



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on October 2, 2018

U.S. Ship Sails Near Disputed South China Sea Islands in “Freedom of Navigation” Operation

A U.S. guided-missile destroyer sailed near two contested islands in the South China Sea on September 30, an unidentified U.S. defense official said.

The “guided-missile destroyer USS *Decatur* (DDG 73) conducted a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea to uphold the rights and freedoms of all states under international law. *Decatur* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Gaven and Johnson Reefs in the Spratly Islands,” the official said in a statement quoted by Fox News.



A UPI report noted that the Defense Department describes such freedom of navigation missions, which are intended to enforce the right of free passage for U.S. vessels in international waters, as “routine” operations.

Freedom of navigation operations are meant to “challenge excessive maritime claims and demonstrate our commitment to uphold the rights, freedoms, and uses of the sea and airspace guaranteed to all nations under international law,” an official told CNN.

“U.S. Forces operate in the Indo-Pacific region on a daily basis, including the South China Sea. All operations are designed in accordance with international law and demonstrate that the United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows,” the official said.

Gaven and Johnson Reefs are among seven heavily fortified artificial islands that China has built since 2013, raising fears among its Asian neighbors and in the United States that Beijing could use them to enforce its claims to almost all of the South China Sea. The United States fears that China might attempt to impose air and sea restrictions in the chain.

Back in 2015, the *Global Times*, owned by the Chinese Communist Party’s *People’s Daily*, said in an editorial that “U.S.-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea ... if the United States’ bottom line is that China has to halt its activities” in the disputed Spratly Islands.

The disputed islands have a long and complicated history. The countries that presently have claims to the Spratly Islands are Brunei, mainland (Communist) China, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Vietnam.

All these nations occupy some portions of the disputed islands, but only China (PRC), Taiwan (ROC), and Vietnam have made claims based on their historical presence in the islands. The Philippines has claimed part of the area under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) agreement.

Photo of the Decatur: [U.S. Navy](#) photo by Photographer’s Mate 1st Class Daniel N. Woods



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