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This month, the LeMay Center highlights Operation SOUTHERN SPEAR. Recent tanker seizures and maritime interdictions around South America exemplify the principles outlined in AFDP 3-04, Countersea Operations.

Airpower is integral to contesting and controlling the maritime domain. While naval forces retain primary responsibility for sea control, the Air Force provides speed, reach, persistence, and cross-domain integration, expanding the joint force's ability to influence events at sea. AFDP 3-04 describes countersea operations as those operations that are conducted to attain and maintain a desired degree of maritime superiority by the destruction, disruption, delay, diversion, or other neutralization of threats in the maritime environment. These operations span the competition continuum from steady-state competition to armed conflict, engage regular and irregular threats, and reflect the complex character of the maritime environment.



Tanker seizures linked to illicit trafficking and malign state activities in the Caribbean and South American approaches illustrate the principles of maritime security and Air Force countersea operations in practice. Joint and interagency forces employ airpower to detect, track, and cue maritime interdictions across vast ocean areas where surface forces alone lack sufficient coverage, range, and flexibility. Air Force intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms enable maritime domain awareness, while airborne command and control, air refueling, and mobility assets extend the reach and endurance of naval and partner-nation forces. Together, these capabilities enable individual interdictions by using coordinated countersea operations to disrupt illicit networks, impose costs on

adversaries, and reinforce freedom of navigation without requiring escalation or additional permanent forward presence.

Why it matters today: AFDP 3-04 emphasizes information superiority and integration in the maritime domain. Recent South American tanker seizures demonstrate these principles in action. Air Force contributions compress adversary decision-making timelines, enable lawful and precise maritime enforcement, and reduce risk to friendly forces operating in complex legal and operational environments. As competitors increasingly exploit the maritime domain through gray-zone activities—using commercial vessels, proxy actors, and ambiguity to challenge international norms—airpower’s ability to provide persistent awareness and rapid, scalable response remains decisive. These operations underscore that countersea operations are a daily application of airpower that protects global commerce, supports partners, and sustains joint advantage.

For more on the Air Force’s approach to Countersea Operations, see [AFDP 3-04](#). You can also explore our doctrine podcast library on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, or at www.doctrine.af.mil.