Solidifying sovereign power in liquid space: The making and breaking of 'island chains' and 'walls' at sea

Wirth, Christian

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Solidifying sovereign power in liquid space: The making and breaking of 'island chains' and 'walls' at sea

Christian Wirth

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)—German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4, 10719, Berlin, Germany

A B S T R A C T

As new visions of international order emerged among major actors of the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, calls for freedom and openness intensified. Yet, in maritime space, the strategies for implementing these competing visions produced contradictory outcomes. The increasing sense of urgency—especially among Chinese, Japanese, and US leaders—to strengthen their defences against dangers from the other has led to the creation of militarized 'walls' at sea. How did the seemingly oxymoronic walls come into being, and what significance do these bordering practices have for the conduct of international, regional, and national politics? Drawing from research on the social construction of boundaries and of maritime space, this study uses the cases of the Ryukyu Islands in the East China Sea and the Spratly area of the South China Sea to show how Sino-Japanese/US antagonisms mobilized the imagery of 'island chains' and 'sea lanes' for fixing meaning amid profound socio-economic transformations. However, despite temporarily stabilizing foreign- and security-policy ideas and solidifying sovereign power in the liquid space of the oceans, the long-term consequences of these precarious divisions can be seen only when looking beyond the erected walls at sea.

1. Introduction

After President Xi of China announced the Belt and Road Initiative for rebuilding the Middle Kingdom's trade routes across the Pacific and Indian Oceans in 2013 against the background of escalating maritime disputes, calls for the protection of freedom and openness proliferated. Based on earlier geopolitical constructs, the Japanese government started to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy for safeguarding the 'rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade', 'economic prosperity', and 'peace and stability' (MOFA, 2017). Australia, the United States, India, and even actors from outside the emerging meta region, such as the European Union, followed suit. They, too, adopted maritime connectivity strategies and deployed naval forces to secure sea lanes across the Indo-Pacific (European Union EU, 2021; Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these ubiquitous calls for openness and connectivity, the corresponding practices have inscribed new divisions into the seas. For some time now, China has been seen as building a 'great wall at sea' in the western Pacific (Cole, 2010; Pedrozo, 2012), a 'great wall in the sky' (Osawa, 2013), and a 'great firewall' in cyberspace (Shen, 2014). These developments culminated in China's construction of a 'great wall of sand' (Harris, 2015)—through massive land-reclamations in the Spratly area of the South China Sea. Moreover, China (Goldstein, 2016) and India (Singh, 2016) have been erecting 'undersea walls' of hydrophones to match and complement, respectively, the integrated US–Japanese surveillance infrastructures girding the western Pacific littoral (Ball & Tanter, 2015). And while the Chinese government decided to militarize the enlarged features in the Spratly islands group, Japan has been fortifying the Ryukyu Islands bordering the East China Sea (Denyer, 2019).

This walling off of East Asian seas contradicts the long-standing Japanese preoccupation with the safeguarding—as a 'matter of life and death' (Kantei, 1994)—of so-called sea lanes of communication (SLOC) through Southeast Asia as well as the Chinese attempts to overcome the Malacca Dilemma (Shi, 2004) of keeping 'vital' supply lines through the same waters open. It also goes against continuing US efforts to secure naval access to the global commons of the East Asian littoral (Ross, 2018). The proliferation of similar bordering practices—for instance, through India's fortification of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which straddle the same interoceanic shipping routes (Katoch, 2019), and Europe's enhanced walling off of the Mediterranean (Vallet, 2014)—points to a larger phenomenon.

It raises the questions of how seemingly oxymoronic walls at sea can come into being, and what significance bordering practices in East Asian

maritime space have for the conduct of politics. Taking Ozguc's (2021) conceptual argument to the sea, this study suggests that walls at sea can best be understood as fluid meshworks that emerge due to political elites' efforts to stabilize what they see from a national perspective as an increasingly fluid international order. The ensuing escalation of seemingly minor contestations over a few uninhabited rocks into a great power conflict over the last three decades reveals how notions of order continue to rely on the drawing of multidimensional boundaries and how the control of flows of goods, people, and information forms part of long-standing state rebuilding projects. Somewhat counterintuitively, the liquid spaces of the seas have proven to be particularly amenable to the solidification of sovereign power therein.

Apart from empirically contributing to our understanding of how various minor disputes over East Asian maritime space have been linked and have come to popularize the view of an impending Cold War-like conflict, this study also contributes to the development of theory-oriented scholarship. It brings together existing research on borders, walls, mobility, and island studies to further debates on how 'territory may work not just through terrains of earthly matter but also through liquid, aeriated, and "hybrid" matters; it investigates hitherto neglected "ungrounded" workings of territory' (Peters et al., 2018, p. 3).

In the following section, I review key literature about the nature of borders and bordering practices, including the conceptualization of walls. Next, I propose a framework for analysing how discursive practices are employed to fix meaning and stabilize sovereign power through the redrawing of lines of division and lines of connection. Three subsequent sections trace how practices of imagining island chains and attempts to control movements across led to the erection of walls in the East and South China Seas. I conclude that this spiralling out of control of once geographically and politically confined disputes came to gradually close East Asian maritime frontiers and gave rise to the search for new ones in the Indo-Pacific.

2. Bordering and walling off as performances of sovereign power

How does the drawing of lines across the seas relate to the sovereignty-enhancing politics of ordering? This question can be answered by bringing research in border studies together with scholarship on the social construction of ocean space.

Border studies extend from the basic tenet that, for the sovereign power of the state to be stabilized, 'differences, discontinuities, and conflicts that might be found *within* all places and times must be converted into an absolute difference *between* a domain of domestic society, understood as an identity, and a domain of anarchy, understood as, at once ambiguous, indeterminate, and dangerous' (Ashley, 1988, p. 257, original emphasis). In this vein, scholars of East Asian politics have shown how officially promoted narratives of national pasts deepened disputes over the demarcation of maritime space and thereby institutionalized antagonistic state-to-state relations (Bukh, 2020; Wang, 2015a). Accordingly, boundaries can be understood as institutions and symbols established and maintained through socio-cultural practices for the construction of identities and the allocation of jurisdictional authority (Paasi, 1998, p. 72).

In cases of particularly strong demand for enclosure or exclusion, governments mobilize enormous political and financial capital to reinforce boundaries through physical walls (Brown, 2010). Apart from being less permeable than fences, walls bar the view to the other side and visually solidify the idea of inclusion or exclusion (Jones, 2012). Moreover, the existence of walls in contested places, combined with their monumental dimensions, create awe-inspiring effects as they testify to the political determination, raw power, and human sacrifice required for their erection, maintenance, and operation as barriers (McAtackney & McGuire, 2020). As such, borders (and walls) are 'pools of emotions, fears and memories that can be mobilized apace for both progressive and regressive purposes' (Paasi in Johnson et al., 2011, p.

62). Thus, walls can also evoke the desired effects among geographically distant audiences.

At the same time, border studies scholarship has established that even walls—which need constant policing to remain effective barriers—are unable to completely seal off the inside from the outside. In most cases, they are even meant to be crossed; only the act of crossing unleashes boundaries' full power. In seeming contradiction to their primary purpose of inhibiting movement, borders can function as 'engines of connectivity' and even be reconfigured as portals (Rumford in Johnson et al., 2011, p. 67).

Thus, the act of (re)inscribing boundaries represents the claim to, and exercise of, sovereign power to define 'the rules and regulations which determine the existence of difference and, by association, the borders within which such difference is enclosed' (Newman, 2003, p. 17). This very capacity to control flows, to stay on top of disembedding and re-embedding socio-economic processes, and to decide on norm and exception and on inclusion and exclusion—if not 'inclusive exclusion' (Vaughan-Williams, 2008, p. 333)—characterizes sovereignty. Through 'the marking and crossing of boundary lines, one defines not merely the scope of what is inside the territorial unit but also the nature of the system itself, as the system is represented as being the sum of its bounded units' (Steinberg, 2009, p. 474).

Walls at sea carry this logic to the extreme. Because of the liquid medium into which they are built, walls at sea are largely devoid of 'sublime' architecture and cannot easily serve as the sites 'of meeting and exchange' that walls on land have been associated with (see, e.g., Callahan, 2018, p. 472). As such, walls at sea are an inversion of how walls on land work. Instead of a physical monument that enables state agents to police mobility around it, state agents' policing activities bring the image of a wall and the effects of the border into existence. And even though the walls in East Asian seas are not primarily meant to regulate flows of people, and are therefore under-researched,[1] they have proven to be highly consequential. Efforts to enhance sovereign control over islands and rocks, and to extend exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and vast extended continental shelves from there, got linked to efforts to preserve preferential access to specific strategic spheres. They have inscribed boundaries into the seas not only on a national scale but also on subnational, regional, and global scales (Ryan, 2013; Wirth, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the lines that so powerfully delineate maritime space on the one hand and depict highway-like interoceanic shipping routes or sea lanes on the other.

These lines on maps constitute two-dimensional (cartographic) representations of a 'flat' global order (Elden, 2013, p. 37). Scholarship of critical geopolitics has shown how pertaining foreign- and security-policy practices, through their 'geopolitical gaze', produce world politics as a staged drama, which foreign-policy makers and commentators, ostensibly passively, observe from the panoptic towers of their privileged positions of power (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Ironically, this geopolitical gaze erases both history and geography (Ó Tuathail, 1996, 53). To address this propensity for presentism, I will outline the historical context in which the walls in the East and South China Seas emerged in the empirical sections below. Regarding geography, as Elden (2013, p. 49) shows, there is a need to think in at least three dimensions, as 'volume matters because of the concerns of power and circulation. Circulation does not simply happen, nor does it need to be contained, controlled, and regulated, on a plane'. After all, ocean politics encompass the exploitation of non-living seabed and, over immense distances circulating, living resources in the water column. And maritime geopolitics are defined by attempts to control human movement and communication on the surface, through the water column, above the seas, in outer space, and, via the network of undersea communication

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[1] Rosière and Jones (2012, p. 230) discuss 'liquid walls' across maritime straits mainly in relation to migration and do not elaborate on their graphical indication of such a barrier across the western Pacific.

cables, in cyberspace. Yet, also thinking in terms of solid volumes turns out to be too static. The oceans' molecular structure blurs the boundaries between land, sea, and air in that it allows for much more movement in all dimensions while providing few fixed points for body and mind to hold on to.

Addressing this phenomenon, Steinberg & Peters (2015) propose a 'wet ontology'. As they point out, the reason for the misleading view of the ocean as an inherently dangerous, monotonous space with neither history nor geography is that it is not amenable to reductionist epistemology: water is 'simultaneously encountered as a depth and as a surface, as a set of fixed locations but also as an ungraspable space that is continually being reproduced by mobile molecules' (Steinberg & Peters 2015, p. 252). As such, the ocean's physicality 'opens new territories of control and conflict' (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 252). It also 'contains potential for rethinking histories of land-based governance and conquest [not least because of] the types of encounters, negotiations, connections, and politics that these volumes engender' (Lehman cited in Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 256). In other words, the enquiry into the construction of walls at sea must start from an ontological perspective that understands the world as being permanently in motion, as constituted through movements ranging from particles and molecules to ocean currents and tectonic plates.

Such a world, Ingold argues, has no boundaries of exclusion, 'no insides and outsides, but only comings and goings' that make places occur rather than exist (Ingold, 2008, p. 13). Building on Deleuze and Guattari, he suggests that 'every organism—indeed, every thing—is itself an entanglement, a tissue of knots whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other bundles, make up a meshwork' (Ingold, 2008, p. 11). Ozguc (2021, p. 288) uses these insights to reconceptualize the border wall as a 'sphere of "many politics"', as a 'fluid meshwork', 'constituted and constitutive of the ever-shifting transformative movements' that occur 'beneath and above the state'. As such, this conceptualization represents the other side of the coin looked at in mobility studies.

Newer scholarship in mobility studies acknowledges the need to overcome established inside/outside and mobility/immobility dichotomies. It emphasizes the advantage of thinking about 'circulation assemblages', where 'mobility can be detected and analyzed even in the absence of movement' (Salter, 2013, p. 15). In their efforts to uncover 'the multiplicity of sites of control, the choke-points or nodes' in the assemblages (Salter, 2013, p. 16), or 'tunneling effects' (Marvin cited in Cresswell, 2010, p. 24), especially scholars of Pacific history, Japan studies, and island studies have provided extensive accounts of how policymakers came to think of the Pacific Basin as an 'integrated strategic physical complex' to be controlled (Friedmann, 2001, p. 1), and how the corresponding assemblage of mostly US military bases has impacted, and been resisted, on the islands of the western and southern Pacific (Davis, 2015; McCormack & Oka Norimatsu, 2012). A few recent studies also examine how intensifying efforts to balance or contain China's growing economic and military power continue to inscribe paramount strategic importance on these islands. Revealing increasing dependencies on extraregional actors (Davis, 2020; Grydehøj et al., 2021), these analyses show how overlapping assemblages strengthen islands' agency and may allow them to elude falling into single spheres of influence (Davis et al., 2020).

Yet, this body of literature, similar to existing studies on the spatial dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (Flint & Zhu, 2019; Narins & Agnew, 2020), pays scant attention to how actors involved in contestations over the delimitation of maritime space have mobilized and been mobilized by imageries of island chains and walls that threaten to interrupt movements across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is thus necessary to have a closer look at the lines that constitute the circulation assemblages of the fluid meshwork that is the wall at sea.

3. Lines of hopes and fears, mobility and immobility

The lines that divide or connect the seas are visible only on widely circulated maps and graphs and on classified documents used by state security agencies. Through these representations, lines direct attention, shape policymakers' knowledge about the world, and constitute circulation assemblages. Deleuze et al. (2007) distinguish three manifestations.

In their molar or segmentary guise, lines are about 'prioritization […] ordering, duty, false oppositions […] enabling mass containment of the vital flows' and are 'necessarily reductive, forced and simplifying' (de Miranda, 2013, p.111). For these objects of earlier border studies, beginnings and endings are insignificant. Emphasizing limits, segmentary lines direct attention to what is 'out there'—primarily, as a means—and have the effect of defining what is 'in here'. Marginalized, if not excluded, is the possibility that people and things on opposing sides share properties, while those located on the same side may be far more diverse. As such, segmentary lines establish 'classifying links between "pairs"' (de Miranda, 2013, p.117).

Rupture lines or lines of flight that visually link the so constituted units, at first, appear as opposites of segmentary lines because they cut across (de Miranda, 2013, p.114) and primarily emphasize connection. Despite leaving some room for including places in between, they invariably disconnect many other points and routes. Not least, these seemingly connecting lines also entail a dominant direction. They look outward and thereby ascribe agency to the seeing actor while assuming passivity on the part of the viewed. This imbalance is pronounced when purported end points remain abstract, a distant vision, or even non-existent, as it betrays the connection's self-referential character. Thus, the promotion of maritime connectivity, too, can signify a desire for closeness or attempts to find lost bearings, meaning, and purpose. As Ingold (2008) elaborates, lines follow a 'logic of inversion', both connecting and dividing depending on how they are drawn, or viewed.

This duality reflects the fears and hopes that inform the spatial politics of ordering. As fearful practices leading to the construction of walls at sea (segmentary lines) and hopeful discourses enhancing maritime connectivity (rupture lines) suggest, geopolitical imageries are highly consequential. But while the longing for certainty increases, the more, faster and deeper socio-economic change undermines established worldviews, the more things get lost in between the criss-crossing segmentary and rupture lines. Geopolitical line-drawing remains detached from the lived experience outside the foreign and security policy elite circles, outside specific national contexts, and outside the industrialized world (Lawson, 2007).

Life cannot exist within the rigid confines of borders or segmentary lines and connections or rupture lines. Thus, Deleuze et al. (2007, p. 124) also conceptualize a third guise, that of molecular, crack, or lifelines. These are 'set into motion by "particles escaping from these classes"' (de Miranda, 2013, p.117). It is these molecular lines that genuinely connect; importantly, however, lines can change their guise across space and time. In short, 'Desire makes things flow, this is the rupture line. Desire flows, this is the molecular line. Desire seizes up, this is the molar [segmentary] line' (de Miranda, 2013, p.132). Or, in Merriman's (2019, pp. 67, 77) words, the molar (segmentary) and molecular lines are mainly distinguished by the perceptibility of the movements along them, whereby molecular movements operate below the threshold of perception.

Looking at developments in East Asia and the Pacific, the perceptibility of movements has shaped and been shaped how Chinese, Japanese, and US observers have conceived the overarching, increasingly fluid international order. These perceptions are themselves informed by the speed at which societies and nations have been moving along idealized historical trajectories. For Japan, the collapse of the Soviet threat coincided with the burst of the post-war 'bubble economy', which ended decades of linearly rising GDP growth rates. These events put Japan itself 'adrift' (Funabashi, 1999). Depending on the observers'

location, Japan was either in danger of leaving the US orbit to join an emerging Asian regional bloc or it risked being expelled from its unique position as the leading Asian nation within the US-led West due to the catching up of the rest. Thus, seemingly obsolete US–Japan military ties regained their purpose as an 'alliance of hope' (NPI, 2016) to 'anchor' Japan (Armitage & Nye, 2012) in the continuously modernizing West, saving it from falling behind or into oblivion (Wirth, 2015).

Efforts to reduce the uncertainty about the future of the Chinese party-state have been most consequential too. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the culmination of societal upheaval during the Tiananmen Square protests—which shocked the Communist Party of China (CPC)—prompted the 'pessoptimistic' (Callahan, 2010) leadership to redouble its efforts to stabilize the (Han Chinese) nations' path towards modernity. Thus, the deepening of a siege mentality, combined with increasingly high hopes for the future, continue to drive the CPC's meticulous planning of the 'road to national rejuvenation' along a linearly rising trajectory that connects ancient dynasties to the year 2049, the centenary of the founding of modern China and the endpoint for achieving the Chinese Dream (Wang, 2015b). In this master narrative, the US, leading the West, became the sole reference point for what to achieve, to surpass, and to negate.

The Chinese elite's increasingly confident yet anxious determination all but confirmed the fears and hopes that US foreign-policy elites had been projecting onto China. In their search for certainty about the futures, of China and of the US, they had long oscillated between two extremes. First, they had been anxious about China failing to follow the Western path to modernity. The Trump administration articulated it most clearly, warning about the loss of the American way of life (Pompeo, 2020). Second, they had been worried that China could be too successful in its quest for power and thus question the inevitability of all nations following the Western model (Pan, 2012).

These changing vectors of hopes and fears coincided with the spatial rearticulation of sovereign power across the Pacific. During this process, the discursive representation (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Squire, 2015) of maritime features has been instrumental. To address the geopolitical erasure of history, the next section provides an outline of how island chains came to constitute circulation assemblages.

4. Making island chains

For the idea that the numerous rocks and islands scattered between Russia in the north to the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos in the south formed a chain to take root, panoramic perspectives were indispensable. These emerged as a corollary of modern warfare.

During the Pacific War (1941–1945) between Imperial Japan and the US, the meaning of 'islands' and 'archipelagos'—two terms carrying much political weight in themselves (Mountz, 2015)—changed drastically. In the military circulation assemblage of the western Pacific, segmentary lines of north–south island chains came to overlay the east–west sea lanes, which had previously represented the rupture line connecting the US via Hawaii and Guam to its Philippine colony. After World War I, more Pacific islands fell under Japanese control and became forward bases. They served as launching pads for aerial surveillance missions and attacks against enemy fleets—first against the US, then in reverse, against Japan. As moorings for military mobility (Merriman et al., 2017), Pacific islands strategically divided battle spaces. After the US's 'island-hopping' campaign and submarine attacks on ships heading to the Japanese main islands succeeded in defeating Japan, the Pacific became an 'American lake' (Friedman, 2001). With General MacArthur's proclamation of a new strategy for preventing another Pearl Harbour, all features from northern Japan via the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan down to the Philippines and from eastern Japan down to Guam, Papua New Guinea, and Australia officially came to form the first and the second island chains, respectively (MacArthur, 1965).

The seamless transition from decolonization into the Cold War's hot conflicts in Korea and Indochina meant that the mobility of Communist

forces was to be contained within the semi-enclosed East Asian seas. Hence, US strategic planners drew a 'defence perimeter' along the first island chain, thereby retaining its segmentary character (Schaller, 1982). This barrier greatly reduced Soviet forces' freedom to manoeuvre into the deep Pacific. Passages through the Kurile Islands and through the Tsushima Strait between Japan and the Korean Peninsula now represented 'gates' to be monitored, guarded, or blocked by US–Japanese or Soviet forces, respectively. Conversely, the Sea of Okhotsk became imagined as a 'bastion' where, protected by the barrier of the militarized Kurile Islands, Soviet submarines would loiter, ready to launch nuclear-tipped missiles (Breemer, 1989). Reminiscent of the Pacific War, strategists also used island chains to delineate 'maritime safety zones' subaltern to the American lake and to create a 'Japanese lake' for defence against an impending Soviet (counter-)blockade (Sekino, 1971).

With the reversion of Okinawa Prefecture to Japan in 1971, the 'remote islands' of the Ryukyu Islands then regained strategic value for the Japanese government. This value increased further in 1981 after Prime Minister Suzuki partially conceded President Reagan's demand that Japan shoulder a bigger share of the burden of upholding regional security and agreed to expand the Japanese navy's area of responsibility to 1000 nautical miles from the main islands (Shaw, 1985). Henceforth, Japanese forces would assist the US in defending military supply lines, reminiscent of pre-war colonial trade routes between the US West Coast and the Philippines. Now, military mobility across the Pacific took the form of a rupture line for Japan, itself also a part of the segmentary first island chain. However, becoming a hub in this trans-Pacific military mobility assemblage reinforced Japan's insularity and exclusion from the Northeast Asian continent.

To overcome pacifist resistance to these remilitarizing moves, Japanese leaders tapped into long-standing feelings of vulnerability that are inherent to being a disconnected 'island country' and rekindled the memory of being of cut off from vital supplies during the Pacific War (Graham, 2006). This emphasis on sea lane security tied the Ryukyu Islands, girding the transport routes toward Southeast Asia—a region itself again the primary target region of Japan's development—to the imperative of strengthening the US–Japan alliance (Takei, 2008). Under Prime Minister Nakasone (1982–87), the preoccupation with sea lanes through Southeast Asia eventually resurfaced in official thinking and public discourse (Akaha, 1986).

By 1994, a time when the Soviet threat had vanished and China had not yet become one, the fear of being cut off from supplies for industrial production culminated in the designation of sea lane security as a 'matter of life and death' towards whose protection Japanese defence policies could henceforth be reoriented (Kantei, 1994). Over the next two decades, those rupture lines of maritime connectivity were extended across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. This imagery of a connection to the oil-rich region eventually helped to legitimize the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force's refuelling operations for coalition ships during the Global War on Terror in the western Indian Ocean. And it also justified participation in anti-piracy operations off the coast of East Africa. By 2011, these military movements found a mooring through the establishment of Japan's first overseas military base since 1945 in Djibouti.

Starting from the very different historical background of guerrilla warfare against Imperial Japan and the nationalist Kuomintang, communist China's strategists also reinscribed maritime space with new meaning. Taking recourse to earlier receptions of Mahanian ideas and to US practice, the rediscovery of strategic thinking came to gradually recreate the segmentary lines of western Pacific island chains too. Due to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) overwhelming territorial orientation, naval strategy aimed only at securing the 'near seas' of the Yellow, East, and South China Seas through 'offshore defense' within the 'first island chain' by the late 1980s (Liu, 2005). However, the rewriting of national history in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests emphasized the need to regain control over 'lost' maritime territories (Callahan, 2009). From a Chinese perspective, the consolidated first

island chain now simultaneously functioned as a protective 'barrier, springboard and benchmark' (Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016). As such, it facilitated the extension of Chinese sea lanes, as rupture lines, beyond the segmentary Ryukyu Islands into the 'far seas' (Wu, 2019). Yet, the island chain imagery suffers from a missing link: Taiwan, though geographically integral to it, disrupts the line. Its ambiguous political location (Chen & Shimizu, 2019) bestows it with the crucial function as a gap, and as a bridge across.

The strengthening of a Taiwanese national identity in the post-Cold War years made the CPC's historical mission to pull the island over to its side all the more important (Yu, 2010). However, Taiwan moved even further away after Chinese leaders, in 1995/96, sought to intimidate pro-independence voices by firing ballistic missiles into waters off the coast of major cities, and thereby prompted President Clinton to dispatch two aircraft carrier groups to the vicinity. For President Jiang Zemin, this move resonated with China's humiliation at the hands of Western imperial powers. Alluding to the island's ideational mobility and potential use for the projection of military power, he asserted that 'The idea of using Taiwan as an unsinkable aircraft carrier [against the Mainland] was first contrived by Japan […] It can be said that it was initially Japan who put Taiwan in its current position, and it was the United States which has maintained it' (cited in He, 2007, p. 13). By the late 1990s, this geopolitical gaze on the East China Sea intensified as China moved to the centre of US nuclear war planning (Kristensen, 2008). The subsequent integration of South Korea and Japan into the ship-based western Pacific ballistic missile defence system, potentially covering Taiwan, raised the stakes to another level.

Amid these deepening anxieties, thinking about sea lanes, island chains, and the asphyxiating 'choke points' of maritime straits gained general popularity. This discourse revealed the character of the island chain as a segmentary line, across which Chinese, US, and Japanese strategists mirrored their own thinking. In a 2003 speech that echoed the long-standing Japanese threat perceptions, President Hu Jintao raised the spectre that the US and Japan could strangle China by interrupting flows of raw materials through Southeast Asia, the so-called Malacca Dilemma (Shi, 2004; You, 2007). The same mirroring effect appeared when US and Chinese analysts came to attribute the strategic imagination of island chains (Fig. 1) as means to control flows through East Asian seas to one another (Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016; see, for instance, Yoshihara, 2012).

In a demonstration of how segmentary and rupture lines complement, constitute, and morph into one another, moving beyond the first island chain came to represent the yardstick for China's path towards modernity (Zhang, 2003). The path along Southeast Asian sea lanes symbolized the continuation of China's linear ascent from 'national humiliation' towards the fulfilment of the Chinese Dream—namely, becoming a 'maritime power', if not 'maritime civilization' (Ni, 2013). Hence, not unlike the Japanese case, the PLA's participation in international efforts to combat piracy around the Gulf of Aden represented a major milestone towards achieving 'national rejuvenation' (Wirth, 2019). This trajectory culminated in 2017, when China joined Western naval powers and Japan in establishing its first military base abroad in Djibouti—a further mooring for military mobility. These bases represented the continuation of national modernization projects, as envisioned in the new connectivity strategies of the Belt and Road Initiative and the (Free and Open) Indo-Pacific policies, respectively, toward Africa.

Nonetheless, these moves towards operations 'beyond the wall', as a US Naval War College report referred them (Dutton & Martinson, 2015), stoked anxieties about the continued expansion of China's interests and reach. Following a US consulting firm's 2004 publication of a report that speculated about Chinese plans for establishing naval logistics facilities in the Indian Ocean (MacDonald, 2004), fears that China would financially entrap poor island nations such as Sri Lanka to establish a so-called string of pearls overshadowed China's attempts to highlight its contributions to 'peace and stability' (Xinhua, 2015). Subsequently, East Asian

island chains came to be seen more and more as means to block China's access to the open seas. This would not have happened without the prior magnification and discursive linking of the hitherto disparate maritime disputes through the imageries of island chains and sea lanes of communications.

5. Breaking island chains

Against the background of escalating maritime disputes, the first island chain rendered some molecular movements of fish and fishing vessels and of military assets undersea, on the surface, and in the air perceptible to the political observer. This selectivity reinforced the imagery of the island chain as a segmentary boundary and, at the same time, elevated the ability to militarily control rupturing interoceanic sea lanes of communication across and along the island chain to that of a principal signifier of a changing international order.

From Japanese and US perspectives, the danger from China increased tangibly in the form of naval and oceanographic research vessels and aircraft crossing the island chain into the western Pacific. Commonly said to have intensified from 2008, Japanese authorities meticulously documented and publicized these movements, irrespective of whether they complied with Japanese interpretations of international law (MOD, 2020, p. 73; Fig. 2). Against the backdrop of recurring controversies about wartime history and continuously increasing Chinese defence expenditure, these representations solidified the contrasting idea of a law-abiding and peaceful Japan (Suzuki, 2015).

In November 2008, the appearance of Chinese government vessels near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku rocks disrupted President Hu and Prime Minister Fukuda's historic attempt to pry open a crack in the island chain through Sino-Japanese cooperation on natural gas development (MOFA, 2008). Instead of enabling both sides to isolate and defuse contentious issues, the event caused the multidimensional character of the bilateral dispute to resurface. Japanese observers criticised China for tapping subterranean deposits from the western side of the contested median line, which delineates overlapping EEZs, while simultaneously obstructing exploration on their side to the east. Subsequently, the confrontation spiralled out of control, engulfing more and more policy areas and greater maritime space.

In 2010, a Chinese trawler following movements of fish[2] crossed into Japan-claimed waters and rammed Japan Coast Guard vessels near the disputed rocks. Preparations for the trawler captain's trial evoked a strong reaction from Beijing. Conversely, Japanese threat perceptions 'increased exponentially' (Koga, 2020, p. 60). Apart from spilling over into economic policies through hints that China might restrict rare-earth exports to Japan, the incident engendered a further major controversy. In 2012, the Tokyo governor declared that his government would buy three of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islets from their private owner. The central government's attempt to diffuse the escalatory potential by pre-emptively nationalizing them, backfired, as Chinese leaders saw it as another assertion of Japanese jurisdiction (O'Shea, 2021). Mirroring Chinese demonstrations of preparedness and determination in the form of naval exercises, in 2010, the Japanese government started to stage military drills for the retaking of outer islands, which included the involvement of US troops (MOD, 2014).

These developments magnified perceptions of China's new assertiveness and spread them across the Pacific (Johnston, 2013), thus boosting the strategic value of the Ryukyu Islands as watchtowers for monitoring Chinese movements, and as forward bases for military operations. By 2014, tensions had risen to the extent that Barack Obama, as the first sitting president, felt compelled to declare that Japanese administrative control over the few disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku rocks was covered by the US–Japan alliance (Panda, 2014).

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[2] For the discussion of fishing as a bordering practice, see also DeSombre (2019) and Song (2021).
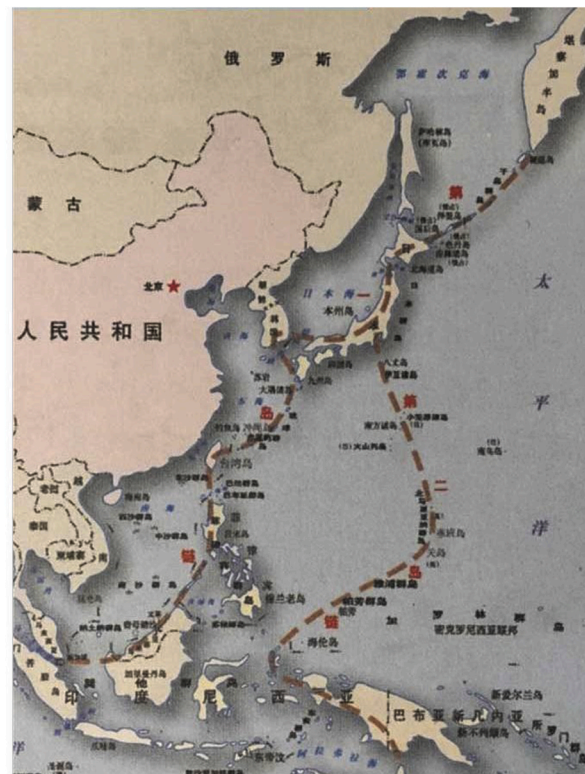
Fig. 1. US (left) and Chinese (right) imageries of pacific island chains (sources: DoD, 2012, p.40; PLAN, 2012)
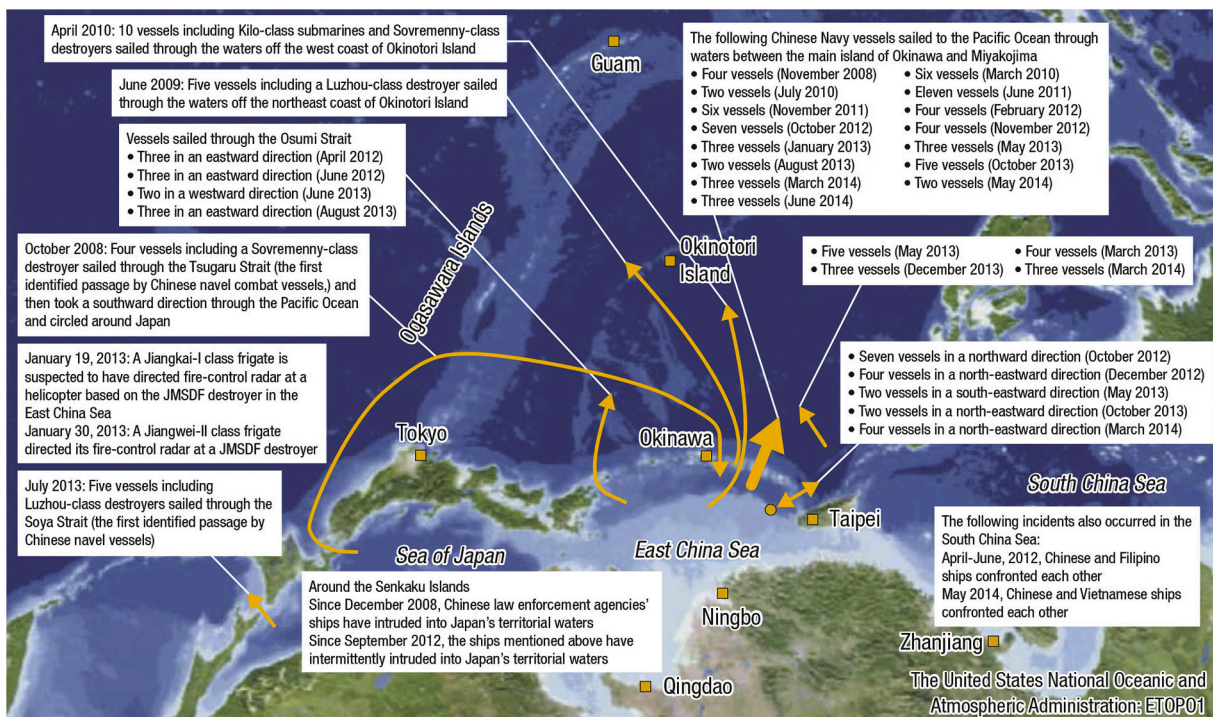

Fig. 2. Chinese movements across the first island chain (source: MOD, 2014, p. 41).

At the same time, the movements of Japanese and US military assets across the first island chain raised Chinese threat perceptions and imbued features therein with unprecedented strategic value. These threat perceptions rose significantly after the Obama administration responded to increasingly louder Japanese (and Australian) demands for reassurance by declaring the Pivot towards the Asia-Pacific (Clinton,

2011). Prominent assertions that the US Pacific Fleet would henceforth have 60 per cent of all naval assets, including six operationally available aircraft carrier groups at its disposal, and the forward deployment of various assets to Guam, Japan, Singapore, and northern Australia, reinforced the CPC's long-standing conviction that building a richer nation and stronger armed forces was the only way to avoid another

national humiliation (Fu & Wu, 2016; Ross, 2012). Hence, mirroring Secretary of State Clinton's declaration that the United States, 'like every nation', had a 'national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons' (Clinton, 2010), China added its claims in the East and South China Seas to the list of non-negotiable 'core interests' (China Daily, 2013).

The deepening contestations over the waters inside and outside the first island chain also popularized the term Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD). It became the lens through which national security circles in the US and Japan viewed Chinese movements in the area. Their principal fear stemmed from China's strategy of deploying evermore precise and far-reaching missiles to keep aircraft carriers at a distance, thereby limiting US forces' freedom to manoeuvre in the global commons of East Asian seas in wartime (O'Rourke, 2014). Hence, the Pentagon devised the Air-Sea Battle concept, later renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (Van Tol et al., 2010). However, as with the mutual attribution of the island chain metaphor, it is unclear whether China or the US came up first with a strategy to control maritime space between island chains (Fravel & Twomey, 2015). This circular logic shows how antagonistic practices between China and one hand, and Japan and the US on the other, reinforced the reconstruction of the first island chain as a barrier to China's trajectory towards becoming a global 'maritime great power' (People's Daily, 2014). Facilitated by the imagery, the escalation of the various disputes resulted in the emergence of a segmentary wall that divides the western Pacific and crosses its main shipping routes.

6. Constructing walls at sea

The increasingly stronger differentiation among specific movements' perceptibility suggests that one actor's mobility means another's immobility and that more connectivity among some come with the increasing disconnection of other locations. These discursive representations eventually created the fluid meshwork of the walls at sea.

A particularly consequential but under-researched case for how movement is politicized concerns the air defence identification zones (ADIZs) that cover the Northeast Asian and western Pacific seas. Having no basis in international law, ADIZs are military tripwires in the skies. They reach far beyond claimed maritime space and are therefore one of the clearest manifestations of the discursive construction of metaphorical bricks in the walls at sea. Government aircraft with undisclosed flight plans invariably trigger fighter jet alarm starts when they cross ADIZ boundaries. The thereby produced and widely circulated statistics of danger, ostensibly very clearly, reveal the aggressive and dangerous nature of the other.

The presence and function of ADIZs entered public debate in 2013 after the Chinese government surprised decision makers in Washington and Tokyo by drawing up an ADIZ too. Enclosing much of the East China Sea, it overlapped the comprehensive Japanese and Taiwanese ADIZs and prompted South Korea to extend its own southward (Ha & Cho, 2013). However, the enforcement of ADIZs had been privileging the perceptibility of some movements over others. Statistics published in Japanese defence white papers, the mass media, and on social media channels showed, for instance, that the number of scrambles by Japan Air Self-Defense Force fighter jets against Chinese aircraft surged from 2 (out of 158) in 2003 to 306 (out of 567) in 2012 (MOD, 2013, p. 176). By 2012, they outnumbered those against Russian aircraft and, in 2014, even exceeded the Cold War peak of 1985 (MOD, 2020). Yet, these movements represent only a fraction of the picture. A look at the political context reveals that most scrambles were directly related to the unresolved delineation of the EEZ and that only few concerned flights through the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku rocks' territorial seas (MOFA, 2012). Moreover, as Japanese government reports indicate, Chinese aircraft triggered most scrambles when they transited from the Chinese mainland above the international waterways of the Tsushima and Miyako Straits into the Sea of Japan or across the first island chain (Fig. 3).

The Chinese leadership has been using these flights as a tool to ramp up political pressure on Japan (and against Taiwan since 2021). This display of resistance to others' claims is also driven by Japan's formal insistence that no legal dispute exists over the Senkaku rocks. As such, these movements serve to create *effectivités,* which international legal practice has recognized as criteria for the adjudication of disputed claims. Not least, China's frequent movements along and above major shipping lanes can be seen as mirroring the US's exercise of freedom of navigation and overflight, including for surveillance and reconnaissance purposes. In the eyes of observers in Tokyo and Washington, however, Chinese ADIZ intrusions called for stronger pushback. They feared that inaction would lead to a domino effect resulting in the loss of the Ryukyu Islands, if not neighbouring Taiwan (Perlez, 2013).

This case demonstrates how movements along east–west sea lanes' rupture lines, crossing the segmentary line of the island chain,
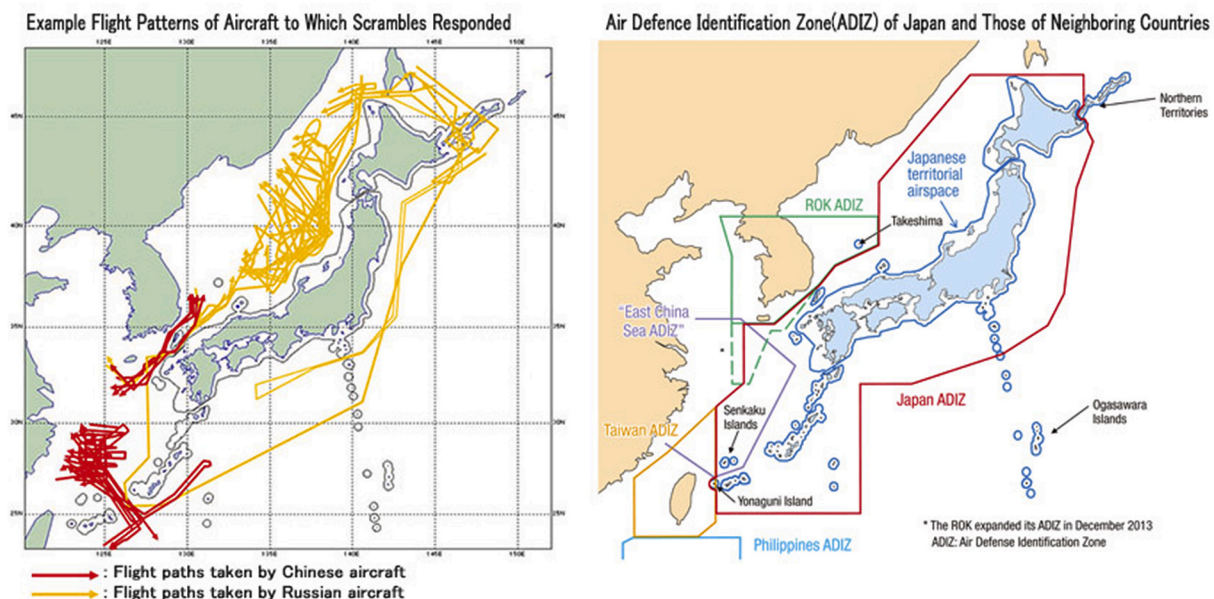
Fig. 3. Violations of the Japanese ADIZ—indicative flight paths (source: JASDF, 2021).

reinforced the imagery of a wall. In the words of a naval strategist, 'Geography affords the US–Japan alliance abundant opportunities to make trouble for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), denying China's military access to the vast maneuver space […] Fortifying the [Ryukyu] offshore island chain while deploying naval assets in adjoining waters could yield major strategic gains on the cheap. Doing so is common sense' (Holmes, 2014). This portrayal also extends the imagery of the island chain to Southeast Asia.

Sino-US tensions in the South China Sea had been building up since the mid-1990s. These first climaxed in 2001 and foreshadowed future events when a PLA fighter jet collided with a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane that had crossed into the Chinese EEZ. Forced into an emergency landing on nearby Hainan Island, an emotionally charged stand-off followed (Shen, 2007). The controversy was rooted in China's instrumentalization of international law to keep foreign military forces at bay, insisting on prior permission for military operations in and above its EEZ (Zou, 2002). In contrast, the US argued that such practices were legal as long as the data obtained served no commercial purposes (Pedrozo, 2010). A string of similar incidents convinced both sides of the need to deny the other control over the South China Sea (Bateman, 2011). From a US perspective, Chinese practice not only violated specific legal provisions but endangered the freedom of navigation more generally (Summers, 2021). From a Chinese perspective, the (coming) containment by the US and its allies required ever stronger responses. After all, official post-Tiananmen historiography had been emphasizing the narrative that the entire South China Sea was inherently part of China and that its reclaiming was imperative for overcoming national humiliation at the hand of foreign powers (Callahan, 2009). Hence, Chinese decision makers felt more and more entitled to control the entire South China Sea. The so-called nine-dash line made it into official documents and materialized as a de facto maritime claim (MFA, 2009). To enforce it, Chinese authorities surveyed seabed resources and took recourse to fishermen militia, which dispatched hundreds of purpose-built boats to disputed features (Poling et al., 2021).

In 2012, China's all-encompassing claim led to a stand-off at Scarborough Shoal and prompted the Philippines to resort to international dispute settlement. Even though the Chinese political system makes it nearly impossible to trace decision-making processes, it can reasonably be assumed that nationalist entitlement and perceptions of foreign military encirclement triggered the decision to enlarge and fortify occupied features in the Spratly area from 2014 onwards (Hugar, 2016). This move, combined with China's refusal to participate and eventual defeat in the Philippine-induced arbitration case in 2016, confirmed long-held suspicions on all sides.

As China continued to build a wall at sea on its side, Japan and the US reinforced theirs by elevating the freedom of navigation for their warships to a matter of international order. This discursive move drastically increased the perceptibility operational assertions under the US Navy's long-standing global Freedom of Navigation Program. Despite the US's difficulty to send clear legal signals (Dutton & Kardon, 2017) when sailing naval vessels through (claimed) territorial seas and EEZ, freedom of navigation operations came to be seen as indispensable for upholding the rules-based international order—the protection of which was the primary motivation for the Indo-Pacific policies mentioned at the outset of this article. This emphasis on the security of sea lanes through Southeast Asia reinforced the division along the first island chain between the ostensibly fully law-abiding and peaceful democracies and the law-breaking and dangerous autocracies. Thus, as one influential think tank put it, the US would need to 'tighten the chain' with a 'posture that places distributed, resilient, forward-stationed strike forces on the tactical defensive along the First Island Chain' (Mahnken et al., 2019, p. 25; Fig. 4). Congress implemented these recommendations as part of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative in 2021 (Nakamura, 2021). The walling off of the seas accelerated.

Mutual suspicion accelerated the implementation of the Japanese government's plans from 2010 to deploy anti-ship missile systems, against potentially hostile Chinese activities, on Miyako, Ishigaki, Amami-Oshima, and the Okinawa main island. Thus, by 2018, the
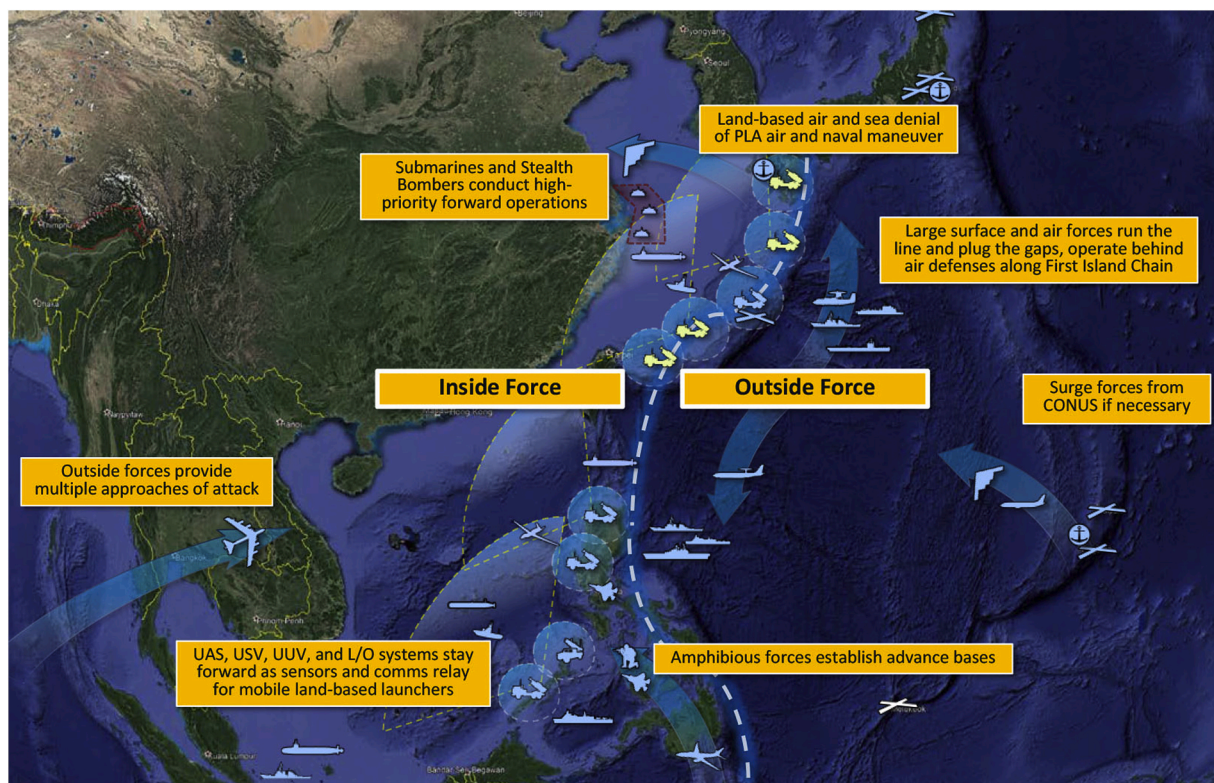

Fig. 4. Inside out defence overview (source: Mahnken et al. (2019), p. 31, reproduced with permission from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA)).

Ryukyu Islands had become a wall straddling the sea lanes between the Chinese mainland and the western Pacific north of Taiwan (Denyer, 2019). The main reason for establishing this barrier, according to a high-ranking Japanese bureaucrat, was that Chinese military vessel movements through the international Miyako Strait 'have become a major threat to the US forces that are engaged in activities there' (Doi, 2018). This construction of a wall at sea consequently also turned Taiwan into a major security concern for Japan. Reminiscent of geopolitical ideas articulated in the early twentieth century, the island nation became seen as an extension of Japan, i.e. the Ryukyu Islands, or even as part of the Japanese 'family' (Grady, 2021).

The construction of the wall continued through military and other movements across the first island chain. In response to Taiwanese and US actions, Chinese military airplanes started buzzing the Taiwanese ADIZ. This raised awareness among foreign officials. In response to highly publicized visits to Taipei, for instance by US House Speaker Pelosi, in August 2022, the Chinese government responded by ordering unprecedented numbers of planes across the median line in the Taiwan Strait, and fired multiple barrages of ballistic missiles into waters around the island, and into the nearby Japanese EEZ (MND, 2023). The remaining gaps in the wall were closed when continued Chinese pressure in the South China Sea prompted the Philippine government, in February 2023, to align more closely with the US and Japan. US forces regained access to four additional bases, which they had lost in the 1990s. The Philippines also embarked on trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan (Heydarian, 2023). Moreover, the US announced to increase the presence of military personnel for training Taiwanese forces from 30 to up to 200 (Youssef & Lubold, 2023).

The wall at sea then expanded northward and southward. Even before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, prominent strategists had justified the continuation or rediscovery of policy lines that explicitly referenced the containment of the Soviet Union within the northern section of the island chain (e.g., Gregson & Hornung, 2021; Koda, 2020). To the south, Australia's intensified security cooperation with Japan as well as its planned acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, capable of operating in the East and South China Seas, linked Australia to the wall at sea – thereby increasing pressure on the newly created gap in the Indonesian archipelago (White, 2023).

Thus, the reinscription of segmentary and rupturing lines, and the erasure of countervailing realities—such as the molecular lines of commercial shipping and migration patterns of marine life—from foreign- and security-policy discourses led to the dominance of certain military circulation assemblages. The ensuing fluid meshwork of the walls at sea came to stabilize views of international order that had nearly been lost amid the profound socio-economic transformations of the past three decades.

7. Conclusions

Standing against the tides of time, walls at sea represent efforts to solidify sovereign power. However, unlike concrete barriers, the walls in the liquid space of East Asian seas are best understood as a fluid meshwork. They emerged from a circulation assemblage where movements along segmentary lines of separation and rupture lines of connection reinforced one another.

These walls bolster state sovereignty by converting 'differences, discontinuities, and conflicts that might be found *within* all places' 'into an absolute difference' not only '*between* a domain of domestic society, understood as an identity, and a domain of anarchy, understood as, at once ambiguous, indeterminate, and dangerous' (Ashley, 1988, p. 257, original emphasis). But the lines of separation and lines of connectivity each also create insides and outsides in themselves. The assemblage of these lines may well make the walls stronger and more durable, and free them from specific places and binary inside–outside orientations. In fact, the walls' purported geographical locations remain out of the main audiences' sight, rendering their representation as effective barriers

easier to control. As such, the examined practices reveal similar teleological rationales, for example, as conflicts over the resource-scarce and inhospitable altitudes of the Himalayas, where 'the border cannot ever physically be reached, but is continually aspired to' (Harris, 2020, p. 83). These never-ending struggles mandate the continued re-enactment of sovereign power.

This re-enactment collapses space (geography) and time (history) into singular lines of connection and division, allowing for the discursive recruitment of a wide array of disparate issues into metanarratives of indivisible security threats. Consequently, the securing of all and everything in maritime space facilitates the securing of all dimensions of the state and mandates decisive and unified responses on the part of national executives to homogenize their nations (Wang, 2021; Williams, 2015).

Yet, the phenomenon that calls for freedom and openness nonetheless led to the walling off of the seas, points to larger processes at play. As a corollary of rival attempts to control flows in maritime space, the semi-enclosed waters of the East and South China Seas are being transformed from a frontier—that is, 'a space that both reminds society of its limits and that suggests that these can be transcended' (Steinberg, 2018, p. 237)—into a borderland whose creation reflects the 'reconceptualization of the ocean itself as national territory' (Dudden, 2017, p. 152). This can be seen in how Japanese and Chinese practices under the label of 'ocean state' (*kaiyo kokka*) and 'blue territory' (*lanse guotu*) (Fabinyi et al., 2021), respectively, envision EEZs. In the words of Peters et al. (2018, p. 3), territory also works through the terrain of the seabed, water, and air.

Paradoxically, the multidimensional struggle among nations and among established and aspiring hegemons reduces maritime space to two dimensions, to a single line to be defended: the one between us and them. However, without looking beyond these border walls, the uncertainty of the future will likely increase as economic inequality and climate change continue to undermine established notions of the state and international order.

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