

China seizes US underwater drone in South China Sea; Pentagon seeks immediate release of its ve

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Beijing: A Chinese Navy warship has seized an underwater drone deployed by an American oceanographic vessel in international waters in the South China Sea, triggering a formal diplomatic protest from the US and a demand for its immediate return.

The USNS Bowditch (T-AGS 62) and the UUV -- an unclassified "ocean glider"™ system used around the world to gather military oceanographic data such as salinity, water temperature, and sound speed - were conducting routine operations in accordance with international law about 50 nautical miles northwest of Subic Bay, Philippines, when a Chinese Navy PRC DALANG III-Class ship (ASR-510) launched a small boat and retrieved the UUV.

According to Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook, the incident took place on Thursday.

"Using appropriate government-to-government channels, the Department of Defense has called upon China to immediately return an unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) that China unlawfully seized on December 15 in the South China Sea while it was being recovered by a US Navy oceanographic survey ship," Cook said.

"Bowditch made contact with the PRC Navy ship via bridge-to-bridge radio to request the return of the UUV. The radio contact was acknowledged by the PRC Navy ship, but the request was ignored," he said.

"The UUV is a sovereign immune vessel of the US. We call upon China to return our UUV immediately, and to comply with all of its obligations under international law," Cook demanded.

The incident comes amid rising tensions in the South China Sea due to Beijing's military presence in the disputed area.

The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam have competing claims in the South China Sea, which is laced with the world's most heavily travelled international trade routes.

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