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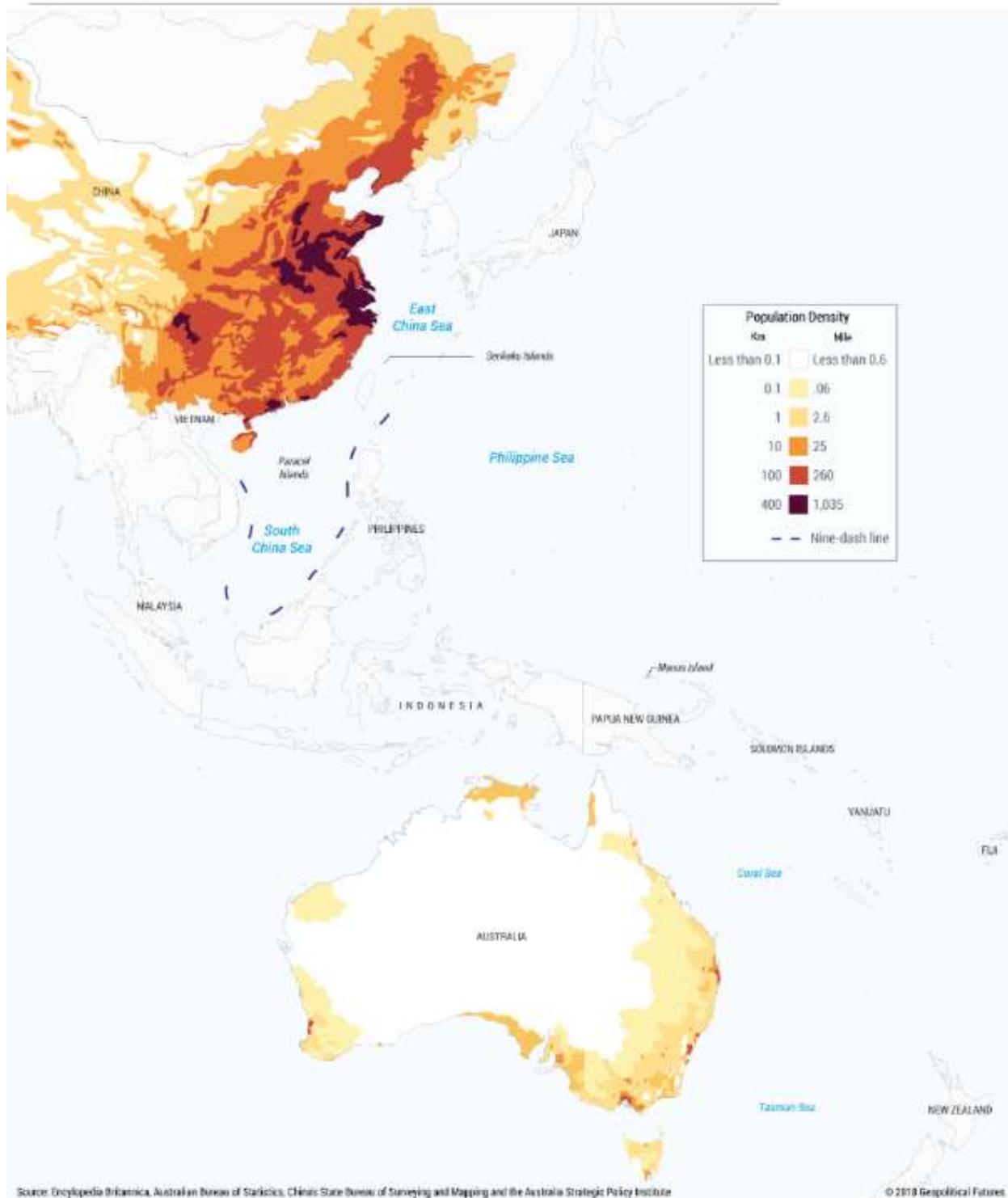
The Coral Sea: The Mirror Image of the South China Sea

Australia, like China, is militarizing the waters off its eastern coast.

Australia and China possess profoundly different geographies, but in one key way, they are similar: The bulk of the wealth and populations of both countries is concentrated on eastern-facing coasts. These coasts, in turn, face seas containing small islands that, if held by a hostile power, could be used to block Chinese or Australian ships from entering the greater Pacific and engaging in global trade – in effect, crippling their economies. China, of course, is facing the South and East China seas. Australia is next to the less-discussed Coral Sea (the Tasman Sea being virtually secure already). China's imperative to solidify its grip over the South and East China seas is mirrored by Australia's recent push to solidify its control over the Coral Sea. The difference is how each goes about doing it.

China's militarization of the South China Sea in recent years has been well publicized, but there is nothing recent about Chinese territorial claims in the South and East China seas. (That "China" is in both names is an indicator of the country's long-standing presence in these maritime domains.) China – that is, the Republic of China – first published a map delineating its maritime claims in the South China Sea in 1912. The number of dashes used and the precise claims on this line have changed slightly over time, but overall, China's territorial claims were essentially the same under Mao as under Chiang – and remain so under Xi today. The same is true of the East China Sea, though until recently China's naval capabilities precluded any attempt at challenging Japanese control over the Senkaku Islands, which China has claimed as its own since the 14th century.

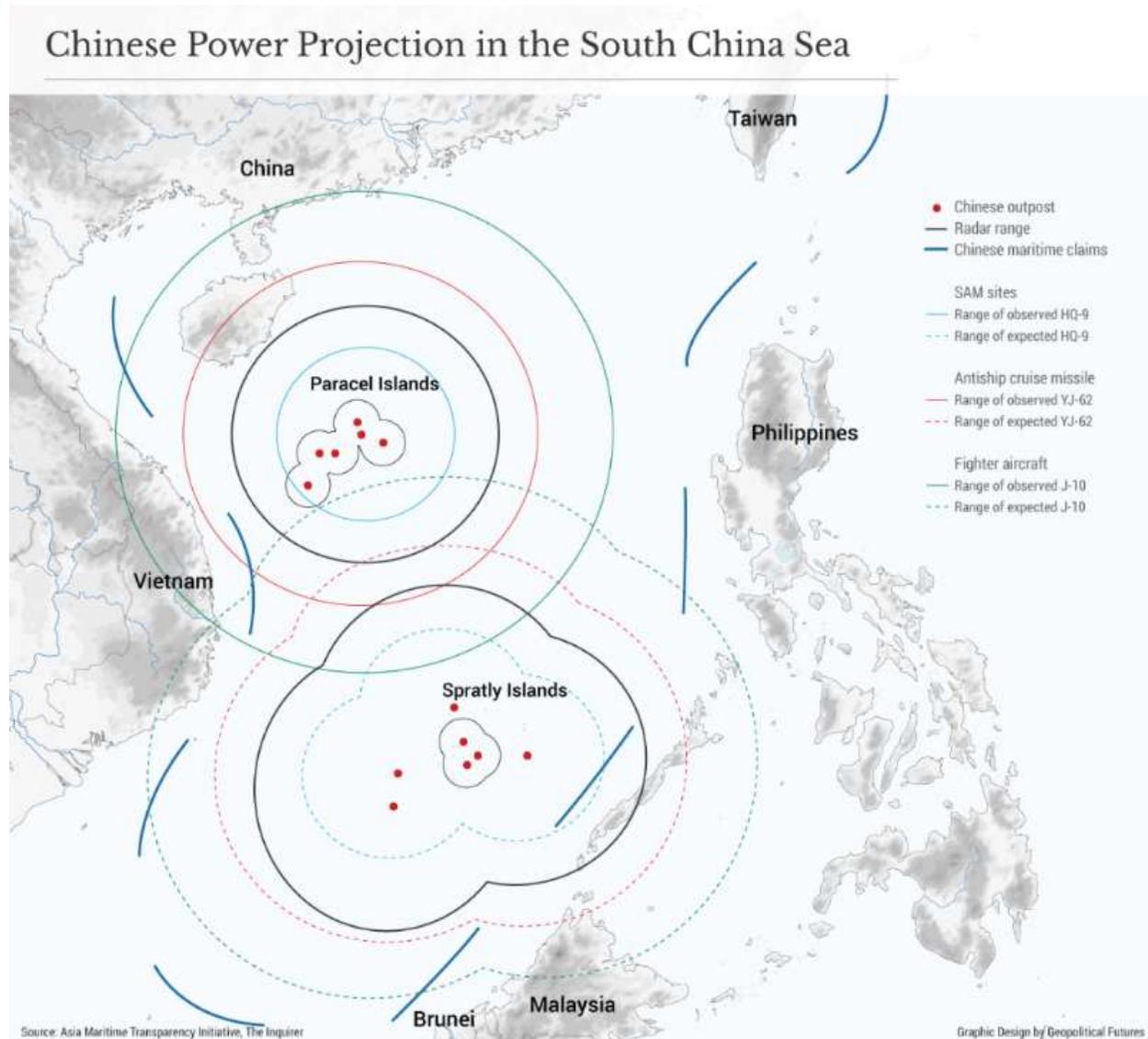
Coastal China and Australia



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In this sense, Chinese militarization of the South and East China seas can legitimately be described as centuries-old. What has ebbed and flowed over time was China's ability to project power in these seas – a capability it has only just begun to redevelop. The beginning of the current territorial disputes in the South

and East China seas can be located in two dates: Jan. 19, 1974, when the Chinese navy fought off an attempt by the South Vietnamese navy to take the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, establishing de facto Chinese control, and Nov. 24, 1971, when the Japanese Diet ratified a deal transferring control of the Senkakus from the United States to Japan – in effect, putting Chinese maritime trading lanes in the hands of a country that had committed the Rape of Nanking 33 years prior.



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Since the 1970s, China has used a combination of economic incentives, political pressure, military force and diplomatic niceties to ensure its continued control of these vital maritime domains. In recent years, it has relied more on military force to do so, a reflection of the Chinese navy's rising power. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when China began establishing military installations on islands in the South China Sea – in 1990, for example, China built a runway and airport on Woody

Island, but it deployed surface-to-air missiles and fighter jets on the island only in 2016. Suffice to say, China has been doing so for decades, even if opposition has become vocal only in recent years. As for the Senkakus, Chinese naval ships occasionally enter Japanese territorial waters to make their presence known, but the frequency of such assertion of navigation acts has increased since 2016. China also offers development aid and economic incentives to countries willing to recognize its claims or overlook its island-making in the South China Sea, with [its recent courting of the Philippines](#) being the most prominent example.

[Australia](#) and its fellow English-speaking countries (New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S., primarily), as well as Japan, have taken note of the slow and steady rise of Chinese power in the South China Sea and its desire for power in the East China Sea. At issue is not so much what China has done – in the unlikely event of war, the military installations on South China Sea islands could be destroyed and their resupply could be fairly easily curbed – but what the continued slow conquering of these regions might portend. There has been no serious attempt to stop China beyond the occasional freedom of navigation operation, mostly because for the countries powerful enough to stop China, control over the reefs, atolls and islands in the South China Sea are not worth fighting for. What concerns Australia (and New Zealand) more is the way China has been using a similar strategy in the Coral Sea. Though China has no historical claim to ownership of the various island nations of the South Pacific, everything else in its toolkit is fair game.

South Pacific



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Australia has responded by essentially mimicking China's strategy in the South China Sea – though with extremely different tactics. This is in part by necessity. China, after all, is the oldest civilization in world history, and many of the islands it wants to control are uninhabited; some aren't even islands. Australia, by comparison, is a relatively recent creation of the British Empire, and the sun has set on the imperial rule of the South Pacific by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. In addition, many of the [island nations with which Australia needs strategic relationships](#) are not uninhabited. What works for China in the South and East China seas cannot work for Australia in the Coral Sea – Australia has to be far more solicitous of its would-be partners. If Australia is too heavy-handed, it only serves to drive South Pacific countries into the waiting arms of China, which, despite its expansionist ambitions, is roughly 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers) away, making it a potentially very attractive partner for South Pacific countries.

Australia has greatly accelerated its execution of this strategy in 2018. Whether by signing a new bilateral security treaty with Vanuatu, increasing its aid and development projects throughout the region, or spearheading a new security framework for the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia is trying to ensure that it is the dominant power of the Coral Sea. Last month, it blocked China from funding a major regional military base in Fiji by not just outbidding Beijing but, as Fiji's military chief of staff told *The Australian*, by offering a more "holistic" partnership rather than simply trading yuan for influence. Australia also completed upgrading infrastructure at Papua New Guinea's Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island last month, and it is reportedly negotiating with PNG to establish a permanent Australian naval presence at the base (the official agreement is expected in mid-November). Australian broadcaster ABC also reported last month that Australian soldiers might begin regular troop rotations in Papua New Guinea in the near future.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Australia is "militarizing" the Coral Sea. It is renovating naval facilities to be able to host Australian and presumably U.S. naval assets; signing new, beefed-up security agreements with neighboring countries; deploying troops in the region; providing neighbors with naval assets (Australia plans to provide 21 Guardian-class vessels to 12 Pacific nations and East Timor by 2023); and spending money on development projects like undersea high-speed internet cables for the Solomon Islands – among other things. The goal is simple: Make sure that no foreign power hostile to Australia's interests can use these countries to block trade in and out of Australia, or in a worst-case scenario, as a springboard for invasion.

China can no more prevent Australia from securing control over the Coral Sea than Australia can prevent China from securing control over the South China Sea. (As for the East China Sea, that will remain in Japanese hands for as long as the Japanese navy outclasses the Chinese, and for as long as Japan remains a stalwart U.S. ally – in other words, for quite a long time.) Nor does either have an imperative to conquer the other's backyard. In effect, what both China and Australia are doing is clearly drawing their defensive lines – and there is a great deal of water and land between the lines being drawn. Indeed, there are three buffer states of particular import between China and Australia: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. It is in these three countries that the real battle for supremacy in the Pacific will primarily be fought in the coming decades. That competition, however, is still in its infancy. For now, two regional powers are shoring up their

greatest weaknesses from external threats, and Australia, with fewer obstacles to overcome, has a head start.

