

# The US Strengthens the Second Island Chain

by Ronan Wordsworth - August 5, 2024

Much has been made of the U.S.' efforts to contain China. Central to its strategy is the first island chain, a line of islands comprising the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and **Japan** that naturally obstruct China's access to the open seas. And now that Washington is increasingly confident in South Korea and Japan's ability to manage the first chain, it is increasingly eager to focus on a second island chain, one to be managed by Australia. Australia has been a partner of Washington's for years, and recent events, including the progression of the AUKUS security alignment, show that it will likely become a recipient of massive amounts of U.S. defense spending in the coming years.

## Alliance Building

The first island chain acts as the vanguard in the U.S.-led security alliance in the region. As such, it has to be able to withstand and prevent a direct attack from mainland China. This is why Washington has worked extensively over the past two years to strengthen its strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, signing trilateral security agreements with Japan and South Korea and with Japan and the Philippines. (The Philippines was once more open to balancing against China and the U.S., but having bristled under Chinese coercion in the South China Sea, it has shown a greater willingness to work with the U.S.)

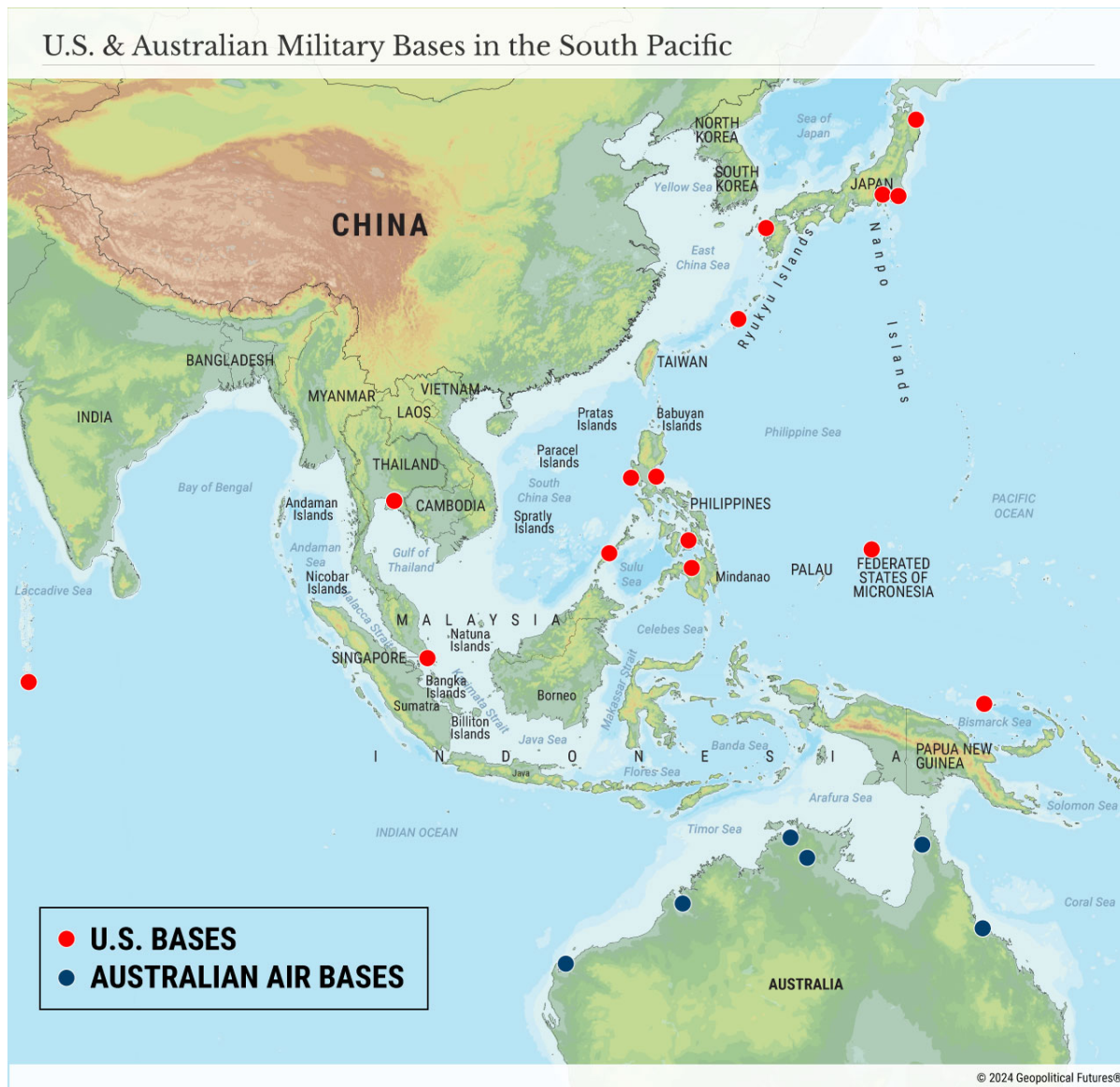
The second island chain gives the U.S. strategic depth, focusing on things like long-range surveillance and strike capabilities. In theory, it will reinforce the first island chain in the case of an attack and act as a deterrent. This alliance building follows 2021's AUKUS agreement with Australia and the U.K., which ensured that defense expenditure and the burden of power projection and deterrence into the Indo-Pacific was shared with the closest of allies and provided Washington with a strategic direction for the next decade of military doctrine.

## U.S. Allies & The First and Second Island Chains



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Northern Australia – from Darwin in the Northern Territory to Far North Queensland – has thus risen in strategic prominence for Australia and the U.S. alike. Conventional wisdom has it that the only significant threats to the Australian mainland will come from the north, which thus requires a disproportionately large military presence there. For Washington, Australian bases in this region have been used to station B-52 bombers and F-35 and F-22 fighters, as well as a host of logistics and refueling aircraft – that is, long-range vehicles.



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Defense expenditures from both countries attest to the region's importance. Canberra allocated nearly \$4 billion in 2023 to shore up northern bases, from RAAF Base Learmonth to the Cocos Islands, a remote Australian overseas territory in the Indian Ocean, closer to Sri Lanka than to Perth, that completes the second island chain, as well as air bases in the Northern Territory and northern Queensland. Announced in April this year, the 2024 Integrated Investment Program calls for 14 billion-18 billion Australian dollars (\$9 billion-\$12 billion) for upgrading northern bases in Townsville, Darwin and the Cocos. This money is being spent on air base remediation across northern Australia, including major maintenance at RAAF Base Darwin and Mount Bunday Airfield, redevelopment of the RAAF Base Townsville and airfield works at RAAF bases Curtin and Learmonth. Capital expenditure projects are meant to upgrade runway capacity, provide additional aviation fuel and ammunition storage, invest in additional central mission command planning facilities, and increase defensive capacity with long-range missile installations. In the Cocos Islands, money has been set aside for runway upgrades to accommodate P-8A Poseidon aircraft undertaking surveillance missions, as well as for long-range surveillance drones.

The U.S. is spending likewise. Washington has reportedly begun to use some of the \$300 million set aside in 2024 on construction projects in the north, and there are tenders open worth more than \$2 billion for the construction of wharves, runways, fuel storage facilities, and aircraft hangers across North Queensland, the Northern Territory, Cocos Islands, Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

Only taking into account the \$300 million already committed, this will make northern Australia the top overseas location for U.S. Air Force and Navy construction spending, and with the additional projects in the pipeline, this looks set to continue until at least 2030.

## **Shifting priorities**

These joint efforts between the U.S. and Australia reflect a new method of countering China, which has been increasingly assertive in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2022, Beijing unexpectedly signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, potentially putting a Chinese naval base within the immediate vicinity of Australia's eastern flank. In September 2023, China approached Papua New Guinea with an offer for a security deal to help with internal policing. This is similar to the arrangement China has had in Fiji since 2011.

Though Australia and the U.S. are frequent partners of Papua New Guinea and Fiji, their economic reliance on China means that they have often struggled to balance greater powers. Australia and the U.S. understood prying these countries away from China would require offering them a lot of economic incentives. This is precisely what they did, effectively keeping China out of Australia's near



abroad and further cementing the second island chain.

In its 2024-25 budget, for example, Australia set aside a record \$2 billion in Pacific development assistance. Fiji is set to be one of the biggest beneficiaries thanks to port upgrades and a plan to lay undersea cables to enhance its telecommunications. Papua New Guinea will receive \$637.4 million, while the Solomon Islands will get \$171.2 million.

Australia has also advanced its cause through security assistance. Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka expressed his desire to end his country's security deal with China and has now signed security and policing agreements with both Australia and the U.S. This has undermined China's influence as the Australian Federal Police are now heavily involved with local training. Papua New Guinea also signed a defense agreement with Australia last year that enables its military officers to serve in leadership positions in the Australian army, and it inked a defense cooperation agreement with the U.S. The Solomon Islands has not forsaken its ties to China, but a recent Australian commitment to help expand and train its police will obstruct Beijing's ability to coerce its neighbors.

The strategy to strengthen northern Australia isn't without obstacles. The area is remote even by Australian standards, so it will be difficult to find the personnel to complete the projects. Many companies may rather work for clients that are seen as less risky. And it all depends on the continued reliability of South Korea and Japan to handle the first island chain.

Even so, the U.S. and Australia seem set to try. What was once dismissed as unlikely is now a core feature of the long-term strategy to contain China. For the U.S., part of that strategy entails moving some forces from the first island chain to the second and increasing overall deterrence and security without expending additional manpower. Australia seems wholly committed to the idea. After all, its buy-in will secure its northern border and allow dual use by its AUKUS partners.

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