

Navy's unmanned vessels key to \$81 million cocaine seizure in Caribbean



The Freedom-class variant littoral combat ship USS Wichita (LCS 13) sits pierside during the annual Fleet Experimentation (FLEX) 2026 event in Key West, Fla., April 29, 2026. Hosted by U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet April 24-30, the exercise integrates commercially developed unmanned systems and artificial intelligence with traditional manned naval platforms. FLEX 2026 features comprehensive collaboration across the Department of War and industry to demonstrate a sophisticated kill chain that successfully found, tracked and engaged captured drug boats. The campaign focuses on operationalizing advanced robotic and autonomous systems to combat transnational organized crime and patrol vast maritime regions. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jasmin L. Aquino)

By Cmdr. John Williams, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command /

U.S. 4th Fleet

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MAYPORT, Fla. – On October 16, 2025, a Long-Dwell Unmanned Surface Vessel detected and identified a target of interest designated by Joint Interagency Task Force South. The unmanned vessel tracked the target, coordinated with naval forces, and enabled a U.S. Navy ship to interdict the vessel, resulting in the significant drug seizure.

Since January 2025, NAVSOUTH has been operating LD-USVs in the Central Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, supporting the regional effort to counter Transnational Criminal Organizations. These autonomous systems have become a critical force multiplier, enhancing maritime domain awareness and augmenting U.S. Navy and Coast Guard capabilities at a fraction of the cost of traditional assets.

“This interdiction is the culmination of months of refining our tactics, techniques, and procedures for these advanced systems in the region,” said Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command /U.S. 4th Fleet. “The ability to detect a target, have that vessel identified by our team on the watch floor, and then coordinate with assets on scene to complete the interdiction is a testament to the hard work of our Sailors and our commitment to integrating unmanned systems into fleet operations.”

NAVSOUTH’s unmanned operations are set to expand in 2026 with the integration of interceptor USVs, unmanned aerial vehicles, and high-altitude balloons. These assets will be deployed across the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility to provide a multi-layered approach to maritime surveillance and counter-illicit trafficking.

“The success we are seeing with these robotic systems allows

us to expand our reach and support our mission requirements more effectively,” said Cmdr. Jon Williams, NAVSOUTH’s Technology and Innovation Director. “By layering unmanned surface and airborne systems, we create a highly effective maritime domain awareness network. Operating these systems at scale allows us to accelerate their development and integration across the entire Navy.”

U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet supports U.S. Southern Command’s joint and combined military operations by employing maritime forces in cooperative maritime security operations to maintain access, enhance interoperability, and build enduring partnerships in order to enhance regional security and promote peace, stability and prosperity in the Caribbean, Central and South American region.