

Small Island Strategies in the Indo-Pacific by Large Powers

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—The article delineates, explains and evaluates large powers' use of small islands in the Indo-Pacific.

Design—Island studies, the dual land-sea features of islands, relevant balancing theory, and the geopolitical and geo-economic nature of islands in the Indo-Pacific are explained in the Introduction. This is followed by main sections which pinpoint island strategies pursued by its leading powers—China, India, Japan, the U.S. and France. Finally, the article concludes with puzzles and paradoxes arising from the preceding evaluation, and the continuity and change concerning the strategic value and place of islands for the U.S., France, India, China and Japan in the Indo-Pacific. The concluding paragraphs sum up the puzzles and paradoxes in their island strategies, and continuity and change in the strategic role of islands.

Findings—Firstly, the article finds that China's success in island strategy has generated greater use of island resources by other states and mutual strategic cooperation over their island assets. Secondly, it finds that Alfred Mahan's concepts of *seapower* value in islands are still valid but have been supplemented by various changes. These changes are three-fold. Some are military: the move from coal power to oil and nuclear power, the arrival of aircraft carriers and submarines, the advent of missiles and airpower. Some are technological: the ability of states to physically shape and create new island formation in the Indo-Pacific. Some are legal: in particular the United Nations Convention (UNCLOS) generating exclusive economic zones' rising significance in the Indo-Pacific.

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Originality, Value—Firstly, a new application of island studies (nissology) onto great power strategy. Secondly, a new application of inter-state balancing theories onto Indo-Pacific islands. Thirdly, the intertwining of geopolitics and geo-economics. Fourthly, the application of continuity and change onto islands' role.

Keywords: China, France, India, Indo-Pacific, islands, Japan, U.S.

I. Introduction

In recent years the “Indo-Pacific,” the waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as connected by the South China Sea, has emerged as an increasingly important strategic concept. Within these waters, there are a myriad of small islands: a “cloud of islands” (Ellis), a “sea of islands” (Hau’ofa).¹ As President Franklin Roosevelt once said, across the Pacific, “islands, hundreds of them, appear only as small dots on most maps. But they cover a large strategic area.”² Some of these small islands are independent, perhaps facing the general challenge of being “pawns in the game of international interests and territorial powers.”³ Such Indo-Pacific islands are the source of inter-state competition⁴—in the Indian Ocean between China and India⁵; and in the Pacific between China and the U.S., and between China and Japan.⁶ Some of these islands are possessions of large rimland (China, India, Japan, U.S.) and metropolitan (France) states.⁷ Despite their size, small islands have been called “game changers” with “enduring significance” in the region.⁸

The article first invokes relevant theory applications. It then analyzes and evaluates the island strategies pursued in the Indo-Pacific by its leading powers—China, India, Japan, the U.S. and France. Finally, the article concludes with puzzles and paradoxes arising from the preceding evaluation, and continuity and change concerning the strategic value and place of islands.

II. Theory Considerations

This is a study of islands, *nissology*. Whereas most nissology is bottom up, with subaltern studies and post-colonial studies analytically dominant, this study is distinctive by being top down, analyzing large powers' use of small islands in the Indo-Pacific.⁹ Bottom-up nissology underplays or obscures the increasing military and economic value of islands to powerful large states; illustrated here in the Indo-Pacific by China, France, India, Japan and the U.S. Pressure for decolonization of their island holdings and basing facilities remains an ongoing challenge for France (New Caledonia and Polynesia), and for the United States (Diego Garcia). However, Indo-Pacific islands remain subject to a post-colonial counter “island logic” of being too small to sustain meaningful independence, with meaningful agency an issue for them in their relations with such larger powers.¹⁰

Relevant theory drivers for Japan, India, France and the U.S.' island strategies are *realism*-derived; in theoretical terms reflecting *balancing* to counteract China's growing Indo-Pacific presence. The building up of military capabilities on island possessions exemplifies *internal balancing*. Mutual use of island possessions between major powers exemplifies *external balancing*. There is also a deliberate competitive use of naval soft power, aimed at the island states between China on the one hand, and France, India, Japan, the U.S., as well as Australia, on the other.¹¹ Pushing for closer relations and privileges with Indo-Pacific island states has an element of getting small island states *bandwagoning* with them.¹²

Stephen Walt's *balance of threat* theory's criteria of "geographic proximity," reflecting "proximate power" is applicable in the role that islands have for forward power projection (China, India, France, Japan, U.S.) and in generating perceptions of being hemmed in (China, India, Japan).¹³ Walt's threat criteria of "perceived offensive intentions" is apparent as states respond to China's island activities, and indeed as China perceives external *first island chain* restrictions. Mutual fears of island activities spark *security dilemma* spirals of mistrust and further island military reinforcement by China and other states.¹⁴ Paradoxically, as illustrated with Guam, the closer *proximate power* an island has vis-à-vis a perceived threat, the more that island may then become under threat.

Historically, the locational advantages accruing from islands had "undeniable attraction" for large powers, drawing them in a "small islands suction effect" (SISE).¹⁵ Islands continue to serve as logistical staging points.¹⁶ Old classical geopolitics remains in play from 1924 with Ernst Haushofer's "offshore island arcs" still operating as "protective veils" around China and India.¹⁷ Islands in the Indo-Pacific also serve for forward power projection; though the tyranny of distance involved in defending distant islands, the Loss of Strength Gradient (LSG), remains a counter-vailing consideration.¹⁸ Edward Luttwak may have argued that geo-economics is now replacing geopolitics in the "logic of conflict," but the two are entwined, as in reality the location of islands, territorial and maritime, generates geopolitical and geo-economic advantages as well as frictions for states.¹⁹ Geo-culture, national prestige, is also apparent in inter-state island frictions.²⁰

The geo-economics of islands has been profoundly affected by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), whereby "islands" meeting article 121(3) criteria of sustaining either "human habitation" or "economic life" generate 12-nautical mile (nm) territorial waters and 200 nm exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Consequently, "islands, in particular, had the potential to generate maritime zones that would greatly surpass the extension of the land territory of the island itself."²¹ Island-generated EEZs are economic assets for states, involving fisheries, energy and mineral resources on the seabed. Such assets make islands a source of inter-state "resource rivalry."²² Disputed islands are also sources of litigation and the application of international law. Consequently, islands have moved from being geographical descriptors to legal judgements; with *juridical islands* at the heart of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in 2016 on the South China Sea.²³

III. China

Looking west, China seeks control over the uninhabited Diaoyu islands, administered by Japan as the Senkaku islands since 1895. Their surrounding waters are rich in fishing and also potential oil and gas fields. Chinese strategy has been to successfully increase the frequency of its own coast guard, navy and air force appearances around the Senkaku islands—but probably counter-productive as the U.S. has responded by extending security guarantees to Japan over these islands.

Further westward, China seeks to break the “first island chain” (*Di yi dao lian*), namely Japan’s Ryukyu chain and Taiwan.²⁴ China’s growing pressure on the Ryukyu chain is manifested in increasing naval and aircraft deployments, particularly through the Miyako Straits, an international waterway which cuts through the chain.²⁵ Beijing’s increasing economic, political and military pressure on Taiwan, a door to the Western Pacific, has been heightened since 2016 and the arrival of the pro-independence administration of Tsai Ing-wen.²⁶ However, this rising pressure from China has been counterproductive in the light of closer American security support to Taiwan, and Tsai’s presidential re-election victory in 2020.

China’s missile technology has gone from deploying short range missiles threatening Taiwan to successfully developing the intermediate range Dongfeng-26, commissioned in April 2019 with an estimated range up to 2,485 miles. Chinese strategists noted that its “radius of fire should reach to the second island chain” (*Di er dao lian*), including the American stronghold of Guam.²⁷

Further westward, China is pursuing the Pacific island states.²⁸ In part, this is to establish diplomatic recognition at the expense of Taiwan, currently standing 10–4 in Beijing’s favor among the Pacific islands. In part, the drive reflects the geo-economics around the rich fisheries and sea-bed mineral resources found in these states’ EEZs.²⁹ Here, one successful Chinese avenue has been the *China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation* (CPICEDC) mechanism, operating since 2015, though criticisms remain that China’s assistance program binds Pacific Island recipients.³⁰ China’s Pacific drive also involves the potential for these island states to host future bases, though this has yet to materialize.³¹

Looking south, islands are central to China’s thrust toward the South China Sea. Its *9-dash line*, enclosing most of the South China Sea, includes all of the Paracels (Xisha) and Spratleys (Nansha). In an example of *lawfare*, Sansha (Woody Island) was announced as a prefecture-level city within Hainan Island province in 2012, with a notional population of around 1,000. Further separate district levels were announced for the Paracels and for the Spratleys in April 2020, the latter located on Fiery Cross Reef. Geo-economics is a factor. The South China Sea has rich fisheries stocks, where Chinese fishing boats are an active presence, while significant potential reserves of undiscovered oil and gas are thought to be present in the South China Sea. However, China’s development of energy fields has so far mainly focused on northeast areas by Hainan Island, rather than in disputed waters deeper in the South China Sea.

China expelled South Vietnamese forces from the Paracels (Xisha) in 1974. Viet-

nam still maintains claims, but to little effect. The largest Paracels formation is Woody Island (Yongxing Dao), with a land area of just over one square mile. China has successfully conducted substantial land reclamation since 2014 to expand Woody Islands' military capabilities, increasing harbor, airstrip and surface to air missile capacity. Sand to earth conversion, soil creation, has also been introduced on Woody Island, with the Chinese state media specifically arguing that "the breakthrough also counters international theories, including those in a 2016 arbitration, that [South China Sea] islands could not support communities of their own."³² Elsewhere in the Paracels, harbors and helipads have been built up from 2014 to 2018 at Drummond Island, Money Island, North Island, Palm and Duncan Islands, North Island, Pattle Island, Tree Island, and Triton Island.

Similarly in the Spratleys, from 2014 to 2018 China created around 3,200 acres of new land through sand dredging and concrete pouring, thereby enlarging existing islands and creating new artificial islands.³³ Harbors have been developed and air-power significantly extended through the construction of long runways at the high tide elevation of Fiery Cross Reef (9,841 feet), and the low tide, i.e., artificial, elevations of Subi Reef (10,663 feet) and Mischief Reef (8,675 feet). Air defense, anti-ship missiles, signal-jamming installations, weapons and fuel bunkers, have also been placed in the Spratleys. The largest artificial island, Subi Reef, now has over 400 buildings on it, and is available for forward troop deployment. This all represents a military success.

Admittedly, some discomfort was faced in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in *The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China* made in July 2016. Of particular island note, the PCA found that none of China's existing Spratley land outcrops were "islands" under UNCLOS (121.3) criteria of being able to "sustain human habitation or economic life of their own," and thus none had 200 nm EEZs. While the PCA ruled that Gaven Reef, McKennan Reef, Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef were high tide features entitled to a 12 nm territorial waters; Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, and Second Thomas Shoal were deemed as low tide features, with no territorial waters generated from them (UNCLOS 60.5), but merely 500-meter, i.e., 0.27 nm, "safety zones" around them (UNCLOS 60.8).³⁴ China's drawing of territorial waters from far points around the Paracels was also rejected (point 573), on the grounds that China, unlike say Indonesia, was not an "archipelagic" state.

However, China has been successful in not just refusing to participate or comply with the PCA ruling and instead carrying on with its program of island creation and island militarization, but also in using its geopolitical and geo-economic muscle to get the Philippines and ASEAN to not pursue the verdict.³⁵ Nevertheless, China has not been able to stop increased Freedom of Navigation operations around the Paracels and Spratleys from being undertaken, not just vigorously by the U.S., but also circumspectly by the UK and France.

As Chinese scholars have noted, "there are an awful lot of islands and archipelagos within the ancient maritime Silk Road and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)."³⁶ China has successfully sought to involve Pacific Island states like Fiji and

the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) into the MSR.³⁷ In the Indian Ocean, participation in China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative has been aimed at island states like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Seychelles and Mauritius. This was on show with the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Indian Ocean Islands Conference held in Mauritius in December 2016. However, although China's push brought with it a 99-year operating control of Hambantota (Sri Lanka) to the state-owned company China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH) in 2017, this was a success that paradoxically has generated regional concerns over Chinese *debt diplomacy*.

IV. India

The most obvious part of India's island policy concerns the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a union territory of over 570 islands, approximately 3,190 nm² in area, of which 37 are inhabited. Long neglected in colonial and post-colonial times, with some uncontacted tribes like the Sentinelese, the island chain is increasingly prominent in Indian strategic thinking.³⁸

Geopolitically, imperatives were clear for the Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, for India "to strengthen its maritime influence, the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands rank foremost," since they are "such a well located asset."³⁹ The then Chief of Naval Staff Nirmal Verma argued in 2012 that "the geographic disposition of the archipelago offers a vital geo-strategic advantage to India," for "they provide the nation with a commanding presence in the Bay of Bengal."⁴⁰ Their location at the head of the Strait of Malacca also enables Indian access to this important choke point in and out of the Indian Ocean. Motives are clear for some Indian strategists; the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are "where India can build an 'Iron Chain' to deter China."⁴¹ They enable easier Indian naval deployments into the South China Sea and Western Pacific; which underpinned comments in 2014 by the then President Pranab Mukherjee about their "strategic position" and "potential to be a spring board for India with South East Asia and the Pacific region."⁴²

India is successfully, albeit gradually, strengthening its military presence on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with a ten-year military infrastructure plan approved in 2019. At the northern end, on North Andaman Island, the commissioning in January 2019 of INS Kohassa, was explained by the navy as being due to the "wide expanse of Indian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) mak[ing] the base a very vital asset."⁴³ The present airstrip of 3,281 feet is being extended to 12,000 feet. At South Andaman Island, Port Blair houses the major naval base of INS Jarawa, the naval air station INS Utkrosh, and is slated for expansion as a deep water transshipment terminal able to handle container traffic but also aircraft carriers. Port Blair has frequently hosted the MILAN exercises with other Indian Ocean and South-East Asian navies, with China conspicuously not invited. At the top of the Nicobar Islands, the Indian Airforce (IAF) operates out of Car Nicobar Island, complete with 3,000-foot long runway. At the bottom of the Nicobar Islands, INS Baaz was opened on Great

Nicobar Island in 2012, with a runway of 3,500 feet currently being extended to 4,500 feet and ultimately to 11,000 feet. All this echoes the remarks made in 1945 by India's *seapower* advocate Kavalam Pannikar about the potential for future bases on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, "which if fully utilised in coordination with air power can convert the Bay of Bengal into a secure area" for India.⁴⁴

Geo-economically, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands' significance lies in their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of around 256,228 nm². However, the economic potential of this EEZ remains under-developed. There remains a potential connectivity role for the islands in the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁵ In May 2018, India and Indonesia's leaders announced in their *Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* specific island-to-island linkages between India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Indonesia's adjacent island of Sumatra. Prime Minister Modi was clear in August 2020 that "under the Act-east policy, Andaman and Nicobar have a very high role to play in India's strong relations with East Asian countries and other countries associated with the sea and is going to grow steadily."⁴⁶

Off the west coast, "the Lakshadweep Islands can be called the nation's window to the Indian Ocean" according to the then Indian President Pratibha Patil.⁴⁷ The smallest union territory of India, its 36 coral islands and reefs have a total surface area of just 12 mi², but territorial waters of around 7,700 nm² and an exclusive economic zone of around 150,000 nm². Military facilities for a long time consisted of only two small naval detachments on Kavaratti and Minicoy Islands. However, they are now being reinforced, as the islands "grow in strategic importance."⁴⁸ The naval detachment on Kavaratti was upgraded and commissioned as INS Dweeprakashak in 2012, providing logistics and maintenance support. Further naval detachments, forward operating bases, were established in 2016 at Bitra Island and Androth Island, with radar facilities set up at Androth in 2018. The naval logic was clear: "Lakshadweep occupies a strategic location in the Arabian Sea. A number of shipping lanes pass close to these islands," so that "setting up of a naval detachment at Androth Island will enhance the Navy's reach and surveillance."⁴⁹ However, their smaller spread and land mass give the Lakshadweep Islands less power projection potential compared to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Moreover, India's utilization of the Lakshadweep's EEZ has lagged.

India is now actively seeking out the Indian Ocean island states.⁵⁰ This has been sharpened by the Ministry of External Affairs decision in December 2019 to set up a new Indian Ocean Region Division to handle relations with the Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, (French) Reunion, the Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. In the Maldives, the Indian navy has set up radar facilities at Gan Island airstrip. Deeper in the southwest Indian Ocean, a naval radar tracking station has been set up on northern Madagascar. More recently, moves have been made to establish naval/air presence in Mauritius (Agalega Atoll) and the Seychelles (Assumption Island), alongside an already established coastal radar facility. The Indian Navy conducts joint exclusive economic zone separate surveillance exercises with the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius. Trilateral national security advisor discussions were held in 2014 with the Maldives and Sri Lanka (previously held in 2011 and 2013), with Mau-

ritius and the Seychelles as observers. Disrupted by the temporary pro-Beijing turn of Sri Lanka under Mahinda Rajapaksa and by the Maldives under Abdulla Yammien, this format was revived in 2019 with their change of governments.

In the Indian Ocean, the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) signed with France in March 2018 opened the way for Indian use of the French island of Reunion. VARUNA naval exercises with France were held off Reunion in May 2018, as were Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) in March 2020. Indian officials attended the “*Unis dans l’espace Indo-Pacifique*” (“United in the Indo-Pacific Space”) conference hosted by France in Reunion in October 2019, where they joined other officials from the “Vanilla Islands” of the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. Similarly, the LSA signed with Australia in June 2020 now opens up Christmas Island and Cocos Island airstrips and harbors to India.⁵¹ However, India’s political support for Mauritian claims over Diego Garcia complicates any Indian use of U.S. facilities on Diego Garcia, despite the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed with the U.S. in 2016.⁵²

Further eastward, India’s 2018 Logistics Cooperation Agreement (LCA) with the island city-state of Singapore facilitates easier Indian naval presence in the South China Sea and Western Pacific. India has made veiled criticisms of China militarization of artificial island possessions in the South China Sea, though this has had little effect on China. With regard to the Pacific micro-states, the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), established by India in 2014, enables further modest economic cooperation and potential access for India to their EEZs, and provides some modest competition to China’s Pacific Islands outreach.⁵³

V. Japan

Japan is itself an “island nation,” with the four main islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku forming the metropolitan center.⁵⁴ A myriad of smaller islands surround the four home islands, with perceived “vital” geopolitical and geo-economic significance.⁵⁵

Island disputes affect Japan’s relations with its neighbors Russia, South Korea and China. Japan claims four of the southernmost Kurile Islands, administered by Russia since 1945, as its “Northern Territories.”⁵⁶ A potential compromise would be that Japan regain two of the smaller flanking islands (Shikotan and the Habomai) leaving the two larger islands (Etorofu and Kunashiri) with Russia. Friction remains with South Korea’s continuing administration of Dokdo “Solitary Islands,” but claimed by Japan as Takeshima “Bamboo Islands,” with the issue continuing to hamper their wider relationship.⁵⁷ Japan faces increasing pressure from China over the uninhabited Senkaku Islands, claimed and administered by Japan since 1895, but claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands since the 1970s.⁵⁸ The biggest island, Uotsuri, is roughly 1.67 mi². Japan has the option of either stationing limited troops or missiles on these outcrops but has so far resisted. Perhaps the biggest success here is getting the U.S. to include these islands within the U.S.-Japan Security alliance provisions.

This rising friction with China in the East China Sea is driving Japan to focus southward, to successfully build an *island wall* against China along the Ryukyu chain.⁵⁹ At the top of the Ryukyu chain, the purchase of Mageshima Island in December 2019 aims to buttress Japanese (and U.S.) airpower projection on Japan's southern flank. With the sensitive Miyako and Tokara Straits in mind through which China has been increasingly deploying; Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force opened new bases in March 2019 on the islands of Miyako and Amami Oshima to accommodate 700 to 800 troops, anti-ship and surface-to-air missile batteries, and radar and intelligence-gathering facilities. At the end of the chain, the military positions placed on the island of Yonaguni in 2016 was immediately denounced in China.⁶⁰ Similar reinforcement is planned for the island of Ishigaki by 2021. Concerning the main island Okinawa, local self-determination remains a muted issue, exacerbated by island discontent over U.S. bases.⁶¹

In contrast, the Ogasawara (Bonin) archipelago of more than 30 islets over 600 miles south of Tokyo, though part of the *second island chain* that runs further down through the Northern Marianas and Guam, has a low security profile. Since reverting to Japanese control in 1968, they have slumbered as a remote tourist destination, though a naval air base is maintained on the southernmost island of Iwo To (Iwo Jima), with an airstrip 8,700 feet long.

Japan's easternmost possession Minamitori-shima (Marcus Island), around 1,148 miles southeast of Tokyo, is of strategic importance, as it enables Japan to successfully claim an exclusive economic zone of around 165,590 nm² in the surrounding waters, as well as rare earth minerals.⁶² Uninhabited, it nevertheless has regular Japanese Coast Guard deployments, plus a medium-sized (4,300 feet long) airstrip.

At nine square meters, Japan's southernmost "possession" Okinotori, around 1,056 miles south of Tokyo, is a coral reef with small rocks (Higashi-Kojima, and Kita-Kojima) jutting out barely 3 inches and 7 inches at high tide. Even as ocean levels rise, Japan is desperately trying to safeguard and artificially enlarge the area through coral seeding, concrete encasing of the two surviving rocks, and creation of a new concrete platform (Minami-Kojima).⁶³ It contains a three-level observatory able to scan for ships, and a helicopter landing pad. Geo-economics underpins Japanese activity, since a 200 nm EEZ around Okinotori would largely fill the gap between Japan's EEZ around the Ryukyu Islands (*first island chain*) and the EEZ around the Ogasawara Islands (*second island chain*).⁶⁴ China (as well as Taiwan and South Korea) denounced Japan's island creation program at Okinotori, on the grounds that "artificial land features cannot generate any legal rights" under UNCLOS.⁶⁵ In this vein, Chinese research vessels dispatched to the Okinotori waters in December 2018, "high seas" in China's view, attracted Japanese protests.⁶⁶ National inconsistencies were in play, as China's own artificial concrete island making was taking place in the South China Sea, which had attracted denunciations from Japan.⁶⁷

Farther afield, Japan has pursued a vigorous, and successful outreach policy to the Pacific island microstates.⁶⁸ This builds upon Japan's development assistance, now extended into security issues, and is institutionalized around Japan's Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM) thrice-yearly mechanism initiated in 1997.⁶⁹ The

2018 PALM Summit Leaders Declaration specifically “welcomed” Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, and the need to uphold “freedom of navigation.”⁷⁰ PALM explicitly reflects Japan’s own sense of itself as a fellow Pacific *island* state.⁷¹ It is also a quite successful implicit counter to China’s diplomatic-economic push in the Pacific basin.⁷²

In the South China Sea, Japan has denounced China’s creation of artificial islands and their militarization, but this has had little effect on China, and Japan has so far has not conducted any Freedom of Navigation exercises around China’s island holdings. However, Japan has successfully launched infrastructure support for Indonesia’s Natuna Islands, its waters a bone of contention between Indonesia and China. In the Indian Ocean, the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) signed with India in September 2020 opens up India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Japanese use, and dovetails with Japan’s growing infrastructure investment in these islands. This in turn dovetails with the joint development by Japan and India of Trincomalee port on Sri Lanka, as a counterweight to China’s position in Sri Lanka at Hambantota.

VI. United States

This section starts with the United States’ sovereign holdings, Hawaii (State status), Guam (unincorporated Territory status) and the Northern Marianas (Commonwealth status); which enables useful U.S. participation in the regional island institutions. American Samoa, Guam, Hawaii and the Northern Mariana Islands are members of the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL), running since 1980. American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Marianas are members of the Pacific Community (PC) and have enjoyed observer status at Pacific Islands Forum since September 2011. American Samoa is also a member of the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG). However, the U.S.–Pacific Island Nations Joint Commercial Commission set up in 1993 is increasingly challenged by China’s economic penetration of Pacific island states. The *Pacific Pledge* made to the Pacific Island states in September 2019, of an extra US\$65 billion assistance, marked a belated U.S. attempt to counter Beijing’s advance.⁷³

In the central Pacific, Hawaii is a long chain of around 137 islands. Its total area of land is 6,423 mi², along with a much bigger EEZ of 609,863 nm². Hawaii’s annexation in 1898 was welcomed by Mahan since these “islands with their geographical and military importance, unrivalled by that of any other position in the North Pacific” would bring “a great extension of our naval power.”⁷⁴ Oahu houses Pearl Harbor, the Pacific’s biggest natural deep water harbor, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), and the U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific. Kauai houses the Pacific Missile Range Facility.

Over in the Western Pacific, Guam at the south end of the *second island chain*⁷⁵ is an unincorporated territory of the U.S. With an area of 210 mi², Guam’s population was recorded as 159,358 in the 2010 census, with indigenous Chamorros making up

37 percent of the population. Over 30 percent of the island is taken up by military bases.⁷⁶ Some local discontent is apparent but has been contained.⁷⁷

Annexed in 1898, Mahan reckoned that “no situation in our possession equals Guam to protect every [U.S.] interest in the Pacific.”⁷⁸ Guam is currently being built up militarily, as the so-called “tip of the spear” of military power reaching across from Hawaii.⁷⁹ Guam’s deep water port of Apra harbor has been further deepened, handling periodic aircraft carrier deployments, with fast attack nuclear-powered submarines deployed there since 2002. Andersen Air Force Base is home to the Pacific Air Forces’ 13th Air Force. Its Bomber Forward Operating Location (BFOL) status involves regular B-1, B-2 and B-52 bomber deployments, including overflights over China’s artificial islands in the South China Sea. Guam also hosts *Exercise Cope North Guam* involving the air forces of Australia, Japan and the U.S., as was seen in February 2020.

The island is slated to receive around 5,000 troops relocated from Okinawa by 2024, to be housed at a new military base being constructed at Camp Blaz for 2026. The deployment in 2013 of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems to Guam seeks to counter China’s “Guam Express” missile capabilities.⁸⁰ However, there remain delays in project completion and base hardening, together with the Trump administration diverting funding in 2019 from Guam to domestic projects like the Mexican border wall.⁸¹

Above Guam, the Northern Marianas voted to accept Commonwealth status in 1986 within the U.S., leaving Washington in charge of defense and foreign policy. Within the Marianas, on the island of Tinian, the Department of Defense controls 15,353 acres for marine training and live fire ranges. The air force has operated out from Tinian since 2014, with a divert airfield agreement signed in May 2019, while the army runs the Ballistic Missile Defense test site at Kwajalein Atoll. However, plans to turn Pagan Island into a firing range encountered strong local resistance.⁸²

In the Western Pacific and with China in mind, U.S. strategy is based on early renewal, due by 2023/2024 at the latest, of the existing Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau—under which the U.S. handles their defense.⁸³ The U.S. pace has quickened. Trump’s meeting with these states’ three leaders in 2019, a first-ever event, brought a formal declaration that they all “jointly reaffirm our interest in a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.”⁸⁴ In September 2020, Palau offered the U.S. new basing facilities.

U.S. control in the *first island chain*, running from Japan down to Taiwan is increasingly challenged by China’s maritime expansion. The significant U.S. presence maintained at Okinawa has been hampered by poor military-civilian relations, involving murders and rape by U.S. service men. Such factors, as well as Okinawa’s uncomfortable closeness to Chinese missile attacks, is leading to moves to relocate some U.S. forces on Okinawa to Guam.⁸⁵ U.S. policy has delicately moved to give more security support to Taiwan as a partner within its own Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework.

In the South China Sea, the U.S. has denounced Chinese militarization of arti-

ficial islands, and archipelago boundary lines drawing around the Paracels, and has consequently increased Freedom of Navigation (FoN) operations around the Paracels and Spratleys since 2017. These operations have stopped such island waters being turned into no-go zones by China but have not been able to stop the construction of artificial islands, nor to roll back China's militarization of islands.

The U.S. presence at Changi Naval base in the island city state of Singapore smooths U.S. deployments from the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean. This arrangement from 1990 was successfully renewed again in September 2019, to run until 2035. Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) have been specifically earmarked to Singapore since 2013, and U.S. aircraft carriers regularly berth at Singapore. With China implicitly in mind, LCS *Gabrielle Giffords* carried out bilateral exercises with Singapore's stealth frigate RSS *Steadfast* in the South China Sea in June 2020.⁸⁶

In the Bay of Bengal, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed in 2016 enables U.S. use of Indian facilities on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an "INDOPACOM gateway" for the U.S.⁸⁷ This was demonstrated for the first time in October 2020 with U.S. P-8 Poseidon aircraft landing at Port Blair for logistics and refueling support.

U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific is underpinned by its basing facilities at Diego Garcia, in the middle of the Indian Ocean. With a deep-water pier and sheltered atoll anchorage, the Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia (part of INDOPACOM) is able to handle aircraft carriers, with nuclear submarines deployed there from time to time. Like Guam, the long airstrip at Diego Garcia is designated as a Bomber Forward Operating Location (BFOL), from which B-52 and B-2 stealth bombers were regularly deployed in 2020.⁸⁸ This is UK sovereign territory, in which the original 1966 agreement for a U.S. base was successfully renewed for another 20 years in 2016. However, the U.S. was unable to stop the UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice calls in 2019 for decolonization of Diego Garcia (and the wider Chagos Islands) and their handing back/over to Mauritius.

VII. France

France defines itself as an "Indo-Pacific power" (*puissance Indo-Pacifique*) through its possessions of key islands across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and embedded population. Through these Indo-Pacific island possessions, France has the second largest EEZ in the world, after the U.S.

Reunion is the key French island in the Indian Ocean, with an area of 970 mi², a population of around 866,500, and an EEZ of 120,242 nm². Politically, Reunion is an integrated *département* (like Mayotte) with little apparent local sentiment for political self-determination.⁸⁹ French naval forces are permanently present and forward deployed from Reunion. Thus, FS *Latouche-Tréville*, stationed at Reunion, joined the French aircraft carrier group dispatched to the northern Indian Ocean in *Operation Clemenceau* in 2019. Reunion has become the site for strategic cooperation with India. The third phase of the 2018 VARUNA exercises with India were

held in May 2018 at Reunion, while joint patrolling with India were carried out at Reunion in March 2020. Amid Covid-19 disruption, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) summit was due to be hosted by France at Reunion in November 2020, as chair of the IONS for 2020–2022.

Southeast of Reunion are the uninhabited *Terres australes et antarctiques françaises* (TAAF), which include (1) the Crozet Islands; (2) the Saint Paul & Amsterdam Islands; and (3) the Kerguelen Islands. France's most significant TAAF possession is the Kerguelen Islands, an archipelago of around 300 islands and isles.⁹⁰ The main island, Grande Terre's area of 2,577 mi² is more than triple the size of Mauritius; while its capital settlement Port-aux-Français has harbor facilities and houses rotational groups of scientists, a satellite tracking station run by the French Space Agency, and rumors of weapons stockpiles. Kerguelen has an EEZ of 209,549 nm²; while under Decree 2015-1183 France successfully defined its continental shelf around Kerguelen in September 2015, and with it rights to seabed extraction up to 350 nautical miles. However, fishing has declined, and mineral extraction remains to be developed.

In the northeast Indian Ocean, the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) signed with India in March 2018 opens the way for French use of Indian harbors and airstrips on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, while the LSA with Australia signed in May 2018 opens the way for French use of Australian harbors and airstrips on Christmas and Cocos Islands.

France has its own successful outreach to the Indian Ocean island states. The Indian Ocean, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), established in 1982, brings together the French department of Reunion with other independent island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles. The *Unis dans l'espace Indo-Pacifique* ("United in the Indo-Pacific Space") conference was held in October 2019 between French officials and counterparts from the island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, as well as India.

In the southwest Pacific, the main French possession of New Caledonia is an archipelago with a total land area of 7,172 mi². Its population of around 263,000 is split, according to the 2014 census, between a 40 percent indigenous Kanak share and a 29 percent European share. New Caledonia has geo-economic and geopolitical significance. The former is illustrated by the fact that New Caledonia holds around 20–25 percent of the world's nickel reserves, and a good-sized exclusive economic zone of 770,873 nm². The latter is shown by how New Caledonia is a midway point between French possessions in the Indian Ocean further west and French Polynesia further east. France sees New Caledonia in geopolitical terms as its "forward base" for French presence in the Pacific.⁹¹ This includes an interception unit at the naval airbase at Tontouta. French Caledonia is the headquarters for French naval vessels; for example, FNS *Vendémiaire* is regularly dispatched in the South China Sea, Taiwan Straits and Western Pacific. The biennial *Croix du sud* ("Southern Cross") organized by French forces at New Caledonia since 2006, now involves France, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the U.S. and smaller Pacific island states in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises.

Politically, New Caledonia has faced deep division over independence or retaining the French link under which Paris controls defense and foreign policy. France has been successful insofar as two referendums have rejected the independence option, though by a gradually smaller margin. In November 2018 it was 56.67 percent (staying with France) versus 43.33 percent (independence), although on a higher turnout in October 2020 the gap had shrunk, at 53.26 percent versus 46.74 percent. Nearby Wallis and Futuna has a much smaller area of about 55 mi² and a population of 11,558 according to the 2018 census, with little political unrest. Most of the south-east quadrant of the Pacific is occupied by French Polynesia, with a population of around 272,000. This includes 118 islands such as Tahiti, with an extremely large total EEZ of 2,819,615 nm². French Polynesia was strategically important as the site for 193 nuclear tests from 1962 to 1996 in the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls. France has been able to successfully mute political sentiment for self-determination through generous economic support packages.

Finally, France's successful outreach to the island micro-states of the Pacific, has successfully solidified its legitimacy in the region. In the Pacific, the France-Oceanic Summit (FOS) met in 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2015. Headquartered in New Caledonia, the Pacific Community (PC) has French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna as members sitting alongside the independent Pacific island nations and U.S. territories. French Polynesia and New Caledonia have also been members (and hosts) of the tri-annual Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL) running since 1980. French Polynesia and New Caledonia attended Japan's Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) in May 2018. French Polynesia and New Caledonia and French Polynesia were also admitted as full members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in September 2016, with Wallis and Futuna given associate membership in September 2018.⁹² In addition, France remains a separate dialogue partner of the PIF.

VIII. Conclusions

This article has sought to evaluate Great Powers' island strategies by the leading Indo-Pacific powers China, France, India, Japan and the U.S. As demonstrated, these powers have successfully built up their military position on various island possessions. All these powers have conducted quite effective outreach to the independent island states. However, some puzzles and paradoxes emerge with regard to this evaluation.

One puzzle, or perhaps paradox, is that China's successful military build up in the South China Sea has been counterproductive to some extent since it has generated pushback by the other leading powers, and indeed by other South China Sea littoral states. Another puzzle is that all these leading powers have not made particularly effective use of the EEZs, associated under UNCLOS with their island possessions. This is a result of inertia, problems of bureaucracy, and the more evident drive for military security usage. The final paradox is that given the power competition

between China on one side and France/India/Japan/the U.S. on the other side, independent Indo-Pacific island states have some bargaining strength despite the otherwise enormous power imbalance. Davis, Munger and Legacy, applying *assemblage theory*, argue that islands in the Pacific simultaneously engage with multiple powers and their associated political, economic and social influences, and thereby demonstrate effective agency.⁹³ A similar dynamics may be seen among Indian Ocean island states. The implications for this are that neither the U.S. (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) nor China (Maritime Silk Road) will be able to swing independent island states behind their particular Indo-Pacific initiative at the exclusive expense of the other initiative.

With regard to change and continuity, there are elements of both in the strategic role of islands. Their old role for potential naval bases, refueling stations (coal now giving way to oil) and potential control of commerce routes, stressed by Mahan in the late 19th century is still relevant. Such island positions enable naval power projection, but also the need to be defended necessitates strong defense. As Mahan, the advocate of seapower and the setting up of coal stations at Hawaii, Samoa and Guam, noted over a century ago “it is vain to look for energetic naval operations distant from coal stations,” but “it is equally vain to acquire distant coaling stations without maintaining a powerful navy; they will but fall into the hands of the enemy.”⁹⁴ Geopolitically, the advent of airpower gives islands a new dimension, forward power projection in which seapower is now complemented by airpower. Island-based airpower generates the assertion of such islands being “unsinkable aircraft carriers.” Paradoxically, missile technology affects islands in two ways. Firstly, presenting vulnerability to island fixed basing. Secondly, high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMAR) placed on islands, for example in the *first island chain* or in the South China Sea, can serve as anti-ship missiles. Geo-economically, the significance of islands has been transformed by the concept and framework of exclusive economic zones generated by “islands,” as defined in the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea.

Finally, in this so-called “age of islands,” islands can paradoxically appear and disappear.⁹⁵ Their *appearing* reflects how islands are now able to be physically and literally made by the state.⁹⁶ Not only can reefs be built up for airstrips, but the waters inside reefs can be deepened for bigger harbors, in a way almost impossible in Mahan’s days. Their *disappearing* reflects how rising sea levels, reflecting global warming, threaten the very existence of island micro-states and of states’ island possessions across the Indo-Pacific.⁹⁷

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