

Annual air combat tactics, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief exercise Cope North increases readiness and interoperability of U.S. Air Force, Japan Air Self-Defense Force, and Royal Australian Air Force (U.S. Air Force/Matthew Bruch)



The Second Island Cloud

A Deeper and Broader Concept for American Presence in the Pacific Islands

By Andrew Rhodes

In the early 20th century, the visionary Marine officer Earl “Pete” Ellis compiled remarkable studies of islands in the Western Pacific and considered the practical means for the seizure or defense of advanced bases. A century after Ellis’s work, China presents new strategic and operational

challenges to the U.S. position in Asia, and it is time for Washington to develop a coherent strategy, one that will last another 100 years, for the islands of the Western Pacific. It has become common to consider the *second island chain* as a defining feature of Pacific geography, but when

Ellis mastered its geography, he saw not a “chain,” but a “cloud.” He wrote in 1921 that the “Marshall, Caroline, and Pelew Islands form a ‘cloud’ of islands stretching east and west.” His apt description of these archipelagoes serves well for a broader conception of the islands in, and adjacent to, traditional definitions of the second island chain. A new U.S. strategy should abandon the narrow lens of the “chain” and emphasize a broader

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second island cloud that highlights the U.S. regional role and invests in a resilient, distributed, and enduring presence in the Pacific.

The United States has often been of two minds about its role in Asia, and recent heated debate on the future of U.S. security commitments in the region is no exception. This pendulum has swung before, from the heavy presence lasting from World War II through Vietnam to a partial retrenchment under Richard Nixon's Guam Doctrine, and back toward statements of a greater strategic emphasis on the region under the Obama administration's "Rebalance to Asia."¹ Despite some inconsistent messaging on military alliances and trade relationships, the Trump administration has indicated a major focus on Asia in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) and its strategy for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."² Regardless of whether the United States pursues broad engagement with the region, focuses on military containment of China, or decides to allow a larger Chinese sphere of influence in the Western Pacific, the second island cloud represents critical geography for what Vice President Mike Pence has called an "ironclad commitment" to the region.³ To demonstrate this commitment and respond to operational imperatives, there is a compelling need to get serious about the second island cloud—we need to identify the challenges to a sustained or enhanced U.S. presence and to pursue near-term opportunities that advance U.S. national interests. A strategy for the second island cloud should deepen the unique U.S. relationship with these islands and reframe the strategic discussion with a broader definition that includes valuable islands excluded from the second island chain.

Origins and Interpretations

The second island chain has no official standing among geographers or international organizations but has served as shorthand for the line of islands extending from the Japanese mainland, through the Nanpō Shotō, the Marianas, and the western Caroline Islands, before terminating somewhere

in eastern Indonesia. The second island chain lies to the east; the *first island chain*, which is also imprecise, generally comprises a line from southern Japan through the Ryukyus and Taiwan, terminating in the Philippines or Borneo. The island chains took on strategic importance for the United States when it annexed the Philippines and Guam after the Spanish-American War. The fortification of these outposts was a central feature of negotiations in the 1920s that vainly sought to prevent military competition and conflict between the United States and Japan. Michael Green notes that as much as many planners of the interwar period regretted the decision not to establish robust fortifications of strategic points such as Guam, the restrictions of the Washington Naval Treaties incentivized key innovations in fleet mobility, such as underway replenishment, to mitigate against the threat to fixed fueling points.⁴

The notorious geopolitician Karl Haushofer was one of the first to describe the island chain concept, calling them "offshore island arcs."⁵ Haushofer served as German military attaché in Tokyo before he established his Institute for Geopolitics at the University of Munich and gained influence in the 1930s with Nazi leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Rudolf Hess. Leading architects of the post-World War II Pacific security architecture, including Douglas MacArthur and Dean Acheson, also invoked the island chains. Chinese strategists have focused contemporary attention on the island chains, and it is Chinese adaptations and descriptions of the island chains that have reintroduced the concept to American strategists.⁶ Throughout the remarkable modernization of China's military since the 1990s, its leaders have emphasized the military challenge of U.S. and allied deployments in the island chains and the strategic importance of the waters they enclose.⁷ A central figure in the promulgation of the island chains in Chinese geostrategy and military planning was Admiral Liu Huaqing, often referred to as the "Father of the People's Liberation Army Navy," who served as its commander in the 1980s and then

as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission in the 1990s. One leading Chinese scholar on seapower references control over the Pacific islands as key to U.S.-led efforts to "contain China," invokes the operational imperative to "break through" the island chains, and also highlights the power of small islands to confer broad "jurisdictional sea area."⁸ Andrew Erickson and Joel Wuthnow catalog these discussions of the island chains concept in Chinese sources and lay out three ways that Chinese authors have thought about island chains: as *barriers*, *springboards*, and *benchmarks*.⁹ These three concepts provide a useful framework for not only understanding Chinese perspectives but also analyzing U.S. interests in the region. A durable U.S. regional strategy should reject what have become Chinese concepts of the islands and redefine the geography as a cloud, then consider the various roles of the second island cloud as a barrier, springboard, and benchmark.

These three perspectives are already inherent in some of the debates on U.S. relationships and force posture in the Western Pacific. The argument for "archipelagic defense" typifies the barrier concept, seeking new ways to defend the island chains in the face of daunting Chinese capabilities.¹⁰ The second island chain has served as a springboard for the U.S. military for decades, launching strategic bomber strikes at the end of World War II and in Vietnam, and sustaining the Continuous Bomber Presence Mission from Guam's Andersen Air Force Base since 2004.¹¹ Homeporting submarines at Guam and redeployment of Okinawa-based Marines to the island have enhanced the springboard aspect of one link in the second island chain.¹² Finally, the second island chain has been an important benchmark of China's growing maritime power, both for those seeking to balance against Chinese expansionism and those advocating a more conciliatory approach to China. Lyle Goldstein, for example, argues that a reduction of U.S. forces on Guam would foster trust and greater cooperation with China.¹³ Goldstein also employed the benchmark concept to note Chinese

focus on the Philippine Sea—between the two island chains—as nascent evidence of an “evolving new multipolarity.”¹⁴

Island Geography

The second island cloud lies to the east of the first island chain, across the Philippine Sea. This cloud spans a complicated patchwork of sovereignty arrangements, political contexts, and economic challenges. The concept of a second island cloud should build on three basic types of islands in the traditional *chain* definition: Japanese and Indonesian territory at the northern and southern ends, a core of U.S. territory in the Marianas, and the island groups adjacent to the core consisting of the Republic of Palau and portions of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). The second island cloud should also include the islands in the Carolines that make up the rest of the FSM, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and islands on the southern rim of the Caroline Basin belonging to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

The fully sovereign foreign territory at the northern and southern anchors of the second island cloud is markedly different in terms of U.S. security architecture. The Nanpō Shotō are covered under existing U.S.-Japan treaties, and U.S. forces enjoy access to military facilities, such as the airfield at Iwo Jima.¹⁵ Indonesia, which governs the islands along the southern rim of the Caroline Basin, remains a nascent security partner for the United States, and U.S. forces have enjoyed only limited access to the economically challenged parts of eastern Indonesia. Papua New Guinea, whose islands mark the southeastern rim of the Caroline Basin, is an even more nascent partner for the United States, although the joint U.S.-Australia initiative at Manus Island, announced by Pence in 2018, is an important development for an area not included in the second island chain.

Discussions of Pacific strategy regularly reference the U.S. territories in the Marianas, but these islands are poorly understood. Guam and the Commonwealth of the Marianas Islands (CNMI) have

subtly different statuses in U.S. law, and each has a non-voting representative in Congress. Both Guam and the CNMI are unincorporated territories where the Constitution applies only partially. Both territories have a non-voting member of the House of Representatives, but there are subtle differences in the application of Federal law in each territory. Guam is the largest, most populous, and most developed island in the Marianas and hosts a substantial U.S. military presence, while the CNMI—including the smaller and less populous islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota—hosts only small-scale U.S. military training. The CNMI has struggled economically in the last decade and has started to rely for jobs and growth on Chinese investment in casino tourism, an alarming development for those who advocate for the CNMI’s importance to U.S. regional military strategy.¹⁶

Palau and the western end of FSM are links in the traditional chain, but these islands are part of a broader geography and have a uniquely complicated relationship with the United States. The shared history and similar political status of Palau, the FSM, and the RMI make it imperative to consider all three of these island nations together and highlight a key dimension of why the more expansive second island cloud is more coherent and accurate than the chain. The United States administered these islands as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands following World War II and then devolved sovereignty to the three independent governments under Compacts of Free Association (CFA). The CFAs with the FSM and the RMI entered into force in the 1980s and were revised in 2003, while the CFA with Palau entered into force in 1994, and a long-pending revision entered into force in late 2018.

These three sovereign nations, known collectively as the Freely Associated States (FAS), receive various forms of financial assistance and public services from the U.S. Government, and FAS citizens may live and work in the United States, including serving in the military. The U.S. Government takes full responsibility for the defense of FAS territory and enjoys exclusive rights to establish and control

access to military facilities in the islands. All three nations face development challenges relating to their remote locations and undiversified economies and have seen heavy outward migration, with nearly a quarter of FAS citizens living in the United States.¹⁷ Palau has much higher per capita gross domestic product and has been more successful at investing U.S. assistance than its neighbors. The economic outlook is more discouraging for the FMS and RMI as a 2024 deadline looms for both nations to transition away from direct U.S. support in favor of disbursements from a trust fund established in 2003.¹⁸ The trust fund sought to place the FMS and RMI on a more stable long-term financial footing; however, enduring structural challenges, weak performance, and corruption suggest poor prospects for a successful transition to trust fund income.¹⁹

Barrier and Springboard: The Military Potential of the Second Island Cloud

The second island cloud can play a vital role in concepts in the 2018 NDS Global Operating Model, filling operational space for the “contact layer” and enabling maneuver for the “blunt layer.”²⁰ While Ellis and the “War Plan Orange” generation sought protected anchorages for the fleet, since 1942 the military value of these islands has resided primarily in airfields, even as growing Chinese capabilities for long-range strike make them increasingly vulnerable.²¹

Active defenses, like missile interceptors, and passive defenses, such as hardening, play a central role in mitigating long-range fires, but the chief defensive contribution that the second island cloud can offer is dispersal.²² Dispersal bases are in short supply in the Pacific, but the second island cloud includes several of the “secondary and tertiary operating locations” called for by Elbridge Colby, the principal architect of the 2018 NDS.²³ The importance of Palau and Yap, from which aircraft can range the Philippine Sea, is evident, but the eastern Carolines also have utility. The FSM’s Chuuk, for example, is several



U.S. Air Force and Japan Air Self-Defense Force conduct Cope North annually at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, to increase combat readiness and interoperability, concentrating on coordination and evaluation of air tactics, techniques, and procedures, February 21, 2011 (U.S. Air Force/Angelita M. Lawrence)

hundred kilometers closer to Taipei than Darwin, Australia. Operational discussions do not typically include the RMI, but the Marshalls and Aleutians are equidistant from potential combat zones; Kwajalein and Attu are each roughly 2,900 miles from Okinawa.

The second island cloud's military potential could grow with the introduction of new capabilities and operational concepts. U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty could lead to the deployment of mobile intermediate-range missiles in the second island cloud that could range key regional targets and complicate adversary targeting.²⁴ Secondary airfields in the second island cloud could also prove valuable to supporting operations by future "arsenal planes" with large load-outs of standoff weapons, an old concept that gained new energy through a 2016 Strategic Capabilities Office program.²⁵ A growing body of operational literature on new concepts for combat logistics in the Pacific has developed recently, some

of it hearkening back to World War II and the anchorages surveyed by the likes of Ellis.²⁶ Expeditionary "forward arming and refueling points" at tertiary airports offer the potential of much more dynamic airpower, particularly with aircraft capable of operating from austere facilities.²⁷ The ability to rearm combatants, and potentially even submarines from support ships in sheltered anchorages, rather than pierside at established bases, offers a new take on an old concept to regenerate naval combat power despite the Western Pacific threat environment.²⁸ All these concepts are directly compatible with the second island cloud concept and would benefit from peacetime infrastructure investment throughout the islands.²⁹

Demonstrating Regional Staying Power Through the Second Island Cloud

Sustaining and growing the U.S. presence in the second island cloud is important for the springboard or barrier purposes; it would also provide

an important benchmark demonstrating to rivals, allies, and partners alike that the United States intends to sustain its role as a Pacific power. The United States should integrate the second island cloud into what Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell call "tighter frontline webs" of security relationships.³⁰ The means to strengthen these ties in the second island cloud are primarily non-military and suggest a greater focus on diplomatic, political, and development aspects of U.S. relationships with these islands. Traditional security cooperation with Indonesia and Japan helps ensure the northern anchor remains secure and U.S. access grows along the southern edge of the second island cloud, although there is room to improve synchronization with other instruments of national power.³¹

Washington should also reinforce its commitment to its territories in the Marianas where foreign and domestic policy overlap. Both Guam and the CNMI would benefit from enhanced



Two U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancers assigned to 9th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron, deployed from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, fly 10-hour mission from Guam through South China Sea, operating with USS *Sterett*, June 8, 2017 (U.S. Air Force/Richard P. Ebensberger)

commitments at the Federal level to support sustainable economic growth and address labor shortfalls while creating alternatives to potentially problematic Chinese investment.³² The Department of Interior–led Interagency Group on Insular Areas was established in 2010 to make recommendations on Federal programs in Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the CNMI.³³ The group could play a role in coordinating long-term U.S. policy for the second island cloud, but would be more effective with more frequent meetings and the inclusion of additional agencies at the assistant secretary level. Enhancing the influence of Guam and the CNMI in Congress, potentially through greater staff support on their representatives’ assigned committees, would also build capacity for shaping legislation that supports these islands. Although a near

impossibility in the current political climate, statehood for a unified Guam and the CNMI could imitate Hawaii’s economic success and provide an unmistakable symbol of long-term U.S. commitment to regional presence.

Senior-level visits are an important currency in diplomacy, particularly with partners like the FAS that get less attention. In 2018, senior Defense officials, including the Under Secretary of the Navy and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, visited underappreciated parts of the second island cloud.³⁴ High-level officials from Washington should sustain a regular calendar of bilateral and multilateral meetings to discuss diplomatic, defense, and development initiatives in venues like the Pacific Islands Forum.³⁵

Investing in the economic development of the FAS entails serious challenges

but supporting the long-term stability of these U.S.-aligned nations offers a high potential return for the United States. These nations already rely on assistance from multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and their economic situation leaves them vulnerable to bilateral economic inducements from rivals probing for weakness in the U.S. regional position. ADB assistance to the FAS is small by the standards of most international development programs but is significant in small economies like those of the FAS. ADB assistance in 2017 was \$8.3 million to the FSM, \$10.5 million to the RMI, and less than \$1 million to Palau.³⁶ In the larger context of regional relationships, it is important to note that Palau and the RMI are among the few nations that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, making them a target for



Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptor missile launches from Meck Island to intercept ballistic missile target during Missile Defense Agency integrated flight test, Republic of the Marshall Islands, October 25, 2012 (U.S. Navy)

Chinese coercive diplomatic efforts.³⁷ Deliberate erosion of FAS support for the United States by a challenger with deep pockets could introduce substantial friction should the United States seek expanded presence or new facilities.

A new focus on economic development that complements the RMI and FSM trust funds but endures beyond them could increase investment in infrastructure and such key industries as tourism and fisheries to build a stronger economic foundation. Revenue from fishing licenses has been a critical source of foreign exchange for the FAS with their large exclusive economic zones but small economic bases. The ADB notes that in 2017, revenue from fishing licenses was the primary factor returning the economy of the FSM to growth after a period of contraction.³⁸ Monitoring and oversight are essential to effective development

programs, but the strategic imperatives suggest the United States should accept the risk of some inefficiency in an expanded aid program while continuing to address structural economic reform and corruption. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) plays only a minor role in the second island cloud, as all assistance is managed through the CFA, but it has been active in disaster preparedness in the FSM.³⁹ Washington should make greater use of USAID, which has expertise and mechanisms for providing the needed support while managing the tradeoffs between efficiency and foreign policy objectives, in the FAS.

Finally, just as Japan is the linchpin of the northern part of the region, Australia plays a critical role throughout the South Pacific, both as a staunch U.S. ally and as a leading voice in venues such as the

Pacific Islands Forum.⁴⁰ The United States should seek additional opportunities, such as that recently announced for Manus Island, to partner with Australia in new defense, diplomacy, and development efforts across Oceania. India's growing engagement in the region also offers the possibility of coordinating on second island cloud investment within the emerging Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, Australia, and India.⁴¹

Counterarguments

There are strategic, financial, political, and operational arguments against a deeper U.S. commitment to the region. At the strategic level, some might argue that an enhanced U.S. focus and posture in the area will contribute to a security dilemma and further incentivize China's military buildup and aggressive behavior. Replacing or augmenting

the RMI and FSM trust funds with additional financial support, as with any development program, risks open-ended dependence of small economies on the U.S. Government. Politically, enhancing military presence in territories where the population is not composed of U.S. citizens or does not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship could contribute to a narrative of the United States as an exploitative neocolonial power. Operationally, as much as the airfields of the second island cloud allow for greater dispersal of forces and would complicate adversary targeting, the facilities are small, fixed, and difficult to defend in the face of large numbers of long-range weapons. Aircraft scattered among the islands might survive but could quickly exhaust fuel supplies and might not find any means to rearm.

This article is not the first to argue for a reconception of the second island chain, and some might argue that the second island cloud is still too narrow. Former Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Scott Swift suggested in 2018 that the second island chain circles around New Guinea, then crosses the Indian Ocean through Diego Garcia and terminates at Djibouti.⁴²

Conclusion

A stable footing in the second island cloud is worth these costs and risks, as it can serve as a strategic position and powerful symbol that transcends the operational imperatives to balance Chinese military capabilities in the near term. In the first 50 years after the United States took possession of Guam, Ellis saw the rise of Japan and envisioned key geographic aspects of its defeat that took place two decades after his death. In 1942, geostrategist Nichols Spykman foresaw that technological change and political shifts could one day make Chinese airpower more dominant than British, Japanese, or American seapower in what he called the “Asian Mediterranean.”⁴³ In only 30 years, China changed from a strategic partner in the Cold War to a peer rival in a newly bipolar world. China is pursuing a much more expansive role on

the international stage with new security relationships and overseas bases and is even contemplating military alliances.⁴⁴ The coming decades will see major structural changes to the international system, and a truly long-term strategy should secure America’s Pacific position through and beyond the current competition.

Ely Ratner argues that “it is imperative that the United States stop China’s advances toward exerting exclusive and dominant control over key geographic regions.”⁴⁵ With growing Chinese investment and influence throughout the Pacific islands, the second island cloud can play a central role in near-term efforts to avoid a power vacuum and create what Ratner calls “spheres of competition.”⁴⁶ The current administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act passed by Congress have brought important focus to the policy discussion on the region, but sustained energy is required to realize these ambitions.⁴⁷ In addition to developing new partnerships, Washington should double down where it is already strong—the second island cloud is squarely aligned to the United States, but U.S. policy must work hard to sustain that alignment and build on it to our advantage.

Ellis’s description of an island cloud aptly captures the complexity and diversity of the key geography and provides a framework for lasting and dispersed strength—chains fail with a single weak link, but clouds are resilient. The argument for a durable commitment to the second island cloud in the 21st century is much the same as what Ellis wrote in 1913: “Once secure it will stand as a notice to all the world that America is in the Western Pacific to stay.”⁴⁸ JFQ

Notes

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⁴⁰ “Australia Is Battling China for Influence in the Pacific,” *The Economist*, January 19, 2019, available at <www.economist.com/asia/2019/01/19/australia-is-battling-china-for-influence-in-the-pacific>.

⁴¹ Balaji Chandramohan, “India’s Strategic Expansion in the Pacific Islands,” *The Diplomat*, June 13, 2018, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/indiass-strategic-expansion-in-the-pacific-islands/>>.

⁴² Admiral Swift presented the map at “The New China Challenge Conference,” hosted by the U.S. Naval Institute in October 2018. The map was reproduced in Kevin Rudd, “Can China and the United States Avoid War?” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 144, no. 12 (2018), available at <www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018-12/can-china-and-united-states-avoid-war>.

⁴³ Nicholas Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), 469.

⁴⁴ Huang Yufan, “Q and A: Yan Xuetong Urges China to Adopt a More Assertive Foreign Policy,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2016; and “Yan Xuetong: ‘China Will Be a Superpower within 10 Years,’” *Chinascopes*, November–December 2013.

⁴⁵ Ely Ratner, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on China and Russia*, Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, video, 2:28:37, January 29, 2019, available at <www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/19-01-29-china-and-russia>.

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⁴⁷ *Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018*, Pub. L. No 115–409, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., December 31, 2018, available at <www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736>.

⁴⁸ F.H. Schofield and E.H. Ellis, *Report of the Naval War College Committee of Defense of Guam*, Part I (1913), 14. Original document held in the U.S. Naval War College Archives.