

Corsair Autonomous Surface Craft Help Patrol Panamanian Waters



When Exercise Panamax 2026 concluded in mid-August, Panamanian security leaders were impressed with the performance of the Corsair unmanned surface vessels that the U.S. Navy brought along with them.

The Corsair platforms, the same type that recently rescued downed AH-64 Apache pilots off the coast of Oman, participated in the exercise alongside U.S. and partner forces. During that time, they demonstrated the potential of long-endurance uncrewed systems to support maritime security.

For Panama, those capabilities could help expand the country's ability to monitor maritime approaches, identify suspicious activity, and respond to threats posed by illicit trafficking

and regional threat networks.

In the weeks following Panamax, the U.S. embassy and U.S. Southern Command coordinated with Panama's Ministry of Security to retain the Corsairs for a maritime security mission conducted in partnership with Panama's National Aeronaval Service.

The effort supports Panama's ongoing work to protect its territorial waters, counter drug trafficking and other illicit activity, and strengthen security along critical maritime routes.

It also advances the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition's objectives to improve regional coordination against cartels, narco-terrorist networks and other regional threats while respecting the sovereignty and authorities of partner nations.

"The Corsairs are providing additional patrol craft," said Marine Corps Col. Ian Fletcher, commander of Southcom's newly established Autonomous Warfare Command. "Their onboard radar and electro-optical sensors provide many of the enhanced detection capabilities associated with a manned patrol craft, allowing operators to maintain awareness over a larger area."

The long-endurance craft are engineered to operate reliably without an onboard crew. The platforms can maintain a persistent patrol presence across the maritime domain, complementing Panama's existing fleet, aircraft and personnel.

By integrating uncrewed systems with manned patrol vessels and airborne assets, Panama can expand the area it monitors and increase its potential threat assessment speed. The additional coverage can help crews distinguish routine activity from activity requiring further investigation, enabling manned assets to focus on response and interdiction missions.

“The platforms can operate alongside manned patrol craft and provide additional information to crews at sea,” Fletcher said. “That gives partner forces greater flexibility, improves efficiency, and expands the area they can monitor without requiring additional personnel aboard each vessel.”

The current mission focuses on strengthening maritime awareness and supporting partner efforts against narcotics trafficking, regional threat networks and threats associated with designated terrorist organizations. The platforms operate as a complement to – not a replacement for – Panama’s maritime security forces and decision-making authorities.

Fletcher said the effort also creates an opportunity for Panama and Southcom to assess how additional autonomous systems could support the protection of critical waterways and maritime infrastructure.

“As we learn from these operations, we can examine where additional autonomous capabilities may increase maritime presence and awareness,” he said. “That includes exploring how systems can operate safely and effectively in the canal environment.”

The partnership reflects a shared commitment to regional security: combining Panama’s leadership, regional cooperation and emerging technology to counter illicit networks, strengthen maritime security, and help secure the Western Hemisphere and the reliable flow of commerce through the Panama Canal.

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