

Navy Develops Missile-Armed Drone Boats to Strengthen Future Sea Power

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The U.S. Navy is moving ahead with plans to build a fleet of fast, unmanned surface vessels designed to carry and launch missiles, part of a broader effort to modernize maritime operations and respond to emerging global threats.

The new craft, called the Modular Attack Surface Craft (MASC), will be smaller than current unmanned platforms but highly capable. Each drone boat is expected to travel over 2,500 nautical miles at speeds above 25 knots and carry between 16 and 32 vertical launch missile cells depending on the configuration. A larger variant could carry significantly more cells, potentially up to 64, and could deploy Tomahawk cruise missiles or other precision—guided munitions.

These drones are part of the Navy's push to create a more distributed and flexible force structure. By relying on autonomous vessels to handle missile strikes and other high-risk missions, the Navy aims to reduce danger to personnel while maintaining a strong forward presence.

The MASC program builds on earlier efforts, such as demonstrations of containerized missile payloads launched from unmanned surface vessels like those tested in the Navy's Ghost Fleet Overlord experiments. Navy officials believe that modular payloads will allow these drones to shift quickly between roles, from long-range strike and surveillance to anti-swarm defense.

Defense analysts view the initiative as a response to increasing challenges from China and Russia, whose naval doctrines emphasize missile-centric platforms and anti-access/area-denial strategies. By deploying unmanned missile boats, the Navy can complicate enemy targeting, stretch the reach of its firepower, and operate more flexibly in contested waters.

In addition to offensive capabilities, the drones could support force protection by acting as sentinels or interceptors, especially in areas where manned ships face high risk. Smaller, agile, and designed for quick

deployment, these vessels represent a new way to apply naval power across vast regions.

The Navy has issued a solicitation for industry proposals with the goal of fielding operational prototypes by fiscal year 2027 under an accelerated prototyping schedule. If successful, these missile-equipped drone boats could play a central role in reshaping U.S. naval strategy for the coming decades, especially as the Pentagon focuses on Indo-Pacific security and the evolving nature of maritime warfare.