Task Force 66 Applies Lessons Learned From Black Sea Battle Lab to Exercise BALTOPS 25

Royal Navy Archer Class P2000 patrol vessels HMS Pursuer (P273) conducts counter unmanned surface vessel operations with global autonomous reconnaissance crafts (GARC) attached to Commander, Task Force 66 during Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) 2025, June 12, 2025. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Christine Montgomery)

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UTSKA, Poland – Commander, Task Force (CTF) 66, U.S. 6th Fleet's purpose-built all-domain task force with the mission of integrating Robotic and Autonomous Systems (RAS) into fleet operations, is participating in Baltic Operations 2025 (BALTOPS) June 5-20, 2025.

Established in 2024 to deploy and employ RAS with Navy, joint, and NATO partners, CTF 66 utilizes RAS in conjunction with conventional manned platforms and spaced-based capabilities to expand Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), develop defense measures against adversarial use of RAS, innovate asymmetric fighting, and in the future, deliver lethal effects, if necessary.

“Task Force 66 operates through strong collaboration with U.S. Navy programs, NATO Allies, and partner nations, fostering the development and integration of cutting-edge robotic and autonomous systems,” said Rear Adm. Michael Mattis, Commander, Task Force 66. “By leveraging our collective expertise and technology, we aim to demonstrate strength and bolster maritime security not just here in the Baltic Sea, but in other maritime environments, to include the shores near the U.S. and in the Pacific Ocean.”

During BALTOPS 25, CTF 66 has employed unmanned surface vessels to simulate fast attack craft engagement on both Blue Ridge-class command and control ship USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) and Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Paul Ignatius (DDG 117) with Global Autonomous Reconnaissance Craft (GARC) and other unmanned systems. These simulations allowed the ships to practice and develop tactics, techniques, and procedures to defend against unmanned attacks in close coordination with Allied forces.

“The thing is, ‘unmanned’ isn’t completely unmanned,” added Lt. Jay Faylo, unmanned systems director for CTF 66. “There’s a lot of manpower that goes into making these systems work—maintaining the platforms, developing the software, and providing the right amount of oversight and direction during operations. Building that familiarity and those skill sets with our RAS operators is critical to ensure we can continue to evolve and adapt at the speed of the technology.”

BALTOPS 25 provides the U.S. Navy and its NATO Allies and

partners an opportunity to test and refine joint warfighting capabilities in a dynamic environment. CTF 66 is also conducting training to enhance MDA in the Baltic Sea in order to counter grey zone activities in tandem with NATO's Task Force X and leverage RAS and commercial space-based sensors to support tracking and targeting for at-sea interdictions and joint fires.

"CTF 66's success hinges on strong collaboration with our partners to share tactics, operate together, and develop lessons learned," said Faylo. "During this exercise, we are operating with the U.S. Marine Corps, Polish Special Operations Forces and the United Kingdom's Royal Navy to develop procedures for resupplying land-based forces with our unmanned surface vessels, just to give one example."

Additionally, CTF 66's close collaboration with Ukraine provides insight into the employment of RAS in the challenging Black Sea environment against a capable and adaptive enemy. Known by its nickname the "Black Sea Battle Lab" CTF 66 has observed Ukraine employ RAS in order to secure crucial sea lanes for continued economic activity and deny the Russian Federation Navy's use of the Black Sea to launch offensive attacks.

"The opportunity to closely observe the cycle of action-reaction-counteraction in the Black Sea is a unique advantage that allows CTF 66 to learn from real world conflict and adapt to the changing character of war," said Mattis. "In order to keep up with these changes, we must seek out creative solutions to rapidly field and develop new technology, with a focus on software and low-cost platforms, to inform our approach to future maritime security operations."

BALTOPS 25 is an annual maritime-focused exercise designed to enhance flexibility and interoperability among allied and partner nations. Now in its 54th iteration, the exercise strengthens regional security and demonstrates NATO's

commitment to collective defense.

For imagery, video and updates, visit https://www.c6f.navy.mil.