

Austal USA Starts Construction on Fifth Navy Utility Landing Craft



From Austal USA, May 4, 2026

MOBILE, Ala. – Austal USA celebrated the start of construction on its fifth U.S. Navy Landing Craft Utility (LCU) 1700-class vessel, LCU 1714, at its Mobile, Ala. ship manufacturing facility on April 27, 2026.

This progress highlights continued momentum for the LCU program, a key component of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps' expeditionary capabilities. Austal USA was awarded a \$91.5 million contract in September 2023 for the design and construction of up to 12 LCUs and associated support efforts. Currently, five construction contracts have been awarded to Austal USA.

“Austal USA is proud to continue advancing the LCU program with the start of construction on LCU 1714,” said Bill Bingle, acting vice president of surface ship programs. “This milestone reflects the strength of our serial production approach and the dedication of our workforce to delivering high-quality ships that support critical Navy and Marine Corps missions.”

LCU vessels are deployed from the Navy’s amphibious assault ships and operate across a wide range of missions, transporting Marine Corps vehicles, equipment and personnel from ship to shore and back. These platforms provide significant heavy-lift capability, carrying payloads comparable to multiple C-17 aircraft.

LCU 1710, the first vessel in the program constructed at Austal USA, recently conducted acceptance trials and will be delivered to the Navy soon. The program continues to scale as part of Austal USA’s growing steel shipbuilding portfolio.

The LCU program is one of three ship platforms under serial production at Austal USA. In total, 12 ships are under construction across the company’s programs with three vessels preparing for sea trials. This demonstrates the company’s ability to execute multiple programs simultaneously while maintaining production efficiency.

Austal USA continues to leverage its advanced manufacturing facilities, uniquely supporting both aluminum and steel shipbuilding, along with lean production techniques to meet the Navy’s evolving fleet requirements and deliver ships on schedule.

Argentine and U.S. Navies Conduct Bilateral Maritime Engagement in Atlantic Ocean



Argentine Navy Almirante Brown-class destroyers ARA La Argentina (DD 11) and ARA Sarandi (D 13) steam alongside U.S. Navy Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68) during a bilateral maritime engagement in the Atlantic Ocean, April 29, 2026. Nimitz is deployed as part of Southern Seas 2026, which seeks to enhance capability, improve interoperability, and strengthen maritime partnerships with countries throughout the region through joint, multinational, and interagency exchanges and cooperation. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Peter K. McHaddad) [by Seaman Apprentice Raven Fraser](#), May 4, 2026

The Argentine and U.S. navies conducted a bilateral maritime engagement as part of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command (USNAVSOUTH)/U.S. 4th Fleet’s Southern Seas 2026

deployment in the Atlantic Ocean, April 28-May 1.

The engagement, focused on increasing interoperability between the two navies, included participation by Argentine Navy Almirante Brown-class destroyers ARA La Argentina (DD 11) and ARA Sarandi (D 13), Espora-class corvettes ARA Rosales (P 42) and ARA Robinson (P 45), Gowind-class offshore patrol vessels ARA Piedrabuena (P 52) and ARA Bartolome Cordero (P 54), U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Gridley (DDG 101), and Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68).

Aircraft involved also included an Argentine P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft and SH-3 Sea King and AS550 Fennec helicopters, and U.S. Navy MH-60S and MH-60R helicopters assigned to Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 17.

“Training with allies like Argentina builds the trust required to operate together in complex environments,” said Rear Adm. Cassidy Norman, commander of Carrier Strike Group 11. “Working through realistic scenarios with our Armada de Argentina counterparts deepened our understanding of each other’s systems, sharpened our interoperability, and strengthened our ability to accomplish our many shared maritime objectives.”

Training conducted included subject matter expert exchanges, communications drills, a live-fire gunnery exercise, maneuvering in formation and air defense exercises.

Nimitz also hosted a visit of senior Argentine government and military leaders including President, Javier Milei; Minister of Defense, Gen. Carlos Alberto Presti; Foreign Minister, Pablo Quirno; and Chief of Defense, Vice Adm. Marcelo Alejandro Dalle Nogare. The delegation was accompanied by U.S. Ambassador to Argentina, Peter Lamelas.

The visit was one of many planned opportunities for distinguished visitors to observe carrier operations aboard Nimitz during Southern Seas 2026.

While onboard, the Argentine delegation met with Norman and Capt. Joseph Furco, commanding officer of Nimitz. The leaders discussed the Southern Seas 2026 mission and the role of maritime cooperation in the alliance between Argentina and the U.S.

Visitors also observed flight operations and an air power demonstration from Nimitz' flight deck.

The visit and bilateral training demonstrated the Southern Seas 2026 mission to strengthen existing regional partnerships, and encourage the establishment of new relationships, through the exchange of maritime mission-focused knowledge and expertise.

Southern Seas 2026 marks the 11th iteration of the exercise, launched in 2007. Like the previous deployments, Southern Seas 2026 is designed to foster goodwill, strengthen maritime partnerships to counter threats, and build the U.S. Navy's team alongside partner nation maritime services.

During the deployment, the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group (NIMCSG) is scheduled to conduct passing exercises and operations at sea with partner nation maritime forces as the ships circumnavigate the continent of South America.

NIMCSG consists of Nimitz, Carrier Air Wing 17, Destroyer Squadron 9, and Gridley.

USNAVSOUTH/U.S. 4th Fleet is the trusted maritime partner for Caribbean, Central and South America maritime forces improving regional unity and security.

5 Ways Shipbuilding Can Be Shipshape Despite Geopolitical Instability

By Vicky Uhland, *Seapower* Correspondent

Shipbuilding is highly affected by geopolitical volatility and there are five key adjustments that will define the new winners in this rapidly shifting environment, according to a new report from McKinsey & Company.

The report, "Seizing the advantage in shipbuilding amid geopolitical shifts," was released during Sea-Air-Space 2026.

"It's a desire to look beyond the everyday headlines of defense budgets and capacity restraints and look more globally at the shipbuilding sector," McKinsey senior partner and report co-author Ryan Brukardt said during a discussion at Sea-Air-Space.

Brukardt and McKinsey Senior Partner Brooke Weddle said there are four main geopolitical factors affecting shipbuilding in the western hemisphere:

- Trade agreements and tariffs
- State-directed industrial policies and incentives
- Import, export and capital controls
- Artificial intelligence and technology.

While all of these can make it difficult for U.S. and European shipbuilders to compete with other countries, the report notes that they can outperform their industry peers with five best practices:

- Rethinking portfolio strategy with future-proof platforms. This involves an unsentimental, analytical assessment of core products, big bets, products with limited market opportunities unless they're linked to a specific program, and reevaluated products, the report says.

Examples of core products include command and control systems or radar and sensor systems. Big bets might be communications systems or digital twins. Opportunistic go-to-market products could be training or self-defense systems. And products that might need to be reevaluated include navigation or propulsion-control systems.

- Accelerating production to meet spiking demand. This includes developing more efficient processes and personnel management by using technological innovations like AI-enabled dynamic scheduling and digitized workflows.

The McKinsey researchers found that using AI to handle scheduling inputs can increase throughput rates by at least 10 to 15 times, Weddle said.

- De-risking supply chains. Starting with the COVID-19 pandemic and extending to the current tariffs, sanctions and regional conflicts, shipbuilders have been dealing with vulnerabilities in their supply chains.

The report recommends two best practices to help address these

vulnerabilities: continuous exposure assessment, including advanced illumination models that help companies identify common sub-supplier choke points and other risks; and mitigation planning such as finding alternative suppliers and considering insourcing capabilities.

- Improving cost structures. The report identified three cost categories that are most affected by geopolitical disruption: materials, external labor and internal labor.

Materials procurement strategies can include creating supplier risk profiles for each country, supplier and commodity. Managing external labor includes developing multi-region vendor pools and shifting toward more modular work packages with standardized scopes of work. Handling internal labor costs requires time, the report found, but can include developing digital work instructions and smoothing out workloads.

- Building organizational capabilities. Many shipyards have trouble attracting and retaining young workers because of limited growth opportunities, low pay and difficult working conditions, the report found. And retirement looms – the report cited data that a third of U.S. aerospace and defense manufacturing employees are over age 55.

“When you compare our shipyards to Korea, it’s not always a great place to be a young or older worker,” Weddle said. “We need to fundamentally rethink what we think about workforce in the shipbuilding environment.”

The report recommends using holistic talent strategies like recruiting people with similar skills from non-shipbuilding sectors; partnering with schools for job-

shadowing initiatives; cutting the time it takes to achieve job proficiency through standardized onboarding boot camps and hands-on learning; rethinking performance measures to identify what roles high-performance employees are best suited for; and determining the underlying causes of attrition by encouraging employee feedback.

“Capital is the constraint in certain places but really, at the end of the day, it’s management practices, appropriate use of technology, and ability to attract and retain talent that are most significant” for gaining competitive advantage in an increasingly geopolitical shipbuilding environment, Brukardt said.

Insitu’s ScanEagle and Integrator UAS Selected by US Navy to Deliver ISR Services with Advanced AI-Assisted Payloads



BINGEN, Washington, May 4, 2026 – Insitu, a Boeing Company, has been selected to provide ISR support services to the United States Navy (USN), United States Marine Corps (USMC) and other United States Government (USG) customers as directed, under a Contractor-Owned, Contractor-Operated (COCO) model. Insitu will compete with other selected partners for task orders with both ScanEagle and Integrator UAS, offering these customers unparalleled flexibility in capability, range, endurance, and operational profiles.

“We have been providing ISR services to the USN since 2005 and the USMC since 2004 and are honored to be selected to bring our enhanced versions of ScanEagle and Integrator with updated autonomy and resilience capabilities to bear,” said Diane Rose, Insitu CEO. “The choice between two platforms offers our important USG customers the ultimate Mission flexibility. We’ve incorporated our 20+ years’ experience working with the Navy and Marines into the feature sets on our UAS to ensure they offer the most robust maritime operational capability for their unique ISR needs.”

Both ScanEagle and Integrator platforms offer FLARES no-sacrifice VTOL and extended-range SATCOM capabilities, enabling light-footprint operations with truly persistent ISR missions lasting up to 27.5 hours (Integrator), and 18+ hours (ScanEagle). Integrator can travel up to 2,000 nm (point to point) or spend 13 hours on station at 500 nm performing ISR missions before returning to refuel. Insitu UAS have operated from over 45 ship classes and land sites on 6 continents.

Insitu UAS are maintained and operated by a team of deeply experienced, award-winning field services representatives (FSRs) who have decades of experience deploying with the US Navy, US Coast Guard, and US Marine Corps, as well as customers from 35+ international militaries. Insitu's FSR teams have been praised as seamlessly integrating into deployments and rising above and beyond the call to support the US warfighter.

"Our FSR's are proud to support the USG and look forward to continuing their deployments alongside our brave Sailors and Marines as they work tirelessly to keep America and her allies safe," added Rose.

**Texas Returns from
Deployment**



The Virginia-class nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine USS Texas (SSN 775) returns to Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Conn., May 1, 2026, following a six-month deployment to the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility. Texas and crew operate under Submarine Squadron (SUBRON) 12 whose primary mission is to provide fast-attack submarines that are ready, prepared, and committed to meet the unique challenges of undersea combat and deployed operations in unforgiving environments across the globe. (U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Darren M. Moore)

From Chief Petty Officer Darren Moore, May 4, 2026

GROTON, Conn. – The Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Texas (SSN 775), under the command of Cmdr. Andrew S. McGovern, returned to Naval Submarine Base New London Friday, May 1, completing a six-month deployment to U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.

Capt. Philip Castellano, commander of Submarine Squadron (SUBRON) 12, under which Texas operates, welcomed them home and praised their efforts while deployed.

“Texas and her crew did an outstanding job throughout their deployment,” Castellano said. “They continued the Navy submarine force’s tradition of excellence while performing their mission to perfection. Our submarine force is critical to deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas, and Texas’ efforts exemplified this to its core. Welcome home Texas and crew and thank you for a job well done”

McGovern praised his crew and their devotion to the mission.

“In a time of heightened tensions our team remained resilient, focused and ready,” McGovern said. “Our Sailors performed at the highest level for six months and I could not be prouder of everything we achieved while executing our mission.”

McGovern also credited the crew’s family and friends for taking care of the homefront.

“The support our loved ones provided while we were away was critical to our sustained success,” McGovern said. “Knowing they were home cheering for us inspired us to continue accomplishing our mission at peak form.”

Texas steamed more than 21,200 nautical miles and made port calls to Port Canaveral, Florida.

Thirty-four personnel earned their submarine warfare devices – commonly referred to as “dolphins”. Five Sailors welcomed new babies.

Seaman Bronson McIntosh, a member of the Royal Australian Navy serving aboard Texas, and his spouse, Jessica McIntosh, were honored with the ceremonial first kiss on the pier.

Chief Machinist’s Mate (Nuclear) Derrick Altenberger was awarded the ceremonial first hug with his spouse, Kayla Altenberger.

Texas was commissioned in 2006 as the fourth U.S. Navy ship to be named for the Lone Star State. The first two were

battleships, commissioned in 1895 and 1914, respectively. The third was a Virginia-class guided-missile cruiser in service from 1977 through 1993. The submarine is 377 feet long and has a 34-foot beam, as well as a crew of more than 130 Navy personnel.

The Virginia-class of nuclear-powered fast attack submarines are designed for a broad spectrum of open-ocean and littoral missions. Fast-attack submarines are multi-mission platforms enabling five of the six Navy maritime strategy core capabilities – sea control, power projection, forward presence, maritime security and deterrence. They are designed to excel in anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship warfare, strike warfare, special operations, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, irregular warfare and mine warfare. Fast-attack submarines project power ashore with special operations forces and Tomahawk cruise missiles in the prevention or response to regional crises.

Textron Systems to Provide Tsunami USVs to SOUTHCOM And U.S. Navy 4th Fleet



Textron Systems' Tsunami uncrewed surface vessel. *Photo credit: Textron Systems*

Textron Systems Corp. announced today a contract award from the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) to produce and deliver multiple Tsunami uncrewed surface vessels (USVs), which will be used to support the U.S. Navy Fleet Experimentation (FLEX) exercise in Key West, Florida and provide three months of joint operations with U.S. Southern Command and the U.S. Navy 4th Fleet.

Under the contract, Textron Systems will provide long-dwell Tsunami interceptor USVs and Field Service Representatives to the FLEX exercise, demonstrating cooperative intelligence, surveillance reconnaissance and targeting with its Aerosonde 4.7 vertical takeoff and landing UAS from a littoral combat ship. The exercise will also demonstrate manned-unmanned surface warfare with Invariant Corporation's Surface-to-Air Kinetic Engagement, or STAKE, system.

The Tsunami family of autonomous maritime surface vessels are designed to meet the needs of the U.S. Navy and its allies for a readily available, versatile portfolio of multi-mission uncrewed assets to team effectively across the fleet. Using Brunswick Corp.'s reliable, high-performance vessels, Textron Systems developed the Tsunami family of products with its trusted Common Unmanned Surface Vehicle autonomy control system, leveraging mature commercial technologies to deliver

increased capacity and immediate scale.

“The Tsunami family of vehicles leverage Textron Systems’ decades of expertise in autonomous systems innovation, coupled with the speed and scalability of Brunswick Corporation’s established and globally sustainable production line of vessels,” said Ryan Schaffernocker, senior vice president of Air, Land and Sea Systems. “This award establishes a partnership foundation for Tsunami USV government-owned, contractor-operated and contractor-owned, contractor-operated services, allowing for rapid deployment with a lower cost of ownership for the Navy.”

Textron Systems is the originator of the CUSV, the mine countermeasure USV for the U.S. Navy Unmanned Influence Sweep System program of record. Most recently, Textron Systems introduced the Multi Mission USV, the fifth generation of its CUSV craft, designed to expand the Navy’s capacity for advanced mission capabilities.

Northrop Grumman Delivers 70th E-2D Advanced Hawkeye to US Navy



The E-2D Advanced Hawkeye delivers advanced airborne early warning and battle management to ensure air superiority. *Photo Credit: Northrop Grumman*

Northrop Grumman said it has delivered the 70th E-2D Advanced Hawkeye to the U.S. Navy, demonstrating steady production momentum and continued collaboration with the Navy and industry partners.

- Northrop Grumman has produced a total of 82 E-2D Advanced Hawkeyes for the U.S. Navy and Japan Air Self-Defense Force to date.
- The company continuously modernizes the E-2D to meet evolving mission requirements driven by lessons learned from today's operations.
- The system is purpose-built for airborne early warning and battle management, capabilities that are deliberately enhanced to maintain air superiority now and decades to come.

Janice Zilch, vice president and program manager, E-2D Advanced Hawkeye, Northrop Grumman, said, "E-2D deliveries demonstrate our commitment to quality and performance with speed and scale, supporting those who operate and maintain

this platform. We're seeing the Advanced Hawkeye's exceptional performance in today's operational environments, and we're actively planning its future advancements."

From remote, austere locations to the most advanced airfields, the E-2D Advanced Hawkeye provides exceptional airborne early warning and battle management capabilities that enhance joint and coalition operations and ensure air superiority. E-2D is a versatile airborne command node that connects joint and allied forces into a unified network. Equipped with an advanced 360-degree radar and powerful mission, data and communications systems, it delivers real-time data and communications to dominate across domains and missions.

Navy Awards Raytheon \$335M for SM-6 Missiles



A Standard Missile-6 (SM-6) guided missile is launched from the USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53) during Flight Test Standard Missile-27 Event 2 in 2017. During the test, a medium-range ballistic missile target was successfully intercepted by SM-6 missiles fired from the USS John Paul Jones. *Photo credit: Missile Defense Agency | Latonja Martin*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy has awarded Raytheon a \$335 million contract modification to “exercise options and provide funding for the manufacturing, assembly, test, and delivery of Standard Missile-6 Tactical All-Up Rounds,” according to an April 30, 2026, Department of War contract announcement.

The SM-6, deployed on U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyers and cruisers, has featured heavily in combat in actions in the Middle East since 2024 against Houthi and Iranian missiles. The Navy has received funding to replenish and increase stocks of missiles to maintain readiness.

This contract modification, awarded April 24, is funded weapons procurement accounts for fiscal years 2025 and 2026.

“Standard Missile-6 is a critical, combat-proven system that provides a vital layer of protection for ships and Sailors – a capability that has never been more critical than it is today,” said Phil Jasper, president of Raytheon. “Contracts of this nature are an essential step in sustaining production, and we remain focused on enhancing our operations to meet unprecedented demand. To support this growth, Raytheon has invested nearly \$900 million over the last three years to expand capacity at key sites, including Tucson, Arizona, and Huntsville, Alabama. These investments paired with the clear demand signal will help ensure we deliver these critical munitions at the speed of the mission.”

Exercise Obangame Express Closes 15th Iteration in Cameroon

By U.S. 6th Fleet Public Affairs, April 30, 2026



Exercise Obangame Express 2026 officially concluded during a ceremony in Douala, Cameroon, on April 30. *Photo credit: U.S. Navy*

Exercise Obangame Express 2026 officially concluded during a ceremony in Douala, Cameroon, host nation for the 15th iteration, on April 30. The ceremony marked the conclusion of three weeks of training for participants from 30 nations across Africa, Europe, South America and the U.S. reinforcing regional collaboration and maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

“As this exercise concludes, our work is not over. Obangame Express is not simply an annual event; it is a catalyst for

continuous cooperation,” said Capt. Andrew Cleeves, exercise director for Obangame Express 2026. “I challenge you to maintain the networks you have built, to keep the lines of communication open, and to make ‘togetherness’ a daily practice.”

Obangame Express, the largest multinational maritime exercise in West and Central Africa, is an annual event facilitated by U.S. 6th Fleet and sponsored by U.S. Africa Command. Obangame means “togetherness” in the Fang language to symbolize the partnerships built and strengthened through the collaborative effort.

This year, participants worked together from Maritime Operations Centers located across the Gulf of Guinea and from ships at sea, focusing on countering illicit maritime activity and improving communication and information sharing between nations. With over 30 nations working together across the 5 Yaounde Code of Conduct zones in maritime operations centers and at sea, partners operated in real-time to conduct complex scenarios including piracy interdiction, illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing enforcement and search-and-rescue operations.

“With piracy, illegal fishing, various forms of trafficking and attacks faced on the maritime environment, our response must be commensurate with the challenges: concerted, structured, and sustainable,” said Vice Adm. Jean Mendoua, chief of naval staff of the Cameroon navy. “Cameroon, faithful to its international commitments, will continue to play its full role in this collective dynamic.”

In addition to at-sea training, subject matter experts from participating nations led classroom instruction on topics such as maritime law and interdiction, medical readiness, and command-and-control techniques. These exchanges are vital for building long-term cooperation and understanding among the partner nations.

“Every time you demonstrate the capability to counter piracy, you are safeguarding the flow of global commerce that fuels economic growth for the entire continent,” said Cleeves. “Maritime security is the bedrock of economic prosperity.”

Participating nations in OE26 include: Angola, Benin, Belgium, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Denmark, Equatorial Guinea, France, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Italy, Liberia, Mauritania, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome & Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Togo, Tunisia and the United States.

OE26 is one of three regional maritime “Express” series exercises led by U.S. 6th Fleet as part of a comprehensive strategy to provide collaborative opportunities to African forces and international partners to address maritime security concerns.

Commander, U.S. 6th Fleet, headquartered in Naples, Italy, conducts the full spectrum of joint and naval operations, often in concert with allies, international partners, and other U.S. government departments and agencies to advance U.S. national interests, security and stability in Europe and Africa.

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.