

# Chinese vessels shadow, harass unarmed U.S. surveillance ship

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WASHINGTON (NNS) -- Five Chinese vessels shadowed and aggressively maneuvered close to the USNS Impeccable in the South China Sea on March 8, a senior Pentagon official said March 9.

The U.S. oceanographic ship was 70 miles south off Hainan Island conducting routine operations in international waters when the ships approached, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said.

“We view these as unprofessional maneuvers by the Chinese vessels and violations under international law to operate with due regard for the rights and safety of other lawful users of the ocean,” Whitman said.

A civilian crew mans the ship, which operates under the auspices of the Military Sealift Command.

The incident began as the ships surrounded the Impeccable and two craft closed to within 50 feet, Whitman said. The Chinese ships included a Chinese navy intelligence collection ship, a Bureau of Maritime Fisheries patrol vessel, a State Oceanographic Administration patrol vessel and two small Chinese-flagged trawlers.

Crewmen aboard the Impeccable used fire hoses to spray one of the vessels as a protective measure. The Chinese crew members disrobed to their underwear and continued closing to within 25 feet.

The Chinese vessels dropped pieces of wood in the water directly in the Impeccable’s path, and two of the ships stopped directly in the U.S. vessel’s path forcing it to stop. Whitman said the Chinese used poles in an attempt to snag the Impeccable’s towed acoustic array sonars. Impeccable’s master used bridge-to-bridge radio circuits to inform the Chinese ships in a friendly manner that it was leaving the area and requested a safe path to navigate.

“These are dangerous close maneuvers that these vessels engaged in,” Whitman said.

The incident was the culmination of earlier harassment. A Chinese patrol vessel shined a high-intensity spotlight March 4 on the USNS Victorious operating in the Yellow Sea 125 miles from China’s coast. Chinese maritime aircraft “buzzed” the ship 12 times March 5.

A Chinese frigate crossed the bow of the Impeccable at a range of about 100 yards March 5. Maritime aircraft buzzed the ship after that incident.

Another Chinese ship challenged Impeccable over bridge-to-bridge radio March 7, calling its operations illegal and directing the American ship to leave the area or “suffer the consequences,” officials said.

The Impeccable is one of six surveillance ships that gather underwater acoustical data, Whitman said. U.S. ships routinely operate in the area.

“We expect Chinese ships to act responsibly and refrain from provocative activities that could lead to miscalculation or a collision at sea, endangering vessels and the lives of U.S. and Chinese mariners,” a Defense Department official said.

U.S. embassy officials lodged a protest against these actions with the Foreign Ministry in China, and Defense Department officials have protested with the Chinese embassy here.

