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## US Aircraft Carrier Group Begins "Routine" Patrols In Disputed South China Sea

By Tyler Durden

02/19/2017

Threatening to destabilize the tentative improvement in Sino-US relations achieved in recent days following Trump's recent concession over the "One China" policy, was the US deployment of the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) to the disputed waters of the South China Sea on Saturday as part of maritime "routine operations", according to an announcement posted on the Vinson's Facebook page.



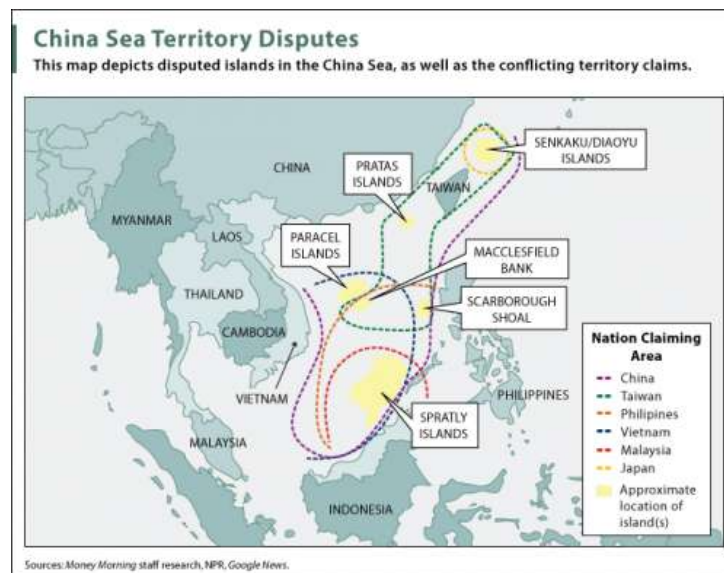
Sailing with the 97,000-ton Vinson is the guided-missile destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer, the Navy said in a statement. The Vinson carries a flight group of more than 60 aircraft, including F/A-18 jet fighters.

The deployment comes just one day after China wrapped up its own naval exercises in the South China Sea on Friday, CNN reported [5]. War games involving its own aircraft carrier have unnerved neighbors with which it has long-running territorial disputes.

US aircraft carrier operations in the South China Sea are not unusual. Almost a year ago, the USS John C. Stennis led a similar cruise through the area. And the Vinson was in the South China Sea in 2015, just one of its 16 operations in the South China Sea in its 35-year history. The cruise of the Vinson in the South China Sea is the second of a high-profile US Navy vessel this month.

It also follows training operations in the South China Sea conducted by the littoral combat ship USS Coronado, which is temporarily based in Singapore, according to a Navy statement. "While underway, we are conducting training across multiple mission areas including weapons training, manned and unmanned flight operations, ship handling, and damage control drills," said Cmdr. Scott Larson, the Coronado's commanding officer. "Training at sea in these warfare areas maintains crew proficiency and ensures we are ready to operate successfully in a variety of missions."

Quoted by the Navy News Service [6], Rear Adm. James Kilby, commander of the Vinson strike group, had a similar message: "The training completed over the past few weeks has really brought the team together and improved our effectiveness and readiness as a strike group," Kilby said in a statement. "We are looking forward to demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region."



The operation, which is the latest test of Chinese response to US naval presence in the contested region comes amid growing tensions between the United States and China over territory and trade, and as the Trump administration looks set to take a more confrontational stance toward China than its predecessor. During his confirmation hearing, new Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said China should be blocked from accessing the artificial islands it's built, setting the stage for a potential showdown.

As CNN reports, in a news conference Wednesday, China's Foreign Ministry said it heard about the planned deployment of the Vinson days before it happened, and warned Washington against challenging its sovereignty. "China respects and upholds the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, which countries enjoy under international law, but firmly opposes any country's attempt to undermine China's sovereignty and security in the name of the freedom of navigation and overflight," China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said.

In an overnight op-ed in the nationalistic Global Times tabloid, [8]China wrote that it "should strongly object to the US in this case. Having freedom of navigation is reasonable in certain areas in the open sea. But, in an exclusive economic zone over which a country has exclusive rights to explore and use the marine resources, the US' freedom of navigation does not apply and it may harm the economic interests of other countries."

*In the past few years, the US administration under then president Barack Obama limited the US Navy operations in disputed areas such as the Nansha Islands and did not perform freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea from 2012 to 2015 so as to avoid unnecessary clashes.*

*After all, frequent US activities in the waters can easily lead to clashes with China. Obama's restriction has to some extent prevented such scenario from happening. Recently, a Chinese early warning aircraft nearly collided with a US Navy patrol plane. In matters like this, Trump needs to learn from his predecessor.*

The contested waters are a key shipping route at the heart of a territorial dispute that pits multiple countries against one another. China has a long history of maritime disputes with its South China Sea neighbors. China claims almost all of the South China Sea, including islands more than 800 miles from the Chinese mainland, despite objections from neighbors such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam.

Beijing has also created artificial islands in the area, outfitting some of them with military features. According to the US, China has reclaimed more than 3,000 acres in the Spratly Islands since 2014. In December, satellite imagery released by Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative showed [9]China has installed weapon systems on all seven artificial islands.

Though the US takes no position on the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, its warships have conducted routine "freedom of navigation" operations near the reclaimed islands, eliciting warnings from Beijing. The most recent of those was in October by the guided-missile destroyer

USS Decatur. China at the time called it a serious breach of law and an intentional provocation. There is no word whether the Vinson or the Meyer would be getting near the Chinese-claimed islands.

In a preemptive move to limit foreign naval presence in proximity to China and the disputed South and East China Sea islands, last Thursday China's People's Daily reported [10]the Beijing is set to revise its 1984 Maritime Traffic Safety Law, **which would allow the relevant authorities to "bar some foreign" (read U.S.) ships from passing through Chinese territorial waters.** The Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council announced Tuesday it is soliciting public opinions on the revisions. Think of it as an Air Defense Identification Zone, only in the water. China has yet to make a formal decision.