

# US warships provocatively challenge China's claims in South China Sea

By Peter Symonds  
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Amid sharply rising confrontation with China over trade and economic policies, the US yesterday dispatched a naval warship within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China around one of its islets in the South China Sea.

The naval operation is the latest in a growing number of US military provocations in strategically sensitive waters close to the Chinese mainland. It underscores the danger that trade war will escalate into military conflict as the US seeks to ensure its economic and strategic domination over China.

Monday's so-called Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) was conducted by the guided missile destroyer USS Preble in waters around the Scarborough Shoal. It was the second FONOP this month; on May 6, the US Navy sent the USS Preble and another guided missile destroyer, the USS Chung Hoon, within the 12-nautical miles limit of the Gaven and Johnson reefs in the Spratly island group.

The Scarborough Shoal is an isolated atoll that is claimed by both China and the Philippines, but which has been effectively controlled by China since 2012. Tensions between Beijing and Manila over their territorial claims in the South China Sea diminished after Rodrigo Duterte became Philippine president in 2016.

The US Navy justified its intrusion into Chinese-claimed waters by repeating the absurd claim that it was simply seeking to maintain "freedom of navigation" and its FONOPs were not directed at any one country. One only has to consider the reaction in Washington if Chinese warships were to engage in similar manoeuvres off the US West Coast near key naval facilities. There would be a hue and cry that would include demands for military retaliation.

China sharply criticized the latest US naval intrusion

in the South China Sea—the fourth this year. Foreign affairs spokesman Lu Kang declared that the US actions "violated China's sovereignty and undermined the peace, security and good order in the relevant sea areas." He "strongly urged the US to stop "such provocative actions so as not to undermine US-China relations and regional peace and stability."

The choice of the Scarborough Shoal was undoubtedly aimed at sending a message not only to Beijing but also the Duterte administration in the Philippines. The operation was a not too subtle warning that the US could stir up trouble on Manila's doorstep, forcing it to take sides with Washington.

In an interview last week, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin was critical of Washington's "strategic confusion" in the South China Sea. "China's offer of a strategic partnership is a bit more attractive than the current offer of the US of strategic confusion," he said.

Like other nations in Asia and internationally, the Philippines is seeking to balance between its economic dependence on China and strategic ties with the US. Locsin pointed out that despite a military alliance with the US, Washington had given Manila no firm guarantee that it would back the Philippines in a war with China.

As Locsin emphasised, the Duterte administration is maintaining military ties with the US and building up its own capabilities even as it seeks to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations with China. In another operation in the South China Sea, the US Coast Guard cutter Bertholf and two Philippine coast guard vessels practiced search-and-rescue procedures on May 14 near the Scarborough Shoal—without breaching the 12-nautical mile limit.

The Trump administration has also given the green

light for stepped-up naval operations in the Taiwan Strait. In late April, the US Navy sent two destroyers—the USS William P. Lawrence and the USS Stethem through the strategic waterway. While the strait constitutes international waters, it is only 180 kilometres wide and is adjacent to major Chinese mainland cities as well as military installations.

A similar naval operation took place in March with the guided missile destroyer, the USS Curtis Wilbur, accompanied by the coast guard cutter, the Bertholf, transiting the Taiwan Strait. Washington is also encouraging allies to engage in such provocations. On April 6, a French military vessel passed through the strait, prompting China to cancel France's invitation to take part in a naval parade to mark 70 years since the founding of China's navy.

US naval passages through the Taiwan Strait are part of the Trump administration's increasingly evident support for the Taiwanese government. The US still observes the One China policy, under which it treats the Chinese Communist Party regime in Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan. However, under Trump, the US has begun to strengthen political and military ties with Taiwan.

The Democratic Progressive Party, which currently rules in Taipei, has not overtly called for Taiwanese independence, but favours a far more independent foreign policy. China has warned that any formal declaration of independence by Taiwan could lead to the forcible take-over of the island. Earlier this month, the Chinese military conducted live-fire exercises at the northern end of the Taiwan Strait.

The increasing frequency of US naval operations close to the Chinese mainland take place as the Trump administration has imposed a raft of new sanctions against China—increasing tariffs and imposing punitive restrictions on Chinese tech giant Huawei on security grounds.

By deliberately inflaming dangerous flash points in Asia, the US is greatly heightening the dangers of conflict. A miscalculation or mistake could rapidly lead to a military clash that could quickly escalate into war between the two nuclear-armed powers.