

**BOWMAN:** Hello and thank you for tuning in for today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Brad Bowman, Senior Director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. I'm honored to be joined today by Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, for what I believe is an extremely timely and important discussion. A career surface warfare officer, the admiral served on guided missile cruisers, guided missile destroyers, aircraft carriers, and amphibious assault ships. Ashore, he's served in a variety of executive military assistant and special assistant roles in the White House, the Office of Secretary of Defense, U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. Pacific Fleet Headquarters.

Today, he has a critical role as head of NAVCENT, which includes both U.S. Fifth Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, which as we'll discuss has a vital mission in maintaining stability and security in the maritime environment in the Middle East and beyond.

Just a few quick words about FDD for our viewers before we get started. FDD is a nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We accept no funds from foreign governments. For more information on our work, visit us at [fdd.org](http://fdd.org) and find us on Twitter at @FDD. With that, I'm very pleased to jump into today's discussion. Vice Admiral Cooper, thank you again for making time to join me for this discussion.

**COOPER:** Hey, thanks so much for you making the time. It's a real honor and privilege to join. Look forward to it.

**BOWMAN:** Well, thank you and thanks for your service and all that you do, you and your family. Thank you. Well, I'd like to organize our conversation perhaps by talking about your current position and responsibilities, maybe the importance of the region, the threats and challenges and opportunities that you see, and how you and your great team that you lead are responding to all that. So with that, let's jump right in. Obviously, you know and I know, but some of the viewers may not, what is U.S. Naval Force's Central Command and Fifth Fleet? What's the bottom line?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I think it's a terrific question to get things started. First of all, we're the headquarters for all the U.S. Naval Forces operating here in the Middle East. The NAVCENT side of this is the U.S. Navy service component, that's under U.S. Central Command, who's the combatant commander. And then Fifth Fleet is the U.S. Navy's number of fleet headquarters here in the region. And if I just try to capture the number of people, we have about 8,000 people here overall, 6,000 of whom are active duty and reservists, around 1,200 or so are family members, 500 DOD civilians, and about 300 contractors. So that's kind of where we are today. And the people side in particular are obviously at the heart of everything we do. This team is doing tremendous work every single day. And as we move forward in the conversation, I'm hoping to highlight the great work that they are doing, that I'm just so proud of.

**BOWMAN:** For sure. Thank you for that. That's really helpful. So you kind of described who and what, so just in terms of your portfolio, or military term, AOR, the area of responsibility that you have and your responsibilities there, how would you describe basically your portfolio and responsibilities in the region that you're looking at?

**COOPER:** Yeah, like other leaders at this level, I have a number of hats in terms of our organizational construct. So, one of them is I command the U.S. Naval Forces under the NAVCENT and Fifth Fleet hats. I also command a force called the Combined Maritime Force, which is the largest multinational maritime partnership in the world. We've got 38 nations represented here. When it was first established about 20 years ago, it started with 11. So a pretty significant increase, most recent of whom has been India. And then the final hat is I'm the Commander of the International Maritime Security Construct, which is 11 member nations focused on really deterring attacks against commercial shipping in the region and reassuring partners and the shipping industry.

**BOWMAN:** That's right. Sorry, go ahead. I didn't mean to-

**COOPER:** And I think it's healthy to characterize, there's a lot of hats because there's a lot of space out here. The water space here is really dynamic and vast. But when we think about how we employ ourselves, it really is to the concept of working by, with, and through our partners. And that's important because the vastness, as I look at it and define it, is 5,000 miles from the Suez all the way around the Arabian Peninsula into the Arabian Gulf. The distance from the Suez down to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait itself is about the length of the entire U.S. eastern seaboard. So, these are really large distances, and clearly, and we can talk about this, the waters are just critical to all the global economy just writ large.

**BOWMAN:** That's a great point, and I'm reminded that people often talk, certainly here in Washington, a lot of people talk about global maritime choke points, and you've got at least two or three of them, arguably, right there in your area of responsibility that are vital to international commerce and also the movement of our military forces.

**COOPER:** Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait Hormuz.

**BOWMAN:** Exactly.

**COOPER:** We'll talk about this.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah, exactly. For sure. I have to ask, just on a personal level, I am curious, before we move on, how did a son of a career Army officer end up going to that other academy, the Naval Academy, and joining the U.S. Navy? I have to ask.

**COOPER:** Like many military kids, we moved around, lived in Army bases, which I really enjoy doing, I have a great love and respect for the Army. My father was in the Army, my grandfather, my great-grandfather. But I really wanted to try something different, and not so unlike a lot of teenagers who make unusual choices based on a variety of things, mine were, I thought the Navy's white uniforms were great, and I thought the bases were in great places: San Diego, Jacksonville, Florida, Hawaii. Those weren't the places I necessarily lived in Army bases. But from the 16 or 17 year old then to now, the 35 years or so, it's been a real honor and privilege to be here.

**BOWMAN:** So you didn't want to spend time in Fort Irwin, California then, is what you're saying?

**COOPER:** Some Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Some wonderful places. And again, I have great respect for the Army.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah, totally.

**COOPER:** They're just culturally a little bit different.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah. No, I'm a former Army officer. Spent a little time at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, myself, in the Military Intelligence Advanced Course. Actually, one of my kids was born there. Exactly. It's very good.

All right. So, someone may be watching this and say, "Okay, well, a prestigious career, really important issues there, but everything I'm hearing in the news is about the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Why should I, as an American, busy with my life, raising the kids, paying a mortgage, why should I be concerned about the Middle East?" So here's I guess my question for you, as someone who's really, I'd say, an expert on the region there, what are U.S. interests in the Middle

East, from your perspective? Why do you think we need to be there, and what do you think are the interests that we're trying to protect there?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I think if we begin with this, just with a really broad overview, it starts with the free flow of commerce throughout the world. And then if I broke it down here in the Middle East, it's the free flow of commerce and the sustainability of that commerce through those three critical choke points, the Suez Canal, Bab-al-Mandeb, and Strait of Hormuz. It is clearly in our national interest to maintain that free flow of commerce, and the way we do it and we guard those interests is by, with, and through our partners.

And the mechanism is pretty well set. By working through them, we establish regional maritime security and stability, which leads to that free flow of commerce. So, doing this critical work together with our allies is important. It's deterring aggression, disrupting terror networks, maintaining that freedom of navigation in these critical waterways. And we've had some tangible results. So, in the last couple of years, our forces, alongside our partners, have seized about 15,000 illegal arms and about a billion dollars in illicit drugs. So I'm a firm believer that great things are possible when our maritime forces can plan together, train together, operate together, and then lead together across the region. And that's exactly what we're doing.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. And you started to touch on it there, I'd love to just dig a little deeper. And so, in terms of what we'll call the headache portion here of our discussion, is the biggest, as you eye those interests that we as a nation want to protect, what do you see as the biggest threats to those interests in your region? You mentioned terrorism and smuggling and some other things, but would just love to hear a little bit more from you on the threats to those interests.

**COOPER:** Yeah. First, I think that any destabilizing maritime activity or events that really impede the navigation, one, they have our attention, just because the waters are vital to that global trade, as we just discussed. Clearly, Iran is the most serious threat in the region today. I put it into essentially three main reasons. One is the ballistic and cruise missile advancements in their use, and the proliferation of those weapons, proliferation in particular of the UAVs and technology. And then two, the support of their proxy forces and the proliferation of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and UAVs to the proxies. These proxies have been engaging in acts of terror and really undermining regional security and stability. And then three, there's the nuclear program that our diplomats clearly have the lead on. So I think there's really shared interest across the region on these threats, which affords us and our partners the opportunity to further advance the regional maritime security and cooperation, the construct of how we do that.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. And just for the viewers, I'll flag that my colleague here at FDD, Behnam Ben Taleblu, just published this week actually, a major monograph on Iran's ballistic missile program. It's using both his English and Farsi skills. As far as I can tell, it's the most robust report that I've seen on the origins, evolution, character, and predictions about the future of Iran's ballistic missile program. So I just flag that for viewers. I did a podcast on it with H.R. McMaster and Behnam that was just released yesterday, so I'd flag that for viewers. And Admiral, you mentioned Iran's drone program. Of course, a lot of the viewers will know that Iran has sent some of their drones, including the Shahed-136, to Russia, and Russia has employed those drones in Ukraine to kill Ukrainians in their homes, men, women, and children.

And so just a reminder from my perspective that Iran is not just a threat in the Middle East, but it's a global threat, including to Europe and elsewhere. And of course, you mentioned the nuclear program as well, which is a topic in discussion. Admiral, I'd love to talk just a little bit more about the weapons and drug smuggling that you touched on earlier. You mentioned the number of weapons seized, which is amazing, because every one of those weapons seized is a weapon that's not being used for nefarious purposes. Would welcome any more details you have on some of the

smuggling you're seeing in general, or particularly stuff emanating from Iran, headed toward Yemen, for example, and that sort of thing. Any more details you'd care to discuss on that?

**COOPER:** Yeah, just a couple of pieces just broadly. As you characterized, the weapons are flowing to Yemen from Iran. This flow is illegal. It violates UN Security Council resolutions. And so we have a variety of task forces that are established to both deter it if at all possible, but interdict when we can. And just in about the last 60 days, we've had four major interdictions, which I think signal the efficiency and the effectiveness of what we're doing. And just exactly as you described in these last two months, these last 60 days, we've had about 5,000 weapons, about 1.6 million rounds of ammunition. That's a lot of firepower that's no longer on the battlefield. I think that's helped everyone would agree That's helpful and we'll continue to press it in that particular vision.

**BOWMAN:** And you don't have to comment on this unless you want to, but just it's amazing to me that even as we see the regime in Iran doing horrible things to its own people and sending drones to kill Ukrainians, we still see this illicit smuggling of weapons going to Yemen to arm the Houthis. And it's really that... From my perspective, that flow of weapons that kind of keeps that... We've had a ceasefire for a while there, but that keeps that conflict going in some form and that also facilitates one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. And so a lot of criticism goes to our Saudi partners, but if those weapon... If we really want a durable peace in Yemen, it seems like we have to focus on stopping that flow of weapons. And you and your team are playing a huge role in that it seems to me.

**COOPER:** Yeah. It's important work. I've characterized in different venues, the malign activity of Iran has certainly continued. We've watched it in an important part of what we're doing here is trying to deter it or interdict it.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah. That's great.

**COOPER:** And proud of the great work of the men and women that are doing it. It's been very successful.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. We'll dig into this more a little bit later, but I just want to give you a chance, if you like to talk about some of the sail drone incidents that we've seen with Iran. I know, so for the viewer, maybe you can describe it, Admiral, what are these sail drones? How are they good and helpful and what have we seen Iran doing and in recent months in terms of the U.S. sail drones in international waters?

**COOPER:** So there's a lot to unpack there. Let me describe kind of broadly for the viewers. So about 18 months ago we saw the opportunity to close gaps in maritime domain awareness. MDA for those who aren't aware is our ability to see and understand what's happening on below and above the sea. And given the vastness of the area, that 5,000 miles, our assertion is there's no navy acting alone that can possibly cover that large area. And so you have to operate just as a general concept with your partners. But even with partners, because it's such a big area, there is just too much of a gap that we have the opportunity based on emerging technology to fill. And that's what we've done. So we've been using USVs, unmanned surface vessels, just think eyes on the water, right? Extra sensors with radar, cameras, controlled by satellite, and communicating with satellite to put eyes on the water to see what's out there.

And let me just go off in a quick excursion. So, I think many people would recognize that UAVs aerial have been up around for 30 years, the UUV under the water has been around in particular, but this USV really has only been around the technology to effectively do it is about 18 months. So we got on the cutting edge of that. We got on the leading edge of that and we took the idea, which was a two-page point paper about 18 months ago and turned it into a Task Force called Task force 59. The Navy's actually DoD's first unmanned and artificial intelligence task force. In over a period of time we

started putting these platforms, these USVs out to sea in both experimenting and then operating with it. And we've done that very successfully. If I now propel ourselves ahead to just earlier this week, we just finished I think our 16<sup>th</sup> exercise.

We've had three or four big multilateral international exercises. We've accumulated about 30,000 hours of experience. We've really established ourselves in this Task Force 59. Construct is the most experience in the world on how to operate unmanned surface vessels and 30,000 hours. How does that translate? So that really is essentially Monday through Friday, nine to five. For 13 years, it's just a gigantic amount of experience. So with that and operating throughout the region and putting those eyes on the water, it allows us to do a couple of things. One, it allows us to deter events from happening. This is the shopping mall guard, the guard of the shopping mall effect. If your walking the mall and you see a guard there, you're less active at a crime because you think you might get caught. Same principle applies at sea rather to deter. But then if something does happen, it would allow us to detect it and then respond more efficiently and effectively with the crewed ships that we have.

So that's generally how we operate. And we also operate with these platforms in a teaming effort called manned-unmanned teaming. So you'll have some number of unmanned surface vessels out there with a manned vessel at some distance in support in oversight. Back to the original part of the question about the sail drones. Sail drone is one of the two general types of USVs that we have. This is a specific company's name, but in this particular case, if the types are long endurance platforms that can stay at sea for longer periods of time. So in this case, these drones have been staying at sea for 220 days. They don't pull into port. There's no maintenance. Really extraordinary sustainment that we would never be able to achieve with a manned ship. That's just not possible. And it's keeping eyes persistently on the water. Persistent ISR in military vernacular.

The second version is a high-speed interceptor. So we have unmanned surface vessels that essentially go about a hundred knots that can respond very quickly. And you combine the two along with a manned ship and you find yourself in a big spot. And that's how we have been operating. The general concept is to put these eyes on the water using those two different types of platforms. With respect to the Iranians, if I walk back, it's been about five or we're coming up upon about six months right now. I think it's first important to point out that the Iranians attempted seizure of these platforms was... It was blatant, it was flagrant, it was unprofessional, but most importantly it was an outright violation of international law. So you have that. Since then we've then, had six unmanned exercises. We haven't had any Iranian involvement. So I think we have a pretty good charted course as we go forward.

And importantly, just as we went through 20 or 30 years ago when we started to fly UAVs, you can just imagine the conversations that took place when someone approached another country or another region, and said, hey, we're going to take this thing and it doesn't have a pilot. We're going to fly it from point A to point B. That took a lot of coordination. And what I would just characterize as a lot of normalization of activity. We're going through a similar process now. It's just in a different domain. It's all on the water. And fortunately, the technology is mature to be able to do it. And our operating principle is we're going to operate and fly and sail wherever international law allows and support our partners to be able to do the same. And that's exactly what we're doing. So a lot of operations at sea all around the Arabian peninsula. Long answer to a very short question. It's framed up the broader aspect of all this.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you sincerely. I thought that was helpful and excellent and just commentary for me that you don't have to respond to: I mean if you look at it, the Islamic Republic of Iran's playbook, so much of it depends on asymmetric terrorist and illicit activities that is not detected. And so if you're describing something where we're putting persistent eyes and ears on the water, that it makes it harder for them to do things that aren't detected. And so it's not surprising to me at all that they would not like that and want to stop it. And so we've had these incidents you described

where they literally would come and correct me if I'm wrong grab some of these out of the water. And when our vessels and helicopters arrive, they put them back in the waters. In one instance, they actually kept them, if my research is correct for overnight and that sort of thing.

But you can see that this is really troubling for them because it's uncovering their illicit smuggling activities and some of their potential efforts to harass or even attack maritime shipping. So I just think it's what you're doing there is really important this way you're combining technology to defend one of our core interests in freedom of navigation. So thanks for the rundown. I thought that was excellent. Just finishing up the headache section if we can here. A lot of people think China, that's over there, Indo-Pacific; Russia that's over there in European command, but that's not the case. Anything that you'd like to say to the viewers or tell the viewers about in terms of the activities of China and Russia in your area of responsibility?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I would just broadly say that what we focus on every day with our partners is to remain the partner of choice in the region. And we want to be the number one partner of choice, its strategic competition. And I want to be first. So I can confidently tell you is that we look around the region, there's 15 countries in the maritime. I can confidently tell you there's 13 of them who view the United States Navy as their partner of choice. There are two who don't. Iran views China as their partner of choice and Syria views Russia. So I think big picture, we really do overall find ourselves in a good position for a number of reasons. Let me give you a couple... A little bit of data on this.

**BOWMAN:** Sure.

**COOPER:** So, in 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted 33 partner engagements around the region. Exercises, other big events. Last year, we more than doubled that as a sign of our commitment to the region over 70. And this year we're what? Six weeks into the year? Seven weeks into the year, we've already done 15. So we're on a really strong trajectory. If you compare that to what Russia and China have done over the same period of time, I could count the total number of engagements on one hand. So we're just really in a completely different position vis-a-vis our partners in the region than either of those countries are.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. And we've done a bit of research here at our Center on Military and Political Power on military exercises in the Middle East, not only naval, but land and air exercises. And from our humble foxhole here, everything you're saying is exactly right. That really is an impressive exercise regimen. And of course, as you know, but some of the viewers may not. I mean, these exercises improve the readiness of our own forces. It improves our ability to work with other militaries and it sends a very positive deterrent message to our adversaries and a very positive assurance message to our allies and partners. So that's great. Anything you want to say about the Chinese base in Djibouti? For the viewers: the first major overseas base that the Chinese established was in Djibouti, right near one of those maritime choke points that we've been discussing. Any comments on that or more in general on China's efforts to establish a new base potentially in the region?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I just broadly say the PRC has a base, as you articulated in Djibouti. It's fairly small. It does offer them some abilities to sustain their forces in the region. They have historically had three ships in the region that tend to operate in the Western Gulf of Aden. We know where they are, we know how they operate. They're not generally a concern from a tactical perspective, but broadly, Djibouti does offer a sustainment base for the Chinese.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah, excellent. Ok, thank you. All right, well, so with that discussion, maybe we can move to kind of the aspirin portion here. And we've started to touch a little bit on some of the great work you're doing, but with what

you've already said about exercises, is there anything more that you would like to say about some of the bilateral and multilateral exercises that your team has been conducting, and how we might be growing those in the future?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I think big picture is important. And you hit on this a little bit, why do we do these exercises?

**BOWMAN:** Yeah.

**COOPER:** It really is a reflection of our commitment to the region. So it's one thing to say you're committed. I believe the most prudent thing, the most artful thing to do is actually execute things together. Deeds, not words.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah.

**COOPER:** And so our commitment in this region manifests in a lot of different ways, and the exercise regiment is a great way for that to manifest. You get together, it's a win-win on learning for both sides. Everyone improves. It's a sign of our commitment. And just in broad terms for the Navy here in the region, I would tell you sometimes we operate unilaterally, more often we operate bilaterally, but most of the time we are operating multilaterally with multiple countries in the region, in both exercises and a lot of real-world operations, particularly on the interdictions of both drugs and weapons.

So I think that's the big picture. Just a couple of closing thoughts in this regard, we've been doing this for many, many years, this operating construct of by, with, and through our partners. So that's not new. I think what is new is just how we do it through unmanned... and we can talk a little bit about this, is one way. It's also more broadly when we talk about our commitment to the region. I'll share with you the same thing I share with a lot of leaders in the region. It's about how we engage, and engaging with the Navies and engaging with ships are very important. And of course, it's my orientation to talk about ships all the time, because I tell people as a matter of priority, there are really four important ships that everyone should keep in mind, and they're always going to be the four most important ships that we employ. And they are relationships, partnerships, friendships, and then they're all woven together with shared leadership.

So that's the broader component of how we operate and what we're thinking about in our engagement with the partners in our exercise routine.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. Thank you. You touched on the Combined Maritime Forces earlier, we'll call it the CMF, and what a large entity that is with all so many different nations involved with that. Do you want to talk just a little bit more about that, and how that's kind of helping you protect shared interests and accomplish your mission there in the region?

**COOPER:** Yeah. Let me talk about the two large coalitions that we have the privilege of leading here in Bahrain. Now, one is the Combined Maritime Force and the International Maritime Security Construct, whose tactical arm is Task Force Sentinel. So on CMF, it is organized under the flags of 38 nations, very large. And I'll share with you, we also just extended invitations to another 20-plus nations to join. And this process generally takes on the order from months to years, but we'll see where that goes. But really, it's a very large maritime partnership. I think I mentioned earlier, it's the largest in the world. Operationally, it's broken into four operational task forces, CTF 150, 151, 152, and 153. I'll briefly talk about them. 150 does maritime security and our drug interdiction effort in particular in the Gulf of Oman and the North Arabian Sea. CTF 151 is the counter terrorism, and CTF 150 today commanded by the UK. If we would've had this conversation two months ago, it was commanded by Saudi Arabia.

And you'll see the multinational nature as I walk through all these. CTF 151 is the leading counter-piracy. Today, it's commanded by Republic of Korea leadership. Last week, they just took over from Brazil, last week. CTF 152 does security in the Arabian Gulf in general with GCC nations, and it's commanded by Bahrain. And then CTF 153, we just established it about 10 months ago so that we have a greater focus on Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Today is led by Egypt, which is their first time leading. So that's CMF doing terrific work, 38 nations and growing. IMSC, the tactical arm, again, whose Task Force Sentinel is three years old. You may recall in the summer of 2019 where there was a series of kinetic attacks by Iran in and around the Strait of Hormuz.

IMSC grew from those attacks as a mechanism to both deter malign activity in and around the Strait, as well as the Bab al-Mandeb, and reassure our regional partners. So the coalition today is doing great work. They're stronger than ever. It was originally three countries, now it's 11. I expect that number to grow here throughout the year. And again, both doing really terrific work.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you for that. On the Combined Maritime Forces, one question I did want to ask you: You mentioned how there's 38 nations and how invitations have gone out to 20 nations. I did want to ask about Israel. As some of the viewers may know, Israel was, a couple of years back, moved from European Command's area of responsibility to Central Command's area of responsibility. And you mentioned how 20 nations were invited to join. You also mentioned Combined Task Force 153, which as you said, is responsible for the Red Sea. And you mentioned how Egypt is currently leading that, which I think is noteworthy and very positive for my part. It seems to me it would make sense for regional security, it would make sense in the context of Abraham Accords, it would make sense for all involved to invite Israel to join the Combined Maritime Forces and maybe participate formally in Combined Task Force 153. Is there anything you can update us on with respect to that?

**COOPER:** Yeah, we prudently allow each country to speak on their own behalf of what their interests are in their timeline and desire to join these coalitions. So I'd probably defer to Israel to let them talk about that from their perspective. Entirely separately, although it is related, I will say the Israeli Navy is incredibly capable and proficient. They're outstanding to work with, and for sure on a bilateral basis when we're operating together in the Red Sea, we add value. There's value added to maritime security, maritime stability, that free flow of commerce. Of course, that's good for everybody.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah, no, that's a great point. And you don't have to respond if you don't want to, but it seems to me that the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategy is to divide its adversaries, to divide, to distract, and weaken. I use the three [two] Ds for what they're trying to do. And so conversely, it seems to me the more that we can unify our coalition, and just as you're doing on a day-to-day basis, to create a more unified and capable coalition to push back on their activities, the better. And so it seems to me that adding Israel to the CMF and 153 might be a positive step. And I could be wrong, my understanding is that they would love to join. They're just waiting for some of that to be worked out. But we can move on from that.

I'd love to ask you something that you'll be well familiar with based on all your experience in the region, is security architecture, a fancy term for kind of institutions, habits, processes that we build to promote security and stability in the region.

I would highlight, as you know but some the viewers may not, that the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council defense working groups met earlier this month. And as you and your team were intimately involved with... one of them was focused on maritime security. Kind of an area of research and growing research here at FDD is just what can we do to

move toward a more effective security architecture in the region. So, is there anything you can tell us about this U.S.-GCC defense working group, particularly the maritime security element, and what you kind of see as the next milestones or steps in building a more positive security architecture that protects our interests and deters behavior like that we're seeing from the Islamic Republic of Iran?

**COOPER:** Let me try to take it to that kind of big picture and give you some tangible examples. I participated in the working group. It was really outstanding, really focused in two areas, IAMD, Integrated Air and Missile Defense, and maritime security. And if I just take the maritime security aspect, I think as I've described, just given the vast and dynamic nature of the maritime environment here in the region, the value in strengthening and then expanding maritime cooperation, I think, is obvious. So, our U.S. Naval Forces, as well as our international partners, including forces from GCC countries here on the Arabian Gulf today, if I look at what are we doing, we're deterring, we're detecting, we're responding to regional maritime security threats. And frankly, we're doing it with some record-breaking results. And so that's effective. And so we want to make sure that we establish a foundation of where we are, increase information sharing.

There's a whole series of things that we're doing that are things that we've done to some degree in the past that we're really pressing the accelerator on, and they've proven themselves to produce results. So I'll kind of come back to a couple of things I mentioned before. So just in the past couple of months alone, actually we've had five interdictions now, think about it, that came from U.S. and partner maritime forces seizing more than... Let me just think about this for a second. I mentioned the 5,000 weapons. This is just essentially two months. 5,000 weapons, the 1.6 million rounds of ammo. We've had about 7,000 rocket fuses. We had about 2000 kgs of propellant used to launch RPGs. And we had over 20 new anti-tank guided missiles, and about \$60 million worth of drugs. Of course, not one penny of those drugs is going to anything good. We can't really always talk about exactly where it's going here, because it's an intelligence matter, but I can guarantee you this, it's going to nothing good.

So to me, then, that's a little bit of the detail. If you zoomed out, numbers are really part of this two-year trend that I think are made possible by the tremendous amount of collaboration and leadership that we get from the GCC countries and other partners in the region from those two multinational coalitions. Super happy with it, and we're not one to rest on our laurels. So, as was in the OSD press release, we certainly achieved some things last year. In the ensuing year, we really pressed the accelerator, and the results, I think, speak for themselves.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah. And correct me if I'm wrong, deference to your expertise here, but the unmanned surface vehicles that we were discussing earlier, and I've heard you talk about this before, I thought, very effectively, the way it extends our eyes and ears. So instead of just having your sensors on land looking out to sea, if you put them 20 kilometers, 40 kilometers, 60 kilometers out, and they're persistent, they're there all the time, just how that kind of extends the, like you said, to use the ISR, Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance, and how that enables a partner nation to really understand what's going on in the waters around their space and how that could feed into a common operating picture that is shared among partners in an agile way. One could see doing that in the maritime regime and also in the integrated air missile defense space, where you're really starting to build a security architecture that's good for us and good for our partners. Anything you want to kind of correct on what I said there, or add to, or?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I think it's worth maybe just giving a little vignette for the viewers on pragmatic impact, positive impact that these platforms can provide, these USVs. So I'll just play on, how do you describe it. So if you take any country in the region here, and I'll just focus on the Arabian Gulf. A country can today see 30 kilometers off their coast, 18 to 20 miles, with the existing sensors and platforms that they have. Imagine now taking another unmanned surface

vessel with radar, high-end optics, satellite control, and satellite communication and putting it out a little further. Once out there, it uses artificial intelligence to map what's around it, and when something is different, it'll take a picture of it and send it back to the operation center. So now you've extended your eyes further into the water than you had before. And we've measured this, instead of being able to see 30 kilometers now you can see 60.

Pretty significant. Okay, now take another one, another USV being put it out even further. Now you can see 90. So you've essentially for that country tripled your maritime domain awareness. That's for that country. Now, multiply that by the nine countries in the region, and you get to do the Alabama public school math on this. You just simply increase your knowledge of what's happening about 27 times, through a very, very modest investment and a high ROI. That's one aspect of it. The other aspect, if I can just pivot a little bit of how's this future. What does this look like going forward? I believe I've said in multiple venues that I think we're on the cusp of an unmanned technological revolution. Our CNO, Admiral Gilday, is very clearly articulated that our future path is building a fleet that's a larger hybrid fleet with manned and unmanned.

These unmanned platforms would be under, on, and above the sea and that would meet the nation's strategic and operational demands. And a key aspect of that is that speed matters. You can't go talking about something you're going to field in terms of capability or capacity, and say, okay, we're going to get it in year 2043. That's just not good enough. Technology is moving too quickly. This is where Task Force 59 has really been very successful using a little bit of a different model, introducing these new platforms into the region. And because of commercial dual-use technology, they offer an easy or no, or low barrier to entry for other partners to be able to use the same technology. We have information agreements all worked out, that's all done. So it's the here-and-now opportunity to be seized, and that's what we're doing.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. And you mentioned Task Force 59, that's actually exactly where I wanted to go next. Just a little bit more for the viewers. So Task Force 59, it's focused on bringing this innovation in. Just anything more that you want to say on that? And I understand that you have a 100 USV fleet goal. Is that right? And what is that, and when do you hope to achieve that by?

**COOPER:** Yeah, I wanted just to say I had a couple of high points on it.

**BOWMAN:** Sure.

**COOPER:** So about 18 months ago, as I mentioned earlier, this idea of an unmanned artificial intelligence task force was literally a two-page point paper, working with Navy leadership, and with the CNO's approval, we established into a formal task force. And as we were doing that, we consulted frankly with all the top experts in the field of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence. In then, of course of doing so, we really realized there was this opportunity to establish this task force in a dedicated manner that we just hadn't done before, because of the emergence of unmanned systems and that technological maturity, and the ability to couple that with artificial intelligence in the maritime, and do something and achieve things with domain awareness, i.e. eyes on the water, that we just hadn't been able to do before. So we're super proud of what we've done, working very closely with our partners, just in the last couple of weeks. It's not just the U.S. doing things, it's a combined task force. So we currently have personnel from seven countries, US, Canada, France, Germany and Netherlands, Spain, and UK.

We'll have a Jordanian officer join us here soon, and we've extended invitations to other countries in the region. So they've really done terrific work. Then what I described earlier, enormous amount of operational experience, 30,000

hours, exercises I talked about before, operating all around the Arabian peninsula. About six weeks ago or so, we established it's an FOC, it's full operational capability, 16 months since establishment. So that's a significant goal. And then yesterday when I was in Abu Dhabi, we also announced that we are approaching the halfway point to a broad goal, which is to have a hundred USVs deployed throughout the region, or available for deployment throughout the region here by the end of the summer. And so we're coming up on halfway there, and the vision is to integrate these systems into daily maritime ops throughout the region. And I think we have good momentum here and super proud of the entire staff and the Task Force 59 team, for how far we've come. And I go back to that same point of speed matters. You've got to go quickly on this, because of the emergency and speed of technological movement. It's been great.

**BOWMAN:** No, that's great. Thank you for that. What a very helpful rundown. One question I just kind of habitually ask senior officers like yourself in important positions, just it's probably the former Senate staffer in me, nine years of U.S. Senate work in some of these issues. What do you need that you don't have? Or another way to ask the question, where would you spend one additional dollar?

**COOPER:** Yeah, actually we've been resourced to do exactly what we are trying to achieve, which is to expand maritime domain awareness. So the CNO has the resources to do that. And let me just the opportunity to talk about it, we're definitely using a little bit of a different model. I think, many on the line here would be familiar with the POM [Program Objective Memorandum] process and the time that takes. That's a necessary process that's been around for some time. It's important to get everything right. We use a little bit of a different model, where we scan the environment for the latest and greatest tech. We bring it out here. We provide an opportunity for that tech to get tested in the environment, ultimately deploying. And in the course of doing so, you quickly find out what works and doesn't work, and what does work. We put it to operational use. So I'll give you an example of how that manifested here in the last year.

So last May, we teamed with DIU, the Defense Innovation Unit, and we generated a solicitation around the world. 'Hear ye, hear ye' we're looking for the best-unmanned service vessels and UAVs as well as AI platforms to come out here and conduct an exercise in November, December timeframe. DIU got 105 submissions of countries around the world that says we have the best. Over a period of time, that got whittled down to 17 companies providing 15 platforms, including about 10 of which we've not seen before. We connected it with a big exercise called Digital Horizon in November and December. Really got to match what companies said were the best that they had, and see it actually work. And we're very happy with it, and we really frankly exceeded our own expectations, which were already very high. And I think number one, it was a great example of how DOD, in our case the Navy, can work with industry in a very meaningful, positive way. Very positive. And we learned a lot, as you might expect. And we looked to tweak that process just a little bit. But essentially, we'll follow the same process this year, and what will it get us? We'll maintain currency on having the best platforms that exist in the world, out here again. So that'll be fantastic.

**BOWMAN:** Okay, so I hear you saying investments in both exercises and technological investments are paying big dividends there. Is that good?

**COOPER:** Yeah, for sure.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah.

**COOPER:** They really are. And we're taking advantage of what American industry, because America is leading in this-

**BOWMAN:** Comparative advantage for our country. For sure.

**COOPER:** And we're taking advantage of what's out there and putting it to operational use very quickly.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. I'm eyeing the clock here, I want to be respectful of your time. I could talk all day with you, but I know you have a Navy to run out there, but if I'm not mistaken, you assumed command back on May 5, 2021, I think. And so how much time do you have left there in command, and what are you most proud of you and your team accomplishing so far? And what are some of the remaining challenges you hope to address in the time you have left in that position?

**COOPER:** Yeah. Well, as you know from your Senate time, there is a process here. I have a relief who's been nominated. We'll turn that over to the Senate and see how that goes. So we'll see what the timing looks like. But in terms of what I'm proud of, far and away is the great work that the people have done here. I say this all the time, every success we have is starting with people. Everything that we have accomplished, the secret sauce is really all about the people, what the people have done here. So that is far and away what I'm most proud of. Also, certainly proud of the great work we've done with partnerships and relationships, building on many years if not decades of good work that have already happened out here just in new ways. Particularly I highlight with CMF, we recently integrated India into CMF. And the integration efforts in the wake of Abraham Accords and Israel's shift into the region have also been noteworthy.

And the challenge side of this would be clearly Iran's destabilizing behavior. It's obviously something we're going to continue to work on with regional partners, to maintain that rhythm and pace with exercises and our engagement. The information sharing and intel sharing that we do is meaningful. Growing the partnerships as I mentioned before and establishing that 100 USV fleet going forward. All said in a different way. The two things we're focused on most are the strengthening of the partnership piece and then accelerated innovation to achieve the results I described. Super exciting. All enabled by people who are great.

**BOWMAN:** That's great. Thank you for that. Anything, admiral, that I didn't ask you that you wanted to cover? Any closing comments that you'd like to make?

**COOPER:** No, I think we covered a lot. I really appreciate the time, and I just want to thank you and the entire foundation for hosting the discussion and others that are illuminating really important points I think on this particular matter. But national security and foreign policy matters that are really grave. Looking forward to sustaining the conversation. Thanks for all that you do, and we look forward to staying in touch.

**BOWMAN:** Absolutely. Thank you sincerely for your service to our country and uniform, the sacrifice of your family, and thanks to all the wonderful men and women that you lead that keep our country safe and stand between us and our adversaries who want to do as harm, so we don't take that for granted at all. Thank you for making time to join me for this conversation. And also thanks to our audience for watching. For those tuning in, if you are not already receiving updates from FDD, please visit [fdd.org](https://www.fdd.org) to subscribe to our work. Thank you for joining us and we hope to see you again soon. Thank you.

**COOPER:** Thanks so much.