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## Sea Breeze 2021- NATO Naval Manoeuvres in the Black Sea

NATO allies and partners are participating in a two-week-long multinational naval exercise 'SEA BREEZE 2021' in the Black Sea region which began on 28 Jun 2021. Co-hosted by the Ukrainian Navy and the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet, the annual bilateral exercise aims to strengthen maritime security in the Black Sea region. A total of 32 ships, 40 aircraft and helicopters and 5,000 soldiers from 24 countries are taking part in the exercises, which last through July 10. Participating countries include the US, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Israel, Morocco, Japan, South Korea and Australia. Germany, which has been involved in the past, is not taking part this year.



The exercises on the north-western Black Sea coast are an annual event led by Ukraine and the US and is based upon a 1993 memorandum on military cooperation between the two countries. The first manoeuvre in the Black Sea took place in 1997. The exercise has seen NATO's participation since its inception.

As per the NATO press release, SEA BREEZE 2021 provides the opportunity for personnel to engage in realistic maritime training to build experience and teamwork and strengthen interoperability among NATO allies and partners. The press note further highlighted that NATO warships routinely operate in the Black Sea, consistent with international law, usually patrolling the waters for around two-thirds of the year. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014,

NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea. It further pointed that NATO does not and will not recognize Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and denounces its temporary occupation.

The drills follow recent tensions in the Black Sea last week. First, the tracking data for a British destroyer and a Dutch frigate were falsified to make the ships look as if they were operating near Sevastopol, where Russia's Black Sea Fleet is based. The ships were actually in port in Odesa, Ukraine. Later, Russian fighter jets buzzed U.K. warship HMS Defender while it was sailing in the Black Sea. Russia claimed it chased the Type-45 Daring-class destroyer out of waters near Russian-seized Crimea by dropping explosives in Defender's pathway and firing warning shots. The U.K. Ministry of Defence denied Russia's claims. Russian military video of the transit had shown Russian fighters buzzing the ship during the transit. In a subsequent statement responding to the Russian ministry's comments, the U.K. MoD said Defender was conducting an "innocent passage" past Ukrainian territorial waters and the Russians were conducting a previously announced gunnery exercise nearby.



Earlier, Russia's embassy in Washington had called for the latest exercises to be cancelled, and the Russian defence ministry said it would react if necessary to protect its national security.

### Emerging Contours of the US Pacific Pivot

As per media reports, the Pentagon may be mulling over options to establish a permanent naval task force for the Pacific. The naval task force would be modelled on the Standing Naval Forces Atlantic construct which NATO had launched in Europe during the Cold War. In addition, there is also a plan to establish a named military operation for the Pacific, which would create a formal planning process for the US Defence secretary and provide additional budget authority and resources for the effort. It has been reported that these options emerged from the report submitted by the Pentagon's China Task Force which was commissioned by the Biden administration on March 21 to examine the department's China-related policies and processes. Strategic commentators have argued that these initiatives would add muscle to President Joe Biden's tough talk on China and send a signal that the new U.S. administration is serious about cracking down on Beijing's military build-up and aggressive behaviour in the Pacific region.



These options are still being evaluated internally by the Pentagon and have not yet been communicated to the US Congress which is debating the US Defence Budget. While there exists strong bipartisan support in the US Congress for robust efforts to counter China, the US Defence Budget 2022 has fallen short of the Capitol Hill expectations. The

specific point of contention being budgetary allocations for congressionally mandated Pacific Defence Initiatives (PDI). The Congress had intended PDI to rebalance the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific investments by elevating the priority of joint and enabling capabilities; tightening the focus on Indo-Pacific theatre posture and logistics, and seizing on investment opportunities to enhance credible deterrence against China in the short and medium-term.

However, the budget request includes more than \$1 billion in infrastructure investments in Guam, Japan and Australia. None of that was included in PDI. Likewise, the Pentagon excluded Indo-Pacific security assistance funds, leaving a pitiful \$500,000 for "strengthening alliances and partnerships" in the initiative. Meanwhile, nearly all proposed funds for PDI went to procurement or R&D programs that Congress made clear were not the focus of the initiative.

Some of these concerns will get remedied during the further consultative process between the Pentagon and Capitol Hill and a clearer contour of the US strategic approach in the Pacific, during the Biden Administration, would emerge.

### **Visit of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman Abdullah Abdullah to Washington**

Amid Taliban escalating violence and conflict, and US and NATO forces on the verge of complete withdrawal, President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman of Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation Dr Abdullah Abdullah visited Washington and met President Joseph Biden on 25 June 2021. President Biden assured the visiting Afghan leaders of the United States' enduring and sustained partnership with Afghanistan. He stated that the US may be withdrawing its troops but it would continue to extend diplomatic, political, economic and military support to Afghanistan.



According to the official readout of the meeting, “President Biden emphasized enduring United States support for the Afghan people, including Afghan women, girls, and minorities, through civilian, development, and humanitarian aid, as well as the continued

provision of security assistance to support Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.” However, at the same time, President Biden made it clear that it is for the Afghans to decide their future and what they want.

Accompanied by Vice President Amrullah Saleh, Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar and National Security Advisor Mohibullah Mohib, President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah also met Secretary of Defence Llyod Austin, National Security Advisor Jacob Sullivan, and members of Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

A fact sheet on US commitment to Afghanistan released on the occasion stated that “Since 2002, the United States has provided nearly \$88 billion in security assistance, \$36 billion in civilian assistance, including \$787 million specifically intended to support Afghan women and girls, and nearly \$3.9 billion in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan”. It was further stated that the Biden administration has requested the US Congress to approve \$3 billion for the Afghan Security Forces Fund for 2021 and \$3.3 billion for 2022. The Biden administration has also sought additional humanitarian and development assistance for Afghanistan for 2021 and 2022. In addition, the US will donate three million doses of vaccine to help Afghanistan deal with the surge in COVID-19 cases.

On June 25, the Associated Press, quoting anonymous US officials, reported that the US plans to maintain about 650 troops to ensure the security of its diplomatic staff in Kabul, and few additional troops at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul to assist Turkey, which has agreed to take responsibility for the security of the airport with US support.

With the Taliban making rapid territorial gains, and the Afghan National Army (ANA) struggling to secure population centres, provincial capitals, and key highways and critical infrastructure, efforts are on to forge political unity among various groups in Afghanistan.