

# 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.

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

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