

Simple Unmanned Systems Could Impose ISR Tax on Adversaries, Marine General Says

WASHINGTON – One of the ways to counter rivals in the Great Power Competition is to impose costs on a potential adversary. An effective way to do that is with a big, unmanned inflatable boat, according to a top Marine Corps commander.

The Marines are looking to reduce their exposure to increased long-range precision fire with unmanned systems in the air, on land and sea. In addition to accomplishing a mission without exposing troops to danger, unmanned systems are also seen as a way to flood an adversary's decision-making and targeting processes with an array of low signature, affordable and risk-worthy platforms, according to written testimony prepared for a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing March 11.

Asked by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) to explain how the Corps is leveraging unmanned systems to upset adversaries' decision-making, Lt. Gen. Eric Smith cited the Long Range Unmanned Surface Vessel (LRUSV), a 33-foot long rigid hulled inflatable boat that can travel far to enemy littorals and unleash a swarm of small aerial drones.

Smith, the deputy commandant for Combat Development and Integration, said the LRUSV had been tested at the annual Advanced Technology Exercise last July. The autonomous boat traveled down the Inland Waterway from Norfolk, Virginia, to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, about 200 miles, with no one aboard, controlled from Norfolk. On arrival, the LRUSV launched a swarm of small, expendable Raytheon Coyote drones that could either attack or observe the target.

“That’s the kind of capability that we will provide to those forces forward,” Smith said, adding that LRUSV and other lighter, more lethal, resilient capabilities like the Remotely Operated Ground Unit Expeditionary (ROGUE) naval strike missile-firing vehicle, would be transported to overseas exercises in 40-foot long shipping containers.

“That complicates an adversary’s calculus, because if you don’t know what’s in that, it could be weights for a weight room or a lethal strike missile,” Smith said. As the Marines and their weaponry are dispersed in support of distributed maritime operations, “You impose an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance tax on an adversary,” he added.