

# 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.