

## CHINA WILL SOON CONTROL STRATEGIC WATERWAY

China will soon effectively control the South China Sea, a maritime expert warned, amid fresh concerns over Beijing's development of artificial islands in the heavily disputed waterway.

China's massive island-building on seven reefs in the Spratly archipelago was an apparent military buildup, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative director Gregory Poling told reporters on Friday.

"I think we kinda see the outline already. The island-building was hard to miss. You know when you're building islands that are on front page of every paper, but since that stopped they've kind of moved on to phase two, which is putting all the infrastructures on to that island. And now, clearly, that infrastructure is military in nature," Poling said.

Latest aerial photographs obtained by the Inquirer show

China has gone ahead with building artificial islands on the reefs and topping these with runways and other military installations despite opposition from the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan, which have overlapping claims in the South China Sea.

### Not for search, rescue

"The days of arguing whether or not the Chinese are building civilian or military bases are long behind us. You do not build 72 fighter jet hangars for search and rescue or for fishing shelters. You build them because you want an airbase. Now maybe there are civilian structures or two but first and foremost these are military facilities," Poling said.

With the buildup nearly finished, he said, China will soon establish its ultimate suprema-

cy over all rival claimants to the strategic waterway.

"You're gonna see more signaling [systems], intelligence [facilities] and things like that. You're gonna keep on seeing the increase of number of Chinese coast guards and the maritime militias and naval ships making calls to these. And little by little, the Chinese plan seems to be to establish de facto control," Poling said.

"Maybe without provoking an immediate sharp clash but by sheer force of numbers, eventually there's gonna be a Coast Guard and Navy ship close enough to intervene no matter what any claimants are trying to do anywhere in the [sea]. And they are gonna have the radars and patrol craft to make sure that nothing moves within the South China Sea without them seeing it," he added. —FRANCES MANGOSING INQ

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