

## Comments about The New York Times “China’s Pacific Overtures” editorial

*8 November, 2015*

There was an editorial in the New York Times today, “[China’s Pacific Overtures](#)”. The article is interesting but overstates the Chinese threat and somehow ignores the Indian Ocean, focusing instead on the Pacific, when in fact the seas bordering China are all internal waters between the two. The article mentions the First and Second Island Chains which are described usually as defensive, whereas they are most probably a line of external blockade rather than of attack, and they clearly show the unease of the Chinese strategists with the realization that they are trapped at home.

Below is a chart of the region, showing coastlines and maritime areas controlled by different powers (for ease of mapping the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ’s) are shown. which are at most 200 nautical miles from shore). Green represents the Commonwealth of Nations, blue the U.S. and its Pacific Islands satellites, yellow Asian countries other than China, blue-grey Russia, orange France and red China.

The red line with white circles just offshore China represents the “9-dash” area of Chinese territorial ambitions, and the crossed blue lines are drawn along archipelagos, along which China could be easily blockaded at will by her neighbors (Russia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Australia, with the solid support of the U.S.). The editorial seems to imply that the U.S. is the only foe. It is not. The barriers are multiple and probably impassable, and it is worthwhile noting that China’s territorial ambitions so far are limited to small atolls and fringing islands inside the barriers, thus not presenting a real threat to the external world, although it is understood that a strong reaction needs to be displayed as a matter of principle and of security for the countries bordering the South China Sea.

Regarding Chinese options in East Timor, although not perfect, a naval and aeronautical base on the south coast of East Timor would be positioned outside the major lines of blockade. The blockade line across the Timor Sea would still be in place, but the naval base would directly threaten Australia. Access to Timor would be along the boundary between Indonesia and Australia, thus never entering the EEZ’s of either. The only similar route in the north to exit the South China Sea would be quite tortuous and multiple, between Taiwan and Japan first, then between Japan and the Philippines, and finally between Japan and the U.S. The route to reach the open ocean would be 2,100 nautical miles long, while exiting Timor requires 500 nautical miles. It is a fact that the Chinese Government is very adept at bullying opponents and would at least try to position itself in Timor: other powers have offshore bases, why not China, and how could the U.S., Australia and Indonesia deny in practice the right for China and East Timor to establish Chinese bases there? The Chinese feel trapped and cornered and won’t be afraid to try bold tactics. It is not likely that the establishment of an aeronautical and naval base in Timor has the potential of seriously upsetting the global balance of power, but it can be assumed that the thing would be quite annoying and disturbing for all, with serious political repercussions in Australia.

A comparison of current and planned Chinese naval capabilities and the current U.S. navy are drawn below. Chinese figures are possibly inflated, but the table still shows that China is far from being a real threat in the foreseeable future, although the article predicts huge naval capabilities by 2049. Chinese history tends to show that the Chinese, as a people, have had little imperialistic ambition in the past. They are everywhere around the planet but their imperialistic spirit pales in comparison to Westerners, and in the past decades the Government's territorial ambitions have only been applied to the mostly uninhabited high plateaus and mountains near the borders of India and Pakistan. It seems that the current territorial and maritime bullying is an undertaking of the Chinese Communist Party only, perhaps devised as a nationalistic display to impress its own population, but it could be bet that the common people don't care a bit. Anyhow, where will the Chinese Communist Party be in 2049? Will it still be in power, and if it were to last another 35 years, wouldn't its aggressive and expensive military policies be the very engine of its demise? History would indicate so.

The navies of the Axis fared quite badly during WWII, and although Japan and Germany were not as landlocked as China is, their very strong navies were annihilated relatively quickly.

## Comparison of U.S. and Chinese naval capabilities

	U.S.			China		
Type	Units	Total displacement (MT)	Notes	Units	Total displacement (MT)	Notes
<b>Aircraft carriers</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1,060,000</b>	<i>(all nuclear) (900 aircraft)</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>67,500</b>	<i>(range: 4,000 NM) (36 aircraft)</i>
<b>Submarines</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>729,867</b>	<i>(all nuclear)</i>	<b>71</b>	<b>279,220</b>	<i>(13 nuclear)</i>
<b>Amphibious ships</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>640,947</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>100,000</b>	
Amphibious assault ship	9	374,893				
Amphibious command ship	2	38,354				
Amphibious transport dock	9	227,700		4	100,000	
<b>Battleships</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>823,200</b>		<b>106</b>	<b>378,260</b>	
Cruisers	22	215,600				
Destroyers	62	607,600		29	183,520	
Frigates				51	157,300	
Corvettes				26	37,440	
<b>Dock landing ship</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>207,200</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>173,240</b>	
<b>Littoral combat ship</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13,200</b>				
<b>Total:</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>3,474,414</b>		<b>242</b>	<b>998,220</b>	

## Chinese “First Island Chain” policy

Information about the Chinese “First Island Chain” policy is probably quite unreliable. Below is a definition in Wikipedia, reportedly derived from the Japanese and Chinese articles and citing “The Economist” as a source.

It is ironic that the Chinese should officially consider the island barriers as a defensive position and that the doctrine is about *“seal [ing] off the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea inside an arc running from the Aleutians in the north to Borneo in the south”*. Their real concern is obviously the opposite: I can’t imagine the U.S. trying to invade China with its 1,400 million people, but I can conceive that the Chinese may be wary of being sealed off the world outside their internal seas. What they fear is not invasion, it is a blockade, which is quite the opposite. Furthermore, how would the Chinese technically *“secure and disable from American bases, aircraft and aircraft-carrier groups”* these islands which are, from north to south, under the jurisdiction of the U.S., Russia, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and Malaysia?

Annexing Taiwan would be a first step as far as access to the Pacific Ocean is concerned, but the barriers further east would still be there.

*“The People’s Republic of China views the first island chain as the area it must secure and disable from American bases, aircraft and aircraft-carrier groups, if in defending itself it must tactically unleash a pre-emptive attack against an enemy. The aim of the doctrine is to seal off the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea inside an arc running from the Aleutians in the north to Borneo in the south. According to reports by American think tanks CSBA and RAND, by 2020, China will be well on its way to having the means to achieve its first island chain policy.”*



