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**Telephonic Press Briefing
Hosted by the Brussels Media Hub**

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Moderator: Good morning everybody and greetings from the U.S. Department of State. I would like to welcome our journalists who are dialing in from across Europe and to thank all of you for joining in this discussion.

We are very pleased this morning to be joined from the USS San Antonio by Vice Admiral James Foggo who is the Commander of the Striking and Support Forces and Commander of the U.S. 6th Fleet, along with senior leaders of his STRIKFORNATO team. They're going to be talking to you today about the ongoing BALTOPS 2015 exercises which, as you know, are taking place in many of your countries.

We're going to begin today's call with opening remarks from Admiral Foggo, followed by introductions from Rear Admiral Tim Lowe of the Royal Navy, and Rear Admiral Juan Garat of the Spanish Armada. Then we're going to turn it over to your questions.

Just as an aside, you already have Admiral Foggo's bio and I will send you the others after the call.

Today's call is of course on the record and we're going to try to get to as many of your questions as possible during this time.

With that, I will turn it over to you, Admiral Foggo, for your opening remarks. Go ahead, sir.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Good morning. Ladies and gentlemen of the press and media, thank you for dialing in this morning to discuss our current operation BALTOPS 2015.

I'd just like to make a brief statement and let you know also that you don't just have one admiral here this morning, you have three. My Deputy Commander, Rear Admiral Tim Lowe of the United Kingdom is with me. He has been with Strike Force NATO for three years. And my Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, the guy who keeps all the ships and aircraft and submarines going throughout this operation, Rear Admiral Juan Garat of the Spanish Navy is also here. And we're looking forward to taking some of your questions after kind of a brief introductory statement.

Let me start off by saying it's been an action-packed week in BALTOPS 2015. We started with our pre-sail conference in Gdynia, Poland last Friday. We worked through the weekend and we sailed on Monday with 49 ships, over 60 aircraft, 5,600 international personnel, and embarked 700 Marines from Finland, Sweden, the United States, and the United Kingdom in a variety of ships in order to conduct a series of serial exercises for naval training at sea and ashore.

I'm out here on board the USS San Antonio and her sister ship from the United Kingdom, USS Ocean, along with two Polish amphibious ships have been parked off the coast of Sweden in a place called Ravlunda. It's a training range, and it's an excellent training range, near Bornholm, Sweden. So for the last couple of days we have been embarking and disembarking with various amphibious vehicles, the Swedish, Finnish, U.S. and Royal Marines as well as Soldiers of the 173rd Brigade Combat Team of the United States Army who normally reside in their garrison in Vicenza, Italy.

These troops are now ashore, and we've just finished an airborne photo exercise, taking pictures of the ships in action, and we're about to start a live fire exercise which will go on for the majority of the day on the range of Ravlunda with Marines conducting live fire and aircraft conducting support and live fire.

Elsewhere throughout the Baltic Sea, ships in BALTOPS are participating in other serialized training scenarios including air defense, anti-submarine warfare, mine countermeasures, and maritime interdiction operations.

We'll soon transition to a scripted free play meant to test our capabilities of the maritime component force, and respond to different asymmetric threats that will ensure regional stability in the Baltics.

NATO and our partners share a common interest in maintaining Europe and the Baltic region free, safe, secure, and prosperous. We've been conducting this exercise since 1971. This is the 43rd time, and this is the first time where we've actually had a NATO commander and a NATO command staff in charge. So that's me, as the Commander of Strike Force NATO with my Deputy, my DCOS Ops and all my other staff embarked here, and it is a wonderful experience for us to be able to guide these task group commanders throughout two weeks of probably the best training that we've had in any time that I can remember, and I've certainly been doing this a long time, 34 years in the Navy.

I think it will have a lasting impact and I think it will pay big dividends for peace and prosperity here in the Baltic, which is what it's all about.

So with that, let me just ask Admiral Lowe to say a couple of remarks and Admiral Garat to say a couple of remarks, and then we'll go right to your question and answer period.

Admiral Tim Lowe.

Rear Admiral Lowe: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I just thought I'd give you a little bit of a reflection on my experience at BALTOPS 2015. That's in the context of a number of previous BALTOPS exercises that I've taken.

I think right up front, the spirit of engagement among all the participants is certainly as strong as ever. As Admiral Foggo mentioned, the men and women of the task force have been very busy. Today we've got eight task groups operating across the Southern Baltic, ashore in three countries, afloat, and in the air. Twenty-two mine countermeasures vessels are operating off the coast of Poland. Overnight they've located over ten exercise mines. Our frigates and destroyers today are conducting some very complex anti-submarine and anti-air warfare exercises. And ashore, it's a very busy day. We've got live firings for our Marines from Sweden, Finland, and the United States and the United States Army. Our UK Apache helicopters will be demonstrating their capabilities. And our Swedish Griffin fast jets will be doing the same.

Yesterday, I managed to get off the flagship for a couple of hours and had the opportunity to visit our troops on the range ashore in Ravlunda, Sweden. I was taken ashore by UK Royal Marine landing craft. As I stood in the deck house talking to the young corporal coxswain I asked him to give me his experience of the exercise so far. His response: "Two things, sir. Brilliant training." I think that summed up the feeling I experienced ashore.

As I met more of the troops from Finland and the United States working together, showing each other how their equipment worked, and swapping stories about previous exercises, about operating together in operations.

I met the Joint Tactical Air Controllers from Sweden who were controlling United Kingdom, United States, German, and Swedish fast air. The U.S. Marines and U.S. Army conducting live firing and maneuvering exercises together. Actually, we were all standing under a tree in the shade talking about what we'd done.

In short, I think the exercise is going extremely well. I could almost feel sort of a spirit of engagement, of cooperation, working together and improving capability as I was ashore yesterday.

For those Black Adder fans amongst you, I think the phrase would be "most excellent," but I think my young Royal Marine corporal summed it up very well. "It's hoofing."

Thank you very much, indeed. I'll now hand over to our Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Rear Admiral Juan Garat.

Rear Admiral Garat: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm Rear Admiral Juan Garat, the Spanish Navy, Deputy Chief of Staff of Striking and Support Forces NATO, STRIKFORNATO.

Let me first give you a bit of background on who we are. STRIKFORNATO is high readiness supporters, fundamentally assigned to NATO -- at very short notice all of the spectrum of NATO operations. Our permanent base is in Lisbon, but currently part of our staff is aboard the United States ship [inaudible], as you know, for the Exercise BALTOPS.

Staff on board is composed of men and women belonging to most of the maritime NATO nations. My job as the DCSOPS, as Admiral Foggo said, is to synchronize and coordinate all of the regional tactical activities in order to achieve all the training

objectives of the exercise. This year the exercise has increased its capacity in terms of the number of units participating in it, as you know. [Inaudible] to deploy and train aboard this capable ship is a great experience for all of us.

Thank you. I'm open to your questions.

Moderator: Thank you so much to all of you for setting the stage for us, and we're going to go ahead and get started with the question and answer portion of today's call.

Our first question today is coming to us from Poland. We have a question from Karol Darmoros of Polish Radio.

Polish Radio: Thank you. I would like to ask questions of Vice Admiral Foggo.

During the second part of BALTOPS there is a landing troops in Ustka. Why you chose this town in the Polish coast? This is the first question.

The second one, every year BALTOPS is growing bigger. NATO trains the situations, referring to the Article 5 of NATO Treaty. Do you consider the Russia threat for Baltic Region serious?

Vice Admiral Foggo: Thank you very much, Karol, and if I understand this is a three part question. Why choose the Ustka range in Poland; BALTOPS is growing every year, is it connected to Article 5; and do we consider Russia a threat in the Baltic region.

Polish Radio: Yes.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Okay, great. Let me try those and see if my comrades, Admiral Lowe and Admiral Garat, have anything to add too.

Why choose Ustka range? The same reason that we chose the Ravlunda range here in Sweden. Both ranges are outstanding training opportunities for amphibious forces to come ashore and do what Marines and Naval personnel do. The Navy is responsible for providing what we call the connectors ashore. That is the delivery mechanisms for taking the Marines to the beach. You need a suitable area in which you can operate and conduct live fire exercises, and Ravlunda and Ustka are both extremely well

qualified for this type of exercise. They are instrumented ranges. Although Sweden is not yet a NATO partner, Poland is a NATO partner, and we are more than happy to take advantage of the tremendous capability that the Poles have allowed us to have for a couple of days while we do our major amphibious landing here next week.

As to BALTOPS and Article 5, I think you point out an important point. NATO and BALTOPS are all about the alliance, about unity of command, about solidarity of the alliance, about defensive operations in sustainment and defense of the alliance that of course touches on Article 5. So we are here doing all of those things in BALTOPS 2015.

As far as whether or not Russia is a threat in the Baltic region, we have had interaction with Russian forces to date. They actually came out and let us know that they were here on day one of the photo [act], but those Russian naval forces and aircraft acted fairly professionally, and I would not consider them a threat when we were operating here in an exercise in what we call Phase Zero, or peacetime operations.

Rear Admiral Lowe: I would just add I've had the privilege of visiting the Ustka range. I met the commanding officer of the range. It is an outstanding capability and one that I've actually operated on before in a previous BALTOPS, so we're returning to an area that we've operated in.

Let me endorse everything the Admiral said about the excellent support from Poland and from Sweden. Sweden is one of our key partners in the region.

I think the overall atmosphere of the collective defense, the cooperative security, and of course the enhanced partnerships that we're building from this exercise go a long way to enhancing security in the Baltics.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Let me add just one thing to that too on the subject if I may. This is the 43rd year that we've conducted BALTOPS. In the past, the Russians have participated in BALTOPS. In fact when I served at SHAPE Headquarters with Admiral Stavridis, they were participants. The last time the Russians actively engaged as a participant in BALTOPS was 2012. Of course I don't have to tell you the geopolitical situation has changed, and they are not part of the exercise of this year.

Moderator: Thank you for that.

Our next question is actually a question that was emailed to us here at the Media Hub, and it's coming to us from Octavian Manea who is with the outlet of Foreign Policy Romania in Bucharest. His question is --

To what extent are the anti-access area denial capabilities or A2/AD capabilities that Russia has developed over the recent years a threat for the regional commons? For example, freedom of navigation, access to shared spaces in the Baltic and Black Seas. And have the Baltic and Black Seas become no-go areas as a consequence of the Russian A2/AD?

Vice Admiral Foggo: Thank you very much for that question, and thank you out there in Bucharest to Octavian for asking a great question.

Let me respond by putting this in the context of anti-access area denial threats writ large, meaning not just any one nation that chooses to implement such a strategy.

Anti-access area denial strategies concern all nations because it has an impact on freedom of navigation and the Convention on Law of the Sea. It's fairly easy to build a system that restricts access or denies access with all of the types of things that are available on the market nowadays, including unmanned underwater vehicles, mines, and of course part of what we're doing here with the 22 mine countermeasure ships is training in mine countermeasures. And prior to their arrival the NATO Mine Countermeasures Group found hundreds of mines and destroyed dozens of mines here in the Baltic. Excellent training for what may be some day an eventuality where there is a new minefield placed somewhere and we have to go and clear it.

They're very professional. I was out with them on one of their ships, the German ship Donau, the command ship, the other day, and received an incredible brief on their success and progress to date.

Submarines also make up an anti-access area denial strategy, as do very inexpensive but lethal anti-ship cruise missiles.

So as naval officers and commanders we are concerned about all these things, but we will not be deterred because as naval officers of freedom-loving nations we will conduct freedom of navigation exercises, and we will sail according to the rules, norms, and institutions that give us the right to navigate in

international waters anywhere in the world. Generally speaking, that is outside 12 miles from land.

As to the latter part of your question, are the Baltic and Black Seas becoming no-go areas? Absolutely not. We're here with 49 ships right now and we're operating in littoral areas all over the Baltic Sea. And the Standing Naval Maritime Group recently operated in the Black Sea. And I frequently operate in the Black Sea with destroyers from the 6th Fleet. So no, they are not no-go areas, and we will continue to operate in both places.

Rear Admiral Lowe: I would just comment on the fact that our navies across the alliance have invested in high-end capabilities. Those high-end capabilities are important because they allow us to exercise that freedom of navigation to enable that access.

So as the Admiral has said, there is no reason why we cannot and should not operate in any of those areas. They're certainly not closed areas to us.

Moderator: Thank you.

Our next question is coming to us from the Wall Street Journal, and we have a question from Naftali Bendavid. Go ahead, Naftali.

Wall Street Journal: Hi Admiral, thanks for taking the call.

I wanted to ask you a question that wasn't directly perhaps related to the exercise, but more as someone who is a military commander. At a time like this, the Russians have been using more nuclear rhetoric, they've been talking about their nuclear forces. They've been in some cases using dual-use equipment. And I'm wondering the extent to which that's a concern to you and the extent to which it factors into your planning and your exercises.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Naftali, good question. I follow that carefully. I'm a news junkie, if you will. I love the study of international relations and politics. I've seen some of this rhetoric, however I consider it just rhetoric. Responsible nations, nuclear armed, are bound by a number of treaties and limitations on the use of those weapons. We are currently operating in, like I said, a Phase Zero, peacetime environment. So as to concerns about nuclear rhetoric or dual-use technology out here, I have no concerns. We're steaming in peacetime,

we're exercising, we're doing what Navies and Marine Corps do both at sea and ashore and in the air, and we're getting a phenomenal training opportunity out of this.

There's another nuclear armed nation NATO officer in the room with me and that is Admiral Lowe. Sir, do you have anything you might add on that?

Rear Admiral Lowe: Sir, I completely agree.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Thanks. Good question.

Moderator: Thank you.

Our next question is coming to us from Helen Maguire with Germany's DPA. Helen?

DPA: Developing on the last one, really. You mentioned the change to the political situation. I was wondering to what extent over the last few years you've been tailoring these exercises specifically towards a potential threat from Russia.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Thank you, Helen.

I would offer this. Over the course of 43 years the exercise goals and objectives and milestones have not changed considerably. It's operating with unity of the alliance, unity of effort, solidarity, and reassurance in the Baltic Sea region. We're developing capabilities collectively where it matters and when it matters, and we've really brought together [5,600] maritime professionals to enhance security and peaceful operations in the world's navigable waterways.

So over the course of time, yes, there have been ups and downs. Like I said, when I was at SHAPE headquarters, there was an event to conduct a reset with Russian forces. That did not work out, and you understand perfectly the geopolitical situation of the day. But BALTOPS is a continuum. It's been consistent.

The one thing that has happened, however, is the interest in BALTOPS. It has grown over the years. That's why I'm so pleased, this is one of the largest, the largest BALTOPS exercise we've ever had, and I look forward to increasing interest in the future.

Rear Admiral Lowe: I would just add one point, sir. In addition to the increase in numbers, the increase in complexity,

as we look to really tease and test our capabilities. It's really pleasing to see the ships, the Marines, the Soldiers, the Airmen, all working together.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Yeah, technology has changed too, so we had the very good question about anti-access area denial threats from Octavian. Over the years the complexity of the exercise and the kinds of threats that we are trying to mitigate have become harder. Therefore, more capability needed, more people needed, more skill sets needed, and more ships and naval officers and Marines needed in order to mitigate those threats.

Rear Admiral Garat: I would add that obviously our training requirements and our training objectives are adapted to [inaudible] but slightly, so normally as we call [inaudible] operations, we need to train and to improve our inter-operability, even more it has to be adapted to warfare. That's why our training objectives are more or less the same.

Moderator: Thank you for that.

Our next question is coming to us from Bojan Pancevski who is with The Sunday Times. Please go ahead.

The Sunday Times: Hello, and thank you very much for the opportunity to pose this question.

I was just wondering, this has been asked before in various shapes and forms, but how is this exercise different to the previous years in the light of this increasingly aggressive posture by Russia and in light of what happened in Ukraine and what is happening in Ukraine? Is there any difference this year to last year and the previous years? Thank you.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Bojan, great question.

For starters, in answer to your question I'd like to defer to my Deputy Commander Admiral Lowe, who has been with Strike Force NATO for three years, so he has a little bit better corporate knowledge of past exercises. Sir, would you comment on that, please?

Rear Admiral Lowe: I'm delighted to, sir.

I think it's not in light of any posture from Russia. I think over the years, and certainly in previous BALTOPS exercises I've participated in where I've worked alongside Russian colleagues

in the exercise, every year we strive to build on our capabilities, to build on our interoperability, and to stretch and test ourselves. That's the whole aim of the exercise.

This year because of the renewed interest in the exercise, we've really managed to stretch and push the envelope. We've managed to achieve some areas of interoperability that we haven't done for some significant time, working with the mine countermeasures vessels, providing air defense for them, getting the larger ships in, making the exercise more complex. The firings that are taking place today, the live firings that are taking place today. Again, a lot more complex than we've done in the past. It's an opportunity that's been provided to us by the increased participation this year, and I would anticipate that as in previous BALTOPS that have been successful, that have pushed and have moved us forward in terms of delivering our assurance and in terms of delivering our capabilities, that this year will be no different.

Rear Admiral Garat: I think this year, obviously we all know this, we have more activity, Russian activity in the area. I wouldn't call it [inaudible], just more activity. So the challenge for us is to ensure that we operate, and we both operate in the same space, taking care of avoiding any miscalculation, any potential situation that could put the units in a difficult position.

Rear Admiral Lowe: Just picking up on that point from Admiral Garat, transparency is key, and we're certainly being as open and as clear in our intentions and what we're doing in the exercise as we can be.

The sea is the last great sort of international space. Everybody has their right to operate and to be there. We can share as mariners, we can operate and work together, and certainly in the Baltic region that's exactly what we're doing with our NATO allies and of course our partners.

Vice Admiral Foggo: Bojan, let me offer one last thought to you. This is something that as journalists you may not have heard about because it's so recent, so a little bit of new information for you.

First of all, I think that Navies in general are inherently capable of operating as an extension of diplomacy, and one of my favorite presidents, it happens to be a U.S. president, but nonetheless a great quote, Theodore Roosevelt said, "A good Navy

is not a provocation of war, it's the surest guarantee of peace."

So while we're out here floating around with 49 ships, NATO partners and allies, conducting naval exercises at sea and afloat, we have pursued diplomacy and guarantees of peace in other ways.

Just yesterday in my other headquarters, Naples, Italy, Commander, 6th Fleet Headquarters, we hosted a Russian delegation led by Vice Admiral Oleg Burtsev. This was to have a dialogue and a discussion about prevention of incidents on and over the high seas, something that is known as the INCSEA Agreement. It's been around for a very long time, since 1972.

During this dialogue, which lasted the better part of the day, there was an open, frank, and direct discussion between our Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral John Nowell, and Admiral Burtsev about how we can better operate in the same bodies of water and avoid miscues, mistakes, or miscalculations. So I think that dialogue was productive.

So you can kind of see linkage between conducting exercises and training with a preponderance of force at sea, while still leaving the door open for frank and direct dialogue with those who may not share the same interests that we do at this time.

Moderator: Thank you. We have just a few minutes left on the call so I will open it up for one last question if anybody has one. This will be our last question for the day, coming to us from the Polish Press Agency, and it's Jakub Borowski.

Polish Press Agency: It's kind of a follow-up to the last statement of Admiral Foggo. You mentioned the good dialogue and discussions with Russia. So do you think, a comeback of Russia to the BALTOPS would be possible in the predictable future?

Vice Admiral Foggo: I'm sorry, Jakub, I only got the first part of your question. You said you reference the [discussion] with the Russians, and what was the rest of the question please?

Polish Press Agency: Considering the dialogue and discussions you had in Naples, do you think a comeback of Russia to BALTOPS exercises would be possible in the near future? And under what conditions?

Vice Admiral Foggo: That's a great question, and I don't know the answer. I think the answer lies with the Russians and their comportment and their behavior in the maritime domain.

As Admiral Lowe pointed out, we, NATO and our forces, have been very transparent. We have not kept any secrets about what we were doing. In fact, our final planning conference for this exercise was in a hotel in Talin, Estonia with just over 100 of our personnel from Strike Force NATO conducting planning. It was done in the open. People have known for months that we have planned this. We've had press releases, we've had dialogue, we've had discussions, and we have gone out to our NATO partners and allies on open circuits, in unclassified manners to bring them in and to set the stage for all these serial exercises.

I don't see the same transparency on the other side in the Russian Navy, and that's something that would have to change.

I would hope that as the word trickles down to the deck plate that there were productive and positive outcomes from the INCSEA discussion yesterday -- in other words we were very honest with one another -- that that honesty and transparency would find itself here in the Baltics, starting with communications between our vessels when we are operating in large formations. We communicate, they do not.

As a professional Navy and a professional courtesy, I think it's important to communicate your intentions. We have a time-honored tradition called hale and query. We often offer what our intentions are, where we're going, what course we are on, but we do not receive anything back from Russian forces who are afloat. That should change in order for things to improve between NATO and Russian Navies operating in close proximity.

Moderator: With that our call has come to an end. I would like to thank you Admirals Foggo, Lowe, and Garat for your time with us today and for taking questions from our journalists, and I would like to thank all of our journalists for participating in today's call and for all of your questions.

A digital recording of today's call is going to be available for the next 24 hours, and I will turn it back over to AT&T to provide instructions for accessing that recording. But again, I just want to thank all of you.

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