

U.S. Navy Special Forces Demonstrate Manned-Unmanned Vessel Teaming at Balikatan 2025

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During Exercise Balikatan 2025 at Subic Bay in the Philippines, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command showcased a significant advancement in maritime operations by demonstrating integrated manned-unmanned vessel teaming. Special Operations units operated their Combatant Craft Assault (CCA) vessels alongside MARTAC's T38 Devil Ray unmanned

surface vessels (USVs), underscoring the growing role of autonomous systems in distributed maritime warfare.

The exercise involved Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen (SWCC) piloting high-speed, low-profile CCA boats in coordination with the Devil Ray USVs. These unmanned vessels, measuring approximately 11.6 meters and capable of exceeding speeds of 80 kilometers per hour, were equipped with modular payloads including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) equipment, electronic warfare systems, and logistics supply capabilities. The Devil Rays operated both autonomously and under remote control, offering versatile support functions to human-crewed units.

The manned-unmanned teaming offered tactical benefits across multiple mission sets. The USVs were used to perform pre-mission reconnaissance, relay real-time data to SEAL teams, act as mobile communication nodes, deploy deception tools, and deliver small payloads—all before exposing manned craft to contested zones. This capability enhanced situational awareness and operational tempo while minimizing the risk to personnel in forward areas.

Navy officials highlighted this effort as part of a broader push to embrace automation and robotics in naval operations. The successful integration of autonomous vessels into real-world exercises supports the U.S. Navy's vision for future conflict scenarios where unmanned platforms extend the reach, speed, and resilience of maritime forces. The operation also reinforced U.S. commitments to regional allies, particularly the Philippines, and demonstrated the evolving capabilities needed to ensure security in the Indo-Pacific.

This demonstration is part of a wider modernization strategy within U.S. defense planning, aimed at combining the strengths of autonomous platforms with the decision-making and adaptability of human operators. As peer adversaries expand their maritime presence, the ability to project power using smaller, faster, and more survivable systems becomes increasingly critical, especially in areas with limited infrastructure or high surveillance risk.

Exercise Balikatan 2025 delivered a clear message: the future of maritime special operations will be shaped by seamless coordination between manned and unmanned forces. In a region marked by rising strategic competition, the integration of such technology ensures the U.S. maintains its operational edge in complex, contested littoral environments.