

Ministry downplays presence of US ship

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US research vessel Thomas G. Thompson is pictured at the Port of Kaohsiung yesterday.

Photo: CNA

The Ministry of National Defense yesterday downplayed the presence of a US Navy ship in Kaohsiung, saying it is a research vessel and urged people to stop speculating about its mission or how it relates to US policy.

The Thomas G. Thompson dropped anchor in the Port of Kaohsiung on Monday morning to replenish supplies and for crew replacement, Taiwan International Ports Corp (TIPC, 台港港) said in a statement.

The ship is owned by the Office of Naval Research.

It has visited Taiwan four times for resupply since its maiden voyage in April, the company said.

During a question-and-answer session at the Legislative Yuan in Taipei, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislators Jason Hsu (許添榮) and Lin Li-chan (林麗珊) asked Minister of National Defense Yen De-fa (嚴德發) if the boat's presence is connected to the US' National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 or a US military show of force in the region.

The ministry monitors every vessel that enters the nation's territorial waters, Yen said, adding that while the Thomas G. Thompson is nominally a US Navy vessel, it is operated by the University of Washington and exclusively for academic research.

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The ship has no other known relationship with the US military and there is no reason to interpret its presence in Kaohsiung as related in any way to US legislation or a show of force in the South China Sea or waters near Taiwan, he said.

Earlier in the day, ministry spokesman Major General Chen Chung-chi (陳重奇) said the vessel's mission is to exchange scientific data with National Taiwan University (NTU) oceanographers and atmospheric researchers.

The ship has been gathering data on regional oceanic currents in connection with an academic program that NTU announced last year on its Web site, he said.

"Public speculation [over the matter] is misplaced. This is a pure and simple scientific research mission," he said.

However, retired navy captain Lu Li-shih (盧立時) said that the timing of the US vessel's appearance in Taiwanese waters is of interest.

The ship is equipped with remote-operated vessels and autonomous underwater vehicles for conducting oceanographical surveys, which are essential for military navigation through a maritime region, said Lu, who is an instructor at the Republic of China Naval Academy in Kaohsiung.

The ship, which is heading to Fremantle, Australia, could have stopped in the Philippines instead of Kaohsiung for supplies, Lu said, adding that the seas near Kaohsiung are strategically important for submarine and anti-submarine warfare.

The last time the Thomas G. Thompson, which has a gross tonnage of 3,095, anchored off Kaohsiung was from May 3 to May 17, the TIPC said.

The ship is expected to depart for Australia at 6am tomorrow, it said.

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Port of Kaohsiung workers said they saw the crew unloading the vessel's radar for disassembly and storage in a cargo container.

Additional reporting by CNA

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