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China tests new warships near Vietnam's territorial waters

The Chinese Navy has conducted a week-long naval exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnam's territorial waters while relations between the two countries are being strained by the presence of a Chinese survey ship near the energy-rich Vanguard Bank, that Hanoi has declared part of its exclusive economic zone.

The geological survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 (Hai Yang Di Zhi Shi Hao, launched in 2017), has become a long term presence in the zone and it belongs to the Guangzhou Marine Geological Survey, itself under the direct control of China Geological Survey. It is a very modern ship and its predecessors of an apparently similar (Hai Yang Shi Hao) started exploring the Pacific in 1986 and in 1990-1991 explored the Antarctica during the seventh Chinese scientific expedition towards that continent.

China has announced at the beginning of August that it will hold military exercises near the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, while since 2017 the US Navy is carrying out regular FONOPS (Freedom of Navigation Operations). The exercise was designed to test China's new warships and ship-borne weapons and the PLA's capacity to protect China's economic interests in the Gulf of Tonkin and the whole of the South China Sea.

Warships such as the: advanced Type 054D guided-missile destroyers (Luyang III class), next-generation Type 055 destroyers (Renhai-class cruiser; official PLAN denomination 10.000-ton class destroyer; first ship of the class was the Nanchang destroyer) and the Type 071 amphibious assault vessels (NATO reporting name Yuzhao, a class of Chinese amphibious transport docks) have been commissioned during the past year.

The Type 055 destroyers are the largest surface combatant currently being built in the world with a full load displacement of 13.000 t (considerably bigger than the US Ticonderoga-class cruiser). In fact the

US Department of Defense has been calling them “cruisers” since 2017 and their main task will be escorting the new Chinese aircraft carriers.

In the last few months China has launched eight Type 071 vessels, four of which were deployed to the PLA Navy’s South Sea Fleet. The fleet plays a key role in asserting China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, an area contested by a number of Southeast Asian nations and Taiwan.

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