Rota, Spain, for the last time as a Forward Deployed Naval Forces-Europe (FDFNF-E) destroyer, June 30, 2021, said Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kaila Peters, in a July 6 U.S. 6th Fleet release.

USS Arleigh Burke (DDG 51), the lead ship of its class of Aegis-equipped guided missile destroyers with the latest AEGIS baseline 9 upgrade, replaced Donald Cook in the second of four scheduled homeport shifts to occur in support of the U.S. Navy's long-range plan to gradually rotate the Rota-based destroyers. USS Roosevelt (DDG 80) replaced USS Carney (DDG 64) in the first homeport shift.

"These Sailors distinguished themselves throughout their five years deployed overseas," said Capt. Joseph Gagliano,

Commander, Destroyers Squadron 60 and Task Force 65. "Their contribution to NATO security and freedom of navigation is a legacy that will now continue with Arleigh Burke."

Donald Cook bookended its operations in U.S. 6th Fleet by conducting operations in the Black Sea.

Upon arrival in U.S. 6th Fleet in 2014 as one of the first Rota-based FDNF-E destroyers under Commander, Task Force (CTF) 65, Donald Cook executed operational tasking immediately by conducting operations in the Black Sea following Russia's annexation of Crimea. After 11 patrols and numerous visits to the Black Sea, the ship wrapped up its last visit to the Black Sea in support of NATO Allies and regional partners, Feb. 10, 2021. During this last visit, Donald Cook conducted presence operations, demonstrated commitment to NATO allies and partners, and engaged in exercises that strengthened interoperability and collective readiness.

Donald Cook's commitment to NATO Allies and regional partners extended well beyond the Black Sea. During its time in Europe, Donald Cook operated from the Barents Sea above Europe, to the Gulf of Guinea along the west coast of Africa.

"Donald Cook's time in 6th Fleet has afforded this ship and her crew a number of invaluable experiences that are unique to this area of operation to include operating in the Black Sea, crossing the Arctic Circle, and a multitude of international operations," said Cmdr. Matthew Curnen, Donald Cook's commanding officer. "My time in 6th Fleet has been unlike anything else I've experienced in my naval career. I am extremely thankful for the opportunities and challenges it has presented that have helped all of us grow professionally and personally."

The agility and capabilities of the Arleigh Burke class destroyer has made it an ideal platform to integrate and strengthen relations with regional allies and partners.

Throughout Donald Cook's time in U.S. 6th Fleet, the ship participated in previous iterations of Exercise Sea Breeze, BALTOPs, Phoenix Express, Formidable Shield, Atlas Handshake, and other multi-lateral maritime training opportunities with partners to include Algeria, France, Georgia, Italy, Morocco and Norway. Mission sets during these exercises included surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-air warfare scenarios that focus on maintaining maritime stability and security.

Notable milestones include Donald Cook's Oct. 2019 visit to the High North for the first time. The ship's presence in the Arctic Circle reinforced the United States' commitment to regional security and stability, as well as the Navy's ability to deploy to many different environments on short notice, and the value of having forward-deployed naval forces available to operate in the region.

The visit also provided the crew the rare opportunity to become "Blue Nose" Sailors when the ship crossed into the Arctic Circle, a Navy tradition that only Sailors who have been to the Arctic can claim. Donald Cook's time in the High North followed a historic port visit to the Faroe Islands, with Donald Cook being the Navy's first destroyer to visit the island, and the first Navy vessel to visit in 33 years.

"It has been a bittersweet departure from Rota," said Operations Specialist Second Class Jory Fetterolf. "My time in Spain has been an amazing opportunity to experience a different culture and afforded me the opportunity to travel to places I would've never seen if I wasn't stationed here, however, I'm excited to return to the United States to be closer to family."

Donald Cook completed one final underway to the Aegean Sea to perform maneuver exercises with the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Roosevelt (DDG 80) to conclude its last patrol. The two destroyers formed a Surface Action

Group (SAG) led by Capt. Joseph Gagliano, commander, Task Force 65, who was embarked on the Roosevelt during this underway. The SAG conducted numerous scenarios to provide integrated training and test real-time response to combat situations.

Named after U.S. Marine Corps Col. Donald G. Cook, a prisoner of War during the Vietnam War who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, Donald Cook is scheduled to return to its former homeport of Mayport, Florida.

Forward-Deployed Naval Forces-Europe ships have the flexibility to operate throughout the waters of Europe and Africa, from the Cape of Good Hope to the Arctic Circle, demonstrating their mastery of the maritime domain.

CTF 65 and Destroyer Squadron 60, headquartered in Rota, Spain, oversee the FDNF of C6F's area of operation in support of regional allies and partners as well as U.S. national security interests in Europe and Africa.

U.S. 6th Fleet, headquartered in Naples, Italy, conducts the full spectrum of joint and naval operations, often in concert with allied and interagency partners, in order to advance U.S. national interests and security and stability in Europe and Africa.

Saildrone USVs Set for 7th Arctic Mission



A SAILDRONE Explorer at work. *SAILDRONE*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Saildrone is set to conduct an Arctic research mission for the seventh consecutive year with its autonomous unmanned surface vessels (USVs) powered by wind and sun. The company is conducting the missions with six of its smallest USV, the 23-foot-long Explorer.

The six USVs are being launched from Dutch Harbor, a port in the Aleutian Islands. Four will collect data in the Bering Sea and two will collect data in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas in the Arctic Ocean.

The voyages are being conducted to collect atmospheric, oceanographic and bathymetric data for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and NASA. The sensors on board the SAILDRONES will be collecting data on carbon dioxide dissolved in the water; bathymetry; climate and weather – including heat, radiation, carbon and atmospheric variables; wind speed and direction; and radiation and temperatures.

“Every year we have increased our capabilities,” said Rich Jenkins, Saildrone’s CEO, who noted that the Explorer USVs have “incredible reliability.”

For maritime domain awareness, the Explorers also are fitted with 360-degree cameras that record visual information 24/7 using machine learning algorithms to spot anomalies, such as a passing vessel, imaging every five seconds.

“We’ve amassed hundreds of millions of images of the open ocean from the Arctic down to the Southern Ocean,” Jenkins said. “We train the machine-learning model to recognize things visually” such as vessels, icebergs, birds, whales, dolphins, etc.

Data on vessels can be fused with data from the Automatic Information System for increased maritime domain awareness. Saildrone leases the services of Iridium commercial satellites for transmitting data between a USV and a ground station.

Oshkosh Defense Receives \$152M Order for JLTVs to U.S. Military and NATO Allies



U.S. Marines with Battalion Landing Team 3/5, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), land on the beach in a joint light tactical vehicle (JLTV) to begin a light armored reconnaissance raid rehearsal at Camp Schwab, Okinawa, Japan, June 19, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Sgt. Daisha R. Ramirez*
OSHKOSH, Wis. – The U.S. Army Contracting Command – Detroit Arsenal has awarded Oshkosh Defense, a wholly owned subsidiary of Oshkosh Corp., a \$152 million order for Joint Light Tactical Wheeled Vehicles (JLTV), companion trailers, and associated kits, the company said in a July 1 release.

The order includes Oshkosh JLTVs, trailers and kits for the U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Navy, as well as NATO allies Lithuania, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Romania.

Since winning the competitive JLTV contract in 2015, Oshkosh has built over 12,500 JLTVs, fielded vehicles to over 40 U.S. and international military installations, and received commitments from eight NATO, Allied, and Coalition partners.

“We’ve spent over 10 years developing our vehicle, followed by nearly six years of manufacturing the vehicle in both low rate

and full rate production,” said George Mansfield, vice president and general manager of Joint Programs, Oshkosh Defense. “We’ve refined the manufacturing process, matured our robust supply chain, and fulfilled the light tactical vehicle capability gap in eight additional countries with our proven platform. No one else can say that. And we have no plans to stop building the Oshkosh JLTV anytime soon.”

The U.S. Army recently increased Oshkosh’s option ceiling under the current contract from 18,170 to 23,163 vehicles to support critical missions worldwide.

“Oshkosh Defense is incredibly pleased with the reception the JLTV continues to receive around the world,” said John Lazar, vice president and general manager of International Programs, Oshkosh Defense. “The JLTV provides unprecedented levels of off-road mobility, survivability, and hosted firepower on a light tactical vehicle platform. We had a busy Spring and the momentum surrounding the platform continues to grow.”

In May, the North Macedonia minister of defense, Radmila Sekerinska, was able to ride in the JLTV for the first time. Sekerinska later tweeted, “These new American-made light armored vehicles will become part of the Army facilities. Today at Krivolak, we were convinced of their exceptional performance. This is what our Army looks like in #NATO.”

Later in June, the Slovenian deputy prime minister and minister of defense Matej Tonin, remarked at a JLTV acceptance ceremony, “Modernization of the Slovenian Army has finally begun. With the new light armored vehicles Oshkosh 4x4, our Soldiers will be more successful and safer in tasks at home and abroad.”

To date, Oshkosh has received orders or commitments from the following NATO, Allied, and Coalition partners including the United Kingdom, Belgium, Montenegro, Slovenia, Lithuania, Brazil, Romania, and North Macedonia.

First USMC F-35C squadron Declares Full Operational Capability



U.S. Marines with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314 and Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 352, Marine Aircraft Group 11, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, conduct a new expeditionary landing demonstration with M-31 arresting gear Interim Flight Clearance (IFC), on Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif., Dec. 3rd, 2020. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Leilani Cervantes*

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION MIRAMAR, Calif. – As the Marine Corps continues to make changes to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 314 has reached a new milestone in Marine Corps history as they declare their full operational

capability (FOC) for the F-35C Lightning II, according to 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) spokesman 1st Lt. Charles Allen in a July 1 release.

“VMFA-314 is the first F-35C squadron in the Marine Corps to declare FOC. They are now full up round and bring the incredible 5th generation capability to 3rd MAW. They will deploy as part of a Carrier Strike Group next year.” said Maj. Gen. Christopher Mahoney, 3rd MAW commanding general. “FOC for the Black Knights is yet another step forward in achieving Force Design objectives. The Black Knights are ready- 3rd MAW is ready.”

FOC is significant in its confirmation that VMFA-314 is fully prepared and equipped successfully deploy aboard U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, marking the first FOC declaration for Marine Corps. This inaugural event is met after VMFA-314 received their first F-35C on January 21, 2020, when their first jet arrived at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar from Naval Air Station Lemoore.

“Many hours were spent maintaining aircraft, launching and recovering aircraft in Miramar, at other military facilities, and aboard the ship to conduct the training required to meet these goals,” said Major Derek Heinz, VMFA-314 operations officer. “The Marines of VMFA-314 have gained confidence in fighting this aircraft and feel confident we can do so in combat if called upon.”

VMFA-314 is currently continuing its preparations toward future deployments by conducting tailored ship’s training availability (TSTA), marking the first F-35C squadron to conduct TSTA in the Marine Corps. This training will consist of communication rehearsals, medical drills, flight operations, and shipboard drills conducted while underway, ensuring the squadron is prepared to deploy in support of maritime campaigns.

Exercise Sea Breeze Underway in the Black Sea



Special forces from several countries participated in Exercise Sea Breeze 2021 in Ukraine, June 30, 2021. Exercise Sea Breeze is a multinational maritime exercise cohosted by the U.S. 6th Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy since 1997. Sea Breeze 2021 is designed to enhance interoperability of participating nations and strengthens maritime security and peace in the region.
U.S. NAVY / UKR SOF

U.S. 6th Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy are cohosting the annual naval Exercise Sea Breeze 2021 (SB21) in the Black Sea region. SB21 kicked off on June 28 and runs through July 10.

According to a statement from the U.S. 6th Fleet, SB21 will “focus on multiple warfare areas including amphibious warfare, land maneuver warfare, diving operations, maritime

interdiction operations, air defense, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations.”

The first Sea Breeze exercise took place in 1997, and it has grown steadily to involve more nations and participants. “This year’s iteration has the largest number of participating nations in the exercise’s history with 32 countries from six continents providing 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft, and 18 special operations and dive teams scheduled to participate,” said Lt. Bobby Dixon, a spokesman for the 6th Fleet.

Nations participating in SB21 include Albania, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, France, Georgia, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Senegal, Spain, South Korea, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States. Participants will engage in realistic maritime training to build experience and teamwork and strengthen interoperability.

NATO has participated in Sea Breeze since the beginning, and the annual exercise’s popularity has continued to grow in popularity over the years.

The ships and embarked aircraft of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 will take part in the exercise. The exercise will focus on multiple warfare areas including amphibious warfare, land maneuver warfare, diving operations, maritime interdiction operations, air defense, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations in the Black Sea region.

According to a NATO press release, “This is good example to how allies and partners provide unique training opportunities, designed to enhance readiness, improve collaboration, and interoperability in the Black Sea region.”

“Sea Breeze allows allies and partners to come together and operate in the Black Sea and build capabilities and to conduct coordinated operations in international waters,” said Capt. Kyle Gantt, the deputy commodore and the deputy commander of Task Force 65.

Task Force 65, based at Rota, Spain, is the U.S. Navy’s forward-deployed destroyer squadron in Europe, and represents the United States annually as the lead task force executing exercise Sea Breeze.

Gantt said Sea Breeze improves partner capabilities and interoperability. “I’ve been very impressed with the capability of the Ukrainian navy,” said Gantt. “All of the exercises are conducted using standard procedures, which are common among our allies and we use when operating with our partners.”

The exercise is following appropriate COVID 19 protocols. “Last year, significant limitation was imposed due to COVID-19 pandemic and there were no ships were able to visit Ukrainian ports. This year training will be conducted to the fullest extent,” said Rear Adm. Oleksiy Neyezhpapa, commander of the Ukrainian navy. “More foreign equipment will be deployed than in the Sea Breeze of the past year.”

Capt. Cameron Chen, commander of Task Force 68, said the training and coordination with the Sea Breeze partners will help build and increase the capabilities of the Ukrainian military. “We are the Naval Expeditionary Force component for Sixth Fleet. We provide EOD [explosive ordnance disposal], divers, MCM [mine countermeasure] capability, and naval construction force and maritime expeditionary security to Europe and Africa. More Iterations like this, more exercises and continued partnerships, I think, is the key to strengthening ties and improving capabilities in the region.”

Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has

increased its presence in the Black Sea. According to a statement from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, NATO supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters.

"NATO does not and will not recognize Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and denounces its temporary occupation," the statement said. "NATO continues to operate in international waters and the alliance's actions are always defensive in nature, proportionate in posture, and in line with international laws and conventions. The multinational character of NATO deployments, and transparency in all of its exercises and activities, reflects allies' fundamental commitment to the principles of collective defense, transatlantic unity, and interoperability in order to maintain peace and preserve security."

No Provocation

Russia consistently monitors allied operations in the Black Sea with interest. This June, Russia fired warning shots at a Royal Navy destroyer that it said was in Russian waters, harassed a Dutch frigate, and has "spoofed" AIS tracking information to show allied ships near Crimea when they were actually faraway or in port in Odessa.

Gantt said the exercise was not intended to provoke Russia.

"This is a long-planned exercise. In fact, this is an exercise that has happened since 1997. In fact, this is the 21st iteration. This is in no way a reactive exercise. This is a longstanding commitment to an exercise in the Black Sea co-hosted by the United States and the Ukrainian navies. All nations have the right to operate in international waters, and this exercise will take place either in Ukraine or in international waters."

"Russia routinely observes our operations, and it is their

right to do so when they're doing that in international waters," said Gantt. "What we expect is that all nations will operate professionally at sea. We expect that all nations will respect the international laws and norms that govern safe and professional operations at sea. I expect that from Russia and I expect that from all of the forces here operating in Sea Breeze."

Gantt pointed out that the U.S. and Russia have a longstanding Incidents at Sea agreement (INCSEA) to reduce the chance of an incident at sea between the two countries and, in the event that one occurred, to prevent it from escalating.

"INCSEA provides a standardized set of communications to make sure there is no question when ships communicate with each other how they are – what their intentions are, and it's a longstanding process that, quite frankly, removes risk. That's an important part of what we're doing here with Sea Breeze. We are demonstrating to the world that the Black Sea is an international sea; it is open and available for the free transport of commerce, of shipping, for all nations, and it is not owned by any one nation."

As in past years, Sea Breeze serves to demonstrate the commitment of the U.S., NATO and partner nations to the stability and prosperity of the region.

"We are committed to maintaining the safety and security of the Black Sea," said Chargé d'affaires Kristina Kvien of the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine.