

Former PACFLEET Commander: FONOPs Should Be Consistent, Not Unique to China

WASHINGTON —

The previous commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet said the United States should conduct more freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) and not limit them to Chinese claims but include sailings through the disputed claims of other nations as well.

“Specific to the South China Sea, I think the United States should conduct FONOPS no less than every four weeks and not sooner than four weeks of the last FONOPS and not longer than six weeks of the previous one,” said retired Navy Adm. Scott Swift, former commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet, the keynote speaker July 24 at the 9th Annual South China Sea Conference sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

“Consistency is important,” Swift said. “Right now, [the Defense Department] keeps track of all the FONOPs. They’re passed over to the State Department, and the State Department publishes once a year what we do globally. We need to publish those FONOPs every three months.”

"I don't think that we should ever do a FONOP that is unique to the South China Sea, that's unique to China," he said. "We should always include other countries to point out that – I think it's very important to maintain the position – that we don't take positions with respect to claims."

Swift said the United States "should be conducting more than 200 FONOPS a year globally. We should stop saying that these challenges are unique to China. This is a common issue: adherence to the rule-based order. If people disagree with the positions being highlighted by the U.S. conducting freedom-of-navigation operations, they are really done in the service of the State Department. It's up to the State Department through the ambassador to take the reasoning why we did a FONOP to the country that's being considered."

He highlighted the importance of each country making its own decision about how it wants to highlight deviation from the international rules-based order.

"There are good friends of the United States that are very concerned about the term 'freedom of navigation operations,' he said. "They have another conceptual way to think about it and we encourage it. There's pressure that we bring on other countries that they should be following our template. That's not useful. We should

be talking about
the rules-based order and asking amongst ourselves the view of
common nations
and common concerns about how we can work together to
highlight where actions
are deviating from those norms.”