

GEOPOLITICS: ISLAND CHAIN

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The island chain off mainland Asia in the Western Pacific has historically had an outsized impact on geopolitical strategy and stability. This book tackles systematically the close relationship between geopolitics and international cooperation and competition, as well as the important role and relevance of these islands in this context.

The necklace of volcanic islands running south to north off Eurasia's eastern coast represents, in geopolitical terms, the "first line" of defense in postwar US strategic efforts to contain Russia, North Korea, and China. With Cold War vibes once again shaping the US-China relationship, Taiwan, at the center of this Western Pacific island chain and a visceral target of Chinese territorial ambition, is being increasingly discussed as a potential flashpoint for war. *Geopolitics: Island Chain* details the perspectives of thirteen subject experts from Taiwan on the strategic importance and position of this island chain and its effect on global geopolitics.

The first of this book's seven chapters discusses the defining differences between traditionally land-power and maritime-power based states, and how these may influence their respective standing and prospects in this island chain. Chapter Two launches into the region's history, the emergence of the concept of these islands as a geopolitical barrier, and its shadow over post-Korean War geopolitics. Chapter Three discusses the natural and cultural heritage of these islands and disputes over reefs and islets in the East and South China Seas. In Chapter Four, the authors attempt an overall analysis of major-power views and strategies with regards to this island chain. Chapter Five explores the current status of the island chain, and Chapter Six examines Taiwan's relationship with the overall island chain from the perspectives of international relations, socioeconomics, military strategy, and national defense. The final



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chapter spotlights the authors' varied perspectives on various island-chain-related issues.

Geopolitics is an erratic and ever-changing game, and plenty of articles and books may be found on most any political situation or potential flashpoint. This book was written to provide an easily digestible introduction to the background and current situation in East Asia's island chain in hopes of injecting a uniquely "Taiwan perspective" on relevant issues into the broader discourse.

Geopolitics Editorial Department

地緣政治編輯部

This book, under the chief editorship of Eric Lin, benefits from the insights and experience of five international affairs experts (Li Shi-Hui, Albert Chiu, Matteo Chang, Tang Chih-Mao, and Liu Bih-Rong), three geopolitical researchers (Ou Si-Fu, Huang An-Hao, and Chai Wen-Chung), one high-ranking military officer (Chang Yen-ting), one popular geography educator (Wu Yang-Jui), and three senior international observers (Ko Pi-Chen, Tao Yu-Jung, and Lin Chun-Yu). In clear prose and easy-to-decipher graphs, each provides insightful new analysis, elucidating problems and potential solutions sensitive to the region's geography, international relations, strategic priorities, economics, industries and trade flows, cultural landscape, and points of chronic friction.

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By Geopolitics Editorial Department

Translated by Paul Cooper

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Chapter 1: Understanding the Geopolitics of Island Chains

Reemerging Importance of Island Chains

Text by Lin Chun-yu

With a new cold war emerging, the island chains are resurgent, with Taiwan at the center of conflict. Geopolitics can provide the most realistic perspective on this dynamic.

The Sleeping Lion Has Awakened, and It Is Roaring

The Pacific island chain strategy was born out of a rare confluence of natural geology and international relations. Recent East Asian international relations history is a story of confrontation between sea and land powers, with island chains playing a central role.

Two classic metaphors illustrate the importance of the island chain strategy: the "lion awakes" and the "clash of spear and shield."

The first metaphor derives from a well-known quote widely attributed to Napoleon: "China is a sleeping lion, and when the sleeping lion awakes, the whole world will tremble." On the map, along the eastern side of the Eurasian continent, three archipelagos extend out into the Western Pacific. They may be likened to three waves of sound projected by the land power China's roar or to three layers of chains used by the sea powers to keep that landbound lion in check.

The Pacific island chains, formed through tectonic collision and compression, are separated from the Eurasian continent by marginal seas, marked by rapid ocean currents and strong typhoons during the typhoon season in the summer months, which, while connecting these islands to the continent, also make them difficult to reach over water. From its earliest beginnings, China has been threatened mainly by the various nomadic peoples living along its northwest frontier, and, throughout its history, China has had to expend considerable manpower and financial resources to build and maintain the Great Wall in the north to prevent these peoples from encroaching south. By contrast, the Chinese have had little time to pay attention to the rich resources beyond the coastline to the south and west, taking a relatively passive approach in dealing with attacks by *wokou* (Japanese pirates) off the coast.

During the Age of Exploration, Western nations sought to extend their reach to the Orient, and European sea powers set up bases of operations in these island chains, from which they could knock on the gate of China. During the nineteenth century, the sea power of Great Britain initiated

the First Opium War against the Qing Empire, after which Hong Kong Island in the south of China was ceded to the British. Subsequently, France gained Vietnam as a colony in the Sino-French War and Japan gained control over Penghu and Taiwan after the First Sino-Japanese War. The Western sea powers had maritime power bases, and took advantage of the decline and weakness of the Qing Empire to extend their influence in China through footholds within the empire obtained either outright or leased at highly preferential terms. The “sleeping lion” had not only been trussed, it was being dismembered.

Taiwan: At the Center of Spear and Shield

After the Second World War, the island chain strategy took on a different form, which may be explained using the aforementioned spear-and-shield metaphor.

The influence of communism spread south from Soviet Union in the north down throughout China and into parts of Indochina. The US, a sea power, conceptualized an island chain strategy as a maritime Iron Curtain to contain the spread of communism. This strategy successfully contained communist influence to the Eurasian continent and heralded the start of the Cold War.

The maritime Iron Curtain proved extremely effective for several decades in the late twentieth century, not only limiting the spread of ambitions of the land powers but also leading communist China to implement economic reforms and the policy of opening up, transforming the country into the “world’s factory” and the main engine of globalization as well as a crucial global trading partner.

However, the island chain nations and Western countries had made a serious misjudgment, mistakenly thinking that economic growth and modernization would eventually result in China’s democratization. The lengths to which the Chinese Communist Party system would go to maintain its grip on power went far beyond what the outside world anticipated, and it was Western economies that became increasingly dependent on China’s manufacturing chain and consumer market. China, they discovered, had begun to challenge the world democratic order. However, by the time this realization had sunk in, the optimum time for constraining this land power’s ambition had already passed.

It is as if, as Soochow University political science professor Liu Bih-Rong noted, the three Pacific island chain archipelagos are a spear and shield drawn by the hand of God for the purpose of geopolitical competition. A glance at the map shows China as a “spear” protruding into the Western Pacific, wanting to transform itself into a sea power and pierce the Pacific Ocean. An alliance of the US, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia form the shield in this scenario, with the island chains creating successive layers of containment nets that help maintain the status quo in the Western Pacific.

On the map, whether viewed north to south or east to west, Taiwan is located at the intersection of the confrontation between the two opposing sides, serving both as the tip of the “continental spear” and the handgrip of the “maritime shield” while playing a central role in the

global semiconductor industry's supply chain.

Realignment: Five Points

The spear and shield confrontation between the sea and land powers has realigned the importance of the island chains.

In the north of this island chain, South Korea, which was originally on good terms with China, has now taken sides. Economically, it has joined the “Chip 4 Alliance” with Taiwan, the US, and Japan, while politically, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has made it clear that China presents a security threat, that the Taiwan issue is an international issue, and that the US-South Korea military alliance is of tantamount importance.

In April 2023, President Yoon and US President Joe Biden signed the Washington Declaration, which granted US nuclear submarines permission to dock at South Korean ports. This is the first such agreement made in over forty years, and, with the US “Boomer Submarine” capable of carrying twenty Trident II “nation-killer” ballistic missiles, it is an effective deterrent against North Korea and a further reason for China to think twice about challenging the status quo in the region.

However, at the center of the island chain, the tacit agreement between China and Taiwan regarding the Taiwan Strait median line acting as the boundary separating their mutual sovereignties has been broken, with China's People's Liberation Army now breaching this line on a regular basis.

In 2019, after news broke of Taiwan purchasing F-16V jets from the US, China responded by flying fighter jets close to the median line, with Taiwan dispatching fighters to shadow and monitor their activity. In 2022, then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan to underscore America's commitment to maintaining its friendly relations with Taiwan, after which China began ignoring prior precedent about not crossing the median line. Chinese fighter jets and naval vessels now repeatedly crossed the line, attempting to establish a “new normal” of violating the median line.

At the southern end of the island chain, China has extended its reach into the South China Sea, constructing artificial islands and military airports. It even started broadcasting local weather reports as well as building movie theaters, coffee shops, supermarkets, banks, hospitals, post offices, and hot pot restaurants to foster an image in the media of everyday civilian life there to bolster its claims to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea area.

In 2023, in response to China's frequent activity in the area and after a five-year hiatus, the US and the Philippines reinstated the Balikatan military drills, after which the US also held the Exercise Cope Thunder military exercise. In 2022, the US and Indonesia elevated the scale of the Garuda Shield bilateral joint military exercise to include fourteen participating countries under the name “Super Garuda Shield”.

To the east of the island chain, Australia, which acts as the hub of the second and third island chains, has found itself within range of Chinese missiles, and, as such, can no longer rely on its geographic isolation to guarantee national security. In recent years, Australia has been

working to implement a nuclear submarine program, and has been assisting South Pacific Island nations such as East Timor and Papua New Guinea in the realms of trade, finance, and infrastructure development to reduce their reliance on China.

China, for its part, further ramped up its Belt and Road Initiative, investing in and creating infrastructure construction projects, and providing financial assistance to South Pacific island nations. The US has tried to bolster preparedness by discussing formal cooperation with Taiwan's diplomatic allies Palau and the Marshall Islands, which may allow the US military a presence in their territories. The US has also signed an MOU with Micronesia, and it is anticipated that Micronesia may at some point establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Significantly, the Chinese weather balloons that drifted east and crossed into mainland US airspace in early 2023 raised US public awareness of the direct threat posed by China, and, from this point onward, US public opinion began supporting a more confrontational approach to China in international affairs.

In South Asia, India, originally considered as having little to do with either the Pacific or its island chains, found itself having to address the "String of Pearls" strategy being employed by China to encircle India to the south. It was this that ushered India into the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and expanded its geopolitical thinking to considerations of the security of the Western Pacific island chains. As a democratic nation, it joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) with the US, Japan, and Australia, and realigned its foreign policy stance to support the tenets of the Act East Policy. This has given India a more active security role in East Asia and has expanded its military relations with other nations in the region.

Where Next? Geopolitics as the Solution

Island chains are resurgent, and all eyes are on the tensions at the center of the first island chain, with significant attention given to what Taiwan will do next. The geopolitical landscape cannot change overnight, but the question is how can Taiwan take control of the situation to turn its geographic situation into a "spear and shield" of its own to avoid being used as a mere pawn in the ongoing game between land and sea powers. As Taiwan is an island, should it view the world from a land power or sea power mindset? Might it gain control of the island chain using its inherent economic and cultural strengths?

Will Taiwan's proactive deployment of a three-dimensional strategy incorporating land, sea and air defense necessarily increase tensions? Should the Taiwanese stand firm on their democratic values, or would pursuing a more China-friendly path dissipate some of the current tensions in Cross-Strait relations? Geopolitics points to solutions to these questions, as it facilitates discernment of the most practical and realistic path. Looking at a map and disassembling its constituent pieces will shed insightful light on the current circumstances, the problems, and the potential solutions in the island chains as well as on which "black swan" events are most likely to come to pass. The process of thinking over these issues will gradually produce

insights pointing the best way forward.

In this new cold war between sea and land powers, the value of the island chains is being redefined. Thus, understanding geopolitics will be critical to providing Taiwan the best path forward to divesting itself of nationalistic and ideological frameworks. Only then, starting from an understanding of the most pertinent characteristics of island chain geopolitics, can Taiwan move confidently and strategically forward.

The Characteristics of Island Chains

Feature 1: Confrontation Between Maritime and Land Powers

He Who Controls the Island Chain Controls the World

“Sea power” and “land power” are the two most important concepts to consider in the study of geopolitics.

Sea power involves the belief that a nation need only to control the oceans to dominate the world. In other words, sea power nations pursue a maritime strategy to secure military security and, in turn, ensure national prosperity. In particular, this strategic approach emphasizes securing and maintaining the ability for rapid and free movement on the seas, which, through the resultant ability to allocate and manage global trade routes, bolsters major power status.

Land power perceives Eurasia as a global hub that is easily defended and difficult to attack. Thus, control of Afro-Eurasia is the key to controlling the world. The strategic thinking revolves around expanding territorial holdings to gain access to the greatest amount of natural and human resources so that, even if maritime trade routes are blocked, continental resources may still be tapped to maintain and sustain national power. As such, the more territory controlled, the better.

Combining the assertions of both sea and land powers, US political scientist Nicholas Spykman proposed the Rimland Theory that helps shape today’s global strategic perspective. According to this theory, whoever controls the coastal perimeter, i.e., the “rimland”, controls all of Eurasia, and control over Eurasia essentially means holding control over the destiny of the world. The island chains, located in the marginal seas off Eurasia’s eastern seaboard, seem to conform to the Rimland Theory, making them the main focus of competition and conflict between the major land and sea power players.

Each of the three island-chain layers east of the Eurasian continent is connected along a north-south axis and possess considerable trade and military value. Importantly, the first island chain, cleaving most closely to the continental coast, runs astride the shortest and busiest shipping route between Northeast Asia and Europe.

The Delicate Balance Between Sea and Land Powers

A ship sailing from a Japanese port at the northern end of the island chain can dock at countries along its route southward, taking on containers as it goes. Stopping at Taiwan and the Philippines

on the way, and then sailing into the South China Sea, the ship will eventually arrive at Singapore. If it continues on through the narrow Strait of Malacca, it can proceed on to India and then, perhaps, to Europe. This route through the marginal seas is also the oil lifeline between East Asian nations and the Middle East. As a result, the country that controls this island chain has ready access to a chokehold on the pulse of global trade.

The idea that “he who controls the island chain controls the world” was true as far back as the 15th century. At the time, European ships set sail to the Indo-Pacific searching for trade. The great seafaring nations of the day built military bases on islands in what is today Indonesia and the Philippines as well as on Taiwan as staging posts from which to trade with the region’s larger states. After the Second World War, the power dynamics among Asian powers changed. Communism, after establishing itself in the Soviet Union, gradually spread its influence east and southward, with communist governments coming to power in North Korea, China, and Vietnam. In response, the sea powers, led by the United States, built up a maritime network to constrain the continued spread using a strategy involving the three island chains.

Island chains are also the fulcrum upon which the balance of power between sea and land powers rests. When relations between these powers are good, island chain nations are free to develop their full potential as staging posts for trade. However, souring relations can have difficult outcomes such as the withdrawal of the US military from the Philippines.

Feature 2: Island Chain Nations Are Maritime by Nature

As Islands, Island Chains Are Generally Regarded as Sea Powers

Under the framework of geopolitics, we can assess whether a country is a land or sea power using three factors: geographic features, relations with neighboring countries, and location within the global strategic landscape.

The geographic features of a country, including location, territorial extent, terrestrial topography, climatic and hydrological conditions, natural resources, land area, and population, influences its strategic thinking.

The state of relations with neighboring countries, including comparative land areas, strengths and weaknesses, number of countries, border characteristics, and offensive and defensive considerations, all influence the geopolitical competitive relationship a nation shares with other countries.

Finally, a country’s position within the global strategic landscape establishes its relative importance, its risk of becoming a point of conflict, and its potential alliance strategies.

From a contemporary geopolitical perspective, the territory of a land power nation is continental, and the main strategic goal is to secure land route advantages via territorial expansion and ice-free harbors as protection against being besieged. Russian and China are prime examples of land power nations.

Sea power nations prioritize trade interests, and have the strategic goal of maintaining

free passage through and control over maritime trade routes. Establishing and sustaining transoceanic international alliances are thus crucial to maintaining these routes. The US, the UK, and Japan are examples of modern-day sea power nations.

Island chain nations are defined as countries surrounded completely by the sea. As such, their strategic development will tend to use strategies typical of sea power nations, focusing on the buildup and development of naval, air force, and sea port infrastructures.

When Sea and Land Powers Face Off, Island Chain Nations Must Take Sides

During times of peace, island chain nations can pursue close trade relations with land and sea powers and cultivate strategic affiliations with both. However, when tensions rise, island chain nations must choose sides and do not have the luxury of remaining neutral in conflicts, hot or cold, between sea and land powers.

Importantly, as island chain nations are essentially sea powers, they tend to align naturally with other sea powers during times of conflict to avoid subjugation by the land power, either through buyout or occupation, and subsequent use as springboards for future land power ambitions further out into the island chains.