

Naval Drones in Pursuit

Matt Friedman:

Inspired by the military's aircraft drones, the U.S. Navy is aggressively pursuing self-driven undersea vehicles.

Chris Egan:

We-we do see these, uh, autonomous undersea vehicles as game changers. They can increase the-the access and-and increase the range of our manned operational forces, and they can keep man out of harm's way.

Matt Friedman:

The undersea vehicles are currently being used to detect mines and map the ocean floor. One recently navigated its way from Cape Cod to Newport, Rhode Island. Officials said the sailboat-dotted waters provided a realistic environment for engineers to test the gadgets.

Chris Egan:

These systems have a lot of computing power in them. They have got very advanced sensors in them, and they have autonomy that can perceive and, uh, identify and avoid obstacles, uh, and course their own path, uh, through obstacles and get to their objectives.

Matt Friedman:

With tweaks over the next several years, the military says the drones will be applied more to intelligence gathering. Eventually, the navy hopes the unmanned crafts will pilot themselves across oceans.

Chris Egan:

Uh, we want these devices to be able to go in and find their way in tough environments, through adversarial conditions, um, without the aid of operators or the help from operation forces.

Matt Friedman:

Compared with aerial drones, the undersea vehicles can be more challenging to control from a distance. That's because the water distorts the transmission of signals, and the drones have to contend with boat traffic, swirling currents, and obstacles on the ocean floor.

Chris Egan:

UUVs [unmanned underwater vehicles] are very communication-challenged, uh, devices, so there are limited, uh, capabilities in communications. Um, acoustically, we can communicate with these vehicles, but that's limited bandwidth. Uh, above water, um, we want to pick and choose when UUVs pop up to the surface so that they can communicate, uh, over air or satellite.

Matt Friedman:

The navy sees the drones as a cost-effective way to extend the reach of its submarine fleet, which has been gradually shrinking in size since the end of the Cold War.

Matt Friedman:

Matt Friedman, Associated Press.

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