

OFFICIAL NAVY REPORT

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Report No: FONOP-2024-0347 | Date: 30 October 2024

1. Executive Summary

On 30 October 2024, the United States Navy conducted a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea. USS John McCain (DDG-56), an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer assigned to Commander, Destroyer Squadron 15, transited within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands. The operation challenged excessive maritime claims that restrict navigational rights.

2. Background

The South China Sea is a critical waterway through which \$3.4 trillion in trade passes annually. China claims sovereignty over the 1.3 million sq-mile waterway via its nine-dash line, despite competing claims from the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that China's claim had no legal basis under UNCLOS.

3. Operational Timeline

0342Z - USS John McCain departed patrol station ALPHA en route to operating area
0615Z - Entered 24 NM contiguous zone. Increased readiness to Condition III
0648Z - PLA Navy Type 052D destroyer detected, bearing 045, range 32 NM
0712Z - Entered 12 NM territorial sea claim zone. Bridge fully manned
0715Z - PLA Navy vessel commenced radio challenges on VHF Channel 16
0718Z - Standard response transmitted: lawful transit per international law
0724Z - Two PLA Navy Z-9 helicopters observed conducting surveillance passes
0805Z - Cleared 12 NM zone. PLA Navy destroyer maintained parallel track
0830Z - PLA Navy assets broke off trailing. Normal patrol ops resumed

4. Force Disposition

Primary Asset: USS John McCain (DDG-56)

Class: Arleigh Burke Flight IIA | Displacement: 9,700 tons

Commander: Captain James R. Sullivan, USN

Crew: 323 personnel

Armament: 96-cell Mk 41 VLS, Mk 45 5in gun, Phalanx CIWS, Mk 32 torpedoes

Supporting Assets:

P-8A Poseidon (VP-47) providing overhead maritime surveillance

MQ-4C Triton UAS providing persistent ISR coverage

USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) CSG positioned 340 NM east as contingency

5. Chinese Military Response

- a) Kunming-class destroyer (DDG-172) maintained parallel tracking course throughout the transit. Closest point of approach: 6.2 nautical miles.
All interactions consistent with international maritime norms.
- b) Two Z-9C ASW helicopters conducted surveillance flights at safe distance.
No aggressive maneuvers were observed.
- c) Shore-based radar emissions detected from Mischief Reef installations, consistent with Type 305B and Type 364 surveillance radar systems.
- d) VHF radio challenges issued on Channel 16 at regular intervals.
Professional in tone, consistent with previous FONOP interactions.
- e) No unsafe or unprofessional behavior observed during the operation.

6. Intelligence Assessment

Satellite imagery shows continued construction on Mischief Reef, including expansion of northern weapons emplacements and new radome structures. Garrison estimated at 200-400 personnel. PLAN response time of 33 minutes from initial detection to tracking position suggests enhanced surveillance capabilities.

7. Legal Basis

This FONOP was conducted under authority of Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command:

- a) UNCLOS Articles 2, 3, 17-19 (innocent passage), 56-58 (EEZ rights), and Article 87 (freedom of the high seas).
- b) 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling (PCA Case No. 2013-19): Mischief Reef is a low-tide elevation with no entitlement to territorial sea, EEZ, or shelf.
- c) Customary international law recognizing freedom of navigation rights.
- d) U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program established in 1979.

8. Recommendations

- a) Continue regular FONOP operations on quarterly basis to demonstrate U.S. commitment to international maritime law.
- b) Coordinate with allied navies (RAN, JMSDF, Royal Navy, French Navy) for multilateral freedom of navigation operations.
- c) Enhance intelligence collection on construction and military posture changes on Chinese-occupied features in the Spratly Islands.
- d) Maintain diplomatic engagement through ASEAN Regional Forum and bilateral military-to-military channels to reduce miscalculation risk.
- e) Update contingency plans for potential escalation scenarios, incorporating lessons learned from this and recent FONOP operations.

Prepared by: Intelligence & Operations Directorate, U.S. Seventh Fleet

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