

US carrier strike group patrolling S China Sea

Written by Taipei Times

Monday, 20 February 2017 07:18 -



A US Navy photograph obtained on Feb. 7 shows the aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* participating in a vertical replenishment-at-sea with the Black Knights of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 4 and the Military Sealift Command dry cargo and ammunition ship USNS *Charles Drew* in the Pacific Ocean on Feb. 3.

Photo: AFP

A US aircraft carrier strike group has begun patrols in the South China Sea amid concerns the disputed waterway could become a flashpoint under the new US administration.

The US Navy said the force, including the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson*, began routine operations in the South China Sea on Saturday.

The announcement was posted on the *Vinson's* Facebook page.

It said that the ships and aircraft had recently conducted exercises off Hawaii and Guam to “maintain and improve their readiness and develop cohesion as a strike group.”

The strike group's commander, Rear Admiral James Kilby, said that weeks of training in the Pacific had improved the group's effectiveness and readiness.

“We are looking forward to demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region,” he was quoted as saying by the US Navy News Service.

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China wrapped up its own naval exercises in the South China Sea on Friday.

It lays claim to almost all of the South China Sea, but Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam also claim parts.

The US has criticized Beijing's construction of artificial islands and build-up of military facilities in the sea.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs last week said ships and aircraft were allowed to operate in the area according to international law.

However, Beijing "firmly opposes any country's attempt to undermine China's sovereignty and security in the name of the freedom of navigation and overflight," ministry spokesman Geng Shuang (耿爽) said on Wednesday, responding to reports that the *Vinson* was headed to the South China Sea.

"We also urge the US to refrain from challenging China's sovereignty and security and to respect regional countries' efforts to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea," he said.

The *Vinson* has deployed to the South China Sea 16 times in its 35-year history, the US Navy said.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2017/02/20](#)