



The Guardian



Photos show Beijing's militarisation of South China Sea in new detail

China accused of building 'island fortresses' as Philippine newspaper obtains aerial images

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Beijing has been accused of building “island fortresses” in the South China Sea after a newspaper in the Philippines obtained aerial photographs offering what experts called the most detailed glimpse yet of China’s militarisation of the waterway.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer said the surveillance photographs - passed to its reporters by an unnamed source - were mostly taken between June and December last year and showed Chinese construction activities across the disputed Spratly archipelago between the Philippines and Vietnam.

Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the region.

The Inquirer said the images showed an “unrestrained” building campaign designed to project Chinese power across the resource-rich shipping route through which trillions of dollars of global trade flows each year.



Installations on Johnson South Reef. Photograph: Inquirer.net/Philippine Daily Inquirer

Some photographs show cargo ships and supply vessels, which the newspaper said appeared to be delivering construction materials to the China-controlled islands.

Others show runways, hangars, control towers, helipads and radomes as well as a series of multistorey buildings that China has built on reefs such as Fiery Cross, Subi, Mischief, McKennan, Johnson South, Gaven and Cuarteron.

The Inquirer described the reefs as “island fortresses”. Bonnie Glaser, an expert in Asia-Pacific security issues from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called the images “the most complete, detailed batch of aerial pics available” of China’s military outposts in the South China Sea.

However, both Beijing and Manila sought to play down the significance of the images.

Ties between the two Asian countries have warmed since Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines president, took power in 2016 and set about forging a lucrative new alliance with China during a four-day state visit to Beijing.



Images from the Philippine Daily Inquirer showing Mischief Reef. Photograph: Inquirer.net/Philippine Daily Inquirer

Responding to questions about the photographs, the presidential spokesman, Harry Roque, told reporters: “[The region has] long been militarised. And the question is, what can we do?”

He reportedly added: “What do you want us to do? We cannot declare war.”

Opposition figures hit back, accusing Duterte’s administration of betraying their “sacred core duty” to defend their country’s territory.

Experts interviewed by China’s Communist party press also shrugged off the photographs, suggesting they showed mostly civilian installations.

“Civilian facility construction is the major focus of the South China Sea islands building and the portion of defence deployment is relatively small,” Chen Xiangmiao, from the state-run National Institute for South China Sea Studies, told the Global Times.

Another Chinese expert, Zhuang Guotu, accused foreign journalists of “hyping” Beijing’s activities in the South China Sea, but added: “China has the right to build whatever it needs within its territory.” Zhuang claimed China’s military deployment was not for military expansion, but about defending its security and interests.

In December a report claimed China had created military facilities about four times the size of Buckingham Palace on contested South China Sea islands.

Territorial claims in the South China Sea





Fierly Cross Reef. Photograph: Inquirer.net/Philippine Daily Inquirer

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