

# Destroyer Pinckney challenges Venezuela's maritime territorial claims



The guided-missile destroyer Pinckney transits the Pacific Ocean on April 26. (Navy)

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For the second time in three weeks, U.S. Southern Command has sent a Navy warship through waters off the coast of Venezuela, the combatant command said Wednesday.

The guided-missile destroyer Pinckney steamed through waters off the South American country's coast to challenge Caracas' "excessive maritime claims in international waters."

Such freedom of navigation operations, or FONOPs, occur regularly in the South China Sea, where the U.S. military regularly contests Beijing's territorial claims, but several such operations have also taken place off Venezuela this year.

A SOUTHCOM release announcing the Pinckney FONOP decried “the illegitimate Maduro regime” of the country’s authoritarian president, Nicolas Maduro, and alleges that his government “improperly claims” waters that lie three miles outside of Venezuela’s 12-nautical-mile sea territory.

Pinckney is operating in the Caribbean Sea with other Navy and Coast Guard vessels on a counter-narcotics mission.

“We will exercise our lawful right to freely navigate international waters without acquiescing to unlawful claims,” SOUTHCOM’s commander, Adm. Craig Faller, said in a statement. “The guaranteed rights of nations to access, transit, and navigate international waters is not subject to impositions or restrictions that blatantly violate international law.”

Last month, the warship Nitze conducted a FONOP off Venezuela.

Nitze’s FONOP followed a similar operation in January by the littoral combat ship Detroit.

The United States has joined nearly 60 other countries in backing Venezuela’s opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, as the country’s legitimate ruler, rather than the dictatorial Maduro, who is accused of illegitimately winning a 2018 election that banned other opponents and driving his oil-rich country into financial ruin.

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### **About Geoff Ziezulewicz**

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