

Defender-Europe 21 Exercise Tests Ability to Move Military Might Overseas



A stevedore at the Port of Jacksonville drives a military vehicle onto the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command's USNS Bob Hope March 26, 2021. The vessel was bound for the Defender-Europe 21 linked exercise. *U.S. ARMY / Kimberly Spinner*

A major U.S.-led multi-national exercise in Europe is testing America's ability to move troops, cargo and vehicles overseas to support NATO and partner nations.

Defender-Europe is an annual, large-scale U.S. Army Europe and Africa-led, multinational, joint exercise designed to build strategic and operational readiness and interoperability between U.S., NATO allies and partners. Defender-Europe 21 activities began in March in the U.S. and across Europe and will continue into June.

Movement of vehicles from the Military Sealift Command large medium speed roll-on/roll-off (LMSR) USNS Bob Hope (T-AKR-300) are taking place this week in Albania.

"Defender-Europe 21 is a critical exercise that will provide V Corps with another great opportunity to build readiness in our march towards full operational capability, and promote interoperability as we work alongside allies and partners," said Lt. Gen. John Kolasheski, V Corps commanding general. "We are looking forward to this chance to work closely with U.S. Army Europe and Africa and demonstrate U.S. resolve and commitment to Europe."

Exercise Defender-Europe 21 will include "nearly simultaneous operations across more than 30 training areas" in a dozen

countries.

While the exercise is a U.S.-led training event, it involves more than 30,000 multinational military personnel from 27 nations, along with 10,000 U.S. personnel including rotational forces from the continental U.S. About 10 percent are members of the National Guard or Army Reserve.

Last year's exercise, Defender-Europe 20, was scaled back due to COVID restrictions, and while the pandemic does have an impact on this year's events, with all activities being conducted in accordance with COVID 19 protocols, there are more NATO ally and partner nations conducting activities over a wider area than what was planned for last year.

A strict COVID prevention and mitigation strategy has been implemented by U.S. and participating nations. U.S.-based personnel will conduct pre-deployment COVID testing, quarantine in Europe upon arrival and conduct another COVID test before travelling in theater.

"While we are closely monitoring the COVID situation, we've proven we have the capability to train safely despite the pandemic. No matter what, our nations count on our forces being ready to defend the peace," said Gen. Christopher Cavoli, U.S. Army Europe and Africa commanding general.

Cavoli said exercises like Defender-Europe 21 are essential to building readiness and interoperability. "Defender-Europe 21 provides us the best opportunity to hone our abilities alongside our allies and partners in the strategically important Balkans and Black Sea region so that collectively, we are ready to respond to any crisis that may arise," he said.

Ships and aircraft began movement of people and equipment from the continental U.S. in March, and Army prepositioned stock sites in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands began moving supplies and equipment into position to support the training

activities.

Seaports in five European countries – Albania, Croatia, Germany, Greece and Slovenia – were used to send or receive more than 1,200 pieces of equipment to or from the continental United States as part of the exercise.

Besides USNS Bob Hope, the expeditionary fast transport USNS Yuma (T-EPF 8) is also participating in the exercise, transporting cargo from USNS Bob Hope to other locations.

Journey from Jacksonville

For the U.S. Army's 7th Transportation Brigade-Expeditionary, and the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command's (SDDC) 841st Transportation Battalion, the loadout began at the Port of Jacksonville's Blount Island Marine Terminal March 25-26, with the loading about 750 pieces of tactical vehicles and other equipment of the 53d Infantry Combat Team onto the Bob Hope.

Bob Hope is the first ship in a class of seven 62,000-ton, 951-foot vehicle cargo ships. It was built at Avondale Shipyard in Louisiana and entered service in 1998. The ship supports the U.S. Army storing and transporting supplies, tanks, trucks and other vehicles to equip an Army brigade. It is one of 11 T-AKRs operated by the Military Sealift Command with civil service mariner or contract crews. The ship is one of the 15 ships assigned to the Surge Sealift program, which are ships held in a reduced operational status until activated for missions.

"The support of Jaxport and its skilled labor force ensures that we have the right tools to carry out our mission seamlessly from start to finish," said Lt. Col. Altwan Whitfield, Commander, 841st Transportation Battalion. "The most challenging part of a deployment operation is ensuring the synchronization of all of the elements, it is not a one-person show – it's a team effort."

With its key highway and rail connections, Jacksonville is designated as one of the nation's 17 strategic seaports to move U.S. military cargo for national defense, foreign humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

"One of Jaxport's most important roles is serving the community as one of the military's strategic seaports," Jaxport Chairman Jamie Shelton said. "By investing in our facilities and maintaining a world-class port, we ensure that we can continue to support our service members and the important work they do to protect our national security."

"Supporting Defender-Europe 21 is a great opportunity," said Maj. Mark Huey, 841st Transportation Battalion terminal management team officer in charge at Jacksonville. "The mission integrates units from the Reserve, National Guard and active duty, then also units on the naval side. We really get to exercise our full functionality."

From Jacksonville, Bob Hope sailed to Portsmouth, Virginia, and loaded more equipment for the exercise before sailing for Durres, Albania, including an Army causeway section, warping tugs and other lighterage needed to move equipment from ships at anchor to shore.

The deployment of Bob Hope and the embarked equipment provided an opportunity to demonstrate the Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) concept.

According to "JLOTS Vision 2010," JLOTS is a unified commander's joint employment of joint employment of Army and Navy LOTS assets to Army and Navy LOTS assets to deploy and sustain a force. JLOTS operations allow U.S. strategic sealift strategic sealift ships to discharge over a bare, inadequate or damaged port, or over a bare beach. JLOTS watercraft can also be used to beach.

While Navy amphibious ships routinely deploy with Landing Craft, Air Cushion (LCACs), the Army gave up its air-cushioned

watercraft about 35 years ago, and the Navy's LCAC inventory cannot self-deploy or be lifted onboard existing sealift ships.

According to a news release from the 7th Transportation Brigade, "JLOTS operations are part of U.S. Transportation Command's strategic sealift mission. The process allows combined Army and Navy forces to move equipment to and from a ship on air-cushioned watercraft to overcome anti-access and area-denial challenges while improving the ability to move forces closer to tactical assembly areas. JLOTS missions are unique in that they allow for an entire brigade-sized element to be moved on and off a ship with an improvised port infrastructure, providing flexibility to choose load locations such as a bare beach, austere port, or a damaged or fixed port."

"It doesn't require ramps, it doesn't require anything other than the causeway, which can be assembled organically from the vessel. The ramp is able to lower onto the causeway and then equipment can begin to [roll-on/roll-off] expeditiously and be pushed ashore," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jordan Milo, 841st Transportation Battalion mobility warrant officer and Defender-Europe 21 operations officer in charge at the Port of Portsmouth.

"Any limiting factors that would have existed from not having an improved infrastructure port, or if the depth of the water wouldn't allow for the vessel to come in, that's where these JLOTS operations allow us to project power ashore where we need it," said Milo.



U.S. Soldiers unload a truck from the U.S. Army Logistic Support Vessel MG Charles P. Gross during Defender-Europe 21 Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore operations, May 1, 2021 in Durres, Albania. *U.S. ARMY / Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Bryson*

JLOTS Albania

The JLOTS capability was showcased at Durres, Albania, this week when USNS Bob Hope discharged its cargo of heavy equipment onto smaller vessels that was transferred to shore for onward movement, including USNS Yuma and the British roll on/roll off vessel Hurst Point, which delivered equipment from the U.K.'s 104th Logistic Support Brigade to Gazenica in Zadar, Croatia.

"As part of Defender-Europe 2021, we are transferring up to 1,000 vehicles for the 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team who, will arrive in Albania in the coming days, said Capt. James Hilton, the U.S. senior defense official/defense attache/security cooperation officer to Albania. He told attendees at a VIP event to witness the exercise port operations that JLOTS is a multi-step process.

"First, the vehicles are loaded onto a large, medium speed roll on/roll off vessel [LMSR] in the United States. That ship sails across the ocean in advance of the troops. Upon arrival, the vehicles must be transferred from the ship to the shore. In some ports, the LMSR pulls up to the pier and discharges the vehicles directly. However, a secure port is never guaranteed, so crews must practice an alternative method of offloading.

"Because the USNS Bob Hope is too large to enter the port of Durres, U.S. Army and Navy Soldiers and Sailors work together to construct a roll on/roll off to discharge facility that is connected to the LMSR a few miles away from here. Vehicles are then loaded onto smaller ships called logistic support vessels which transport the vehicles the final miles to the pier here. Additional ships from the United States and the United Kingdom will transfer vehicles to other Adriatic ports in support of Defender-Europe 2021."

According to exercise officials, this was the first time this capability had been demonstrated since World War II. U.S. Ambassador to Albania Yuri Kim said Defender-Europe 21 was the

largest ever multi-national military exercise in southeast Europe, and is taking place on the 30th anniversary of the reestablishment of U.S. Albanian relations.

Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby said the exercise is building operational readiness and interoperability between NATO allies and partners. "It's defensive in nature, focused on deterring aggression, while preparing our forces to respond to crisis and conduct large-scale combat operations if necessary."

"When a crisis begins is not the time to wish America had the expeditionary capability and capacity to support power projection requirements of the Army and Marine Corps," said retired Rear Adm. Sinclair Harris, Navy League national vice president of military affairs and chair of the Maritime Policy Committee.

"Not everything that is needed can be flown and America's military has the unique and asymmetric advantage of being able to put what we need, where we need it, and when we need it. Be it for humanitarian operations or combat ops, ships like the USNS Bob Hope and systems such as JLOTS provide game changing options for our combatant commanders."

The exercise will conclude in June with the redeployment of U.S.-based forces and equipment back home.