

USS John McCain, USS Georgia Conduct High-Profile Transits to Message Rivals



The MH-60R Seahawk helicopter, attached to the Helicopter Sea Maritime (HSM 48) Squadron, flies above the guided-missile submarine USS Georgia (SSGN 729) as the submarine transits with the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Port Royal (CG 73) on the Strait of Hormuz, Dec. 21. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Indra Beaufort

The U.S. Navy conducted and announced two high-profile ship movements in recent days, both intended to send messages to international rivals.

In the latest, the USS John McCain (DDG 56) “asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the Spratly Islands, consistent with international law,” 7th Fleet public affairs announced Dec. 22.

One day earlier, the nuclear-power Ohio-class guided-missile submarine USS Georgia (SSGN 729), along with the guided-missile cruisers USS Port Royal (CG 73) and USS Philippine Sea (CG 58), transited the Strait of Hormuz entering the Arabian Gulf on Dec. 21, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command announced.

The Navy said the USS John McCain exercise was aimed at “challenging restrictions on innocent passage imposed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan” in the South China Sea.

“Unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas, including the freedoms of navigation and overflight, free trade and unimpeded commerce, and freedom of economic opportunity for South China Sea littoral nations,” the 7th Fleet said in a press release.

China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines claim sovereignty over some or all of the Spratly Islands. Of those, China, Vietnam, and Taiwan require either permission or advance notification before a foreign military vessel engages in “innocent passage” through the territorial sea, the 7th Fleet noted.

“Under international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention, the ships of all States – including their warships – enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea. The unilateral imposition of any authorization or advance-notification requirement for innocent passage is not permitted by international law, so the United States challenged these requirements. By engaging in innocent passage without giving prior notification to or asking permission from any of the claimants, the United States challenged the unlawful restrictions imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The United States demonstrated that innocent passage may not be subject to such restrictions.”

In what was widely seen as a show of capability to Iran, the Dec. 21 voyage of a heavily armed submarine and cruisers through the Strait of Hormuz, part of the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations, “demonstrates the U.S. Navy’s ability to sail and operate wherever international law allows,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command said in a press release.

“As an inherently flexible maneuver force, capable of supporting routine and contingency operations, Georgia’s presence demonstrates the United States’ commitment to regional partners and maritime security with a full spectrum of capabilities to remain ready to defend against any threat at any time.”

SSGNS are equipped with superior communications capabilities, carry up to 154 Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles and can also be configured to host up to 66 Special Operations Forces.

The 5th Fleet area of operations encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. The expanse is comprised of 20 countries and includes three chokepoints, which the Navy says are critical to the free flow of global commerce.