

US Navy vessel carries out freedom of navigation exercise in South China Sea

Written by Taipei Times

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A US Navy destroyer yesterday carried out a “freedom of navigation” operation within 12 nautical miles (22.2km) of an artificial island China has built in the South China Sea, US officials said, a move likely to anger Beijing.

Yesterday’s operation was the latest attempt to counter what Washington sees as Beijing’s efforts to limit freedom of navigation in the strategic waters.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the USS *Mustin* traveled close to Mischief Reef (Meiji Reef, 礁石) in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群岛), which are also claimed by Taiwan, and carried out maneuvering operations.

Neither the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the Chinese Ministry of National Defense immediately responded to a request for comment.

In the past, Beijing has reacted angrily to such moves, saying that they are provocative.

The US military has a long-standing position that its operations are carried out throughout the world, including in areas claimed by allies, and they are separate from political considerations.

However, the latest operation, the first since January, came just one day after US President Donald Trump lit a slow-burning fuse when he signed a presidential memorandum that would target up to US\$60 billion in Chinese goods with tariffs, but only after a 30-day consultation period that starts once a list is published.

The US has criticized China’s construction of islands and buildup of military facilities in the sea, and is concerned that they could be used to restrict free nautical movement.

China’s claims in the South China Sea, through which about US\$5 trillion in shipborne trade

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passes each year, are contested by Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The US military put countering China and Russia at the center of a new national defense strategy it recently unveiled.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy is to carry out combat drills in the South China Sea, the military's official newspaper said yesterday, describing the move as part of regular annual exercises.

In Taipei, the Ministry of National Defense earlier this week said it shadowed a Chinese aircraft carrier group traversing the Taiwan Strait in a southwesterly direction — meaning into the South China Sea — in what it judged to be a drill.

The US has been pushing its allies to carry out freedom of navigation operations as well.

Earlier this year, Britain said one of its warships would pass through the South China Sea to assert freedom of navigation rights.

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