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U.S. Warships Enter Disputed Waters of South China Sea as Tensions With China Escalate

The move comes as a war of words between the United States and China over the coronavirus pandemic intensifies.

By Hannah Beech

American warships have sailed into disputed waters in the South China Sea, according to military analysts, heightening a standoff in the waterway and sharpening the rivalry between the United States and China, even as much of the world is in lockdown because of the coronavirus.

The America, an amphibious assault ship, and the Bunker Hill, a guided missile cruiser, entered contested waters off Malaysia. At the same time, a Chinese government ship in the area has for days been tailing a Malaysian state oil company ship carrying out exploratory drilling. Chinese and Australian warships have also powered into nearby waters, according to the defense experts.

Despite working to control a pandemic that spread from China earlier this year, Beijing has not reduced its activities in the South China Sea, a strategic waterway through which one-third of global shipping flows. Instead, the Chinese government's yearslong pattern of assertiveness has only intensified, military analysts said.

"It's a quite deliberate Chinese strategy to try to maximize what they perceive as being a moment of distraction and the reduced capability of the United States to pressure neighbors," said Peter Jennings, a former Australian defense official who is the executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Since January, when the coronavirus epidemic began to surge, the Chinese government and Coast Guard ships, along with maritime militias, have been plying contested waters in the South China Sea, tangling with regional maritime enforcement agencies and harassing fishermen.

Earlier this month, the Vietnamese accused a Chinese patrol ship of ramming and sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat.

Last month, China opened two new research stations on artificial reefs it has built on maritime turf claimed by the Philippines and others. The reefs are also equipped with defense silos and military-grade runways.

Over the weekend, the Chinese government announced that it had formally established two new districts in the South China Sea that include dozens of contested islets and reefs. Many are submerged bits of atoll that do not confer territorial rights, according to international law.

"It seems that even as China was fighting a disease outbreak, it was also thinking in terms of its long-term strategic goals," said Alexander Vuving, a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. "The Chinese want to create a new normal in the South China Sea, where they are in charge, and to do that they've become more and more aggressive."

After the sinking of the Vietnamese boat, the State Department urged China in a statement “to remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic, and to stop exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea.”

The Chinese government has made vast claims to the South China Sea that conflict with demarcations made by five other governments. An international tribunal has dismissed most of China’s claims to the waterway, but Beijing does not recognize the ruling and has instead built naval bases on reefs it now controls.

While the United States has no territorial claims in the South China Sea, the American Navy says it has kept the peace in these waters for decades. American military officials have chastised China for its increased militarization of the waterway.

“Through our continued operational presence in the South China Sea, we are working with our allies and partners to promote freedom of navigation and overflight, and the international principles that underpin security and prosperity for the Indo-Pacific,” said Lt. Cmdr. Nicole Schwegman, a spokeswoman for the United States Indo-Pacific Command. “The U.S. supports the efforts of our allies and partners to determine their own economic interests.”

The Chinese government has countered that the United States is the country destabilizing the region. The appearance of the America and the Bunker Hill may do little to dispel that narrative.

And regional governments have worried that the United States has a habit of briefly showing up in hot spots only to depart, leaving them to contend with an increasingly muscular Beijing.

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“What is the intention of the U.S. here?” said Ian Storey, a South China Sea expert at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a think-tank in Singapore. “Is it just to say, ‘We’re here?’ Or are they going to shadow the Chinese survey ship to try to stop it from operating?”

The United States Indo-Pacific Command did not specify the exact location of the two American warships, citing operational restrictions, but it confirmed that the warships were in the South China Sea.

On Tuesday, the United States Navy posted pictures of the warships on Twitter, accompanied by a third vessel, a destroyer called the Barry, saying that the expeditionary strike group was operating “in support of security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.”

The area where the American warships have been sailing is around 200 nautical miles off the coast of Malaysia, defense experts said. Malaysia, China and Vietnam all claim rights to the natural resources in this part of the contested waterway.

Last week, a Chinese government survey ship began shadowing the West Capella, a drill ship conducting exploration activities off the Malaysian coast and operated by Petronas, the Malaysian state oil company.

The Chinese survey ship, called the Haiyang Dizhi 8, had previously tracked similar oil operations off Vietnam.

An Australian frigate, the Parramatta, is accompanying the American naval ships, as part of a previously planned operation, according to defense experts.

Mr. Jennings, the former Australian defense official, said that the Parramatta's deployment would have been arranged at least a year ago.

At that time, "it probably didn't know it was sailing into a heightened military environment," Mr. Jennings said. "It's been made that way really since March, with the greater pattern of offensive operations that China is engaging in all the way from Japan to the South China Sea."

Defense experts who have reviewed information about military movements in the area but are not authorized to share them publicly, said that a Chinese warship has been operating off the coast of Malaysia. The destroyer is called the Wuhan, named after the city where the coronavirus outbreak began.

At a time when China has been sending doctors and personal protective equipment to Malaysia to combat the viral epidemic there, the Malaysian government has not publicly protested the Chinese survey ship's activities or its security cordon of armed Chinese Coast Guard vessels. The prolonged presence of Chinese maritime militia and Coast Guard ships in another oil-rich area off Malaysia has not prompted an official protest either.

Beijing has been dispatching medical supplies and expertise across the region and has boasted in a military publication that not a single member of the Chinese People's Liberation Army has come down with the coronavirus, an eyebrow-raising contention given the epidemic's rapid spread.

An American aircraft carrier, the Theodore Roosevelt, which had been sailing in the South China Sea earlier this year, was struck by an outbreak of the coronavirus that killed one sailor and sickened hundreds of others. Other ships in the United States Pacific fleet have been infected by the coronavirus as well.

"The optics for the U.S. Navy in the region don't look so good, even as the Trump administration is trying to reassure its allies," said Mr. Storey, of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. "China can say, 'Look at our superior governance system, which has beaten back the epidemic. And then look at the U.S.'"