

South China Sea: Two US Navy Warships Conduct Freedom of Navigation Operation in Paracel Islands

The latest freedom of navigation operation involved two U.S. warships.

By Ankit Panda - May 28, 2018



Image Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Declan Barnes/Released

Two U.S. Navy warships conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) on Sunday in the South China Sea, near islands occupied by China in the Paracel Islands. The operation is the first known FONOP to involve two U.S. Navy warships.

According to Reuters, which first reported on the operation, a U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, USS Higgins, and a cruiser, USS Antietam, sailed within 12 nautical miles of islands controlled by China in the disputed Paracel Islands. “The U.S. military vessels carried out maneuvering operations near Tree, Lincoln, Triton and Woody islands in the Paracels,” Reuters reported, citing a U.S. official with knowledge of the operations.

U.S. freedom of navigation operations are designed to protest maritime claims that are excessive under international law.

In the Paracel Islands, U.S. freedom of navigation operations have been designed to protest China’s prior notification requirements for innocent passage transits with 12 nautical miles of features and Beijing’s straight baselines around the island group, which are illegal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Under the Trump administration, the U.S. Navy has increased the frequency of its freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and not all operations have been publicly reported. The U.S. Department of Defense did not make any on-record statement confirming the latest reported FONOP in the Paracels. “We conduct routine and regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), as we have done in the past and will continue to do in the future,” the U.S. Pacific Fleet said in a released statement.

A statement released by the Chinese Ministry of Defense condemned the operation, saying that it had “contravened Chinese and relevant international law, seriously infringed upon Chinese sovereignty [and] harmed strategic mutual trust between the two militaries.” “China will continue to take all necessary measures to defend the country’s sovereignty and security,” the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in another statement.

The operation comes one week before the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, a high-level conference on Asian security that will be attended by senior U.S. and Chinese defense officials.

It also follows the United States’ decision to disinvite the Chinese People’s Liberation Army-Navy from the 2018 iteration of the Rim of the Pacific exercise.

The U.S. Department of Defense cited China’s moves to militarize the Spratly Islands, where it has constructed seven artificial islands, as a reason for the disinvitation.

Woody Island in the Paracels is China’s largest military outpost in the South China Sea, with more than 1,000 military personnel stationed on the island full-time. The island has hosted multi-role fighters, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles.

