

# US navy sends destroyer to challenge China in South China Sea

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22 October 2016

The US Navy yesterday carried out a provocative new challenge to Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea by sending a guided missile destroyer, the USS Decatur, close to Chinese-administered islands in the Paracel group. The so-called freedom of navigation operation took place amid mounting concern in Washington over the diplomatic lurch towards China by US ally, the Philippines, under its new president, Rodrigo Duterte.

American officials told Reuters that the USS Decatur sailed near to Triton and Woody Islands in the Paracels, but did not enter the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit in either case. White House spokesman Josh Earnest declared that the naval operation had been to demonstrate that “coastal states may not unlawfully restrict the navigation rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea” by the United States and all other states.

The naval intrusion into disputed waters is the first since July, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled in favour of a US-backed legal case contesting Chinese claims. The US navy had carried out three previous “freedom of navigation” operations close to Chinese controlled islets, sending a destroyer within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef in October 2015, Triton Island in January this year and Fiery Cross Reef in May.

The latest operation, close to Woody Island, which functions as China’s administrative centre in the South China Sea, is particularly provocative. As tensions with the US have mounted, China has placed anti-aircraft missile systems on the island and flown fighter jets there. Woody Island is to the south of major Chinese naval facilities on Hainan Island, adjacent to the Chinese mainland.

The Chinese Defence Ministry branded the US operation “illegal” and “intentionally provocative

behavior,” and lodged a protest with the US. It accused Washington of being a “troublemaker when it comes to the stability of the South China Sea” and urged it to respect China’s “national sovereignty and security interests.”

The ministry warned that the Chinese military would increase its patrols, strengthen its defence capabilities and “resolutely defend national sovereignty and security.” Two Chinese warships, the Guangzhou and the Luoyang, shadowed the USS Decatur and demanded it leave the area.

The US naval operation took place just one day after Philippine President Duterte concluded his state visit to Beijing, during which he declared that he was “separating” the Philippines from the United States both diplomatically and militarily. In his bid for billions of dollars in Chinese aid and investment, Duterte played down his country’s territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Duterte’s tilt towards China is in marked contrast to the foreign policy orientation of his immediate predecessor, President Benigno Aquino, who spearheaded the Obama administration’s efforts to confront Beijing in the South China Sea. Aquino had ramped up closer military ties with the US, including via a new basing agreement that has already opened up five Philippine bases to American forces, and adopted a confrontational approach in territorial disputes with China. At one point, he likened Beijing to the Nazi regime in Germany.

Duterte’s about-face is a significant blow to Washington’s “pivot to Asia”—an all-embracing diplomatic confrontation and military build-up against China over the past five years throughout the Asian region. Hillary Clinton, as Obama’s secretary of state, was central to the launching of the “pivot,” including

by fueling tensions in the South China Sea through her declaration in 2010 that the US had “a national interest” in the disputed waters. The South China Sea is central to the Pentagon’s strategy for war against China, which includes a massive air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a crippling naval blockade.

Unnamed US officials have denied that yesterday’s dispatch of the USS Decatur was in response to Duterte’s trip to China. But such denials ring false. By sending a warship to challenge Chinese claims, Washington is sending a warning both to Beijing and Duterte that it will not tolerate any undermining of its strategic dominance in East Asia. The naval intrusion is also aimed at stemming any attempt by other South East Asian countries to follow Duterte’s example in developing their own arrangements with Beijing.

Duterte’s failure to press China over The Hague ruling has significantly undermined Washington’s plan to escalate its confrontation with Beijing over the South China Sea. Without Philippine backing, the Obama administration cannot readily intervene in Manila’s maritime disputes with China. The US is not a party to the territorial disputes and, moreover, has failed to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea under which the legal case was heard.

The choice of the Paracels for the latest “freedom of navigation” operation suggests a shift in tactics by the US and an orientation to Vietnam, rather than the Philippines—in the short term at least. Vietnam has, with Washington’s encouragement, adopted a more confrontational stance towards China.

For his part, Duterte, an erratic right-wing populist, is continuing his efforts to balance between the United States and China. Having secured large loans and investments from Beijing, he made clear yesterday that he was not about to burn his bridges with Washington. Speaking in the Philippines yesterday on his return from China, he declared he did not intend to sever ties with the United States. “I cannot do that. Why? It’s to the best interest of my country that we maintain that relationship,” he said.

Since taking office this year, Duterte has branded President Obama the “son of a whore,” called for US troops to leave the southern island of Mindanao and signaled an end to joint exercises with the US. His anti-US bluster has been aimed, in part, at securing closer

economic ties with China, while appealing to anti-imperialist sentiment within the Philippines, a former American colony. He is, however, walking a tightrope. Washington will have no compunction in orchestrating a regime-change operation in Manila if Duterte threatens its interests.

The rising tide of American militarism and geopolitical rivalries in Asia—as in the Middle East—underscores the danger that a miscalculation or mistake by any of the countries involved in the South China Sea, or in other tense regional flashpoints, can trigger a military clash, setting off a conflict between nuclear-armed powers.



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