

## The Next Chapter of Unmanned Warfare Has Arrived

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Drone warfare is expanding from the skies to the seas, and the United States must be ready. The Russia-Ukraine war, which has become synonymous with aerial drone warfare, has now [featured](#) the “first naval battle in history between unmanned boats,” according to the Ukrainian Navy. On September 14, 2026, a Ukrainian Sargan 300 drone boat fired at and sank a Russian unmanned surface vessel (USV) in the Black Se. This is a [significant milestone](#) in warfare’s rapid evolution.

Unmanned naval platforms are also starting to see combat beyond the battlefield laboratory of Eastern Europe. During the Iran conflict, in July 2026, three American one-way attack USVs [struck](#) an Iranian submarine and naval facility, the first-ever American use of USVs to strike enemy targets. Just weeks prior, a USV [rescued](#) two U.S. Army pilots from nearby waters after an Iranian drone struck their helicopter.

Nor are recent U.S. unmanned successes confined to the Middle East. They have occurred right in America’s backyard. Reporting from August 5, 2026, [indicated](#) that an American USV recently detected, tracked, and helped intercept a U.S. bound narcotics shipment worth \$81 million in the Caribbean Sea.

Now, building on these recent tactical successes requires accelerated U.S. efforts, not complacency. Greater strategic imagination is the first step. The Pentagon needs to think both bigger and smaller about unmanned military platforms. Bigger thinking means integrating them into a single network with manned assets and human warfighters. Smaller thinking means complementing high-end platforms with inexpensive, expendable ones. Today, the U.S. military does neither at scale.

The American military’s recent success with autonomous platforms, along with the unmanned advances of partners like Israel, Ukraine, and Taiwan, offers three main lessons for the Pentagon’s next unmanned leap forward.

First, expendability has its own currency. Ukraine has achieved outsized battlefield effects with lower-end, expendable unmanned platforms, as well as Iran and Russia. This is true for sea-based autonomous systems too. However, one-way attack USVs, like those American forces used against Iran, remain in short supply. That shortfall stems from bureaucratic, not technological, reasons. The Pentagon applies the same rigid standards to unmanned, expendable platforms as to high-end, manned surface combatants. Yet overly rigorous testing and evaluation inhibit production at the pace the battlefield demands.

Second, as the recent USV [rescue](#) of U.S. aviators from the Arabian Gulf demonstrates, unmanned platforms offer more than strike or surveillance functions. In fact, those lower-tech functions may have a greater upside, involving less rigorous testing and faster deployment timetables. Take, for example, the since-axed UCLASS program to build carrier-based

surveillance-and-strike drones. Due to a lengthy requirements list, the project became unsustainable. That is subtraction by addition. Now, the Navy is developing the MQ-25 Stingray, an unmanned aerial refueler and a simpler platform meeting a [fundamental need](#).

Unmanned platforms offer additional unconventional utility, such as logistics resupply and forward basing. For example, an Israeli firm is exploring turning commercial ships into camouflaged [floating drone bases](#). Another has [developed](#) heavy-lift drones to move materiel to the battlefield. These concepts address a primary challenge America would face in a future Pacific war: contested logistics across a broad geographic area far from the homeland and near the enemy's surf and turf. Fortunately, unmanned systems could ease those logistical headaches by offering greater concealment, dispersal, and flexibility, while preserving manpower.

Another potential evolution is now on the horizon: unmanned amphibious landings. A Ukrainian startup has a prototype autonomous amphibious vehicle that resembles a small truck. It can carry drones, travel underwater with a low radar profile, and drive onto enemy shores. The United States, by acquiring that capability, could facilitate a naval version of [Operation Spiderweb](#), where Ukrainian drones hidden inside cargo trucks infiltrated Russia and neutralized strategic Russian bombers across the country.

Third, and finally, the Pentagon's unmanned advances must be complementary. However, they are not presently. This is the "think bigger" half of the equation, and what makes the first two lessons pay off. Expendable autonomous mass, low-cost single-purpose platforms, and distributed unmanned hubs reach their potential only when they work as a team. Recognizing this, Taiwan is [seeking](#) over 200,000 one-way attack drones and over 1,200 USVs, including the [systems architecture](#) to link them together.

To prevail in a hypothetical Pacific war, American forces must maintain persistent surveillance of the adversary. That interconnectivity is currently lacking, which impedes readiness. Surveillance drones cannot directly communicate with nearby submarines or USVs, nor fuse data into a common operating picture.

Linking autonomous platforms, manned assets, and human warfighters in a shared data mesh and command-and-control system would close those gaps. The U.S. military's Combined Joint All-Domain Command-and-Control (CJADC2) aims to forge that very integration. Yet CJADC2 [remains limited](#) to "fragmented deployments," according to the Pentagon. Fixing this is a critical next step.

Innovating in the unmanned domain will require the Pentagon to be more imaginative in how it acquires, tests, and links its manned and unmanned platforms. That requires thinking smaller, by acquiring more expendable unmanned systems, and thinking bigger, by operationalizing a joint-domain network. It should also involve Washington acquiring Israeli, Taiwanese, and Ukrainian unmanned technology and expanding co-production with those U.S. partners at the cutting edge of warfare.

Successful adaptation also requires the Pentagon to re-examine how it allocates resources. Currently, cost overruns on large, manned surface combatants poorly calibrated to today's threat landscape constrain the development and acquisition of future unmanned capabilities. Studies [indicate](#) that guided-missile destroyers would be highly vulnerable in a Pacific war, and that [reliably fixing](#) and returning them to battle would be nearly impossible. Spending on these platforms, while important, takes up a disproportionate share of the Navy's budget, crowding out unmanned innovation and acquisition.

The Pentagon's recent unmanned successes show it is not completely outpaced by warfare's rapid evolution. Yet this is a marathon, not a sprint. The U.S. will suffer if it does not keep up—particularly in the unmanned domain.

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