

Ministry confirms US warships' Strait activity

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The USS Antietam, a US Navy guided-missile cruiser that passed through the Taiwan Strait on Monday, is pictured in an undated photograph.

Photo: AP

The Ministry of National Defense on Monday evening confirmed that two US warships had sailed through the Taiwan Strait with a northerly bearing, after entering the channel from the seas near Oluanpi (蘭陽).

Premier William Lai (賴清德) yesterday said Taiwan respects the US' right to exercise freedom of navigation in international seas, after a reporter asked at a Legislative Yuan news conference whether the US gave prior notification to Taiwan of the activity.

Lai said that the government appreciates US efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and that the passage of US warships should be viewed "as routine events that the US engages in every year."

The US sailed warships through the Strait 10 times in 2015 alone, he added.

The passage of the two warships through the Strait was the second time since July, a show of US force that threatens to further exacerbate tensions between China and the rest of the region.

US Pacific Fleet spokesman Commander Nate Christensen said that the guided-missile

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destroyer USS *Curtis Wilbur* and the guided-missile cruiser USS *Antietam* took part in the passage operation "in accordance with international law."

"Cruising through the Strait is not new, but it is a strong signal that the US will be on Taiwan's side in case of a crisis between Taipei and Beijing," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, who teaches US-China relations at Hong Kong Baptist University. "Taiwan might talk up its asymmetric warfare capabilities, but without the US, Taiwan would be dead."

China expressed their disquiet to the US after a similar transit by two US warships in July.

Tensions have also risen ahead of the nine-in-one local elections next month.

Taiwan late on Monday requested that China refrain from interfering in its elections, saying that Beijing should respect and learn from its democracy.

Additional reporting by Jonathan Chin, staff writer

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