

US Navy says it will not be deterred by artificial islands in South China Sea

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US Navy personnel work in flight deck control tower as US Navy aircraft sit on the flight deck of the USS Carl Vinson, anchored off Manila, Philippines, on Saturday.

Photo: AP

A US Navy officer aboard a US aircraft carrier brimming with F18 fighter jets on Saturday said that US forces would continue to patrol the South China Sea wherever “international law allows us” when asked if China’s newly built islands could restrain them in the disputed waters.

Lieutenant Commander Tim Hawkins told reporters on board the USS *Carl Vinson* that the US Navy has carried out routine patrols at sea and in the air in the strategic waters for 70 years to promote regional security and guarantee the unimpeded flow of trade that is crucial for Asian and US economies.

“International law allows us to operate here, allows us to fly here, allows us to train here, allows us to sail here, and that’s what we’re doing and we’re going to continue to do that,” Hawkins said on the flight deck of the warship, which anchored at Manila Bay while on a visit to the Philippines.

“We’re committed,” Hawkins told reporters. “We’re here.”

In December last year, US President Donald Trump’s administration outlined a new security strategy that emphasized countering China’s rise and reinforcing the US presence in the Indo-Pacific region, where Beijing and Washington have accused each other of stoking a dangerous military buildup and fought for wider influence.

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US officials have said US warships will continue freedom of navigation operations that challenge China's territorial claims in virtually the entire South China Sea, including on seven artificial islands China built mostly from submerged reefs in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群岛).

The nuclear-powered *Carl Vinson* patrolled the disputed sea prior to its Manila visit, but did not conduct a freedom of navigation operation, Hawkins said.

"That's not to say that we won't or we can't, but we have not, up to this point," he said.

"We're prepared to conduct a spectrum of operations, whether that's providing humanitarian assistance, disaster relief in the time of an emergency, or whether we have to conduct operations that require us to send strike fighters ashore," Hawkins said. "We don't have to use that spectrum, but we're ready to, in case we need to."

The US Navy on Saturday invited journalists on board the 35-year-old *Carl Vinson*, which was packed with 72 aircraft, including F18 Hornets.

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