

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Volume 18 Edition 13

©SS 2026

U.S. EDITION

[stripes.com](https://www.stripes.com)

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2026

## DRONE DERBY

Soldiers vie in first drone warrior competition **Page 2**

A pair of Neros Archer FPV drones controlled by U.S. soldiers race through a Humvee on an obstacle course in the final race of the Army's first-ever Best Drone Warrior Competition on Feb. 19. The competition was held on the University of Alabama in Huntsville's drone test range and run by the Army Aviation Center of Excellence.

COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

## COVER STORY

# Army holds first Drone Warrior competition

## Big wins and lots of lessons learned

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. — Two small quadcopter drones buzzed between a pair of shipping containers, around a bend and through a purple obstacle heading toward the homestretch of the race. Then they collided.

The impact sent one of the Neros Archer drones crashing to the ground on the University of Alabama in Huntsville's drone test range, while the pilot of the other Archer, Army Sgt. Javon Purchner, maintained control and sent his first-person-view drone swooping through the doors of a Humvee and racing on to the finish line. The win in the final race Feb. 19 of the Army's inaugural Best Drone Warrior Competition earned the 22-year-old artillery forward observer from the 1st Cavalry Division the first-ever title of Army Best Drone Operator.

The first-of-its kind Army event was meant to evaluate soldiers' current capabilities with the small drones that are becoming increasingly important to how the U.S. military plans to conduct combat operations, competition organizers said. It also aimed to identify areas where those soldiers and the drones themselves need improvement in a fun setting far from the battlefield.

"I'm still processing it," Purchner, with a wide grin, said of the accomplishment moments after the race's conclusion as he was high-fived and hugged by fellow Fort Hood, Texas, soldiers.

But it almost did not happen. With the best-of-three final tied at one win apiece, Purchner's drone took off at the start of the would-be decisive race and smashed at full speed into a metal cargo container, breaking into dozens of pieces. The sergeant immediately threw his hands up, explaining that he had no control of the drone.

"I thought everyone was going to think that was me messing up as a pilot," he said. "And it was really just that we were having a little bit of interference down there. But after that, once we started up again, I just flew my race, and that was it."

The interference issues were among



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

**Army Spc. Dylan Eisenbach, an infantryman from the 25th Infantry Division, lugs a rucksack with homemade first-person-view attack drones mounted on the outside during the hunter-killer portion of the Army's inaugural Best Drone Warrior Competition in Huntsville, Ala., on Feb. 19.**

**"At the end of the day, it's not about receiving trophies or awards, it is about what lessons can we take from this to find out who the best operator is and how they became the best operator."**

Army Col. Nicholas Ryan

many other problems that plagued the competitors over the course of the three-day event. Rain slowed the competition because some drones had exposed electronics. Environmental factors jammed communications. Other drones proved inefficient in tactical conditions, and dozens crashed — into each other, obstacles and the ground — over hours of competition.



**Sgt. Javon Purchner, of the 1st Cavalry Division, flashes a smile moments after winning the final race of the service's first-ever Best Drone Warrior Competition to be named the Army's best drone operator.**

But that was not necessarily a bad thing, said Army Col. Nicholas Ryan, who led planning for the drone warfare event. Those problems provided Army planners with a clearer picture of the

technology and training gaps its soldiers currently face in the emerging field of small drone warfare, which has become a dominant aspect in recent conflicts, especially in Ukraine.

Like other Army-wide competitions the service has held for decades, Ryan said, the new tournament was meant to bring together troops to share their latest tactics, innovations and knowledge about small drones and to discover the remaining capability gaps across the service.

"At the end of the day, it's not about receiving trophies or awards, it is about what lessons can we take from this to find out who the best operator is and how they became the best operator," said Ryan, a career CH-47 Chinook pilot who has spent recent years studying the implementation of small drones into Army combat planning as the director of unmanned aerial systems transformation at Fort Rucker, Ala. "What skills and resources and training allowed them to become the best operator? Who's doing some amazing innovation out there across the Army that we can take and see what

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 4**



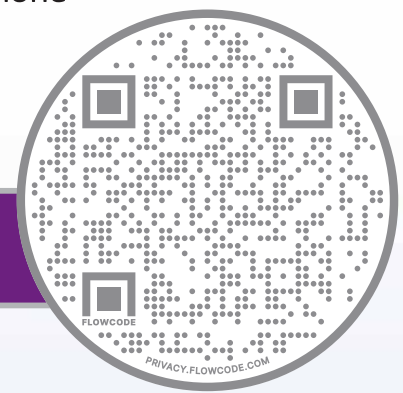
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## COVER STORY

# Competition an 'eye-opener' on some issues

## FROM PAGE 2

kind of innovation — like grassroots soldier-level innovation — is happening, that we can then take and scale across the entire Army ... to make the Army the most dominant drone force in the world.”

Planners decided in August that a new competition would help the Army implement a series of drone-based executive orders and guidance issued by President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth aimed at “unleashing drone dominance,” Ryan said.

The service has used competition to test new skills and tactics since the Revolutionary War. Each year, competitors across the Army compete to determine the service’s best Rangers, Sappers, snipers, mortar units, medics and combat squads. Why not build something similar to find its best small drone users? Ryan said.

Officials decided to test Army drone operators’ skills across three separate competitions built into the event: a drone racing competition to find the best operator; a two-man hunter-killer lane to find the best tactical squad; and a “Shark Tank”-like innovation competition to find the most innovative ideas.

Planners opened all the competitions to soldiers from across any military occupational specialty in the regular Army, National Guard and Reserves, including special operators.

In the Best Drone Operators competition, won by Purchner, competitors completed timed laps on their own to build a bracket before a series of head-to-head races determined the winner. All the competitors were provided Neros Archer drones to fly in the competition so that everyone had the same platforms, Ryan said.

The UAH drone test course provided a track with multiple obstacles set up to resemble an urban environment to navigate the drones using a video game-like remote control and first-person-view goggles.

In the innovation competition, teams submitted a white paper, conducted a 15-minute pitch to a panel of judges and conducted a flight test, according to the Army.



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

**Army Spc. Dylan Eisenbach prepares a C100 drone to fly during the hunter-killer portion of the Army’s inaugural Best Drone Warrior Competition.**

A Pennsylvania Army National Guard Team from the 28th Infantry Division — 1st Lt. Ryan Giallonardo; Chief Warrant Officer 3 Robert Reed; Chief Warrant Officer 2 Nathan Shea; and Sgt. 1st Class Brent Wehr — took the top prize. Their innovation, dubbed Project R.E.D. (for recovery exploitation drone), used an AI-enabled drone to identify downed enemy or friendly drones and recover them with a 3D-printed carbon fiber claw arm.

Meanwhile, the hunter-killer competition proved the trickiest. Most teams failed to complete the 45-minute exercise to conduct strikes on five targets. The two-man teams were instructed to camouflage themselves and their equipment, conduct a five-minute physical session that included dragging a 145-pound dummy, overhead-pressing water cans and walking with weight before beginning a 1,000-meter hike toward their drone engagements carrying all their equipment, according to the Army.

A 30-minute timer to complete the five strikes by flying their self-selected offensive drones to a target started as teams embarked on the hike, leaving them with a short time to set up their drones, scout five targets with a surveillance drone and then attack.

A team from the Vilseck, Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Staff Sgt. Angel Caliz and Spc. Jonah Burks, won that competition and proved one of the few teams able to hit targets.

Army Sgt. 1st Class Jose Morua, who teaches small drone operations to new soldiers at Fort Benning, Ga., and

helped run the competition, said teams that were successful had mastered the basics of flying drones, showed they were in good physical condition and kept their efforts simple.

The hunter-killer lane best mimicked the conditions front-line troops face in combat in Ukraine, he said. It showed that the U.S. Army is “a little bit behind” on small drone capabilities and must work quickly to improve.

Most of the teams were not completing the hike quick enough to give themselves time to complete the drone attacks, Morua said. Many teams, he said, struggled with their equipment before getting it in the air. Others, he said, got their drones in the air, but struggled to communicate properly to find and attack the targets.

“It just pretty much boiled down to operator and basic fundamentals of knowing the equipment, and that’s been the common issue these last two days,” said Morua, an infantryman who saw combat in Afghanistan.

The sergeant called the event “an eye opener,” because so many capable teams struggled with so many different issues.

The equipment and communications issues were among the more concerning lessons learned for planners, Ryan said. As a career helicopter pilot, communicating in the air is instilled into you from practically Day 1, but it clearly did not come so naturally to soldiers who have spent their careers on the ground.

“We’re seeing that kind of a breakdown in that communication because

they haven’t been trained in that — in Army Aviation, we call that crew coordination — where two people in a helicopter are talking to each other, explaining what they’re seeing, what they’re doing, and what they need the other person to be doing,” Ryan said. “We’re seeing that breakdown happen up there that we never anticipated, but it’s definitely something that ... standing out as something we as an Army need to do better on if we’re going to proliferate these drones and want them to be more effective and lethal.”

One team in the hunter-killer competition also found it needed to ensure its equipment was more resilient. The 25th Infantry Division team of Staff Sgt. Andres Garcia and Spc. Dylan Eisenbach managed to get their C100 surveillance drone airborne but could not fly their homemade, 3D-printed, first-person-view attack drones because a piece of their controller broke during the mission.

Garcia said they had tested everything at their home station in Hawaii and during training in the Philippines and came to the competition feeling “super confident.” He said they were able to locate all five targets, but after discovering a sensitive pin in the FPV drone controller had bent, the team had no way to fly their drones.

It was a disappointment, Garcia said, but an opportunity to learn that they need to improve how they protect their gear in the field, and, perhaps, carry a second controller.

“Transporting is kind of our next step right now,” said Garcia, a cavalry scout. “How to find a way how to actually be able to get all this gear onto the individual infantryman, or scout or whoever’s on the ground utilizing this equipment and for them to actually carry it out and employ it correctly.”

Ryan said the Army would leave the competition with dozens of data points on where it needs to focus its efforts to improve small drone warfare. He said next year’s Best Drone Warrior Competition would reflect those lessons learned and find new ways to challenge soldiers to improve in the drone space.

“This is the first one of many,” the colonel said. “It’s finding the lessons, improving on things and sharing those best practices and ... then continuing to make [the competition] better and more relevant and more challenging as we move forward in the future for that sole purpose of making the Army better.”



## MILITARY

# Marines stick with M27 as Army fields new rifle

BY SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Marine Corps will keep the M27 automatic rifle as its standard service weapon rather than adopt the higher-caliber firearm being fielded by the Army, according to the amphibious force.

“The Marine Corps will retain the M27 for our close combat formations as it best aligns with our unique service requirements, amphibious doctrinal employment of weapons, and distinct modernization priorities,” the Corps said in a statement emailed Feb. 25 by spokesman Lt. Col. Eric Flanagan.

The M27 is a 5.56 mm rifle produced by Heckler & Koch that first saw combat use with Marines in Afghanistan in 2011. The Corps adopted it as the standard service rifle for all infantry battalions in 2018.

The Army, by contrast, is adopting the M7 rifle and M250 machine gun made by SIG Sauer to replace the M4 rifle and M249 machine gun.

The Army M7 production contract

gave other customers — the Marine Corps included — an option to adopt the new rifle, Army Col. Scott Madore, project manager for soldier lethality, told reporters in April 2022.

The Marine Corps will monitor the Army’s progress with the M7, according to Flanagan’s email.

The Army’s new weapons fire a 6.8-mm round and are designed to provide increased lethality, longer range and advanced optics that service officials say will reshape small-unit tactics.

On Jan. 30, the Army released photos showing members of a marksmanship unit training 25th Infantry Division soldiers in Hawaii on newly fielded M7 rifles.

“We’re not here to reinvent the wheel,” Sgt. 1st Class Alexander Deal, a member of the marksmanship unit, said in a news release accompanying the photos. “The fundamentals of marksmanship don’t change, even when the weapon system does.”



EMILY HAZELBAKER/U.S. Marine Corps

**A member of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit trains with an M27 infantry automatic rifle aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima in the Caribbean Sea last month.**

Australia-based defense researcher Allan Orr said the Marines’ decision represents a significant rebuke of the Army’s approach.

The Marines’ most likely adversaries in a future conflict would be Chinese forces operating in dense urban and jungle terrain across Asia, he said in an email Feb. 25.

In those environments, lessons from the Vietnam War still apply, Orr said, adding that “fire-volume is more important than firepower.”

Maintaining common ammunition with allied forces is also critical, particularly in Southeast Asia, where partners would be needed to offset China’s numerical advantage, Orr wrote.

The issue of diverging cartridge sizes between U.S. services can’t be overstated, he said.

“This announcement (by the Marines) is a massive dis-endorsement of what Army is doing with its small-arms programs and a line drawn now in the Pacific sands,” Orr said.

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## MILITARY

# Watchdog: Bases need more weather planning

BY ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Extreme weather and natural disasters cost the Pentagon at least \$15 billion over the past decade, and more planning is needed to mitigate future weather impacts to bases and their military missions, a government watchdog found.

However, that estimate could be low because the Defense Department has not comprehensively tracked data related to those costs, according to the Government Accountability Office, which recently issued a report on preparing for extreme weather events.

The GAO reviewed 12 bases that have sustained substantial damage since 2015 and visited three of them in person for the 61-page report — conducted at the request of Congress.

“Starting in 2024, DOD began taking steps to track data on extreme weather costs and other impacts, but DOD’s efforts to date have not enabled the department to collect complete and accurate data on installation disaster recovery costs,” according to the report.

The GAO made five recommendations: to establish a process to collect



ARTHURGWIN L. MARQUEZ/U.S. Navy

**Civilian Department of Defense personnel repair damaged base infrastructure after multiple earthquakes occurred July 4-5, 2019, in Kern County, Calif.**

complete disaster recovery cost data from military bases; to expand the definition of natural disasters to make sure all types of threats are accounted for; and for the secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force to issue guidance to bases to put resiliency and recovery plans into installation master plans. Specifically, the GAO wanted to make sure that earthquakes were in-

cluded in disaster plan accounting and preparation because it is not included in the Pentagon’s definition of extreme weather, according to the report.

The Defense Department agreed with each recommendation, according to the report.

Among the larger disasters evaluated in the report was Hurricane Michael, which hit Florida’s Tyndall Air Force Base in 2018, causing roughly \$4.5 billion in damage. It also resulted in 700,000 cubic yards of debris to manage. Among the cost of recovery was transferring the F-22 mission to Joint Base Langley-Eustis, in Virginia.

Recovery work at the base is estimated to continue until 2027, according to the report.

In 2019, an earthquake struck National Air Weapons Station China Lake, in California, causing nearly \$4 billion in damage that affected critical labs and weapons magazines. Final recovery work is expected to be completed this year.

The costs associated with recovering from extreme weather were not always damage related. Fort Hood, Texas, was hit in 2021 by Winter Storm Uri, leaving the Army with a \$35.9 million heat-

ing bill for the storm. Total recovery costs from the ice storm, which left several buildings and barracks with busted water pipes, were \$48.3 million.

The GAO also noted that during recovery, the 12 bases reviewed did look for ways to rebuild so that future weather events would be less impactful and made adjustments that were feasible.

Some examples of improvements included stabilizing hillsides after 2023 flooding at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., to prevent erosion from future flood events, adding seismic joints to buildings at China Lake and adding breakaway walls to minimize structure damage in flooding at Tyndall.

Air Force officials also redesigned the layout of the base to improve resilience, operational efficiency and quality of life for airmen.

In some instances, base officials told the GAO there were resilience projects they identified that could help the base, but a lack of funding stopped them from moving forward.

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## IG: Personnel at Djibouti base faced health hazards

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. military officials put potentially thousands of deployed service members at risk to toxic exposure from an open-air burn pit near a remote Air Force base in east Africa, a Defense Department investigation concluded.

The inspector general probe validated a hotline complaint that personnel at Chabelley Airfield near Djibouti were routinely exposed to “a thick fog of smoke” from trash burning, which caused breathing difficulties and other symptoms, the report stated.

The complaint was prompted by an IG report released in December 2024 on air quality concerns at the Navy’s Camp Lemonnier, which didn’t consider the nearby airfield, the report said.

The IG’s final report, which was published Feb. 20, did not say how many service members were potentially affected.

But the Air Force, which operates

the airfield, told the audit team that most deployments to Chabelley are six months long and consist of about 120 airmen, a number that does not include personnel that may deploy from other services, according to the report.

Last fall, Air Force officials announced the opening of a new medical care facility at Chabelley and said at the time that the base supports nearly 1,000 personnel.

Used for drone operations and other Air Force missions, Chabelley has evolved from a small commuter air-strip into a more permanent installation and is poised to grow as threats in the region increase, officials said in October.

An eight-month IG review that included an April 2025 visit to the airfield found that U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa officials did not properly manage the effects of poor air quality at Chabelley.

DOD contractors transport products such as petroleum and metals from Lemonnier and the air base to the Chabelley dump, where they often are burned despite a prohibition on incineration of those items, the IG said.

The visiting inspection team saw the open burning of solid waste at the dump, and service members living and working at the airfield described symptoms such as eye and throat irritation, difficulty breathing and nausea, according to the report.

Among other findings, AFRICOM did not identify the Chabelley dump to Pentagon staff as an open-air burn pit or work with Djibouti to reduce or eliminate use of the site, the report said.

Further, officials with the USAFE-AFAFRICA office of the command surgeon did not implement an air quality mitigation plan or ensure air sampling including certain toxins, the report said.

As a result, service members who

deployed to the installation from November 2019 through September 2025 weren’t protected “from the increased exposure to harmful airborne hazards,” the IG said.

That put them at risk of serious health conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cancer, the document stated, according to the report.

AFRICOM and USAFE-AFAFRICA officials agreed with most recommendations from the audit.

AFRICOM said it was working with Djibouti to reduce the amount of solid waste sent to Chabelley and would request an exemption from the Pentagon as required by DOD policy.

The AFRICOM chief of staff, however, did not agree that the open-air burning at Chabelley met the exemption criteria, according to the report.

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## MILITARY

# Air Force speeds up B-21 Raider timeline

## Northrop Grumman to boost production capacity of bomber

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force is taking a big step forward with the B-21 Raider as it seeks to hasten delivery of the service's next-generation stealth bomber fleet.

Manufacturer Northrop Grumman and the Air Force agreed to boost production capacity of the bomber by 25% using \$4.5 billion in already approved funding, according to a service statement Feb. 23.

The Raider represents a "generational leap" in dual nuclear and conventional stealth aircraft, designed to operate in the most contested environments, according to the Air Force.

It is expected to become the primary penetrating bomber in the U.S. inventory, gradually replacing the B-1B Lancer and B-2 Spirit.

"We are responsibly accelerating delivery of a critical, combat-effective capability," Gen. Dale White, director



U.S. Air Force

**The second B-21 Raider, the nation's sixth-generation stealth bomber, joins flight testing at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., in September.**

of critical major weapon systems at the Pentagon, said in the statement.

The B-21, now in flight testing, is set to form the backbone of the Air Force's future bomber fleet alongside upgraded B-52s. The first aircraft are slated to arrive at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., in 2027.

While the move speeds up delivery of planned aircraft, the Air Force did not announce changes to the program's total planned fleet size.

It previously said it would buy at least 100 B-21s, though some military officials and analysts have advocated

for a higher number amid the current geopolitical environment.

The push to accelerate B-21 production comes as military leaders emphasize the need to modernize the aging nuclear triad while preparing for large-scale conflict.

The triad refers to the three delivery systems for U.S. nuclear weapons: land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles and strategic bombers. The bomber leg has relied heavily on decades-old aircraft, including the B-52, first fielded in the 1950s.

Military leaders have repeatedly

described the B-21 as central to maintaining credible deterrence in the coming decades, particularly as potential adversaries invest in advanced air defenses and long-range weapons.

Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and Dyess Air Force Base in Texas will be the second and third installations, respectively, to receive the B-21, the service said in 2024.

An expected timeline for those deliveries has not been announced.

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# Congress funds new airlifter on skis for polar operations

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon has secured \$194 million to build the first of a fleet of new ski planes that will support troops flying over the Arctic and Antarctic.

Funding approved by Congress last month includes \$29 million for engineering work and \$165 million to purchase one new LC-130J aircraft, according to a statement posted on the Senate Appropriations Committee website.

Four ski-equipped LC-130H Skibirds and 250 airmen from the New York Air National Guard's 109th Airlift Wing have been supporting operations in Antarctica during the Southern Hemisphere's summer research season, which kicked off in October and was to wrap up in February.

The 109th supports science research in Greenland during summer in the Northern Hemisphere.



Air National Guard

**An LC-130H Skibird takes off from Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station in Antarctica in 2022.**

"Some of our planes are over 50 years old," wing commander Col. Steven Slosek said Jan. 7.

The Air Force has been replacing its C-130H Hercules tactical airlifters with upgraded C-130J Super Hercules planes in recent years.

Manufacturer Lockheed Martin will deliver a C-130J and then upgrade it to

an LC-130J equipped with skis, Slosek said. The Guard expects the new aircraft will roll off the production line in about three years and require another year to convert.

"I think it's going to be a big upgrade," Slosek said.

The C-130J needs two fewer crew members than the model it replaced

thanks to automated navigation and engineering systems, and its engines provide more power, fuel efficiency and range.

The military's fleet of C-130Hs is dwindling, which could lead to challenges with the supply chain if the guard doesn't upgrade its planes, Slosek said.

The C-130J will be flying for a long time and has a robust supply system, he said.

A goal for the new ski plane is stronger landing gear, Slosek said.

"Landing on unprepared snow, the aircraft can take a massive beating," he said.

Guard members are also interested in the C-130J's aerial refueling capability, which could extend their range, Slosek said.

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## MILITARY

# Pressure intense in anti-sub warfare

## NATO can't take 'foot off the gas,' US admiral says

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

ABOARD ITS VIRGINIO FASAN — NATO submarine deterrence from the Arctic to the Mediterranean Sea is unmatched and only stands to get better, but allies can't afford to let up, an American commander in Europe said.

Rear Adm. Bret Grabbe and two Italian navy counterparts were aboard this Italian frigate on Feb. 23 to view the start of NATO's Dynamic Manta, an exercise that showcases allied submarine warfare capabilities. The exercise kicked off in the Ionian Sea near the coast of Sicily.

"We're just really good at what we do," said Grabbe, commander of NATO submarines. He added that detecting, tracking and potentially neutralizing submarines is "not an easy game" and that adversaries can get lucky.

The exercise is part of NATO's effort to "take luck out of the game" for enemies through repeated training and exercises.

NATO can't rest on its laurels, Grabbe said, adding that "now is not the time to take our foot off the gas."

The exercise is the southern counterpart to Dynamic Mongoose in the north Atlantic Ocean. It offers participating navies the chance to hone their skills in



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

**An Italian patrol helicopter hovers above one of four submarines participating in NATO's Dynamic Manta submarine warfare exercise in the Ionian Sea off the coast of Sicily last month. The exercise involves 11 NATO submarine countries, including the U.S., Italy, Greece and Turkey.**

the deeper, saltier Mediterranean Sea, where sound travels differently through water than it does in the north.

This year's Dynamic Manta includes surface ships, patrol aircraft, helicopters from various countries along with submarines from Turkey, Greece and Italy. Other participants include Canada, Germany, France, Norway, Portugal, Spain, the U.K. and the U.S.

Grabbe joined Rear Adm. Francesco Milazzo, head of the Italian navy's submarines and underwater dimension department, and Italian Rear Adm. Cristian Nardone, commander of NATO Standing Maritime Group 2, for the start of the exercise and a news conference.

NATO submarine countries — such

as Italy, Germany, Greece and the U.S. — have built, are building or have committed to build more submarines.

Plus, the alliance is experimenting with new technology, such as the first-ever underwater deployment of an aerial drone from a U.S. submarine in September during an exercise off the coast of Portugal.

Those investments, including sophisticated surface ships, aircraft and drones along with continued technological advancement, point to NATO's efforts to revolutionize submarine warfare, Grabbe said.

They also are behind his confidence in the alliance's ability to maintain undersea superiority. Military officials have repeatedly warned in recent years that Russian submarine activity in the High North is increasing.

And cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is expanding, particularly in the Arctic, U.S. Air Force Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, NATO supreme allied commander Europe, cautioned in January.

They are "trying to figure out how they can counter NATO capabilities on and under the sea," Grynkeiwich said at a security conference. The partnership could "grow very quickly, and we need to be mindful of it and ready for it," he added.

In addition, the Baltic Sea has seen suspected sabotage events in recent years, such as the destruction of un-

dersea communication cables.

NATO countries accuse Russia of carrying out such gray-zone warfare in Europe because of Western military support for Ukraine.

Nardone noted that the Mediterranean has many of the same vulnerabilities to its infrastructure as the Baltic Sea, but with the added worry of exported terrorism.

Protecting undersea cables and energy pipelines, along with monitoring sea traffic and other duties in a body of water with critical chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and Strait of Gibraltar poses considerable challenges, Nardone said.

"It's what we call maritime awareness, and it's not that easy," Nardone said.

The effort includes watching for "weird behaviors," such as ships stopping for no reason, and being on the lookout for vessels attempting to avoid sanctions, he said.

Nardone and other officials acknowledge that Russia's maritime presence in the region has fallen significantly following the overthrow of longtime Syrian leader Bashar Assad in December 2024. Assad was a staunch ally of Moscow.

The Kremlin's loss of a key port in the Syrian city of Tartus has left Russia with limited capabilities in the region to supply, refuel and repair its ships and submarines.

Even so, Russian navy vessels, including submarines, still make regular appearances in the Mediterranean. That means vigilance is still required, the officials said.

The wider, deeper expanse of the sea at NATO's southern flank offers plentiful places for submarines to hide, officials said.

Practicing techniques and experimenting with new technology, such as an unmanned surface vehicle capable of deploying sonar, gives Dynamic Manta participants an understanding of the characteristics and challenges of the Mediterranean, they said.

"We are trained, we are integrated, and we walk together with common goals," Nardone said. "And (if) anything happens, we are ready to react."

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