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China's Search for a Maritime Periphery around the SCS: The Pacific Islands and the Bay of Bengal

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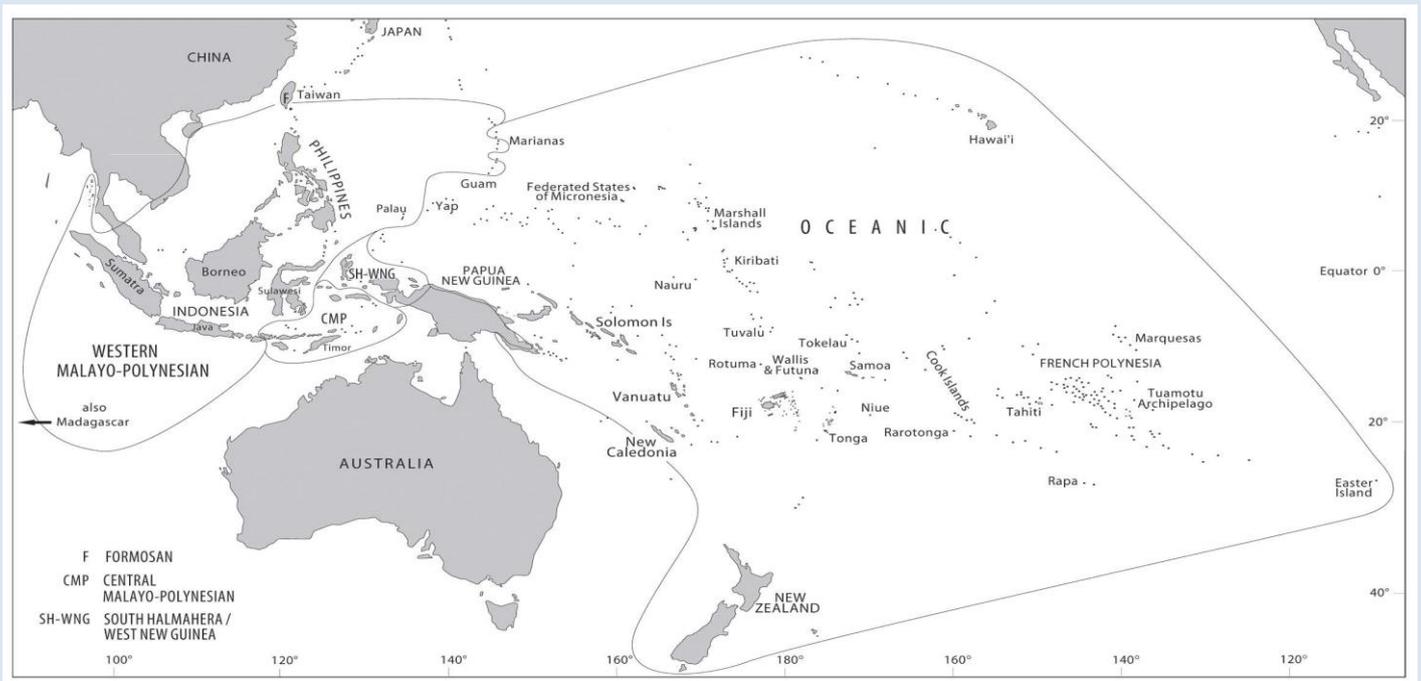


Image Source: Jennifer L. Gaynor, "Maritime Southeast Asia: Not Just a Crossroads", *Maritime Asia*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2014



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Even as the global community pays attention to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, China has been continuing its expansionist propensity, this time to the Pacific islands and possibly next to the Eastern Indian Ocean, including the Bay of Bengal, to create a maritime periphery around the South China Sea (SCS). China is working to establish regional hegemony in the SCS, with aspirations for broader influence and control of the Indian and Pacific Oceans - the far seas. The SCS is a virtual lake, part of China's near-seas and active defence strategy, surrounded by a Southeast Asian archipelago, and the choke points between the islands are crucial to China's sea lanes of communication as well as its naval strategy. Expanding naval influence outside Southeast Asia and establishing a maritime periphery would serve to protect trade routes, undeterred access to the choke points from the open ocean, and also allow easy passage of naval ships for far-seas operations.

On April 19, 2022, China announced it had signed a framework agreement on security cooperation with the Solomon Islands,¹ part of the Pacific Islands, which includes Fiji and Papua New Guinea, a first-of-its-kind arrangement with a Pacific island state that could pave the way for expanding overseas Chinese naval influence well beyond the SCS. The Solomon Islands' Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, says the deal does not include plans for a Chinese military base,² while China will assist the Solomons to "strengthen capacity building in safeguarding its own security".³ However, a draft proposal leaked in March indicated China could "make ship visits to carry out logistical replenishment in and have stopover and transition in the Solomon Islands," with Chinese forces to be used "to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in the Solomon Islands."⁴

The deal, however, raised concern both in Canberra and in Washington that China could get a military foothold in the South Pacific, threatening Australian and US interests in the region. Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has categorically stated that "a Chinese military base in the Solomon Islands would be a 'red line' for his government," and he is coordinating with the U.S. as well as with the Prime Minister Sogavare to "avoid a naval base in the Solomon Islands".⁵ The Solomon Islands lie about 2,000 kilometres (1,242 miles) off Australia's east coast and sit on a key shipping route linking Australia, New Zealand, Asia, and the U.S.

The Pacific states have received millions of dollars of Chinese BRI investments on various projects,⁶ and courtesy of Beijing's 'helping' hand, the Solomon Islands severed its ties with Taiwan in 2019. Beijing's overture to the Solomons has come on top of a failed commitment by Canberra. In 2016, Australia had agreed to set up a USD 1.5 billion infrastructure fund after two years but could not honour its promise so far. China's expanding maritime influence beyond its traditional sphere of

influence in the East and the South China Seas would open a new tussle between China and the US and its allies which will have wider ramifications in the larger Indo-Pacific.

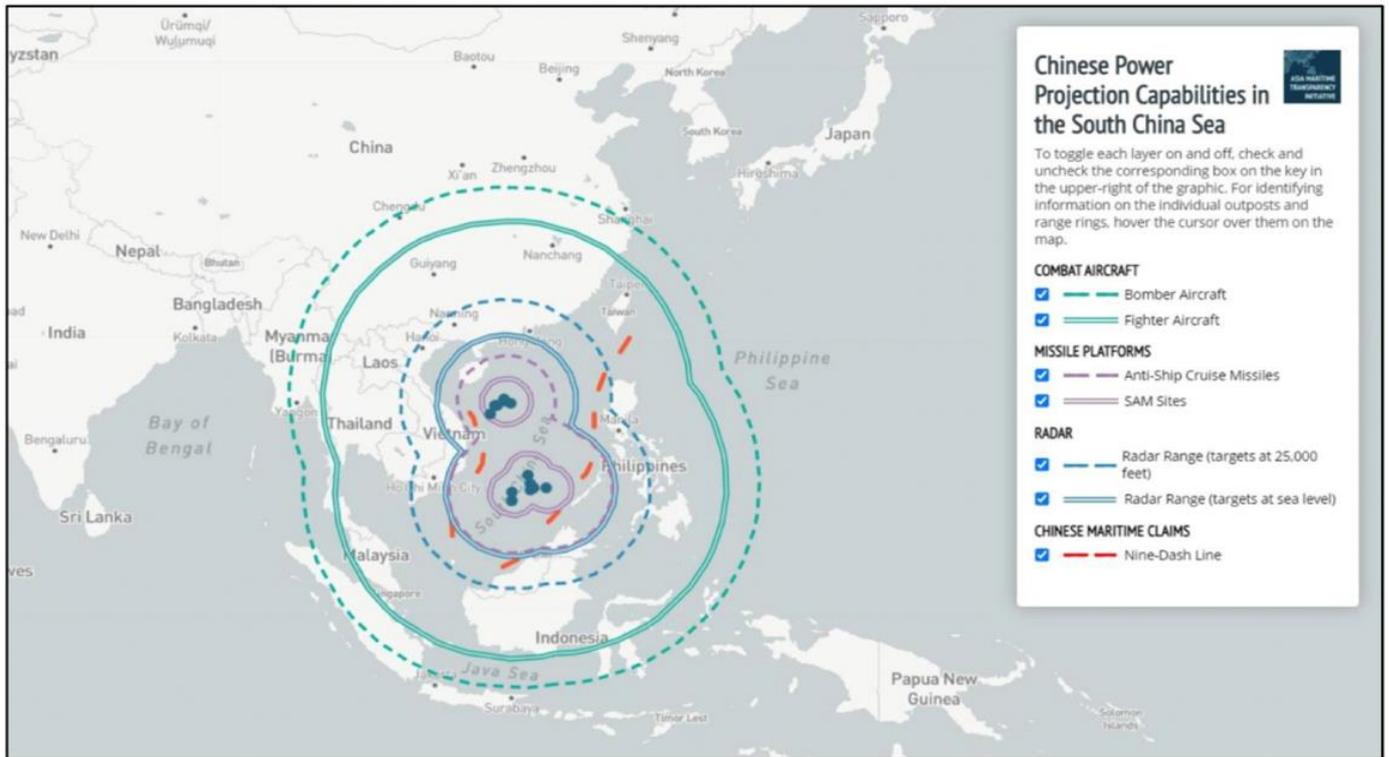
SCS: A 'fortified' Chinese Lake and its Vulnerabilities

China's consolidation of the SCS is almost certain not because of its ability to establish a full spectrum sea control in the SCS but because none of the regional countries nor the US wants to escalate the tension by provoking China. China has set up hangars for fighter aircraft, fixed-weapons positions, barracks, administration buildings, and communication facilities on the artificial islands it created in the Spratly Islands groups.⁷

That suggests China can defend the SCS, but projecting power beyond the SCS region would be difficult for China, given the naval strength of the Quad members. The Quad members from the region - India, Australia, and Japan are enhancing their capabilities, while the US remains the predominant naval power in the region. The US strategy is to contain Chinese naval power past the boundaries of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.⁸ Sustained US naval operations around Southeast Asia can cut off Chinese supply routes and aid, inflicting severe damage to Chinese power projection and making the country more or less locked inside the "first island chain".⁹

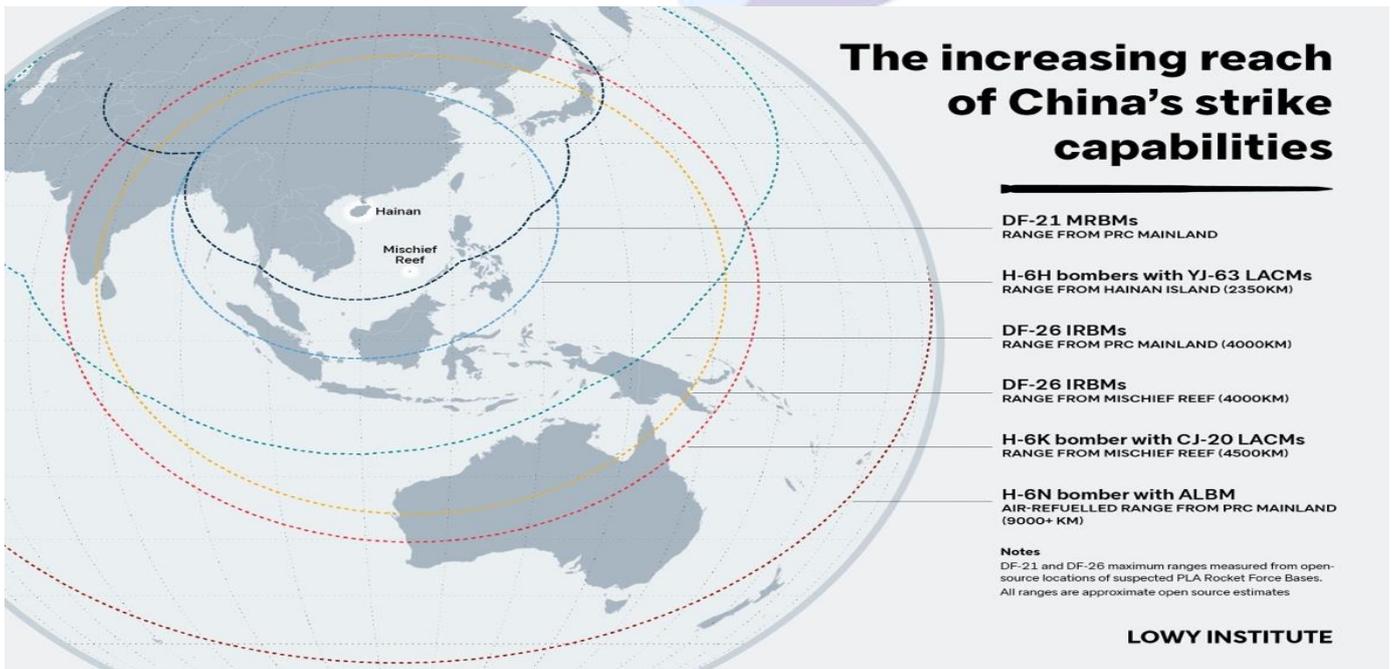
In this regard, getting a military foothold in the Pacific islands is important for China as it is looking to prevent the US from accessing the near seas, thus getting undeterred passage of commercial and naval ships through the choke points to the open ocean. From the artificial islands created in the southern part of the SCS, China can target the US base at Darwin and many parts of Australia, only with DF26D anti-ship missiles or with land-attack cruise missiles (LACM) and air-launched ballistic missiles (ALBM) from H6 Bombers (Figure 1 & 2). A 'dual use' port with berthing facilities for the Chinese Navy ships in the Solomons would help partially mitigate China's concern about the US threat to its interests.

Figure 1: PLAAF’s combat radius from current airbases in the SCS



Source: CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Chinese Power Projection Capabilities in the South China Sea,” <https://amti.csis.org/chinese-power-projection/>, accessed on April 28, 2022.

Figure 2: PLA Power Projection from the SCS



Source: Thomas Shugart, “Australia and the Growing Reach of China’s Military”, The Lowy Institute, August 9, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-and-growing-reach-china-s-military>, accessed on April 28, 2022.

A maritime influence in both the South Pacific and the Eastern Indian Ocean (including the Bay of Bengal) would help overcome the US' threat to China's power projection strategy. Beijing has been enhancing its military capabilities in the western part of the SCS, aiming to get a strategic hold on the Malacca Strait and further into the East Indian Ocean. It has attempted to revamp a Cambodian naval base in Ream, built by the US in Sihanouk province in the Gulf of Thailand, and an old Dara Sakor airbase, 40 km away from the Ream base. The Wall Street Journal in July 2019 revealed a secret agreement between China and Cambodia granting the Chinese Navy access to the base, rejecting the US offer to repair the base, creating anxiety about the Chinese larger game plan for power projection.¹⁰ Though both countries have rejected the report, China has stepped up the construction activities at both the locations, including a massive 3,400-metre airstrip at Dara Sakor, which would be able to accommodate many of the aircraft operated by the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF),¹¹ and new buildings and a road, along with dredging activities for creating a deep port for berthing larger military ships, at Ream Naval Base¹². From the Cambodian facilities, China can project power in the East Indian Ocean and will get air cover up to the west of the Andaman and Nicobar islands (Figure: 3).

Figure 3: PLAAF's Air cover with J-16 from Dara Sakor



Source: Marcus Mohlin, "A Panama Canal for Asia: An analysis of China's role in Cambodia and implications for international security", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2021, pp. 235-244, p. 238

Options for India

The Bay of Bengal is fast becoming a key area of economic and strategic component of the Indo-Pacific. China's trade routes and naval access to the Indian Ocean are going through the chokepoints associated with the region. India should utilise China's vulnerabilities in the region, such as the 'Malacca Dilemma', and alter them to India's advantage. India has to strengthen its military infrastructure to counter China, independent where India is capable of facing the Chinese threat individually (Atmanirbhar), and assist regional countries to strengthen their capabilities. Similarly, India has to conduct more military exercises in the region to signal our strength and status, demonstrating the capability to deter an expansionist China. India has to strengthen its cooperation with the Bay of Bengal littoral countries and enhance diplomatic, economic, and peaceful military engagements with them. Also, India can initiate military exercises with the countries of the Bay of Bengal, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Conclusion

To counter China, India has to devise an A2AD strategy centred on the Eastern Indian Ocean, comprising internal and external balancing tactics. The Bay of Bengal is India's area of influence where India should focus on strengthening its own capabilities, which includes strengthening the Eastern Air Command (EAC) at Shillong and fortification of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) at Port Blair. While out of the southern part of the Eastern Indian Ocean, a coordinated strategy with Australia and the US would help prevent Chinese maritime influence in the region.

NOTES

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³ Krishnan, n. 1.

⁴ Ruth Pollard, Bloomberg, "The West forgot about the Pacific Islands. China didn't", *The Japan Times*, April, 20, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/04/20/commentary/world-commentary/west-forgets-pacific-islands/>, accessed on April 22, 2022.

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⁶ National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), “Success stories of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands”, People’s Republic of China, July 27, 2021, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/news/mediarsources/202107/t20210727_1291826.html, accessed on April 26, 2022.

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⁸ Daniel E. Ward, “Going to War with China? Dust off Corbett”, *Proceedings*, US Naval Institute, January 2020, p.56-60.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold and Rob Taylor, “Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China’s Quest for Military Network”, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482>, accessed on April 27, 2022.

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¹² CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “China Continues to Transform Ream Naval Base”, October 12, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/changes-underway-at-cambodias-ream-naval-base/>. Accessed on April 28, 2022.

