Southern Command, 4th Fleet Complete FLEX in Key West

By Lt. j.g. Paul Archer



U.S. Marine Gen. Francis L. Donovan, commander of U.S. Southern Command and Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet, along with senior executive services representatives and partner nation officials stand for a group photo during FLEX 2026 on April 29, 2026. *Photo credit: U.S. Air Force | Staff Sgt. Christopher Bermudez*

U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet successfully concluded their annual Fleet Experimentation (FLEX) event from April 24-30. The exercise showcased the powerful integration of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence in the fight against transnational organized crime.

FLEX is a cornerstone of USNAVSOUTH's strategy to field advanced robotic and autonomous systems, addressing the

challenge of patrolling vast maritime regions with a limited number of traditional naval assets. The campaign focuses on operationalizing AI alongside innovative air, surface, and subsurface platforms to accelerate the delivery of next-generation capabilities to the fleet.

“The time to work with international partners and industry leaders to secure the Western Hemisphere is now,” said Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of USNAVSOUTH/4th Fleet. “Through FLEX, we leverage and operationalize new technological advancements to increase maritime domain awareness, counter illicit traffic, and defend our homeland.”

The at-sea portion of the exercise demonstrated a sophisticated kill chain where commercially developed unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and unmanned surface vehicles (USV) worked in concert with traditional manned platforms — MH-60 helicopters and the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Wichita (LCS 13). These synchronized platforms successfully found, fixed, tracked and targeted a captured drug boat. This scenario culminated in a successful law enforcement interdiction and kinetic engagements destroying several captured drug boats, proving the concept’s real-world effectiveness.

Highlighting the event’s strategic importance was a group of distinguished visitors, including Undersecretary of War for Research and Engineering Emil Michael; Gen. Francis L. Donovan, commander of U.S. Southern Command; and Vice Adm. John Dougherty IV, commander of Naval Air Systems Command. Leaders from the U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, Joint Interagency Task Force South, partner-nation militaries and various industry partners also attended.

“FLEX provides a unique opportunity for stakeholders to operationalize new technologies that directly support our warfighters in countering illicit activities and threats,” said Dr. Christopher Heagney, the Naval Air Systems Command

Fleet / Force advisor to USNAVSOUTH/4th Fleet. “From initial concept in December, to fielding operational systems by April, we showed how quickly the acquisition community and Fleets are delivering increased capability and lethality at a lower cost and risk to the Warfighter. This is the result of strengthening partnerships between Congress, defense laboratories and programs, industry, and academia.”

This year’s FLEX in Key West serves as a prelude to further experimental operations later this year in Comalapa, El Salvador, deepening international partnerships and advancing the integration of unmanned platforms into a hybrid fleet.

FLEX 2026 featured a comprehensive collaboration across the Department of War. Participants included operational commands like U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet and Joint Interagency Task Force South, alongside premier research and development entities from the Navy, Army and Air Force, as well as the Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office.

The success of FLEX and the development of the hybrid fleet are critically dependent on robust collaboration between the Congress, Department of War, and trailblazers in industry and academia. These partnerships are the engine of innovation, accelerating the development and fielding of cutting-edge unmanned systems and AI. By bridging the gap between commercial ingenuity and military requirements, these collaborations ensure the fleet can rapidly adapt and integrate the most advanced technologies, maintaining a decisive advantage at sea.

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 to enhance regional security and promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the Caribbean, Central and South American region.