

USS George Washington Docks in Manila Amid Sea Tensions

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The nuclear-powered United States aircraft carrier USS George Washington arrived near Manila on Thursday, highlighting the growing defense partnership between the United States and the Philippines. The visit comes at a time of heightened tensions with China, which claims nearly the entire South China Sea despite an international ruling dismissing those claims as groundless.

Sailing into view just off the Philippine capital, the Nimitz-class vessel made its presence known on the same day China's first domestically built aircraft carrier, the Shandong,

docked in Hong Kong after completing exercises in the western Pacific Ocean. This timing underscores the region's increasing strategic competition and the delicate balance many Southeast Asian nations must navigate.

Lieutenant-Commander Mark Langford, spokesperson for the USS George Washington, emphasized the visit's message of solidarity. "The United States Navy, along with our allies and partners, is committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific," Langford said in an email statement. He added that operations like this one demonstrate Washington's commitment to regional stability, regardless of shifting events.

That commitment has become more visible since Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office in 2022. Under his leadership, Manila has taken a stronger stand against Beijing's expansive maritime claims. The two longtime allies, bound by a 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, have stepped up their joint military activities, including frequent naval exercises in disputed waters. In May, the Philippine and United States coast guards even held their first-ever joint drills along the Philippines' coastlines, signaling deeper cooperation.

While Washington's port call is largely symbolic, it also sends a clear message that the United States intends to maintain a visible security role in Asia's contested seas. Over 60 percent of the world's maritime trade passes through the South China Sea, making it a critical waterway for global commerce. Despite a 2016 international arbitration ruling that invalidated China's sweeping claims, Beijing continues to assert control and expand its naval reach.

Meanwhile, China's growing fleet has captured the attention of defense analysts. According to a December report by the United States Department of Defense, China now has the world's largest navy by numbers, with a battle force exceeding 370 ships and submarines. The Shandong's arrival in Hong Kong just as the USS George Washington approached the Philippines highlighted the contrast between the two powers' ambitions.

As the two aircraft carriers loom over different parts of the region, the Philippines finds itself at the forefront of a strategic contest. For many in Manila, the USS George Washington's visit is more than just a show of force; it is a reassurance that in turbulent times, old alliances remain strong.