

37. Memorandum From Secretary of State Rusk to President Johnson¹

Washington, July 15, 1964.

SUBJECT

Indian Ocean Island Facilities

Action Recommendations

1. The weekend press may have stories saying that the US and UK are jointly engaged in developing new bases in the Indian Ocean. If you are asked about it, you may wish to follow the same general line as the press guidance sent key posts (Tab B).² I would hope you could limit comments to the first two paragraphs in quotes in the attachment.

2. If, however, you are pressed hard regarding our intentions to develop military facilities in the area, I think the suggested line in the last paragraph in quotes at Tab B should be adequate.

Discussion

1. In February, we initiated discussions with the British in London about possible future requirements for military resources in the Indian Ocean. Our objectives were to encourage the UK to remain in strength in this area, and to plan to develop with the UK island airstrips and anchorages to supplement existing bases and staging facilities on the Indian Ocean littoral. The joint US/UK recommendations were approved by me March 5 and by DOD April 21. They involve developing a "strategic triangle" of virtually uninhabited British or Australian islands 500 miles off Tanganyika and the southernmost parts of India and Indonesia. We plan initially to develop in the Chagos Archipelago (south of India) a central ocean communications station (already funded) and austere supporting facilities.

2. The British Cabinet agreed to these concepts May 6. While we have settled tentatively on the British islands involved, as indicated, final determination will be based upon a joint US/UK survey commencing July 17.

3. The Washington Post has somehow acquired all details of this story. At State Department urging, Alfred Friendly has deferred publishing the story since June 15, on condition that he would publish if it looked as though the story would leak elsewhere. Latest conversations with Friendly indicate that the Post is apt to print the story this coming weekend. We are very grateful that he has withheld publication this long.

¹ Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Komer Files, Indian Ocean (incl. IOTF), December 1963-March 1966. Secret; Limit Distribution.

² Attached but not printed.

4. Bob Komer and McGeorge Bundy have been kept advised of developments. Attached (Tab A) is a more detailed explanation, which you may wish to read.

DR

Tab A

SUBJECT

Indian Ocean Island Facilities

1. Following discussions in London February 25-27, I approved on March 5, and the Department of Defense and Joint Chiefs approved on April 21, a joint US/UK agreed statement and recommendations, involving the development over the long-term of a strategic triangle of austere air and harbor facilities on Indian Ocean islands. These would supplement existing bases and staging facilities on the Indian Ocean littoral, and would reinforce in depth mainland commitments. We initiated the discussions. We thought that, by drawing the British into forward thinking about possible future requirements for military resources in the area from the Gulf of Oman eastward, the UK would be encouraged to remain East of Suez in strength. Also, we could plan for mutually advantageous island airstrips and/or anchorages to support our intermittent naval presence in the area and to facilitate necessary CINCSTRIKE/MEAFSA operations under its responsibilities in Africa and the Asian subcontinent.

(a) Initially, the U.S. would develop on the Chagos Archipelago (roughly 500 miles below the southern tip of India) a central ocean communications station and austere supporting facilities (already funded). Here, the U.K. would like to share use of an oil storage depot and might share airfield facilities, if their presence in Gan becomes untenable.

(b) The U.K. plans to develop an airfield on Aldabra (an uninhabited Crown island 500 miles off Tanganyika), which we would share, in order to anticipate U.K. inability to overfly Africa from Ascension Island and to provide a staging area for actions in East Africa. Aldabra would be useful to the USAF and CINCSTRIKE for operations either from Ascension or through Turkey and Iran.

(c) The U.K. and the U.S. could usefully employ facilities in the Cocos/Keeling Islands in conjunction with the Australians, thus completing the strategic triangle.

2. Apart from the communications station in the Chagos, what we have in mind are prestockage, anchorages and logistic air strips. It was agreed that the U.K. would be responsible for acquiring land,

resettling population and compensating them therefor, at HMG's expense, while the U.S. would be responsible for construction and maintenance costs. We have carefully chosen areas where there is a limited number of transients or inhabitants (e.g. 100-200 people).

3. Except for Cocos, the islands in which we are interested are administered from Mauritius or the Seychelles. The British have already obtained an initially favorable reaction to our joint concepts from the Mauritian Prime Minister, and expect to sound out other key members of the local administrations on July 14. The British Cabinet decided May 6 that they would transfer, to direct administration from London, those islands on which facilities would be constructed. Although we are reasonably certain which islands would be chosen, the actual choice will depend on a joint US/UK survey, to commence July 17. The question of transferring administration is a somewhat delicate one, on which the Mauritian Prime Minister reserved his view, and the British consequently are not now raising this issue with the other members of the local administrations.

4. The London correspondent of the *Washington Post*, during a recent trip to the Middle East, somehow acquired nearly all details of this story. At State Department request, the Managing Editor of the *Post*, Alfred Friendly, has agreed to defer publication unless it seems likely the story would leak elsewhere. The *Post* has held this story since June 15 but has become increasingly apprehensive. On July 11, Friendly insisted that the London *Economist* had all the details, the *Daily Express* had part of the story, and that the *Post* had succeeded in keeping the Washington correspondent of the London *Observer* from publishing the story. Friendly reluctantly agreed that he would withhold the story at least until July 17 or 18, when the island survey would begin, or until it looked as if the story was about to break.

5. In the judgment of my staff, with which I agree, it is unlikely that the *Post* will continue to hold off publishing a story of this magnitude longer than Friday, July 17. We are very grateful that Friendly has deferred publication over a month and, in so doing, rendered considerable service to the USG. We have an agreed press-line with the British (Tab B) and have alerted concerned posts in the Indian Ocean littoral to this effect. We are trying to persuade the British to approach key governments in the area and explain to them, before the story breaks, what our objectives are, generally along the line of the press guidance. The British are resisting informing third countries, until the story breaks. If the matter becomes public and you are asked about it, you may wish to follow the same general line as the attached guidance.