

18 NATO and Partner Nations Conducting Multi-Lateral Combat Training During BALTOPS 50



Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) ships HMCS Halifax, HDMS Absalon, FS Commandant Blaison, HNoMS Storm and HNoMS Gnist participate in a PHOTOEX with RFA Mounts Bay and HMS Albion off the coast of Denmark on June 6th, 2021 during Exercise BALTOPS 50. *ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY / Sailor First Class Bryan Underwood*

The U.S., NATO allies and partner nations are participating in the 50th Baltic Operations (BALTOPS 50) exercise, currently underway through June 18 in and around the Baltic Sea.

BALTOPS 2021 features air and maritime assets from 18 NATO allies and partner nations, which will participate in live training events that include air defense, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations, maritime interdiction, mine countermeasure operations.

Command and control of the exercise is being led from the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO) headquarters in Oeiras, Portugal. II Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Expeditionary Strike Group 2 will provide command and control of Marine forces throughout the exercise from aboard USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20), demonstrating international naval integration and power projection ashore for an amphibious demonstration in Lithuania.

“This year, we celebrate the 50th BALTOPS, an exercise that sets the foundation of interoperability across the alliance,” said U.S. Vice Adm. Gene Black, commander, Naval Striking and

Support Forces NATO and commander, U.S. 6th Fleet. "BALTOPS stands as the keystone of our exercise season, demonstrating half a century of the unwavering commitment of our partners and Allies. Lessons learned in BALTOPS enable international strike group operations, advanced missile defense capabilities and seamless surface action group missions."

According to a statement from NATO, BALTOPS 50 consists of two at-sea training phases: the combat enhancement training (CET) and force integration training (FIT) portion and the final tactical phase of the exercise (TACEX).

"During the first six days (the CET/FIT phase), ships and aircraft will transit through the Danish Straits, focusing on maritime operations in critical chokepoints, ensuring access and freedom of navigation in the Baltic Sea. The exercise will continue to move east during its two phases, operating in accordance with international law and supported by participating allies and partners. The exercise will culminate with the TACEX phase, where the exercise paradigm will shift into a 'free-play' portion, and commanders are given more freedom to run their own tactical programs," the statement said. "The TACEX phase is designed to better represent operating in real-world situations."

This year's exercise incorporates defensive cyber warfare tactics, techniques and procedures to help forces adapt and train to ensure an asymmetric advantage in the era of modern warfare.

BALTOPS 50 involves participation from 16 NATO countries – Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the U.K., and the U.S. – and two partner nations, Sweden and Finland. Together, the nations are providing 40 maritime units, 60 aircraft, and 4,000 personnel to the exercise.

Addressing reporters from his headquarters in Naples, Italy, Black said BALTOPS is an exercise that spans the full range of maritime missions and sets the foundation of interoperability across the alliance.

“BALTOPS represents half a century of unwavering commitment to maritime security by our partners and allies,” said Black. “Lessons learned during BALTOPS enable international strike group operations, advanced missile defense capabilities, seamless surface action group missions, amphibious operations, and mine warfare.”

Speaking from Portugal, Deputy Commander of Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO Rear Adm. James Morley, Royal Navy, said BALTOPS forms a key element of NATO’s exercise program and NATO’s deterrence and defense, as well as demonstrates and develops alliance capability and readiness. “It serves a number of purposes, but principally it’s an opportunity to demonstrate alliance cohesion, a chance to demonstrate and to develop and to test alliance capability, and it’s all done with an emphasis on transparency. And I might just touch on each of those points in turn.”

Morley said BALTOPS provides the opportunity for allies to operate alongside each other, “Just as they would fight together, training across the entire spectrums of naval warfare against conventional threats from aircraft, ships, and submarines, including this year against a highly capable Swedish submarine, and in mine warfare, in amphibious operations, and in maritime interdiction operations.”

BALTOPS 2021 began with a training and integration period to improve unit readiness using a pre-planned serialized program. The exercise then moves to a tactical or free-play phase. “Units won’t know what the enemy will do next and will be expected to react as they would for real to a series of multi-threat challenges,” Morley said.

This year's exercise will also add defensive cyberwarfare tactics, techniques, and procedures into the scenario. "It's something we contend with and do every day, but it'll give both commanders and operators something else to contend with," Morley said. "We'll also be experimenting with unmanned and autonomous systems, particularly in mine warfare."

Morley said the forces will be using a range of both conventional and autonomous systems that various nations are trialing in the exercise to give them some real-world context and to test them alongside conventional capability.

The officials emphasized transparency. "BALTOPS is a long-planned and publicly announced exercise conducted in compliance with international law, with a strong focus on real-world safety," said Morley.

"BALTOPS is regularly scheduled and announced, and always there is a slight uptick in Russian activity as we bring forces into and operate in the Baltic," Black said.