

8 Soviet Naval Vessels Reported Off Vietnam

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WASHINGTON, May 16 — Two Soviet flotillas comprising eight naval vessels have joined forces 200 miles east of the Vietnamese coast, Administration officials disclosed today.

One group, previously in the Indian Ocean, had stopped at an anchorage at the Paracel Islands, of the South China coast, the officials said, to refuel shortly before President Nixon's announcement of May 8 of the mining of the entrances of North Vietnam's harbors. Following the announcement, they said, this Soviet force remained in the area. A second group recently arrived, they added.

Jerry W. Friedheim, a Pentagon spokesman, declined to comment on Soviet movements in the area. Other sources said, however, that the two Soviet flotillas had been under United States air and submarine surveillance for several days.

No Challenge Is Seen

Two destroyers, an oil tanker and a diesel-powered submarine armed with four missile launchers made up the flotilla from the Indian Ocean, sources said. The other force, a cruiser and three destroyers, was said to have come from Valdivostok, the principal Soviet naval base in Siberia.

American officials said that the Soviet flotilla presented no challenge to the United States forces operating off Vietnam.

The United States forces consists of six aircraft carriers, three cruisers and more than 30 destroyers. Officials differed, however, as to the likely purpose of the Soviet vessels.

"They may just be doing some low-key muscle-flexing," one military analyst said. "They may want to remind us—and the rest of the world—that Moscow also has naval forces in the Pacific and interests to protect around North Vietnam." Another responsible infor-

mant suggested that the Soviet force might have assembled to observe United States naval activities and to eavesdrop on United States communications.

"Or," this source said, "they may be there to protect their shipping—just in case."

Well informed officials said 13 merchant vessels were at sea bound for Haiphong: Five Soviet freighters, two East German, four Polish, one Bulgarian and one British of Hong Kong registry.

The Soviet vessels are due to approach the area of Haiphong in the next 24 to 48 hours, sources said, if they hold their present course.

The sources noted that the Soviet Pacific Fleet often used the Paracel Islands for anchorage and refueling.

Pentagon sources said that there were no signs that Soviet or other merchantmen had put into south China ports. They also said there were no signs of any attempts to sweep the mines at Haiphong, six other North Vietnamese harbors and into some of North Vietnam's rivers and estuaries.

Informants with access to reconnaissance reports said that North Vietnamese fishing boats were sailing freely in and out of North Vietnamese harbors. The light vessels, with their wooden hulls, the informants said, appeared immune to the effect of the magnetic mines, which are detonated by the magnetic field surrounding large steel-hulled vessels.

More Mining, Hanoi Says

Saigon, South Vietnam, May 16 (UPI)—The Hanoi radio said United States planes had planted more mines at Haiphong and several other harbors yesterday, possibly to replace those that had drifted out to sea since they were planted last week.