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China's South China Sea Bases Threaten Regional Stability

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China has converted several reefs and atolls in the South China Sea into a network of militarised island bases, spanning more than **1,300 hectares (over 3,200 acres)**. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), satellite imagery confirms significant development on Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs in the Spratly Islands. These bases now feature 3,000-metre runways, hangars for up to 24 fighter jets, and facilities capable of supporting H-6 nuclear-capable bombers.

The installations include radar arrays, anti-ship and surface-to-air missile systems, and deepwater harbours capable of docking naval vessels such as Type 056 corvettes. Since 2013, China has reclaimed around 3,000 acres across seven sites in the Spratlys. Mischief Reef alone houses nearly 400 buildings. These developments allow China to

monitor and control vast stretches of the South China Sea, with radar systems providing overlapping coverage across critical maritime corridors.

Australia has expressed concern over the implications of China's military build-up for regional security. The proximity of these bases to vital shipping routes, through which more than \$5 trillion in trade passes annually, poses a direct strategic challenge. While the Albanese government continues to invest in long-term defence programs such as AUKUS, critics argue there is a pressing need to accelerate capabilities to counterbalance China's growing presence.

The United States and Japan, both key allies of Australia, have consistently rejected China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Washington maintains that Beijing's actions violate international maritime law. The expansion of **significant** military infrastructure signals China's intention to entrench its influence in the region.

Analysts warn that without clear steps to enhance readiness and regional deterrence, the balance of power could shift further. For Australia, this means reinforcing defence partnerships, increasing maritime surveillance, and ensuring freedom of navigation operations remain unimpeded by coercive behaviour. The situation underscores the urgent need for coordinated defence and diplomatic strategies in the Indo-Pacific.