

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MAY 23 1975

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Dear Mr. President:

On May 13, the President sent to the Congress a message concerning his determination, in accordance with Section 613(a)(1)(A) of the Military Construction Authorization Act, 1975, that the construction of United States facilities on Diego Garcia is essential to the national interest of the United States.

I am pleased to transmit to you today the attached supporting justification which has also been approved by the President. I hope it will be of assistance to the Senate in its consideration of this important legislation.

With kindest regards.

Sincerely,



Max L. Friedersdorf  
Assistant to the President

The Honorable James O. Eastland  
United States Senate  
Washington, D. C. 20510

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Justification for the Presidential Determination  
on the Construction of Limited Support Facilities  
on Diego Garcia

In 1966, the United States signed an agreement with the British Government providing that the islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory would be available for 50 years to meet the defense purposes of both governments. In this context, we concluded in 1972 an Administrative Agreement providing for the establishment of a limited communications station on the small atoll of Diego Garcia in the central Indian Ocean. In February 1974, an agreement was negotiated ad referendum to replace the 1972 agreements and to provide for the construction and operation of a proposed support facility. The British Government announced in December 1974 its agreement with our proposal to expand the facility.

The United States has an important interest in the stability of the Indian Ocean area. In particular, the oil shipped from the Persian Gulf area is essential to the economic well-being of modern industrial societies. It is essential that the United States maintain and periodically demonstrate a capability to operate military forces in the Indian Ocean. Such exercise of our right to navigate freely on the high seas communicates to others the importance we attach to the stability of the region and to continued free access by all nations.

The credibility of any US military presence ultimately depends on the ability of our forces to function efficiently and effectively in a wide range of circumstances. Currently, the US logistics facility closest to the western Indian Ocean is in the Philippines, 4,000 miles away. At a time when access to regional fuel supplies and other support is subject to the uncertainties of political developments, the establishment of modest support facilities on Diego Garcia is essential to insure the proper flexibility and responsiveness of US forces to national requirements in a variety of possible contingencies. The alternative would be an inefficient and costly increase in naval tankers and other mobile logistics forces.

Objections have been raised to this proposal on the grounds that it will prompt an increase in the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean and give rise to an arms race in the region. Clearly, both we and the Soviets are aware of the military presence of other nations, but it would be incorrect to assume that Soviet actions are determined exclusively by the level or nature of our

force presence. The growth of Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean from 1968 to the present can most convincingly be ascribed to the pursuit of their own national interests -- including the continuing expansion of the Soviet Navy in a global "blue water" role -- rather than to US force presence as such.

A distinction must also be drawn between facilities and force presence. The proposed construction on Diego Garcia would enhance our capability to provide support to US forces operating in the Indian Ocean. However, there is no intent to permanently station operational units there, and the installation would not imply an increase in the level of US forces deployed to that region. We have, on several occasions, expressed our willingness to consider constructive proposals for arms restraint in the Indian Ocean, but we do not believe that construction on Diego Garcia should be contingent upon the outcome of discussions on such proposals. In our view, these are two separate issues.

The Diego Garcia proposal has been criticized by a number of regional states which favor the concept of a special legal regime limiting the presence of the great powers in the Indian ocean, as expressed in the several Indian Ocean Zone of Peace resolutions adopted in the United Nations General Assembly. United States policy has consistently been to oppose measures that would constitute an unacceptable departure from customary international law concerning freedom of navigation on the high seas.

We are aware of the concern expressed by some states of the region, but we do not share their conviction that the construction of support facilities on Diego Garcia will result in an arms race or that these facilities will somehow represent a threat to their interests. On the contrary, it is our belief that such facilities will contribute to the maintenance of healthy balance essential to the preservation of regional security and stability. It is our considered judgment that the legitimate differences in perspective between ourselves and certain other nations with respect to Diego Garcia are susceptible to reasoned discussion within a framework of mutual respect and need not inhibit the development of satisfactory relations with the states of the region.