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Autonomous vehicles (AVs) have been used in military operations for more than 60 years, with torpedoes, cruise missiles, satellites, and target drones being early examples.¹ They have also been widely used in the civilian sector—for example, in the disposal of explosives, for work and measurement in radioactive environments, by various offshore industries for both creating and maintaining undersea facilities, for atmospheric and undersea research, and by industry in automated and robotic manufacturing. Recent military experiences with AVs have consistently demonstrated their value in a wide range of missions, and anticipated developments of AVs hold promise for increasingly significant roles in future naval operations. Advances in AV capabilities are enabled (and limited) by progress in the technologies of computing and robotics, navigation, communications and networking, power sources and propulsion, and materials. Autonomous Vehicles in Support of Naval Operations is a forward-looking discussion of the naval operational environment and vision for the Navy and Marine Corps and of naval mission needs and potential applications and limitations of AVs. This report considers the potential of AVs for naval operations, operational needs and technology issues, and opportunities for improved operations.
