

See the island US warships just buzzed to prove a geopolitical point to China

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IT'S TIME TO BUZZ THE TOWER



The guided missile cruiser USS Antietam, one of two warships the US Navy dispatched to a disputed island chain. (U.S. Navy/AP)

The US Navy sent two warships to a disputed archipelago in the South China Sea on May 28 in its latest symbolic protest against China's claims there.

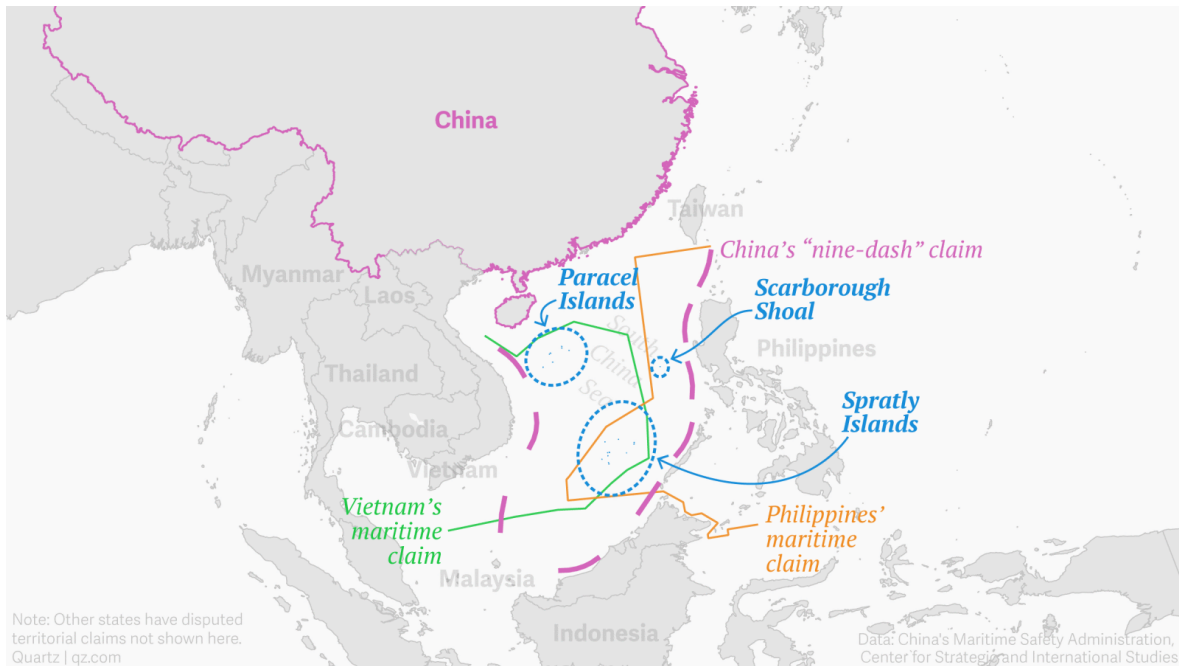
Reuters [first reported](#) that the USS Higgins and the USS Antietam ventured within 12 miles of the Paracel Islands in a demonstration the Pentagon calls a "freedom of navigation operation" or FONOP. The move signals US rejection of China's claims of political control in the South China Sea.

The objective of their sail-by was a speck of land called "Woody Island," where China has developed airstrips and port facilities in recent years [as part of a broader strategy of establishing bases](#) in these islands to demonstrate and exercise its political claims. This spring, China [landed strategic bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons](#) on the island, a symbolic display of its deterrent power, and satellite imagery showed the arrival of surface-to-air missiles this month.

The Vietnamese government protested China's move [as a violation of its sovereign claim to the islands](#)—exactly the language used by China to protest US actions today after sending its own warships to warn away the Americans.

You can see the expansion of the Woody Island's roads and buildings in this time-lapse provided to Quartz by [satellite-imaging company Planet](#):

The island is one of many that lay behind [the “nine dash line,” a diplomatic term of art](#) for China's political vision for the South China Sea, which is at the center of a web of claims by nearby nations:



Complicated. (Quartz)

In March, the US sent a destroyer on a FONOP to the Spratly Islands. In response, China [increased its naval activity there](#), including a parade of warships that was also captured by Planet satellites.

Tensions in the South China Sea have been simmering for years, but are now complicated by [China's role in North Korean nuclear talks](#) and [growing trade disputes](#) with the Trump administration.