

U.S. violated our sovereignty: China

Beijing asserts sovereignty over almost all of the South China Sea. A file photo of a section of the region.AP

Beijing on Saturday said it had dispatched a warship to drive away a U.S. missile destroyer which had “violated” its sovereignty by sailing close to a shoal in the disputed South China Sea.

The *USS Hopper* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Huangyan Island on the night of January 17 without alerting Beijing, the Foreign Ministry said, referring to the shoal by its Chinese name.

‘Safety under threat’

Also known as Scarborough Shoal, the ring of reefs lies about 230 km (140 miles) from the Philippines in the South China Sea, where Beijing’s claims are hotly contested by other nations.

The U.S. vessel “violated China’s sovereignty and security interests”, and put the safety of nearby Chinese vessels “under grave threat”, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said.

China’s Defence Ministry said in a separate statement that a Chinese frigate “immediately took actions to identify and verify the U.S. ship and drove it away by warning” it.

The *USS Hopper* recently entered the U.S. Navy’s 7th Fleet area of operations, where the ship is on an “independent deployment”, according to a statement released earlier this month on the Navy’s website.

Ship’s mission

Its mission in Asia involves “security cooperation, building partner capacity, and performing routine operations within the area”.

News of the encounter follows Friday’s release of a new U.S. national defence strategy that says America is facing “growing threats” from China and Russia.

China is a “strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarizing features in the South China Sea”, the document says.

China’s Defence Ministry dismissed these claims on Saturday, saying “the situation in the South China Sea has steadily stabilised,” in comments attributed to spokesperson Wu Qian.

But it added, “the United States has repeatedly sent warships illegally into the adjacent waters of the South China Sea islands and reefs.”

Beijing asserts sovereignty over almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea despite rival claims from Southeast Asian neighbours and has rapidly built reefs into artificial islands capable of hosting military planes.

China seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012 after a brief standoff with the Philippine navy. The shoal is also claimed by Taiwan.

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