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Outside the Wire

U.S. Naval Operations and the South China Sea



Photo of the USS Ronald Reagan. Credit: Petty Officer 3rd Class Elizabeth Thompson. Sourced from Navy.mil

What is the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76)?

The USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76) is a Nimitz-class, nuclear powered supercarrier based out of Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan in the Navy's Seventh Fleet. It is named after former President Ronald Reagan and was commissioned in 2003. USS *Ronald Reagan* was built by Northrop Grumman and supports 3,500 personnel and up to 90 fixed and rotary wing aircraft. It began operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2006. It is currently the flagship for the *Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 5 and deployed in maritime operations in the South China Sea.

What is Carrier Strike Group 5?

Led by the flagship USS *Ronald Reagan*, CSG 5 also consists of guided-missile cruiser USS *Shiloh* and guided missile destroyer USS *Halsey*. CSG 5 is also supported by Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 5. CVW 5 consists of nine squadrons and detachments that are based out of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

What is the Seventh Fleet?

The Seventh Fleet is based out of Yokosuka, Japan. It is the largest Navy fleet encompassing 50% of the world population and includes countries in the Indo-Pacific geographic region such as China, Russia, India, North Korea, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia.

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Seventh Fleet by the Numbers:

- 124 million = square kilometers in the area of operations
- 36 = number of countries in the area of operations
- 5 = number of U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty Allies including the Philippines, Australia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Thailand
- 150 = average number of U.S. based aircraft
- 20,000 = average number of Sailors
- 50-70 = average number of ships and submarines at any time



Map of the South China Sea with outlines around claimed territory by country.
Photo Credit: Nationsonline.org

The South China Sea by the Numbers:

- 3.5 million square kilometers
- \$3.7 trillion worth of global trade (as of 2016)
- 40% global liquified natural gas trade
- 1/3 of the world's maritime trade passes through the region
- 12 nautical miles is the number that a country can claim off its shores
- 200 nautical miles is the number of miles a country can claim as an exclusive economic zone off its shores
- China claims approx. 3.15 million square kilometers (90%) of the South China Sea as its own territory

Why is the South China Sea contested?

China has made territorial claims to the maritime area in violation of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the process, China has dredged sand and created 3200 acres of land to include artificial islands known as the Spratly and Paracel islands. In response, the U.S. has sought to counter China's claims through Freedom of Navigation of Operations where Navy ships sail in and around the disputed island chains. The Navy conducted five in 2018, nine in 2019, and three in 2020.

What is the objective of Ronald Reagan CSG?

The objective is to assert international law and maintain a military presence in opposition to China's unlawful claims to the maritime domain. The U.S. is committed to preserving the rules-based order that keeps maritime passageways free and open for navigation.



Multiple aircraft from Carrier Air Wing Five fly in formation over the Navy's forward-deployed aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan in the South China Sea. Photo Credit: U.S. Naval Pacific Fleet

Sources and References:

- [Facts Sheet \(navy.mil\)](#)
- [How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? | ChinaPower Project \(csis.org\)](#)
- [U.S. Maritime Limits & Boundaries \(noaa.gov\)](#)
- [UNCLOS - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#)
- South China Morning Post [documentary](#)
- [USNI](#)
- [CFR](#)

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