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RESEARCH STUDY  
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DIEGO GARCIA GETS ON THE MAP

A joint US-UK project for a small communications facility on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, which had been under consideration for several years but had obtained US Congressional approval only toward the end of 1970, is about to enter the construction stage. Officially surfaced to the public in mid-December, the Diego Garcia project appears to have weathered the initial phase of third-country reactions and seems unlikely to encounter serious political obstacles in the near future. The following paper reviews the background of US-UK planning for the Diego Garcia facility and discusses the issues involved in its establishment.

ABSTRACT

The idea of emplacing a communications station on Diego Garcia atoll, southernmost island in the Chagos Archipelago, lying about 900 miles south of the tip of India, dates from the early 1960's, when the US and UK governments began consultations on the problem of securing communications and transit routes through the Indian Ocean. Utilized as an alternative or back-up location for intelligence collection, missile and satellite tracking, or possibly other naval support, Diego Garcia could serve US interests both in the area and worldwide, apart from its contribution as a symbol of US-UK strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.

A major preparatory step was taken in 1965 with the incorporation of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), consisting

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ii

of a thinly populated island area previously controlled by the Mauritius and Seychelles administrations; and in December 1966 a US-UK agreement made the BIOT jointly available for defense purposes for a 50-year term. Subsequently, it was determined by naval surveys that Diego Garcia would be the most practical BIOT site for a re-fueling and communications base, and after some years' delay caused by Congressional reluctance to authorize funds, a scaled-down version of the plan finally cleared the Senate in November 1970.

The Diego Garcia project has so far aroused only moderate concern among the countries of the Indian Ocean littoral. Of approximately 40 governments informed of plans for a US-UK facility, prior to the public announcement, only a small minority responded by expressing concern for their interests; and of these, but few reacted in a clearly negative sense. Predictably, India and Ceylon were prominent among this latter group, but even their protestations--directed chiefly against the principle of active involvement by external powers in the waters washing their shores--were restrained. On the other side of the coin, most of the littoral states allied with the US supported the Diego Garcia project as a necessary link in the Pacific defense system.

In some instances, a secondary concern was evident--namely, that the Diego Garcia facility might be linked to UK military aid to South Africa, which is opposed by most of the Indian Ocean countries; but this connection was sufficiently dubious to limit

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iii

manifestations of concern. The remaining problems so far identified with the Diego Garcia project are related more narrowly to its implementation and thus have less general significance, although some (e.g., those involving Mauritian rights under the BIOT agreement and resettlement of some inhabitants of the atoll) will require careful management.

Over the longer term, the political costs of developing Diego Garcia will depend on how the facility is fitted into the overall US posture in the Indian Ocean area. The Soviets' perception of its significance and their tactics in reacting to its presence will have to be taken into account as a constant complicating factor.

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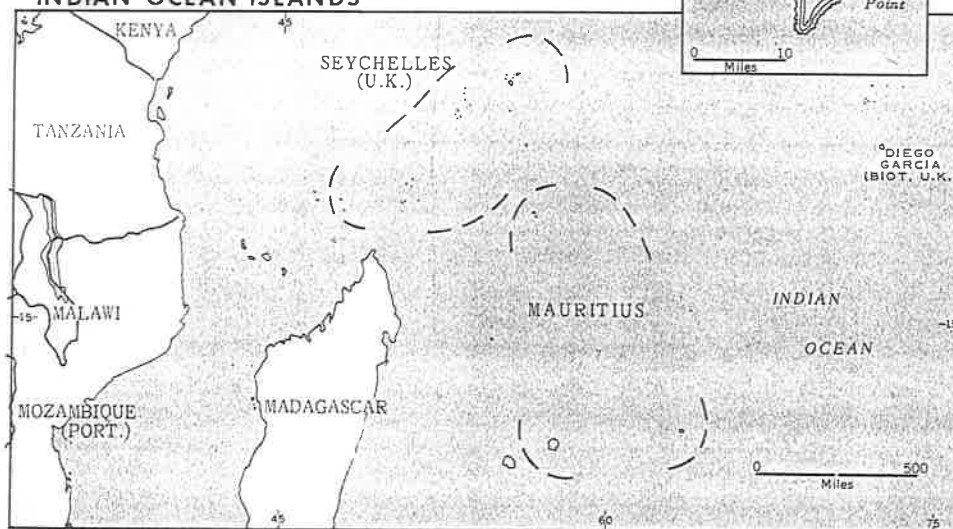
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# INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS



## DIEGO GARCIA



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DIEGO GARCIA

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Origins

An unprepossessing atoll cluster at the remotest reaches of the Indian Ocean, about equidistant from the Asian and African continents (see map at Figure 1), Diego Garcia owes its projected utilization for something other than the desultory harvesting of copra, to the gradual decline of British imperial authority after World War II coupled with continuing US-UK concern for the security of communications and transit routes across the Indian Ocean. In-house consideration of the problem by both governments led to formal consultations in London in February 1964, which produced a decision to plan for a "complementary" US presence on Indian Ocean islands under UK sovereignty. Two months later, the then Foreign Secretary Butler discussed the question further with Secretary Rusk in Washington, indicating a UK preference for Diego Garcia as the site of a joint US-UK base and noting that the UK was preparing to detach the island from Mauritius.

The official act of detachment followed in November 1965 with the creation of a new colony called the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Included in BIOT were the Chagos Archipelago--of which Diego Garcia is the southernmost island; Farquhar atoll, in the Farquhar Island group; the Aldabra Islands; and Desroches Island. All except the Chagos group, formerly under Mauritius, had been dependencies of the Seychelles. Diego Garcia, 11 square miles in area, is the largest island in the BIOT. An exchange of notes in December 1966 confirmed US-UK understanding that it would be made available for joint defense use for a period of 50 years. The agreement envisaged that the UK would make available the necessary land at its expense and assume responsibility for population transfer and compensation matters, while the US would undertake actual facilities construction and maintenance. The facilities would be shared by the UK and the two governments would consult on any future UK use of the island as a base.

There followed a US naval survey of Diego Garcia in the fall of 1967, and by mid-1968 planning was sufficiently advanced to permit an explicit US proposal for a "modest" facility costing \$44 million, which would include ship-to-shore communications, telemetry, scientific and intelligence monitoring equipment, and support installations. The UK confirmed acceptance by letter in September, suggesting procedures for resettlement of the island's small population of copra workers (estimated at slightly less than 400 persons, including dependents), for setting aside the main island's three subsidiary atolls as nature preserves in order to meet ecological objections to establishment of the naval facility, and for advance notification of interested third countries.

Although Congressional authorization to build the Diego Garcia facility was obtained in 1969, funding was held up by opposition in the Senate, and not until the costs of the project had been substantially

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- 2 -

trimmed, to the level of \$19 million, was an initial slice of \$5.4 million approved just before Thanksgiving Day 1970, as a classified item in the FY 1971 Military Construction Appropriations Bill. The official announcement of the Diego Garcia project, issued simultaneously by the US and UK governments on December 15, stated that construction would begin in March 1971 on "an austere naval communications facility" consisting of "communications, and minimum necessary support activities, including an air strip." Its stated purpose was to "close a gap in the US naval communications system."

In ongoing negotiations between the US and UK, it was meanwhile agreed that the western half of the main island would be cleared of inhabitants before construction began about the middle of March, with the necessary relocation to be accomplished, if possible, by July, the target date for completion of the airstrip. The three small islets at the mouth of the atoll's lagoon would be kept unoccupied except for navigational aids, and occasional visitors would be permitted in order to study the local flora and fauna. A US reconnaissance party inspected the site in January and staging arrangements for the Navy Seabee crews were substantially completed by the end of that month.

#### Strategic Significance

From the standpoint of US strategic requirements, Diego Garcia presents immediate as well as longer term advantages. The atoll's location makes it feasible as a partial alternative to the Kagnev Station site in Ethiopia, thus providing insurance against possible jeopardy to that link in the US communications network, or even as a back-up for strategic intelligence collection operations. Missile and satellite tracking equipment could be installed to add another dimension to Diego Garcia's utility, and submarine replenishment is a further possibility, although present planning does not envisage more than limited provision for naval vessel support.

In the broader perspective, the Diego Garcia facility offers a means of supplementing, at relatively small expense and minimal force commitment, the wasting British assets East of Suez, which have played a traditional role in keeping open sea lanes and lines of communication important to US as well as UK interests. Should the need arise for intensified development at some future time, the terms of the 50-year lease agreement of 1966 could be utilized to pick up the US option for augmentation of base facilities.

#### Issues

For both the US and UK, the principal issue involved in the Diego Garcia plan has all along been summed up in the problem of avoiding the appearance of unwarranted intrusion into a zone relatively free of major power conflict--one, moreover, for which new and highly articulate nations were asserting the principle of a direct relationship between peaceful

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- 2 -

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- 3 -

growth and the exclusion of Great-Power interests. The principle was explicitly stated at the Lusaka conference of 54 non-aligned nations in September 1970, which defined the Indian Ocean as an area "from which Great-Power military bases and all nuclear weapons are excluded"; and at the British Commonwealth Conference in January 1971, the great majority of the 31 member countries refused to accept Prime Minister Heath's argument that military support for South Africa was justified by the threat of safe passage of British shipping posed by Soviet penetration of the Indian Ocean area.

In both participant countries, moreover, the case for non-involvement has had noteworthy proponents whose ability to mobilize significant pressure against the development of Indian Ocean facilities could not be underestimated, despite the general ignorance of Diego Garcia's very existence and probable indifference as to its fate. In the UK, a Labor MP named Dalyell has campaigned vigorously, if so far ineffectively, against the project; and in the US Senate, reservations on the advisability of expanding our naval presence, rather than considerations of economy per se, persuaded key legislators to withhold approval for more than a year and a half. It was natural, therefore, that the US and UK approached in gingerly fashion the task of advance notification of interested third countries. As it turned out, this sensitive phase of the operation was negotiated without incurring significant political drag on the Diego Garcia enterprise.

The major sources of recalcitrance were, as expected, India and Ceylon. Official Indian sources, to some extent echoed by public information media, expressed "disappointment and regret"--in part motivated by the feeling that the degree of consultation extended India was inappropriate to its status as the largest littoral state concerned and, in effect, amounted to notification of a fait accompli. Corollary to this feeling, and no doubt colored by it, was the suspicion that Diego Garcia was all along intended to be something more than an "austere" facility; and that, regardless of its intent, the effect could be to provoke augmentation of the Soviet naval presence in the area.

However critical in tone, the Indian reaction has been moderate in decibel count, partly for circumstantial reasons--Parliament, which had been prepared to produce a condemnatory resolution on the subject, had been dissolved in preparation for the upcoming elections--but partly also because the declared US-UK intentions were sufficiently limited to justify a certain restraint in the expression of Indian reservations on the matter.

In the case of Ceylon, too, distaste for the idea of a Diego Garcia base has been tempered by a pragmatic restraint; at the Commonwealth Conference, Prime Minister Bandaranaike observed that presumably nothing could "be done about" Diego Garcia now, but that in future it ought to be possible for Indian Ocean states to exert more influence over the

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Not surprisingly, African mainland countries tended to focus on this aspect also, but with the paradoxical result of a consensus tentatively favoring the Diego Garcia facility, as a possible alternative to direct continued aid to South Africa).

official that the Soviet threat was being overstated in order to justify even in allied countries (e.g., in the view expressed by a New Zealand UK support for the South African regime, and the same connection cropped up to see the Diego Garcia facility as an actual or implied instrumentality of disadvantage. There was a tendency in both Indian and Ceylonese comment to South Africa--had the effect of coloring some reactions, to the US-UK connection between Diego Garcia and the Heath policy of military assistance. A side issue to that of Great-Power interventionism--the possible influence. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have both signified acceptance as well. to US involvement in the Indian Ocean area as a counterpoise to Soviet Gulf waters after the UK's formal departure, is thought to be receptive. The Shah, though on record as opposed to any foreign naval presence in plan "good news"--evidence of Western competitive interest with the Soviets. A high official in the Iranian Foreign Ministry called the Diego Garcia. The Persian Gulf states were similarly inclined toward the positive.

Most Indian Ocean littoral states allied or aligned with the US or UK tended to view the Diego Garcia project as reaffirmation of a commitment to area defense. In Australia, the press as well as official sources welcomed the planned Diego Garcia facility as a sign that the UK and particularly the US were taking seriously the increased Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean--this despite the fact that US representatives had stressed in their briefings of foreign governments that our interest in the site predated the Soviet naval augmentation in the area. Australia has followed up with concrete support in arranging for use of the Cocos Islands as a staging point for construction operations on Diego Garcia. In Singapore, the Foreign Minister privately expressed satisfaction at this indication of continued US interest in the Indian Ocean and regret that the installation would be so small. No reaction was reported from Malaysia, Pakistan, leaders, preoccupied with domestic political crisis, reserved comment, as did the press in that country.

effect that his country was not concerned with the Diego Garcia question. deduced from Indonesian Foreign Minister Malik's public statement to the analogous balancing act between non-alignment and anti-communism might be on outright opposition to projects on the order of Diego Garcia. An Ceylon's continuing dependence on Western economic aid--a familiar brake Great-Power involvement and its quasi-imperial overtones, and awareness of in this point were apprehensiveness over the anticipated escalation of communications facilities would not be put to other uses. Equally implicit establishment of such facilities, in particular to obtain guarantees that

- 4 -

SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

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arms support for the South African regime. clearly in Tanzanian President Nyerere's High Commissioner that he had not so far project because he hoped that it might be a separate report by the US Embassy. The same point was made by the Secretary of State. The same point was made by the Secretary of State.



SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

- 5 -

arms support for the South African regime. The paradox emerged most clearly in Tanzanian President Nyerere's private comment to the British High Commissioner that he had not so far opposed the Diego Garcia project because he hoped that it might somehow serve as a substitute for UK arms sales to South Africa; he suspected, in any case (according to a separate report by the US Embassy), that the British were deliberately exaggerating the dimensions of the Soviet threat in the Indian Ocean area. The same point was publicly made in Uganda by Defense Minister Onama, and echoed by President Obote shortly before his deposition in late January; the new regime of General Amin has not so far commented on the subject.

Apart from this special concern, the African inclination seems to be to look askance at Diego Garcia as a symbol of Great-Power involvement and omen of possible conflict. The point was crisply stated by an editorial in Tanzania's government-controlled newspaper, which declared that Tanzania does not want the Indian Ocean area turned into a parade ground for international naval rivalry. A more extreme version of this attitude of rejection was expressed both publicly and privately by the Somali government, which has an interest in maintaining a consistently "anti-imperialist" stance. Perhaps more representative of politically aware opinion in Africa are the mixed feelings of Kenyan leadership circles concerning the problem of Indian Ocean security. Conservative Kenyan opinion has been wary of the increased Chinese Communist presence in the neighboring states of Tanzania and Zambia; President Kenyatta among others may view the establishment of the Diego Garcia facility as a welcome indication of countervailing Western interest. The compromise agreement reached at the January Commonwealth Conference, which established a study group to consider the issue of security of trade routes, might be read also as implying African hesitancy to close the door to US-UK involvement in the area.

The South Africans themselves have maintained an attitude of tactful reserve on the question of Diego Garcia. The government responded in noncommittal fashion when informed in advance of US-UK plans, and no significant comment on the subject has appeared in the press. No doubt the South Africans are pleased, despite their circumspection, by the implicit recognition through Diego Garcia of the potential significance in strategic terms of the Cape sea route in linking the Atlantic and Indian oceans.

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-6-

### Implementation Problems

By contrast with the generalized political issues related to Diego Garcia, which seem to fall within fairly manageable limits, the initiation and progress of actual construction of the installation are affected by certain more complex questions that will require careful management if its three-year development timetable is to be maintained. Foremost among these problems are those involving the interests of the island Commonwealth countries which are Diego Garcia's nearest neighbors--the Seychelles and Mauritius. The latter's claims, in particular, to a special share in the implementation of Diego Garcia, are so entwined in the atoll's past and future status as to make it imperative that they be given reasonable satisfaction.

Mauritius derives its case from the arrangements under which the Chagos Archipelago was sequestered in 1965, the parent colony being granted independence subsequently (1968) and entering the British Commonwealth. The emergence of the Diego Garcia plan has distinctly enhanced the value of this former territory in Mauritian eyes; Prime Minister Ramgoolam was candid enough to tell the US Ambassador recently that it had been a mistake to transfer the Chagos group to the UK with what he considered insufficient material compensation. He now argues that the UK is legally committed to give preference to Mauritian labor in developing the Diego Garcia facility (specifically, to Mauritians already settled on the island and under threat of relocation). This interest has been reflected in approaches by Mauritian firms on the matter of construction contracts, and the local press has speculated about opportunities on Diego Garcia for the chronically under-employed population of Mauritius.

Currently, the British Foreign Colonial Office is preparing to open negotiations with the Mauritian government on the relocation of Mauritian nationals resident on Diego Garcia and the three other Chagos islands to the north. According to the latest statistics reported from London, some 360 persons--about two-thirds of the aggregate Chagos population--are inhabitants of Diego Garcia; like their compatriots, they have been employed in harvesting copra on plantations reportedly declining rapidly toward the point at which further production will become uneconomic. About 100 of these people, born in the Chagos islands and thus known as Ilois

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- 7 -

("islanders"), hold dual British and Mauritian citizenship; while others, born after the islands were detached from Mauritius, are UK citizens only, thus further complicating the resettlement issue.

Reportedly, the British are prepared to help Chagos islanders who are resettled on Mauritius, together with some 100 families already there, to become effectively assimilated into the Mauritian economy, and plan to make available up to £ 500,000 for housing, pensions, cash subsidies, and miscellaneous aid. In view of British unwillingness to expose the relocation issue unduly to public discussion, and of the fact that the British are under pressure to carry out relocation and other preparatory measures on the schedule agreed with the US, Ramgoolam may be expected to drive a hard bargain--inter alia, reviving an earlier claim to oil and mineral exploitation rights in BIOT, hitherto firmly rejected by the UK. Should it develop that Mauritian gains from the Diego Garcia facility compensate inadequately for its incidental burdens, Ramgoolam could find it attractive or expedient for domestic political reasons to add his voice to those critical of the enterprise in principle.

As for the Seychelles, more than 200 of whose nationals are threatened by relocation from Diego Garcia, the prevailing attitude appears to be coolly materialistic. According to the newly elected Seychellois head of government, James Mancham, Diego Garcia signifies an augmented strategic importance for his state and the attendant perquisites should be soon forthcoming. Mancham has already expressed an interest in visiting the US to discuss an increase in aid, and it is assumed that he will not be diffident about playing the card of the relocation question and its publicity value, or for that matter about resorting to the expedient of raising the ante for continued support of the US tracking station located on his own territory.

#### Outlook

Without underestimating the potential weight of these and other problems associated with actual construction of the Diego Garcia facility--e.g., objections raised on ecological grounds, which have been substantially met through environmental surveys and by resultant provision for periodic access by scholars and scientists, including a pending visit by a representative of the British Royal Society--it is probably fair to say that the project has passed the initial, critical tests of utility and acceptability. An important

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By NARA Date 8/13



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- 8 -

factor has been the cautious response of the USSR to this development--conditioned, no doubt, by unwillingness to call attention unnecessarily to the concomitant expansion of Soviet naval operations in the Indian Ocean area, and conceivably also by sober evaluation of Diego Garcia's modest design and potential significance. Lacking more than a perfunctory example of Soviet propaganda harassment of the Diego Garcia project, others who may be skeptical or mistrustful of US-UK intentions regarding the Indian Ocean area are to that extent handicapped in driving home whatever point they wish to make. Undoubtedly, the Soviets are cognizant of Diego Garcia's long-term usefulness as a propaganda target.

Although not all of the political returns are in--for example, the role of Diego Garcia as a serious irritant in US-Indian relations, with the likelihood of aggravation as the base facilities are developed, will need further assessment; and persistence by the UK in aiding South Africa could crystallize latent misgivings elsewhere on the continent about the function of the base in aid of "colonialism"--the phase in which third-country views might adversely influence joint planning and implementation appears to have been safely weathered. Barring sharply unfavorable shifts in the prevailing winds of opinion, the establishment of the limited base facility at Diego Garcia, consistent with the region's political requirements, appears to be a feasible objective.

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