

THE SECOND ISLAND CLOUD:

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

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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’ work, China presents new strategic and operational challenges to America’s position in Asia, and it is time for Washington to develop a coherent strategy for the islands of the Western Pacific that will last another hundred years. It has become common to consider the “Second Island Chain” a defining feature of Pacific geography, but when Ellis mastered its geography, he saw not a “chain,” but a “cloud.”¹ 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 US strategy should abandon the narrow lens of the “chain” and emphasize a broader “Second Island Cloud” that highlights America’s regional role and invests in a resilient, distributed, and enduring presence in the Pacific.



Lt Col Earl H. Ellis, USMC

America has often been of two minds about its role in Asia and recent heated debate on the future of US 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 Nixon’s Guam Doctrine, and back towards statements of a greater strategic emphasis on the region under the Obama Administration’s “Rebalance to Asia.”² 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.”³ 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 Pence has called an “ironclad commitment” to the region.⁴ To demonstrate this commitment and to respond to operational imperatives, there is a compelling need to get serious about the Second Island Cloud: to identify the challenges to a sustained or enhanced US presence, and to pursue near-term opportunities that advance US national interests. A strategy for the Second Island Cloud should deepen the unique US 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 of the “Second Island Chain” Concept

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 but generally comprises a line from southern Japan, through the Rykuyus and Taiwan, and 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, and the fortification of these outposts was a central feature of the 1920s negotiations that vainly sought to prevent military competition and conflict between the US 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 like 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.⁵



First and Second Island Chains
Map created by author, February 2019

The notorious geopolitician Karl Haushofer was one of the first to describe the island chain concept, calling them “offshore island arcs.”⁶ Haushofer served as German military attache in Tokyo before he established his Institute for Geopolitics at the University of Munich and gained influence in the 1930s with Nazi leaders like 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.⁷ Throughout the remarkable modernization of China’s military since the 1990s, its leaders have emphasized the military challenge of US and allied deployments in the island chains and the strategic importance of the waters they enclose.⁸ 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 (PLAN),” who served as PLAN commander in the 1980s and then Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission in the 1990s. One leading Chinese scholar on sea power references control over Pacific islands as key to US-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.”⁹ 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: “barriers,” “springboards,” and “benchmarks.”¹⁰ These three concepts provide a useful framework for not only understanding Chinese perspectives but also for analyzing American interests in the region. A durable US 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 US 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.¹¹ The Second Island Chain has served as a “springboard” for the US military for decades, launching strategic bomber strikes at the end of World War Two and in Vietnam, and sustaining the Continuous Bomber Presence mission from Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base since 2004.¹² Homeporting submarines at Guam and redeployment of Okinawa-based Marines to the island has enhanced the “springboard” aspect of one link in the Second Island Chain.¹³ 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 US forces on Guam would foster trust and greater cooperation with China.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵

Island Geography: From a Narrow Chain to an Expansive Cloud

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 upon three basic types of island in the traditional “chain” definition: 1) Japanese and Indonesian territory at the northern and southern ends, 2) a core of US territory in the Marianas, and 3) 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 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 US security architecture. The Nanpō Shotō are covered under existing US-Japan treaties, and US forces enjoy access to military facilities, such as the airfield at Iwo Jima.¹⁶ Indonesia, which governs the islands along the southern rim of the Caroline Basin, remains a nascent security partner for the United States and US 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 US-Australia initiative at Manus Island,

announced by Vice President Pence in 2018, is an important development for an area not included in the Second Island Chain.

Discussions of Pacific strategy regularly reference the US territories in the Marianas but these islands are poorly understood. Guam and the Commonwealth of the Marianas Islands (CNMI) have subtly different status in US law, and each has a non-voting representative in Congress. Both Guam and 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 US military presence, while CNMI, including the smaller and less-populous islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota, hosts only small-scale US 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 US regional military strategy.¹⁷

Palau and the western end of FSM are links in the traditional "chain," but these islands are part of a broader geography and a uniquely complicated relationship with the United States. The shared history and similar political status of Palau, FSM, and RMI make it imperative to consider all three of these island nations together and highlights 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 the Second World War and then devolved sovereignty to the three independent governments under Compacts of Free Association (CFA). The CFAs with FSM and 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.



One Chain, One Cloud: The Second Island Cloud and Key Regional Airfields
 Map created by author, February 2019

These three sovereign nations, known collectively as the Freely Associated States (FAS), receive various forms of financial assistance and public services from the US government and FAS citizens may live and work in the United States, including service in the military. The US 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.¹⁸ Palau has much higher per-capita GDP and has been more successful at investing US assistance than her neighbors. The economic outlook is more discouraging for FMS and RMI as a 2024 deadline looms for both nations to transition away from direct US support in favor of disbursements from a trust fund established in 2003.¹⁹ The trust fund sought to place 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.²⁰

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.”²¹ 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 makes them increasingly vulnerable.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ The importance of Palau and Yap, from which aircraft can range the Philippine Sea, is evident, but the Eastern Carolines also have utility. FSM’s Chuuk, for example, is several 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 both roughly 4,700 kilometers from Okinawa.

The Second Island Cloud’s military potential could grow with the introduction of new capabilities and operational concepts. US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) 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.²⁵ Secondary airfields in the Second Island Cloud could also prove valuable to supporting operations by future “arsenal planes” with large loadouts of standoff weapons, an old concept that gained new energy through a 2016 Strategic Capabilities Office program.²⁶ A growing body of operational literature on new concepts for combat logistics in the Pacific has developed recently, some of it hearkening back to the Second World War and the anchorages surveyed by the likes of Ellis.²⁷ Expeditionary “forward arming and refueling points” at tertiary airports offers the potential of much more dynamic air power, particularly with aircraft capable of operating from austere facilities.²⁸ 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.²⁹ All of these concepts are directly compatible with the Second Island Cloud concept and would benefit from peacetime infrastructure investment throughout the islands.³⁰

Benchmark: Demonstrating Regional Staying Power through the Second Island Cloud

Sustaining and growing US presence in the Second Island Cloud is important for the “springboard” or “barrier” purposes, but also would provide an important benchmark demonstrating to rivals, allies, and partners alike that America 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.³¹ The means to thicken these ties in the Second Island Cloud are primarily non-military and suggest a greater focus on diplomatic, political, and development aspects of US relationships with these islands. Traditional security cooperation with Indonesia and Japan helps ensure the northern anchor remains secure, and US access grows along the southern edge of the Second Island Cloud, although there is room to improve synchronization with other instruments of national power.³² Washington should also reinforce its commitment to its territories in the Marianas, where foreign and domestic policy overlap. Both Guam and CNMI would benefit from enhanced commitments at the federal level to support sustainable economic growth and address labor shortfalls, while creating alternatives to potentially problematic Chinese investment.³³ The Department of Interior-led Interagency Group on Insular Areas (IGIA) was established in 2010 to make recommendations on federal programs in Guam, American Samoa, the United States Virgin Islands and the CNMI.³⁴ The IGIA can play a role in coordinating long-term US 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 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

CNMI could imitate Hawaii's economic success and provide an unmistakable symbol of America's long-term American commitment to regional presence.

Senior level visits are an important currency in diplomacy, particularly with partners like the FAS that get less attention. 2018 saw senior defense officials, including the Under Secretary of the Navy and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, visit under-appreciated parts of the Second Island Cloud.³⁵ Engagement by 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.³⁶ Investing in the economic development of the FAS entails serious challenges but supporting the long-term stability of these US-aligned nations offers a high potential return for the United States. These nations already rely on assistance from multilateral financial institutions, like the Asian Development Bank, and their economic situation leaves them vulnerable to bilateral economic inducements from rivals probing for weakness in the US 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 FSM, 10.5 million to RMI, and less than one million to Palau.³⁷ In the larger context of regional relationships, it is important to note that Palau and RMI are among the few nations that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, making them a target for Chinese coercive diplomatic efforts.³⁸ 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 key industries like 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 base. The ADB notes that, in 2017, revenue from fishing licenses was the primary factor returning the economy of FSM to growth after a period of contraction.³⁹ Monitoring and oversight are essential to effective development programs, but the strategic imperatives suggest the US should accept the risk of some inefficiency in an expanded aid program while continuing to address structural economic reform and corruption. USAID plays only a minor role in the Second Island Cloud, as all assistance is managed through the CFA, but has been active in disaster preparedness in FSM.⁴⁰ Washington should make greater use in the region of USAID in the FAS, which has expertise and mechanisms for providing the needed support while managing the tradeoffs between efficiency and foreign policy objectives. 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 US ally and a leading voice in venues like the Pacific Islands Forum.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

Counterarguments

There are strategic, financial, political, and operational arguments against a deeper US commitment to the region. At the strategic level, some might argue that an enhanced US 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 US government. Politically, enhancing military presence in territories where the population are not US citizens or do not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship could contribute to a narrative of the United States as an exploitative neo-colonial 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 paper is also not the first argument 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.⁴³

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 fifty years of after America 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. Geostrategist Nichols Spykman in 1942 foresaw that technological change and political shifts could one day make Chinese air power more dominant than British, Japanese, or American sea power in what he called the “Asian Mediterranean.”⁴⁴ In only thirty 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.⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ In addition to developing new partnerships, America should double down where it is already strong: the Second Island Cloud is squarely aligned to the United States, but US policy must work hard to sustain that alignment and build upon it to our advantage. Ellis’ description of an island cloud aptly captures the complexity and diversity of the key geography but also 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.”⁴⁹

¹ Public domain photograph courtesy of the US Marine Corps. See U.S. Marine Corps, *712H Operation Plan: Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* (1921), republished as FMFRP 12-46 and reissued by Headquarters United States Marine Corps in 1992.

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⁵ Green, 141

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