



If China is to become a world power, Beijing must first become the dominant power in Asia, writes Joseph E Fallon.

If China is to become the dominant power in Asia, Beijing must first break a maritime containment imposed by the three island chains created by the U.S. during the Cold War.

These "chains" described by Chinese authors as "barriers that China must penetrate to achieve freedom of manoeuvre in the maritime domain" have "become benchmarks that in many ways define the field of play as China's regional maritime power expands."

The first island chain, the most important of the three, is 700 nautical miles off the coast of China and extends from the Kuriles to Japan to the Ryukyus to Okinawa to Taiwan to the Philippines to Malaysia and encloses the East China and South China Seas. From here, the U.S. could blockade China's ports, neutralize China's navy, and cripple China's economy.

The second island chain extends as far as 1800 nautical miles from China's coast stretching from Japan to Guam to Palau to Indonesia.

The third island chain runs from the Aleutian Islands to the Hawaiian Islands to the Line Islands to Tonga to New Zealand. Chinese authorities have referred to this chain as "a 'strategic rear area' for the US military".

If China is to break these island chains, Beijing must possess a "blue water" navy with "the ability to exercise sea control at wide ranges", an "archipelago" of naval bases dotted across the Pacific Ocean, and successfully "Finlandize" New Zealand. This is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the process whereby a country is induced to favor, or refrain from opposing, the interests of a more powerful country, despite not being politically allied to it (originally with reference to the influence of the former Soviet Union on its neighbour Finland)."

If China could detach Wellington from New Zealand's traditional alliance with Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as exemplified in the "Five Eyes" intelligence sharing agreement, Beijing could significantly improve its strategic position in the Pacific at the expense of the United States.

China is pursuing all three objectives.

Beijing is building its "blue water" navy. "Ship by ship, port by port, China has over the past two decades been assembling one of the essential engines of global power: a modern navy capable of projecting force far from home." Dr. Patrick Cronin, Center for New American Security, believes "By 2030, the existence of a global Chinese navy will be an important, influential and fundamental fact of international politics."

China is establishing, or seeking to establish, an "archipelago" of naval bases sprinkled across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In the Indian Ocean, Beijing has established a chain of bases, referred to as a "string of pearls" that stretch from China to Thailand to Myanmar to Bangladesh to Sri Lanka to the Maldives to Pakistan to Djibouti. China denies they are military bases, insisting they are "conventional shipping facilities designed to connect China's landlocked western provinces to maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

In 2019, however, the U.S. Defense Department reported that China's "efforts to obtain access to commercial ports in Africa, the Middle-East and South Asia would align with its future overseas logistic needs...These bases, and other improvements to the PLA's ability to project power during the next decade, will increase China's ability to deter by military force and sustain operations abroad."

These naval bases, in fact, constitute Beijing's own "island chain". They complement Beijing's network of roads connecting China to Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan and serve to complete China's encirclement of India, U.S. ally and regional rival.

In addition, Wilson Vorndick, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, noted "what is particularly interesting is that these 'islands' almost directly parallel U.S. military presence in the Indian Ocean".

In the Pacific Ocean, Beijing's initial strategy concentrated on the South China Sea, a body of water that "encompasses several hundred small islands, reefs, and atolls, almost all uninhabited and uninhabitable, within a 1.4 million square mile area." In 2010, Beijing classified the South China Sea a "core interest" to national security. Elevating its geostrategic importance to the level of Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. The state-controlled Global Times newspaper wrote that this designation meant China had the right to use military means to defend its claims.ÂÂ

Citing Chinese historical records and the "nine-dash line" map, Beijing claims sovereignty over 90 percent of the South China Sea, its islands, waters, seabed, and airspace. Despite international objections, in 2013 China began constructing "artificial island fortresses" in the disputed territories of the Paracel Islands, which are contested by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and the Spratly Islands, which are contested by China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. (See also U K Defence Forum paper on these islands dated 1999)

Beijing then focused on breaking the first island chain and establishing a presence in the Western Pacific. On August 2, 2013, the 86th anniversary of the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China, China held a joint sea exercise with Russia. Chinese warships "entered the Pacific through the Soya Strait...between the Russian island of Sakhalin and the Japanese island of Hokkaido...the ships crossed the Miyako Strait between Japan's Miyako and Okinawa islands on their return voyage to Qingdao, headquarters of the North China Sea Fleet. The move marks the first trip by the Chinese navy circumnavigating the Japanese archipelago."

Du Wenlong, PLA's Academy of Military Science, commenting on the significance of this event, stated "The Chinese navy has the capability to cut the first island chain into several pieces...Now the chain is fragmented."

In 2015, Yu Chang Sen wrote in "The Pacific Islands in Chinese Geo-strategic Thinking", National Center of Oceania Studies, Sun Yat-sen University, China's "maritime great power dream will not become true if the second island chain remains intact."

On June 7, 2019, Asia Times reported Beijing was in talks to establish a base in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. If Beijing were able to establish a naval base on Vanuatu it would breach both the Second and Third Island Chains.

China's efforts to fragment the third island chain include an attempt to "Finlandize" New Zealand. In 2017, newspapers, academicians, and intelligence agencies began reporting China was targeting New Zealand, the supposed "soft underbelly" of the "Five Eyes". Beijing's ability to infiltrate, interfere, and influence New Zealand is a result of Wellington's growing economic dependence on China.

China is New Zealand's largest goods trading partner and second largest services trading partner. Beijing is exploiting this advantage to conduct espionage. China is using "business tie-ups with companies, universities and research centres" to "influence activities and to provide access to military technology, commercial secrets and other strategic information".

In December 2017, the Financial Times reported "briefings provided to [Prime Minister] Ardern by New Zealand national security chiefs have raised fresh concerns about political interference coming from Beijing."

This confirmed the findings of Professor Anne-Marie Brady, University of Canterbury, in "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping". Professor Brady reported that "Beijing has worked to place pro-China individuals in the leadership of ethnic Chinese associations in New Zealand, and has managed donations to the country's political parties."

Such attempts to influence New Zealand public opinion have been relatively successful. A 2017 Massey University online survey found a plurality of New Zealanders (42.5 percent) would choose closer bilateral relations with China rather than the U.S. or U.K.

There are three reasons for China to target New Zealand in its quest to break the island chains and become a global power.

First, New Zealand administers the defense and foreign affairs of neighboring Niue, Tokelau, and Cook Islands, offering China a possibility to expand its military presence in the South Pacific and fragment the third island chain.

Second, New Zealand, Niue, Tokelau and Cook Islands represent "four potential votes for China at international forums."

Third, New Zealand is the Western Pacific country closest to Antarctica with a territorial claim on the continent. New Zealand could function as a "port" facilitating shipments to and from China's Antarctic bases.

China has been positioning, itself, to become a leading power in Antarctica. It has established five research stations on the continent, only the U.S. and Russia have more. These are state-of-the-art facilities. Three are located along the coast, "Great Wall", "Zhongshan", and "Ross Sea". The last is situated at Terra Nova Bay on the strategic Ross Sea in the territory claimed by New Zealand, the Ross Dependency. The other two research stations, Kunlun and Taishan, are located deep in the interior of Antarctica. Taishan is assumed to function as a relay station between Kunlun and the coastal stations.

Since many satellites pass over the continent, Antarctica has a military value. "In its 13th five-year plan (Part IX), Beijing listed 'the development of real-time online monitoring systems and overseas observation (monitoring) stations for the marine environment' as one of its major aims, not just for the Antarctic but for the ocean as a whole." When up and running, "no vessel could move in the Southern Ocean without Beijing knowing about it."

If such a real-time online monitoring system based in Antarctica could be linked to Chinese bases in the South Pacific - Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, or Vanuatu - and the Western Pacific - Palau, Micronesia, or Marshall Islands, the three are freely associated states with the U.S., but subject to growing Chinese influence - Beijing could "break" the second and third island chains by "seeing" Washington's naval deployments in real-time, thereby undercutting the U.S. position in the Pacific.

If China possesses a "blue water" navy, overseas bases, and a real-time global monitoring system, Beijing can dominate, through intimidation alone, East and South Asia. This would be a prelude to achieving world power status for a totalitarian dictatorship that persecutes dissidents and ethnic and religious minorities. Depending upon which foreign policy it chooses to follow, "Five Eyes" or "Finlandize", New Zealand is in a position to either obstruct or facilitate China's ambition.

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