

Navy, Marine Corps Leaders Say Unmanned Systems Will Be Key Element in Peer Competition



The MQ-9 Reaper is an armed, multi-mission, medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aircraft, one of several unmanned systems Navy leaders say help extend the reach and capabilities of the fleet. *U.S. AIR FORCE / Sgt. Dennis J. Henry Jr.*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The top commanders of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps say increased deployment of unmanned air and maritime systems will help extend the reach and intelligence capabilities of the fleet and the force, while sowing uncertainty among peer competitors.

“We intend to use our fleet in a distributed manner, so unmanned obviously will give us volume, more ships, and will allow us to come at, let’s say China or Russia, at many vectors across many domains,” Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday told a recent House Armed Services Committee hearing. In effect, forcing adversaries to spread their resources and be on guard everywhere, all the time.

The Navy and Marine Corps released their Unmanned Campaign Plan in March, but some in Congress have said it was short on details. At the June 14 HASC hearing on the Navy Department’s fiscal 2022 budget request, Chairman Rep. Adam Smith (D-Washington) asked Gilday and Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger to explain how unmanned systems will help their mission.

For unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), “the vision you’re talking about probably has four different parts,” Berger said.

They include intelligence collection; logistics, lethality and command and control, “the ability to fuse and move information laterally and back to the joint force.

“Beginning last year, we started our transition to a mixed capability of long range ship and ground-based unmanned aerial systems including the MQ-9 Reaper,” Berger said. “This will significantly expand our ISR capabilities and will enable us to better support the fleet and the joint force operational commander, including anti-submarine warfare.”

The Marines have initiated a partnership with industry to develop a future autonomous, long range, unmanned surface vessel. “That will extend the reach of our MEUs [Marine Expeditionary Units]. That vessel will give us a new tool for maritime gray zone competition. It will help thicken what we call the C5ISR network. It will add to our conventional naval deterrent using loitering munitions,” Berger said.

Gilday said the two biggest challenges unmanned systems presented the Navy are reliability on vessels that would have to operate for months at a time, and command, and control. “We feel like we’re on a good path on both, but we don’t have any intentions of scaling any of these efforts until we get to a place where we’re comfortable with both of those aspects.”

He noted the Navy recently completed its largest unmanned exercise on the West Coast with unmanned undersea, surface and air systems operating with manned surface ships; had the first successful refueling of an F/A-18 Super Hornet from an MQ-25 drone; and had the third unmanned surface vessel make a transit of more than 4,000 miles from the Gulf Coast, through the Panama Canal to California, operating autonomously 98% of the time.

“We are making strides,” Gilday said, but widespread use of unmanned craft is “a big step though. I think it’s going to be phased with respect to minimal manning before we ever get to a

point where we use an unmanned completely unattended.”